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Feature Article

Benefits and challenges of supervising occupational therapy fieldwork students: Supervisors' perspectives

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places by exploring additional fieldwork options (Fisher & Savin-Baden, 2002; Thomas *et al*., 2005). Some examples include project-focussed fieldwork (Fortune *et al*., 2006), the use of role-emerging fieldwork placements (Bossers, Cook, Polatajko & Laine, 1997), and alternative supervision models (Thomas

Challenge of p o iding den field o k placemen

Participants were asked to rate challenges of supervising fieldwork students from 'not at all challenging' to 'extremely challenging'. Results are presented in Table 4, and illustrate that 'lack of resources' (e.g. desk space, computers) was rated most frequently as the greatest challenge in fieldwork supervision. 'Workload pressures / lack of time', 'concern for student capability' and 'costs in staff downtime' were rated as moderately to very challenging by a majority of respondents, while 'learning style clashes' and 'potential difficulties with clients / consumers' were rated by a majority of respondents as only

TABLE 4: *Challenges associated with supervising fieldwork students*

Potential challenge to employees / workplace	Degree of challenge to workplace
Lack of physical space / availability of room / desk / computer (resources)	77% moderately, very or extremely challenging
Workload pressures / lack of time	79% moderately or very challenging
Concern for student capability	67% moderately or very challenging
Costs in staff downtime	65% moderately or very challenging
Learning style clashes	78% slightly or moderately challenging
Potential difficulties with clients / consumers	78% slightly or moderately challenging
Insurance / indemnity issues	84% not challenging at all, or slightly challenging

TABLE 5: *Barriers to providing occupational therapy fieldwork placements*

Barriers to providing fieldwork placements	%
Staffing issues – (e.g. high staff turnover, only part-time staff)	31%
Limited resources (e.g. deskspace, PCs)	13%
Workload pressures / variable caseloads	13%
Sole occupational therapist (e.g. rural position)	10%
Non-clinical environment ('not beneficial for student placements')	8%
Newly established business / service ('never taken students')	5%
Concerns for student safety / security	5%
Have not been approached	5%
Only consider students for final placements	3%
Students reject offer of placement	3%
New grad occupational therapist (not yet ready to supervise students)	3%
Unsure	3%
Total	100%

analysis and reporting. The challenges reported most often related to staffing issues (e.g. having only part time, temporary or less experienced staff), lack of physical resources (e.g. desk space, computers) and prohibitive workload pressures. A wide variety of other challenges associated with student supervision were reported, including that students were not permitted to attend home visits alone, that there was significant effort required to solve conflicts with some students, that greater support was required from universities to support placements, security / safety issues and fluctuating caseloads (i.e. very low or very high caseloads) which increased the complexity of managing students. An additional challenge to providing placements related to the timing of fieldwork placements. A vast majority of respondents relayed the inability or reluctance of services to provide fieldwork placements over the Australian summer holiday period (i.e. December to February), when caseloads and staffing levels were typically at their lowest.

Respondents whose services *did not* provide occupational therapy fieldwork placements were invited to comment about the barriers to doing so. As can be seen in Table 5, the most commonly reported barriers to providing placements related to staffing issues (e.g. high staff turnover, a large proportion of part-time or locum staff), resource limitations, and workload pressures. Several respondents reported that they were unable to provide placements because they were sole therapists, and others stated that placements would have been of no value to students in their organisations because they worked in non-clinical settings and / or newly established services.

Model of fieldwork supervision

Results indicated that multiple models of supervision are employed in respondents' workplaces, both in relation to which professionals were responsible for supervision, and in terms of the ratio of supervisors to students. While a majority of respondents indicated that students were supervised solely by occupational therapists (63%), a further 33% indicated that supervision was provided by a combination of occupational therapist / s *plus*

another employee or employees. A small number of

therapists in student fieldwork supervision, and many indicated that students were jointly supervised by two therapists, or that supervision involved two or more students simultaneously. It has been previously shown that placements involving two or more students with a supervisor are more effective for students (Martin & Edwards, 1998), with the main advantage being that students are able to share ideas and support each other during the placement. Similarly, group models of supervision have been shown to increase the development of professional skills required in the workplace (Farrow, Gaiptman & Rudman, 2000). There is some support in this study for the notion that coordination of student supervision can be a shared responsibility, and that multiple supervisors can be involved at any one time. Previous studies demonstrate that having more than one supervisor for a placement can benefit students by providing exposure to different roles, clinical areas and therapists' styles (Farrow *et al*., 2000). The results of this study provide evidence of changes in the nature of the supervisory relationship, and indicate increasing opportunities for more occupational therapists to contribute to fieldwork through a variety of supervisory models. There is a need for further diversification of effective models of group supervision across a broad range of organisations.

Recommenda ion

It appears that the primary motivation for supervising students is not financial reward, and therefore it can be argued that financial compensation for supervisors is not the only solution to the current shortfall of available student placements. Strategies that acknowledge and provide increased professional status for those who provide placements, and that recognise supervisors' increased responsibilities that arise during student placements are needed. Appropriate acknowledgement by the profession, universities and by host organisations is vital. Such genuine recognition may assist to increase the willingness of occupational therapists to provide fieldwork supervision, and increase the satisfaction they experience as a result of supervising a student or student group.

Continuous improvement in supervisor training and recognition by universities may help to improve both the quantity and the quality of available placements, as well as increase the status of fieldwork supervisors. For its part, OT AUSTRALIA has developed the AccOT program, which provides acknowledgement of the professional development inherent in supervising students. Future programs aimed at monitoring competence in the profession, either by Registration Boards and/or by OT AUSTRALIA, should recognise and give status to a willingness to pass on knowledge and educate students through fieldwork.

Finally, the future vision for fieldwork must include flexibility and innovation to ensure implementation of new models of supervision suitable for a greater range of roles in the community. As a profession, occupational therapy has already moved a considerable distance away from predominant reliance on 'one-to-one' clinical models of supervision, typically utilised in traditional inpatient fieldwork settings. With continued review of actual practice and future opportunities, the definitions of fieldwork will be continually extended and reviewed. Professionally, occupational therapists' perceptions of fieldwork must not be confined to what already exists, but should be proactive in attempting to find new and different ways to achieve the educational goals of the profession.

S d limi a ion

While this study canvassed the views of a large number of occupational therapy supervisors (N = 132), it had several limitations. First, because the survey was sent to people already known to fieldwork coordinators at two different universities, a degree of selection bias existed. Second, the extent to which the participants 5.3T* 0.1h212 T0.2778 TD 0.0

from the perspective of fieldwork supervisors and investigated the challenges and benefits of occupational therapy student fieldwork supervision. The most com-

Sloggett, K., Kim, N. & Cameron, D. (2003). Private practice: Benefits, barriers and strategies of providing fieldwork placements. *Canadian Journal of Occupational Therapy*, *70*,