

# An intervention to enhance the supervision of health science students who struggle during work placements

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Supervisors are often reluctant to make an adverse assessment of the student's performance during work placements, which leads to a phenomenon known as "failure to fail". This Australian study evaluated resources designed to enhance the management of students who fail to meet the required standard of performance during work placements. Staff from a range of health disciplines evaluated the training program comprised of a half-day workshop and written guide using a questionnaire and semi-structured interviews. Staff reported renewed confidence in working with underperforming students, increased comfort with failing students who did not reach the required standards. The Staff Guide was seen as useful with all students undertaking work placements, not just underperforming students. The Student Guide was perceived as relevant to the student experience. The findings of this research are important to university educators engaged with work placements, work placement supervisors, and students who undertake work placements.

Keywords: Work placements, failing students, professional development, underperformance

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Work placements are an integral component of health professional education courses. Placements occur in environments that are dramatically different from campus-based or online learning experiences (Cooper et al., 2010). Healthcare environments, like many other workplaces, are complex and dynamic where service delivery is prioritized over student learning and learning is unpredictable and at times chaotic (Delany & Molloy, 2018). Given these challenging placement environments, it is not surprising that students frequently struggle with the transition from university-based to workplace learning (Zukas & Kilminster, 2018). Research indicates that many students are inadequately prepared for the stressors of fieldwork (Nagarajan & McAllister, 2015), their expectations often do not match their experience (Rowe et al., 2012), and they lack empowerment to accept and use feedback (Algiraigri, 2014; Boud & Molloy, 2013), all of which are critical to learning during fieldwork. Despite these difficulties the students' role in the supervisory process can be overlooked with placement preparation often focused on knowledge and skill acquisition, professional communication, ethical conduct, and workplace health and safety issues (Nagarajan & McAllister, 2015). Students who underperform during work placements pose a risk to the reputation of the university and can impact the fieldwork site's business and service delivery (Earle-Foley et al., 2012). The management of underperforming students, including supporting their supervisors, is resource-intensive for university staff and thus costly to the university (Bilgin et al., 2017).

Student performance issues are compounded by the lack of formal training that most supervisors receive for this vital educational role (Delany & Molloy, 2018). Martin et al. (2019) describe the work placement supervisors' role as a combination of mentor, advisor, counsellor, performance manager, and problem solver, a description that aligns with Rowe et al.'s (2012) and Winchester-Setto et al.'s (2016) studies of work-integrated learning supervision. Supervisors are required to balance this

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complex role with their usual workload (Delany & Molloy, 2018) leading to feedback on student performance being viewed more as "...an act of compliance rather than a genuine commitment to further learning and reflection" (Peach et al., 2014 p.241). Supervisors' expectations of their role often differ from the expectations of students leading to stress and frustration for both parties (Peach et al., 2012).

Research suggests between 10% and 15% of students struggle to meet the standards set by their course and accreditation bodies (Boileau et al., 2017). When a student underperforms during work placements, supervisors are often reluctant to provide constructive feedback (Peach et al., 2012) or to make an adverse assessment of the student's performance (Adams & Adamson, 2004). This reluctance can lead to "failure to fail" a well-documented phenomenon in the health professional education literature (Bush et al., 2013; Earle-Foley et al., 2012; Jervis & Tilki, 2011; Luhanga et al., 2014). Supervisors cite a multitude of reasons for their reluctance to address student performance issues including learning environment constraints (e.g., lack of suitable clients/patients), lack of supervisor competence (e.g., lack of experience or training), insufficient supporting evidence (e.g., inadequate documentation of issues to support decisions), and concern over potential negative consequences for the student and supervisor (Elliott, 2016; Guerrasio et al., 2014; Luhanga et al., 2014; Peach et al., 2012). Despite the plethora of research on "failure to fail", research to guide placement supervisors on how to best support and manage underperforming students is limited (Boileau et al., 2017; Martin et al., 2019). Instead, research indicates that when working with underperforming students, supervisors tend to do more of the same, that is, provide more feedback and closer oversight of student activities (Bearman et al., 2013). Supervisors report that their "failure to fail" is exacerbated by the lack of guidance on how to manage student performance during placements (Carless et al., 2011). Further heightening supervisors' lack of knowledge on how to manage student performance issues is students' reliance on their supervisor to manage the placement and their learning (Peach et al., 2012). This reliance leads to a lack of student agency in the supervisory process (Mercer-Mapstone et al., 2017). Student agency is a critical aspect of placements (Jackson, 2018) with students needing to engage collaboratively with their supervisor to negotiate an optimal placement experience (Nagarajan & McAllister, 2015).

To address concerns over supervisor management of students who fail to meet the required standard of performance during work placements and the lack of student agency during work placements, this study aimed to develop and evaluate an intervention designed to enhance both supervisors' management of underperforming students and students' agency. This intervention involved the creation of staff and student resources that provide critical information on how to optimize the learning experience within placements. The resources were a half-day training workshop for staff and two written guides, one for staff (who supervise students) and another for students (for use before, during and after placements). Specifically, the study addressed three research questions:

1. How did staff participants perceive the training program?
2. How did staff and students evaluate the written guides?
3. What impact did the staff training have on placement supervisors' educational practice when managing underperforming students?

## METHOD

An exploratory mixed-methods case study approach was adopted (Yin, 2014) to capture supervisors' experience of the training (via survey and interview) and feedback on the written guides (Guetterman et al., 2017). Interviews enabled a deeper understanding of the impact of the staff training, particularly

changes in their supervision practices post-training. Surveys enabled collection of feedback from a large group of staff and students.

### *Intervention*

The staff training program was created by an interdisciplinary team of academic staff who lead work placements in the Faculty of Health Sciences at Curtin University (Curtin). The team represented the professions of social work, occupational therapy, speech pathology, physiotherapy, and exercise science. Steinert et al.'s (2016) recommendations for good practice in staff development informed the design of the program including integration of a conceptual framework, use of multiple instructional methods, opportunities for practice, application, feedback and reflection.

The staff training was delivered as a face-to-face 3.5-hour workshop in line with health professionals' preference for this mode of delivery (Morrison et al., 2016). A key component of this training was the provision of a written guide titled "Strategies for Fieldwork Supervisors (Staff Guide)." Informed by a review of the research on managing underperforming students, the Staff Guide (Brewer et al., 2018) included: (i) the supervisory process; (ii) the reasons why some students underperform and supervisors may tend not to fail these students; and (iii) a recommended process for supporting underperforming students. A toolkit of resources were also included, for example, a supervision meeting template and tips for having difficult performance conversations with students. Key elements of the Staff Guide were embedded in the workshop; however, it should be noted that a draft version (prior to professional editing) was utilized in the workshops.

A Student Guide (Gribble et al., 2018) was developed to complement the staff training workshop and Staff Guide. The Student Guide included research on the factors that influence student performance during work placements, along with strategies students could use to enhance success in their placements, with an emphasis on student agency, and a process for students to use when they were informed that they were underperforming.

Ethics approval was obtained through the requisite Human Research Ethics Committee prior to commencement of the study [HRE2018-0108].

### *Data Collection*

Three phases of data collection were undertaken. First, evaluation of the draft Staff and Student Guides was completed via an online survey. Waller's (2011) benchmarking criteria for assessing technical documents was adapted to obtain staff and student feedback on the clarity of purpose, language, design, and content of the guides. The benchmarking criteria (Table 3) used a 7-point Likert scale to evaluate the quality and usefulness of the documents where 1 = strongly disagree and 7 = strongly agree. Qualitative questions asked participants to comment on the positive and negative aspects of the guides and for ideas on content that could be included in the final version.

Second, participants in the staff training completed a questionnaire adapted from Kirkpatrick Partners' (2009) revised evaluation model (Table 4). The agreement statements used a 4-point Likert scale where 1 = strongly disagree and 4 = strongly agree. This evaluation, administered at the conclusion of the training, sought each participant's feedback on the workshop materials, the delivery (e.g., the pace and duration), and their overall impressions of the workshop. Submission of the hardcopy survey was taken as consent.

The final phase of the research involved interviews with participants who attended the staff training several weeks after the workshop. These interviews explored the impact of the training on participant's practice when supervising students with a focus on supervising underperforming students. Specifically, supervisors were asked about the aspects of the training that were of most value, strategies they had used when supervising students post-program, and any difficulties experienced with incorporating learning from the training. Interviews were conducted by a research assistant at a time and place convenient to the participants. Interviews varied from 20 to 40 minutes in length, and were digitally recorded and transcribed verbatim.

### *Participants*

Curtin University staff and qualified health professionals directly involved in the management or supervision of student work placements were invited to participate in the staff training via an email and a notice in a University newsletter. Staff were able to opt into attending the half-day training workshop without agreeing to participate in the research. A total of 70 of the 74 staff who participated in one of the two training programs, conducted between June and September 2018, completed the post-program evaluation (Table 1). The majority of these staff were experienced supervisors from physiotherapy, dietetics/nutrition, nursing, and occupational therapy.

Evaluation of the Staff Guide was undertaken by 27 staff (Table 1) recruited via email using project team members' contact databases. The email included information on the study, the link to the online Qualtrics survey and a copy of the guide. All staff were currently involved in the supervision or management of work placements. Most were placement supervisors (67%), who currently supervise students (81%) or have supervised students in the past (96%). The majority of staff who evaluated the guide had over six years of experience as placement supervisors (96%) and had supervised a minimum of six students (89%). Only 30% of the staff who evaluated the guide attended the staff training.

Seventeen staff training participants (Table 1) agreed to be interviewed. Face-to-face semi-structured interviews were held in October and November 2018 between two and five months after completion of the training program. All interviewees were placement supervisors working in healthcare. The majority were from physiotherapy and occupational therapy with most having less than six years of experience as placement supervisors.

TABLE 1: Staff participant demographics across three elements of the training program.

Demographic	Staff Training (N=70)	Staff Guide (N=27)	Interview (N=17)
Gender			
• Male	5	1	2
• Female	63	25	15
• Other/No response	2	1	
Age (years)			
• 20-29	17		Not available
• 30-39	26	6	
• 40-49	13	2	
• 50>	14	3	
Profession			
• Physiotherapy	27	10	5
• Occupational Therapy	8	1	5
• Speech Pathology	4	3	1
• Medical Imaging, Radiography	1		
• Nursing	9	5	2
• Dietetics/Nutrition	11	4	2
• Social Work	2	1	
• Exercise Science, Physiology	1		
• Other (pathology, cardiac science)	2		
• Oral Health Therapy	5	2	2
• Not specified		1	
Current role			
• Academic	13	5	
• Supervisor	38	18	17
• Fieldwork Leader	19	4	
Experience in placement supervision			
• <5 years	38	2	13
• 6-11 years	20	6	4
• 12-17 years	6	3	
• 18> years	6	16	
No. of students supervized in the past			
• <5	11	3	
• 6-10	16	6	
• 11>	23	18	
No. of students supervized since the training program			278

Undergraduate and postgraduate students enrolled in a Health Science course at Curtin University and undertaking work placements were invited to evaluate the Student Guide. Students were recruited via

a flyer promoting the research placed on the students' learning management system. The flyer provided information on the study and the link to the online Qualtrics survey. Both the email and survey included a copy of the guide. Submission of the survey was taken as consent. While 136 students completed elements of the evaluation, only 77 fully completed the survey (Table 2). Two-thirds were undergraduate domestic students. A range of year groups was represented: year 1 (40%), year 2 (16%), year 3 (26%) and year 4 (18%). The majority were enrolled full time (96%) and had completed work placements during their course (92%). Placements varied from one day to 50 weeks in length.

TABLE 2: Demographics of students who evaluated the guide ( $N = 77$ ).

Demographic	Attribute	No.
Gender	Male	13
	Female	63
	Other/prefer not to say	1
Course	Undergraduate	51
	Postgraduate	26
	Domestic	57
	International	20
	Fulltime	74
	Part time	3
Year level	Year 1	14
	Year 2	20
	Year 3	12
	Year 4	31
Profession	Physiotherapy	21
	Exercise Science	1
	Occupational Therapy	5
	Speech Pathology	16
	Oral Therapy	0
	Medical Imaging/Medical Radiation	12
	Laboratory Medicine	12
	Nursing	27
	Dietetics	28
	Social Work	10
	Psychology	3
Public Health	1	
	Not provided	0

### Analysis

Descriptive statistics using Microsoft Excel 16.22 were used to analyze the training evaluations and online questionnaire data about the guides. Data analysis of the interviews was informed by Braun and Clarke's (2006) thematic analysis protocol. Transcripts were read twice to ensure familiarization with the content prior to the commencement of data coding. NVivo 12 (2018) software was used to organize the data. Inductive coding began on the third read when significant statements of interest were assigned a preliminary code. Preliminary codes were collated into potential themes. Saturation

(Creswell, 2009) was reached by the ninth interview, typical of interview data of this nature (Guest et al., 2006). The data set was analyzed in its entirety to capture the representativeness of themes.

RESULTS

The analysis of the results is presented with the quantitative, followed by the qualitative data. These results are organized into three areas: quality of the Staff and Student Guides; quality of the staff training; and the thematic analysis of the Staff interviews.

The Staff Guide received positive ratings against all the benchmarking criteria (Table 3) from the majority of staff. The highest ratings (93% agreement) were received for the overall impression of the guide and its clarity of purpose. The lowest ratings (74% agreement) were for the information having enhanced their understanding of supervision and learning during placements.

The Student Guide received mixed results with agreement ranging from 62% to 84% of students (Table 3). The students rated the guide most positively for clarity of purpose (84%), the appropriateness of the document to the target audience's level of knowledge and skills (80%), and the appropriateness of the language used (75%). The guide received the lowest ratings for the usefulness of the document (62%), the layout (62%), and their clarity on how they could apply the information to their placements (63%).

TABLE 3: Evaluation of the staff and student guides (percentage agreement on a 7-point Likert scale).

Criteria	Staff	Students
My overall impression of this document was positive	93	68
The purpose of this document was clear to me	93	84
The document was appropriate to my knowledge and skills	89	80
The information enhanced my understanding of supervision during placements	74	64
The information enhanced my understanding of learning during placements	74	66
The information will be useful to me now and/or in the future	81	62
I am clear on how I can apply the information to my <i>placements (my work with students)*</i>	85	63
The language used was appropriate for <i>students (academic/clinical staff)*</i>	89	75
The document was easy to navigate	85	66
The layout made good use of space, lines and colour	78	62
Illustrations, tables, graphs, etc. added value to the information provided	81	68

\*Text in brackets indicates word change in the staff survey

In relation to the quality of the staff training, over 94% of participants rated the workshop positively (Table 4). All aspects of the training received high ratings, including course materials, delivery, and relevance of the program. The lowest rating was for the ease of navigating the program materials. The following quote is indicative of the positive reaction to the training:





I've actually recommended that more supervisors actually attend this workshop. I think for half a day you get quite good bang for your buck, education and resources as a supervisor because you know how time-poor supervisors/professionals can be. I think this is a really good course. (Participant [P]12)

TABLE 4: Participants reaction to the staff training workshop (n=70).

<b>Learning environment</b>	<b>% Agreement</b>
I understood the learning objectives	99
I found the program materials easy to navigate	94
I was appropriately challenged by the material	97
The program material will be helpful to my supervision of students in the future	99
I was engaged with what was going on during the program	99
The activities and exercises aided in my learning	99
My learning was enhanced by the knowledge of the facilitators	100
My learning was enhanced by the experiences shared by the facilitators	99
I was comfortable with the pace of the program	100
I was comfortable with the duration of the session	96
I was given adequate opportunity to interact with others and build networks	96
The program met my expectations	99
I am clear on how to apply what I learned on the job	96
I would recommend this program to my colleagues	99

The majority (82%) of the 17 staff interviewed had supervised students who had underperformed or failed a work placement prior to the staff training. After the staff training, nine staff (53%) supervised one or more underperforming students. All nine staff reported they had been able to implement their learning from the training with these underperforming students. Another three staff reported they had not supervised underperforming students post-training but had utilized aspects from the training with students who performed at the required standard.

Three overarching themes emerged from the interviews: changes in supervision practices after the training; clarity of the processes involved in managing underperforming students; and the development of a positive supervisor-student relationship. A minor theme related to understanding the student context also emerged. Two of the themes have sub-themes.

#### *Changes in Supervision Practice*

Most staff reported the training resulted in changes in the ways they supervised students. These changes arose from gaining new perspectives, knowledge, and skills related to student supervision. Staff expressed a renewed confidence towards supervising and working effectively with underperforming students which included being more assertive as a supervisor, initiating difficult conversations with students, and taking on the role of “gatekeeper” for their profession. These three areas of confidence are described in more detail below.

Several staff reported they felt able to be more assertive, taking a more active role in the supervision process which included: setting clear expectations of roles from the outset of the placement, identifying underperforming students early on, being specific and transparent with student feedback, and assisting students in developing a specific plan to improve their performance:



It's given me more confidence to bring up issues early with students. And, I suppose, that impacts on the supervision because it gives the student more specific feedback, and then, more of an opportunity to make change... I can see, probably before the workshop, if I had a struggling student, I would just say, 'Oh, go and see your fieldwork supervisor and they'll talk you through the process.' But I can see, now, I can take more of an active role in that if I need to which is good for the student and for me. (P5)

Staff remarked the training had equipped them with the language, structure, and necessary skills needed to have difficult conversations with students and to address concerns regarding student performance on work placements:

Actually being able to name something because you've got the language around it is really helpful, and yeah, those paperwork and the templates for supervision and those sorts of things were really helpful. (P1)

I've actually structured her [current student] prac [placement] based on the framework. So it has worked really well for her because we have had a structure, so in her mind she feels that, okay there is a roadmap for her and it's not as daunting ... And then that takes her mind off so she has more energy to focus on what matters most, which is to communicate well with the clients that we're bringing her along to see. And also to develop her own skills as a practitioner, and her own self-reflection skills. So it takes the guesswork away and amounts to reserving more energy for this more important stuff. (P9)

Staff also reported the training encouraged them to view themselves as a gatekeeper for their profession, which was a new perspective that they subsequently used to assess their student's performance objectively. For example, staff described feeling an increased sense of responsibility to their profession such that, when faced with a difficult decision regarding a student's suitability to enter the profession, they considered if the student would be safe to treat one of their family members:

If you're looking after a student and you think to yourself, 'This student, I wouldn't want them anywhere near any of my relatives or loved ones' or 'Could you trust them as a colleague to be able to depend upon?' And the answer to either one of those is no, then it's a 'not yet competent', really. Or you need to say, 'Well, why is that?' And is there anything I can do about it?' Ask those questions. (P10)

Related to this gatekeeping role, staff highlighted an increased sense of comfort with failing students when their performance did not reach the required standards. Of the nine staff who had supervised an underperforming student after the program, two had gone on to fail the student at the end of the placement. Interviewees reinforced the impact of changes in their supervisor practice on student success, for example:

... the one that was failing, he did actually pick up... I did notice when I saw him the next two times, the specific points that I had pointed out to him, he had actually acted on... So I suppose by being very direct, he did actually make those changes and that enabled him to pass. (P2)

The two students who ultimately failed their placement did so despite the supervisor implementing many of the training program's recommendations from the workshop and guide, as indicated by the following quote:

The primary factors of the struggling student was that she wasn't taking on feedback that we had provided to her on numerous occasions. It was also her knowledge base and technical skills that weren't really up to par of where she needed to be. I had addressed those in meetings. We had set some SMART goals, as was discussed in the managing struggling students [program]. She slowly improved. I did offer her to have an extended placement here but she declined. (P8)

#### *Clarity of Processes*

As described earlier, the staff training program included a recommended process, comprised of multiples steps, to follow when a student was identified as not meeting the expected performance level. All interviewees, except one, discussed the importance of timely feedback and intervention for underperforming students, including early identification of issues, taking immediate action to identify areas of concern, and developing a plan of action:

I think some of the strategies... having regular catch-ups, having checklists of behaviour, nipping things in the bud early, addressing things early with students, and also setting appropriate time frames really stood out to me. So, not leaving things a week between, but maybe setting a goal that something will happen by tomorrow morning. (P7)

Several staff alluded to a shift in their perceptions of, and relationship with, the university. Some commented on the reality of universities who have limited resources to provide regular, targeted assistance with underperforming students. Others discussed feeling encouraged to seek support from the university to manage underperforming students.

Most staff commented on the importance of keeping adequate documentation and encouraging students to do the same. This included: incorporating checklists of student performance such as goal-setting checklists and self-assessment forms, implementing mid-placement assessments, developing staff and student end-of-placement evaluation forms to assist with process improvement and streamlining, maintaining up-to-date records of student performance and the supervisory process, implementing student learning contracts with supervisor endorsement (i.e., supervisor and student sign off), and having students identify SMART goals to facilitate success during placements:

That tip of getting everybody to sign off on the supervision notes is that recognition that this is a true reflection of what we've discussed, that there's no surprises or no comeback to say you didn't address that with me. I thought that was a really good idea. (P1)

#### *Positive Supervisor-Student Relationship*

Most staff highlighted the importance of developing an effective supervisory relationship with the student from early in the placement. The workshop had highlighted the importance of open communication with students and setting specific and reasonable expectations at the outset of, and throughout, placements. Within this, staff shared the importance of clarifying the role of the supervisor and the student in the learning process to ensure both parties have a shared understanding of their roles and expectations:

I feel like I'm asking them better questions. Like I'm asking them now what their goals are, routinely now what the goals are... I ask them their goals, "What do you want to get out of this placement?" So that gives me a broad perspective of where they're going and that I can meet

those expectations. And I feel that's really, really good for them to know that I am trying to meet their expectations. So they've already started on that professional plane. (P2)

The workshop had afforded participants the tools to instil a sense of personal responsibility and accountability in their students, including putting the onus back onto students to be the driver of their own learning experience:

Especially from the workshop, I understand that I'm not here to help the student pass, I'm here to supervise the student to do their work and to help them progress. But not to do anything for them... I need to take the ownership away [from myself] and let the student drive their own placement. (P8)

Staff noted a collaborative relationship could be achieved through practices such as encouraging student self-care, encouraging student reflection, recognizing when the student might need support, and providing the student with examples of the required performance standard (e.g., exemplars of written documentation, role modelling an assessment with a patient). Providing students with opportunities to implement feedback was also noted as important to facilitate student success:

We've brought self-care right to the front and I know if we had gotten our student to work on a project surrounding student self-care. So it's no longer just doing the project for the sake of passing a prac, but she has to implement all these self-care strategies at the onset as part of her student project. That has definitely changed how we are doing our student supervision here. (P9)

#### *Acknowledging Each Student's Context*

A minor theme to emerge was staffs' deeper appreciation for the broad array of student factors external to placement that can influence performance in work placements. Factors identified included family (e.g., caring for relatives), personal (e.g., mental and physical health, relationships, social commitments), work commitments (e.g., full-time or part-time work), and financial stressors (e.g., working to support family members). Some staff reported they realized they needed to understand the student holistically by acknowledging each student's priorities and responsibilities outside of the placement environment:

One incidental fact that came out of it [program] was the statistics around how much students work part-time outside of uni at the moment, now, compared to, say, 20 years ago. So, that students have a lot more commitment outside of work--sorry, outside of uni--than previously. So, that was something that surprised me. (P15)

## DISCUSSION

Student performance is linked to the competence of their educators (Blitz et al., 2019). Yet, universities must rely on industry staff (i.e., work placement supervisors) to take on the role of educating and assessing students during work placements. These host supervisors are generally not trained as educators and have been reported to struggle when managing students who fail to perform as expected (Yepes-Rios et al., 2016). Boileu et al. (2017) suggested there is a paucity of evidence to guide best practice in supporting and remediating underperforming students. Therefore, this study aimed to develop and evaluate an intervention designed to enhance the learning and management of students

who fail to meet the required standard of performance during work placements. The research uniquely combines the perspective of placement supervisors, students, and university staff.

The major element of this intervention was a staff training program comprised of a workshop and a supplementary written guide. Not surprisingly, the workshop was attractive to staff who had supervised underperforming students during work placements with over 80% of the participants having previously supervised failing students. The half-day workshop was well received by staff from diverse roles, supervision experience, and professions with all 14 evaluation criteria receiving at least 94% agreement. Research on the professional development needs of staff involved in work-integrated learning (WIL) supports this short delivery option focused on student learning (Zegwaard et al., 2019). Our research also supports the preference for face-to-face delivery by health professionals (Morrison et al., 2016). Furthermore, research indicates such positive reactions are common in health professional training programs (Steinert et al., 2016).

Responding to calls to move training evaluations beyond “happy sheets” which are the evaluation forms that follow a training session (Hauser et al., 2018; Steinert et al., 2016), the researchers interviewed program participants several weeks post-training to gauge their reflections on the value of the workshop and guide, and any self-reported changes in their supervisory practice. Reflections on the program continued to be positive with the vast majority of participants valuing the opportunity to learn from and networking with peers from other disciplines, a common training outcome (Steinert et al., 2016; Tai et al., 2016). More importantly, the majority of staff interviewed reported greater confidence in their supervision skills. This confidence led to greater assertiveness in the supervision role, a sense of preparedness to have difficult conversations with students about their performance, and feeling comfortable to fail students who did not meet the required standards of the placement. Comfort and confidence are once again common outcomes of effective training programs (Gillieatt et al., 2014; Steinert et al., 2016).

Interestingly, half of the staff interviewed reported having supervised an underperforming student post-program. These supervisors described using the new strategies outlined in the workshop and guide, with two going on to fail the students who did not address their performance issues. While student failure may appear on the surface to be a poor outcome in relation to the training, the importance of supervisors failing students who do not meet the required standard is critical to the reputation of the university program (Larocque & Luhanga, 2013), the reputation of the profession (Basnett & Sheffield, 2010), and the safety of the community who receive services from graduates (Earle-Foley et al., 2012; Finch, 2015). Furthermore, the failing of two students suggests the program assisted staff to adjust their leniency bias (Jackson, 2018) and facilitated them to feel equipped and confident in their role as supervisors. These two students were provided with a realistic sense of their own capabilities (Jackson, 2018) and were encouraged to pursue additional professional learning prior to their next work placement.

A core element of the staff training was the provision of a process for managing student performance in the form of a flowchart within the Staff Guide (Brewer et al., 2018). The interviewees all reported that the provision of a clear process to work through, in collaboration with the underperforming student, was a critical success factor of the program. The importance of implementing support strategies early and having a clear remediation process is supported by Boileau and colleagues (2017) who highlighted early identification of student difficulties as the gold standard in education. These researchers claim that supervisors often identify the problem but are hesitant to fail because they do not know "...which steps should be followed and how to achieve them" (Boileau et al., 2017 p. 91). The

results of our study suggest supervisors were able to move away from just providing more of the same strategies they use with high performing students (Bearman et al., 2013) to provide more nuanced and customized support to underperforming students. Other studies that have investigated the reasons supervisors' "fail to fail" have endorsed the provision of specific strategies and resources for work placement supervisors and university staff (Kalet, Tewaksbury et al., 2014; Kalet, Guerrasio & Chou, 2016).

The easy to follow, evidence-based remediation process embedded in the workshop and Staff Guide, highlights the importance of early contact and ongoing consultation with the university support team. Supervisors interviewed reported having a clear understanding of the support mechanisms the university was able to provide and indicators of when to contact key university personnel was important information gained from the staff training. Other researchers have also found enhanced communication between placement supervisors and university staff is critical in WIL (Guerrasio et al., 2014; Rowe et al., 2012; Winchester-Setto et al., 2016).

The importance of developing an effective collaborative relationship between the student and supervisor is emphasized by many authors (Gribble et al., 2017; Killam & Heerschap, 2013; Rowe et al., 2012) and has been shown to influence assessment judgements (Yeates et al., 2013). Collaborative relationships ensure both students and work placement supervisors are involved in the assessment process, which aligns with one of the recommendations for ensuring an effective assessment of the student's work placement (Jackson, 2018). Understanding the student's context, listening to and validating the student's feelings and emotions, and showing genuine interest in the students has been shown to build trust and assist students in developing their confidence in using their emotional intelligence skills during work placements (Gribble et al., 2017). The staff training encouraged supervisors to build collaborative relationships with students early in the placement in order to facilitate challenging conversations about performance issues. In addition to understanding the importance of the supervisor-student relationship, interviewees also highlighted an increased understanding of the context in which the contemporary university student lives and learns. These contextual factors were viewed both positively and negatively, so a closer examination of supervisors' views on this is warranted.

The final element of the intervention was the provision of the staff and student guides. Feedback on the draft version of the Staff Guide that accompanied the workshop was largely positive while the draft version of the Student Guide guide received mixed reactions from students. The high ratings for the clarity of purpose and appropriateness of the document to the students' knowledge and skills suggested the students appreciated the need for a specific set of resources to support students during work placements. The fact that one-third of students rated the usefulness of the Student Guide as only 'somewhat agree' was a concern. Aligned with this was the low ratings for clarity on how students could apply the information to their placements. This finding reinforced the need to embed the Student Guide into student preparation for work placements where staff can facilitate students' understanding of when and how to use the strategies and resources to support their learning. This embedding links to the need to enhance students' recognition of the pedagogically rich experiences that workplace activities provide (Billett, 2016; Nagarajan & McAllister, 2015) and how they can effectively engage in and direct the opportunities provided rather than take on the role of passive recipient of teaching (Blitz et al., 2019). As the guides were provided in draft form to ensure user feedback was integrated into the final version, it was not surprising that the lowest ratings were for layout issues. These issues were addressed with the support of an experienced instructional designer. Provision of the information via

an online interactive format with embedded video exemplars was perceived by authors to be highly desirable but beyond the scope of this project.

One unintended outcome of the program was that supervisors felt the toolkit of strategies and resources within the workshop and Staff Guide were useful with all students undertaking work placements, not just underperforming students. This finding aligns with calls for more professional development for host supervisors and university staff to support students' learning during WIL (Zegwaard et al., 2017).

One of the limitations of the study was the small sample size for survey-based outcome measures and the predominance of two professions in the post-training interviews. The representativeness of these participants is thus questionable. Member checking was not undertaken with interviewees due to the limited timeframe of the grant funding. Perhaps the most significant limitation was the lack of data on students' experience of the supervisory process post-training. Students supervised by the staff training participants were contacted, but only one student agreed to be interviewed. This finding suggests a high level of student vulnerability within the work placement context. As well as ascertaining the impact of the staff training on students, further research is needed to investigate student usage of the Student Guide and the impact that has on students who underperform during their placements. Further research is also needed to determine whether the staff training program led to changes in "failure to fail" rates.

The implications of our study's findings for each of the key stakeholders, university educators, work placement supervisors, and students to emerge from this project are summarised below in Table 5.



TABLE 5: Recommendations for work placement stakeholders.

Stakeholder	Key Recommendations
University staff	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Ensure key stakeholders are clear on the expectations of their role</li> <li>• Create strong relationships between supervisors and university WIL staff so that when students are underperforming supervisors are confident to approach the University for support</li> <li>• Create a clear remediation process for supervisors to follow when they encounter an underperforming student</li> <li>• Provide professional development for supervisors focused on the processes, skills and approaches that can be used when working with students who are under performing. Promote this to all staff considering supervising students, not just supervisors with underperforming students</li> <li>• Be responsive to supervisors concerns about student performance</li> </ul>
Host supervisors	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Ensure clarity of the role as supervisor and the university staff</li> <li>▪ Participate in professional development on how to effectively supervise and support students who are underperforming</li> <li>▪ Understand the variety of reasons some supervisors fail to fail underperforming students and reflect on these in their supervision</li> <li>• Embrace their role as a gatekeeper for the profession, focusing on confidently judging student performance against the required standards (where relevant to your role)</li> <li>• Develop skills in providing quality feedback to students</li> <li>• Contact the relevant university staff when concerns with a student’s performance are identified to optimise the opportunity for support and student success</li> </ul>
Students	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Ensure students are clear on their role, the role of the host supervisor and the relevant university staff</li> <li>▪ Provide students with to a clear process to follow when they are informed they are underperforming or failing a placement</li> <li>▪ Provide students with preparation for placements that includes a focus on how to optimise their learning experience and how to engage in the supervisory process/relationship as agentic learners</li> </ul>

## CONCLUSION

The findings of this research are important to university educators engaged with work placements. The combination of face-to-face training with a well-constructed written guide had a positive impact on supervisors' confidence and knowledge as well as self-reported supervisory practices. Supervisors felt equipped with realistic and practical strategies to work effectively with underperforming students, and most importantly, when relevant, felt confident to fail a student. The broad applicability of the training, to all students the participants supervised, suggests the program filled a gap in supervisors' knowledge of useful strategies and resources. Vocational and professional bodies need to ensure that staff who take on the role of placement supervisor receive formal preparation for this complex task. However, we caution against work placement supervisors being advised to be the directors of the student learning

experience. Instead, we highlight the need for students to be provided with advice on how they can increase their sense of agency during these critical learning experiences. The provision of assessable strategies and resources, designed with student input, is an important step in this process. Student agency must be reinforced by work placement supervisors, a core element of this staff training program. Managing underperforming students should be a developmental process where the work placement supervisor, student and university staff work together to optimize learning while ensuring performance standards are met through the critical gatekeeper role.

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