

Bond University

Legal Education Review

Volume 35 Issue 1

2025

‘This Could Be Me’: Law Students’ Experiences of a Rural, Regional, Remote (RRR) Clinical Program

Tamara Walsh

The University of Queensland

Follow this and additional works at: <https://ler.scholasticahq.com/>



© Copyright the authors.

This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivative 4.0 International Licence](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/).

‘THIS COULD BE ME’: LAW STUDENTS’ EXPERIENCES OF A RURAL, REGIONAL, REMOTE (RRR) CLINICAL PROGRAM

TAMARA WALSH*

I INTRODUCTION

In 2023, the Law Council of Australia reported that whilst one third of the Australian population lives outside of the capital cities, only 10% of lawyers practise in rural, regional or remote (‘RRR’) areas.¹ Concerns have been raised for some years that there is a critical shortage of lawyers in RRR areas, and that the existing workforce is aging and often without a succession plan.² Difficulties attracting and retaining professionals in RRR areas have been experienced across a range of professional groups, particularly amongst doctors, allied health professionals and teachers, and various strategies have been implemented to address this. One such strategy involves sending tertiary students to RRR areas for clinical placements to encourage them to consider RRR practice as a career pathway.³

Clinical placements are embedded in several academic disciplines, yet law schools were slow to adopt clinical legal education.⁴ Whilst

* Professor of Law, Director UQ Pro Bono Centre, University of Queensland. The author wishes to thank Daisy Rice for her excellent research assistance. The hard work of Mandy Shircore in raising funds for this project is also gratefully acknowledged. Thanks also to the four community legal centres who participated in this pilot clinical program: Townsville Community Law, Wide Bay Burnett Community Legal Service, Suncoast Community Legal Service and TASC (The Advocacy and Support Centre); and the nine students who were our inaugural RRR clinical students.

¹ Law Council of Australia, ‘Financial Incentives to Bring Lawyers to the Bush’ (Media Release, 13 December 2023). See also Urbis Pty Ltd, *2022 National Profile of Solicitors: Final* (Annual Report, 26 April 2023) 34.

² Law Council of Australia, *The Justice Project: Volume 1 – Rural, Regional and Remote (RRR) Australians* (Final Report, August 2018) 28; Amanda Kennedy et al, ‘Educating Law Students for Rural and Regional Practice: Embedding Place Based Perspectives in Law Curricula’ (2014) 24(1) *Legal Education Review* 6, 27.

³ Mundy outlines some other strategies that have been considered in a legal context, including HECS fee waivers, graduate programs, salary incentives, tax incentives: Trish Mundy, ‘Recruiting and Retaining Lawyers: A Problem in Rural Regional and Remote Communities’ (2009) 34(1) *Alternative Law Journal* 32, 34-5.

⁴ In 2002, Giddings and Hook reported that only 16 Australian law schools ran clinical legal education programs: Jeff Giddings and Barbara Hook, ‘The Tyranny of Distance: Clinical Legal Education In “The Bush”’ (2002) 2 *International Journal of Clinical Legal Education* 64, 70. There were 38 Australian law schools at this time: David Barker, ‘An Avalanche of Law Schools 1989-2013’ (2013) 6(1) *Journal of the*

most law schools offer clinical legal education in some form, it is typically an elective and therefore not mandatory.⁵ Very few law schools offer clinical placements in RRR areas apart from those that are themselves located in the regions.⁶ Since the vast majority of law students study in a capital city or metropolitan region,⁷ very few have an opportunity to experience legal practice in a RRR area prior to graduation.

As part of its RRR Justice Project, the UQ Law School piloted a RRR clinical placement program during the summer and winter of 2024. We sent nine students to four RRR locations for two weeks to experience RRR legal practice at a community legal centre. The author undertook interviews with each of the students after their placements concluded. Based on their reflections, we concluded that the pilot was a success, and we intend to continue the program in future. In this paper, I share some of the students' reflections and embed them in the existing literature on RRR placements.

II ENCOURAGING RRR PRACTICE: THE ROLE OF THE LAW SCHOOL

Access to justice is highly dependent on the presence of lawyers.⁸ The legal needs of people in RRR areas may be more complex and they are likely to be intertwined with non-legal problems.⁹ In addition to this, access to legal and related services is much more limited.¹⁰ People in RRR areas often live long distances away from legal services and courts, and there are limited or no public transport options available, which makes accessing legal assistance expensive and time consuming.¹¹ Some RRR areas have high levels of financial

Australasian Law Teachers Association 153. As to the (similar) experience in the United States: see Ashli Tomisich, 'Learning the Rural Practice of Law' (2024) 24(1) *Wyoming Law Review* 113, 123-4.

⁵ See generally Kingsford Legal Centre, *Clinical Legal Education Guide 2019/20* (Final Report, 2020).

⁶ The Kingsford Legal Centre Guide indicates that in 2020, only one law school ran a dedicated RRR clinic, La Trobe University: Kingsford Legal Centre (n 5) 18. Others including Murdoch University and the University of Wollongong ran clinics in RRR areas because their campuses were located in RRR areas: Kingsford Legal Centre (n 5) 23, 47. Mundy confirms that even at regional universities, RRR clinical placements are limited: Mundy (n 3) 35. Note also that a similar 'metro bias' in student placements has been observed in other disciplines: Tony Smith et al, 'Ruralization of Students' Horizons: Insights into Australian Health Professional Students' Rural and Remote Placements' (2018) 11 *Journal of Multidisciplinary Healthcare* 85, 86.

⁷ Sher Campbell and Katherine Lindsay, 'Lawyers of the Future: Creating Aspirations, Forging Connections and Facilitating Professional Links in Rural and Regional Contexts' (2014) 2 *International Journal of Rural Law and Policy* 1, 2.

⁸ See generally Rosemary Hunter, Annette Olesen and Rebecca Sandefur, 'Lawyers and Access to Justice' in Richard Abel et al (eds), *Lawyers in 21st Century Societies* (Hart Publishing, 2022) 303.

⁹ Law Council of Australia (n 2) 8-9.

¹⁰ Ibid, 15; Michael Cain and Suzie Forell, 'Recruitment and Retention of Lawyers in Regional, Rural and Remote New South Wales' (2010) 13 *Justice Issues* 1, 11.

¹¹ Law Council of Australia (n 2) 17-9.

disadvantage, and others are home to marginalised communities with particular legal needs, such as newly arrived immigrants and older people.¹² These community members may have high and complex legal needs, yet fewer public or free legal services are available in RRR areas. This places substantial pressure on local lawyers to provide pro bono assistance.¹³ There is ‘growing concern’ about the shortage of lawyers in RRR areas and the need to attract new graduates to RRR practice.¹⁴

It is often observed that it is difficult to recruit and retain lawyers in RRR areas and that demand for legal services often exceeds supply.¹⁵ The situation seems to be particularly dire in Queensland. Thirty eight percent of Queenslanders live in rural and remote areas, yet only 8% of solicitors practice there.¹⁶ Queensland is a highly decentralised state, and there are often vast distances between remote communities and urban centres.¹⁷ Many of Queensland’s RRR areas experience high levels of disadvantage,¹⁸ resulting in greater need for legal and related social services.¹⁹ Furthermore, 66% of Queensland’s Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander peoples live in RRR areas.²⁰ As Porter and Cubillo explain, legal service delivery to Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander peoples requires particular understanding and expertise, which is in short supply generally, let alone in RRR areas.²¹

Geographical isolation can further complicate individuals’ legal problems. For example, women who are victims of domestic violence may find it more difficult to leave, and people found guilty of criminal offences may not be able to access community corrections programs.²² A shortage of lawyers can mean people do not seek assistance due to

¹² Ibid 16; and see generally Richard Coverdale, ‘Postcode Justice: Rural and Regional Disadvantage in the Administration of Law in Victoria’ (2011) 16(1) *Deakin Law Review* 156.

¹³ Kennedy et al (n 2) 3.

¹⁴ Cain and Forell (n 10) 1; see also Law Council of Australia (n 1); Law Council of Australia (n 2) 3; Simon Rice, ‘Access to a Lawyer In Rural Australia: Thoughts On The Evidence We Need’ (2011) 16(1) *Deakin Law Review* 13.

¹⁵ Similar observations have been made in Canada: Nicole Aylwin and Lisa Moore, ‘Rural and Remote Access to Justice: A Literature Review’ (2015) *Canadian Forum on Civil Justice* 51.

¹⁶ Queensland Health, *Rural and Remote Health and Wellbeing Strategy 2022-2027* (Handbook, 2022) 8; Urbis Pty Ltd (n 1) 35.

¹⁷ Queensland Government Statistician’s Office, ‘*Queensland Compared with Other Jurisdictions, Census 2021*’ (Final Report, 2022) 1.

¹⁸ Seven of Australia’s 10 most disadvantaged local government areas are in Queensland: Queensland Health (n 16) 8.

¹⁹ Law Council of Australia (n 2) 8. Although note that the Law Council distinguishes between two types of RRR area, coastal and inland. There is, of course, considerable variation between the different regions: Law Council of Australia at 6.

²⁰ Queensland Health (n 16) 8.

²¹ Amanda Porter and Eddie Cubillo, ‘Unsettling Australian Clinical Legal Education’, in Nicole Watson and Heather Douglas (eds) *Legal Education Through an Indigenous Lens: Decolonising Law School*, 2024.

²² Ibid 10; see also Helen McGowan, ‘Adapt, Improvise and Overcome: Engaging with Conflict of Interest in the Bush’ (PhD Thesis, Australian National University, 2018); Australian Institute of Family Studies, *Domestic and Family Violence in Regional, Rural and Remote Communities* (Policy and Practice Paper, December 2015) 4; Coverdale (n 12).

privacy concerns or conflicts of interest.²³ It is, therefore, particularly important for universities to encourage students and young lawyers to consider practising in RRR areas to ensure that everyone has access to legal services.

Students' career choices are strongly influenced by the professional experiences they encounter whilst at university. Law students invariably report feeling pressured to pursue careers within large corporate law firms which typically operate out of capital cities.²⁴ Law schools tend not to teach rural legal content²⁵ or offer work-integrated learning experiences in RRR areas.²⁶ As a result, few students consider legal practice in RRR areas as a viable career option.²⁷

Other disciplines do take active steps to encourage students to consider working in RRR areas after they graduate. Medical, teaching and allied health students routinely undertake (sometimes very lengthy) clinical placements in RRR areas.²⁸ Research has demonstrated that positive RRR placement experiences are associated with an intention to pursue employment in RRR areas amongst medical and allied health students.²⁹ Brown and colleagues, for example, found a 38% increase in allied health students' intentions to work rurally after a short-term RRR clinical placement.³⁰ Another predictor of RRR practice intention

²³ Law Council of Australia (n 2) 15.

²⁴ See, eg, Judy Allen and Paula Baron, 'Buttercup Goes to Law School: Student Wellbeing in Stressed Law Schools' (2004) 29(6) *Alternative Law Journal* 285. Whilst some have suggested that law schools are responsible for the pressure students feel to pursue employment in top tier law firms (see, eg, Barry Yau and David Catanzariti, 'At Play in the Field of Dreams: Theorising Attitudes, Perceptions and Practices of Law Students in Conjunction with the Reflections of Early Career Commercial Lawyers' (2020) 37 *Law in Context* 114) it has also been noted that top tier law firms market directly to students (Yau and Catanzariti at 125 and Campbell and Lindsay (n 7) 2). Hewitt and colleagues found that peer pressure was to blame rather than academics or the university generally: Anne Hewitt et al, 'Weighing the Cost Of Expectations that Students Complete Legal Work Experience' (2022) 32 *Legal Education Review* 109, 119-120.

²⁵ Note, however, that law is not alone in this. A meta-analysis of health curricula found 'little evidence of specific rural curriculum content or pedagogical strategies that are tailored to rural and remote practice': Margaret Adams, 'Education to Prepare Health Professionals For Rural Practice: A Scoping Review' (2023) 33(1) *Australian and International Journal of Rural Education* 17, 17.

²⁶ Economides claims that legal theory and practice is inherently urban-centric and that the law curriculum reinforces this: Kim Economides, 'Centre-periphery Tensions in Legal Theory and Practice: Can Law and Lawyers Resist Urban Imperialism?' (2012) 2 *International Journal of Regional, Rural and Remote Law and Policy* 1.

²⁷ Trish Mundy, 'Placing "The Other": Final Year Law Students' "Imagined" Experience of Rural and Regional Practice Within the Law School Context' (2012) *International Journal of Regional, Rural and Remote Law and Policy* 1, 4.

²⁸ Hudson and colleagues report on a year-long placement: Judith Hudson, Patricia Knight and Kathryn Weston, 'Patient Perceptions of Innovative Longitudinal Integrated Clerkships Based in Regional, Rural and Remote Primary Care: A Qualitative Study' (2012) 13 *BMC Family Practice* 72. See also Leanne Brown et al, 'Longitudinal Tracking of Workplace Outcomes for Undergraduate Allied Health Students Undertaking Placements in Rural Australia' (2017) 46(2) *Journal of Allied Health* 79, 84.

²⁹ See particularly Joshua Mortimer et al, 'Are All Rural Placements Created Equal? A National Study of Placement Experiences Among Multidisciplinary Health Students' (2019) 27 *Australian Journal of Rural Health* 118.

³⁰ Leanne Brown et al (n 28) 83.

amongst students is rural origin. Importantly, RRR clinical placements have been found to cement rural practice intentions, even amongst those of rural origin.³¹

Very limited research has been undertaken on the influence of clinical placements on law students' practice intentions, and since few RRR placement options exist in Australian law schools, even less is known about the role RRR clinical placements could play in attracting young lawyers to RRR areas. With this in mind, we designed a RRR clinical placement program to learn more about whether clinical legal education in RRR areas could influence our own students' practice intentions.

III THE UQPBC RRR JUSTICE INITIATIVE

In 2021, the UQ Pro Bono Centre ('UQPBC') launched its RRR Justice Initiative. The UQPBC is a nationally recognised leader in the development, promotion and provision of student pro bono legal services. Through partnerships with the not-for-profit sector, the UQPBC coordinates both the clinical legal education program of the UQ law school as well as its substantial pro bono offerings.³²

Clinical legal education at UQ is an LLB elective, graded as either pass or fail. Students are placed at one of seven community legal centres for one day a week during semester (13 weeks).³³ They undertake supervised paralegal work under the guidance of experienced legal practitioners. All of the community legal centres that run UQ student clinics are located in metropolitan areas, and all but one are located in the inner-city centre.

Between 2020 and 2022, the UQPBC, through a philanthropic campaign, raised funds to support student pro bono activities in RRR areas. The goals of the UQPBC RRR Justice Initiative were to support RRR community legal services, increase access to justice in RRR areas, build awareness and understanding of the legal needs of people within RRR areas, and encourage students to consider RRR legal practice as a career option.

A steering committee was established to guide the UQPBC RRR Justice Project and to oversee the commitment to funds to various project initiatives. Several organisations were represented on the RRR steering committee including Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Legal Service ('ATSILS'), Queensland Human Rights Commission ('Far North Queensland region') and Community Legal Centres Queensland ('CLCQ').

³¹ Some have found rural origin to be the strongest predictor of rural practice: see, eg, Timothy Skinner et al, 'Does Undertaking Rural Placements Add to Place Of Origin as a Predictor of Where Health Graduates Work? (2022) 30 *Australian Journal of Rural Health* 529, 532.

³² 'UQ Pro Bono Centre', *University of Queensland* (Web Page) <<https://law.uq.edu.au/pro-bono>>.

³³ We run nine separate clinics each semester: 'Legal Clinics', *University of Queensland* (Web Page) <<https://law.uq.edu.au/current-students/course-information-and-support/legal-clinics>>.

The steering committee decided to dedicate a substantial proportion of the raised funds to pilot a RRR clinical placement program. We identified four RRR community legal centres that were willing to undertake clinical supervision of two students for a two-week period over the academic break in summer (January 2024) or winter (July 2024); they were Townsville Community Law, Wide Bay Burnett Community Legal Service, Suncoast Community Legal Service and TASC ('The Advocacy and Support Centre'). The UQPBC provided funds to each of the participating community legal centres to offset the costs of supervision for the two-week period.³⁴ The aim of the placements was to highlight the career opportunities available for legal practitioners in RRR Australia, and to expose students to the unique access to justice issues facing those in RRR areas.

As with the other clinical placements, students received academic credit but the course was assessed on a pass/fail basis.³⁵ The students were required to submit a learning plan, outlining their personal learning goals, before they commenced the placement. They also completed a written reflection after the first week, and another after the second week. Students completed the equivalent of three days' work from home after the placement ended to ensure they completed the same number of placement days as students undertaking clinic during the academic semester.

A total of nine students completed a RRR clinic in 2024 – six students completed the course during summer, and three completed the course during winter. The students undertook the placement in pairs, apart from one student who went alone. Several applications were received for the summer program, so the application process was highly competitive. Fewer students applied for the winter offering, which is why one student completed the clinic on their own: they were not accompanied by another student due to insufficient student interest.

We restricted student applicants to those who were returning home to the relevant RRR area for the university break or were otherwise able to pay for their own travel and accommodation. Our reasons for this were two-fold. First, the aim of the program was to encourage students to consider RRR legal practice as a viable career option. We reasoned that students who had grown up in, or otherwise had strong ties to, RRR areas would be most likely to consider RRR practice upon graduation. Second, we wanted to limit expenditure, particularly in the pilot stage. Eight of the nine students who undertook a RRR clinic were returning

³⁴ An additional amount was provided to one of the centres to cover the costs of students' travel and accommodation so they could accompany a lawyer on a two-day outreach visit to several remote communities.

³⁵ We feel confident that a pass/fail approach is appropriate in clinical settings. Kruger and Tennant came to the same conclusion in their dentistry course. They found that students 'gain[ed] a great deal more from the placement time' if they were not graded. When they did grade their students, they found this distracted students from the learning experience and instead result in students 'trying to say and do what they thought [the educator] wanted to see and hear': Estie Kruger and Marc Tennant, 'Short-Stay Rural and Remote Placements in Dental Education, an Effective Model for Rural Exposure: A Review of Eight-Year Experience in Western Australia' (2010) 18 *Australian Journal of Rural Health* 148, 151.

home for the break. The other was a mature-age student who was able to self-fund the trip. All nine students completed the placement successfully.

IV INTERVIEWS WITH RRR PLACEMENT STUDENTS: METHOD

Within two weeks of their return to the city, the students participated in a debrief interview. Some of the interview was recorded for reporting purposes, however the parts of the interview that related to students' wellbeing and more personal reflections on how they coped were not recorded. This was to ensure students could speak honestly about their experience, and to ensure any occupational health and safety concerns were identified. Ethical clearance for the interviews was obtained from the relevant university ethics committee.

The interviews were semi-structured in nature. Students were asked to comment generally on what they did whilst at the clinic, what went well, and what challenges they faced. They were also asked some questions that specifically related to the RRR setting, including what differences they observed compared to work experience in the city, and whether participating in the placement changed their RRR practice intentions.

The recorded portion of the interview was around 30 minutes' duration for each student. The audio recordings were transcribed for data analysis and a reflexive thematic analysis applying Braun and Clarke's methods was undertaken.³⁶ Themes were generated relating to four broad topics: what the students did; what students learned about legal practice; what students learned about RRR legal practice; and whether the placement influenced their views on potential career pathways. We acknowledge that this is a very small sample size, however the students made some important comments about RRR placements in a legal context which we believe will be useful to others who are considering implementing similar programs.

V STUDENT REFLECTIONS ON THE RRR CLINIC PILOT

1 *What Students Did*

All of the students had the opportunity to shadow several highly experienced and well-respected community lawyers. They obtained hands-on experience in the diverse practice of a regional community legal centre, participating in client interviews, legal research, project work, community engagement and education initiatives, all under close supervision. Most students visited court, and all visited at least one outreach location, most often a rural or remote neighbourhood or community centre. This meant that all students experienced legal practice both in the centre's regional office and at least one of their more remote outreach locations.

³⁶ Virginia Braun and Victoria Clarke, *Thematic Analysis: A Practical Guide* (SAGE Publications Ltd, 2022).

Students described ‘observing different legal appointments’, ‘shadowing staff’, ‘letter writing’, doing ‘legal research’, ‘resource-making’, doing ‘intake work’ and ‘taking initial instructions’, ‘triaging clients’, and ‘talking to the lawyers’. The students were grateful for the various ways in which the supervising lawyers weaved educational opportunities into their day. For example, some students said they and the lawyer both drafted a letter to a client and compared their letters so the student could see ‘what is useful and direct, and then what is a little too much for the client and you just sort of need to put it into other words.’ Students considered this to be a useful learning experience.

Most students said they ‘sat in on’ several client interviews during the first week so they could see how the lawyer ‘would ask questions’ and ‘how the lawyers handled the different clients that came in’. By the second week, students said they ‘got a bit more involved’ and ‘interacted with the clients a bit more’. Some also reported ‘drafting up the advice’ for the lawyer to deliver to the client. They appreciated being able to sit in on interviews first and then debrief with the lawyers to ‘get some helpful tips and advice’ and learn ‘what they were thinking, why they suggested what they did.’

Most students reported doing ‘intake work’ or ‘triaging’ and said they benefitted from seeing the file note detailing the legal advice that was ultimately provided. This way, they were able to see ‘what you would say to someone who came in with this kind of issue’.

Students’ confidence grew as they realised that even though they were doing some of these tasks for the first time, ‘you could go a fair way just with doing some research.’ One said they realised, that ‘oh yes, I do know quite a lot!’ Another said, ‘I felt like I properly was able to apply some of my legal knowledge’. This allowed the students to feel ‘valuable’ and ‘useful’.

All of the students emphasised how generous the lawyers at the community legal centres were with their time and advice. They said the lawyers were ‘welcoming’, ‘very, very kind people’, ‘so friendly’, ‘chatty and social’ and ‘took us under [their] wing’. They were grateful for the lengths that lawyers went to to enhance their learning experience. One said:

‘they were always trying to find a learning opportunity, and they really went out of their way, even though they are quite busy... they kind of knew we were there to learn and observe and engage with us as much as we could, and they really jumped on board with that and found ways to expose us to as much as possible.’

In addition to the instruction and mentoring they received from the supervising lawyers, students reflected on the importance of values and the example the lawyers set for them as individuals. Students were able to reconnect with some of their own motivations for entering law school, and address the tension between ‘striving for real justice’ and ‘earning less money’. One said:

‘It was great to hear even their mindset and their values and what they’d learnt because I think a lot of people go into law school with those ideals as

well, and they almost have to change them in order to have success as a lawyer... I don't think you should need to compromise on that.'

For many, interacting with the lawyers was the highlight of their placement:

'I think it was the solicitors there would probably be the highlight for me. Super engaged with the work they're doing... They're there to make a difference in the community and they were really invested in us as students as well'.

Several students said that 'just sit[ting] down and having a chat' with the lawyers 'just generally talking about what they did' was one of the best elements of their clinical experience. Importantly, even students who had volunteered or worked at community legal centres in the past said they benefitted from the experience. One said:

'You don't really get an opportunity like that in any other experience that you get... If you're working for an organisation, you don't want to be sitting there distracting the lawyers for an hour, just asking them questions. Or you can't do that at a networking event... It was very, very informative to get their perspective and their mentorship and their advice on what we can do in the future in terms of our career as well.'

2 *What Students Learned About Legal Practice*

Several students observed that the placement was 'very different to anything else you do at uni' and they were 'able to see the gaps in the uni education compared to practice'. In particular, they described the importance of 'people skills' in legal practice. They noted that the lawyer was required not only to provide legal advice but was also 'managing everything else that's going on in the client's life'. One student said: 'I learned a lot about the substantive law, but I learnt even more about procedural law and just the soft skills as well that come along with being a solicitor in that environment'.

Students also observed that the advice given by lawyers was very different to the legal advice they had been trained to give at law school. They noted that often the advice given by lawyers was more 'practical', or 'intuitive', than 'legal'. One student said they were surprised to observe a lawyer recommending against taking legal action because the best course of action was to 'avoid these situations... you don't want to stir anything up.' Similarly, they observed that clients did not always follow the lawyer's advice, and often this was for a good reason. One said: 'for some people, even after they got the legal advice, they chose not to progress further because that just wasn't the best option for them'. They observed this was very different to what they had been taught at law school:

'At law school, your exam question ends after they say: do they have a cause of action? Likelihood of success? What damages could they get? And they don't ask: is this an appropriate remedy for this client? What steps would they have to take to get the damages, to have a successful claim?'

Students also said that the language the lawyers used to explain the law was quite different to what they were used to. They learned that ‘when you have someone there, they’re not going to be able to understand everything’.

Students were surprised to learn that often there was nothing that could be done to assist clients, at least in a legal sense. They also noted that the kind of assistance community lawyers could provide was limited – many clients only received advice, not representation, and some students questioned ‘whether that’s really facilitating access to justice’. However, the students were inspired by the ‘genuine care’ the solicitors had for their clients, and they could see that, for the client, having ‘someone who was on their side and willing to keep pushing for them, made the world of difference’ even when the legal outcome was ‘quite unjust’ – ‘that gave a lot of strength to the client.’

Some students said they found the client work ‘a bit confronting’. That was particularly so when they worked with clients who were distressed, intoxicated or experiencing significant relationship problems. Watching the lawyers taught the students to be realistic in what they could offer and to manage their own emotional reactions to clients’ circumstances. One student said:

‘I learned that you’ve got to be able to move on quickly. There’s a lot of value in sympathising and empathising with the person who’s coming to you with what is probably the biggest concern in their life at the time. But realistically, you’re limited by what you can actually do and I think it’s really important to be able to quickly weed through some of those emotional challenges and focus on the quick and useful advice you can give.’

The students were also surprised by the wide range of legal issues confronting community legal centre clients. Students observed that there are often ‘just so many things going on in [clients’] lives’ – some legal and some non-legal, but inter-related. As a result, the students were exposed to a range of legal practice areas particularly criminal law, family law, child protection, domestic violence, elder law, neighbourhood disputes and consumer law. They realised that community lawyers needed to ‘be across’ several areas of legal knowledge to be able to assist clients. One said: ‘I don’t think I quite realised how many hats you have to wear as a solicitor in a legal centre... you go from family law to personal injury just with a snap of the finger’. One said: ‘It’s a real multifaceted approach to solving some of the issues within the community, not just legal.’

3 *What Students Learned About Practising in RRR Areas*

Several students described the differences between legal practice in the city compared with RRR areas based their own experience. In particular, they noted the very high level of unmet legal need in RRR communities. They also noted the limited amount of non-legal support services on offer. One said:

‘If they were in the city, they have access to other resources, but in the RRR area, there are limited other services to go to. In the city, you can turn on every corner and, you know, you have more people, but you also have more opportunities for help.’

Students said the clients, and the legal issues they presented with, were quite different, even between regional and remote areas. For example, they observed high levels of drug use (particularly ‘meth’) and high levels of domestic violence in RRR areas. Whilst they acknowledged that both are also present in the city, the problems seemed worse the more remote the students went. One said, ‘there is more of a relationship between meth and DV in the clients in the remote areas, even compared to the [regional] office.’

The students concluded that both legal and related services were lacking, ‘there’s obviously legal steps that clients in the regions can take, but there is a social work need as well... there is such a need in these areas for social work, for healthcare.’

Having said that, several students remarked on the strong relationships practitioners in RRR areas had built with one another. One said: ‘they [the lawyers] have connections with everyone... you seem to know everybody, even security guards.’ This ‘cohesion’ allowed for some ‘back and forth’ as lawyers and other providers discussed who could provide what service to the clients: ‘they are all kind of there for each other’. The students enjoyed the ‘community feel’.

Some reflected that successful legal practice in RRR areas relied on these relationships, particularly when providing services in more remote areas. Some witnessed first-hand the challenges associated with delivering legal services in remote outreach clinics noting ‘you can go to these outreaches, put in the effort’ but ‘if the community connection isn’t quite there’, there is a risk that clients will not come. They observed a lack of knowledge amongst community members about the legal services that were available. Interestingly, many students said even *they* were not aware of the existence of the community legal centre they were placed at before they did the clinic, even though ‘I’d been on that street that they are on like a million times’. Many said that ‘even my family was asking me questions – none of us knew.’

Students observed other barriers to access to justice in RRR areas, particularly those related to access to technology. They were surprised to learn that several people in RRR areas have limited access to the internet, and limited knowledge of and experience with information technology, and they noted that sometimes this limited the assistance that lawyers could provide. One said, ‘Some clients didn’t even really understand how to attach photos to emails, and all of that stuff is really, really important, especially if you are going to go to QCAT or go to court.’

Another student was surprised to find that some clients ‘preferred to come in and hand – physically deliver the documents rather than sending them over email.’

One student observed an online hearing and was able to reflect on some of the challenges that posed for the lawyer and the client:

‘it was a very sensitive matter as well and she couldn’t connect to the hearing at all through her own technology. So the lawyer I was sitting with had to be on the phone with the client and then have her phone on speaker phone and then it went through to the computer for her to listen. And we couldn’t even really tell if she could listen until the end... it was just a mess.’

4 *What Students Learned About Possible Career Pathways*

Importantly for the purpose of this initiative, all of the students confirmed that the placement had made them consider RRR legal practice as a career option. They said this was mostly because of the ‘supportive work atmosphere’ they experienced at the service. One said:

‘I could really see myself doing that work – I was like, “I would love to work here!” I was thinking “this could be me – I could finish my degree and go back and work there.”... I see that as much more of an option than I did before. Like, I just never considered going back’.

Another said, ‘when I was there, it was like, “ok, this is actually where I want to end up.”’

All students said that their eyes were opened to alternative career options. They made comments like: ‘I think it just gives you so much clarity on what other options are out there’; ‘for me as a final year, it was great to see what sort of pathways I could take’; and ‘it probably opened up a lot more options than I thought’.

In addition to the opening up of career options, many students enjoyed the RRR lifestyle. They noted the beauty of their surroundings, and even students who had grown up in RRR areas remarked on the different landscapes of remote locations: ‘I hadn’t been inland much, so even just as basic as the landscape changed – there’s wheat here, there’s cotton here – and we were just so excited along the whole road trip!’

For others, the RRR placement cemented the importance of continuing to undertake pro bono work after they graduated. One said, ‘that won’t be the last time I spend in a community legal service, whether it’s volunteering additional time in the future or on a full-time basis.’

Others learned more about what they didn’t want to do. One said, ‘after doing this, I realise I don’t have an interest in family law at this stage.’ Some students said they appreciated the opportunity to meet people from other organisations who were co-located with the community legal centre they were placed at – this included both government agencies and non-government organisations. Whilst they may not have been attracted to community legal practice, it reminded them of other roles that might be available to them in RRR areas.

VI DISCUSSION: THE FUTURE OF THE UQPBC RRR CLINICS

The views of the nine students who participated in this RRR placement pilot have convinced us that this is a valuable program, and we intend to continue it each year over summer. Whilst much of what

the students said was consistent with comments from students undertaking clinics in metropolitan areas, there were some important findings that related specifically to RRR placements.

A RRR Placements and Practice Intention

As we had hoped, participation in the RRR clinical placement did seem to increase our students' rural practice intentions. Many said their 'eyes had been opened' to possible career paths in RRR areas, and that they now considered 'going home' after graduation to be a viable option. This is consistent with the literature from other disciplines – it has consistently been shown amongst medical and allied health students that participation in a RRR placement significantly increases students' intentions to practice in RRR areas, for those of both city and rural origin.³⁷

Importantly, the literature emphasises the importance of positive placement experiences on RRR practice intentions, and notes that negative experiences can have the opposite effect.³⁸ All of our students said they were very satisfied with their placement – they all made comments suggesting 'it was genuinely a very rewarding experience'. All said they would recommend the placement to other students. They valued the opportunity to engage in 'hands-on' learning and they felt that their professional skills had improved, even within two weeks. One said, 'I probably remember the law so much better now that I have a situation that I've used it in.' Another said: 'I've been in the classroom a million days – but to get out there I think is something that I'm really hungry for.'

In particular, our students emphasised that having supportive, friendly supervisors, who went above and beyond to enhance their learning experience, was the 'highlight' of their placement. Research in other disciplines has made similar findings, indeed some have concluded that high quality supervision is the most important factor that contributes to a positive placement experience for students.³⁹ We were fortunate that all our supervisors, and their colleagues, warmly

³⁷ Note that Wolfgang et al found a larger effect for students from non-rural backgrounds: Rebecca Wolfgang et al, 'Immersive Placement Experiences Promote Rural Intent in Allied Health Students of Urban and Rural Origin' (2019) 12 *Journal of Multidisciplinary Healthcare* 699, 707.

³⁸ Mortimer et al (n 29); Wolfgang et al (n 37) 703. Smith et al found that satisfaction with placement meant students were 2.33 times more likely to indicate future practice intention: Tony Smith et al, 'Health Professional Students' Rural Placement Satisfaction and Rural Practice Intentions: A National Cross-Sectional Survey' (2018) 26(1) *Australian Journal of Rural Health* 26.

³⁹ Wolfgang et al (n 37) 703; Smith et al (n 38) 91; Donna Bradley, Lisa Bourke and Catherine Cosgrave, 'Experiences of Nursing and Allied Health Students Undertaking A Rural Placement – Barriers and Enablers To Satisfaction and Wellbeing' (2020) 30(1) *Australian and International Journal of Rural Education* 51, 55; Sandra Walsh et al, 'Supporting Nursing and Allied Health Student Placements in Rural and Remote Australia: A Narrative View of Publications by University Departments of Rural Health' (2023) 219(3) *Medical Journal of Australia* S14.

welcomed the students and generously offered their mentorship and advice as well as providing an exceptional educational experience.

We also found that students were attracted to the ‘community feel’ of rural life, and this was true even of those who grew up in RRR areas. This is consistent with past research, which has found that both city and country students remark on the ‘close-knit’ nature of rural towns and the ‘interdisciplinary comradery’ they observe amongst service providers in RRR areas.⁴⁰ Aylwin and Moore suggest that this seems ‘idealistic’, but graduates may be more attracted to a role by lifestyle considerations than salary.⁴¹ The importance of social connectedness cannot be under-estimated – several studies have shown that students who feel embedded in the community during their placement, and have an opportunity to participate in community life, are more likely to express an intention to practise in a RRR area after graduation.⁴² The social safety net that exists in areas where people know each other well may make up for any ‘professional isolation’ that RRR practitioners might otherwise experience.⁴³

Having said this, it has been found that new graduates who decide to practice in RRR areas often do not stay long. Research suggests that young professionals including lawyers tend to stay in RRR areas for only one to two years, and that any RRR placement effect diminishes over time.⁴⁴ Those who remain were typically raised, or previously lived, in RRR areas.⁴⁵ Some have suggested that a ‘rural pipeline approach’ – that is, sourcing graduates from rural backgrounds and offering them incentives to ‘go home’ – is the best way of ensuring a RRR workforce into the long-term.⁴⁶ This is what we sought to do through this pilot project.

B *Potential challenges of RRR placements for students*

We have considered whether we should open up this RRR placement experience to students who are not from RRR areas. When we asked the nine pilot students about this, most agreed that city students would benefit from the placement, even from learning about ‘the place in general’ and ‘what life might be like there’. One said: ‘I think everyone could benefit from understanding the law’s failings in these [RRR] areas’.

⁴⁰ Wolfgang et al (n 37) 707. See also Smith et al (n 38) 92; Bradley, Bourke and Cosgrave (n 39) 55.

⁴¹ Mundy (n 3) 34.

⁴² Sandra Walsh et al (n 39) S15; Cathy Rogers, ‘Supporting Health Students on Rural Placements: A Scoping Review’ (2020) 29(3) *Australian Journal of Rural Health* 319, 328; Smith et al (n 38) 92; Wolfgang et al (n 37) 705-707.

⁴³ See Aylwin and Moore (n 15) 15.

⁴⁴ Kennedy et al (n 2) 7; Cain and Forell (n 10) 2. As to health graduates, see: Skinner et al (n 31) 532; Claire Seaman, Elyce Green and Kate Freire, ‘Effect of Rural Clinical Placements on Intention to Practice and Employment in Rural Australia: A Systemic Review’ (2022) 19(9) *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health* 5363.

⁴⁵ Seaman, Green and Freire (n 44). As to lawyers, see Mundy (n 3) 33.

⁴⁶ Rogers (n 42) 329; Aylwin and Moore (n 15) 45.

The literature suggests that there are challenges associated with sending city students to RRR areas on placement. Several studies have shown that students can experience financial stress by having to pay double rent and travel expenses.⁴⁷ In Queensland, travel expenses are particularly high due to the vast distances between urban centres, and accommodation can also be expensive, particularly in mining towns. Social isolation, and spending long periods of time away from family and friends, can also adversely influence students' appraisal of RRR clinical placements.⁴⁸

Of course, our placements were only two weeks long, which may ameliorate some of these concerns. In fact, we did wonder whether a two-week placement would provide students with enough time in which to develop professional skills. As noted above, most law clinics run one day a week for a semester, whereas our RRR clinic students attended their community legal centre for a two-week block and then completed three days' work from home. In fact, all of the students agreed that two weeks was an appropriate amount of time for a 'holiday' placement, and they all felt it was a sufficient period in which to observe and learn, and also contribute something themselves by the end. Even in two weeks, they said they 'saw so many matters and engaged with so many clients.' One said, 'I was pretty happy with the two weeks – I feel like I got to know the office really well and got to see lots of different things that they did in that time.'

This is consistent with the literature on RRR placements in other disciplines. Whilst some have speculated that longer placements are more likely to promote community connectedness and thereby persuade students to stay, several studies have found a stronger association between short placements and students' intentions to practice rurally.⁴⁹ In fact, Playford et al found that placements of four weeks or less were more strongly associated with subsequent rural practice than longer placements amongst allied health and nursing students.⁵⁰ Kruger and Tennant found in a dentistry context that short voluntary placements were effective and led to positive placement experiences.⁵¹

Even a two-week placement can be distressing for students, particularly considering the high levels of disadvantage experienced by those who seek assistance from community legal centres. We were concerned about student well-being, and we felt reassured that the pilot students had the support of their families and friends around them whilst on placement, given they were so far away from us. When we asked the students about this, they said that undertaking the placement whilst having the emotional support of their families was important and

⁴⁷ Leanne Brown et al, 'Longitudinal Tracking of Workplace Outcomes for Undergraduate Allied Health Students Undertaking Placements In Rural Australia' (2017) 46(2) *Journal of Allied Health* 79, 80; Bradley, Bourke and Cosgrave (n 39) 57.

⁴⁸ Bradley, Bourke and Cosgrave (n 39) 80; Smith et al (n 38) 92.

⁴⁹ For a meta-analysis, see: Seaman, Green and Freire (n 44).

⁵⁰ Denese Playford, Ann Larson and Belynda Wheatland, 'Going Country: Rural Student Placement Factors Associated with Future Rural Employment In Nursing and Allied Health' (2006) 14 *Australian Journal of Rural Health* 14, 16-17.

⁵¹ Kruger and Tennant (n 35) 150.

helpful. One student reflected: 'I was happy to be there because my sister's living there... but I think to be safe, ask [future students] will you have enough support there? Because I think if you felt alone... it could be hard.'

We also aimed to ensure students had the support of a peer. Research has confirmed that social support is important for students to feel positively about their placement, and Rogers suggests that students be placed in pairs to ensure they have access to peer-support.⁵² We sent our students in pairs for the same reason. As noted above, we did send one student alone, but we first assured ourselves that the student had access to other social supports nearby. We asked the students whether they thought sending two students to each service was the right number. All of the students who went on placement in pairs said they benefitted from having another student there with them, because 'we would constantly debrief afterwards'. They tended to conclude that 'two is the perfect number'. Rogers suggests that the students should meet one another prior to the placement⁵³ – one of our students made the same suggestion, so we will ensure this occurs in future.

Overall, few criticisms were made of the program, and any challenges faced related to unforeseen circumstances, such as illness.⁵⁴ We intend to continue the program on the strength of our students' positive experiences this year.

VII CONCLUSION

We found, as others have, that RRR clinical placements can result in a 'ruralisation of students' horizons'.⁵⁵ However, we found that influencing practice intentions requires more than just 'putting students in the bush'.⁵⁶ It is important that the experience is positive, with high quality supervisors and sufficient logistical and emotional support. We were fortunate that all of our students had a positive experience – they appreciated the effort that their clinical supervisors went to to ensure they learned about legal practice but also received the mentoring and support they craved. We found that students felt inspired by the work that the community lawyers were doing in RRR areas, and this had a strong impact on their practise intentions.

Sadly, law schools are lagging behind other disciplines in the extent to which they embed clinical education into their programs, and all the more when it comes to RRR placements. Our experience has shown that RRR clinical placements in law can alert students to alternative career options. Most of our students said they were now considering a career in a RRR area; others said their placement made them want to work in the legal assistance sector, or at least continue to do pro bono work after

⁵² Rogers (n 42) 321.

⁵³ Ibid.

⁵⁴ For one group, a high profile court case occurred on the day of their planned court visit and their ability to observe proceedings was limited by the presence of media.

⁵⁵ Smith et al (n 6) 85.

⁵⁶ Walsh et al (n 42) S17.

they graduated. Both are important and this has convinced us that our program is worthwhile.