Bridging the health divide
Securing a stable health workforce

The University of Wollongong (UOW) partners with regional, rural and remote communities towards better health and securing a stable health workforce.

Roughly one-third of Australia’s population live in regional, rural and remote areas with some of the lowest population densities in the world. On average, Australians living in these areas have shorter lives, higher levels of disease and injury and poorer access to and use of health services, compared with people living in metropolitan areas.

Poorer health outcomes in regional, rural and remote areas may be due to multiple factors including lifestyle differences and a level of disadvantage related to education and employment opportunities, as well as access to health services and health-related infrastructure. These populations also face unique health and social issues such as Indigenous health needs and inequities, farm safety, social isolation and natural disasters.

As a university with campuses across rural and regional NSW and with extensive health networks spanning much of the state, UOW is committed to improving the health and wellbeing of people living in regional, rural and remote areas and has become a leader in this space.

UOW has demonstrated this commitment by educating doctors, nurses and other health practitioners with placement programs in regional and rural settings to world-class research and Australia-first programs targeting Indigenous health, early childhood, ageing, dementia and mental health.

The University believes that an important part of improving regional, rural and remote health is to ensure that the people affected most – communities, patients and their families – are included in the process. This is why we partner with an extensive network of communities and health providers throughout NSW and across a range of settings and disciplines including general practices, hospitals, allied health, community and Aboriginal health services.

UOW is committed to bridging the gap between city and country. We recognise that a collaborative approach – which addresses the pipeline from high school to practice – is a key strength we provide in making the difference to health in regional, rural and remote areas. Simply increasing the size of the health workforce does not address this problem. There are enough doctors and nurses being trained, but the distribution – where they end up working – is out of balance.

UOW is committed to improving the health and wellbeing of people living in regional, rural and remote areas.

Our reach: key regional, rural and remote health initiatives

- **DOCTORS:** Graduate Medicine regional and rural placements
- **NURSES:** School of Nursing regional and rural placements
- **EARLY CHILDHOOD:** Early Start education and care centre partners
- **AGED AND DEMENTIA:** National education and consultancy projects
- **GRADUATE MEDICINE HUBS:** Illawarra, Shoalhaven, Milton / Ulladulla, Southern Highlands, Manjimup, Mudgee, Broken Hill, Grafton / Maclean
- **EARLY CHILDHOOD:** and rural placements
- **RESEARCH:** and rural placements
- **DOCTORS:** Graduate Medicine regional placements

A career in rural health

UOW alumna Teena Downton has become the voice of her generation in bringing better health outcomes to rural and remote communities after being named 2017 Rural Registrar of the Year by the Australian College of Rural and Remote Medicine and the Rural Doctors Association of Australia.

Dr Downton graduated with a Bachelor of Medical Science in 2008 and a Bachelor of Medicine/Bachelor of Surgery in 2012.

“When I was at university, life expectancy was said to be four years less in regional, rural and remote areas, compared to Australia’s major cities, and access to health professionals in remote areas was said to be half that of the cities,” she says.

Dr Downton was stymied not only to make a difference herself, but to encourage her peers to do so too. “I personally see a responsibility for my generation of health professionals to consider how they can help close the gap between rural and urban Australia, and bring the best of care closer to the people in the bush,” she says.

She became a representative on the Council of the National Rural Health Students’ Network, encouraged her peers in medicine, nursing and allied health to consider the rewards of rural careers, and advocated to government and policymakers on incentives to help keep them there.

Dr Downton took advantage of the work experience placements offered as part of her degree to explore the diversity a rural medical career can offer. “My one-year placement as a medical student in Broken Hill provided the real test as to whether rural practice was for me,” she recalls.

After graduating, she undertook her residency at Tamworth Rural Referral Hospital. Raised in Foxground NSW, Dr Downton completed an advanced skills year in obstetrics at the Orange Base Hospital and now calls the NSW Central West community of Cowra home. She works in private general practice and at the Cowra District Hospital, providing antenatal, intrapartum and post-pregnancy care. In addition to her role as a GP and obstetrician, Dr Downton also works as a medical educator for general practice trainees.
Delivering doctors in regional, rural and remote areas

Uniting students with opportunities

The Student Health Alliance for Rural Populations (SHARP) is UOW’s Rural Health Club. It is a student-run club united by one common interest – rural, remote and Indigenous health. SHARP aims to promote regional and remote practice to its members through rural experience weekends, rural health conferences, regional high school workshops, cultural awareness training, numerous volunteering opportunities and social events that link like-minded students across the university.

SHARP at UOW has over 1000 members studying in disciplines of Exercise Science and Rehabilitation, Indigenous Health, Medical and Health Sciences, Medicine, Nursing, Nutrition and Dietetics, Psychology, Public Health, and Social Work. It is one of 28 Rural Health Clubs nationally as part of the National Rural Health Student Network (NRHSN).

UOW is the only medical school in NSW whose admissions process places such a strong weight on outstanding academic achievement, personal qualities and experiences and a proven commitment to rural and remote settings.

UOW’s medical school Graduate Medicine (GM) was established in 2007 with a core focus on educating doctors with the capacity and desire to work in regional, rural and remote communities.

GM offers a unique and innovative medical education program that helps equip our graduates to care for their future patients in more effective and meaningful ways, and also makes a major contribution to addressing the maldistribution and critical workforce shortages in some of Australia’s rural and remote settings.

UOW is the only medical school in NSW whose admissions process places such a strong weight on outstanding academic achievement, personal qualities and experiences and a proven commitment to rural and regional communities. In addition, we prioritise students with a rural background, which results in about 60 percent of our students at GM having a rural origin.

A growing body of evidence demonstrates that medical students with a rural background are more likely to practice in rural areas.

Operating from two campuses – Wollongong (regional) and Nowra in the Shoalhaven (rural), all students at GM undertake a portion of their study in a rural setting and almost 50 per cent of the entire medical program is delivered rurally.

In fact, GM is the only medical program in Australia to give all students the opportunity to undertake a 12-month longitudinal clinical placement in a regional or rural setting. The longitudinal clinical placements are offered in one of 11 regional and rural communities across NSW, stretching from the Northern Rivers to the South Coast, and as far west as Broken Hill, with some even working as part of the Royal Flying Doctor Service.

As part of their longitudinal placement, students undertake a research project on a local rural or regional health issue. Results from these projects have provided evidence that has been used by clinicians to modify and improve their own practice as well as supplying important information to community members allowing them to better manage and improve their own health.

UOW provides scholarships and incentives to support students to undertake rural clinical placements and to support the progress of Indigenous students through the course. The University also offers an alternative entry pathway for Indigenous applicants and three Commonwealth supported places dedicated annually to Indigenous students.

WHAT SETS US APART?

- UOW is the only medical school in Australia where all students undertake a 12-month longitudinal clinical placement integrated across community and hospital in a rural (two-thirds of students) or regional (one-third of students) setting.

- UOW has a network of more than 500 Honorary Clinical Academics in rural and regional areas.

PROGRAM SUCCESS

- 752 students (10 cohorts) have now graduated from this program with GM producing quality doctors and addressing the shortage of healthcare professionals in regional, rural and remote Australia.

- UOW produces a significant proportion of graduates each year who elect to undertake an internship in a rural or regional area and an average of 61 per cent of our graduates are currently training or working in rural or regional settings.

- 75 per cent of UOW graduating students would like to practice outside urban metropolitan regions upon completion of their training.

- UOW has an expanded community training network incorporating 22 Regional, District, Base and private hospitals and approximately 70 partner teaching medical practices across rural and regional Australia.

- UOW has contributed directly or through collaborative partnerships to over $10 million in rural and regional infrastructure to support clinical education and training. This includes a direct contribution into rural and regional medical practices to increase their capacity to facilitate medical training.
Making a difference for our communities

UOW’s Health and Wellbeing Strategy harnesses and builds upon the collective talent across the University and our partners to deliver innovative and quality healthcare as well as improved physical and mental wellbeing for our regional and state communities. At the core of the strategy is UOW’s endeavour to increase social equity through health models that support open access. Rural & Regional Health, and Nursing Education & Research are two initiatives that are included in this strategy.

Rural and Regional Health: targets the Illawarra and NSW more broadly and includes UOW rural training pathways and the Regional Training Hub program.

The initiative is:
- Improving the quality of care given to patients in country hospitals and rural practices by addressing the maldistribution of the rural medical workforce across Australia.
- Providing training along the pathway from student to medical professional in rural areas.
- Providing systems that will support the internships, rotations or mentoring of the growing number of students in rural areas.
- Providing educational support, direct clinical supervision and mentoring of all doctors in postgraduate training and direct clinical practice.

As part of the Integrated Rural Training Pipeline initiative, UOW received Australian Government funding, together with the University of Sydney, to develop a Regional Training Hub in the NSW North Coast. Although the two universities work in close collaboration, UOW is focusing on the Clarence Valley (Grafton) region, while the University of Sydney is focusing on the Richmond Valley (Lismore) region.

The training hubs are aimed at attracting and retaining medical graduates for the country by maximising local training opportunities for medical trainees and junior doctors, rather than them having to relocate to capital cities to further their training. UOW is also working in consultation with health services and clinical training networks in the Shoalhaven to implement pathways for rural postgraduate medical training in this region.

Nurse Education and Research: the Bachelor of Nursing is offered both in regional NSW and in South Western Sydney, providing quality person-centred education which is designed to produce transformative registered nurses. Students study where they live, enhancing community and contributing to the workforce.

This initiative is:
- Increasing the number of educated nurses needed to serve the growing population of our communities, an ageing population and an increasing incidence of chronic disease.
- Encouraging a stronger rural nursing workforce by enabling students and graduates to study and work locally.
- Supporting research students with a diverse range of interests and to offer opportunities for multidisciplinary research.

The Nursing Clinical Learning Facility at UOW’s Bega Campus includes a nursing simulation lab and related education spaces supporting staffing of the South East Regional Hospital in Bega.

The Western Sydney Nursing Education and Research Centre (WeSNER) provides a comprehensive education and research facility of a similar scale to the School of Nursing facilities at UOW’s Wollongong Campus. WeSNER’s proximity to Liverpool Hospital and other quality healthcare facilities provides an opportunity for UOW to contribute to South Western Sydney’s growing health and education precinct.

WeSNER is educating the next generation of nurses and encourage them to study, train and work in the Liverpool area. An important feature of this facility is that it is inclusive of its diverse population, tailoring nursing and healthcare education to local needs.

Nursing education and research

UOW has earned a proud reputation for nursing education and research since the School of Nursing was established in 1919. The School enjoys an excellent reputation both academically and clinically within the nursing profession, offering an extensive post graduate and doctoral research agenda.

Bachelor and Masters degrees are delivered across six UOW campuses, predominantly regional and rural NSW – with campuses at Wollongong, Shoalhaven, Southern Sydney (Loftus), South Western Sydney (Liverpool) Batemans Bay and Bega.

The aim is to develop transformative nurses who have the knowledge, skills and values to manage and effect change in the workforce. Being within a Science, Medicine and Health Faculty, the School is in a position to support research students with a diverse range of interests and to offer opportunities for multidisciplinary research.

The Federal Government’s Quality Indicators for Learning and Teaching (QILT) 2020 ranked UOW as second in Australia and number one in NSW/ACT for undergraduate Health Services and Support. UOW is consistently rated in the top 200 universities in the world for the quality of our Nursing graduates (2020 Good Universities Guide).

UOW is strengthening the rural and regional nursing workforce and we are the only school of nursing with a footprint across most of the southern half of NSW. We are committed to growing the numbers of registered nurses that are able to meet the demands of a rapidly changing healthcare service, and who are transformative in their practice and confident to advocate for themselves and their patients.

By providing the opportunity for people to study nursing and undertake placements in regional and rural areas, UOW is widening participation and encouraging a stronger rural nursing workforce with the ability to study and work locally.

The School of Nursing has an extensive network of partnerships with communities across NSW. All of our nursing students have the opportunity to undertake placements in most regional and rural areas of NSW including Broken Hill, Bourke and Brewarrina. More than 330 nursing students are undertaking placements in local hospitals, mental health facilities and aged-care facilities in South Western Sydney.

The School of Nursing has continued to grow steadily since opening in 1919 and has seen over 6,000 nurses graduate through our nursing degrees. UOW nursing graduates enjoy excellent employment prospects with 91.4% gaining full-time employment within four months from graduating (Quality Indicators for Learning and Teaching).

Our research program is strongly aligned to our teaching with a focus on clinical excellence, mental health nursing, primary health care and aged and dementia care. The new micro-credential Mental Health of Older People course provides a pathway to a Graduate Certificate of Master’s Degree.

Improving detection and treatment of delirium

Aged Dementia Health Education & Research (ADHHeR), based within UOW’s School of Nursing, and the Illawarra Shoalhaven Local Health District are leading a translational research project to improve care for hospital patients experiencing post-operative delirium.

Older people undergoing surgery are at a higher risk of experiencing delirium. Delirium is an acute, reversible, short-term confusion which presents as agitation and reduced alertness. Untreated and undetected delirium leads to many health problems including falls, longer stays in hospital and sometimes death.

During this project, which has received State Government funding, the research team will work with clinical staff in recovery units at Wollongong, St George and Bega hospitals to improve delirium care. The outcomes will be improved detection rates of delirium in recovery units, leading to better treatment of delirium and prevention of associated health problems. This will be achieved by improving staff skills in delirium care.

The education goes beyond simply improving knowledge. Findings from this project can be applied by educators working in other clinical areas and expanded to any healthcare problem.

The aim is to develop transformative nurses who have the knowledge, skills and values to manage and effect change in the workforce.
Building skills in nursing research

A mother of three young children, Bega School of Nursing tutor and PhD candidate Sharon James says she would not have been able to study or undertake a PhD without the support of UOW’s Bega Campus and her supervisors.

“The Bega Campus gives people the opportunity to complete their degree with the support of their family and community, without the stress and expense of leaving home,” she says.

“When I finish my PhD, I will be staying in the Bega Valley and it would be great to work clinically and continue research.”

Ms James started a Master of Public Health at UOW via distance education when she moved to the Bega Valley in 2004. She had previously worked in western NSW and Tasmania in the areas of acute care and occupational health. In 2017, Ms James commenced a PhD full-time with the support of the Australian Government Research Training Program Scholarship.

“While I do travel to Wollongong from time to time, most of my work is from home and occasionally from the local UOW Bega Campus,” she says.

“The community feel of the Bega Valley allows you to have those ongoing relationships with patients as well as students across their degree, which helps to support their outcomes.”

Ms James – the first in her family to enter the nursing profession - has been a registered nurse for 25 years and has taught at UOW’s School of Nursing for the past seven years.

Ms James’ PhD is based on the communication between nurses and patients in general practice regarding lifestyle risks, such as smoking, nutrition, alcohol intake and physical activity. All data is collected within the South Eastern NSW Primary Health Network.

“For me, the best thing about nursing is making healthcare accessible and getting to know someone’s needs and priorities,” Ms James says.

“The research skills I have learnt while doing a PhD have led to other opportunities, including being involved in researching PHC nurses’ experiences with COVID-19 and successful UOW Global Challenges seed funding applications supporting communities affected by recent bushfires.”

Ms James has joined fellow health researchers to start an informal collaborative network between UOW Bega, Southern Local Health District and the Health Education and Training Institute. Local problems are being supported with a locally-driven research agenda, with application to the broader community.

“I have worked in a variety of settings, my most recent clinical experience and research is around primary health care (PHC). There is always more to learn in nursing,” she says.

“As a tutor I hope I’m inspiring others to do nursing as well as pursue a career in PHC and research. PHC is important for health promotion and the prevention of illnesses requiring acute care services. As healthcare providers, it is important to provide evidenced-based practice that uses research to support the best outcomes for people in our care.”

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UOW’s key strengths in regional health

**Ageing and Dementia**

Research, education and knowledge translation at UOW is assisting Australia’s rapidly ageing population to live full and productive lives well into their senior years.

Led by UOW, Dementia Training Australia (DTA) is a consortium bringing together leading dementia educators and trainers from five universities and Alzheimer’s Australia. DTA collaborates with its partners to provide professionals with evidence-based information for the care of people with dementia. This is achieved through curriculum development, clinical placements, professional development, online learning, workshops and on-site consultancy.

A team of UOW researchers has been working to create dementia-friendly communities. This inspired the Dementia-Friendly Kiama Pilot Project. UOW has partnered with Kiama Municipal Council, Alzheimer’s Australia, and the community to examine and implement improved access to shops, banks and other public buildings, pedestrian crossings, roads and pathways.

The project also studies social interaction and technology to support the active participation of people living with dementia. The Dementia-Friendly Kiama Pilot Project has successfully assisted the community to adapt and respond to the challenges posed by an ageing society. It is now moving from the “dementia-friendly” to a “dementia-enabling” phase.

**Indigenous Health**

UOW is committed to improving the health of Australia’s Aboriginal population and to training the next generation of Indigenous health professionals.

UOW is undertaking a review of Indigenous health courses in late 2020, with a view to increase opportunities for Indigenous students to develop academic skills and undertake Masters and PhD level degrees.

UOW’s Caring for Community project has delivered successful workshops representing 12 regional Indigenous organisations and community leaders about research collaboration. The workshops have provided in-depth discussions about social, health and economic disadvantage experienced by the Aboriginal community in the Illawarra. The workshops resulted in the development of a detailed report entitled Illawarra Aboriginal Community Profile: a snapshot of an urban Aboriginal community. It identified numerous examples of Indigenous-led, or Indigenous community controlled organisations or initiatives that have been running successfully in the local area for more than 30 years.

Caring for Community is exploring how Aboriginal community organisations and leaders can build sustainable and resilient strategies to help improve health and wellbeing in the face of complex and challenging social health programs and a climate of policy change.

The Graduate Certificate in Indigenous Trauma Recovery Practice is unique in that it is developed and delivered by Aboriginal academic and health delivery experts in collaboration with local Aboriginal elders and is designed to respond to issues that have particular relevance in Indigenous communities in Australia. Utilising Aboriginal and western concepts of trauma, this course focuses on the contributing factors to experiences of trauma, considering historical, cumulative impact of trauma and current day experiences. The research experience contributes to the planning and delivery of services which are effective, accessible, acceptable and appropriate to Aboriginal people within the region.

The research team at the Ngarraywan Ngadju Research Centre at UOW focuses on the health and wellbeing of South Coast Indigenous communities. They are putting a microscope on services which are making a positive impact in the Illawarra, the Shoalhaven, Batemans Bay and Bega. The team also addresses issues of inequality, such as Indigenous life expectancy and suicide rates. The centre is leading the way for a future generation of researchers by engaging with PhD candidates and postdoctoral fellows.

**Mental Health**

UOW is undertaking innovative programs to address mental health issues outside of the major cities and is investing in providing mental health services to the communities that need it most. The University is also a member of the Illawarra Shoalhaven Suicide Prevention Collaborative.

MIND the Gap (Mental Illness in Nowra District: Goals and Prevention) is a joint initiative of the Australian Government, Shoalhaven City Council and UOW to address mental health needs in the Shoalhaven, particularly among vulnerable and younger people.

MIND the Gap harnesses expertise to deliver best quality health care practice, clinical services, practitioner training, community outreach and engagement, supported by innovative research in suicide prevention, traumatic stress response and community resilience. Current activity includes a research project focused on developing bespoke Suicide Prevention Community Gatekeeper Training to assist in reducing the incidence of suicide in local Aboriginal communities.

Recovery Camp delivers evidence-based programs for health students, health professionals, and people with serious and enduring illness. Nursing students can count the experience as a mental health clinical placement for their degree. For people with mental illness, Recovery Camp gives them greater ownership over their recovery journey.

The initiative is evidence-based with numerous research publications and HDR student completions.

**Early Childhood**

UOW incorporates community outreach, education and research initiatives to help children living in vulnerable circumstances to realise their potential.

Early Start’s vision is for all children to flourish, be active learners and become engaged members of society – no matter their background, circumstances or challenges. Early Start works towards this vision by bringing together elements of interdisciplinary research, community consultation and professional learning to influence policy and practice.

World-leading researchers investigate areas of children’s learning, health and development to create evidence-based solutions that will transform the lives of children along with the practice of those who work and care for them, especially those living in regional and remote Australia.

The Early Start Engagement Centre network is a collaboration with 39 early childhood education and care centres in regional and remote communities.