



COMMENTARY

Assessment in the final year clinical practicum of an Australian osteopathy program



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Abstract Assessment of students is a cornerstone of health profession education programs. It is essential assessment methods are valid, reliable, fair, defensible and evidence-based. Assessment is a popular topic in health professions literature, although discussions specifically relating to assessment in osteopathic education are limited. This commentary provides an overview of the current assessment methods utilised to assess clinical competency and fitness-to-practice in the final year clinical practicum subjects in an Australian osteopathy program. This summary may be useful to other osteopathy programs in the development and implementation of assessments. Further, this commentary also introduces the concept of programmatic assessment and discusses its application in an osteopathy program. Crown Copyright © 2015 Published by Elsevier Ltd. All rights reserved.

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Implications for practice

- A range of assessments are used in the final year of the osteopathy program to develop a comprehensive picture of a student's fitness-to-practice.
- Assessments should address the knowledge, skills and attributes required for graduate osteopathic practice.
- No one type of assessment can provide a determination of a student's fitness to practice.
- A programmatic approach to assessment can assist with fitness-to-practice decisions.

Introduction

Assessment is a key component of all health professional education programs and is a method of making conclusions about the skills, knowledge, attributes, and behaviours of a student.¹ The process of assessment is designed to assure several stakeholders (e.g. public, university community, accreditation and registration bodies) of the fitness-to-practice of graduates from educational programs. The assessment of clinical competency and fitness-to-practice is widely reported in health professions education literature, although discussions specifically relating to assessment in osteopathic education are limited. The available literature on assessment in osteopathy is mostly situated in the United States (US). However, the scope of practice for US osteopaths is different to Australian osteopaths. In the US, graduates of osteopathic education programs are osteopathic physicians and are more similar to Australian medical doctors than osteopathic practitioners. The differences in both the profession and the educational programs between the US and Australia limits the generalisability of the findings of the US osteopathic assessment literature to the Australian context resulting in limited literature relating specifically to assessment in Australian osteopathic education. The intention of the present commentary is to initiate scholarly discussions on assessment in osteopathic education in Australia and extend to other countries where the scope of osteopathic practice is similar, United Kingdom (UK), New Zealand and some of continental Europe. This commentary provides an overview

of the current assessment methods utilised to assess clinical competency and fitness-to-practice in final year students in an Australian osteopathy program and may be useful to other osteopathic programs in developing their assessment methods and approaches. The description offered here also aims to encourage osteopathic educational institutions to consider publishing their approaches to assessment of clinical competency.

There is increasing pressure on health professional programs to ensure the curriculum and assessments are rigorous, high quality and robust.² In Australia, osteopathic education is only in its infancy when compared to other health professional education programs. The first osteopathic course was offered in 1986 and there have only been a maximum of three programs running concurrently. In contrast, physiotherapy education commenced in Australia as early as the 1940s³ and has seen significant growth with more than fifteen courses (under- and post-graduate) currently being offered across the country and as a result the literature contains many publications relating to curriculum and assessment in physiotherapy education.^{4–8} The small number of Australian osteopathic programs, and limited number of osteopathy academics, has resulted in a paucity in the literature of most facets of osteopathic education (e.g. curriculum design, assessments, development of professional identity, educational methods etc.), whereas other health professions have an abundance of literature in these areas. Educational theories should underpin curriculum design, content delivery and assessment practices. The key theories that have influenced the selection and design of the clinical competency assessments in the program at VU are the social learning theories of Vygotsky⁹ and Rogoff,¹⁰ experiential learning,¹¹ and situated learning.^{12,13} Patton et al.'s review of workplace learning theories in physiotherapy¹⁴ is an excellent resource for a more detailed description of these theories.

This commentary commences with a summary of the relevant literature on competency assessment in non-US osteopathic education. Secondly we introduce programmatic assessment as a guiding framework to approaching assessment within osteopathic education. Examples of the application of this framework are provided and specific assessment methods currently utilised in the final year of the osteopathic program at Victoria University are described.

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