

# Developing competency in project management for allied health students

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Carol McKinstry & Dr. Tracy Fortune

La Trobe University

# Aims of this Paper

- Highlight the changes occurring in allied health professionals' approach to health issues and outline the need for future graduates to have project management skills
- Present the results of a research study evaluating project management placements for graduate entry OT students at La Trobe Uni.

# What is happening in Health?

- Health care priorities now determine funding and practice
- Recognition of the value of health promotion for
  - prevention of illness, disability and impairment
  - improved management of chronic conditions, including a community or population approach rather than focus on individual impairment
- Workforce shortages
- Need to rethink health graduate competencies

# Health Trends

- Impairment consequences to **health determinants**
- Hospital to **community**
- Non/sub-acute services tendered for and **managed** from a vast array of contexts
- Specialist - **generic skills**
- Recurrent funding to....pilot project funding – 3 yearly **program funding based on outcomes**
- **National and state priorities create a wealth of project opportunities**

# What does this mean for allied health professionals?

- Increased emphasis on health determinants rather than consequences
- Increased time spent in health promotion activities and consulting with communities
- Moving from tertiary prevention to primary prevention – stopping the person falling into the river rather than focusing on pulling them out
- Different set of competencies for 21<sup>st</sup> century graduates?

# What is project management?

- ‘set of methods and tools designed to enable organisations to plan, manage and achieve one – off tasks or goals’
- ‘involves turning a good idea into a successful outcome’
- ‘organised time limited, one-off effort toward a defined goal’ (Dwyer et al 2004)
- ‘unique and non-repetitive’ (Munns 2001)

# Teaching future graduates project management – the La Trobe University experience

- Graduate entry OT students – Masters of OT Practice – 2 year intensive program – 13 week project placement in 2<sup>nd</sup> year
- Giving them the necessary tools before commencing the project
- Finding projects and organisations
- Health promotion and occupation focus
- Support for both students and project sponsors

# What is required of the students?

- Understand the organisation's and its needs
- Scope the project and develop a proposal
- Conduct a needs analysis if necessary
- Identify and collaborate with stakeholders
- Work closely with the project sponsor
- Meet timelines
- Report on project outcomes via a written report and a conference presentation

# Examples of Projects

- Improving access to health services for at risk women in St. Kilda
- Reducing obesity in adult clients with intellectual disability
- Investigating current strategies by local primary schools to build resilience in students and identify need for future programs and teacher training
- Developing a proposal/submission for a ‘Time Bank’ model for a mental health service

# Our Research

- Two year project collecting data from students and project sponsors through surveying students and interviewing selected project sponsors.
- 14 students surveyed in 2005 and 23 surveyed in 2006.
- 11 project sponsors interviewed – 4 from 2005 and 7 from 2006. 5 were OTs and 6 non-OT background. Range of organisations.

# What have project sponsors told us?

## Major Themes

- All sponsors indicated their desire to have more project placements in the future
- Very positive experience and great outcomes
  - “the projects were extremely valuable to our agency”*
  - “really great piece of work”*
- Concerned that the placement is at the expense of time spent in ‘clinical placements’ – OT project sponsors
  - “Project management placements should be an add-on to the clinical (placements)”*
  - “project management a growing field” and the skills are “so transferable”*

# Themes from project sponsor interviews

- Impressed by student's initiative, communication skills maturity and commitment
- Students acquired skills such as
  - Time management and self discipline
  - Communication with staff at all levels of the organisation
  - Submission writing skills
  - Plan and evaluate outcomes
  - Leadership
  - Scoping – “*an under-rated skill*”

# Project sponsors response...

- For some sponsors, the project took a different direction to what they initially thought – it changed after the students completed their project scoping
- Report was very useful – a professional document they can use to support future submissions.
- Others felt the report was too academic and too long for their needs
- Some confusion re ethical issues
- One sponsor felt that the students needed more knowledge in health promotion for a CHC setting

# Project sponsors response...

- Differing feedback re project management skills a priority for graduate health professionals to gain in their initial education or acquire them later in their careers. Also depended upon the practice setting
- Pair of students better than one

# What do our students say?

- They felt prepared for the project
- Satisfaction with supervision from uni staff member an issue for some
- Felt very supported by the organisation and project sponsor.

*“Felt valued. Felt the project was genuinely required”*

# What skills did the students believe they acquired?

- *“Confidence, time management, liaising with community, working in a team, being accountable for project, organizing meetings, reporting to team, committee and management.”*
- *“Organisational, communication and writing skills. The skills of identifying a service delivery gap; developing a plan to address the gap; planning the appropriate processes required to achieved the required aims within a stipulated timeframe”*
- *“Ability to actually write 6000 words”*

# Conclusions

- Project placements beneficial to both organisations and students.
- These placements enable collaboration between university and practice settings
- Graduate entry students have the maturity and skills for project management.

# Points to consider

- Will graduates need health promotion knowledge and skills to practice in the future and adapt to health industry changes?
- Will generic project management skills be sought after and perhaps expected skills in allied health professionals or should they be acquired at a postgraduate level?

# References

- Fortune, T., Farnworth, L. & McKinstry, C. (2006) Filling Fieldwork Gaps or Learning about Project Management? *Australian Occupational Therapists Journal*, 53 (3).
- Dwyer, J., Stanton, P. & Thiessen, V. (2004) *Project Management in Health and Community Services*, London: Routledge.