

## Emerging from student to practitioner: a cumulative development tool for students

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### Purpose

A project was piloted in early 2012 to trial a tool, resource and process for developing students' ability to engage in self-assessment, to assist the growth of lifelong learning skills. The process included reflection on clinical experiences and engaging with feedback from workplace learning, to develop strategies for performance improvement, while linking theory to practice. This paper presents preliminary results from implementation of this tool.

### Background

Giving feedback on student clinical practice performance is one of the most widely used methods of supporting learning in the clinical environment (Glover, 2000; Rowntree, 1987). The aims of feedback are not only to give an indication of how a student is progressing toward achieving performance measures and an explanation for assessment outcomes, but also to promote student learning while increasing both motivation to learn and confidence in their abilities (Glover, 2000; Hatzia Apostolou and Paraskakis, 2010; Tang and Chow, 2007). Students often report wanting and needing feedback to be able to develop knowledge, skills and competency (Poulos and Mahony, 2008). This feedback should enable students to make realistic and achievable learning goals and set clear learning objectives to improve their performance (Tang and Chow, 2007). Despite the importance and benefits attributed to feedback (Bailey, 2009; Chanock, 2000; Hatzia Apostolou and Paraskakis, 2010; Winter and Dye, 2004), some students find it difficult to engage with, understand, interpret, process, and use feedback (Hatzia Apostolou and Paraskakis, 2010; Poulos and Mahony, 2008) in a way meaningful for their development. In addition, many students do not actively seek out or collect feedback.

Glover (2000) found that the clinical teachers/mentors were the most significant people to provide feedback for nursing students on their performance in the clinical area. Students who receive feedback from clinical work placements are expected to improve future performance based on the feedback they receive. This is a form of 'feed-forwarding' (Tang and Chow, 2007) into future work placements; and are indicative of gaining skills toward becoming a self-aware lifelong learner. Sadler (2005) states this process should enable students to reflect on and to take ownership of their learning and become more self-monitoring. In nursing education it is reported that students' can experience a 'theory practice gap' (Chan, Chan, and Liu, 2011; Scully, 2011), that is, a mismatch in theoretical learning in the classroom and their clinical performance in the workplace. Further some have difficulty accepting feedback indicating unsatisfactory clinical performance that is incongruent with feedback of satisfactory or optimal performance in theory units. This incongruence could be attributed to students' inability to engage in meaningful self-reflection and self-correcting behaviours following feedback.

A number of strategies to assist students to engage with feedback have been tested (Colletti, 2000; Cramp, 2011; Hatzia Apostolou and Paraskakis, 2010; Tang and Chow, 2007), with varying results. However, these strategies focus on different aspects of students engaging with and receiving feedback or on clinical teachers giving feedback. For instance Cramp (2011), tested standardised templates to increase consistency in the structure and process of teachers' giving feedback, but not in students' making sense of the feedback. In addition, there is a lack of literature exploring *student-driven* reflection, and mutual engagement *with* the clinical teacher, on previously provided feedback to develop learning goals for future performance development.

In 2009, a self-assessment strategy was implemented at Queensland University of Technology within a third year nursing clinical unit to encourage students to engage with previous feedback, that could assist them in their clinical performance, and thus address the theory practice mismatch to some extent. Results were encouraging, as students seemed to develop self-reflection and self-direction in addressing learning needs. Feedback from the students identified the need to engage with the process throughout the course before entering third year, where stakes for performance on work placements were high. The strategy was adapted and reworked for implementation in different clinical units and health disciplines (Nursing and Medical Radiation Sciences).

### Methods

The methodology underpinning this project was a scaffolded, supported reflective practice process. Outcomes evaluated include: student feedback on successful strategies and barriers encountered in implementation; feedback from students and teachers on processes, tools and resources used in implementation; and for the nursing cohort, the number of learning contracts issued compared to similar cohorts. Ethics approval for this project was granted by the university health research ethics committee.

The intervention consisted of a purpose-designed self-assessment tool and accompanying resources, including a process implementation guide, and targeted students who had clinical/work placements in which they were expected to integrate clinical learning with their theory coursework. The tool was designed as a template to prompt students to engage in self-assessment using reflection on their experiences, feedback from industry mentors (from workplace learning), and other relevant forms of feedback. Students compared the self-

assessment of their abilities to relevant industry standards and course learning outcomes to develop understanding of their strengths and areas for improvement. Using the template, students then developed a personal learning plan for performance improvement when undertaking future work placements.

In order to assist students and clinical teachers use the tool and process to its best effect a number of online support resources were developed using Adobe Captivate™ that demonstrated how to use the tool. The resource package included good and poor examples of a student's tool and strategies for giving feedback to support students on their work placement.

The tool and resources were implemented in two cohorts of nursing students in second- and third-year clinical practice units and one cohort of second-year medical radiation students. Engagement with the flexible online learning package was optional, but students were introduced to the tool and process in a briefing lecture at the beginning of semester.

The intervention was evaluated in the nursing cohort following completion of the students' off campus work experience. Students and clinical teachers were contacted by email and asked to complete an anonymous online survey to provide feedback. The survey used both open- and closed-ended items to elicit perceptions on usefulness of the tool and available resources, and success and/or barriers to planning and implementing the strategy. An email reminder was sent one week later encouraging those who had not responded, to complete the survey. Medical radiation students and their work place teachers did not have access to the online resources (as they were still in development phase) and feedback was solicited using the same survey questionnaire, but in a pen and paper format. University unit coordinators were asked to reflect on implementing the intervention into their unit and provided feedback on what went well and what did not, their perception of the value of the process, and any ideas for improving the tool, the process, or the resources. At the time of writing this report the number of learning contracts issued compared to similar cohorts was still being assessed.

### Results

The 2<sup>nd</sup> year nursing cohort (297 students) had a response rate of 14% (n=41), (however not all of the students had completed their off campus work experience at the time of collating the results). The 3<sup>rd</sup> year nursing cohort (537 students) had a response rate of 14% (n=77). Of a total of 63 nursing workplace teachers, 25% (n=16) responded to the survey. The Medical Radiation cohort had 20 students, of which 95% responded (n=19), and six workplace supervisors with 100% response rate.

Results from the survey (Table 1 and 2) indicate that the majority of students and supervisors felt they were well supported/able to support the implementation of goals and strategies. While a considerable number of students (Table 1) believed that the tool assisted them, there are also a reasonable number of students who were ambivalent to the process and tool. On the other hand, the majority of work place teachers report that the tool was very effective in helping to support students to identify areas of improvement and to then develop strategies to implement on placement. Table 3 and 4 identified who used the online resources and of these how useful they were in preparing/using the tool. Of the respondents that used the resources, the majority found them useful.

**Table 1- Student responses**

Question	Agree	Neutral	Disagree
I felt well supported by my workplace supervisor in being able to implement my goals and strategies during my clinical placement	81% (95)	11% (13)	8% (10)
Using this tool was effective in assisting me to identify areas for improvement, and planning how to meet national assessment standards/learning outcomes.	42% (49)	32% (38)	26% (31)

**Table 2- Workplace supervisor responses**

Question	Agree	Neutral	Disagree
I felt I could support students well in assisting them to implement goals and strategies during their workplace experience	96% (24)	4% (1)	0
Using this tool was effective in assisting me to support students to identify areas for improvement, and developing strategies to implement on placement	76% (19)	16% (4)	8% (2)

**Table 3- Respondents use of online support resources**

Question	Cohort	Yes	No
Did you use the online resources to support your engagement with the self-	Student	41%	59%

assessment and goals tool?		(48)	(70)
	Supervisor	32%	68%
		(8)	(17)

**Table 4- Usefulness of online support resources**

Question	Cohort	Useful	Neutral	Not useful
How useful were the online resources in preparing to use the tool in the workplace experience	Student	61% (29)	31% (15)	8% (4)
	Supervisor	75% (6)	25% (2)	0

### The qualitative responses

Students and teachers were asked what the most effective strategies used to improve performance were, and what were 'barriers' (if any) that were experienced in implementing strategies to assist in improving performance.

Many students commented that the tool assisted them to 'narrow down what they needed to achieve and focus on just that'. While the teachers believed that the tools helped them to focus on very specific needs of the students, for example 'allowing time to go through each student's goals and give them regular updates on how they are/are not achieving their goals'. Common identified barriers related to lack of opportunity in specific settings, and staffs willingness to support students in achieving their identified goals.

### Unit coordinator reflections

The unit coordinators all agreed that the tool was valuable and assisted both the students and teachers in gaining the most out of their clinical learning experience. However they did report that it was cumbersome and that if it was more streamlined it would aid students in using it.

### Limitations

The results presented are preliminary; however positive perceptions are apparent in the data. However it could be surmised that there was a bias in who responded to the survey, thus possibly limiting the generalisability of the result. Additionally, the lack of access to the online resources by the medical radiation cohort at the time of implementation may impact on responses related to feasibility and use.

### Conclusion

Implementing the self-assessment tool and resource package throughout the student's entire learning journey may assist them to demonstrate progressive development through the course. Students should have a better applied understanding of feedback and how to integrate these skills for lifelong learning. Feedback from students, workplace supervisors and unit coordinators will be incorporated and the tool will be streamlined to make it more user friendly. Unit coordinators are keen to continue using the tool and resource package to guide and support student clinical performance development throughout their course. Over all, it appears that the students and supervisors have found this tool to be beneficial in identifying and developing personal learning needs and strategies for improving clinical performance.

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**Key words**

- lifelong learning
  - feedback
  - nursing students
  - critical reflection
  - performance improvement.
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