
ARTICLE

Navigating Dual Roles: Practice Perspectives of the Educator-Supervisor in University Music Therapy Centres

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Abstract

This qualitative study explored the practice perspectives of music therapists who hold dual roles as educator-supervisors within university music therapy centres. Through thematic analysis of semi-structured interviews with four participants, four themes emerged: 1) Andragogical advantages of operating university music therapy centres, 2) Benefits of the educator-supervisor role, 3) Complexities of the educator-supervisor role, and 4) Navigating institutional systems. Findings highlight the balance required of educator-supervisors to manage academic teaching and student supervision, revealing benefits and complexities within the dual role. Participants described university music therapy centres as vital “living laboratories” for student learning, yet their establishment and sustainability were often limited by institutional barriers and resource constraints. This study’s findings emphasise clear role delineation for music therapy educator-supervisors, and institutional support to optimise student learning and professional development. Recommendations aim to 1) Support educator-supervisors in their dual roles, 2) Inform institutional strategies for supporting training program centres, and 3) Guide future research endeavours, including exploration of student perspectives on the impact of Work-Integrated Learning (WIL) in university music therapy centres. This research contributes to a deeper understanding of learning opportunities within university music therapy centres, providing a deeper understanding of WIL in the training of future music therapists.

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Introduction

Work-Integrated Learning (WIL) is an often-critical component of higher education, enabling students to apply theoretical knowledge in real-world contexts. This experiential learning fosters the development of practical skills, professional competencies, and an understanding of industry-specific practices, all while enhancing professional identity and employability (Shapley & Hamuka, 2019; Weaver, 2025; Zegwaard & Pretti, 2023). This integration between theory and practice is particularly important in allied health disciplines such as music therapy where academic learning combined with practical experience is essential for developing competent and effective practitioners (Goodman, 2023; Kennelly & Daveson, 2011; Pope, 2023; Wynne et al., 2024). One model of WIL utilised by training programs involves the establishment of university-based centres, also referred to as clinics. These centres serve as vital educational spaces, providing a structured environment where students can apply theoretical knowledge under the direct guidance of experienced supervisors (Fröberg et al., 2018; Haworth et al., 2020; Moore et al., 2018; Schwartzberg & Silverman, 2025; Shapley & Hamuka, 2019). However, university-based training program centres rely on structured partnerships between the educational institution and the therapeutic setting to allow opportunities for highly scaffolded learning, deep reflective practice, and guidance that effectively bridges academic learning with real-world practice (Abbott, 2006; Copley et al., 2007; Haworth et al., 2020; Wheeler, 2000).

To further enhance scaffolded learning, the university centre model can leverage the expertise of training program educators, positioning them as student supervisors within the therapeutic environment. The benefits of these dual educator-supervisor roles are that these individuals typically have a strong grounding in educational theory, a deep understanding of their training program's learning outcomes, and have knowledge of specific student needs. This allows for an integrated oversight that directly connects theoretical knowledge with practical

application, ultimately enhancing students' ability to integrate concepts and develop effective professional skills (Jackson et al., 2025; Winchester-Seeto et al., 2022). However, educator-supervisors must also navigate various complexities, including the need to balance fostering student growth with offering constructive feedback and objective evaluation, whilst also providing support for academic and/or personal challenges (Pope, 2023).

Despite the recognised benefits of university training program centres, there is limited research exploring the practice perspectives of individuals holding dual educator-supervisor roles within this context, particularly within music therapy education. A previous study by the researchers identified that 82% of music therapy training programs operating a university music therapy centre utilise a Work-Integrated Learning model involving staff in dual educator-supervisor roles, with 2-4 such individuals per site (Bortolazzo et al., 2026). Gaining insights into these individuals' perspectives is therefore crucial for optimising centre design and management, ensuring effective service to meet diverse student needs.

Therefore, this study aimed to explore the experiences and practice perspectives of music therapy educator-supervisors within university music therapy centres. Specifically, this research explored the following questions:

- 1) How are the dual roles of music therapy educator-supervisors experienced by individuals working within university music therapy centres?
- 2) What is the impact of the dual roles of music therapy educator-supervisors on teaching and learning within university music therapy centres?

By addressing these questions, this study seeks to provide valuable insights into the practice perspectives of music therapy educator-supervisors, contributing to a deeper understanding of the factors that influence the operation of Work-Integrated Learning within university music therapy centres.

Methodology

Overview

This study used a qualitative design with thematic analysis to explore the practice perspectives of educator-supervisors in university music therapy centres. This study was conducted in accordance with the ethical guidelines of Western Sydney University and approved by the Human Research Ethics Committee (approval number H15893).

Recruitment

Participant recruitment for this study was conducted proactively by emailing staff at 53 music therapy training programs that had been identified through a prior investigation as operating a university music therapy centre. This initial outreach email simultaneously invited participation in a broader survey (results later published as Bortolazzo et al., 2026) and sought expressions of interest for an interview component focusing on dual music therapy educator-supervisor roles. Within the survey results (Bortolazzo et al.) 25 individuals were identified as holding dual educator-supervisor roles, and as such met the inclusion criteria for the current study. A twelve-week window for expressing interest was provided in 2024 to ensure ample opportunity for consideration, and participants were offered remuneration.

Following expressions of interest, four individuals across four training programs participated in the interviews, representing a 16% response rate from the identified pool of 25. Participants included music therapy educator-supervisors from Austria (1), the United Kingdom (1), and the United States of America (2).

Data Collection and Analysis

Data was collected through semi-structured 60-minute interviews conducted via Zoom. The interviews explored participants' experiences and practice perspectives of holding dual

music therapy educator-supervisor roles within university music therapy centres. Interview data, captured via audio and video recordings, was transcribed verbatim using Zoom's integrated transcription feature. Transcription accuracy was subsequently verified and corrected manually.

Thematic analysis was carried out by the primary researcher, who conducted all interviews and gained a deep understanding of the participants' experiences. During the interviews, the researcher took notes, observing and writing down patterns and key ideas as they emerged. These early insights, which came from being directly involved with the data, guided the iterative thematic analysis that followed. The final themes accurately reflected the participants' views and were shaped by the researcher's direct interpretation of their experiences.

To ensure the trustworthiness and rigour of the data analysis, processes were systematically documented, with cross-validation achieved through peer review of coding and member checking of interpretations. Ethical considerations for this study included recognising the potential for participant re-identification due to the small sample size. To mitigate this risk, all identifying information was anonymised during transcription.

Results

Thematic analysis of interview transcripts revealed four overarching themes, each providing unique insights into the practice perspectives of music therapy educator-supervisors working within university music therapy centres.¹

Theme 1: Andragogical Advantages of Operating a University Music Therapy Centre

When outlining the model of Work-Integrated Learning (WIL) utilised within their university music therapy centre, participants described a range of approaches. Despite their differences, all were aimed towards providing practical experience under varying levels of

¹ Within these results participants are identified using codes (e.g., [P01]), where "P" denotes participant, and the number indicates their order in the dataset.

supervision, ultimately progressing towards more independent student practice. Recognising the diverse prior experiences of students was also considered crucial, with one participant reflecting, “our students don’t always come to [the training program] with the same skill set. And really, how does that look in terms of their education?” [P02]. Participants consistently stressed the importance of carefully scaffolding student learning, ensuring a gradual and supportive development of therapeutic skills. Participants indicated that the ability to control the structure of WIL within university music therapy centres allows for focused instruction on the practicalities of therapeutic work, including essential professional skills across standards of practice; “We build their skills step-by-step” [P01].

University music therapy centres were highlighted as an important resource within each training program. Participants shared their perspective that these centres offer significant andragogical (adult learning) advantages as dedicated and dynamic learning environments that benefit student skill development. One participant described them as “a living laboratory for the students” [P01], underscoring their role in providing unique opportunities for direct observation of therapeutic practice. Furthermore, the ability to utilise videotaped sessions for detailed post-session analysis was highlighted as a particularly effective teaching tool; “having this part of looking again into the videos, this [provides important] learning outcomes for students” [P04].

Participants contrasted the consistency of learning offered within university music therapy centres with the variability experienced in community-based placements. A primary observation was the differing theoretical and therapeutic frameworks underpinning therapists’ supervising in community settings; “It can be confusing for students when supervisors have different approaches” [P03]. The need for consistency in the assessment and evaluation of students across all placement types was also noted by participants, emphasising the importance for fairness and accuracy in training. Strategies employed to manage such inconsistencies included fostering peer support networks among supervisors; “Once or maybe

twice a year we meet up and talk [about each] internship... so there's a kind of a network between the supervisors... so we know how each other is doing or is supervising" [P04].

The practical learning facilitated within these training program centres extends beyond direct therapeutic skills. Participants also emphasised the centres' role in exposing students to real-world community needs, fostering a crucial understanding of the societal impact of music therapy. As one participant explained, the centre's inception was driven by "the need here, need for the community in terms of access, and need for our students. That went hand in hand in this space" [P02]. Moreover, participants identified that these centres often provide a valuable platform for students to engage in research activities, further enriching their academic and practical development.

Theme 2: Benefits of the Educator-Supervisor Role

One advantage of the music therapy educator-supervisor dual role that was reiterated by participants was its capacity to facilitate the integration of in-class theoretical knowledge with the development of professional skills in Work-Integrated Learning; "You get to see their growth in a more holistic way" [P01]. With educator-supervisors having the ability to observe student progress across different learning contexts, participants noted that the integrated dual role provides a more nuanced understanding of individual student learning styles and allows for more tailored and effective supervisory guidance; "I know the students already because I teach some of the theoretical courses" [P04], "It's better for the students, when the supervisor also is the teacher" [P03].

One participant described how their professional identity as both music therapy educator and therapist also informs their supervisory approach; "I approach education in the classroom like clinical work. To me, at my core, I'm a clinician and I'm a therapist... and so, my classroom, it's like my students are now my clients and they have goals which are their student learning outcomes" [P02]. Participants noted that the dual music therapy educator-supervisor role also provides students with valuable opportunities to observe their educators actively engaged in

navigating the complexities of real-world professional practice, serving as important modelling opportunities for students; “With us being in that role, they also get to see us handle difficult situations that arise too” [P02].

Additionally, the integrated dual role was reported to enhance communication between educator-supervisors and students. Participants noted that the established rapport from the in-class setting often fostered more open and in-depth discussions of complex therapeutic reflections during supervision, with the dual educator-supervisor role allowing them to more flexibly and effectively adapt their teaching and supervisory approaches in response to individual student needs as they emerged in each learning environment. The longitudinal perspective gained from observing students throughout their academic journey, from initial education through various stages of Work-Integrated Learning, was highlighted as a significant advantage. This long-term engagement allows educators to develop a more detailed and nuanced understanding of each student’s learning trajectory.

Theme 3: Complexities of the Educator-Supervisor Role

While the dual roles of the music therapy educator-supervisor were viewed by participants as “mainly positive” [P02], participants also acknowledged the significant workload involved in navigating multiple responsibilities; “It’s a lot of work to do both” [P03]. Participants reflected on the combined responsibilities of concurrently managing academic work and clinical supervision, alongside research requirements, which could potentially contribute to burnout. This professional balance was compounded by the need to also manage the diverse educational, practical, and emotional needs of students.

In response to these challenges, participants reiterated the importance of establishing and maintaining clear boundaries between their roles as educators and supervisors to mitigate potential role blurring. The need for a conscious and deliberate transition between these roles was reflected on by participants, who emphasised the importance of ensuring students understood the specific context of their interactions, whether it was in a teaching capacity or a

supervisory one; “It’s about being clear about what hat you’re wearing at what time” [P01].

Participants noted that students sometimes encountered difficulties in differentiating between these dual roles, leading to potential confusion in their interactions; “It can be difficult for some students to really know that I am now putting a grade on their work” [P04]. This potential for students to conflate the evaluative nature of teaching with the supportive function of supervision was further elaborated; “[students] see you in one role, and it’s hard for them to switch gears ... sometimes they treat me more like a teacher than a supervisor, even in supervision” [P03]. Additionally, a key ethical consideration in holding dual roles of educator-supervisor was the effective management of student confidentiality, with the need to protect what students experience and share within the supervisory space to ensure appropriate boundaries between in-class and Work-Integrated Learning environments.

Theme 4: Navigating Institutional Systems

The significant impact of institutional factors on the establishment, operation, and long-term viability of university music therapy centres was also discussed by participants. A crucial element identified for the successful establishment of these centres was the presence of an administrative “champion” [P04] within the university structure. This “champion” was identified as a stakeholder within the university who was able to advocate for the music therapy program within institutional structures; “That’s when things started to move more for us. [The administration was] more supportive, asking more questions, [and having] conversations regarding space” [P02]. Participants shared examples of the significant efforts required to establish their centres; “we got [a large sum] from this crowdfunding grant. And we fought tooth and nail for every bit of it. It was a campaign, truly” [P02], and another emphasising the internal advocacy, stating, “I think that we as a team were the Champions. We really brought it forward, and we had to be very patient ... saying the same things [to the administration] repeatedly” [P04]. Participants recounted instances where supportive administrators facilitated the establishment of key partnerships, streamlined often complex bureaucratic processes, and

actively advocated for necessary resource allocation. Conversely, a lack of such support often led to significant delays in the centres' operationalisation, increased the workload for faculty members, and limited opportunities for program growth and development. The repeated emphasis on the importance of administrators who possessed a genuine understanding of the unique needs of music therapy programs and were willing to champion their cause was a key reiteration from all participants.

Ongoing logistical and administrative challenges following the initial establishment of each training program centre was also reported by participants. Participants expressed concerns regarding the need to secure consistent funding, the maintenance of adequate staffing levels, and ensuring the ongoing relevance of their centres within the evolving academic landscape. To address this there was a need for continued advocacy to demonstrate the centres' value to both student learning and community needs with the aim of educating university administrators about the unique nature and purpose of university music therapy centres; "We have to educate about why this [centre] is different. Sometimes we're met with 'This makes a ton of sense, we understand this', but sometimes it can get a little bit confusing [for them]" [P02]. Participants indicated that such misunderstandings could directly impact resource allocation and hinder the effective functioning of university music therapy centres.

Discussion

This study highlights the multifaceted experiences of music therapy educator-supervisors, revealing new insights into the specialised dual roles these individuals hold within university music therapy centres. Results showed that their work is crucial in operationalising core principles of adult learning, thereby bridging theoretical knowledge with professional practice.

- 1) How are the dual roles of music therapy educator-supervisors experienced by individuals working within university music therapy centres?

Participants in this study described their experiences holding dual music therapy educator-supervisor roles as largely positive, despite acknowledging significant associated complexities and demands. A primary positive experience reiterated was the enhanced capacity to facilitate the integration of in-class theoretical knowledge with the development of professional skills in Work-Integrated Learning. As one participant states, “You get to see their growth in a more holistic way” [P01], indicating that the integrated dual role provided a nuanced understanding of individual student learning styles and enabled more tailored and effective supervisory guidance. Participants also reported that their professional identity as both educators and therapists informed their supervisory approach, and they perceived this dual role as providing valuable opportunities for students to observe them actively navigating real-world professional practice, serving as important modelling opportunities; “With us being in that role, they also get to see us handle difficult situations that arise too” [P02]. The established rapport developed from the in-class setting was also experienced as fostering more open communication and in-depth discussions during supervision, demonstrating the positive impact of the dual educator-supervisor role on the supervisory relationship.

However, participants concurrently experienced significant complexities and workload pressures inherent in managing dual responsibilities, including academic work, clinical supervision, and research, which could potentially contribute to burnout. This professional balance was further complicated by the need to manage diverse student needs, including educational, practical, and emotional. A key aspect of navigating these complexities involved establishing and maintaining clear boundaries between roles, as highlighted by one participant: “It’s about being clear about what hat you’re wearing at what time” [P01]. Participants noted that students sometimes struggled to differentiate between these dual roles, leading to confusion, particularly regarding the evaluative nature of teaching versus the supportive function of supervision; “It can be difficult for some students to really know that I am now putting a grade on

their work” [P04]. Participants also identified the effective management of student confidentiality as a crucial ethical consideration when transitioning between learning environments and roles.

2) What is the impact of the dual roles of music therapy educator-supervisors on teaching and learning within university music therapy centres?

The dual roles of music therapy educator-supervisors were found to positively impact teaching and learning by leveraging the unique Work-Integrated Learning environment of university music therapy centres. Characterised as “living laboratories” [P01], participants highlighted the capacity training program centres have to offer distinct observational and reflective learning opportunities. This unique setting enables focused instruction on the practicalities of therapeutic work and essential professional skills, with a consistent emphasis on scaffolding student learning “step-by-step” [P01]. The intentional design, including two-way mirrored observational rooms and videotaped therapy sessions for analysis, embodies adult learning principles of experiential reflection (Knowles et al., 2020). This structured scaffolding aligns with sequential learning in professional education, addressing a recognised gap in integrating in-class instruction with real-world application (Fröberg et al., 2018)

The impact of the dual educator-supervisor role on teaching and learning is further evident in the increased capacity to provide a comprehensive and longitudinal understanding of student development. By observing students across both in-class and Work-Integrated Learning settings, educator-supervisors gain a multi-dimensional view of student progression, allowing for guidance that is tailored to individual learning styles and needs (Colbert et al., 2023). This sustained engagement also enables educators to identify patterns in student learning that might otherwise be missed, supporting a holistic approach to student development (Knowles et al., 2020). While university-based training program centres offer consistency, participants noted the contrasting variability in community-based placements, which could lead to student confusion regarding differing theoretical frameworks and therapeutic approaches. However, strategies like

peer support networks can mitigate these inconsistencies, ensuring foundational competency development across varied Work-Integrated Learning experiences.

However, the valuable impact provided through operating university music therapy centres is also influenced by external institutional factors that impact their ongoing viability. Participants consistently highlighted the need for institutional support and administrative champions, as well as the ongoing need for faculty to advocate and educate administrators about the unique value and needs of university music therapy centres to secure resources and maintain relevance, ultimately impacting the teaching and learning environment they can provide.

Recommendations

To optimise the educational effectiveness of university music therapy centres, programs should prioritise andragogically-informed Work-Integrated Learning design that scaffolds skill development in alignment with students' evolving competencies. This includes implementing structured "step-by-step" [P01] progression models that successfully bridge theory and practice while honouring adult learners' need for self-directed growth. Training programs can effectively balance consistency and exposure by intentionally utilising a hybrid Work-Integrated Learning model, integrating university music therapy centres for controlled learning and community placements for diverse practical experience.

Clear protocols for role transitions between teaching and supervision contexts would help mitigate the boundary confusion observed by participants, particularly when educators must shift between evaluative and supportive functions. To assist this, student preparation for Work-Integrated Learning should explicitly address the dual-role dynamics they will encounter within the university music therapy centre. Transparent communication about the distinct purposes and expectations of in-class versus Work-Integrated Learning contexts may reduce the confusion educator-supervisors observe when students struggle to differentiate evaluative and supportive interactions.

Additionally, the ongoing sustainability of university music therapy centres relies on institutional commitment, which requires music therapy faculty articulating the value of university music therapy centres to non-specialist administrators. This requires the development of shared impact frameworks that demonstrate outcomes through student achievement, community partnerships, and research productivity.

Limitations

This study has several limitations. First, the small sample size ($n=4$) limits the generalisability of the findings. This may have been due to the small cohort of individuals that were identified from the connected survey as holding this role ($n=25$), and that the interviews were only conducted in English. While small, this sample size still offers meaningful insight due to the depth of responses obtained from each educator-supervisor, their specific expertise in this niche area, and the exploratory nature of the study, which aimed to gain in-depth understanding rather than broad generalisability. Additionally, the study relied on self-reported data from interviews, which may be subject to recall bias and social desirability, given the researchers also work within a music therapy training program.

Future Research

Future research should prioritise understanding student perceptions of the impact of university music therapy centres on their learning and professional development. This will inform the development of best practices for supervision and the assessment of student learning within Work-Integrated Learning in music therapy education. Additionally, research is needed to explore university administrations' perceptions of music therapy programs and the unique educational opportunities offered by university music therapy centres to inform advocacy and support their establishment and sustainability. Methodologically, future studies involving this cohort should aim to include a larger and more diverse sample of music therapy educator-supervisors to enhance generalisability.

Conclusion

This study provides new insights into the nuanced experiences and impact of the dual educator-supervisor role within university music therapy centres. By exploring the practice perspectives of these individuals, this research highlights how this dual role supports the core principles of adult learning, fostering contextualised, self-directed, and structured educational experiences for music therapy students.

The dual music therapy educator-supervisor role emerged as a potentially powerful andragogical tool, capable of deeply supporting student professional growth and development. Participants' accounts revealed how this dual role can facilitate holistic student development through benefits such as integrated knowledge application, tailored guidance, and valuable professional modelling. This longitudinal engagement, often leveraging the training program centre environment as a "living laboratory" [P01], is crucial for developing professional competencies through carefully scaffolded, andragogically-informed experiences. However, the dual role simultaneously demands careful boundary management, balancing evaluative duties with supportive functions, and requires structural support to mitigate risks of burnout and role confusion. These findings underscore the intensive and often unseen work required to maintain the ongoing successful operation of university music therapy centres and their important educational function.

Ultimately, this study provides a foundational understanding of the dual educator-supervisor role as a central pillar of Work-Integrated Learning in university music therapy centres. By recognising and strategically supporting these individuals, music therapy education can continue to deliver high-quality, relevant training that prepares students to serve both clients and communities effectively.

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