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Developing students' self-reliance and skills for autonomous professional practice

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Introduction: The World Federation of Occupational Therapists' standards (WFOT, 2002) require the development of students' knowledge, skills and attitudes through a nationally recognised curriculum that reflects practice in local contexts. Within the scope of these standards students are also expected to develop self-reliance for future autonomous practice and appropriate skills and attitudes for continuing to improve professional competence.

Objectives: To explain how an occupational therapy curriculum in the United Kingdom enables students to develop the qualities of self-reliance and autonomy, and how the experience of using a learning contract can be an asset for continuing professional development.

Description/Report: Occupational therapy students at Sheffield Hallam University plan and carry out an Independent Study of their choice in the final year of their degree programme. The study is based on a learning contract negotiated with a personally identified learning facilitator. The study can be carried out locally, nationally or internationally. Students report and reflect on the learning that has taken place.

Discussion: Perspectives on learner autonomy are discussed as the theoretical basis for developing self-reliance and autonomous practice. The paper critically examines students' learning experiences, the challenges that the study often presents and the benefits that ensue. It explores the extent to which students develop self-confidence and self-reliance. Project management skills stand them in good stead for continuing their professional development.

Conclusion: Although some students are challenged by lack of structure in the learning process, students' reflections and feedback suggest that the Independent Study assists them to develop the skills for autonomous practice. The learning contract, as a framework for enhancing knowledge, helps students to focus on meeting set objectives by locating and using learning resources appropriately.

Contribution to the practice of occupational therapy: The Independent Study is the final stage of a graded approach within the programme to developing autonomy for practice. Students can draw on the experience of the Independent Study in job applications, in future practice and as a framework for planning and engaging in continuing professional development initiatives.

WFOT (2002) Revised minimum standards for the education of occupational therapists: Perth.