

The use of eportfolio in pre-registration clinical practicum, professional development and recertification processes in the New Zealand Osteopathic Profession - beyond curriculum to capability

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Chosen theme(s)

Professional learning and accreditation

The context

The OCNZ is the statutory regulatory authority for the NZ osteopathic profession, established as per the Health Practitioner Competence Assurance Act (2003). The primary purpose of the Act is the protection of the health and safety of the public.

The Act requires that regulatory authorities determine a scope/scopes of practice for each registrant, accredit qualifications leading to registration, and develop competency frameworks and processes to ensure the maintenance of competence and assessment of competence in a range of disciplinary, recency of practice and assessment processes of international osteopathic graduates.

How it was ...

Historically the pre-registration/accreditation processes, assessment of international osteopathic graduates for registration, the assessment of competency in disciplinary processes, and the processes for return to practice have been conceptually and methodologically inconsistent. There has been little if any consistency in the approaches used in assessment, or even a shared understanding of what constitutes 'scope of practice' and contingent on that an ill-defined and highly contestable set of knowledge, skills and attitudes that support or are characteristic of 'competent practice'.



Essentially the various forms of assessment were predicated on the existence of a somewhat mythical, historical curriculum and view of practice as being one of rehearsal of the skills acquired in pre-registration training. However, over time and between institutions there is little evidence to support the existence of a stable osteopathic curriculum. Further, understanding of health and disease evolves over time, knowledge of individual osteopaths both decays and develops over the career-span in particular ways, and there is specialisation and diversification within the profession. There is also recognition that there is a range of acceptable levels of competence in any given set of capabilities as there is a continuum between novice and advanced practitioners. The range of assessments in place failed to adequately deal with these realities

The approach

The decision by OCNZ to adopt PebblePad needs to be situated in a broader and complex understanding of discourse on scope of practice and an acceptance of the reality that the nature of what constitutes competence in osteopathic practice is both indeterminate and emergent.

Key aspects to OCNZ's process:

1. A form of assessment that aligns learning and assessment was required that allows the practitioner to identify and develop a reflective approach. At the same time from a regulatory perspective a defensible mechanism was required that allows evidence to be assembled and, notwithstanding the diversity of approaches to practice, allows competencies to be identified within a flexible capabilities framework.
2. Creating an understanding of reflective practice and a commitment to lifelong/lifewide learning - training and dialogue with the profession. Over three years a cycle of regional conferences has been used to raise awareness amongst the profession of issues, problematising current approaches and sharing an understanding of the theoretical framework supporting the use of PebblePad
3. Migrating from a p-portfolio to an e-portfolio: trialling PebblePad with international osteopathic graduates and the 4th year undergraduate student practitioners at Unitec, Auckland; converting the paper assessment tools to PebblePad resources; developing expertise and supporting users.
4. Encouraging practitioners to creatively develop and use PebblePad as a personal learning space.
5. Creating allies and project champions - the coalition of the willing. Identifying potential pilot sites for trialling professional development/recertification processes.



How it is now

Progress is slow but progress nevertheless:

1. Second cohort of 4th year students using PebblePad for the assessment of their clinical practicum.
2. Two peer groups of osteopaths identified as pilot sites and further training scheduled.
3. OCNZ preceptors trained in PebblePad

The benefits

The approach to the adoption and implementation of PebblePad has been deliberately gradual and with no general compulsion to date. Over a period of three years a series of regional conferences have been used as a vehicle by the OCNZ to generate discussion within the profession on issues around professional development.

We have sought to problematise the existing approach of setting a tariff of hours each year for registrants attending approved courses by looking at the evidence base supporting such forms of professional development (which is almost entirely lacking) and to draw out the some key themes relating to learning and assessment in professional practice and epistemological issues relating to osteopathic practice.

We are in the midst of a paradigm shift:

- The underlying knowledge base that supports competence in practice is no longer viewed as being static. It is no longer defensible to view professional development or competence merely as an exercise in recapitulating a pre-registration curriculum.
- The NZ osteopathic profession has a number of scopes of practice: a general scope; vocational; and extended. We need to acknowledge a diversity of practice styles and interests.
- Meta-cognition: thinking about thinking! Self-reflection and feedback.
- The acknowledgement that whilst regulators ultimately rely on professionals to self-regulate, self-declaration of competence in the absence of evidence is no longer acceptable to the public.

PebblePad provides both a means of moving the focus from the proto-professionalism inherent in the underlying knowledge base to practice itself, allowing the fine grain of what constitutes competent practice to be captured. This allows the regulator to inform its policy development and accreditation processes with authentic representations of practice reality.

This empowers the osteopath in a number of ways. In an overload of evidence it is all too easy to be disheartened by the array of conflicting evidence that the literature presents.



What constitutes best practice is seldom clear-cut. Without encouraging reflection it is hard to see how evidence can inform practice. The scaffolding within PebblePad allows learning to be embedded in practice rather than practice somehow to emerge from learning. This gives a real possibility of bespoke and therefore meaningful professional development.

Over time new graduates/overseas trained osteopaths will form a network of PebblePad savvy practitioners and hopefully help ease PebblePad's wider adoption in professional development processes. This has reduced the 'fear factor' with respect to change and created curiosity and a pool of volunteers to trial PebblePad.

Lessons learnt

Overcoming barriers – whilst resource constraints have been, and continue to be, an issue perhaps the major hurdle has been overcoming conventional thinking amongst administrative staff. Poorly articulated fears over loss of control of process, substituting more complex/amorphous 'reflexion' for the simple/concrete hourly tariffs of attending courses or substituting the 'sage on stage' view of learning with self-reflection. It is important to focus on the added value of reflection on practice over the growing pains of different working practices. But enthusiasm and determination carries the day!

An advantage of the slow burn approach with the profession has been time for the conceptual framework to be understood and producing practitioners that are keen to push forward with innovation.

In brief

From the ivory towers to the swampy lowlands of practice!

- PebblePad has helped move the focus of what the profession understands constitutes competence beyond the boundaries and artificial subject areas of traditional pre-registration training courses to professional practice.

