

## Research Article

# Attributes of excellence in practice educators: The perspectives of Australian occupational therapy students

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**Aim:** Occupational therapists frequently undertake the role of practice educator contributing to the development of the future workforce, however, little is known about how they effectively perform this role. This study aimed to elucidate students' perspectives on what makes an excellent practice educator.

**Method:** Documentation for 124 Practice Excellence Commendations nominations by Queensland occupational therapy students for Queensland Occupational Therapy Fieldwork Collaborative awards between 2008 and 2011 were analysed. These were based on students' experiences on long block placements (five weeks or more) in their later years of undergraduate or masters' entry study. Written nominations addressing five selection criteria were de-identified and responses to each of these compiled. One independent coder and the two lead authors read the

transcripts, identified coding categories and reached consensus regarding emerging themes using standard content and thematic analysis techniques.

**Results:** Providing the 'just right' challenge was the overarching theme that symbolised excellence in practice education from students' perspectives. Three themes emerged that enabled practice educators to provide student support needed to balance the challenges of learning on placement; (i) valuing a reciprocal relationship; (ii) facilitating learning opportunities and experiences; and (iii) encouraging autonomy and independence.

**Conclusion:** Findings provided insights into student perceptions about how excellent practice educators facilitated their learning while on placement. These insights can be used to inform practice educators who wish to enhance their supervision skills. Future research should focus on how the attributes of practice educators positively influence student learning outcomes.

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All authors are or were members of the Queensland Occupational Therapy Fieldwork Collaborative (QOTFC) between 2008 and 2012 during which time this research was conducted.

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## Introduction

Practice placements provide students with the opportunity to develop professional competence and prepare them for graduate practice (Holmes *et al.*, 2010). Ongoing research into practice placement education is required as educators continually respond to the demands of the increasing numbers of students, the diversity of practice settings, innovative models of supervision, and the learning styles and changing expectations of their students. Quality improvement in practice placement education aims to increase the effectiveness of practice education experiences and graduate

preparation for professional practice into the future (Kirke, Layton & Sim, 2007; Mulholland, Derald & Roy, 2006; Rodger, Fitzgerald, Davila, Millar & Allison, 2011a). Gray (2008) suggested that traditional methods of practice education such as the apprenticeship model were inadequate to meet the needs of Generation Y students, who are perceived as being overconfident, having a preference for hands on learning and provision of immediate feedback, and who interact more casually or socially than professionally (Hills, Ryan, Smith & Warren-Forward, 2012). Students are central to learning and their attitudes towards, and their expectations and experiences play an important part in ensuring effective learning within practice education settings. However, practice educators also have a pivotal role in ensuring successful practice education outcomes.

Practice educators have significant capacity to influence students' confidence, interest in a specific area of practice and appreciation of the profession (Mulholland *et al.*, 2006). Previous studies have described students' perspectives of the qualities of educators that supported their learning (Hummell, 1997; Kirke *et al.*, 2007; Mackenzie, 2002; Mulholland *et al.*; Rodger *et al.*, 2011a). Central to a successful practice placement is honest, professional relationships with educators who understand them and are able to meet the students' specific learning needs (Kirke *et al.*; Mackenzie; Mulholland *et al.*; Rodger *et al.*, 2011a, b). Providing 'hands on' experience that is graded to the individual student's level of skill and allows the student to be active in the learning process and provides an optimal level of challenge enhances the learning opportunities for students (Hummell; Kirke *et al.*; Mulholland *et al.*). The importance of good quality, positive feedback to facilitate learning is also appreciated by students (Hummell; Kirke *et al.*; Rodger *et al.*). Despite the research undertaken to date about practice placements in occupational therapy, few of these authors (e.g., Copley, Rodger, Graham & Hannay, 2011) have discussed contemporary learning theories relevant to practice education. Contemporary educational theories (such as experiential learning; Kolb, 1984; and transformative learning theory; Costa, 2009) place students at the centre of their learning and consider their views about teaching and learning to be important.

### Educational theory and practice education

This section will provide a brief overview of several educational theories relevant to practice education. Kolb's (1984) experiential learning model provides a foundation theory for practice education and emphasises the critical role of experience in adult learning. Experiential learning theory defines learning as '... the process whereby knowledge is created through the transformation of experience. Knowledge results from the combination of grasping and transforming experience' (Kolb, p. 41). The four stages of the learning cycle include; engaging in concrete experiences; reflection on own performance and knowl-

edge; identifying gaps in knowledge and building new conceptual understandings; and practice in subsequent experiences. Subsequent research has identified the importance of student learning styles and their impact on the stages of learning throughout the experiential learning style (Kolb, Boyatzis & Mainemelis, 1999).

Copley *et al.* (2011) suggested that facilitating learning in practice education is theoretically supported by Vygotsky's zone of proximal development (Vygotsky, 1978). This suggests that the social cultural environment supports cognitive development when joint problem solving occurs between students and educators during practice education. Vygotsky's theory, originally developed for children, explicitly identifies the value of adults as guides and peers as collaborators in learning. In professional practice education, the role of educator, within the practice placement is critical to guide student learners and to work with students as collaborators in their own learning.

Transformative learning theory has also been suggested as an approach to facilitate change and growth in practice education and to equip students for the continual acquisition of skills and knowledge throughout their careers (Costa, 2009; Santalucia & Johnson, 2010). Central to the concept of transformative learning is a process of recognising the limitations of one's current knowledge and perspectives and being challenged to think beyond these limitations (O'Connell, 2010). Practice educators use both their personal and professional selves to assist students to become aware of their own assumptions and transform these to adopt new learning (Hooper, 2007). It is suggested that the complex and demanding environment of practice education reveals and highlights students' assumptions and challenges these through a process of critical reflection to allow both transformation and adaptation (Hooper). The role of the practice educator in transformative learning is to engage in an ongoing dialogue that explores the limits of students' existing knowledge and thus begins to stretch those limits. A student-centred approach to learning involves awareness of the students' attitudes, feeling, personalities and preferences.

### The QOTFC practice education commendations

In Queensland, Australia, the Queensland Occupational Therapy Fieldwork Collaborative (QOTFC) launched the inaugural QOTFC Practice Education Commendations in 2008 to recognise the outstanding contributions of occupational therapists to the practice education of Queensland occupational therapy students. The Commendations are presented to individual fieldwork practice educators based on nominations from final year students. Commendation recipients demonstrate exemplary practice in facilitating the learning of occupational therapy students during practice placements and have demonstrated advanced skills in the provision of quality

learning experiences within the practice learning arena. Students in their final semester of study at three Queensland universities nominate practice educators who have made a significant contribution to their professional development whilst on full time block practice placements. Students at these universities undertake full time placements of between 5 and 14 weeks duration over two semesters during their third and fourth undergraduate years, or second year for masters' entry programs. Students who nominated a practice educator address in writing five selection criteria developed by the QOTFC based on their expertise in student practice education and the relevant literature. These selection criteria relate to the nominated practice educator's ability to: (i) share knowledge and experience in ways that facilitate student learning; (ii) promote the student's identity as an occupational therapist; (iii) value and respect student contributions; (iv) provide effective supervision and support; and (v) provide opportunities for students to engage in reflective practice. Each year, two QOTFC members read the students' written nominations to ensure that the students have addressed each of the criteria adequately and then made recommendations regarding the Commendations to be made each year.

The purpose of this study was to identify the qualities of excellent practice educators from the perspectives of graduating occupational therapy students in Queensland, Australia. The study aimed to provide a contemporary picture of excellence in practice education in the context of diverse practice placement settings and contemporary learners including Generation Y views.

## Method

The study replicates the methods used by Mulholland *et al.* (2006) who analysed 103 transcripts of student nominations of Canadian practice educators for Clinical Teaching Awards between 1989 and 2004. Inspired by the Canadian study, transcripts from the nominations for Practice Education Commendations submitted by Queensland occupational therapy students between 2008 and 2011 formed the data source for this study.

## Design

This study utilised a qualitative research design (Patton, 2002) that enabled exploration of the perspectives of students through their written nominations of exceptional practice educators for Practice Educator Commendations. Specifically, textual analysis of written nomination documents was undertaken using standard content analysis techniques. This study was approved by the Behavioural Social Sciences Ethics Research Committee at The University of Queensland.

## Data collection

Students at The University of Queensland, James Cook University and The University of the Sunshine Coast

between the years 2008 and 2011 who nominated these practice educators ( $N = 124$ ) provided written consent indicating agreement to having their de-identified written comments on each selection criteria included in the study. Nomination transcripts for the 10 practice educators nominated by students in 2008, 29 in 2009, 31 in 2010 and 54 in 2011 were included. Written responses to selection criteria were copied verbatim and pasted into five separate Microsoft Word documents, one for each selection criteria. Each nominee was given a code and all written responses relating to that nomination were linked to that code when copied into each document. This allowed researchers to identify by code, data on each practice educator across documents.

## Data analysis

Once the five selection criteria documents were assembled with data from student nominations over the data collection period, these were read by the lead author and an independent researcher with experience with content analysis techniques (Patton, 2002). Content analysis was undertaken by comparing, contrasting and sorting the students' comments within and across selection criteria into categories until themes emerged. Possible categories revealed in each document were identified and discussed with the lead author. Once agreement on these categories was reached, the documents were coded in their entirety. Further elicitation of themes was undertaken by the lead two authors independently and agreed upon through discussion (peer checking). The themes were identified based on their presence across at least three of the five selection criteria and the frequency with which they occurred (for example, the themes identified emerged from subcodes in at least 60% of the transcripts) before they were considered universal indicators of excellence. The use of these two coders enabled triangulation and peer checking throughout the process. This enhanced confirmability and reduced investigator bias within the analysis (Mays & Pope, 1995).

## Findings

Providing the 'just right' challenge was the overarching theme that emerged to summarise what symbolises excellence in practice education from students' perspectives. Overwhelmingly, students discussed the elements of quality that enabled them to learn optimally which was often referred to as providing the 'just right' mix or balance of challenge within learning experiences and support, guidance, practice, encouragement, preparation, debriefing etc. provided by the educator. For example, one student's description summed this up well, [I] *never felt under-challenged or overwhelmed, this supervisor really created that 'just right challenge'*.

Practice Educators managed to find this 'just right' balance for their students through the development of a supportive relationship with the student as learner, by

facilitating learning opportunities and encouraging the student to gradually become more independent. Hence, three key themes underpinned how excellent practice educators provided 'the just right challenge'. Each of these themes; (i) valuing the reciprocity of the supervisory relationship; (ii) facilitating learning and (iii) encouraging autonomy/independence, will be discussed individually.

### Valuing the reciprocity of the supervisory relationship

Students identified the importance of the student-practice educator relationship as the basis for their learning on placement. They perceived that the quality of the supervisory relationship was a hallmark of excellence, in particular that the relationship with their practice educator was seen as a reciprocally beneficial one, rather than a one way transmission of educator expertise to the student. Students also valued practice educators who embraced life-long learning and valued feedback, as well as those who valued having students who were developing graduate competencies whilst on placement. Many participants commented on the willingness of practice educators to relate to the student as an individual and the practice educators' commitment to the students' learning. In the context of a supportive relationship students were able to take risks and develop their skills as future occupational therapists. Through these collaborations both students and practice educators learnt and developed professionally.

Excellence was recognised in relationships that were open to questions and focussed on the students' development as therapists. Numerous comments outlined the important qualities of practice educators as *approachable, open, non-judgemental, dedicated, patient and trusting* of students. Within the context of these relationships students were able to ask *questions no matter how stupid* (2009, 10) and develop their competence and identity;

... amazed just how patient [she] was with me and she always provided feedback that left me feeling like a good therapist every day (2011, 32).

[She] always dedicated 100% time and effort to bettering my ability/performance as a future OT (2011, 15).

The experience of being supported by practice educators was confirmed when students felt that they were recognised as individuals, rather than '*just another student*'. These relationships allowed practice educators to understand the students' needs and respond to these in practical ways that supported their learning. One participant stated that her practice educator;

... realised I was an ardent reader and gave me piles of reading materials (journal articles, seminar

workbooks, manuals of mental health models) to consume... and discussed in order to find ways to apply the concepts and ideas (2009, 4).

Excellent practice educators worked collaboratively with students to ensure that expectations were met. From the start of the placement, practice educators made an effort to get to know the students and began sharing information and knowledge. Through these collaborative relationships students felt able to discuss their experiences, ideas and concerns without fear of judgement.

[She] was flexible in her supervisory and support methods to accommodate what worked for both of us collaboratively and I have not felt as comfortable and willing to be open about my experiences and progress with any supervisor or other therapist previously (2010, 15).

It was clear that student learning was encouraged when practice educators shared stories and experiences with them and provided opportunities for learning conversations. Sharing stories provided an effective teaching strategy where students felt they were being treated as equals rather than being told what to think.

She also provided guidance and shared her previous experiences and views and did not enforce a particular way of thinking and doing – rather letting me work to my strengths (2010, 12).

... a lovely natural way of conveying her knowledge and experience. She utilised narratives and engaged me in conversations to support my learning (2010, 28).

The reciprocal nature of the relationship resulted in mutual benefits; students recognised that they gained enormously from the placement, and also that their contributions to the practice setting, the clients and therapists were valued. Excellence in practice education was demonstrated in the way students perceived their contribution to the placement as being

... feeling part of these OT contributions as an active participant rather than passive observer (2010, 26), able to ... represent my supervisor at meetings... [and] trusted ... to both give information and receive/report back independently (2010, 12).

Students' comments provided numerous examples of reciprocity and mutual benefits. Some students were encouraged to give feedback to practice educators to help them develop their supervisory skills:

[He] showed the utmost interest in knowing how he could improve himself as a clinical educator and



valued and respected everything students had to say in feedback (2009, 20).

Other comments indicated the students' knowledge base, experience and ideas were valued, particularly in providing in-services, completing projects and conducting interventions with clients. Whether acknowledged formally or not, students who experienced their contribution as valued by practice educators and other team members recognised how this impacted on their confidence and professional identity.

After my presentation to the OT department, I got the sense that they all took what I had to say seriously and that they saw me as a valued and important member of the team (2009, 10).

...formally acknowledged my work on creating a recovery-focussed life writing group and running a successful men's group (2009, 4).

### Facilitating learning

Students described how excellent practice educators encouraged their learning whilst on placement. This included recognition of different learning styles, provision of learning opportunities, graded exposure, promoting independent problem solving, reflection and the provision of feedback.

#### *Recognising learning styles*

More than half of the excellent practice educators were described by students as being aware of and responsive to students' learning styles. Typically they asked their students to identify their learning styles (sometimes on the first day of placement) through discussion or questionnaires. This awareness enabled them to provide appropriate opportunities and experiences to *facilitate learning* in a targeted, *collaborative* way (2011, 6; 2010, 5) or *applied strategies* that suited students' learning (2011, 53). For example,

[I] completed the learning styles questionnaire and we immediately had a discussion about how I prefer to learn, what I had done and what particular opportunities I was hoping for in my placement. She worked towards these preferences (2010, 15).

Excellent practice educators were able to *tailor their supervision to suit their student's learning style* (2011, 17).

#### *Providing learning opportunities*

Students valued the opportunities for learning provided by their practice educators and were appreciative of their *interest in students' learning*, their *hard work* (2011, 30) and proactivity in arranging for students' participation in various learning situations, for example,

[provided] opportunities to work with a diverse patient group, participation in individual and group rehab sessions, attendance at team meetings, OT department meetings, student tutorial sessions and enabled me to observe surgery... inspired me to constantly aim to improve my skills (2010, 23).

facilitated learning opportunities where ever possible and facilitated [me] to gain as much experience and promoted independence as an OT re decision making (2009, 7).

#### *Graded exposure*

One of the key strategies that excellent practice educators used to facilitate learning was through gradually exposing students to various tasks and grading the level of responsibility they undertook. While grading and adapting are 'essential' occupational therapy skills, these were used expertly by excellent practice educators in grading student learning, for example,

tasks were graded throughout my placement and I was given the opportunity to practice on [supervisor] before seeing the patient (2009, 10).

#### *Promoting independent problem solving, learning and reflection*

Excellent practice educators adopted a range of strategies for promoting independent problem solving, including prompting, directing students to other team members or resources, allowing students enough time to come up with answers, using case studies, providing only minimal information, encouraging reflection and discussing why things went well/did not go so well in a client interaction or session. Examples of these strategies included:

...consistently asked me if there was anything I would do differently, and used prompt questions to encourage me to problem solve independently (2009, 1).

[She] encouraged me to have a go and problem solving issues which arose, and allowed me enough space to think of my own answers before enriching them with her wealth of knowledge (2010, 18).

always willing to answer my questions or provide support, however always encouraged me to facilitate my own learning first (2010, 8).

Students considered that excellent educators promoted reflective practice in their students using a variety of methods including; reflective writing, self-rating, questioning, reflection in action, collaborative discussion with the student and scheduling reflection time. Some examples include:

...asked me what I thought about my own performance during interventions and what I thought I should improve in. She encouraged written reflections as I had identified that I found reflection easier that way (2010, 7).

Within this placement, [she] and I decided that I did not have adequate appreciation of the role of structured reflection in clinical practice. Reflective practice has been one of the most important transferrable skills that I have learnt while working with [her]... continually emphasised the importance of self-evaluation when working in a rural area and the need for independent problem solving. She would work with me through different reflective models and organised for me to spend time with expert clinicians for me to learn how they use reflection in their work (2011, 52).

#### *Providing positive, constructive, balanced, encouraging and timely feedback*

More than three quarters of these excellent practice educators were described by nominating students as providing feedback, that was *positive, constructive, balanced, encouraging, timely* (often immediate), *provided in different ways* (written, verbal, scheduled) and helpfully framed as an opportunity for learning. For example,

timely feedback ...balanced the right amount of input and feedback needed to facilitate my learning, this assisted me to enhance my practice skills...always able to provide feedback in a positive way and it improved my confidence (2010, 19).

Students found that constructive feedback helped them to work harder to achieve their learning goals. When feedback was framed within the context of limited experience (that could be gained across the placement) it was frequently well received by students.

Similarly students appreciated it when practice educators used examples *to show me how I have progressed through the placement* (2011, 25). This enabled them to appreciate changes in their own performance over time. Where possible, feedback provided immediately after service provision sessions was considered very useful ... *I found it easier to implement feedback strategies when given directly after, as sometimes I had forgotten how I had performed by the time supervision came around* (2010, 32).

#### **Encouraging autonomy/independence**

From the perspective of students, the ultimate outcome of excellent practice education was the development of competent graduates who feel confident to commence their working careers as autonomous and independent professionals. Throughout their placements, effective practice education contributed to students' ability to assume responsibility for their practice and increase

their confidence as professionals. This was achieved through gradually increasing the students' autonomy whilst providing ongoing support and feedback.

Students recognised that being given the opportunity to work independently of the practice educator was essential in this learning process. Practice educators considered excellent provided *support when needed* (2009, 08) whilst providing opportunities for students to work autonomously, for example,

[She] provided me with opportunities to run sessions independently by waiting outside or in another room. This provided me with a sense of independence and really increased my confidence as a nearly graduated OT student, I really appreciated this (2010, 19).

Through progressively increasing the students' autonomy and responsibility (with support) students knew that they were gaining skills and competence during their placements,

[Her] graded supervision along with her timely feedback, allowed me to feel supported as a student and therefore, by the end of placement, feel I had achieved a high level of confidence and autonomy as an occupational therapy student (2009, 22).

The responsibility I was given throughout the placement was very well graded each week I took on more clients and had greater autonomy over their treatment (2010, 82).

Getting the balance right for the individual student was important. Too little or too much autonomy and responsibility could cause students to be uncomfortable and feel overwhelmed. The practice educators' intuition was viewed as critical to finding the 'just right challenge' for students without giving them *more than [they] could handle* (2009, 25). Some examples include;

Once he felt I was ready, he began to give me much more independence with my clients (2008, 2).

...[She] seemed to have an intuitive way of knowing when I was ready for the next step, even before I felt confident (2009, 1).

Some students described getting the balance right, in terms of being pushed *out of my comfort zone* (2009, 3, 2010, 17) and challenged in order that they developed further confidence in their abilities, for example,

Allowed for plenty of responsibility, the only placement where I felt constantly challenged but not overwhelmed. Was able to recognise strengths and abilities and adjust tasks and responsibilities accordingly (2010, 9).

She also gave me that extra little push that I needed when my ability was there but my confidence was lacking (2011, 36).

Whilst developing autonomy, excellent practice educators also encouraged students to develop their own therapeutic style, allowing them to integrate the art and the science of practice.

She encouraged me to develop my own style of practice, which was extremely empowering. I could therefore, use everything I had learnt through uni, study and clinical observation and then conduct sessions in my style of practice. (2010, 19).

## Discussion

This study replicated the earlier study by Mulholland *et al.* (2006) by undertaking a textual analysis of student nominations of Queensland and Northern Territory occupational therapy practice educators who were awarded commendations. Three key themes emerged to describe students' perspectives on the features of exceptional practice educators. The similarities and differences between the current findings and those of Mulholland *et al.* and other recent studies will be discussed, followed by the three emergent themes.

The findings share some similarities with those of Mulholland *et al.* (2006) in relation to facilitating student learning and the learning environment. However, two themes in the Mulholland *et al.*'s study which were not evident in this study related to the practice educators as expert role models and having a positive effect on the students. Viewing therapists as experts and role models whom the student aspired to emulate was not obvious in the current study. While students valued their educators' expertise, they seemed to perceive themselves on a learning journey where they aimed to bring together their own developing skills and personal style under the practice educators' guidance rather than focusing on emulating the educator as professionalism expert. The students in the current study appeared to accept the expertise of the practice educators as a given, and described different qualities regarding how the educators influenced their learning. The two studies were similar in the themes related to facilitating student learning and learning environments.

The difference between the Mulholland *et al.* (2006) study and the current study may have been influenced by several factors. First, the Mulholland *et al.* study spanned 15 years of practice education awards prior to 2004, which may reflect more dated behaviourist models of education and views of 'teacher as expert' vs. more contemporary views of educational partnership and educators as facilitators of learning (e.g., Boud and Associates, 2010; Carr, 2003) which permeate findings in the current study. Secondly, the criteria for the two

award nominations differed. The Canadian Clinical Excellence Awards required students to address educators' communication skills, theoretical background, practical application, skills development, instilling confidence, independence and overall teaching abilities. In the current study, the criteria addressed sharing knowledge and experience, promoting student identity, valuing and respects student contributions, provision of effective supervision and support, and engaging in reflective practice. The criteria of the current study may presume a more contemporary collaborative educational partnership between educator (as facilitator of learning) and student.

Thirdly, Mulholland *et al.* (2006) defined facilitating learning as 'anything done by the practice educator directly to help, guide or enhance student learning' (pp. 568–569) which emphasised a more unidirectional transmission of knowledge and skills from the practice educator to the student and focused more on the practice educator's teaching style. Students appeared to regard excellent clinical educators as 'role models up on a pedestal' to be emulated in terms of their clinical knowledge, interpersonal skills and expertise. In contrast, the current findings reflected learning as a transaction between student and educator in the context of a relationship, the importance of appreciating the student's learning style and partnership with practice educators as critical in enhancing learning, developing independence, and the students' autonomy. This underscores a change from behavioural pedagogic epistemologies to more cognitivist and constructivist approaches that reflect more contemporary educational theories (Ozmon & Craver, 2008). However, there were some similar student sentiments in the two studies regarding 'being pushed and challenged' by excellent practice educators to develop independence.

The current findings are also consistent with those of Vågstøl and Skøien (2011) who investigated physiotherapy students' perspectives on learning and supervision in practice placements through in depth qualitative interviews with 10 students. Students in the Vågstøl and Skøien study, consistent with our findings, described the importance of a sense of trust and security and a balance of challenge and support. These factors are integral to cognitivist and constructivist approaches to learning (Orlich, Harder, Callahan, Trevisan & Brown, 2007). Similarities in students' perspectives related to respectful relationships, a genuine interest in the students' perspective, the practice educators' pedagogical ability and interest in their own learning processes. These authors also identified the importance of mutual or reciprocal development of knowledge. Both studies highlighted the 'just right challenge' which requires provision of opportunities for autonomy balanced by the provision of appropriate support to allow the development of independence. This parallels Vygotsky's metaphor of scaffolding that

enables a learner to operate within his/her zone of proximal development (Chaiklin, 2003).

These findings are consistent with Rodger *et al.* (2011a) who investigated practice education quality from the perspectives of Queensland occupational therapy students and practice educators. They also found that students described the importance of relationships and valued practice educators' openness and interest in students as individuals. Students similarly valued a graded program of learning experiences that led to increasing independence.

The parallel findings of Vågstøl and Skøien (2011) are noteworthy, in that excellence in practice educators appears to traverse discipline boundaries, at least within health professions. The findings of the current study indicate the potential for shared interprofessional supervision to facilitate students' learning whilst on placement, acknowledging the need for profession specific knowledge. Given the current personnel shortages, increased student numbers, economic constraints (Rodger *et al.*, 2008) and an imperative towards the provision of interprofessional practice education (World Health Organisation (WHO), 2008), these findings suggest that excellent practice educators may well be able to facilitate learning for students within different disciplines given adequate opportunity for students to learn from profession specific role models.

### Limitations

The stated criteria on the Practice Education Commendation nomination form provided a template for students to describe examples of practice educator excellence that they had experienced during their placements. Other descriptions of excellence may have been revealed if open ended interviews had been conducted or if other selection criteria had been employed. In addition the perspectives of practice educators and fieldwork academics about excellence in practice education were not investigated. Given that the criteria for the QOTFC awards reflect contemporary educational theory, the students' comments need to be considered in light of our current understanding of transformational educational theory which may reveal different reflections by students than those in previous papers such as Mulholland *et al.* (2006) whose findings reflect criteria relevant in the 15 years of data collection prior to 2004. The findings are restricted to practice educators in Queensland and the Northern Territory, Australia whom students considered to have been exceptional and award worthy.

### Educational implications

These findings provide evidence of what students believe indicates excellence in practice education, however whether these qualities lead to better student learning outcomes has not as yet been researched. These student-identified characteristics of excellence can be shared with practice educators who wish to enhance

their roles and abilities as educators. Sharing these findings with students may assist them to better prepare and engage with placement learning in partnership with their future practice educators. Further practice education research both within occupational therapy and interprofessional contexts is required to elucidate quality supervision practices within and across disciplines. The perspectives of multiple stakeholders including students, educators, clients and fieldwork academics regarding excellence in practice education is an area requiring further investigation.

### Conclusion

Practice educators working towards providing high quality placements that will positively facilitate student learning may benefit from considering and applying the findings of this research. Students clearly stated that they valued reciprocal and mutually beneficial relationships with practice educators, the myriad of ways in which educators facilitated their learning on placement, the provision of feedback and graded means of encouraging independence over the placement by balancing challenge with support. These findings can be used by university academics whose role it is to support therapists to become practice educators to improve their supervision skills and optimise student learning whilst undertaking placements.

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