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In Practice

The Deakin experience: Using national competency standards to drive undergraduate education

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The story so far

Deakin University commenced the Bachelor of Occupational Therapy in 2002 (Wilcock, 2003). In line with Deakin’s mission for courses to be relevant, responsive and innovative, Professor Wilcock sought to address vexed problems associated with fieldwork. One of her seminal initiatives was to use the ‘Australian competency standards for entry-level occupational therapists’ (AAOT, 1994a) to drive the curriculum. The Deakin Occupational Therapy course uses these national standards in combination with the ‘Revised WOOT Standards for the education of occupational therapists’ (Hocking & Erik Ness, 2002). The Australian competency standards are central to the coursework, and used in the Deakin program as the framework of fieldwork assessment. The assessment is known as the Competency Model of Fieldwork Assessment. This paper will describe the Competency Model of Fieldwork Assessment, and aspects of the Deakin team’s experience of the initiative.

Deakin University’s competency model of fieldwork assessment

The Australian competency standards for entry-level occupational therapists were researched and developed by OT AUSTRALIA over a decade ago (AAOT, 1994b). At that time, the Association outlined possible uses for the standards including ‘curriculum development, assessment of students and clinical education’ within undergraduate programs (AAOT, 1994b, p. 32). Deakin’s Competency Model of Fieldwork Assessment directly uses the standards in those ways.

The Deakin program embeds most of the occupational therapy fieldwork within coursework subjects (known as units at Deakin University) so that they happen concurrently and interactively. Students undertake fieldwork for 1 day a week for five semesters starting in the first week of the 4-year program. Eight-week block practicums follow in levels 3 and 4 as separate units. Competency-based evaluation of fieldwork is centred on the Australian standards. A Competency Evaluation Document adds specific skills and competencies required in various fields of practice to the list of OT AUSTRALIA performance criteria.

All the skills and competencies listed have to be achieved to a level expected of a beginning practitioner as defined by the field, and then signed off by the occupational therapist(s) involved in assessment. Once a competency has been signed off, the evaluating occupational therapist(s) does not have other assessment paperwork to complete. Students can achieve a competency in their coursework as well as fieldwork education, and at any time during the course. To complete the process of achieving performance criteria, students submit relevant evidence-based literature reports to the academic team for marking. These marks contribute to coursework assessment, and the rigour required increases for each year level.

Students must achieve a prescribed percentage of competencies at each level to maintain progression. Given that fieldwork education is embedded throughout the coursework, occupational therapy academics are ultimately responsible for monitoring the students’ standards and progression.

The Competency Evaluation Document was designed in consultation with practitioners involved with students’ fieldwork (known as Centre Facilitators in...
this model), Deakin University Fieldwork Supervisors (who are employed as part of the academic team at Deakin), representatives from various fields of practice, and academics. Reviewing the Competency Evaluation Document annually with those groups allows it to remain relevant to changing practice demands. Each commencing student cohort uses the same Competency Evaluation Document throughout their undergraduate education, but each cohort’s document will be a reviewed and updated version.

The development of the Competency Model of Fieldwork Assessment is a complex endeavour with many challenges including matching the existing national competency standards with the current WFOT guidelines, which were developed more recently. We are mindful of potential weaknesses of competency-based models of assessment. Full assessment of the Competency Model of Fieldwork Assessment will be possible after graduation of the first cohort to have used this model throughout their education. Yet, so far, we have had a range of significant feedback for consideration. This paper will focus on the positive experiences that are rewarding the challenges up to this stage.

The Deakin experience
Assuring rigour in fieldwork assessment
We are positive about the potential of the Competency Model of Fieldwork Assessment to ensure transparency and rigour in fieldwork assessment. A student either achieves a competency or he/she does not. The nature of the competency he/she has demonstrated is clearly specified. The competencies relate to both ‘hands on’ therapy skills and knowledge (including policy and legislation) as well as professional attitudes and behaviours (including continuing professional development). Individual competencies are contextualised through the close, complementary interaction of the Deakin University Fieldwork Supervisors and the Centre Facilitators who each draws upon his/her perspectives of theory and practice. No individual competency can be achieved without satisfactory completion of a relevant evidence-based literature report that articulates the links between evidence and practice. The standards achieved by the students are assessed by occupational therapists who will be professional peers after the students graduate.

Linking theory and practice
The national competencies are relevant to both fieldwork and coursework. By embedding fieldwork throughout and within the coursework, practice skills and theoretical underpinnings are continually linked as students progress. This process of linking theory and practice is assisted by the Deakin University Fieldwork Supervisors being part of the academic teams, and the leaders of the teams being intimately aware of issues associated with particular practical or theoretical competency experiences. Linking the ‘thinking’ and ‘doing’ aspects appears important, as Fish and Coles (1998) have commented that some professionals have difficulty describing what they do, and making meaningful links between theory and practice. By providing a wide-ranging but finite set of competencies to aim towards, we believe that Deakin students can avoid ‘Jack of all trades’ rhetoric. Through the Competency Model of Fieldwork Assessment portfolio, students gain a clear understanding of what they need to learn in their undergraduate education, and what services they could offer as occupational therapists. They become used to the experience of self-determination facilitated by the Competency Model of Fieldwork Assessment; thus their professional identity and role is less likely to be primarily a response to the environment in which they practice. Further, given the Competency Model of Fieldwork Assessment is visibly related to OT AUSTRALIA, students come to understand they are professionally accountable.

Creating life-long learners
Professional competence is linked to currency of knowledge and skill that requires continuing professional development. The continuing professional development process involves identifying gaps in knowledge and skill, considering options for learning, making plans for achieving goals, and then reviewing progress. The Competency Model of Fieldwork Assessment teaches the skills necessary to promote professional competence through its design for student-centred learning, and its requirement for the ongoing continuing professional development process. Other key elements of continuing professional development incorporated into the Competency Model of Fieldwork Assessment are portfolioing (Crist, Wilcox & McCarron, 1998), seeking contact with peers to learn (Abrandt Dahlgren, Richardson & Sjöström, 2004), and efficiently, critically appraising evidence (Brown, Esdaile & Ryan, 2003). We aim to create life-long learners who understand their individual responsibility to promote professional competence by improving and updating their knowledge and skills.

Facilitating interaction between the individual and the collective of the profession
Occupational therapy literature has described the challenge posed by the increasing gap between the academia and the field (Wood, 1998). One of the
most exciting aspects of the Deakin experience is the potential to promote interaction between academics, practitioners, and OT AUSTRALIA. Because the Competency Model of Fieldwork Assessment uses the Australian competency standards as its base, it will change as national standards change. Both are 'living documents'. If the Competency Evaluation Document is found not to work because of the range or number of competencies, a review of the national standards themselves may be called for.

The future

We continue to develop the Competency Model of Fieldwork Assessment as an integral part of the Deakin University undergraduate program, and plan to investigate the model further through the research undertaken in our Honours program. As we trial this new vision for driving undergraduate education using the national competency standards, we will maintain reports of our progress, and value feedback.

References


