

From setbacks to comebacks: Understanding the student's perspective on failing placement

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Globally, placements are an integral component of many allied health and nursing programs. Students are formally evaluated on their placement performance and may fail. Whilst research has explored placement failure, there remains limited insight from students, including the Australian occupational therapy context. This study involved 28, semi-structured interviews with occupational therapy students and graduates across Australia who had failed or almost failed a long-block placement in the past five years. Interview data was initially analyzed using reflexive thematic analysis, followed by framework analysis using self-determination theory. Under self-determination theory, three themes and eleven sub-themes were identified. Findings highlighted when the three psychological needs of autonomy, relatedness and competence were compromised, how this influenced a student's performance and engagement on placement. Strategies for universities and agencies to support students before, during, and after placement failure were discussed, exploring how each can contribute to changing the student's experience.

Keywords: Allied health student, failure, fieldwork, placement, occupational therapy, student voice

Work-integrated learning (WIL) is an educational approach that enables students to engage in authentic industry-based experiences to apply disciplinary knowledge and theories of practice to their workplace context (Ferns et al., 2024; Zegwaard et al., 2023). Across Australia, 57% of students enrolled in health-related programs will participate in some level of WIL throughout their course. Placements are the most common form of WIL in Australia, where students are required to engage in meaningful work-related tasks within a real-life workplace setting (Universities Australia, 2019).

Placements require the involvement of three key stakeholders: the student, the university, and the agency or workplace. Whilst each stakeholder will have their own unique roles and responsibilities, it is expected that they all work in partnership throughout the placement experience (Hay et al., 2023). Universities usually have dedicated staff in placement roles who may have various titles. In this paper the term 'university coordinator' will be used. Students are also required to be supervised and evaluated during their placements by a suitably qualified or experienced clinician who is usually an employee of that placement agency (Brown et al., 2013; Isbel et al., 2020; McAllister & Nagarajan, 2015; Rose & Best, 2005; Stagnitti et al., 2013). In this paper, the term 'supervisor' will be used.

Students are evaluated on their performance on placement, and as such some may be identified as underperforming and may fail their placement (Bearman, 2020; Davenport et al., 2018; Krusen, 2015). Globally failure rates in allied health and nursing programs range from 1 to 10% (American Occupational Therapy Association, 2024; Attrill et al., 2012; Foote, 2015; Johnston et al., 2018). Although these rates appear low, the experience of failing a placement has been reported as complex, time

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consuming and an emotional experience for all involved (Davenport et al., 2018; Nicola-Richmond et al., 2017; Stutz-Tanenbaum et al., 2015) warranting ongoing attention.

Previous research about the reasons underlying a student failing placement and each person's experience has primarily been obtained from the university or agency perspective, with limited studies providing any direct insights from the students (Davenport et al., 2018; Milgate et al., 2023). A recent scoping review by Milgate et al. (2023) further identified that when the student perspective was obtained, it was distinctly different to that of other stakeholders. This was particularly evident in relation to the factors that contributed to them receiving the failing mark, explanations for the student's behaviors prior to and after the fail was communicated to the student, and the perceived effectiveness of the remediation strategies or supports implemented by the supervisor and/or university. This review also identified that there was limited research relating to allied health in Australia, including occupational therapy.

Occupational therapy is an allied health profession that works with people across multiple contexts to promote the everyday activities that a person wants, needs, or is expected to do (World Federation of Occupational Therapists, 2023). Occupational therapy is an internationally accredited health profession and requires a person to complete an accredited occupational therapy education program, including 1,000 hours of placement (World Federation of Occupational Therapists, 2016). In Australia, placements that are 5-weeks or more in duration are commonly referred to as long-block placements (School of Health and Rehabilitation Sciences, 2020). All Australian occupational therapy programs currently use the *Student Practice Evaluation Form – Revised (Second Edition)* (SPEF-R2) for evaluating a student's performance on long-block placements which includes a halfway and final student evaluation (School of Health and Rehabilitation Sciences, 2008, 2020). The halfway evaluation serves as a formative assessment with the final evaluation determining a pass or fail outcome for that placement experience. Students may pass or fail at either stage, with possible variations such as failing halfway then passing the final, passing halfway then failing the final evaluation or failing both at both halfway and final.

Globally, failure rates on placement for occupational therapy remain largely unknown with the only accessible data reporting a failure rate of 1% in 2022-2023 for American students undertaking their fieldwork II placement (American Occupational Therapy Association, 2024). Failure rates in Australia for occupational therapy placements are not publicly available.

Without the student voice, our understanding of placement failure remains incomplete. Student perspectives are essential to ensure that support and intervention strategies effectively address their actual needs. Without these insights, gaps in support may go unnoticed, resulting in wasted time and resources and potentially hindering the development of strategies that truly support student success.

As there continues to be limited direct insights from allied health students regarding failing placement, including the Australian occupational therapy context, this study sought to address this gap by asking the following research question: What is the Australian occupational therapy student experience of failing or near failing a long-block professional practice experience?

METHOD

An interpretative description approach was used involving individual semi-structured interviews to gain each participant's perspective of their experiences (Nathan et al., 2019; Thorne, 2016). Ethical approval from the University of Queensland (2022/HE00739) was obtained prior to conducting this

research. All participants provided informed consent prior to participating in this study. No participant was reimbursed for their time.

Researcher Reflexivity

All authors were qualified occupational therapists with industry and academic experience. At the time of the study, the first author (WM) was employed as a placement coordinator at one accredited Australian occupational therapy program and had actively supported occupational therapy placements for numerous years including working with students experiencing failure. The other two authors (JC, JH) were employed at another accredited Australian occupational therapy program. Author JC held a leadership, teaching and research role which included supporting students with their studies, including failure in placement units. Author JH was a teaching and research academic with previous experience supporting and supervising students on placement.

The roles and previous experiences of the research team was acknowledged and the potential to influence interpretations of the data. To manage this, WM maintained a reflexive journal throughout the data collection and analysis process. This included initial reactions, thoughts and reflections on any information that was new or unexpected, any similarities and differences to other interviews to date, and how individual practices were influenced by this information. All authors engaged in fortnightly or monthly meetings throughout the data collection and data analysis phases which included post interview debriefing and ongoing discussions that challenged any potential biases and assumptions.

To finalize data analysis, participants were provided a written summary of the themes identified from this study. Participants were not required to respond if the summary was an accurate reflection of their experience. A total of six participants did however respond, confirming the identified themes were an accurate reflection of their experiences. No new information or adjustments were suggested by participants.

Recruitment

Participants were recruited across a 1.5-year period via purposive and snowball sampling. Study details, including the participant information sheet and consent form were emailed to each Australian occupational therapy university program via their university coordinator and Head of School/Discipline, requesting them to distribute to their current students and graduates. The first author (WM) also posted information about the study to a range of relevant social media groups ($n = 32$) via Instagram, LinkedIn and Facebook. These groups represented a range of clinical practice areas, relevant funding networks and several occupational therapy student groups, for example AgedCare4OT, Australian Paediatric Occupational Therapists, NDIS OT Community of Practice and Occupational Therapy Australia. Each email and post included a hyperlink which allowed anonymous access to the study details and how to express their interest. Recruitment emails and posts occurred intermittently throughout the recruitment period, typically every three to six months. Recruitment commenced August 2022 and finished May 2024 with interviews occurring from August 2022 through to September 2024.

To be eligible for the study, participants needed to be either a graduated occupational therapist or a continuing occupational therapy student in Australia who had received a fail mark at either their halfway or final SPEF-R (replaced by the SPEF-R2 in 2020) or SPEF-R2 evaluation for a long-block placement in the past 5-years. Occupational therapy students were also required to have had their grades finalized for any relevant failed placement unit, all appeals completed, and continuing with

their occupational therapy studies. Students who had chosen to discontinue their occupational therapy studies or had been terminated from their occupational therapy program were not eligible to participate.

Data Collection

Semi-structured interview guides were developed collaboratively by all authors with questions varying slightly depending on whether the participant was a student or a graduate occupational therapist. Open-ended questions invited participants to discuss their experience of failing placement, including before, during and after that placement, and any subsequent reflections and suggestions for improvement for the university, agency or students. Example questions can be seen in Table 1.

Interviews were conducted online via Zoom at a time convenient to each participant. Each interview was recorded (audio and visual) and transcribed verbatim with pseudonyms applied. Most interviews were conducted by the first author (WM). If a participant undertook their placement at the university at which the first author was employed, interviews were conducted by one of the other authors (JC or JH).

TABLE 1: Example interview questions.

Can you tell us about your experience with failing or near failing your placement?
As the participant discusses their experience/s, use probing questions such as:
• How did you feel / react? • Who did you talk to? What did you share with family / friends / peers? • Who else was involved? What role did they take? • Was there anything that you wished was available / done?
Other clarifying questions may include:
• Did you know they had concerns about your performance?
If they did attend / complete further placements:
• How did this experience impact on your next placement?
Do you have any tips or suggestions for other students / supervisors / university staff?

Data Analysis

Interview data was initially analyzed using a reflexive thematic analysis approach to identify, analyze and report patterns of meanings from the data (Braun & Clarke, 2022). After familiarizing with the data set, to commence data analysis, each author independently reviewed three transcripts and met to discuss their initial and emerging understanding of the data. From these discussions a set of initial codes were generated and refined. The first author then continued to apply these codes to other transcripts. All authors continued to meet during this time and through a series of iterative discussions it became evident to the authors that codes were aligning to self-determination theory (Deci & Ryan, 1985; Ryan & Deci, 2017) and a framework analysis approach was applied (Gale et al., 2013). The framework method is commonly used for thematic analysis of qualitative data as it utilizes an existing theory to provide a systematic way to organize and apply codes so that themes can be generated (Gale et al., 2013).

Given that this study sought to understand the student's experiences of failing, self-determination theory was identified as an appropriate analysis framework as it draws upon how the three basic

psychological needs of autonomy, competence and relatedness underpin a person's motivation to engage in or perform a task, and how this impacts their health and wellbeing (Deci & Ryan, 1985; Ryan & Deci, 2017). The authors used self-determination theory as the framework for the final stages of data coding and via further collaborative discussions between all authors, three primary themes with eleven sub-themes were generated and finalized. These are outlined in Table 4.

The authors did not use any forms of AI for the research design, delivery, data collection, data analysis or at any stage of writing this manuscript. The first author utilized ChatGPT -4 in the final stages to seek ideas for alternative sub-theme titles and paper titles.

RESULTS

Participants

As some states or territories only have one occupational therapy university program, to protect the identity of participants, details of programs and placement locations will not be identified. Of the 26 accredited occupational therapy programs across Australia (Occupational Therapy Council of Australia Ltd, 2024), 17 (65%) programs were represented in this study, from six of the eight states or territories in Australia.

A total of 28 participants were included in this study. At the time of their interviews, ten (35.7%) were continuing occupational therapy students and 18 (64.3%) were graduate occupational therapists. Nearly half of participants identified themselves as mature age students at the time of their placement experience ($n = 13$; 46.4%) and seven (25.0%) identified as male. Further participant demographics can be viewed in Table 2. To finalize the results, participants were asked via email to confirm demographic information by responding to specific open-ended questions. To protect participant's identities, only broad categories of their demographics are presented.

Each interview lasted 60 to 75 minutes. One participant experienced technology difficulties, requiring a second interview. One other participant also completed a second interview as they wanted to speak further about their experiences. A third participant did not attend an interview but provided a detailed written response to the interview questions. In this paper, the term 'student' will be used to refer to participants.

TABLE 2: Participant demographics.

Characteristic (at time of placement experience)	Details	N (%)
Participant Status	Continuing student	10 (35.7)
	Graduate occupational therapist	18 (64.3)
	Total Participants	28 (100)
Gender	Male	7 (25.0)
	Female	19 (67.9)
	Unstated	2 (7.1)
Age	18-25 years	13 (46.4)
	26-35 years	5 (17.8)
	36-45 years	4 (14.3)
	Over 46 years	5 (17.8)
	Unstated	1 (3.6)
Mature aged student (self-identified)	Yes	13 (46.4)
	No	14 (50.0)
	Unstated	1 (3.6)
Ethnicity / Cultural Background	Australian / Caucasian	16 (57.1)
	Other	10 (35.7)
	Unstated	2 (7.1)
Type of OT degree	Bachelor	15 (53.6)
	Bachelor with Honors	6 (21.4)
	Masters	6 (21.4)
	Unstated	1 (3.6)
Previous Tertiary Study	Yes	14 (50.0)
	No	12 (42.9)
	Unstated	2 (7.1)

Placement Details

Of the 28 participants, six had more than one experience of failing or near failing placement, resulting in a total of 34 placement experiences being discussed. Of these 34 placement experiences, 18 (52.9%) were in hospital settings. The next most common setting was private practice, which included working within the National Disability Insurance Scheme, an Australian specific funding scheme supporting people with disability ($n = 6$; 17.6%) (National Disability Insurance Agency, 2022). Table 3 outlines placement details.

Placement duration ranged from 5-weeks to 13-weeks with most fail experiences occurring in the student's final year of study ($n = 21$; 61.8%). Almost all participants received a halfway fail evaluation ($n = 31$; 91.2%). Of these 31 halfway fails, 14 (45.2%) progressed to achieve a final pass evaluation, seven

(22.6%) received a final fail evaluation and ten (32.3%) did not complete their placement to full-term as it was either terminated by the agency or the student chose to withdraw.

TABLE 3: Placement details.

Placement Details	N (%)
Placement Context	
Hospital	18 (52.9)
Private Practice / National Disability Insurance Scheme	6 (17.6)
Community (State Government Health Agency)	4 (11.8)
University or Student Led Clinic	2 (5.9)
Mental Health Services	2 (5.9)
Residential Aged Care Facility	1 (2.9)
Vocational Rehabilitation	1 (2.9)
Placement Location	
Local Placement	28 (82.3)
Location requiring student to live away from own home/community	6 (17.6)

THEMES

The findings of this study reflect the students' experiences across the entire placement cycle, from initial preparation and placement organization, their time on placement, and post-placement such as follow-up support, appeals, and preparation for subsequent placements. Under the three themes of autonomy, competence and relatedness, eleven sub-themes were identified as listed in Table 4.

TABLE 4: Summary of themes and sub-themes.

Theme	Sub-theme
Autonomy	Decisions made by others
	Experiencing powerlessness
	Heightened vigilance and actioning choice
Competence	Navigating skill development
	Expectations and feedback
	Confidence and doubt in performance
Relatedness	Belonging and acceptance
	Connection and isolation
	Respect and recognition
	Support systems: Lifelines and shortcomings
	Relationships matter and lasting impressions

Theme 1: Autonomy

Self-determination theory defines autonomy as one's ability to be engaged in and being able to action choice, decision-making and control (Deci & Ryan, 1985; Ryan & Deci, 2017). Students in this study

described how their autonomy was impacted across the placement cycle, impacting their sense of agency and control. Three sub-themes were identified.

Decisions made by others

Students felt excluded or disregarded in the decision-making process throughout the placement cycle. Many described the initial communications received from various university staff relating to placement organization and allocations as blunt and inflexible. These communications reinforced the limited number of placement opportunities available, and strictly informed students that they could not choose, swap or seek their own placements, which they considered a restriction of their autonomy.

Students acknowledged the complexity of finding and allocating placements and recognized that universities are currently responsible for this process. To assist with these processes, most students reported their university invited them to provide pre-placement information, such as their interests or other considerations. However, more-so for their failed placements, students felt this information was disregarded or ignored by university staff, resulting in a placement that misaligned with their strengths, preferences, or needs.

Once on placement students then described experiencing rigid learning environments, with supervisors being inflexible and not acknowledging the student's individual abilities, interests or styles. This contrasted with their passing placement experiences.

We didn't really get to speak about our strengths or our weaknesses, how we best learn, or how we were expected to run our day. It was more follow me; this is what you do. I felt like I was in the army and I was being dictated to do certain things. If I didn't do it the right way, I was punished, without opportunities for reflection and opportunities to try again [describing their failed placement]. [P3]

At times, placements were terminated early by the agency. When this occurred, students reported that they were unaware that termination was being considered or discussed by others and that this decision was finalized and known by all other stakeholders before the student was formally informed.

After their final fail grade was confirmed, students expressed frustration for how rigid the university processes seemed to be. These processes, alongside the associated timelines and structure of their university program, created delays for course progression and graduation. If they chose to appeal their termination or fail grade, they described this as confusing and overwhelming and wished they had clearer information and more support to navigate this.

Experiencing powerlessness

Students regularly reported feeling powerless across the placement cycle. In addition to feeling powerless in how placements were organized, students felt forced to accept any late placement adjustments or allocations. Any attempts from the student to discuss alternatives were firmly denied, or were provided with options that they considered to be even more misaligned to their circumstances.

It's like 'Bad luck Donald Duck' and I did actually question it. They said 'Yeah, well you know what, you start in a couple of weeks so you get this one or you go to Timbuktu somewhere up in the middle of the bush somewhere'. I said, 'Oh well then, obviously I'm staying where I am.' [P6]

Students regularly stated that responses from their university coordinator indicated to them that the university's relationship with the placement agency was the priority, reasoning that universities needed to maintain these partnerships due to the broader contextual issue of 'shortage of placements'. When performance issues were becoming evident, students expressed they felt the university expected them to continue attending placement. Some were explicitly told that they would immediately fail or not get an alternative placement if they withdrew. Students also believed they did not have the same rights or remediation pathways that an employee may have in similar circumstances.

Students reported having limited avenues to provide feedback in a manner they felt would be genuinely considered and not compromise their placement evaluations or future allocations. This was both during their placement and after completion. At times, students became aware of a placement's reputation of providing challenging placement experiences or regularly failing students. This reinforced feelings of powerlessness and anger and further supported their perception that universities were prioritizing the agency relationship and disregarding the student's needs.

Heightened vigilance and actioning choice

After students were made aware of their failure, many initially considered giving up. However, most responded by refocusing and returning to placement with a renewed determination to succeed and an inner drive to either prove themselves or prove others wrong. This motivation however, created a heightened sense of urgency, making them more critical of their own performance and apprehensive and guarded so as not to make further mistakes. To regain a sense of control, some became overly reactive, seizing any opportunity to demonstrate their abilities and taking on more responsibilities or tasks, at times, at the detriment of other performance areas.

If provided the choice to continue in their failing placement, the majority chose to stay with the hope of improving and passing placement. When reflecting on the short- and long-term impact that continuing their failing placement had on their own health and personal relationships, some students identified that in retrospect they would have chosen to withdraw from that placement if that option was offered. This was their reflection even if they had passed their final evaluation.

Across universities, students received differing advice on whether they could or should disclose past placement failures to future supervisors. Those who chose to share their previous failures, along with ideas for strategies or supports, felt that this was well received by their subsequent supervisors, leading to a more supportive placement.

Theme 2: Competence

Self-determination theory describes competence as one's own perception of mastery and effectiveness to do a task which needs to be supported by relevant, safe, scaffolded learning opportunities, and effective feedback (Deci & Ryan, 1985; Ryan & Deci, 2017). Three sub-themes were identified.

Navigating skill development

Students compared how their ability to develop their competencies was fostered or hindered before, during and after their placements. For their failed placements, some described situations in which they felt their university did not adequately prepare them for that placement context. Only a few students stated they had not fully engaged with pre-placement activities, acknowledging they had started placement under-prepared.

More commonly though, students regularly described the placement site as not having a positive culture or approach towards students or student learning. In these placements, students detailed how their supervisor appeared to lack the time, interest, or skills to provide suitable orientation, resources or guidance for their learning. When students sought clarification, repeated instructions or alternative strategies were rarely offered, even if failure was becoming evident. This left them feeling lost and without clear direction as they attempted to address performance deficits on their own.

Most students believed their supervisors in their failed placements misinterpreted their behaviors and that they were evaluated differently to other students. Underpinning the student's ability to proactively perform on placement was an emerging fear of making mistakes. This intensified after failure was communicated to them and they became increasingly concerned about failing their next evaluation.

So she [supervisor] would ask me a question on the spot and then if I didn't say the answer she would just assume that I didn't know it. I did know it. It's just like if you ask me a question suddenly, I'm just going to be like 'Oh my God.' I wasn't unmotivated, I was terrified. [P12]

When performance issues were identified, some universities or supervisors requested the development of a formal remediation plan, however this was inconsistent across university coordinators and placement contexts. When requested, students reported that these plans were often developed primarily by the student, with limited collaboration or input from others, and often lacked tangible details or strategies for the student to implement.

Expectations and feedback

Students spoke of how in their failed placements, they felt that expectations were not clearly identified, demonstrated or discussed by their supervisor, or that expectations were unrealistic or inconsistent. Without clear, consistent expectations and feedback, students felt unable to develop their competencies as they did not know what was required or how to improve.

They also reported receiving feedback from other placement staff or peers that contrasted from that being received from their supervisor. These inconsistencies contributed to the student's shock and devastation upon receiving a failing evaluation, as some had not anticipated failing at all, while others were unprepared for the number of low scores received on their evaluations.

Students also had pre-existing expectations for their placement supervisor which was challenged in their failing placements. Students regularly considered their supervisor was not adequately skilled or resourced to undertake this role, with some appearing forced to supervise a student due to agency requirements. This made students question why universities do not require supervisors to demonstrate competencies or complete training in student supervision prior to hosting a placement.

I just got the impression that [my supervisor] didn't really wanna do this placement with me, she put no preparation into it, she had no templates ready, she had no onboarding program ready, and I found out that she didn't do any of the training. [P14]

Confidence and doubt in performance

Failing placement deeply impacted the student's confidence in their own competence on an immediate, short- and long-term basis. For most students, failing was a new and emotional experience, causing feelings of anger, shame and embarrassment. This, along with feeling shocked and devastated, reduced their ability to process feedback, seek clarification or develop strategies to improve.

If I was in a more logical state of mind or had an idea that I was going to fail I would have asked more specific questions. But obviously being in a state of shock I didn't have that opportunity. I kind of just accepted it, nodded my head and left. I was not OK. [P3]

After receiving a failing evaluation, students described a lingering sense of doubt in their own competencies, approaching subsequent performance discussions and evaluations with trepidation. This occurred in their failing placement, in subsequent placements and for some, into their graduate roles.

They described how critical any subsequent placements and supervisors were for rebuilding their confidence. Many believed these allocations were done thoughtfully and strategically by their university coordinator to find supervisors and contexts that enabled success. Overall, overcoming failure and achieving success fostered a renewed sense of self-belief, strengthening their resilience and perseverance.

My confidence was totally destroyed. After [failing placement] I kind of just doubted myself with everything, you know, just basic stuff, I was second guessing everything. [My subsequent supervisor] could see I came in broken. I had no confidence, I was scared to do anything. She [the subsequent supervisor] knew it, but she just had a lot more experience and the learning was fun. She really rekindled, reinvigorated [me]. You know if it wasn't for [the subsequent supervisor], I probably wouldn't be here now. [P21]

Theme 3: Relatedness

Self-determination theory describes relatedness as a need to feel connected to others through meaningful relationships, to care for and be cared about, to have a sense of belonging and feel part of a community or social group (Deci & Ryan, 1985; Ryan & Deci, 2017). Five sub-themes were identified.

Belonging and acceptance

In their failed placements, students frequently reported feeling unwelcomed, not fitting in, or feeling they were a burden for the supervisor or agency.

To be honest, I think our personalities clashed a lot. It was a bit of a vibe that I was getting when I was going into the workplace – that I was the intruder. It just seemed like they didn't want students at all and that we were a burden for them. [P4]

These feelings of being unwelcomed or excluded were discussed more frequently by students who identified as mature aged, male or who were not from an Australian or Caucasian background.

Connection and isolation

The failing experience often created feelings of isolation and at times students chose to mask from others the full extent of their struggles or tried to cope by themselves. This approach was often expressed alongside feeling shame or embarrassment and a stigma relating to failing.

Failing initially made them question their career goals and whether this was still the correct pathway for them. This sense of disheartenment resulted in them initially considering leaving their studies altogether. Their commitment to becoming an occupational therapist was reestablished either via encouragement from close friends, family or university staff, or experiencing success in subsequent placements.

The failing experience influenced their graduate pathways, with most actively avoiding that area of practice. They also described becoming more astute in what experiences they sought in their early career roles.

It's given me insight into what a good supervisor is and what a bad one is, and so going for looking for different jobs, I was like, I will sacrifice any amount of pay for a good supervisor, good support system and all that kind of stuff. [P4]

Respect and recognition

Students described that they believed not all stakeholders were transparent with them about their performance. Consequently, they often reported feeling blindsided and being the last to know about any emerging performance concerns. This contributed to them becoming more guarded and not trusting their current, and at times, their subsequent supervisors. "If somebody has a concern, I want to hear about that right at the time, it's not good enough for somebody to be making a kind of dossier against me. That's how it felt" [P7].

Students also reported that the way in which their failing performance or termination was communicated to them indicated limited consideration from others of the significance of the event, or the impact that this news would have on their immediate performance or mental health. Many described needing to immediately return to placement duties or clinical services, with limited follow up discussions or supports put in place.

Support systems: lifelines and shortcomings

Feeling overwhelmed and powerless in their situation, along with shame, embarrassment and the stigma surrounding failing placement, influenced the student's decision regarding from whom and when to seek support. Overall, students reported that their closest family and friends were their main source of support. Most chose not to disclose the failure to their student peers or immediately inform their university coordinator. Students reported that the pressures associated with their placement and a failing performance exacerbated their stress and anxiety, with many accessing formal medical or counselling services on an immediate and longer-term basis.

In relation to university supports, most students valued and appreciated the level of support and guidance they received from their university coordinator both during and after their failed placement. However, the format, resourcing and timing of this support varied across universities and students. If students had not established a positive relationship with their coordinator before placement, or did not find them particularly helpful, they were more hesitant to seek advice and guidance when difficulties or failure occurred.

Having been in the quagmire of stress where you are feeling like you're an absolute failure, not just as an OT, but as a human, the idea of speaking to someone who you really don't know, it doesn't come into your mind to actually make that call, cause you're going 'What can they do?' because I'm the failure, I need to pick myself up, I need to change, I need to do the work. So there is no pre-emptive phone calls to the [university coordinator]. [P11]

Also contributing to their decision to seek help from or confide in their university coordinator were any earlier communications and interactions they'd had as it influenced their perception of how approachable the university may be at this point.

No way. I wouldn't tell [the university coordinator] because I felt like I couldn't. They were so 'You will go where we tell you and there won't be any swipsie swapsies around and you're the student, you need to do as you're told.' That's definitely the message I got so I really question what support I would have actually gotten. [P6]

Relationships matter and lasting impressions

The student-supervisor relationship was central to all the student's placement experiences. In their failing placements, they often described this relationship as not supportive or collegial from the very beginning and that this had further deteriorated after performance issues were communicated to them.

It was never a warm relationship [with my supervisor], but it did become more stressful and distrustful in some ways. Particularly as they started using my reflections that I'd written down as evidence for things that I've done poorly. [P17]

Failing placement did not deter participants from wanting to supervise future students, with their experiences influencing what type of supervisor they believed they would or have become. Those who had become a student supervisor spoke with great passion about providing positive placement experiences and being extra attentive to students who may be struggling or experiencing failure.

The student's longer-term relationship with their university was also impacted, with most actually describing an overall positive appreciation for their university coordinator. However, those who had experienced a lack of support or responsiveness from their university when failure occurred or expressed frustration with university processes, described a reluctance to engage any further with their university after graduating.

DISCUSSION

This study contributes to the limited literature on the student's experience of failing or near failing long-block placements. Through the lens of self-determination theory, these experiences can be interpreted as being shaped by how much their psychological needs for autonomy, competence, and relatedness were being satisfied. If these needs are unmet (need frustration), or actively undermined (need thwarting), a person's intrinsic motivation will reduce, their psychological function will be compromised, and they are more likely to experience ill-health (Ryan & Vansteenkiste, 2023; Vansteenkiste & Ryan, 2013). Furthermore, when these needs are not being met, people will also respond by engaging in maladaptive and compensatory behaviors (Reeve, 2012; Vansteenkiste & Ryan, 2013). It is therefore worth exploring how these three needs can be better supported to change the student's experience of failing placement.

Autonomy

How the student's autonomy was supported or impeded throughout their placement experiences were discussed. For context, occupational therapy programs must ensure students have a variety of placement experiences (World Federation of Occupational Therapists, 2016), however they face ongoing challenges with meeting the increasing demand for placement numbers across Australia (Universities Australia, 2019). Responses from the participants included within this study highlighted the unintended consequences of how the messaging relating to 'placement shortages' and the processes relating to placement allocations was experienced by students. Students reported feeling powerless in this process, with limited influence over their allocations, becoming passive agents in the process even before placement began. This appeared to influence how students approached these learning

opportunities, whether they sought support, and how openly they communicated difficulties with the relevant parties.

From an agency perspective, previous literature has described the challenges experienced by supervisors in managing underperforming students, with recommendations that they seek support from universities and their peers when considering failing a student (Brewer et al., 2021; Gingerich et al., 2022; Hughes et al., 2021; Luhanga et al., 2014). It is unknown from this study what guidance or support supervisors accessed prior to communicating the underperformance, fail or termination to the student. Regardless, our findings suggest that students often felt excluded from early discussions about their performance, leaving them feeling blindsided. Consequently, this perceived delay left students feeling they had limited or no time to act on these concerns. This lack of transparency and opportunity for dialogue further diminished their sense of control, as again, they had limited input into their outcomes. This again, reinforced their role as passive agents in their learning.

Students in this study perceived that universities preferenced the agency relationship and believed there was a lack of genuine feedback avenues available for students. This reinforced their feelings of powerlessness and limited their ability to advocate for a different placement experience either for themselves or future students. This was both at the university and the placement level.

Competence

Competence, the belief in one's ability to develop and apply skills effectively (Deci & Ryan, 1985; Ryan & Deci, 2017), is critical in placement success. Research highlights that high-quality placements facilitate competence by providing students with clear expectations, structured learning opportunities and constructive feedback within a flexible learning environment that has tolerance for error (Bell et al., 2024; Eady et al., 2025; Kusurkar, 2023; McAllister et al., 2018; Rodger et al., 2011). In contradiction to this, students in this study often reported these elements were lacking in their failed placements, believing this contributed to their difficulties developing and demonstrating the required competencies.

To support any competency development, it is common for students to develop learning plans (Bearman et al., 2013; Milgate et al., 2023; So et al., 2019). To be effective, contemporary practice recommends that students are active and leading agents in their development and implementation (Swartz, 2019). Although students in this study reported being provided the opportunity to lead this when failure was identified, they wanted more scaffolding, direction and collaboration as they struggled to understand expectations and how to tangibly improve their performance. More explicit discussions and demonstrations of expectations and follow-up dialogue could also support students in identifying competent practices and realistic improvement strategies. These strategies are further supported in the self-determination theory literature as effective ways to build a person's competence (Kusurkar, 2023; Kusurkar et al., 2011; Orsini et al., 2015).

Relatedness

Placements foster relatedness by providing a welcoming placement environment, demonstrating care and empathy for the student and enabling students to find connection with their career aspirations (Bell et al., 2024; Eady et al., 2025; McAllister et al., 2018; Rodger et al., 2011). In this study, the student's sense of relatedness was critical to their experience, with notable differences between failing and passing placements.

The student's connection to their university and university coordinator was impacted by initial communications that emphasized a scarcity of placement options. This messaging, alongside students experiencing an inflexible allocation process made most students feel disregarded which in turn, affected their relationship with the university and the student's initial willingness to seek help. However, when failure occurred and students received support, they acknowledged and highly valued the role of, and their relationship with, their university coordinator. This relationship however was only considered positive if the coordinator was able to provide timely and empathetic guidance, help with navigating university policies and procedures and was able to strategically allocate students to well-matched subsequent placements.

Supervisor relationships were equally influential on the student's placement experience. The impact that the student-supervisor relationship has on a student's engagement and motivation is well recognized in the literature both from a self-determination theory perspective (Reeve, 2012), and from other allied health disciplines and work-integrated learning contexts (Bell et al., 2024; Drewery et al., 2026; Eady et al., 2025). Unfortunately, in their failing placements, students often felt unwelcomed, devalued, or burdensome, making them reluctant to seek guidance or trust their supervisors. This lack of belonging in the workplace appeared to further exacerbate their struggles.

Despite experiencing failure, students in this study did achieve placement successes. Students attributed this to supportive supervisors, well-matched placements and their own resilience and perseverance. Findings from this study therefore highlight how each stakeholder can draw upon self-determination theory to help students rebuild their confidence, develop competence and transform into capable professionals, even after failure has been experienced.

IMPLICATIONS ON FUTURE PRACTICE AND RESEARCH

Based on the findings of this study the following recommendations are presented to enhance the students' experience on placement. To support a sense of autonomy, universities could consider the way in which the complexity of placement allocation is communicated to students. This could include reframing placement messaging to emphasize placement opportunities over scarcity, providing transparent explanations for allocation decisions, and enabling genuine student input into these decisions when feasible.

Additionally, supervisors should be supported and trained to ensure they feel equipped to identify and communicate underperformance to students earlier in an objective and constructive manner (Brewer et al., 2021). This will facilitate a student's sense of control over their learning, actively engaging them in these earlier discussions so they can co-create strategies and opportunities to address potential emerging difficulties.

To support the student's sense of autonomy for placement, feedback systems with both the university and the placement agency should be available for students to provide a genuine and safe way to express any concerns without fear of repercussions. This could include consistent mid- and post-placement check-ins for every placement alongside confidential student placement feedback mechanisms. Formal reviews should be available and actioned, particularly for failing placements, involving all stakeholders equally. Universities should conduct reviews before final decisions on course progression or failure are made as a way to improve fairness and transparency of the decisions being made. Clearer pathways for students to request a placement review or a withdrawal without penalty should be established, particularly if the quality of the placement may be lacking, learning goals are not aligned, or if adequate

supports are not able to be provided due to external or systemic factors. Additionally, universities should ensure students are informed about actions taken in response to their feedback.

When addressing the student's sense of competence it should be acknowledged that hosting allied health students in the clinical context can be challenging. Supervisors play a critical role in student learning but must balance this with clinical demands (Bourne et al., 2021; Delany & Molloy, 2018; Forbes et al., 2022; Stirling et al., 2024; Varland et al., 2017). Experiences described in this study may be reflective of the difficulties supervisors experience in achieving this balance, impacting their supervisory skills and availability. Consequently, if supervisors lacked the time or skills to support student learning, students may have struggled to develop competence. Universities and agencies must therefore ensure that supervisor preparation, training and supports are readily accessible, particularly for those working with underperforming students. However, while some research exists on supervisor challenges across allied health disciplines (Bearman et al., 2013; Brewer et al., 2021; So et al., 2019), there is a gap in understanding how these alternative models, strategies, and supports impacts the student experience. This calls for further research to continue to evaluate these approaches, incorporating the student perspective.

Finally, to promote positive student-supervisor relationships, and as a result a sense of relatedness, universities should ensure they communicate clear expectations for supervisor-student engagement for placement and ensure any training includes strategies for supportive communications, how to foster psychologically safe learning environments and how to adopt an autonomy-supportive motivation style (Kusurkar, 2023; Reeve, 2012). Universities should also ensure they use early check-ins with both students and supervisors so they can address any relational concerns before they escalate.

In summary, as placement demands grow, maintaining adequate time and resourcing for all stakeholders is essential. If universities and supervisors are overstretched, their ability to provide individualized support, especially for the underperforming or failing student, may be compromised. Without support, struggling students risk disengagement and supervisors become reluctant to offer placements (Luhanga et al., 2014). Hence, to enhance the students' experience of failing or near failing placement, universities and placements must be adequately resourced and staff must be suitably skilled to deliver these tasks effectively.

LIMITATIONS

Failing is an emotional event often linked to stigma, shame, and embarrassment, which may have deterred some from wanting to participate. In addition, students from the authors' universities may have avoided participation due to concerns about anonymity from the authors. Recruitment was also limited by some university research policies.

Due to the complexities and multiple variations that are inherent in placements, along with the qualitative nature of this study, achieving true data saturation was not expected (Braun & Clarke, 2021; Malterud et al., 2016). However, as data collection and analysis occurred concurrently, this study was finalized when participants appeared to be describing similar placement experiences to others. Hence, we consider the themes identified in this study are representative of students undergoing failure and therefore an adequate level of information power has been achieved to support the validity and relatedness of the findings.

Unexpectedly, this study had more male participants, mature-age participants and hospital placements than what is typically represented in Australian student and placement profiles (Occupational Therapy

Board AHPRA, 2022; Yu et al., 2025). Without a broader student or placement profile, we cannot determine whether these trends reflect a broader pattern, are sample-specific, or result from other factors influencing research participation.

This study focused solely on the student experience, excluding perspectives of others who could have provided further insights and those students who either chose to discontinue their studies altogether, or were terminated from their program of study. Investigating these alternative perspectives in future research should be considered to broaden our insights into this topic.

Finally, as this study only examined long-block placements in Australian occupational therapy programs, caution should be applied when generalizing to other disciplines, placement models, or work-integrated learning contexts. However, although these differences need to be considered, we propose these findings are likely to remain relevant for other allied health disciplines, as similar challenges and opportunities are likely to exist where students must demonstrate readiness for professional practice in complex clinical learning environments.

CONCLUSION

Recognizing the pressures on universities and supervisors to facilitate placements, this study does not seek to assign blame but rather to highlight opportunities for strengthening placement experiences for all. Placement failure is a challenging and distressing experience and the ways in which students navigate failure was influenced by all stakeholders throughout the placement cycle. This study highlights the complex experiences of students who experienced failure in long-block placements.

Drawing on self-determination theory principles, our findings highlight how each stakeholder can support a student's autonomy, competence and relatedness to influence a student's experience of failure or success. Ensuring all students have access to high-quality placements that address these needs will reduce the likelihood of student's failing due to a combination of poor circumstances, poor practices or systemic issues, ensuring the student's evaluation is a truer indication of their actual competencies, or lack thereof.

Future efforts should focus on improving placement processes to enhance student autonomy, increasing transparency and student involvement in performance management, and most importantly, ensuring the availability of high-quality placements. Universities must continue to invest in strategies that support students during challenging experiences, recognizing that the right support structures can mitigate the long-term impact of placement failure for students and agencies alike.

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Examples of practice include off-campus workplace immersion activities such as work placements, internships, practicum, service learning, and cooperative education (co-op), and on-campus activities such as work-related projects/competitions, entrepreneurship, student-led enterprise, student consultancies, etc. WIL is related to, and overlaps with, the fields of experiential learning, work-based learning, and vocational education and training.

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Reference

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