

0043

Development of an Occupational Therapy Program at a Regional NSW University Based on the ICF: Report of the First Year

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Background: A new undergraduate occupational therapy (OT) program commenced in 2009 at Southern Cross University (SCU), situated at Tweed Heads. The impetus for the program was in response to an identified shortfall in the number of OTs currently working in Australia, and particularly in regional and rural areas. It has been shown that health professionals, who identify themselves as being of rural origin, and/or have had a positive rural fieldwork experience, are more likely to seek and find employment in regional and rural areas. The program uses the World Health Organization's International Classification of Functioning Disability and Health (ICF) as its organising structure.

Aim: To report on the first year of implementation of the OT program at SCU and reflect on its future development based on feedback and input from students, academics, clinicians and other stakeholders.

Description: SCU's OT program is designed to produce competent, clinically reflective, beginning practitioners. The ICF forms the organising structure for the program and profession specific units reflect its key concepts. Alongside this run SCU's emphases on Indigenous studies and complementary medicine. The program actively includes local clinicians.

Discussion: The course structure will be presented and discussed, along with the challenges faced in commencing a new program in a regional area with limited pre-existing facilities and resources. Reflections on the first year of implementation and the lessons learned from this will be presented, as well as feedback and input received from the first cohort of students, local clinicians, academics and other teaching staff.

Conclusion: Reflecting on the first year of a new occupational therapy program in regional NSW will be used for further targeted development of the course at Southern Cross University.

Learning Outcomes: Understanding how occupational therapy education programs are influenced by the contexts in which they exist.