

## Feature Article

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

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**Background/aim:** Increased enrolments in occupational therapy education programs, together with changes in the employment patterns of practising occupational therapists, have resulted in a crisis in fieldwork education in Australia. This study aimed to investigate fieldwork supervisors' perspectives regarding the benefits and challenges of providing fieldwork placements, explore the potential link between providing student placements and later workforce recruitment, and document currently employed models of fieldwork supervision.

**Methods:** Participants included past, present and potential future fieldwork supervisors, sourced from fieldwork coordinators' databases at The University of Queensland and James Cook University. Using an online, purpose-designed questionnaire, descriptive data (frequencies and percentages) were gathered from forced-choice questions. For open-ended questions, content analysis was conducted to identify categories and themes.

**Results:** One hundred and thirty-two surveys were completed. Benefits of fieldwork placements related to opportunities for later recruitment of fieldwork students,

students conducting projects and developing resources, a sense of contributing to the occupational therapy profession, and the development of employee skills. Challenges related to staffing issues, lack of physical resources and prohibitive workload pressures. Multiple models of supervision were employed in supervisors' workplaces, and almost all participants responsible for workplace employment had employed fieldwork students they had previously supervised.

**Conclusions:** The results demonstrate a strong link between supervision and later recruitment of fieldwork students, suggesting that supervision of students is of considerable advantage to the host organisations in the recruitment of appropriately prepared employees. The study also demonstrates additional benefits to be promoted to supervisors and organisations to encourage and support fieldwork placements.

**KEY WORDS** employer, fieldwork education, fieldwork, recruitment, supervision, survey.

## Introduction

Domestically and internationally, securing fieldwork placements for occupational therapy students has become increasingly difficult for many tertiary education programs (Casares, Bradley, Jaffe & Lee, 2003; Fortune, Farnworth & McKinstry, 2006). This has been attributed to factors such as increased enrolments in occupational therapy programs (Casares *et al.*; Thomas, Penman & Williamson, 2005), greater productivity demands on clinicians (Casares *et al.*), and an increasing shift in the employment of occupational therapists from government institutions to private and non-government sectors (Thomas *et al.*).

In response to the current shortfall of available student fieldwork placements, and in light of the World Federation of Occupational Therapists' revised fieldwork guidelines recommending that fieldwork placements can and should take place in a greater variety of work environments (Hocking & Ness, 2002), universities have sought to increase the number of available fieldwork

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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 *et al.*).

Fieldwork supervisors continue to provide a vital contribution to the education of future occupational therapists. It has been established that fieldwork placements influence graduate career choices, and thereby play an active role in the recruitment process (Christie, Joyce & Moeller, 1985a; Mulholland & Derald, 2004). A recent study identified a significant relationship between the location of fieldwork experiences and the subsequent return of graduates to similar geographical locations and/or occupational therapy roles (Crowe & Mackenzie, 2002).

In the current climate of increasing occupational therapy workloads and rapidly occurring changes in the health-care environment, the nature of fieldwork placements is changing. The need to investigate how different models of placement influence the 'form and quality of practice' has been previously documented (Casares *et al.*, 2003). Further research to investigate previous, current or potential future supervisors' experiences and perceptions of the benefits and challenges of supervising student placements, and to identify how the benefits can be maximised and conversely the challenges minimised, is needed. Research based on fieldwork supervisors' experiences and perceptions will inform future collaboration between fieldwork supervisors and university-based occupational therapists, towards the development of new fieldwork models (Casares *et al.*).

Numerous research studies have detailed the experiences and perceptions of fieldwork from the perspective of occupational therapy students (e.g. Christie, Joyce & Moeller, 1985b; Hummell, 1997; Mitchell & Kampfe, 1993) and following on from these studies, several textbooks are now available which are dedicated to preparing occupational therapy students for fieldwork placements (e.g. Napier-Tibere & Haroun, 2004; Sladyk, 2002). It has been suggested that similar material and educational programs are needed to prepare supervisors for the dual role of meeting market demands for service delivery and for providing quality placement experiences for the next generation of health professionals (Bonello, 2001). To date, however, there is limited contemporary data regarding the benefits and challenges of providing fieldwork supervision, from the perspective of the fieldwork supervisors. While Canadian researchers (e.g. Sloggett, Kim & Cameron, 2003; Tompson & Proctor, 1990) have conducted several investigations into this topic, these studies have generally been relatively small in scope and, given differences in health and education systems, may not fully reflect the contemporary experiences and perceptions of Australian fieldwork supervisors.

The Queensland Occupational Therapy Fieldwork Collaborative (QOTFC), comprising major fieldwork

stakeholders, was established in 2004 to address state-level fieldwork issues (Queensland Occupational Therapy Fieldwork Collaborative, 2004) – in particular, an acute shortage of occupational therapy fieldwork places. One key strategy for the QOTFC was the development and administration of a survey of previous, current and potential future fieldwork supervisors, in order to determine and highlight their experiences and perspectives. The aims of this survey, and hence of this study, were to:

- 1 Investigate supervisors' perspectives regarding the benefits and challenges of providing clinical education for occupational therapy students.
- 2 Document models of supervision currently utilised by occupational therapy clinical educators.
- 3 Explore supervisors' perspectives regarding the potential link between providing student placements and later workforce recruitment.

## Methods

### Design

A descriptive survey design was utilised for this study, as it aimed to provide accurate information about the nature of the current perceptions of occupational therapist fieldwork supervisors (Burns, 2000). The study used an online, purpose-designed questionnaire in order to address the research questions in a time-efficient manner.

### Participants

A combined total of 328 potential participants were sourced from the occupational therapy fieldwork coordinators' databases at The University of Queensland (230 persons) and James Cook University (98 persons). Contacts in the databases were those who had previously participated as supervisors in either university's fieldwork program, were presently participating, or had indicated an interest in participating in the future. Hence, a purposive sampling procedure was utilised, inviting participation from known contacts who were either previous, current or prospective fieldwork supervisors of occupational therapy students.

### Instrument

A survey instrument titled QOTFC Fieldwork Survey 2006 was designed for this study. A copy of the survey can be sourced from the first author. Two QOTFC members collaboratively drafted 31 initial survey items. To ensure face and content validity, a list of these survey items was distributed to all QOTFC members for feedback. Subsequently, several survey items were reworded, others deleted and several collapsed, reducing the original list of 31 items to 22 items.

The survey was divided into 10 categories: participants' employer/industry sectors, participants' previous or current involvement in occupational therapy fieldwork programs, benefits and challenges associated with providing student placements, preferred timing of fieldwork

placements, preferred knowledge/skills of students prior to fieldwork placements, models of fieldwork supervision employed by services, student activities undertaken on fieldwork placements, recruitment of previous occupational therapy fieldwork students and 'other comments'. A combination of fixed choice (e.g. 'Does your centre/organisational unit or practice regularly take occupational therapy students for fieldwork placements?') and open-ended questions (e.g. 'What are some other actual or potential challenges — if any — to you and/or your workplace of taking occupational therapy students for fieldwork placements?') was utilised, and the option of 'other' was provided for relevant survey items.

Likert scales were used to collect data regarding challenges and benefits associated with fieldwork supervision. Responses were indicated on a five-point scale where 1 = no challenge/benefit and 5 = highly challenging/beneficial. Similarly, the frequency of activities undertaken by fieldwork students during their placements was rated by respondents on a five-point Likert scale from 1 = never undertaken to 5 = always undertaken. The option of 'not applicable' was also available for these questions.

## Procedures

Ethical clearance for this study was obtained from a Human Ethics Committee at James Cook University. The online survey was constructed using Zoomerang™ (www.zoomerang.com), which enabled the researchers to construct and administer the survey electronically, eliminated printing and postage costs, and produced automatically collated, de-identified results for further analysis. Following the initial construction phase, the online survey was piloted with two occupational therapy academics, two occupational therapy clinicians and two non-occupational therapy professionals. Based on feedback from these individuals, the content and functionality of the online survey were further modified.

In May 2006, an introductory email providing information about the purpose of the study, and featuring an embedded URL link to the online survey, was sent to all contacts in the James Cook University and The University of Queensland fieldwork databases. Recipients were requested to forward this invitation email to other fieldwork supervisors of occupational therapy students within their organisations. Clicking on the embedded URL link in the email redirected potential participants to the survey's 'Welcome Page', which again briefly described the purpose of the survey, and explained how to proceed with its completion.

In an attempt to maximise the response rate, a 'reminder' email was sent to all potential participants 1 week after the initial introductory email. This reminder email reiterated the purpose of the survey, contained the original URL link to the survey, and once again encouraged recipients to forward the email invitation to other previous, current or potential supervisors of occupational therapy fieldwork students.

## Data analysis

Descriptive data (frequencies and percentages) were calculated automatically by Zoomerang™, and all comments were compiled for further analysis. Using content analysis, two of the authors analysed participants' comments and identified categories and themes independently to ensure triangulation (Patton, 2002). Agreement in categories and themes was achieved through discussion and further reflection on meaning of comments. A final list of themes was agreed upon and open-ended questions were coded in relation to these themes.

## Results

Invitations to participate in this study were sent electronically to 328 email addresses, of which 15 were returned undelivered, giving a total known sample of 313 individuals. One hundred and thirty-two online surveys were completed, representing a response rate of 42%. As previously stated, the initial introductory email encouraged participants to invite past, current or potential occupational therapy student fieldwork supervisors to complete the survey. Therefore, this response rate is an approximation, as the actual number of recipients is unknown. As email surveys of this kind reportedly attract response rates of between 6% and 68% (Schonlau, Fricker & Elliott, 2002), and given that a recent, similarly administered survey had a response rate of 33% (Rodger, McKenna & Brownin, press), this approximate response rate is considered satisfactory. The results are presented in five sections: participants' demographics, benefits of providing fieldwork placements, the frequency of activities performed by fieldwork students, challenges of providing fieldwork placements, models of fieldwork supervision, and the link between student fieldwork placements and recruitment.

### Participants' demographics

Participants identified the employment sectors in which they worked, with 23% employed in community health, 18% in acute hospitals, and 13% in mental health. The remaining 54% were employed in sectors including education, housing, private practice, home modifications, disability, vocational rehabilitation, aged care and equipment prescription.

A majority of respondents (72%) had previous or current involvement in fieldwork supervision. The average number of students supervised per year within the respondents' work settings is shown in Figure 1. As can be seen, the majority of organisations (84%) indicated that they supervised between one and six students per year.

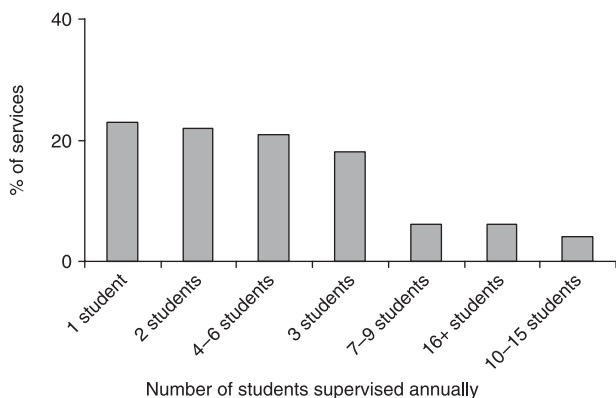
### Benefits of providing student fieldwork placements

Participants were asked to rate the benefits associated with providing fieldwork placements. Results are presented

**TABLE 1:** *Benefits associated with supervising fieldwork students*

Benefit to employees/workplace	Degree of benefit to workplace
Enables assessment for future employment	74% <u>moderately</u> or <u>very</u> beneficial
Develops staff supervision skills	71% moderately or very beneficial
Develops staff clinical reasoning skills	70% moderately or very beneficial
Develops staff organisation and time management skills	67% moderately or very beneficial
Promotes exposure of our service to university/community	66% moderately or very beneficial
Keeps clinicians' skills current	64% moderately or very beneficial
Promotes diversity in workplace	63% moderately or very beneficial
Meets organisational goals/objectives	57% moderately or very beneficial
Assists with team development	59% <u>slightly</u> or <u>moderately</u> beneficial
Workload decreases	70% <u>no benefit</u> or <u>slightly</u> beneficial
Helps with workforce planning	78% no benefit or slightly beneficial
Provides opportunity to influence university curriculum	84% no benefit or slightly beneficial

Underlined items indicate participants who indicated the degree of benefit using a 5-point Likert scale. Results shown correspond to the degree of benefit indicated by the majority of respondents.



**FIGURE 1:** *Reported number of fieldwork students supervised annually at respondents' work settings*

in Table 1 and illustrate that assessment of students for future employment and the development of staff supervision and clinical reasoning skills were the most highly valued benefits associated with fieldwork supervision.

In response to an open-ended question, participants were invited to report any other benefits they believed were attributable to student supervision. Responses were categorised to assist with analysis and reporting, and percentages of respondents' categorised comments are presented in Table 2. In descending order, the most commonly reported benefits related to opportunities for later recruitment, students conducting projects/developing resources, a sense of contributing to the occupational therapy profession, and the development of employee skills (e.g. supervision, clinical reasoning and time management skills). For example, 'Our current student has

worked diligently to assist us in a complex project — and has sourced a huge amount of literature to support us in this project.'

A wide variety of other benefits associated with student supervision were reported. These included students conducting evidence-based practice (EBP), quality improvement and in-service activities, a reduction in employee workloads, an improved ability to 'stay connected' with tertiary institutions, the tendency for students to indirectly promote the occupational therapy role within supervisors' work settings, and improved opportunities for running larger client group programs.

For example:

We always manage to cross a number of things off the endless quality assurance 'TO DO' list!

Students implement projects which help to redirect or make more efficient clinical practice.

### Frequency of activities performed by fieldwork students

Table 3 illustrates the frequency of activities reportedly performed by fieldwork students. The majority of respondents reported that students regularly or constantly write progress notes, assess clients, provide intervention/therapy, conduct planning/evaluation activities, and write reports. In addition, a large proportion of respondents reported that activities such as updating/developing resources, developing materials/brochures, literature searching, preparing educational sessions (e.g. in-services) and conducting specific workplace projects were conducted 'occasionally or regularly' by fieldwork students.

**TABLE 2:** *Other reported benefits associated with supervising occupational therapy fieldwork students*

Benefit	%
Provides potential for recruitment	18
Students complete or commence projects/develop resources	18
Contributes to occupational therapy profession's development ('give something back')	13
Improves staff skills/training (e.g. supervision skills)	9
Students conduct evidence-based practice activities	6
Assists to ease workload	6
Promotes connection with universities/awareness of tertiary curriculum	4
Students provide in-services	3
Students contribute to quality improvement activities	3
Energises/refreshes staff	4
Assists with the running of larger client groups	2
Clients appreciate meeting new people	2
Promotes new ideas/creativity	2
Promotes the role of occupational therapy within service/organisation	2
Promotes an area of occupational therapy (e.g. mental health, intellectual disability, etc.)	2
Increases diversity/acceptance in workplace	1
Students research new ideas/trends	1
Improves staff conflict management skills	1
Enables a more hands-on role for occupational therapists in organisation	1
Assists occupational therapists to better articulate their clinical reasoning	1
Fulfils service requirements	1
Total	100%

**TABLE 3:** *Frequency of activities undertaken by fieldwork students*

Activities undertaken by fieldwork students	Frequency
Writing progress notes	91% regularly or constantly
Assessing clients	90% regularly or constantly
Providing intervention/therapy	85% regularly or constantly
Planning/evaluating	85% regularly or constantly
Writing reports	82% regularly or constantly
Updating/developing resources	84% occasionally or regularly
Developing materials/brochures/client education materials	78% occasionally or regularly
Literature searching	75% occasionally or regularly
Preparing educational sessions (e.g. in-services)	74% occasionally or regularly
Undertaking specific workplace projects	73% occasionally or regularly

### Challenges of providing student fieldwork placements

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 slightly or moderately challenging. 'Insurance/indemnity issues' were rated by a majority (84%) as not challenging at all, or only slightly challenging.

Respondents were invited to report 'other challenges' associated with student supervision. Responses to an open-ended question were categorised to assist with

**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% <u>moderately</u> , <u>very</u> or <u>extremely</u> challenging
Workload pressures/lack of time	79% <u>moderately</u> or <u>very</u> 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% <u>not challenging at all</u> , or <u>slightly challenging</u>

**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. desk space, 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.

### Models 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*

**TABLE 6:** Respondents' estimates of the number of previous fieldwork students employed

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'Too many to count. I calculate that about 50% of our permanent OT staff [have] undertaken some fieldwork with our department.'

'I view student supervision as probably our most powerful recruitment/selection tool. Furthermore, staff who we retain for longer periods are often those who have done placements with us.'

'Usually at least one of the two places we offer each year [is to a previous fieldwork student].'

'Many by me and many by my greater organisation.'

'I employ 75% of my previous students.'

'10 in the last seven years. They have all been wonderful and knew the system so were able to hit the ground running! Would have employed more if I had been able to.'

'This is part of why we have students, to encourage them to [our field of practice].'

'At the beginning of 2005, approx. 40% of our department were previously students here.'

'None in this centre, but previously seven over a three year period [at another centre].'

'Organisation-wide, many OTs are recruited as a result of being students in the organisation.'

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another employee or employees. A small number of respondents (4%) indicated that students were supervised in their organisations by employees *other than* occupational therapists.

Responses indicate that the ratios of supervisors-to-students in fieldwork settings are diverse. Thirty-eight per cent of respondents supervised on a '1 occupational therapist : 1 student' basis, and 32% indicated that their workplaces used a model of '≥ 2 occupational therapists : 1 student'. However, workplaces also employed a variety of other models of supervision such as '1 occupational therapist : 2 students', '≥ 2 occupational therapists : ≥ 2 students', and '1 occupational therapist : student group' 'occupational therapy primary supervisor + secondary supervisor' and 'multiple mentoring' (e.g. '12 students to approximately eight supervisors').

### The link between student fieldwork placements and recruitment

Fifty-seven per cent of respondents reported that they played a key role in the employment of occupational therapists in their workplaces, and 56% of respondents reported that they had employed previous fieldwork students. When viewed together, these two findings indicate a very strong link between fieldwork supervision and later recruitment. Fieldwork supervisors who play a key role in recruitment within their services carry out a dual role, which involves training students to gain workplace competencies, while simultaneously assessing these students as potential future employees within their service.

A majority of respondents (75%) indicated that they maintained records of previous fieldwork students, a finding that may reinforce the apparent link between student fieldwork and recruitment. The most commonly maintained records were copies of Student Performance Evaluation Feedback forms (46%), personal contact details (25%) and students' fieldwork projects and/or written reports (10%). Other student records

reportedly maintained by supervisors included resumes, supervision notes, learning plans, confidentiality agreements and student feedback forms. One participant reported that he/she had employed five to 10 of his/her previous fieldwork students, and stated the strategy used to encourage students to apply for positions within his/her organisation:

I always encourage good students to send me their resumes just prior to graduation. I also have found that friends of previous students also apply if their friend had a positive placement. It is useful to know that your reputation as an employer gets around to many students even though they don't have a placement [in your] organisation.

Respondents who had employed one or more of their previous fieldwork students were asked to estimate approximately how many had been selected based on their fieldwork experience. A selection of respondents' comments in relation to the number of former students they had employed can be seen in Table 6.

## Discussion

This survey provides timely and contemporary evidence regarding the benefits and challenges of fieldwork supervision, from the experiences and perspectives of past, present and potential fieldwork supervisors. Potentially one of the most significant identified benefits of fieldwork supervision relates to the link between provision of fieldwork placements and recruitment. In providing student fieldwork placements, many supervisors are assessing the capabilities and work characteristics of students with a purposeful view towards recruitment. Supervisors reported that this strategy not only made graduate recruitment easier, but that it decreased the time and cost required to train graduate recruits, and improved employee retention rates. In light of current workforce shortages within the occupational therapy profession,

particularly in non-metropolitan areas and within the mental health, aged care and disability sectors (Productivity Commission, 2005), this study provides clear evidence that supervising fieldwork students is a fruitful recruitment strategy. Given the potential value of this finding, it is surprising that this benefit has not been more widely identified in the occupational therapy literature, as to our knowledge this is the first study that provides strong evidence of this link. Further promotion of this link to employers could counterbalance concerns regarding perceptions of 'decreased productivity' (Casares *et al.*, 2003) or other perceived challenges associated with supervising students.

Other direct student contributions to organisations are projects, EBP quality assurance and in-service activities, which were identified as contributing to more efficient practice, greater output, increased diversity of programs and quality improvement strategies. Although a student's ability to deliver certain occupational therapy services may be limited earlier in their placements, it seems that many are offered placements by their host organisations to use their often advanced research, computer and presentation skills to provide invaluable evidence-based programs and education sessions for time-pressured clinicians.

The presence of fieldwork students reportedly delivers a raft of other indirect benefits to many organisations, including the development of staff supervisory, mentoring, time management, conflict resolution and clinical reasoning skills. Such skills development is already formally acknowledged in Australia by the Australian Occupational Therapy Association's accreditation program (AccOT) as evidence of continued professional development and within some workplaces is considered in career progression. Other indirect benefits include the promotion of the occupational therapy role within some organisations, the strengthening and enrichment of team environments through diversity and injection of fresh new and perspectives, a reduction in workloads in the later stages of placements as students implement the new skills they have learnt during their placements, and better connection with tertiary institutions.

It appears that many organisations consciously and strategically plan for mutually beneficial or 'contractual' student fieldwork placements, whereby they provide students with opportunities to learn core occupational therapy and/or generic work skills, and students 'return the favour' by providing organisations with direct, tangible, valuable contributions such as projects and quality improvement activities, and indirect benefits such as the development of staff skills and the strengthening of teams. It is proposed that the supervisors and/or organisations who are most satisfied with fieldwork — and who gain the most out of it — are those who recognise and implement this 'contractual' fieldwork, either consciously or unconsciously. That is, they strategically plan for 'win-win' placements which simultaneously

benefit students and their host organisations and its employees.

Many survey participants expressed that providing student placements is a professional responsibility and a way to ensure that the profession continues to prosper. The results show that, for many respondents, supervising occupational therapy students is a way of ensuring that the next generation of occupational therapists is work-ready. The importance and transferability of generic skills to future employers has been previously identified by Mulholland and Derald (2004) and is recognised in this study as a motivating factor for offering fieldwork placements.

In relation to the challenges of providing fieldwork placements, it is not surprising that the three most frequently cited challenges (i.e. staffing issues, lack of resources and workload pressures) were also the three most frequently cited barriers for those that do not currently offer student placements. It is worth noting that all three of these challenges/barriers are generally beyond the control of individual occupational therapists, and therefore must be addressed at an organisational level. While some therapists appear to offer student placements despite these challenges, it would seem that a lack of organisational support for providing fieldwork placements in other workplaces may prevent occupational therapists from offering placements. The recent proposal in Queensland to include clinical education as core business within Queensland Health (a major employer of occupational therapists) indicates the vital contribution that clinical education plays to the future workforce (Sturgess, 2006).

The ever changing Australian workforce habits, with more staff working fewer hours, have been recognised as a significant and powerful trend by the Productivity Commission (2006). While the present study demonstrates the increasing use of alternative models of supervision, the role of part-time and locum occupational therapists in fieldwork supervision may still be considered 'alternative' by many. Given that this employment trend is so prevalent within the occupational therapy profession and that there are many workplaces which have predominantly part-time or locum staff, this perception must now be challenged. If the only organisations who provided fieldwork placements were those who had stable, permanent, full-time employees, there would likely be very few available placements whatsoever (Fortune *et al.*, 2006). Many graduates will themselves be appointed to part-time, casual or locum positions in the early stages of their careers, and hence will benefit from supervision from others who are employed in this capacity.

Findings from this survey illustrate the diverse models of supervision utilised throughout organisations that provide fieldwork placements for occupational therapy students in Queensland. More than 30% of participants indicated the involvement of staff other than occupational



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, Gaipman & 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.

## Recommendations

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.

## Study limitations

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 were representative of the profession as a whole cannot be assumed. The location of this survey in Queensland, Australia, may not be generalisable to other Australian states and territories, nor to international settings. However, the similarity of some of its findings when compared with recent literature from Canada (Sloggett, 2003) is encouraging. The survey design, and its distribution via email, resulted in an estimated response rate of 42%; however, it is not known how many potential participants the email finally reached.

## Future research

Further research is required to compare the learning gained by students in different fieldwork settings, and to provide a clearer picture of the way in which graduate career aspirations are influenced by fieldwork experiences. There has been little research to date that provides guidelines for students or supervisors regarding undertaking fieldwork in non-clinical occupational therapy roles such as consultative models of practice, occupational therapy education programs or in managerial positions.

Clearly, some organisations have implemented fruitful fieldwork strategies, which simultaneously recognise the supervisor's/host organisation's responsibility to provide adequate training for students while expecting valuable contributions from students during their placements. Future research should identify such organisations and describe in detail their strategic approaches to fieldwork supervision, in order to provide successful models of fieldwork supervision for other supervisors and their organisations.

## Conclusion

This study provides a contemporary view of fieldwork supervision as it is practised in Queensland, Australia,

from the perspective of fieldwork supervisors and investigated the challenges and benefits of occupational therapy student fieldwork supervision. The most commonly reported and most highly valued benefit to supervisors related to recruitment opportunities afforded by provision of fieldwork placements. Fieldwork provides supervisors with direct student contact, and affords them with opportunities to evaluate and prepare future graduates for potential recruitment into their organisations. Other reported benefits included the development of employee skills (e.g. in supervision and clinical reasoning) and the contributions of students in the form of projects, quality improvement and EBP activities, and the development of resources.

The most commonly cited challenges associated with fieldwork provision related to staffing, lack of resources (e.g. desk space, computers) and workload pressures. Additionally, several respondents stated that a key barrier to providing placements in their organisation was that their work was not 'clinical' in nature. Given the movement of increasing numbers of occupational therapists into non-clinical roles, it would seem appropriate and necessary for students to experience placements in such settings.

This study demonstrates the 'win-win' potential of fieldwork placements, which can be mutually beneficial for both students and host organisations. For students, the opportunity to develop occupational therapy and workplace skills during fieldwork placements is essential, and so ongoing collaboration between universities and fieldwork supervisors to plan and develop new models for fieldwork is essential to ensure both the quality and the quantity of future fieldwork placements. Host organisations can reap the benefits of providing fieldwork opportunities. During their placements, students can assist to research practice evidence and complete specific workplace projects. However, the most significant benefit identified in this study was the direct link between student fieldwork placements and the potential for later recruitment.

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