University-initiated strategies to increase supervisory capacity and benefits associated with dietetic student supervision—perceptions of dietetic placement sites

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Abstract

Objective: To assess the attitudes of staff involved in dietetic student professional placement on the utility of a range of university initiatives to increase supervisory capacity.

Design: Cross-sectional survey using a mailed questionnaire.

Subjects: Managers and dietitians participating in the supervision of student dietitian placements in the Griffith University program.

Setting: Nutrition and dietetic practice settings.

Main outcome measure: Attitudes and utility ratings of university-initiated support strategies from dietitians involved in student dietitian placement programs.

Statistical analysis: Descriptive analysis to calculate response frequencies.

Results: Completed questionnaires were received from 14 managers (70% response rate) and 28 supervising dietitians (~56% response rate) from a total of 20 Griffith University placement sites. Direct allocation of a placement honorarium received the highest utility rating among supervisors followed by formal training in supervision provided by the university. There was general agreement that student placements increase overall stress among staff and increase staff workloads but a similar agreement that student supervision adds to job satisfaction and encourages reflective practice and further learning by staff. The majority of respondents reported that the benefits of student supervision outweighed the costs.

Conclusions: There is strong support for university-initiated investments in strategies that focus on increasing the capacity of placement sites and optimise the benefits associated with student supervision. Further study to economically evaluate costs and benefits of this important aspect of development of the dietetic workforce is required to make the most effective use of these investments. (Nutr Diet 2002;59:191–4)

Key words: professional placement, nutrition and dietetics, education, student dietitians, supervisory capacity

Introduction

Professional placement programs are an important component of dietetic training in Australia. The Dietitians Association of Australia (DAA) stipulates, in its university program accreditation guidelines, that students must undertake professional placement for a minimum of 20 weeks comprising a minimum of ten weeks in clinical work settings or practices, four weeks each in community and food service practice domains and a two-week elective placement period (1). Professional placement is recognised as an important process for the development of entry-level competency because it enables students to apply knowledge and skills to real problems in workplace settings (2,3).

Practicing dietitians have a major role in the development of the workforce through their contributions to professional placement supervision. Crude estimates suggest that approximately six thousand weeks (300 students nationally each undertaking 20 weeks) of student professional placement are supervised by dietetic practitioners in Australia each year. This equates with over two hundred thousand supervision hours each year. This is an average of two weeks of student placement per DAA member each year (although not all supervisors may be registered as members of DAA). These calculations demonstrate the existing commitment practitioners have to professional placement supervision.

There are a number of trends that would appear (although not documented) to have affected the capacity of the profession to support universities with student placement programs. Changes in health services and resource constraints may challenge the notion of student supervision as being core business. This coupled with the increasing number of universities offering dietetic training programs and increasing student intakes has made professional practice placements competitive and their organisation logistically challenging. The existing course accreditation standards stipulating professional placement program structure have remained unchanged since 1993 despite ongoing debate (4).

There is limited Australian literature published that describes university-based strategies to address the issue of professional supervisory capacity. This study aimed to assess the attitudes of staff involved in dietetic student professional placement concerning the utility of a range of the university’s initiatives to increase supervisory capacity and the effects students have on practice at the placement site.
Methods

Two mail questionnaires were used to assess the attitudes of dietetic practitioners from nutrition and dietetic services participating in Griffith University's student placement program: one for managers of nutrition and dietetic services; and another for supervising dietitians. The manager’s instrument was an 11-item questionnaire and the supervisors a five-item questionnaire. Both instruments included a mix of scales, closed and open-ended questions. The manager’s instrument included questions relating to supervision history, use of resources allocated by Griffith University as part of the student supervision agreement and experience of placement support strategies from other universities. Both instruments had three consistent questions relating to supervisors’ perceptions of the utility of a range of university support strategies, effects of students on supervisor’s practice and a rating scale of overall cost:benefit associated with student placement supervision. This rating scale was numbered from zero to ten with zero representing a perception that costs greatly outweigh benefits, five representing costs equalled benefits and ten equalling benefits greatly outweigh costs.

Questionnaires were mailed in a bundle (one manager questionnaire plus up to ten supervisor questionnaires) to managers of nutrition and dietetic departments in all placement sites (n = 20 sites) taking students from Griffith University over the previous three-year period (1998 to 2000 inclusive). A covering letter requesting managers to distribute questionnaires to supervisors was included. The exact sample size of supervisors was unknown but was estimated to be approximately 50 dietitians across the 20 sites.

Completed surveys were entered into SPSS for Windows computer program (Release 10.1, SPSS Inc, Chicago 2001) for storage and analysis. Descriptive analysis was used to calculate response frequencies. Responses to the cost:benefit scale rating (zero to ten) were plotted in a bar chart to illustrate the response distribution.

Results

Respondent characteristics

From a total of 20 placement sites, 14 managers’ questionnaires were returned completed (70% response rate) and 28 supervisors’ questionnaires were returned from an unknown sample size. However, if the estimated number of supervisors was 50 the response rate is 56%. Responses from sites included a mix of tertiary hospital, provincial hospital and community health and public health nutrition sites in Queensland, New South Wales and Tasmania (Table 1).

All but two placement sites had two or more full-time equivalent (FTE) dietitian positions and ranged from one to sixteen FTEs. Half the placement sites had more than four FTEs. The mean years of experience of student supervision reported was four years (4.0 ? 1.7 years). Twenty-one of 28 supervisors had three years or more experience supervising students.

Managers were asked to report how they had used the $100 per student weekly honorarium allocated by Griffith University as part of its supervision support strategy. The most common use of this funding had been investment in staff development, resource acquisition, staff backfill and professional membership fees. All but one site had used some or most of the funds allocated. Actual use was mirrored in planned uses of future honorarium allocations.

When asked to rate the utility of strategies to increase student supervisory capacity, there was consensus that the honorarium allocation was most useful, followed by supervisory training, weekly contact between the university and supervisors and weekly university tutor visits (Table 2).

Other supervisory capacity development strategies suggested by respondents included extending placement length, greater standardisation and communication of assessment procedures across placement sites, greater contact between university supervisors and placement sites prior to students starting and paying a hospital-employed tutor rather than using a university tutor.

Table 3 summarises results from respondents when asked to rate the level of agreement with statements relating to the effect of students on departments and practice. There was general agreement that student placements increase overall stress among staff and increase staff workloads but a similar agreement that student supervision adds to job satisfaction and encourages reflective practice and further learning among staff. Respondents mostly agreed that student placements increase service delivery.

Only three respondents considered the costs of student supervision to outweigh benefits, six reported that costs equalled benefits and the remaining 33 rated benefits outweighed costs. Figure 1 illustrates the distribution of cost: benefit ratings in favour of benefits outweighing costs.

Discussion

The response to this evaluation questionnaire was considered adequately representative for managers (70% response rate), particularly those from tertiary hospital sites (100% response rate). Regional placement site response was limited to 50% by managers but there was a good spread of responses across sites allowing an assessment of professional placement issues and the effectiveness of support strategies. The generalisation of results obtained from supervisors is limited by the unknown total sample size and a lack of data from non-respondents. Caution therefore needs to be exercised when trying to generalise results to the total sample of
Table 2. Ratings of different placement support strategies (i.e. those that increase your capacity to take students for the mutual benefit of department and student)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Support Strategy</th>
<th>n</th>
<th>Not useful</th>
<th>Limited use</th>
<th>Useful</th>
<th>Very useful</th>
<th>Extremely useful</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>University paying honorarium of $100 weekly per student to be used at departments’ discretion</td>
<td>42</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>32</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Formal student supervision training for staff provided by university</td>
<td>38</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Weekly telephone contact between university staff and supervisors</td>
<td>37</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>University tutor visiting workplace for half day weekly and supervising students and supporting staff</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Weekly telephone contact between university staff and students</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 3. Ratings of agreement with statements about effects on department associated with taking students on placement

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Statement</th>
<th>Strongly disagree</th>
<th>Disagree</th>
<th>Unsure</th>
<th>Agree</th>
<th>Strongly agree</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Overall stress on staff increases when students are on placement</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Students increase staff workloads</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Students put pressure on space which interrupts department’s functions</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Staff productivity declines when students are on placement (a)</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Recent graduates can contribute to student supervision with guidance from peers</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Student training responsibilities add to staff job satisfaction</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Students encourage reflective practice and further learning amongst staff</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Students make a significant contribution to extra service delivery e.g. increase cases serviced, complete projects that otherwise would not have been done</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Students increase the ‘energy levels’ in the department</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Student supervisors should have at least three years’ relevant experience</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Student placements are a useful staff recruitment tool (i.e. identifying talent)</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Student training is an important part of our core business</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

n = 42

(a) 2 missing responses
Griffith University’s student supervisors. In most placement sites surveyed there was a ‘critical mass’ of dietitians (mean greater than four FTEs) with significant experience in supervising student dietitians. Much of this experience had been gained through participation in supervision of students from Griffith University since 1998.

The direct allocation of discretionary funds received greater support from respondents as a supervision support strategy than other university investment such as visiting tutor support. As all of the dietitians surveyed had been exposed to Griffith University’s honorarium payment support initiative prior to this survey, it is possible that this favourable rating is a result of this experience. This strengthens the validity of utility ratings offered as it represents perception based on experience rather than a hypothetical option.

It is not necessarily the case that the use of honorariums for activities such as continuing professional development increase supervisory capacity. Rather, the university is recognising the contribution of supervisors and supervisors are more prepared to supervise students. Whether the effect is direct (e.g. up-skilling means productivity is not decreased despite student supervision) or indirect (university recognition increases mutual respect and collaboration) cannot be ascertained from this current study.

There have been recent discussions about the burden of student placement and professional responsibilities relating to workforce development (4–6). Results from this study indicate almost universal acceptance that the benefits of student supervision outweighed the costs. Although student placements increase staff stress and workloads this is more than offset by benefits such as increased job satisfaction, increased department ‘energy levels’ and staff development. Student supervision also has useful spin-offs for future staff recruitment and is almost universally accepted as part of practitioners’ core business. These findings concur with US studies that have investigated the economic and other benefits associated with dietetic student supervision (3,7). Although supervisors in this evaluation reported negative impacts on individual practitioner’s productivity, there was also broad agreement that students increase overall service delivery. The data provides evidence that supervision of student placement adds value to departments and individual practice, but a more detailed and economic analysis of costs and benefits is warranted so that resource allocation by universities can be more effectively targeted to support supervisory capacity.

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**References**