

Enabling the community care workforce in rural areas to address the needs of those ageing in place

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Executive Summary

The demand for an appropriately skilled and committed aged care workforce has escalated over several decades. The ageing of Australia's population, policy reforms, and the preferences seniors has shifted the balance between residential and community care services.

Community-based care provision is reportedly more complex given the prevalence of chronic health conditions among this population. Industry and policy demands for high quality and cost effective care into the future, corresponds with current and projected workforce and skill shortfalls, as well as reported dissatisfaction with current training courses.

Workforce estimates indicate a worsening of the current situation due to the ageing and imminent retirement of a large number of community aged care workers. Added to this are the reported difficulties associated in recruiting and retaining younger workers and the declining numbers of Registered Nurses in this sector. While subsequent changes in roles and available skill mix may not directly impact on the provision of community services, there is an overall increased need to develop workforce capacity and re-design and expand roles to ensure both worker numbers and skills. These factors are further compounded by particular federal government policy changes since 2013 which restrict the industry's capacity to increase wages, improve training and educational opportunities, and retain current workers. Also, the perceived negative image of aged care as 'dead end', underpaid women's work continues to undermine recruitment efforts. A corresponding set of financial, recruiting and training issues compromise the role of Vocational education and training (VET) providers to supply the aged care community sector with adequate numbers of skilled workers. TAFE providers are also challenged by the market environment in which they compete with other VET sector providers offering varying delivery of course content.

This research project focuses on community care delivery and training in rural localities. In such places, workforce issues are likely to be compounded by factors associated with the comparatively poor health status of rural elders and reduced availability of and proximity to health care services. The project was initiated through a partnership between NSW Riverina Institute of TAFE and the John Richards Initiative, La Trobe University. Conduct of the research

project was approved by La Trobe University's Human Ethics Committee and the Greater Western Human Research Ethics Committee.

The project pursued questions concerning the changing aged care context and its implications for workers' skillsets in three regional and rural localities across the Riverina area of NSW. It sought to identify training needs into the future as well as the strengths, gaps, and possible solutions for addressing these. The research process utilised a staged, mixed methods design. Quantitative and qualitative data was collected from an extensive literature review, student training information and qualitative interviews conducted with TAFE educators, service managers and direct care workers. Analysis of this range of data provided deep and broad levels of understanding of the contexts and local factors impacting on care delivery, workforce and training needs.

The findings indicate that workforce issues in regional and rural areas are likely to increase given the ageing of this workforce and several factors that hinder recruitment of replacement workers. While the community aged care services represented in this study recognise the need to attract and retain skilled, new workers, they are not well positioned to recruit new workers because of the following conditions, needs and traditional preferences:

- Reduced capacity to participate in student practicum experience.
- Need for workers who once employed, can soon work alone.
- Reliance on and preference for mature-aged workers who are unlikely to leave the job for better pay.
- Incapacity to provide consistent hours of work, improved pay rates, and career pathways.

In regard to the wider calls for a more broadly-skilled workforce, service managers indicated their needs vary according to the services they offer and their current capacity for brokering in specifically skilled workers, and for upskilling selected workers. Corresponding issues exist for the TAFE educators in this study:

- The recruitment of suitable students is hampered by the negative image of aged care in terms of the nature of the work and the remuneration.
- Many students require considerable learning support.
- Training costs to acquire a broad range of marketable competencies are likely to deter disadvantaged students.
- Current training lacks sufficient pathways and articulations with higher tertiary qualifications in health care.

The findings provide a snapshot of the issues that pervade both the delivery of community care services and the provision of an appropriately trained workforce in regional and rural locations. They allow for a discussion of these issues as they are widely articulated and locally

experienced. The analysis and conclusions presented in this report highlight the tensions between broad aims for boosting and skilling the workforce, and local factors and responses to staffing and training issues. They also emphasise current strengths in the relationship between TAFE and service providers which may provide the scaffold for future cooperative approaches to addressing broad industry and local issues.

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