

Health Practicum Placements: Summary of Challenges and Opportunities for Improvement

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Introduction

Through the course of developing the Aboriginal Health Bridging Toolkit (November 2012 to March 2013) concerns were raised regarding the placement of Aboriginal students into health agency practicum placements. These concerns were raised several times at the focus group meetings and during a one-on-one interview.

Two of the main concerns raised were:

- Blatant racism
- There is a lack of understanding and awareness on the part of agency staff regarding cultural sensitivity and cultural norms

A third concern, which has a more internal focus, has to do with the unanticipated costs required to support students financially, especially in situations where students need to be placed outside of their communities.

Consequently, the Indigenous Adult & Higher Learning Association (IAHLA) retained the services of Hunt-Jinnouchi Enterprises to conduct a further review in order to produce an addendum, or a supplementary short paper on health program practicum placements, with the intent to identify the key issues as well as potential solutions.

Hunt-Jinnouchi developed and administered a short survey for the IAHLA institutes that have delivered health programs. These programs are the 'case study' sites identified in the Aboriginal Health Bridging Toolkit, and thus have experience in placing health program students into practicum agencies.

Summary of Survey Findings

Survey Questions

1. Please identify your institute, and include your name and email address.
2. What significant barriers/challenges come up when arranging Practicum Placements for the health/nursing students?
3. What level of employee in the site/agency did you communicate with, e.g., nurse, manager, director, etc., when arranging the practicum placement(s)?
4. How respectful was the agency to the students?
5. How responsive was the agency to ensure cultural sensitivity and safety for the students?
6. Describe the "main challenge" for students while on site and/or at the agency during the Practicum Placements.
7. Describe the highlights and positive learning outcomes for students on Practicum Placements.
8. How well did the sites/agencies support and mentor the student(s)?
9. Based on what you have learned, what would you do differently to prepare students for practicum placements in health agencies?
10. Provide up to three recommendations (the first being the priority) on how to best support students during health related Practicum Placements.
11. Provide up to three (the first being the priority) recommendations on how to best establish collaborative relationships with health agencies and practicum work sites.
12. Provide recommendations on how IAHLA can support its member institutes to improve health related Practicum Placements in the future.

Survey Responses

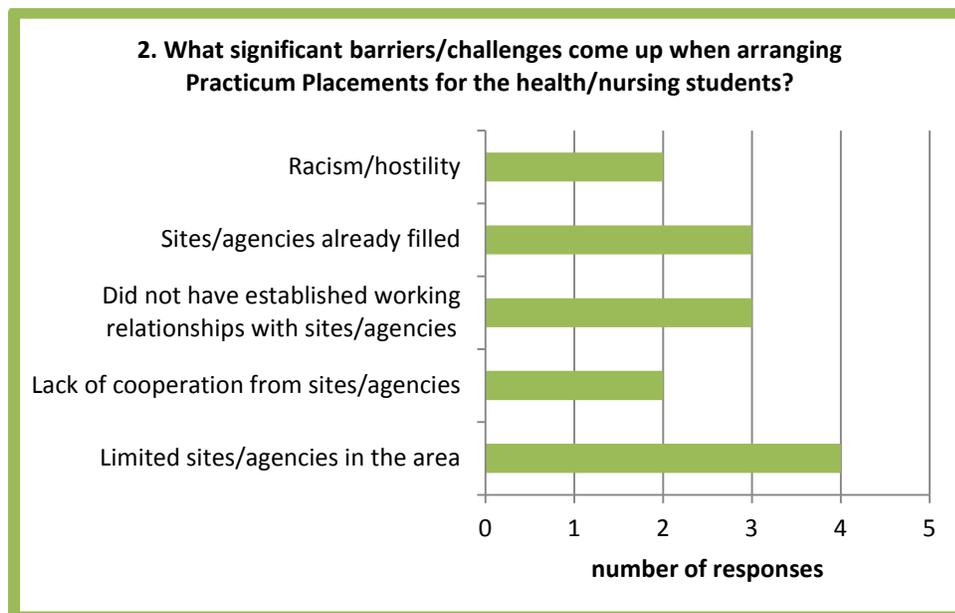
All of the 12 questions were answered by each of the five participants. Most took the opportunity to add additional comments when appropriate. These are included in the following review.

Question #1: Please identify your institute, and include your name and email address.

There were five respondents. These are not identified by name. They represented the following institutions:

- Gitksan Wet'suwet'en Education Society
- Native Education College
- Seabird Island Band
- Heiltsuk College
- Nicola Valley Institute of Technology

Question #2: What significant barriers/challenges come up when arranging Practicum Placements for the health/nursing students?



Open-ended Comments:

- Sites/agencies already [used] for Acute Care Program
- Some negative comments overheard about the students based solely on race; students were also not allowed any space for personal belongings, i.e. coats, purses books.

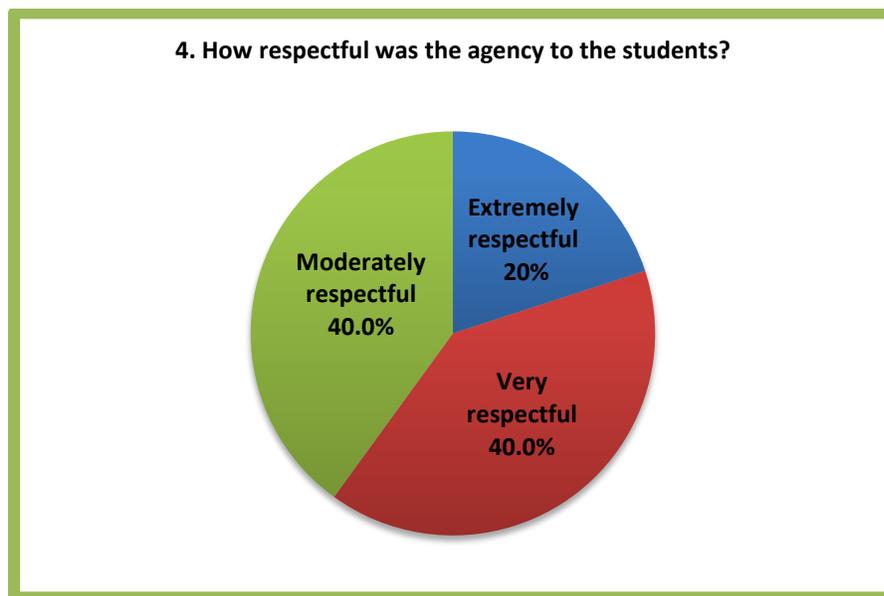
- Unanticipated and unplanned for additional expenses for practica placements (relocated out of community)

Question #3: What level of employee in the site/agency did you communicate with, e.g., nurse, manager, director, etc., when arranging the practicum placement(s)?

Open-ended Comments:

- Director of Health or Executive Director
- As well as, NEC HCA staff, connected with non-HSP net managers, directors, educators (NEC follows the HSP Net protocol)
- Director of Care
- Our program director and instructor; communicated with site manager with support from PPSI partner, Camosun College.
- Managers, Directors

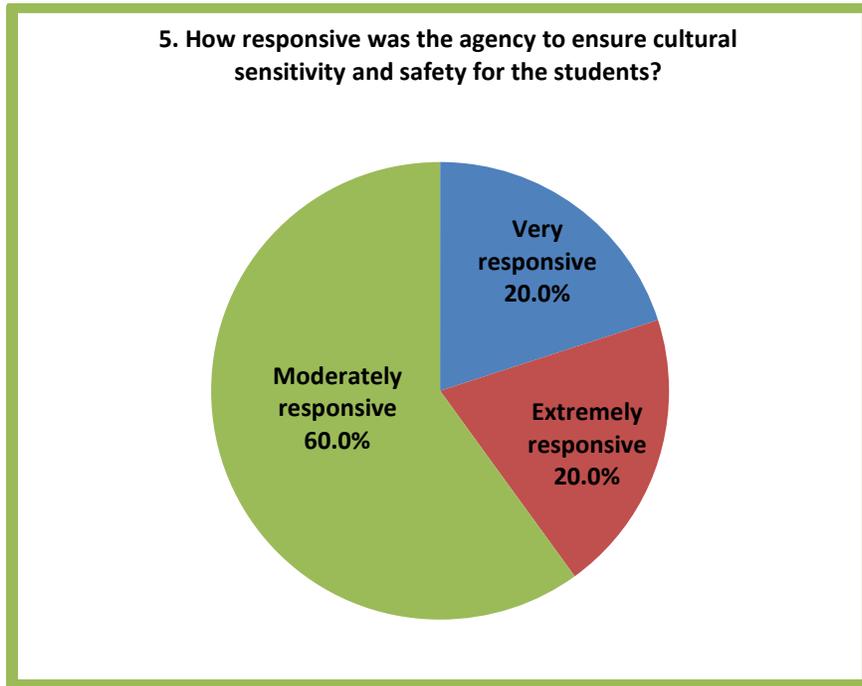
Question #4: How respectful was the agency to the students?



Open-ended Comments:

- Did have the occasional hostile workplace, but overall ok
- This ranges from facility to facility. In some places we receive much respect, but in others it is very little.

Question #5: How responsive was the agency to ensure cultural sensitivity and safety for the students?



Open-ended Comments:

- Not sure there was anything done differently for them than for any other staff member
- I believe that this wasn't addressed per se as students were treated the same as with any other practica students
- See my note in #4 above. This varies between facilities

Question #6: Describe the "main challenge" for students while on site and/or at the agency during the Practicum Placements.

Open-ended Comments:

- For our students the main challenge was having to travel and leave families behind, while maintaining two households. This was added financial stress, especially for students who did not have the same level of financial sponsorship as other students in the program; in addition not having the family support systems there when needed
- Transportation, child care and shift work
- Prioritising care is always a challenge while learning
- Occasionally not getting help from staff when asked - mainly due to what staff did alone, the student required assistance - i.e. using mechanical lifts

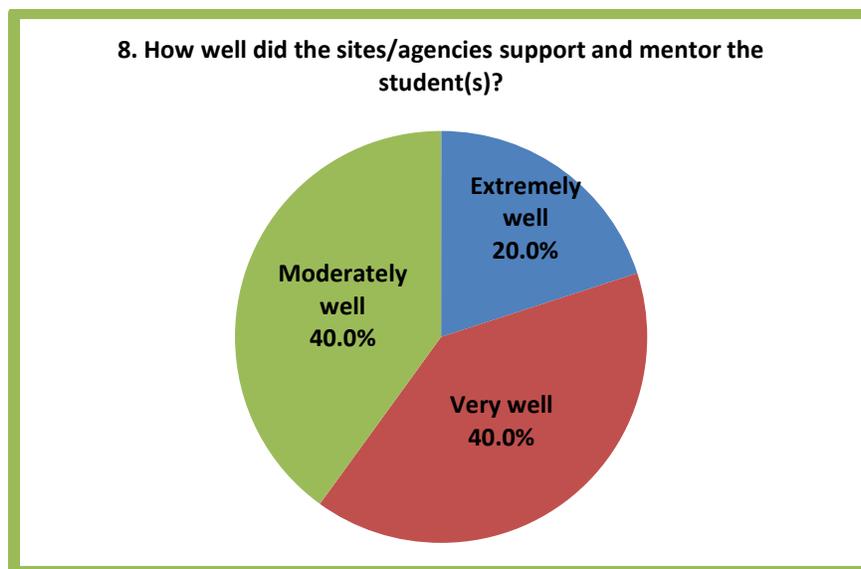
- None that I know of
- Being allowed to 'learn' while on practicum. Facility and staff often expect students to be able to perform like workers, but they are still students. They are in the learning phase of their programs, and must be given the time to learn, and the encouragement to develop slowly, at their own pace

Question #7: Describe the highlights and positive learning outcomes for students on Practicum Placements.

Open-ended Comments:

- They were exposed to different environments. Some left their comfort zone for the first time. Meeting new people and having a network
- Students are able to apply learning to practice
- Students are working with an experienced health care team
- Learning to adapt to professional work ethics
- Working directly with the client/patient/resident
- Being able to use the skills and knowledge they had recently acquired
- Getting hands-on experience in another setting similar to where students were to be employed back home
- Receiving positive reinforcement and praise from facility staff. This makes students feel valued, appreciated, and part of the healthcare team

Question #8: How well did the sites/agencies support and mentor the student(s)?



Open-ended Comments:

- This varies from site to site

Question #9: Based on what you have learned, what would you do differently to prepare students for practicum placements in health agencies?

Open-ended Comments:

- It would be best to have orientation at the practicum sites, so that students can see what is involved, expected of them, going through work ethics workshops. And having a main contact or liaison person who they could talk to when they needed support
- Give more support for child care challenges. The health care field requires shift work. More personal supports for students outside of school hours
- It would be great to be able to have a walk through with the students of the unit; meet the unit manager; show them where they can leave their personal belongings; where they can park; cafeteria, etc. before the first day of placement
- It may be useful to have a mini toolkit developed in consultation with students that lists what to prepare for, what decisions are needed, what funds are required, etc.
- Continue to teach necessary skills to be successful in the practicum sites. Ensure students are aware that the instructor is there to support them, and to help them achieve success
- Provide students with a course on Workplace Skills, to teach professionalism and acceptable behaviour/language in a facility setting, so that they will feel confident in the site

Question #10: Provide up to three recommendations (the first being the priority) on how to best support students during health related Practicum Placements.

Open-ended Comments:

- 1. Being able to go and have check-ins with the students at the practicum sites - just to touch base and see how things are going, see what, if any, support is needed. 2. Having an orientation session with the sites prior to practicum, going over expectations (both site & institute) NEC has established excellent collaborative relationships. However, we want to increase our relationship with health agencies in order to meet the demand in health care fields
- Being able to meet with the unit manager and staff prior to placement to discuss what students can and can't do
- Allow unit to establish areas where student can and can't work

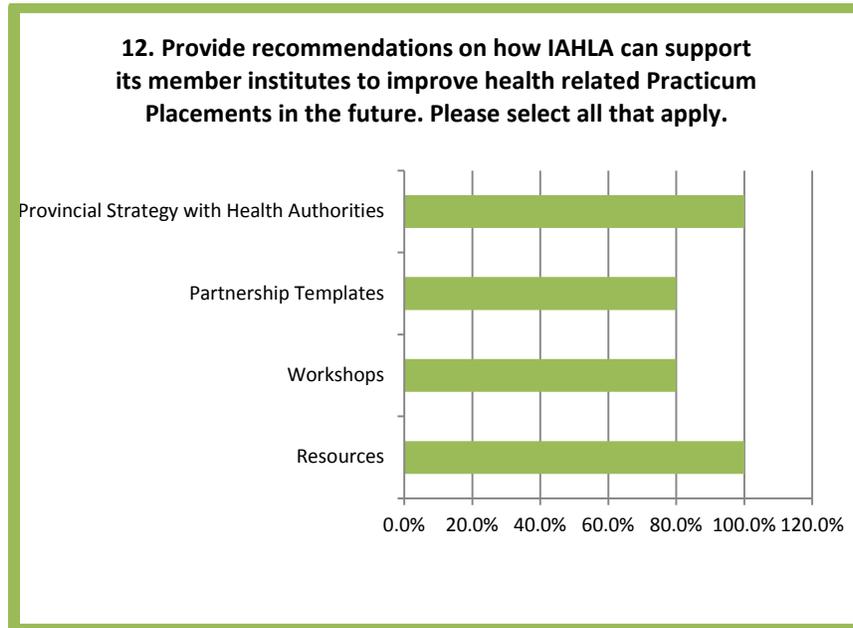
- Have some sort of cultural safety training done with the staff of the unit prior to students starting
- Have discussions prior to placement that would include profiles of our program/training, students, and our community
- Have an open relationship with the facility manager and staff. Be honest and upfront regarding student activity, and our experiences at the site
- Ensure students have adequate skills to meet the needs of facility clients
- Ensure that staff is aware of what students are able to perform, and what is beyond their scope of practice

Question #11: Provide up to three (the first being the priority) recommendations on how to best establish collaborative relationships with health agencies and practicum work sites.

Open-ended Comments:

- Having meetings with potential practicum sites and agencies to discuss potential partnerships at beginning of program; educate each other on what the benefits would be of partnerships
- NEC has established excellent collaborative relationships. However, we want to increase our relationship with health agencies in order to meet the demand in health care fields. Be able to meet with the unit manager and staff prior to placement to discuss what students can and can't do; also allowing unit to establish areas where student can and can't work
- Have some sort of cultural safety training done with the staff of the unit prior to students starting
- Have discussions prior to placement that would include profiles of our program/training, students, and our community
- 1. Have an open relationship with the facility manager and staff. Be honest and upfront regarding student activity, and our experiences at the site. 2. Ensure students have adequate skills to meet the needs of facility clients. 3. Ensure that staff is aware of what students are able to perform, and what is beyond their scope of practice

Question #12: Provide recommendations on how IAHLA can support its member institutes to improve health related Practicum Placements in the future.



Open-ended Comments:

- Need a student practicum placement toolkit

Conclusions

When examining the first concern of racism, the survey findings do not point to blatant racism as being *typical* in the health practicum student experiences, and thus cannot be generalized. However it is noted that five institutes is a small sample group. When asked how respectful the agency was to their students the responses were as follows: 40% answered moderately respectful, 40% answered very respectful and 20% answered extremely respectful.

The second concern, lack of understanding and awareness of cultural sensitivity and cultural norms, was probed in question 5. Forty per cent of respondents said that agencies were either very or extremely responsive to students. Another 60% said that the agencies were moderately responsive. There may be some room to improve cultural orientation for agency staff.

The more pressing concerns focus on:

- The limited number of practicum sites available (since many of those that are available have already been taken by other public post-secondary institutions)
- Not having established formal relationships with local health agencies
- Cost of travel and childcare

On the other hand, highlights included the benefits for students to have opportunities for hands-on experience, being able to apply learning to practice, being part of a team, and being able to work directly with patients/clients.

Recommendations

Nonetheless, the survey findings and focus group discussions revealed the need to:

1. Improve the overall orientation for students before practicum placements are required
2. Design plans to help partners establish and build trusting relationships based on formal agreements.
3. Improve student workplace skills and professionalism.
4. Provide in-service training opportunities for health practicum agencies.
5. Create a student-centered toolkit to help students know how to prepare for and what to expect out of their experiences.
6. Explore ways to alleviate financial concerns.

Although there are numerous challenges, the above recommendations offer opportunities to build stronger processes and resources which will assist IAHLA students be more successful.