

## **INQUIRY INTO SKILLS SHORTAGES IN RURAL AND REGIONAL NSW**

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**Theme:**

**Summary**

Australian Hearing operates a comprehensive network of Hearing Centres nationally servicing metropolitan, regional and rural areas in all States and Territories. In NSW it operates a network of Hearing Centres in 27 locations of which 17 would be classed as rural or regional.

Critical shortages of Generalist and Specialised Audiology talent impacts quickly on a complex network of service centres most noticeably in rural and regional areas where units are small but client needs widespread.

Of particular note is that of all critical Audiology specialist vacancies in NSW, 75% are within rural or regional areas and of already anticipated future specialist needs in the next six months 66% fall within rural or regional locations. This does not take into account additional skills required to service growth areas and potential new rural and regional locations in NSW over the next 12 months.

### **Service impact of lack of clinicians on rural and business coverage**

Rural and regional areas are the hardest to recruit to from state, national and overseas sources and hence the critical specialist skills gap noticeably impacts on the profitability of operations in these areas.

This is especially so in rural locations where higher transport costs are inevitable and where specialist skills gaps contribute to increased client waiting times for service and products.

### **Future network and community coverage**

With 66% of anticipated vacancies falling into rural and regional locations this gives potential for future reduction in community coverage and increased waiting times should clinical resources reduce further. Additionally, it may result in the difficulty of servicing visiting sites and may hinder the development of regular and ongoing hearing services in these locations. Furthermore, some regional centres with client and commercial potential would be unable to expand their current service and product offering.

With respect to Graduate Audiology recruitment, it is often more difficult to encourage Graduates to join away from metropolitan areas which are perceived to have superior training and more future career opportunities. Additionally, most graduates are from metropolitan areas and hence have little familiarity or desire to experience rural or regional locations.

### **Retention and attraction initiatives**

Australian Hearing utilises a number of initiatives with respect to attraction and retention including retention allowances and bonuses, travel allowances and provision of the Living Away from Home Allowance. These translate to rural and regional areas and managers have a number of flexible options to ensure competitiveness of offer in hard to recruit locations. These are, however, only partly successful as they cannot contribute wholly to overcome overall skills shortages.

Australian Hearing is interested in being involved in future state or federal initiatives related to rural and regional recruitment and incentives best practice learning.

### **Skilled migration – impact on Australian Hearing**

Australian Hearing regularly conducts overseas recruitment campaigns for Audiology skills however, these have been insufficient to cover our overall clinical shortages. Overseas recruitment campaigns and the resultant process are significantly more costly per head and place increased risk on the

success of the hire as the process is often lengthy. Furthermore, overseas recruitment is more difficult to plan around expected outcomes and may therefore not run in close line with current critical or anticipated vacancies. Australian Hearing has also found that overseas candidates may not be as attracted to non-metropolitan locations and therefore less likely to alleviate rural skills gaps.

Additionally, overseas recruits have sometimes found assimilation into rural areas not to be an easy experience.

### **TAFE/University awareness of future skills needs**

Currently Australian Hearing takes advantage of future Audiology skills from The Masters of Audiology course from 5 Universities and from 2 TAFE Colleges who provide Certificate IV in Audiometry.

Whilst the Universities provide national coverage in respect of skills pipelines these courses are not focused on regional or rural skills needs and Australian Hearing must market these potential locations with the same vigour to graduates as with any other potential employee. The ability to complete a Masters Degree in Audiology at a Regional University would potentially improve staffing in regional areas.

Currently there are only two TAFE colleges in Australia where Certificate IV in Audiometry, which is the base qualification for becoming an Office of Hearing Services accredited hearing practitioner, are offered these being TAFE NSW Ultimo Campus and OTEN in Strathfield, NSW

The OTEN course only accommodates students who are employed in the hearing industry and who have lined up a supervisor for 200 hours of practicum. Australian Hearing is the main focus for students looking to complete audiometry practicum. This can be difficult for those from rural areas where there is no hearing service provider or only a small practice that cannot accommodate them. Ultimately this means little skill development in rural areas for future needs.

Future needs for rural and regional areas would require further development of TAFE Certificate IV in Audiometry to more widespread locations and potentially in other states to increase overall skills numbers from which NSW would ultimately benefit.

### **Conclusion**

Australian Hearing will continue to focus on service to rural and regional communities of NSW through continuing focus on effective attraction and retention initiatives, skilled migration campaigns, promotion of rural and regional areas to Graduates and close liaison with Tertiary Institutions related to future skills pipelines.

Australian Hearing is committed to Rural and Regional NSW locations that it serves and will continue to focus on initiatives to ensure that critical skills gaps are closed and that future planning focuses on these areas from a client, community service and commercial business perspective.

Australian Hearing remains interested in Committee outcomes and potential learning from NSW or other state initiatives related to skills shortages.