

OT Clinical Educator Tips

“Working with students who are having difficulties”

It is commonly known that an investment of time and energy is required when providing students with clinical education, even more so when students experience difficulty. It is important to be aware of what strategies you can use with students who are having difficulty (Queensland Occupational Therapy Fieldwork Collaborative, 2007).

The best way to deal with any issues is to address them early on so that the intervention is timely, get the university involved from the beginning and take the time to complete written documentation of the situation (which objectively outlines the evidence and what you have discussed with the student). It is essential that confidentiality is maintained at all times for all parties involved (University of Queensland & Griffith University, 2008; QOTFC, 2007).

Students can experience difficulty, which affects their ability to meet the placement learning objectives and competencies, and can be related to one or more of the following:

- clinical performance
- professional behaviour
- health status
- personal problems
- stress relating to other work commitments (like a part-time job) and university deadlines
- negative experience in previous clinical placement (adapted from University of Queensland, 2008; James Cook University, 2008; QOTFC, 2007)

Some examples of the issues a student may experience include:

- Inconsistent levels of clinical performance and competence
 - Is at risk of failing one or more core learning objectives on the SPEF-R
 - Has difficulty translating theory into practice
 - Demonstrates inappropriate behaviour and presentation
 - Displays limited interaction and communication skills with clients or the team or both
 - Displays lack of interest, motivation and initiative
 - Displays inadequate preparation, organisational and prioritisation skills
 - Responds inadequately to feedback (failures to improve performance or initiate behaviour change)
 - Unsafe practice
- (QOTFC, 2007)

It is important to have an action plan in place to focus the student's learning, which outlines the strategies employed to develop the student's area of inadequate performance. This approach encourages the student to take ownership of the difficulty and to work with the Clinical Educator (CE) and the university in changing the performance for the better (University of Queensland & Griffith University, 2008).

Action Plan and Strategy development process

- Identify the problem (is it global or specific?)
- Explore the background (what might be causing the problem?) and offer support to the student
- Relate the problem area to the SPEF-R
- Provide feedback on the student's performance
- Acknowledge their learning style and the placement context
- Collaborate (with CE, CELM and student) to develop an action plan (that is simple, easily monitored & student centred)
- Ensure strategies in the action plan are specific to the intended area of development and a desired outcome is included (a format such as SMART could be used)
- Student needs to undertake/comply with the strategies in the action plan
- Monitor progress on regular basis
- Document the process
- Seek support (from own supervisor, the Clinical Education Officer and the university or seek a second opinion on the accuracy of your observations)
- Review and evaluate the strategies and outcomes

(adapted from University of Queensland & Griffith University, 2008; QOTFC, 2007)

Sometimes despite all your best efforts, it might still be necessary for the student to fail (QOTFC, 2007). If this is the case please ensure you have all the adequate documentation in order and that you seek support for yourself and the student. It is often very stressful for Clinical Educators to fail students, so don't forget about approaching your Clinical Education Officer for assistance and support. In addition, you will need to liaise with the university about the situation.

Are Clinical Educator's required or obliged to offer an extended placement?

All the universities agree that there is no obligation on behalf of the CE to offer more time for a student who is having difficulty meeting the learning objectives and placement competencies. This will only happen if the CE agrees to it, recommends it and feels that it is a process they have the capacity to actively participate in.

What does the University do if a student fails a placement?

The universities who provide OT programs consider clinical placements as a unit/subject, just like all the other units/subjects they undertake as part of their course. For example The University of Queensland 3rd Year Placements are classed as the unit/subject "OCTY3206 Occupational Therapy Clinical Practice". If a student fails a clinical placement, they may be offered a supplementary placement elsewhere. If they end up failing this too, it will result in a fail for that unit/subject. As a result, a fail will be recorded on their academic transcript.

In summary, it is recommended that you deal with any issues that come up as soon as possible with the student and involve the university right in the beginning, even for minor issues. Sometimes students don't improve as you might expect and the university can be there to support the student through this circumstance. In addition, the District Clinical Education Officer is always available to provide you with on the ground support.

References:

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