



Visioning the future for practice education

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Visioning the Future for Practice Education

Quality practice education is an essential component of the program of study for occupational therapy students, assisting in their development of professional specific competencies and graduate attributes. The landscape of practice education is undoubtedly changing as the profession accommodates increasing student numbers, and responds with innovative models of supervision and practice education opportunities. In this context, the recommendation that up to 200 hours of practice education could be delivered using simulation or standardised patients (Rodger, Bennett, Fitzgerald, & Neads, 2010) was welcome. It is human nature to be cautious of something that is new or different to what we have ourselves experienced. So although the recommendation has been implemented in most occupational therapy programs across Australia, there remain mixed responses within the professional community to this innovation. The inclusion of simulation and standardised patients in the early years of the program provides a controlled and high-quality experience for students to develop and refine key professional skills and competencies. Educational experiences provided in occupational therapy courses need to show how professional standards are maintained.

Occupational therapy programs within Australia are accredited against two key documents, both of which have been undergoing revision. Firstly, at their meeting in March 2016, the World Federation of Occupational Therapists endorsed the revised Minimum Standards for the Education of Occupational Therapists with plans to operationalise the revised standards from January 2017. These standards will outline, amongst other detail, the parameters for depth and breadth of the experiences expected within the mandated 1000 hours of student practice education. Secondly, the Occupational Therapy Board of Australia (OTBA) have commissioned the development of Graduate Competency Standards for Occupational Therapy Practice. These will update the previous Australian Minimum Competency Standards for New Graduate Occupational Therapists (2010). The preliminary consultation

paper of these revised competency standards is currently with professional stakeholders for comment; public consultation will occur later this year. The consultation provides an excellent opportunity for all of the profession to engage with the OTBA, and to shape the minimum standards of practice that must be met by all occupational therapists.

The release of both these documents presents a new opportunity for all stakeholders to develop and evaluate practice education within their local context. Practice education is a three-way collaboration between student, university academics, and the practice educator to develop the future occupational therapy workforce. It works best when there is an open and clear dialogue amongst stakeholders around the provision and evaluation of practice education experiences. This dialogue is urgently needed as areas of practice and organisational expectations for extended or advanced scope of practice grow (Broome, 2015). As a consequence of the expanding areas of practice in occupational therapy, university programs may not be able to cover skills and knowledge to the depth some stakeholders consider adequate for all specialist areas of practice. There are simply too many areas of practice. This can place students and new graduates in the middle of an extraordinary “tug of war” when they cannot immediately demonstrate the skills and knowledge specific to an area of practice.

In this dynamic area where minimum professional standards and competencies are being reviewed and where employer and workforce expectations are changing, the focus of university programs must be on core tenets of occupational therapy. Professional preparation courses must provide a strong foundation of occupational therapy knowledge and skills across a broad range of contexts and client groups. It is this foundational preparation together with learning opportunities and experiences provided within practice education that will allow students to develop and demonstrate competency specific to any area of professional practice – practice education is a collaboration.

Increasing numbers of occupational therapy students makes provision of adequate quality practice education experiences a significant challenge (Hamilton et al., 2015; Rodger, Fitzgerald, Davila, Millar, & Allison, 2011). In Australia, there is no regulation or capping of the number of occupational therapy programs by government; nor is there regulation or capping on the number of students a program can enrol. Any university can decide to offer an occupational therapy program and enrol any number of students. The professional association and OTBA can only evaluate the merit of the course in relation to accreditation requirements – whether or not the “market” is crowded or sustainable in terms of practice education opportunities is outside their remit. This has led to discussions about how to best manage demand for practice education placements and how innovative approaches can be used whilst maintaining quality. Simulation is one such strategy.

In the push to seek out more practice placements, it is important to remember that there is a reputational risk for the profession if we do not closely monitor the quality of practice education received by the future workforce. A key question is: who or what body retains the responsibility for monitoring quality? Is it the practice education provider, the university partner, or both? What role should the student play in maintaining and assuring quality? It is timely for the profession to engage in an open and clear dialogue and for the development of a nationally agreed framework or guide for the provision of quality practice education. This framework would apply to all practice education experiences, including short session or simulation experiences together with the longer ‘block’ experiences that are considered the hallmark of practice education. Occupational Therapy Australia has consulted with key stakeholders on this topic and has committed to a project that will develop a good practice guide for practice education. Are you ready to join this important conversation?

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