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ORIGINAL ARTICLE



Supervisor perspectives on a fully simulated practicum as a teaching approach in postgraduate psychology training

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ABSTRACT

Objective: Simulated learning activities are being increasingly used in psychology training, offering potential benefits over real-world training. This study represents the first known qualitative evaluation of supervisor perspectives on a fully simulated practicum in the first year of a postgraduate professional psychology program. The study aimed to understand supervisors' perspectives on: (1) a simulated practicum as a teaching modality; (2) students' competence development through simulated learning activities; and (3) students' preparation for future clinical work as a result of the simulated practicum.

Method: Twelve psychologists who provided supervision to students enrolled in a simulated practicum in Australia participated in qualitative interviews, which were then analysed using reflexive thematic analysis.

Results: Two broad themes were developed. The first theme explored aspects of simulation that either facilitated or inhibited skill development. Supervisors noted that simulation provided a safe and controlled environment where students could develop competencies through a scaffolded and standardised learning process. Conversely, supervisors also questioned the value of skills practice with simulated clients. The second theme centred around the perceived outcomes of the practicum, including increased accessibility for students, and increased competence and preparation for future clinical practice. Participants noted the importance of clear goals being set in the practicum and the role of the supervisor in facilitating learning in a simulated environment.

Conclusions: The results of the present study suggest that a fully simulated practicum may be an accessible and effective teaching modality for competency development in psychology training programs.

KEY POINTS

What is already known about this topic:

- (1) A range of benefits to the use of simulation-based learning has been identified across disciplines such as medicine, nursing and allied health.
- (2) While an integral aspect of postgraduate psychology training, face-to-face practicum experiences may vary widely for students in terms of client exposure and access to supervision.
- (3) A small-scale feasibility study on simulated practica in psychology demonstrated that simulated practica may be an accessible and effective training modality.

What this topic adds:

- (1) Psychology supervisors reported that students increased in both competence and confidence for future practice as a result of the simulated practicum.
- (2) Supervisors identified both strengths of learning within a simulated environment including safety, ability to scaffold and target learning, and opportunities for deeper self-reflection, and challenges such as concerns about authenticity and value of simulated skills practice.
- (3) A simulated practicum may provide a safe environment to scaffold the development of core psychological competencies.

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Simulated learning activities are being increasingly utilised in psychology training and more broadly across health disciplines such as medicine, nursing and allied health fields (Herrera-Aliaga & Estrada, 2022; Imms et al.,

2018; James & Chapman, 2010; Rice et al., 2026). Lioce et al. (2020) define simulation-based learning (SBL) as “a technique that creates a situation or environment to allow persons to experience a representation of a real

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event for the purpose of practice, learning, evaluation, testing, or to gain understanding of systems or human actions" (p. 44). Simulated clients, role plays, actors, objective structured clinical examinations (OSCE), simulated note taking, and case conceptualisations are all SBL techniques utilised within psychology training programs (Australian Postgraduate Psychology Simulation Education Working Group [APPESWG], 2021; Rice et al., 2022). Simulated learning activities offer numerous advantages for both students and training programs, while overcoming some challenges inherent in traditional learning approaches (APPESWG, 2021). These advantages include the capacity to provide broad exposure to common mental health presentations, experience with typical ethical dilemmas in a safe and low-risk environment, experience with low-frequency and high-risk cases that students might not face during conventional practica, fewer disruptions to practicum progress, and greater capacity to observe and evaluate student competencies more effectively (Lateef, 2010; Phillips et al., 2017; Roberts et al., 2017; Scalese et al., 2008). Evaluations of SBLs in psychology training programs have reported a range of benefits and challenges. SBL has been perceived as offering a protected and safe environment in which students can develop skills and confidence (Oxlad et al., 2022). At the same time, a number of challenges associated with simulated practice have also been identified (Roberts et al., 2017). Students who engaged in SBL have noted concerns that authenticity of simulated clients may limit the value of skills practice (Oxlad et al., 2022). Similar challenges have been noted by students who completed a simulated practicum in psychology, who also reported concerns about whether simulated skills practice would transfer to real-world clinical practice (Shelley et al., 2024, 2025).

A number of recent developments have facilitated increased use of SBL in postgraduate psychology training. In 2019, updated Australian Psychology Accreditation Council (APAC) Accreditation Standards (2019) were released that included an amendment allowing the use of SBL for a practicum in the 1st year of a postgraduate Professional Psychology program (Level 3). Furthermore, guidelines to support the implementation of SBL in psychology training were released in 2021 (APPESWG, 2021), followed by an extension of these guidelines on the use of simulation in practica (Rice et al., 2022). These guidelines provide recommendations on the key considerations for implementing simulated practica, such as supervision, self-reflective practice, and employing scaffolded learning approaches, with recommendations for the practical applications of these guidelines (Rice et al., 2022).

Despite the growing utilisation of SBL, there is limited evidence to suggest that fully simulated practica are routinely implemented or evaluated. An investigation into student perspectives on the use of simulation in psychology training found that students were open to extended SBL as an opportunity to build broad clinical skills in a safe environment (Oxlad et al., 2022). Simulated practica may also assist in addressing challenges associated with traditional face-to-face practica in psychology training programs (Shelley et al., 2024). Face-to-face practica provide a supervised opportunity for students to apply theoretical knowledge in practice and develop core competencies for psychological practice (Hatcher et al., 2012). There are, however, a number of challenges associated with successfully sourcing and completing a traditional practicum. For example, students and universities are frequently faced with difficulties finding face-to-face practica that meet stringent requirements, such as access to sufficient client hours where students can practice a broad range of skills (Nedeljkovic et al., 2014; Shires et al., 2017). This issue was further exacerbated by the onset of COVID-19, when many organisations that provided practicum opportunities paused practica altogether (APPESWG, 2021). Furthermore, lack of consistency in practicum experience is a recognised issue; students may have vastly different practicum experiences in terms of client exposure, intervention approaches and access to supervision (Gonsalvez et al., 2008; Nedeljkovic et al., 2014; Scott et al., 2011). In a survey of postgraduate psychology students, Scott et al. (2011) found that only just over half of students surveyed felt that the number and range of clients they had seen was adequate for their training requirements. In a qualitative exploration of a simulated practicum in professional psychology, students reported that simulation allowed them to target specific competencies, practice skill development across common mental health presentations and develop competence across a range of domains, within a safe environment (Shelley et al., 2025).

Supervisors in clinical practica have a unique opportunity to evaluate the effectiveness of various teaching methods. While research in the field of psychology is limited, studies of supervisors' experiences in disciplines such as nursing, medicine and physiotherapy identify both benefits and facilitators of fully simulated practica (Arangalage et al., 2019; Dennis et al., 2022; Helberget & Molnes, 2026). Nurse supervisors in a peer-led simulated practicum reported that simulation offered a safe and structured environment which facilitated deepened self-reflection and competence development for both students and supervisors (Helberget

& Molnes, 2026). Nurse supervisors also highlighted the necessity of sufficient preparation, guidance and institutional support for the successful integration of simulated practica into training (Helberget & Molnes, 2026). Similarly, supervisors of a peer-assisted simulated practicum in physiotherapy reported that simulation provided a safe environment for students to practice foundational skills and prepared students well for future clinical practica (Dennis et al., 2022). Supervisors also identified the role of the supervisor in facilitating simulated skills practice, authenticity of clients and student engagement as factors that influenced the effectiveness of the practicum (Dennis et al., 2022).

A feasibility study on the effectiveness and acceptability of a simulated practicum for postgraduate psychology found that students in a simulated practicum achieved higher completion rates in shorter timeframes than students who completed a traditional practicum (Shelley et al., 2024). Students also reported increased confidence and competence to practice as a result of the practicum. This was an initial exploration into the effectiveness of this modality, and the study was limited in scope and sample size and was unable to conduct inferential statistics on practicum outcomes. Following this pilot study, a further evaluation of a fully simulated practicum in postgraduate professional psychology was conducted (Rice et al., 2026). This evaluation also found a simulated practicum resulted in higher completion rates and shorter timeframes for completion than a traditional practicum. Furthermore, objective ratings of student competence increased throughout the practicum across all domains of competence, including assessment, intervention, ethics and cultural responsiveness (Rice et al., 2026). Based on these initial but promising results, more evaluation of simulated practica is warranted and needed (Rice et al., 2026; Shelley et al., 2024).

The present study

The present study provides the first known qualitative exploration into the perspectives and experiences of supervisors who have supervised students in a fully simulated practicum. Supervisors are required to have the skills and knowledge to accurately assess and monitor student competencies (Psychology Board of Australia, 2018) and have a unique opportunity to closely observe students engaged in the practicum. Supervisors, therefore, may provide valuable information regarding the utility of the simulated practicum in terms of student competence development. In addition,

some supervisors have experience supervising in traditional practicum settings as well as simulation and may provide unique perspectives on competence development and learning in a simulated environment compared to a face-to-face setting. The present study addressed the following questions:

- (1) What are supervisors' perspectives on the simulated practicum as a teaching modality?
- (2) What are the supervisors' perspectives on students' competence development through simulated learning activities?
- (3) What are the supervisors' perspectives on students' preparation for future clinical work as a result of the simulated practicum?

Materials and methods

Design

A qualitative research design using semi-structured interviews was utilised to capture the experiences and perspectives of supervisors of psychology students in a fully simulated practicum. Data were analysed using reflexive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2022), as the primary goal was to make meaning of and reflect supervisor experiences, while maintaining awareness of, and acknowledging, the lens through which the researcher created and communicated maps of meaning.

Participants

All participants ($N = 12$) were Psychology Board of Australia (PsyBA) approved supervisors, with either general registration or general registration with clinical endorsement and, thus, satisfied PsyBA (2018) criteria for accredited supervisors. All participants were supervisors employed by the university to provide supervision within the practicum. As part of the supervisor accreditation process, participants demonstrated competence in assessment and intervention, a strong understanding of learning processes, and training in evaluating and facilitating student competence. The participants' level of experience in supervision ranged from minimal prior experience to more than 15 years. Appropriate sample size for this study was determined with consideration of information power (Malterud et al., 2016). The concept of information power suggests that factors of the study design will influence the concentration of information within each sample, thus influencing the required sample size (Malterud et al., 2016). In reference to the guidelines for determining

information power, the present study's aim was narrow, the participant pool was specific and the dialogue was strong, which would indicate a need for less participants for sufficient information power (Malterud et al., 2016). However, there was limited theoretical background for the present study's topic, indicating the need for a larger sample (Malterud et al., 2016). Thus, a sample of 12 participants was determined to be appropriate to balance the identified parameters of the study design (Malterud et al., 2016).

Procedure

The study was approved by the University Human Research Ethics committee, approval number: HE22-203. An invitation to participate in an online interview was distributed by practicum coordinators via email to all previous and current supervisors who had completed a full semester of supervision within a simulated practicum. Supervisors then contacted the research team if they were interested in participating. Participants were advised that the interview was voluntary, and they were offered a \$150AUD gift card in recognition of their time and contribution to the research. Remuneration of \$150 was considered justified given the nature of the sample and the expertise that participants were contributing. The gift cards were funded through a university allocated budget to support PhD candidate research projects. All participants were interviewed via Zoom by the first author (JS). Information regarding the present study was read out to participants by the interviewer, and recorded informed consent was provided by each participant prior to commencing the interview.

Interview process

Each interview lasted for approximately 60 minutes, and was audio recorded for later transcription. Interviews were semi-structured, and questions explored participant perspectives on students competence development (e.g., "To what extent do you feel that the practicum allowed students to learn and develop competence?"), and preparation for future work (e.g., "How well do you feel that the simulated practicum has prepared students for starting their internship and future work as a psychologist?"), while providing the opportunity for follow-up questions to probe areas of particular interest or relevance. Questions were designed to elicit both potential strengths (e.g., "What aspects were the most helpful/beneficial?"), and challenges (e.g., "What aspects of

a simulated practicum were the most challenging as a supervisor?") of the simulated practicum (see [Supplemental materials](#) for the full interview guide). It is noteworthy that this research focussed on the supervisor perspectives of the utility and effectiveness of a simulated practicum, rather than evaluating the specific contents of this practicum.

The simulated practicum

In line with APAC accreditation requirements, the simulated practicum comprised 300 hours of fully online learning activities completed over one trimester. Supervisors provided both group and individual supervision to students enrolled in the practicum. The design and development of the simulated practicum are outlined in Shelley et al. (2024), and included case-based learning, observation of clinical sessions, simulated learning tasks including practicing assessment and intervention skills with peers, case report writing, clinical note taking and case conceptualisation. The simulated practicum was designed in line with guidelines set out in Rice et al. (2022) for the implementation of fully simulated practica in psychology training. This practicum forms part of an accredited fifth-year training pathway in professional psychology in Australia. Within a fifth-year professional psychology program, students complete advanced coursework in areas such as assessment, intervention, research skills and ethical practice, and undertake a practicum aimed at developing foundational practical skills. Upon completion of a fifth-year professional psychology program, students are required to complete a one-year work-based internship to be eligible for general registration as a psychologist.

Data analysis

The researchers were guided by a relativist epistemological and ontological approach. The research team comprises registered psychologists, psychology supervisors and academics, and the reflexive process was grounded in an awareness that their professional backgrounds, training and positioning to the research influenced how meaning was interpreted and constructed. Interviews were audio recorded and transcribed verbatim by the first author (JS). Reflexive thematic analysis, as defined by Braun and Clarke (2022), was utilised to analyse the qualitative data. In supporting the development of the research audit trail (Carcary, 2021) initial coding was conducted using NVivo 12 Plus (Lumivero, 2017) and used a primarily inductive process whereby codes were created in response to information coming

from the data rather than predetermined codes, as researchers wanted to centre the perspectives of the participants (Braun & Clarke, 2022). There were, however, elements of a deductive approach, as data were coded through the lens of the researchers' knowledge of concepts previously reported in research around simulation and competency development (Braun & Clarke, 2022). Throughout the process, the first author (JS) reflected on their multifaceted relationship to the data, as a researcher, supervisor and previous student. While not directly involved in the coordination or teaching of the program where the practicum was conducted, the first author reflected often on how their own experiences in the role of supervisor interacted with their understanding and perspective on the data. At many points throughout the interview and analysis stages, the first author became aware of how participants' comments on simulation either aligned or contrasted with their own experiences in supervising in face-to-face settings. In becoming aware of this, the first author was mindful of balancing the benefit of having a personal understanding of the supervisor role with ensuring that meaning making was grounded in the participants' comments rather than the author's own experiences. The first author utilised handwritten and typed notes kept throughout interview, coding and theme development stages to capture the researcher's reflections and iterative meaning-making process, which formed the basis of the first researchers reflexive journal (Carcary, 2021). These notes were referred to when reflecting on developing themes and subthemes and organising thematic maps. In order to ensure procedural rigour (Carcary, 2021), the first author (JS) reviewed transcripts multiple times while developing and refining initial codes. Using NVivo (Lumivvero, 2017), codes were organised under preliminary subthemes. These subthemes were then clustered around initial themes. These themes and subthemes were then hand drawn out as initial thematic maps. Maps were drawn and redrawn multiple times as the researcher's understanding of the relationship between codes, subthemes, and themes deepened with each stage of analysis. Initial thematic maps, themes, subthemes, and codes were reviewed and refined with the second researcher KR. Both semantic and latent subthemes were developed and used in the final thematic maps as both communicated important concepts in participants' reports. All authors reviewed the analysis before and after the final stage of thematic development. The COREQ checklist (Tong et al., 2007) was used to support the reporting of this study to ensure transparency and rigour of the research process. Analysis focused on experiences of the simulated

practicum specifically, therefore additional codes that featured in the participants' feedback such as high workload and scheduling challenges impacting hours, that have been reported in evaluations of face-to-face practica (Helmès & Pachana, 2011; Nedeljkovic et al., 2014), were not reported in the results, as they were considered general experiences of practicum, rather than unique to simulation. In Australia, the term "placement" is commonly used instead of "practicum"; therefore quotations will often use the word "placement" to refer to the practicum.

Analysis

Two thematic maps were developed to represent supervisors' experiences of the simulated practicum, and their perspective on students' competence development and preparation for future work as a psychologist. The two thematic maps were:

- (1) There are unique benefits and challenges to a simulated environment.
- (2) There can be positive outcomes to a simulated practicum, but they are conditional.

In the following section an overview of each main theme will be provided before moving into a more detailed exploration of the subthemes that make up each theme.

There are unique benefits and challenges of a simulated environment

This theme centred around the awareness of supervisors that there were unique benefits and challenges to competency development within a simulated environment. The fact that skills practice was simulated in itself altered the experience of competency development, both positively and negatively. On one hand, simulation allowed for a safe experience where student learning could be prioritised, and high control over learning content meant that the learning process could be scaffolded effectively and standardised for all students. On the other hand, supervisors expressed concerns that there were skills they felt students missed out on and that the inherently inauthentic nature of skills practice may have impacted on the value. There were six subthemes within this theme: 1) Controlling the Learning Content, 2) Deepening Self-Reflection in the Client and Practitioner Roles, 3) Safety, 4) Peer Interaction, 5) Missed Skills, and 6) Inauthenticity Impacts Value. The thematic map for this theme is presented in Figure 1.



Figure 1. Thematic map: there are unique benefits and challenges of a simulated environment.

Controlling the learning content

This subtheme compares and contrasts supervisors' perspectives on the lack of control over many aspects of traditional face-to-face practica, with the degree to which content and learning approaches could be controlled and standardised within the simulated practicum. Within the simulated practicum, the ability to control learning content meant that skills development could be targeted to meet a range of competencies and delivered in a scaffolded approach. This subtheme recognises the value of being able to ensure all students had access to a consistent, planned and standardised practicum experience, as well as the ongoing concerns around the inconsistency of practicum experience in face-to-face settings.

Supervisors reported that students often didn't get broad exposure to different clinical presentations in traditional, face-to-face practica, and competencies cannot necessarily be comprehensively met. *"When I compare to interns that we have in my current workplace ... they [the interns] have very limited exposure"* (P11). Reasons for this insistency were explored. In a real-world setting, both supervisors and students are aware of, and influenced by, both the setting of their practicum and the client in front of them. This extended to a general sense that in many ways a student's learning in a face-to-face practicum would be influenced by the priorities, setting, and capacity of the practicum provider, meaning that student

development needs could not always be prioritised, and may instead be limited by their practicum. As these competing priorities do not exist in a simulated environment, supervisors recognised that students learning needs could be prioritised. Participant 5 noted:

I think a lot of placements are very focused on that workplace and that workplace is focused. So, I think that they [the student] might become quite skilled in a specific area, but not broad skills across the board, and I think this was very good at broad skills across the board.

The ability to standardise the learning content meant that students could be exposed to a broad range of presentations, ensuring that all students were gaining experience in assessing and treating a comprehensive range of common mental health presentations across a range of client types. Participant 5 endorsed the value of exposure to a range of presentations: *"I think it's an incredible opportunity for them to go through lots of different mental health conditions that are really common in psychology and also to practise their skills"*.

As well as broad exposure to a range of presentations, supervisors expressed the value of being able to ensure that students gain experience in designing and implementing full treatment plans for common mental health presentations without disruptions or complications. Within the simulated learning environment, students could get a sense of implementing full treatment plans as they are intended to be implemented while also ensuring that competencies could be targeted effectively. Participant 11 commented:

I thought it was a good way to introduce students to learning skills from start to finish because they have the opportunity to actually practise an entire treatment episode for major depressive disorder, for instance, without any of the challenges that would come across in clinical practice.

This opportunity to develop an understanding of how intervention strategies *should* be delivered builds into a student's foundation for clinical skills before they move into delivering interventions to clients. Participant 1 stated:

I think it's valuable for students to be able to see how sessions normally look because a lot of the private ones who just dive straight into seeing clients don't get a lot of that prescriptive ... this is how it's meant to look, more structured, here's a demonstration of it. They really miss that bit. So, I think that really does increase their competence, doing it this simulated way ... Gives them more of a framework.

The value and importance of a scaffolded approach to learning both within the simulated practicum and as a function of the simulated practicum was clearly expressed by supervisors. Scaffolding was identified as a core aspect of learning, both within the practicum and across the students' learning journey. In many ways, the practicum was viewed as a bridge between theory and practice, where students had an opportunity to develop foundational clinical skills, and apply theoretical knowledge in clinical practice for the first time. Reflecting on the simulated practicum as a scaffold, Participant 8 stated: *"It means that they can kind of turn things that they've learned as theoretical into practical experience"*.

Scaffolding was endorsed as a valuable learning approach, not just in the way that the simulated practicum acted as the students' stepping stone between the academic and professional worlds, but also in developing psychological competencies within the practicum. The value of this ability to scaffold the learning content was contrasted with the lack of control in traditional practica, where students primarily build different competencies, when and if the opportunity arises, based on their access to different client presentations. Participant 1 reflected on the inability to scaffold learning in a face-to-face practicum:

In private practise we sort of get closer to the end and go 'wait we haven't done this, this or this'. Now we've gotta actually do these ones (competencies) that aren't naturally coming up based on the clients you're seeing.

Learning content was delivered in a way that knowledge and practical skills could build on from one another. Students were introduced to basic concepts and skills firstly and then extended to develop more complex skills. Participant 6 reported:

I guess the way it's been designed, it's a very scaffolded approach ... starting at the basics and building up so they're scaffolding their learning in every assessment. Everything is tailored specifically to be tapping onto those competencies.

Furthermore, students were afforded the ability to reflect on areas of additional need and focus their skills practice on that area. This control over content and skill development also meant that students could practise a skill as many times as needed without having to wait for a client that matched the skill they were wanting to develop. The value of this control was recognised and is reflected in a comment made by Participant 12:

I think regarding that part of, you know, that you're not relying on like the goodwill of a nice client to come back again, again, again, when you can do that, in some ways, as much as you want to, like that repetition and practise, I think that's the benefit of a simulated placement. Because you're not kind of imposing upon a client to present. Or waiting for a client to present either.

The participants expressed appreciation for the simulated practicum providing supervisors the ability to access all client sessions, clinical notes and student work and hone in on specific areas of need so that students could gain additional practice. Participant 7 stated *"just having the recordings available and everything like on the logbooks, it was quite easy to cross reference everyone"*.

Deepening self-reflection in the client and practitioner roles

This subtheme centres on the concept that the simulated environment allowed access to unique opportunities for self-reflection that enhanced students' learning and competency development. Supervisors highlighted the benefit of students gaining experience from the client's perspective when roleplaying a client for their peers. Supervisors reported that student reflections deepened when they were able to reflect on both their experience of being the clinician and also how it felt to receive an intervention as the client. This experience facilitated further reflection of how their actions may be received by their client. Participant 4 noted there was value in students being able:

To experience it from the perspective of a client, how that feels to be at the receiving end of that. Which also feeds into, you know, modifying and developing their skills, because that's something we don't often get, you know, how does it feel to be a client?

Supervisors recognised the value in working with simulated clients. Peers were able to provide direct, in the moment feedback about a student's work, providing insight into the client experience and in-the-moment reflection. Participant 6 found value in students being able to try a new skill and then *"you can see how that's received by your role play partner. You know which you probably would never do if it was [the real world]. Yeah, let's see how this goes down"*.

Supervisors advised that within the practicum, all sessions were recorded and reported how this was not common in traditional practicum settings. Supervisors noted that students' comfort with recording and rewatching themselves increased, allowing more opportunities for deeper self-assessment of their

competencies and self-reflection. Students' comfort with showing challenging moments to their supervisors for support also increased. Participant 3 stated that *"the recording of the videos was good to actually see that, to see them do the work, and to encourage them to watch the videos back and see themselves was fantastic for learning. So that was beneficial"*.

Safety

Supervisors depicted this subtheme of safety as a broad umbrella that covered supervisors, students, and clients. The supervisors recognised the value in the students feeling safe to explore, try new things, take risks and make mistakes in the simulated practicum.

It was a safe place to allow the students to really explore and learn, make a bunch of mistakes and learn from it. Because you don't have that same element of having to think about the client's safety and their needs. (P3)

The value of mistakes to deep learning was highlighted and juxtaposed with both supervisors and students' fear about mistake making in a traditional practicum. Supervisors also recognised feeling their own sense of safety in being able to encourage students to explore new techniques and take risks without worrying about the impact on a real client. The weight of responsibility on supervisors, for the safety of both students and clients in traditional practica was clarified, and supervisors expressed relief at not needing to worry about client wellbeing in the simulated practicum. Instead, supervisors were able to prioritise the students' learning. Safety was highlighted as an important and valuable container, especially at this early stage of competency development. Participant 8 reflected on the way this influenced her approach with students:

For example, I had a supervisee who in her videos she was dictating the whole time and wasn't making eye contact. So, I said, you've got a challenge this week. ... you're not allowed to write at all during the session. You must maintain appropriate eye contact and attend just to the client. No writing, and then after the session is over, that's when you write your notes. See how that feels ... And I never have been able to do that with real clients because I'm like, well, what if she needs to write something down? What if there's a safety issue? What if there's a negative outcome that can occur? Like it's nice to be able to do things like that without worrying about the like consequences of it, in the same way.

This ability to encourage experimentation also allowed students to try out different ideas and strategies in session, to find out what worked and did not work,

and begin to get a sense of their own style as a clinician. The safety inherent within the simulated practicum supported students to begin the process of developing their own unique identity as a psychologist. Participant 4 reflected:

There's that unique element that's just entirely theirs that can be their biggest strength if they know how to tune into it. And so that's something that I would actively encourage my students to do and I could see that as their confidence built and as their skill sets built, that then they were able to allow that element of themselves to come out as well.

Supervisors expressed comfort that students within the simulated practicum were not expected to be competent enough to see clients at this early stage of their career, voicing concerns about the impact of not-yet-competent practitioners on clients, supervisors, and the students in traditional practicum settings. Supervisors reflected on their own experiences of feeling out of depth when first on practicum and a wish that they had been able to do a simulated practicum themselves. Participant 6 reflected on how a simulated environment might have benefited them in the early stages of their career:

I think it's a fabulous initiative. I mean I remember saying when I was first introduced and I first supervised, I said I wish I had this when I went through. This would have made me feel so much more confident and competent and also being provided with the opportunity to gather your resources, having that space to do that rather than having to go, "Oh ... What do I do with this client?"

Supervisors voiced concerns about the expectation that students who have never had any practical experience should be competent to practice in face-to-face practica, and the potential impact on clients of being treated by not-yet-competent psychologists in training. Participant 11 commented on this concern:

So, I think that's the risk that a lot of people don't think about ... you can't be expected to be able to, but yet you are expected to work with clients from start to finish when you graduate, right? But we know from men especially like when they come to therapy, if the first person they speak to, this first psychologist, if they have a negative experience, they are so much less likely to come back to therapy. So, I think it's safer for the psychologist and for the clients as well to get the chance to practise the skills. And that includes counselling skills, assessment skills, structure.

Peer interaction

Peer interaction came out as a clear and unique aspect of the simulated practicum. Supervisors highlighted

that simulation increased the value of peer interaction in many unique ways, and that students benefitted from having the same client as their peers. They were able to provide helpful feedback and ideas for assessment and intervention, observe one another trying out different therapeutic techniques for the same client, therefore getting more out of group supervision. Working with the “same” client resulted in deeper learning, and an increase in confidence that they had valuable ideas for others. In reflecting on this, Participant 5 stated:

I think it's helpful that all the students are going through the same client each time, because it means that they can really have a look at different people's way of managing that same mental health condition, looking at the strategies that use. They can have really good discussions about that with each other and role play.

Supervisors felt that students also benefited from a sense of companionship from working together so closely with peers. Students were in it together; they understood what one another were going through and could empathise more deeply with one another. When reflecting on their own time as a provisional psychologist, one supervisor reflected that at the time they could connect with other provisional psychologists, but it was not as valuable as what they observed in the simulated practicum because they *“were doing different placements ... or you know there was so much variation they may not have any experience or knowledge of what I'm talking about, they kind of would just be like a nice person to listen”* (P8).

While mostly positive, supervisors also identified ways in which peer interaction limited skill development. Students held responsibilities to act as client and provide feedback to other students; however, they did not always have the skills to meet these responsibilities. Students were expected to play clients of varying demographics and diagnoses, and they often did not have the skills to depict a client presentation accurately. This meant that students were practicing skills with clients who did not accurately represent the diagnosis. While students could still practise skills, they were missing real exposure to some diagnoses. Participant 11 observed that *“a lot of people ... seem to struggle with understanding how OCD works and so how can you role play that presentation then if you don't understand it”*. Students sometimes also lacked the skill of providing appropriate and helpful feedback: *“sometimes students maybe aren't very skilled at giving constructive feedback. I think that can be difficult for students, you know, we don't want to just hear how terrible we are”*. (P6).

Missed skills

Supervisors expressed concerns that there were skills that students missed out on developing in a simulated environment. Elements of the simulated practicum, such as level of planning, simulated clients and the lack of real-world elements resulted in missed skills in some areas. Supervisors reported that it was harder for students to develop interpersonal skills, as they felt they did not have to develop rapport to practise the skills that they wanted to practise. Participant 2 reflected on their experience of students struggling to develop interpersonal skills:

So, what I saw when I arrived from my students was in their role plays, they were ... in their own head. Their focus on their client was almost 0 [percent]. And of course, you don't need to have a focus on the client because the client's just about to do the same role play so they know exactly what's coming ... And we know that rapport in the relationship is a huge factor, in clinical therapy success ... And you know when you start off doing therapy you are a bit like that. But real clients force you to actually stop being a bit like that and so you know, I think that's one of the issues.

The lack of interpersonal skills was addressed and perceived in different ways, with some supervisors concerned about the impact on student work moving forward, and the potential to develop “bad habits” (P2), while others felt that it was a competency that would develop in time. All supervisors that identified the development of “bad habits” noted their role in identifying and supporting the student to address the skill gap, reflected in this comment by participant 2: *“Well, mainly because I've emphasised it hugely, I've now got them really working on focusing on their clients. And checking in and so there's a real relationship developing”*.

Extending on this concern regarding interpersonal skills, supervisors noted that students acting as clients were often very friendly and compliant, meaning that students mostly missed out on developing skills in responding to client challenges such as rupture, escalation, or derailment. Participant 11 explored this concern:

Now because students are very kind to each other, I guess they haven't had the opportunity to, or they haven't given each other the opportunity to practise maybe more challenging clients or treatment resistant clients ... So that all the challenges that come with real life practise, they haven't had the opportunity.

Thus, some supervisors identified the lack of challenges as a limitation of the simulated learning environment. However, other supervisors identified mixed

effects of this, noting that skills practice with compliant clients could be perceived as a benefit, as students could learn to practice intervention skills in their entirety in a best-case scenario and then develop their skills regarding managing challenges down the line.

Also expressed at times as both a benefit and a limitation, supervisors reported that students did not develop skills in working with complexity, such as comorbidity or severe pathologies. Participant 9 reflected on the reality that students would come across this issue in future training: *"Probably the only thing that they might not feel that comfortable with is sequencing treatment with comorbidity for clients and the reality is for a lot of students going to externships, that's what they're faced with"*.

Some supervisors noted that there were some broader aspects of face-to-face practica that could not be replicated within a simulated environment, such as, students missed out on developing skills for working with other professionals such as communication and case coordination, developing a professional network, understanding relevant services that may support their client and the opportunity to learn from other health professionals. Participant 10 stated:

That multidisciplinary approach and being able to, you know, talk to the nurses in regard to their perspective and how they might, you know, handle a situation from a nurse perspective, and then management perspective, psychiatrist, and so the provisional psychologist gets quite rich information in regard to how a system would handle a situation.

Inauthenticity impacts value

Supervisors frequently returned to a reflection that the fact that the practicum was simulated, inherently limited skill development. Supervisors reported, especially early on, that students appeared to practise as though reading from a script. Students were aware that the client was not real and expected roleplays to progress in a certain way, were focused on saying their lines, and struggled when this did not happen. Participant 1 reflected on one way this occurred: *"One of my students said, 'They brought up self-harm, but they're meant to do that in Session 4, not session 2, and I wasn't ready'"*. Beyond the awareness that the practicum was simulated, there also appeared to be a sense in some way that what

students were learning was not as valuable because it was not real. Participant 12 stated: *"it's just not exposing people to doing therapy, it's the exposing people to practicing the skills that are required to do therapy"*.

There can be positive outcomes to a simulated practicum, but they are conditional

The second theme represents the perceived outcomes of a simulated practicum for students and supervisors. Overall, the identified outcomes from the simulated practicum included the prioritisation of student learning, more students could access the practicum, and students who completed the practicum increased in psychological competence and preparation for future practice. These successful outcomes, however, were conditional upon the development and implementation of the simulated practicum being guided by a clear objective, the role of the supervisor in facilitating learning in a simulated environment, and the attitudes and expectations of the students. There are six subthemes within this theme: 1) A Clear Objective, 2) The Supervisor is a Learning Tool, 3) Attitudes and Expectations, 4) Would not Have Been Able to do it Otherwise, 5) Increased Psychological Competence and 6) Preparation for Future Work. The thematic map for this theme is presented in Figure 2.

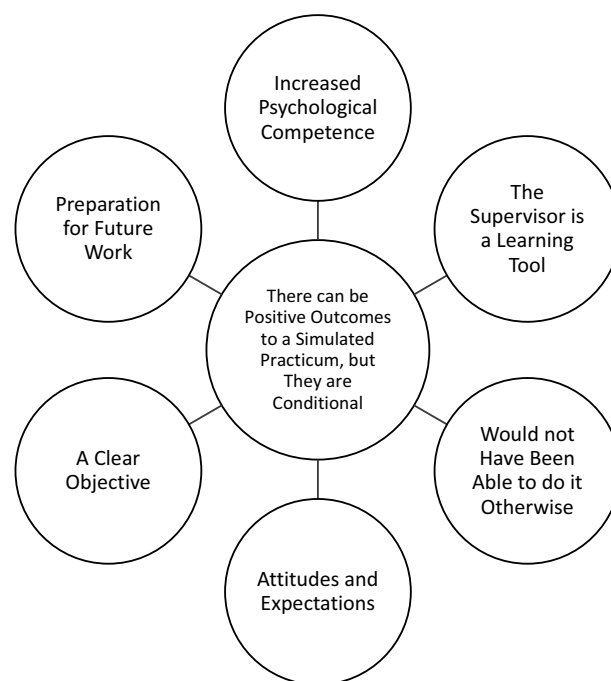


Figure 2. Thematic map: there can be positive outcomes to a simulated practicum, but they are conditional.

A clear objective

A clear vision was identified as necessary for the successful implementation of a simulated practicum. The vision needed to focus on how the practicum should be designed and implemented, and also the role of the practicum in a student's learning trajectory. Supervisors' exploration of the role and value of a simulated practicum recognised that a practicum cannot be effectively evaluated in isolation, but in the role it might play alongside other aspects of a student's learning journey. Supervisors identified the value in a simulated practicum as a complement to traditional practicum methods. On the role of a simulated practicum in a student's learning journey, Participant 5 stated:

Everyone should do that before they go into a second placement really. I think this should be the way it is because I think that this has a benefit over and above the face-to-face as a really good starting point, that then people then can go and do a placement where they actually see people.

Part of the vision for the practicum should also include the purpose or goal of the practicum. Supervisors expressed general agreement that the purpose of the practicum would be to support students developing early psychological competencies such as initial assessment, case conceptualisation, and interventions skills as a foundation for future clinical practice. Participant 12 noted:

I think as long as it's kind of framed as this is a way to really fine tune and develop the ground building clinical skills so that when you get to the performing and the providing of therapy, that stuff is all the stuff you worry about.

Given the practicum in many ways was a hybrid of university learning and professional practice, supervisors expressed that a best practice approach would also have clear expectations of the role of the student within this new modality, with the perspective that they should still be held to similar standards as a student on practicum. Participant 4 reflected on their efforts to establish clear expectations within the simulated practicum:

The whole way that it was structured is we were trying to do our best to make it seem as close as possible to the face-to-face placement. So, they needed to make sure that their notes were up to date and we were reviewing their notes and giving them feedback on it. You know, they had to maintain their logbook and they had to make sure that their sessions that they had, they were responsible for scheduling their sessions and they were also responsible for all the

unexpected things that might happen ... So, I think there were a lot of those practical elements as well that helps students to get the most.

The supervisor is a learning tool

In describing their experiences in the simulated practicum, a subtheme was shaped of the supervisor's central role in creating a learning environment for the students. Supervisors set expectations for how students were to engage with the learning, identified areas of skill development needing attention for students, shared clinical skills and facilitated self and shared reflection. In what could initially be considered a static environment where students were missing the unique characteristics of a real client, supervisors leveraged the value of a simulated environment and created an interactive learning space where students were encouraged to learn, observe, explore, apply techniques, reflect, apply again, and reflect again. Participant 4 noted *"They had the opportunity to watch the skill first, and we know that observational learning is also important. And then they have the ability to try it out themselves, to retry it out, to experience it from the perspective of a client, how that feels to be at the receiving end of that"*.

Supervisors reported encouraging students to be vulnerable in sharing challenges experienced in skills practice and lean in to exploring and experimenting with new skills. It was clear that supervisors saw this as their responsibility, to go beyond what was presented, utilising their clinical skills and knowledge to enhance the learning experience. One example of this was highlighted by Participant 11:

One of the first things I tell students is that I don't want to see their good videos. Like hey I'm super happy to watch them and celebrate with them, those moments of success. But I want to see their bad videos. ... I want to see them when they're struggling because that's where I can help them the most

A salient and unique aspect of the supervisors' influence was that supervisors added richness and life to simulated clients, which deepened learning, engagement and reflection for students. Supervisors brought their clinical knowledge and experience to what was initially viewed as a unidimensional representation of a client, to bring the case study to life for students. Supervisors encouraged students to think of and talk about clients as real people with full lives and stories. Supervisors also facilitated student's understanding of how a particular diagnosis might present for a client. Participant 12 reflected on the way they facilitated

a deeper connection between the students and their simulated clients:

When I'm thinking with them about the person with OCD, I'm not in my mind thinking as much about the roleplay they do. I think about the clients I've worked with, with OCD ... All the other supervision I provide is for people seeing real people and so it felt very real in that way. So yeah, I think my sense is that students were engaging with, at least in our discussions ... the sense of like we're going to have to do this for real, so how would we do this?

Supervisors also encouraged students to embody the role of the client in order to increase the value of the role play experience for the practicing clinician. Participant 3 stated: *"There was a lot of encouragement on my part to embrace that role play environment and to kind of really, when you're the client, try and be the client. And not just necessarily mirror what was in the video, but ... take on that role. ... As the weeks went on you could see a little bit more of that confidence emerging and ability to do that. So, I guess there was that prompting which you probably wouldn't see in a real-life setting"*

Attitudes and expectations

When exploring barriers to skill development, supervisors reflected on specific characteristics of the students that could limit their own skill development. For some students, their attitude and expectations of the simulated practicum influenced their engagement with learning. Supervisors reported that some students perceived less value in practicing with simulated clients, which had flow on effects to their commitment to role plays and willingness to engage sufficiently with the learning content. Supervisors expressed that benefit derived from the simulated practicum was closely related to student commitment to the practicum. Participant 10 reflected on this experience:

There were always a few students, like maybe one or two within a group, that would be quite critical of the set up essentially ... and then quite critical that it was a simulated placement ... kind of focused on that and very much just in regard to ticking boxes.

Supervisors also felt that students' expectations were different to that of a standard practicum because it was simulated. Supervisors noted that students were not prepared for the workload involved in the simulated practicum and expected to be able to get through work more efficiently than a traditional, face-to-face practicum.

Supervisors reported that students were often attempting to balance multiple commitments such as fulltime work or childcare, in a way that would not happen with a face-to-face practicum. Participant 4 reflected on students' expectations of the simulated practicum: *"Initially students came in thinking simulated placement, it's going to be pretty easy to get through right at the start, and very quickly realised that was not, that was not the case, that it was full on work because students were trying to maintain full time jobs as well as try and do the simulated placement"*.

Would not have been able to do it otherwise

This subtheme captured the ways in which the simulated practicum increased accessibility to postgraduate training for psychology students. Both personal and structural barriers were identified when discussing the ways in which the simulated practicum increased accessibility. Supervisors acknowledged current issues in psychology training, with scarcity of practica and supervisors resulting in a "bottleneck" (P12) for students coming out of their fourth year. Some supervisors suggested the simulated practicum may help ease this bottleneck and provide additional practicum options for psychology students and universities. Reflecting on this potential of the simulated practicum, Participant 12 stated:

there's a shortage of psychologists and placements are hard to find so I think being able to find a way to ensure people are getting the exposure to clinical work might form a new piece of the puzzle.

Supervisors also noted that it felt that the simulated practicum increased accessibility for the types of students that were able to attend. Supervisors felt that for students who had responsibilities such as children or work, the simulated practicum was a more accessible training modality. Here, Participant 10 explores their experience of accessibility within the simulated practicum:

One of the main things that ... I did hear was that they wouldn't have been able to actually achieve this if it hadn't have been for the simulated placement. A lot of them ... were working a few days and balancing home life and financial pressures and that this was something that at least allowed them, you know, a pathway to where they wanted to be.

The same was also felt for regional students or those who could not access traditional practica. Some supervisors, such as Participant 4, felt that increased accessibility of the practicum may extend to geographic

barriers, opening up opportunities for students in regional areas:

I've seen those struggles, and I think that this placement offers such a wonderful opportunity for students who are living in areas where they don't, or they can't easily access placement opportunities and that they're able to complete their degree in good time and then move on to either their plus one year to get their general registration.

Increased psychological competence

Supervisors reported that students increased their competence during the simulated practicum. Some supervisors noted that the rate of competence development was influenced by the students' level of competence prior to starting the simulated practicum. Participant 9 noted that *"there's often a difference in confidence and kind of competency at the start that you see enormous growth in the students who don't have that experience and their confidence at the end of placement"* (P9). Furthermore, participant 2 noted the importance of the amount of effort students put in, stating *"I would say to my students that you can get an awful lot out of it. This is a very demanding placement. You can get a lot out of it; you have to put a lot into it to get it out"*. Overall, however, supervisors expressed confidence that students had developed skills across a range of foundational and functional competencies. Supervisors noted that students' foundational competencies had improved. Participant 3 noted an increase in competence in ethics: *"Some of the ones that stood out was, I guess their grasp on like some ethical and risk things because we focused quite heavily on some of those"*. Participant 8 reported that self-reflective practice had improved: *"I'd say like in a nutshell would be self-reflective skills and increased understanding of measurements"* (P8).

Functional competencies including clinical note taking, initial assessment, case conceptualisation and intervention skills also improved. Participant 10 commented that, *"Their note taking improved loads ... In regard to treatment plans, very confident in that, (as well as) initial sessions, CBT approach"*.

Preparation for future work

In general, supervisors expressed confidence that students had a foundation of clinical skills and confidence that would carry them into future practice, with a readiness by the end of the internship for more complexity and challenge. Participant 7 explored this

concept: *"they've got this idea, this practise environment and now they're like OK, now I need to really build on that into the real world and all the complexities that come with the next step"*. Some supervisors felt that the breadth of clinical practice and provision of resources meant that students coming out of the simulated practicum may be better prepared than their peers who had completed a face-to-face practicum. Participant 9 stated:

For a student who is ... the type of student who has never done counselling before, ... hasn't worked in that kind of role and is really just stepping into it, I think they're [students who have undertaken the simulated placement] far more advanced, potentially far more developed than someone who's done a more traditional placement where they might only see a handful of clients.

Supervisors expressed that their perspectives on students' preparation were consistent with students' expected developmental trajectory, and therefore students still had areas to develop and would continue to require supervised practice. *"The other stuff can come when they're doing their internship ... they're not fully-fledged psychologists at the end of this. They're just moving into an internship year so they're still going to need all of those supports that an intern does"* (P3). Supervisors were also aware that transitioning from simulation to real-world practice would come with its own challenges. Participant 12 felt that *"it's whether or not for them that the difference between simulated and real world, if that gap feels very great for them and they become very flustered and they're avoidant ... and that kind of stuff"*. Overall, supervisors expressed confidence that students had developed a foundation of clinical skills and an emerging sense of their own clinical style, that would prepare them for further clinical development in their internship year. Participant 3 reflected on her confidence in students' preparation for future training:

I think in terms of yeah, covering a lot of area. Developing some confidence in it, developing like their own resources and toolkits as well, like of different things. Yeah, I think it did prepare them quite well ... I would certainly be happy to hire someone who'd done a simulated placement.

Discussion

The present study aimed to understand the perspectives of registered psychologists who provided supervision to postgraduate psychology students completing a simulated practicum as part of an

accredited professional Master's pathway to general registration as a psychologist. In particular, this study explored supervisors' perspectives on the simulated practicum as a teaching modality, students' competence development through simulated learning activities, and students' preparation for future clinical work as a result of the simulated practicum. As far as the present authors are aware, this is the first exploration of supervisors' perspectives of a simulated practicum as a teaching modality for postgraduate psychology training. Supervisors identified both strengths and challenges of the simulated practicum. The simulated practicum was perceived as potentially both addressing challenges within face-to-face practica and providing unique value to skills development, although supervisors expressed that these benefits were conditional, and that there were also ways in which simulation limited skill development.

Supervisors recognised that the simulated practicum could help overcome barriers in traditional, face-to-face practica, such as inconsistency in practicum experiences, and limited exposure to client presentations, that are ongoing concerns for psychology training programs (Helmes & Pachana, 2011). Supervisors identified the benefit that, within a simulated practicum undertaken before seeing "live" clients who are vulnerable, students can be exposed to a range of clinical presentations and practise core clinical skills in a safe and controlled environment that allows for experimentation and mistake making. The benefit of this is two-fold. Firstly, ensuring that students have all had the same broad experience with common mental health presentations across the lifespan creates a standardisation of practicum experience. This finding, that a simulated practicum may allow for standardisation, is in line with perspectives of students of extended SBL (Oxlad et al., 2022) but has not been established by supervisors in a simulated practicum. Training bodies are responsible for ensuring that interns have received sufficient training in the required competencies prior to clinical practice (Australian Psychology Accreditation Council [APAC], 2019), and simulation may be an effective approach to ensure that all required competencies can be comprehensively met.

Secondly, ensuring that students move into the next stage of their clinical training with broad exposure to common mental health presentations increases protection for the public, the students, and the supervisors. Ethical practice and public safety are a top priority for accreditation and regulating bodies. The APAC Standards (2019) assert that it is a central responsibility of psychology training programs to ensure that all

psychologists are competent to practise with clients in a manner that is ethical and safe, and that the general public is not exposed to unsafe practice. Supervisors highlighted a concern that students going straight into clinical practice, from coursework units, may not yet be competent to address the challenges they are faced with in traditional practica, and reflected on their own experiences of feeling out of depth in their first practica. The simulated practicum may provide additional protection in providing an opportunity for students to develop initial clinical skills through practise with peers in a safe environment where they are able to make mistakes and learn from this process, without impacting real clients in the process. In addition, the simulated practicum allows supervisors and training providers to clearly assess competence, and practise any additional skills needed, prior to seeing actual clients.

Despite the identified benefits, there are inherent limitations in a simulated experience. The supervisors in this study reported that some foundational clinical skills, such as interpersonal skills, may be overlooked. In developing simulated practica, training programs and supervisors need to be aware of this potential limitation and integrate strategies to develop and monitor these skills. Another limitation of the simulated practicum, that was identified by the supervisors in this study, was a general sense that skills practice with simulated clients was less valuable than with real clients. Concerns about the value of simulated skills practice have been noted previously (Roberts et al., 2017; Shelley et al., 2024, 2025), and future research may benefit from exploring factors that may mediate the perceived value of simulated skills practice.

Limitations and directions for future research

The present study utilised a qualitative research design to explore supervisors' perspectives regarding a simulated practicum as a teaching method. The choice of a qualitative research methodology and the potential of a self-selection bias may limit generalisability of the results. Future research on the effectiveness of simulated practica as a teaching approach could benefit from employing quantitative methods to evaluate changes in students' psychological competency as a result of the practicum.

This research investigated the utility and effectiveness of a simulated practicum, that is embedded in an accredited training pathway towards general registration as a psychologist, from the perspective of the supervisors. The present research was not intended to evaluate the particular practicum, or the taught

content/skills, but rather to explore the broader utility of a simulated practicum at this level. As such, future research investigating simulated practica could consider the various activities and content utilised and further explore elements that facilitate successful implementation to inform the development of effective simulated practica across institutions and healthcare disciplines.

Implications

The results of this study provide valuable insight into the value of a simulated practicum in early professional psychology training, in addressing barriers to training and recruiting rural practitioners. The results of the present study may have implications for the applicability of simulated practica in other health fields that have similar requirements around clinical practice, such as pharmacy, social work, psychotherapy, or counselling. The results may also provide initial insights into some of the necessary elements to consider when developing and delivering a simulated practicum, including having a definable purpose and strategy, and effectively understanding and outlining the role of the supervisor within the simulated practicum.

Conclusion

The results of the present study lend further support to the initial pilot evaluation of a simulated practicum as a teaching approach in psychology (Shelley et al., 2024). These results suggest that the simulated practicum, situated in the fifth year of psychology training, is able to act as a bridge between coursework and clinical practice, and provide valuable skills development for trainees prior to seeing actual clients. It appears there are a range of associated benefits to this approach. Training programs may be able to ensure standardisation of practicum experience and facilitate student development of a comprehensive range of foundational clinical skills in a safe environment. Students from rural and regional backgrounds, or those with competing priorities such as children, may experience increased accessibility to Masters training pathways. The flow on effect of this increased accessibility could also potentially help to address shortages in psychologists, especially in rural and remote locations. Given the potential benefits, further consideration of simulated practica as a teaching modality is essential.

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Data availability statement

The data (interview transcripts) are not publicly available due to ethical restrictions as they may identify participants. Queries regarding data availability may be made to author [KR].

Ethics approval

This study was approved by the University of New England Human Research Ethics committee, Approval number: HE22-203.

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