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Assessment of Australian osteopathic learners’ clinical competence during workplace learning

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IMPLICATIONS FOR PRACTICE

- The discussion in the paper asserts the need for discussion of workplace-based assessment procedures and processes at osteopathic teaching institutions re their responsibility to deliver programs that produce graduates who are fit to practice in the primary health care sector.
- Such discussion ought to be informed by a review of the programmatic approach to assessment of student’s clinical competence, capabilities and capacity in the workplace as well as of the tools used to assess the learners developing clinical practices.
BACKGROUND

The faculty of an osteopathic teaching institution are expected to demonstrate to the various stakeholders that their systems and processes produce graduates with the desired competencies. On a global level the World Health Organisation *Benchmarks for training in osteopathy*¹ and the more recent, Osteopathic International Alliance *Osteopathy and Osteopathy Medicine: global view of practice, patients education and contribution to healthcare delivery*² are providing non-Australasian osteopathy programs with some guidance as to the recommended content of their teaching program. In Australia, osteopathy curricula are designed to meet the standards outlined in the Accreditation Policy of the Australasian Osteopathic Accreditation Council (AOAC).³

In addition to the above standards from the osteopathic community, the Australian Learning and Teaching Council Threshold Standards for Health, Medicine and Veterinary Science⁴ clearly shows upon completion of their discipline-specific programs of study, healthcare graduates will be able to:

1. Demonstrate professional behaviours;
2. Assess individual and/or population health status and, where necessary, formulate, implement and monitor management plans in consultation with patients/clients/carers/animal owners/communities;
3. Promote and optimise the health and welfare of individuals and/or populations;
4. Retrieve, critically evaluate, and apply evidence in the performance of health-related activities;
5. Deliver safe and effective collaborative healthcare and;
6. Reflect on current skills, knowledge and attitudes, and plan ongoing personal and professional development.

Moreover, society and members of the health professions expect that health profession education programs prepare learners in accordance with the various accreditation and registration requirements for that profession. In short, osteopathic graduates are expected to be able to demonstrate they have a particular set of clinical competencies – to prove they are fit for purpose - that they are osteopaths capable of working within their scope of practice. The teaching faculty cannot truly discharge this responsibility to demonstrate their graduates have achieved the required competencies without knowing they are using an appropriate assessment strategy incorporating valid and reliable assessment tools to measure learner achievement. Apart from assessment being necessary to ascertain learners’ progress and performance, workplace-based assessments, aka clinical assessments, are intended to provide ongoing feedback to improve learning and influence clinical behaviours. Feedback is required to support and encourage learning focus.

London reported there is no consensus as to what might be regarded as best practice in osteopathic clinical assessment within the UK teaching institutions. This statement can reasonably be extrapolated to all but the US teaching institutions. Presently, there is a paucity of critical research related to workplace-based assessment in osteopathy curricula. However, there is an increasing volume of literature and research in the pipeline within the profession, which will be valuable in the development of a consensus about best practice in workplace-based
assessment in osteopathy. This research will provide examples of innovative workplace-based assessment practice and how to best provide students with constructive feedback on their ongoing skill development. The osteopathic profession needs to know how the teaching and assessment strategies they use impact on student learning, clinical practices, patient safety and clinical outcomes.

WHAT WE KNOW

There are currently three entry-level osteopathy programs in Australia that are accredited by the AOAC. Each program of study has a curriculum designed to allow learners to achieve the desired educational outcomes for that program, although there is guidance on expected content contained within the AOAC accreditation policy. Institutions are charged with explaining the assessment of these educational outcomes using a variety of tools to meet standard 3.7 ‘The outcomes of teaching, especially clinical competence are rigorously assessed by a range of assessment methods.’

From our personal experience in osteopathic education we know that the current assessment tools used in workplace-based education settings have been influenced by tradition rather than by research and the dearth of literature provides support for this view. That is not to say they have not been critiqued often and updated as necessary – the outcomes of scholarly deliberations are not published in the peer-review literature. Work by Vaughan et al. involving twenty-five participants across eleven institutions from the United Kingdom, Canada, Italy and Australia, explored how osteopathic teaching institutions assess their learners. The study reported
institutions utilised a variety of assessment types such as multiple choice questions and written papers in the early years of a program, and progressed towards more specific clinical assessments such as a) the Long Case Assessment (LCA) and b) the Objective Structured Clinical Examination (OSCE) in the later stages of a program. These authors concluded the latter are both valid measures of performance and each likely measures different constructs. There is little research within the non-US osteopathic profession to support these approaches to assessment beyond a paper by Vaughan & Florentine\textsuperscript{14} describing the use of an OSCE.

The findings from the study by Vaughan et al.\textsuperscript{13} were largely corroborated in the investigation of summative assessments of osteopathic clinical reasoning in the final two years of the curricula in the work by Moore et al.\textsuperscript{15} These authors found that 5 assessment types were used. These and examples of other types of assessment of clinical competence \textit{per se}, not just in the workplace and are described below. They are:

1) Assessment of Actual Workplace-based Performance – the LCA;
2) Assessment of Simulated Clinical Performance – the OSCE;
3) Clinical Supervisors Reports;
4) Oral (viva) Assessments
5) Written assessments and
6) Portfolio Assessments.

1. Assessment of Actual workplace-based Performance
The assessment of student’s actual clinical performance in osteopathy is typically via the long case examination. This takes place at the end of a semester of learning and involves one or two examiners sitting in on a student’s consultation in which a student consults a new patient. One criticism of this type of assessment is that it only requires the student to describe a hypothetical management plan beyond the initial consultation – it does not explore the student’s full management of a patient’s health concern. Furthermore, the long case exam is typically used as a summative exam and as such does not provide an opportunity for students to receive formal critique and feedback so they can improve.

Vaughan et al.’s study in osteopathy concluded the long-case assessment still predominates in the final assessments undertaken by learners. These authors reported osteopathic educators are keen to continue using the long-case assessment due to its perceived validity, however there is no empirical literature in osteopathy supporting this view, and there are questions about its reliability. That said it is difficult to support or refute its continued use in osteopathy or elsewhere with further research required.

2. Assessment of Simulated Clinical Performance

In an OSCE students present at several ‘stations’ at which they are required to perform a particular task, skill or talk conceptually about an issue or, deliver a combination of all three activities. At each ‘station’ the students’ work will be graded by one or two examiners. The assessment is time limited and once they have
completed the work at one station they move to the next. One criticism is that it does
not allow the student to demonstrate the performance of whole tasks in an authentic
clinical context with all its inherent variables. That said, it is a valuable method of
assessing specific aspects of the curriculum in a safe environment.

The OSCE is traditionally used in medicine, and more recently in health profession
education programs, is designed to promote and assess integration and
consolidation of clinical skills. The OSCE was developed as an alternative to the
traditional viva as it is lends itself to greater reliability within a range of caveats. Reports on the use of OSCE in osteopathy identified the assessment of reasoning
related to specific skills on standardized patients which is understood to facilitate
examinee’s knowledge organisation and information integration across ‘standard’
cases and context.

3. The Clinical Supervisor Report

A Clinical Supervisor's Report (CSR) is something that is typically administered
during placement and records the supervisor’s impressions of the student’s overall
professional habits and clinical behaviours and methods over the length of time in
any clinic. Sometimes this may be administered mid-placement promoting a
conversation between student and supervisor in which the student receives feedback
about their performance. A second administration is typically held at the end of the
placement when the tool is used as a summative assessment of the student. Known
by different names, this form of assessment focuses on various aspects of learner
knowledge, skills and abilities. The CSR and its variants are still in use in pre-
professional osteopathic education.\textsuperscript{13}

\textit{An example in Australian osteopathic education}

To illustrate the use of a CSR as part of the assessment of clinical competence, the
authors obtained ethics approval to retrospectively analyse de-identified CSRs from
an osteopathic teaching institution using a mixed methods approach.

The stated goals of the CSR were to: 1) ensure that the learners are performing their
prescribed duties in clinic to the accepted standard; 2) give formative feedback to
learners throughout the year; and 3) ensure that the clinical supervisor spends time
with each learner in a mentoring capacity. Learners were graded \textit{satisfactory} or
\textit{unsatisfactory} against the statements itemised in Table 1. Space for qualitative
comments was also available.

INSERT Table 1 here

Thematic analysis of written comments on the CSRs completed between 2012-2013
was undertaken. In addition, interviews and focus groups with 2014 learners and
clinical supervisors were used to explore views about the use of the CSR as an
assessment. The interview questions were open-ended and sequenced.

The results revealed all 241 assessments in the 2012-2013 student cohort were
graded as ‘satisfactory’ against each of the five statements presented in Table 1. The
qualitative comments focused on encouragement and positive affirmation and directives for improvement were not prevalent. In only two cases, feedback offered in earlier reviews of the students was followed-up. No learners’ reactions or self-assessments were noted, and interview data from students and staff revealed there was no apparent monitoring of feedback given from one administration of the CSR to another during the students time in clinic. In terms of acceptability, the qualitative data from learner and supervisor interviews suggests there is the potential to provide greater feedback and this could be driven by changes to the structure of the CSR. Further, it is likely the supervisors would require training to provide appropriate, structured feedback so as to benefit the student. The lack of qualitative feedback from the review of the CSR in this small study is a concern given feedback adds significant educational value to any assessment. That said, we did not explore the feedback given via other forms of formal or summative assessment or the quality of verbal feedback offered daily.

Like many of the clinical competency assessment tools in use in osteopathic education, there are very few where the psychometric properties have been reported. The example of the CSR provided here highlights the importance of developing assessment tools that consider the users of the information provided by the tool, as well as the users completing the tool. If such a tool was to be used in the future, the psychometric properties would warrant investigation, as the context of the assessment is likely to vary between teaching institutions. We did not explore the cost effectiveness of the CSR however, given its brevity, it is likely to be efficient to administer. The CSR is but one tool used within the osteopathic profession that would require further investigation.
Learners change over time and, at best, tools such as the CSR offer a snapshot of a learner’s work – and most likely records what has been observed immediately preceding the act of ‘putting pen to paper’. Hence, used as an assessment of learning and a summative form of assessment, the CSR is of minimal educational value. Its value is in its use as assessment for learning, as an opportunity to provide the student with feedback – formative assessment. Furthermore, caution must be applied if performance assessments are used to measure a learner’s customary characteristics, rather than the learner’s ability to interact within a given situation.26

4. Oral (viva) Assessments

Although not undertaken in the workplace, summative oral assessments of students’ knowledge are known by many names including the viva. This is an oral exam employed to evaluate learners’ problem solving abilities. One criticism is again, that students discuss and defend their actions in a hypothetical not an actual case they have managed.

An example in the allied health literature is the use of the Structured Oral Self-directed Learning Evaluation (SOSLE) in occupational therapy and physiotherapy.27 The study identified that excellent inter-rater reliability could be achieved using the SOSLE, however its relationship with written tests and tutorial marks suggests the SOSLE measures a different aspect of clinical competence. Chapman et al.27 concluded that the SOSLE is a useful approach for assessing ‘process-oriented’ skills such as problem-solving and self-assessment abilities.
The authors of the current commentary are aware of a SOSLE-like assessment that is being developed in Australasia. In an osteopathic context, Orrock et al.\textsuperscript{28} have recently published the findings of the initial stage of a viva exam assessing clinical reasoning. This exam appears to be promising however it will require further psychometric investigation prior to its use in high stakes assessment scenarios.

5. Written Assessments

Written assessments are typically held during a formal examination period and are often designed to assess a student's clinical reasoning and management of clinical scenarios. Recently Esteves et al.\textsuperscript{29} have explored the implementation of a script concordance test (SCT) in a small cohort of osteopathic students. The SCT has been employed primarily in medicine to assess students' reasoning and management strategies through a stepped process,\textsuperscript{30-32} and are typically written or computer-based. Various reports have suggested this format is reliable and valid, however it can be time-consuming to construct the examination and mark it, particularly for written, rather than computer-based, exams. Other formats such as the multiple choice question and essay-type questions have long been employed in written assessments, however the extended matching question,\textsuperscript{33-38} and key feature question formats\textsuperscript{39-41} are now finding favour. Written examinations are generally easy to administer and grade than workplace-based assessments, however the results of both types can provide a picture of the students' patient management approaches.
7. Portfolio Assessments

In this type of assessment students collect evidence of their learning and present them to the assessor as a Portfolio supporting their claim of achievement of learning goals. Vaughan et al.\textsuperscript{42} identified that osteopathic teaching institutions are developing a greater awareness of the portfolio as an assessment tool.

In a Masters level health promotion program in medicine, McKenna et al.\textsuperscript{43} found a competency-based reflective portfolio is useful for drawing together theoretical and experiential learning. In this example, using a portfolio promoted reflection across the \textit{entire} course rather than within the practice module only. Other authors agree that portfolios are thought to provide learners with an opportunity to bring together the course as a whole and to integrate material across modules and tasks.\textsuperscript{43-45}

Portfolio assessment however, can be labour intensive for both academics and students.\textsuperscript{46} Portfolios require structured preparation and ongoing support of learners, assessors and lecturers if the pedagogic aims for their use are to become an integral part of providing evidence of meeting professional competence requirements.

Vaughan et al.\textsuperscript{42} offered a view of the use of portfolio assessments in the pre-professional osteopathy curricula. They reported that this type of assessment helped them with decisions about a learner’s competency, and that the educational value is strengthened by the ongoing mentoring of learners, examiner training and by using holistic rating scales. Subsequent evaluations of the implementation of the portfolio will be forthcoming.
WHAT CONSTITUTES A GOOD ASSESSMENT TOOL?

Be they formative or summative, effective assessments have five identifiable features.\(^9\)

1. **Validity** - whether the assessment measures what it claims to measure;

2. **Reliability** - the degree to which the measurement is accurate and reproducible;

3. **Acceptability** – the tools and processes are acceptable to learners, faculty and other stakeholders;

4. **Educational impact** – the assessment influences learners learning in several ways; and

5. **Efficient and affordable** – that the assessment strategy and tools are cost effective/labour saving to the individual trainee, the institution, and society at large.

In workplace-based health professional education the inherent variability and unpredictability of workplace affects standardisation of learners’ assessments. For that reason, methods of assessment cannot be declared as either unreliable or reliable \textit{per se} but they can be reliable with multiple sampling. This multiple sampling is the pivotal factor in achieving reliable scores when using any assessment instrument.\(^{10,23}\)

Assessment validity stems from the application of the most appropriate tools to sample and aspect(s) the curriculum; reliability is strengthened by aggregating...
observations from variety of situations, by a variety of assessors and; positive
educational impact is found by confirmation that the tools are assessing attributes
that are of value to the discipline.\textsuperscript{47}

\textbf{ASSESSMENT OF CLINICAL COMPETENCE IN THE WORKPLACE}

Knowledge, skills, problem-solving skills, and attitudes or professionalism are the
key competencies required to be demonstrated by a graduate from a health
discipline.\textsuperscript{48} To develop these competencies to be an effective health professional,
programs of study incorporate a clinical education component. This education is
designed to develop a students’ clinical reasoning, problem-solving and critical
appraisal skills, in addition to their communication and professionalism.\textsuperscript{49-51} As a
learner progresses through their clinical education, assessment of competence
means assessing a learners’ management of integrated \textit{whole tasks} of increasing
complexity.\textsuperscript{48, 52}

Dijksterhuis et al.\textsuperscript{53} contend that ‘Competence achieved in a certain clinical
procedure does not automatically translate into more independent practice’. Thus,
the assessment strategy in any curriculum needs to accommodate and capture the
ongoing development of competence in the professional workplace. If competence is
thought of as a ‘constantly evolving set of multiple interconnected behaviours
enacted in time and space’\textsuperscript{26} then this has consequences for the program of
assessment. Competence ought not be seen as an ‘achievement’ \textit{per se}, instead, it
is developed over time. The pursuit of competence is best thought of as an agenda,
a habit expressed in the desire for life-long learning - competence is contextual,
reflecting the learner’s relationship and abilities with the task at hand. The major distinguishing features of workplace learning events are that they are inherently variable, unpredictable and often brief events of high educational value that are typically not replicable. With that in mind, assessment strategies and the tools employed in workplace-based education must be flexible enough to capture realistic work practices relevant to the discipline. The assessment strategy and tools used need to be responsive to the circumstance of the event(s) observed and not encumber the workplace activities.

Finally, the challenge for those designing a workplace-based assessment programme is to structure assessments in such a way that, despite differences between learning environments, all learners are inspired to work towards the required competency levels and have sufficient opportunities to prove that they have achieved them. In any curricula, the assessment strategy needs to be equitable and mindful of diversity and ought to include a variety of tools that capture different aspects of student’s performance in the professional workplace of the discipline.

There are some advantages to basing judgements on a single assessment event in that it proves the rater has actually observed the learner’s performance and also, reached a decision. On the other hand, it is understood that a single performance does not necessarily predict the performance of the learner during another encounter. Assessing the study across multiple patient encounters is valuable for a variety of reasons. For example a learner may ‘fake’ their performance in a patient
encounter. Unless re-tested in another context or situation, their feigning may not be exposed – the instability of his/her competence could potentially remain undetected, and impact on patient safety.

Formative assessment is preferred over summative assessment because formative creates an opportunity for educators to give students feedback how to improve. Furthermore qualitative feedback is preferred over quantitative feedback even though this relies on the raters’ professional judgement which can be considered subjective. That said, there is still a need for summative assessment and professional judgement of a learner. Information from formative and qualitative judgements can be collated to provide a well-informed view of the learner and subsequently a defensible summative assessment.

There are numerous examples of workplace-based assessment tools in the literature that can be used to provide these formative and summative assessments of competence. They are typically divided into global assessments of student’s clinical methods and assessments at the point of patient care.

Global assessments of student’s clinical methods

In Australia some allied health disciplines have developed national, standardised workplace assessment tools to capture student performance during, and at the end of, their clinical placement. These tools include the Assessment of Physiotherapy Practice, occupational therapy’s Student Practice Evaluation Form – Revised, speech therapy’s COMPASS, the Radiation Therapy Student Clinical Assessment, and a tool to assess nursing competencies. They all
demonstrate face and content validity, and varying levels of construct validity and reliability. However, each of these tools demonstrates varying levels of evidence for their psychometric properties. Of these tools, the Assessment of Physiotherapy Practice tool appears to be the most psychometrically sound, however further work on the evaluation of the criterion, concurrent and predictive validity of these tools is required. That being said, they provide a valuable resource for the osteopathy profession to draw on when developing clinical competency workplace-based assessment strategies. It is important to note that these tools do not assess a learners’ work during single, learner-patient encounters at the point of patient care – there are other tools available for this purpose.

Assessment at the point of patient care

In workplace learning activities in medicine, there is an increasing emphasis on the assessment of learners’ performance during multiple, single-patient encounters and this is evidenced by the volume of literature in this area. There are a variety of tools that exist however the mini-CEX is one of the most widely studied and used workplace-based assessment tools because it has been found to be a valuable tool to assess actual clinical performance with real patients in the workplace. The mini-CEX evaluates the learner’s history taking and examination skills, clinical judgment, professionalism, and organization related to the clinical consultation. When used to assess learner’s progress during multiple clinical encounters with different examiners and different patients reliable ratings can be achieved.
A far as usability is concerned, although the work is ongoing, it has been identified that the mini-CEX is easy to use in day-to-day practice and has broad applicability in a variety of settings and provides learners with instant feedback.\textsuperscript{74, 75} Stone et al.\textsuperscript{76} have advocated its use in osteopathic post-professional fitness-to-practice assessments, such as those undertaken with practitioners wishing to migrate to Australia, and Vaughan et al.\textsuperscript{77} reported it is used in the osteopathy program at Victoria University (Australia). At present there is no research into the use of the mini-CEX in either the pre- or post-professional context in osteopathy, albeit, this tool could be relatively easily implemented in on-campus, student-led osteopathic clinics or in private clinics off-campus.

\textbf{OTHER CONSIDERATIONS}

The literature around assessment in the health professions is suggesting a move away from making high stakes decisions based on individual assessment tools, to decisions based on programmatic approaches.\textsuperscript{10, 48, 57} Focusing on the assessment of a set of small tasks or ‘ticking the box’ leads to trivialisation and threatens validity - global and holistic judgements help avoid this,\textsuperscript{23} particularly when the samples are taken from different assessment tools completed by a variety of examiners in a multitude of settings. Moreover in workplace-based assessment, highly structured assessment (‘tick the box’) tools do not work well.\textsuperscript{78}

In order to track a learner’s growth through the curriculum it is necessary to identify a range of assessment tools that achieve \textit{assessment for learning} at the same time as ensuring the student is assessed on progressively more complex tasks, or whole
task integration. Miller’s triangle\textsuperscript{79} for example, provides a guide as to the type of
assessments that can be used during various stages of a program. In essence this
represents a building-block approach to understanding a learners developing
competence.\textsuperscript{78} Further, the work of Boud and associates\textsuperscript{80} can provide a framework
on which to ensure that the assessment tools used meet this \textit{assessment for
learning} ideal. Vaughan et al.\textsuperscript{42} used this framework to demonstrate the ability of a
portfolio to demonstrate ‘assessment for learning’ in osteopathic education.

The typical health profession assessment strategy needs a range of tools which
explore discipline-specific clinical reasoning, critical analysis of self and others,
clinical and professional judgement, and tacit knowledge. A well-designed
assessment programme will explore how well learners integrate their knowledge,
skills and attributes to solving all-encompassing clinical problems – this is the
essence of competency-based education. The sum of the information gathered by
the tools, be they used formatively or summatively, provides a legal record of the
learner’s progress and achievement of the desired competencies.\textsuperscript{81} Wilkinson\textsuperscript{47}
provides a neat summary:

‘\textit{A variety of assessments over a variety of times, matched against
the areas of interest and value, enhances both reliability and
validity. Workplace-based assessment tools can complement
centralized assessment tools. Multiple snapshots, even if some are
not totally in focus, give a better picture than one poorly aimed
photograph}’
CONCLUSION

Given the holistic philosophy that underpins osteopathic clinical practice,
assessment of clinical competency should ensure that decisions about competence,
capability and capacity can be made, so that ability, responsibility, accountability,
authority and autonomy can be realised.82

We have demonstrated that a gap in knowledge exists in that, currently, there are no
published studies which have explored the validity and reliability of the approaches
to assessing clinical competence within the profession albeit that it has been shown
the professions’ educators perceive the current tools to be valid.13 There is a paucity
of literature on assessment of students in day-to-day osteopathic workplace settings
and the feedback offered to them during single, learner-patient encounters - at the
point of patient care. We maintain that observation of student’s clinical performance
and feedback given at this time is beneficial to learning and safeguards patient care.

We can identify no studies in osteopathy that determine how well a learner’s clinical
skills are developed and assessed across the curriculum or in different workplace
settings. It remains uncertain the degree to which, during day-to-day professional
workplace activities learners are able to elicit the patients full set of symptoms,
determine what intervention they may need to implement, as well as develop and
evaluate appropriate management plans on a consistent basis with multiple patient
complaints and complexity of complaints. Yet, the skills described here are core
competencies of a health professional. Without valid and reliable assessment tools
being used to assess learners work over time, or during moments of direct
observation of learners clinical work, improvement in student performance is
unlikely, and the defensibility of assessment decisions is questionable.

In the osteopathic curriculum the ideal assessment strategy would contain several
tools, each having a different focus and each providing feedback. Where possible,
assessments should be performed by a variety of examiners and include a variety of
patients and clinical scenarios to ensure the resultant feedback is authentic, variable
and broad – reflecting the scope of osteopaths as primary health care practitioners.

Be they formative or summative, effective clinical competency assessments are
known to have five identifiable features: validity, reliability, acceptability, educational
impact, efficiency and affordability. Studies that explore these features in any
assessment tool are essential to ensure the quality of delivery of the pre-professional
osteopathic curricula.

There is an emerging group of osteopathic education researchers who, over the
coming years, will be developing the literature around competency assessment in
osteopathic clinical education. They have a body of work ahead of them to identify
the best strategy, and tools, to assess learners’ performance and the application of
osteopathic clinical knowledge, skills and attributes in order to prepare graduates for
practice. These authors hope that the preceding discussion provides researchers
with some direction, and we eagerly await further contributions to how these skills
are defined and assessed in the pre-professional curriculum.
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Table 1. Items on the Record of Progress (ROP) form.

1. Learner has attended all shifts unless on approved leave
2. Learner’s participation has been professional: punctuality, dress, interpersonal skills,
3. Learner demonstrated effective and comprehensive written communication skills
4. Learner has shown initiation and willingness to participate in clinical activities
5. Learner demonstrated teamwork: peer support, observation and rostered duties.