

For ensuring flexible student trajectories through the development of an innovative program that supports and sustains student access to occupational therapy education in North Queensland

SUMMARY OF CONTRIBUTION AND CONTEXT

It is well acknowledged that rural and remote students face multiple barriers to accessing education and are underrepresented in the Australian tertiary sector (Bradley, 2008). During my initial years of teaching occupational therapy (OT) studies at James Cook University, I observed the challenges our students faced entering a post-graduate health course. Many students were from rural and remote regions and had made a significant journey to enter into life in Townsville. Having moved from home and social supports, many students were required to work long hours to their full time study and fieldwork commitments in order to financially support themselves during study. Many students struggled to balance study roles with family commitments. Consequently, I questioned whether the traditional face-to-face mode of subject delivery was best teaching practice for all students and if health education would be more accessible just as successfully if it provided flexibility around the time and place of delivery. Within the Australian health setting, there remains a workforce shortage within rural and remote regions. Increasing opportunities for access to tertiary health and clinical placements for rural and remote students is recognised as one strategy to address health workforce shortages (HWA, 2012). Flexible design is seen to accommodate students from diverse backgrounds who face geographical, financial, or other life barriers that make access to traditional university programs challenging (Lomas, 2010). I saw flexible delivery as one approach that could increase student access to health education.

In 2007, I began developing the first Occupational Therapy course in Australia which is delivered via flexible

OUTCOME TWO: STUDENT PERFORMANCE

Table 3: Comparison of On Campus and Flexi Students Grade Point Averages

Curriculum and assessment of the on and off campus students are paralleled (near identical) and so comparison of overall grade point averages can be made. As seen in Table 3, students in the Bachelor of Occupational Therapy (Flexible Delivery) perform overall as well, and often better than on campus peers in the Bachelor of Occupational Therapy (GPA is a score out of 7). Overall, flexi students have excelled as demonstrated by two out of the four current undergraduate honours students being flexi students.

OUTCOME THREE: STUDENT ENGAGEMENT AND EXPERIENCE

AUSSE survey data from the JCU course performance review shows that flexi students, over the course of the year 2011, have rated their course experience, active learning and WIL experiences as equal or higher than the U average. Research conducted into the experiences of the first cohort of flexi students show that the course design offered opportunity to engage with study that they would not have otherwise had. As explained and documented in the research (Donohue, 2010) by one student:

I actually started as an internal student last year and then my circumstances changed. So when I did flexible

This course has enabled rural and remote students to have access to a course they would have otherwise been de