



OSTEOPATHIC EDUCATION

Introducing a portfolio assessment in a pre-professional osteopathy program



Brett Vaughan^{a,b,*}, Prue Florentine^a, Annie Carter^a

^a *Osteopathic Medicine Discipline, College of Health and Biomedicine, Victoria University, Melbourne, Australia*

^b *Institute of Sport, Exercise and Active Living, Victoria University, Melbourne, Australia*

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Abstract Portfolios are used in the education of health professionals across numerous professions including medicine, nursing, dentistry and physiotherapy. Portfolios are a collection of evidence of learning and reflection, both of which are required to be a capable healthcare professional. The current paper describes how a portfolio is to be introduced into the assessment of the final year of a pre-professional osteopathy program. A discussion of the introduction, structure, mentoring and assessment of the portfolio is provided, along with how the implementation of the portfolio will be reviewed.

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Introduction

Capable health professionals are practitioners with a broad range of skills, knowledge and abilities in their discipline. They appropriately incorporate these proficiencies into their work whilst taking into account both patient-related influences and the specific practice environment. Furthermore

they possess an ability to routinely reflect on their practice. Reflection is an important component of safe healthcare practice¹ and professional development whilst also providing a basis for self-directed learning practices.²

Pre-professional education programs can develop capable health practitioners by not only teaching the skills and knowledge for that discipline, but they ideally utilise assessments that encourage students to develop generalisable skill sets.³ At present, it would appear that the methods of assessment used, not only in the osteopathic profession but health professions generally, have focused primarily on point-in-time,

* Corresponding author. Osteopathic Medicine Discipline, College of Health & Biomedicine, Victoria University, PO Box 14428, Melbourne, Victoria 8001, Australia. Tel.: +61 3 9919 1210; fax: +61 3 9919 1030.

E-mail address: brett.vaughan@vu.edu.au (B. Vaughan).

factual recall and limited demonstration of performance. Such methods are often not representative of performance in real clinical situations, do not offer the opportunity to demonstrate an integrated approach, and therefore do not accurately represent the individuals' healthcare practice capability. Portfolios appear to be a possible means to promote comprehensive, authentic and integrated learning and may also promote active engagement in learning activities.

Portfolios are widely used in undergraduate health professional education,⁴ however there is no research into the use of a portfolio assessment in osteopathy. A portfolio could be described as a collection of evidence of practice within a profession and is a demonstration of what the candidate or student does in practice, and as such is often referred to as being 'authentic'.^{1,5,6} Furthermore, portfolios can gauge the development of a student's abilities over time in contrast to a single point-in-time assessment.⁷

The portfolio is being introduced into the final year (year 5) of the osteopathy program at Victoria University (VU), Australia, leading to the award of Master of Health Science (Osteopathy). The osteopathy program is accredited by the Australian & New Zealand Osteopathic Council. The introduction of the portfolio will allow the assessment of components of osteopathic practice that cannot be evaluated using other assessment methods, such as the Objective Structured Clinical Examination (OSCE), and to encourage students to reflect on their practice.

Development of the portfolio

Chambers⁸ suggested four stages in the development of portfolio assessment:

1. Establish the competencies to be evaluated
2. Develop 'rules' for what will be accepted as evidence
3. Define who the examiners are and how the assessment will be conducted
4. Consider the logistics and timelines

These are used as a basis, with some modification, for the implementation of the portfolio assessment at VU as these headings suggested by Chambers⁸ provide a simple overview of the development process.

Establish the competencies to be evaluated

The academic staff of the osteopathy program at VU have developed the Graduate Capabilities for

Osteopathic Practice (GCOP). These capabilities provide a foundation for the knowledge, skill sets, and professional values, that students graduating from the program will be able to display. There are seven domains within the GCOP (Table 1) and each of these domains has a number of corresponding elements and criteria. The portfolio assessment has been blueprinted against the domains and elements in the GCOP.^{6,9}

Develop 'rules' for what will be accepted as evidence

Students will be provided with the GCOP at the beginning of the academic year, along with a portfolio guide and the assessment sheet. The portfolio guide includes an overview of the function and form the portfolio can take, provide models of the structure of the portfolio, and examples of evidence that can be used as part of the submission. Such clear guidance about the expectations, content, structure and assessment of the portfolio is important,^{1,10} particularly to increase the quality of evidence provided.^{4,5,11} A mentor will also be allocated to the student to assist them in the development of the portfolio. The mentoring process is discussed in detail later in this paper.

Define who the examiners are and how the assessment will be conducted

Background to assessment

Any assessment should be reliable, valid and authentic, in addition to being fair and reasonable.⁹ In the use of a portfolio, validity is established though the blueprinting of the assessment against capabilities (in this case the GCOP) as noted above.

The reliability of portfolio assessments has been questioned,^{12,13} and the main factor responsible for the limited reliability is predominantly the assessment method employed,⁸ that is the poor explanation and communication of the criteria. Efforts directed towards improving the reliability

Table 1 Domains in the VU graduate capabilities for osteopathic practice.

1. Clinical information management
2. Examination, diagnosis and treatment planning
3. Osteopathic management
4. Patient management
5. Communication
6. Primary healthcare responsibilities
7. Professional and business activities

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