The Bega Valley is a rural community situated on the far south coast of NSW with a modest population of approximately 32,000 people. The main town of Bega, consisting of about 4,800 residents, is also the home of a 65-bed regional hospital—one of two hospitals supported by the Bega Valley Health Service (in addition to three community health centres across the region).

In 2012, the managers of Sapphire Coast Physiotherapy—a private physiotherapy firm with a handful of practices at Bega, Merimbula and the surrounding areas—approached Bega Valley Health Services with a proposal to recruit two new graduate physiotherapists under a public–private arrangement. With both organisations experiencing difficulty recruiting graduates, it was hoped that, if organised and managed correctly, the unique opportunities inherent in the prospective positions would attract an increased number of young physiotherapists to the region.

And now, with the two successful candidates having passed the halfway mark of their two-year commitment with the program, the shared educational model has formed the focus of a research report—subsequently garnering a growing level of praise and recognition from those external to the profession.

Adam Woolacott, APA Musculoskeletal Physiotherapist, one of the head clinicians at Sapphire Coast, explains the impetus behind the practice’s offer: “Our experience is that if...
we take on two new grads at once, it works really well from a tutorial point of view.
Unfortunately, we probably had more than a full-time position available but not enough for two full-timers.

‘But we knew that the public hospital was having some issues recruiting, so we spoke to them about whether they wanted to have a look at having some hours dedicated to those two positions,’ he says. ‘Basically, we would have two positions where they would each work three days a week with us and two days with the public hospital.’

When the hospital jumped on board, two positions were created. With each offering a unique degree of experience and professional immersion for physiotherapy graduates, the program was soon able to achieve its initial objective of attracting young health professionals to the rural townships.

‘The quality of applicants that we had was just amazing,’ Adam says. ‘Obviously we are in a regional area and it’s often difficult to recruit, but the sheer volume and quality of candidates was just outstanding.

‘It’s fair to say that we could have employed any of the top six and we would have been extremely happy. So it made it very difficult to narrow down numbers.’

Naomi White, APAM, Adam’s business partner at Sapphire Coast, duly notes the impact that the program has had on the hospital’s recruitment processes, explaining that the hospital has only been able to find candidates to fill the required hours in two out of the last 10 years. ‘To be able to have this pool of excellent new candidates willing to come into the hospital position and work there addressed that issue for them very nearly,’ she says.

David Schmidt, APAM, the Rural Research Program Officer for the Health Education and Training Institute, echoes Naomi’s sentiments. ‘Certainly speaking from a public point of view, attracting anyone to a part-time position in a rural environment is almost impossible,’ he says, ‘but, because of the way that this model worked, those part-time positions that were likely to stay vacant were able to be filled with two quality staff members.’

David also emphasises that the introduction of the two graduates has had the added effect of bringing a rejuvenated degree of positivity and enthusiasm to the hospital staff. ‘Because the recruitment happened months in advance, the staff knew that at the start of the year they were going to have these bodies on deck,’ he says. ‘So it was a real win from the public sector’s point of view.’

Naomi explains that, for the graduates, the program offered a unique professional opportunity. Rather than being forced to make a relatively uninformed decision on a preferred sector before entering the workforce, they were afforded valuable experience in both sectors to gain greater insight into where their future career path might lead.

‘From the new grad’s point of view, they did not have to make the selection between public and private,’ she says. ‘In effect, they were able to walk straight out of university and into the workforce and sample both spheres of the profession and work out their preferences and where their own strengths lie.

In terms of the feedback that the program’s creators have received from the new graduates who have taken part, Adam is adamant that they have only heard good things. ‘They can always bad mouth their friends and other graduates in the profession, they’re extremely happy with what they’ve got here,’ he says. ‘I spoke to one the other day and he says he is more than happy to recommend this position to anyone in the future.

‘That’s as positive as you get, really.’

Naomi says that an important factor as to whether the graduates would embrace the project was always going to be in relation to social assimilation, and whether they would feel comfortable in a regional setting. In regards to this, she says that having multiple graduates was key.

This view is supported by Adam. ‘From an employer’s point of view, often the happiness of a new graduate in their job is more related to their social setting,’ he says. ‘So yes, having a couple of new graduates at the same time absolutely dealt with that issue.’

With the project successfully up and running and gathering its fair share of appreciation and praise in the wider health community, it wasn’t long before a research project appraising the benefits of the scheme was pursued. Ultimately, this was undertaken by David.

The evaluation started as a conversation between myself and Adam,’ David recalls, ‘I asked how the project was going, and upon hearing about its progression, I thought to myself, “someone should really evaluate that.”

‘It took about three weeks for a light to go off in my head that that someone should be me.’

David explains that in his effort to get the ball rolling, the research project ran into issues relating to sourcing technical funding. ‘Unfortunately, PRF grants are generally targeted at clinical research, so it didn’t really fit in with a workforce project like this,’ he says. ‘So it took a while to get going from that perspective … but the aim was always to evaluate the program towards the end of the first year when everything had settled and all involved had a chance to really have a think about the model, how it worked, and what the benefits might be.’

To undertake the project, the researchers drew upon the qualitative research methodology, appreciative inquiry. ‘It’s a strengths-based model,’ David explains. ‘So instead of looking at the situation and asking what is going wrong, it looks at what is being done right and how it can be extended.

‘You use those processes to get an idea of what the ideal could be and then ask participants if there are any particular strategies they could see that could help move what is now to the ideal,’ he says.

David says that, principally, this research methodology was an ideal mechanism to investigate the partnership from an organisational perspective as well as from the graduates’ view. To do this, a number of in-depth interviews were conducted with 12 participants over three specific
focus groups: the new graduate group, the private manager group, and the public manager group.

'We didn’t want to capture the project from just the individual perspective of the new graduates,' he says. 'We wanted the organisational perspective as well from the public and private sectors—that’s what appreciative inquiry helped us do.

'Also, beyond acknowledging how things are now, appreciative inquiry also lets you focus on the next steps and the practical things that we can do to make this model sustainable in the future. All parties have a plan as to what could be the next step.'

The research project was successful in capturing the benefits of the public–private partnership into five key themes: providing a broader education and experience, attracting quality applicants to difficult-to-fill positions, overcoming social isolation, encouraging management flexibility, and networking between sectors (a community of physiotherapists).

Having shared his research findings with the director of community and Allied Health in Southern Local Health District as well as the chief executive of Southern Local Health District, David offers his opinion that the project will be viewed as a benchmark for future programs and cross-cultural partnerships in health, extending past the physiotherapy profession.

'Both of them [the director and chief executive] are very excited about the model and they certainly are keen to encourage this sort of informal cooperative arrangement again in the future,' he says.

In relation to the collaboration between Sapphire Coast Physiotherapy and the public hospital, according to Adam, the breadth of the project's successes effectively means that the union is set to continue in the foreseeable future.

'We met with the head of the physiotherapy department last week and we were discussing planning for next year and we are all in agreement that we are going to repeat those two positions and possibly even add a third, depending on the available hours,' he says.

Adam is quick to note that a major driving force behind the success of the project was the flexibility shown by both sets of employers. 'From the outset, there was always the potential for issues to arise,' he says. 'For instance, if they needed a day off from our work to go to hospital to do a day of training or orientation, that was no problem ... and vice versa.

'Both sides worked hard to be extremely flexible and it was never an issue.'

Similarly, David asserts that one of the principal reasons that the project worked was that there was a lot of respect between all parties involved. 'Everyone was very considerate,' he says. 'But I would probably put up as a word of caution that people who are looking to enter into a professional partnership like this need to be realistic about what your needs are and what the other party can offer that you can’t.

'If you've got that kind of relationship, it can work'.

While all involved hope that this project can act as a forerunner to a host of similar initiatives throughout a number of other regions, they also point to a number of potential issues as areas requiring specific focus. For instance, Naomi points to the extent of the commitment for private practices, specifically in terms of responsibilities related to the education and personal development of the graduates.

'Some months of the year we were actually dedicating the equivalent of one full-time position to tutorials,' she notes. 'Obviously we don’t receive funding for that so we have to be mindful when we undertake our planning. I suppose that may limit how other, smaller practices take up the model.'

Adam underscores this point by disclosing his estimation that the cost of the tutorials, when one takes into account billing of hours, was in the order of around $40 000. 'It’s a massive amount for a small clinic to handle.'

But despite this expense, Adam is optimistic.

'We see it as an investment, but obviously we need the physios to stay on for their two years in addition to the program, which is happening,' he says. 'But if you had a situation where a new grad left after only 12 months, from a financial and investment point of view that might not be a good outcome.'

Essentially, the partnership between Sapphire Coast Physiotherapy and the Bega Valley Health Service provides a salient example of how a well-organised, low-scale partnership can successfully attract, recruit and educate new graduate physiotherapists in a rural environment. While the program is able to attract candidates with a range of learning experiences via enhanced networking across the sectors, it has been the initiative’s ability to plug difficult-to-fill positions, while establishing a culture of rural health involvement, that has been its most productive achievement.