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"All roads lead to Rome", but "Rome wasn't built in a day". Advice on QSEP navigation from the 'Roman Gods' of assessment!

Martin Eubank, Tim Holder, Ruth Lowry, Andrew Manley, Ian Maynard, Alister McCormick,

Jenny Smith, Richard Thelwell, Tim Woodman & Moira Lafferty

Introduction from the QSEP Chief Assessor

Dr Martin Eubank

Rome was the point of convergence of all the main roads of the Roman Empire. When Roman emperor Caesar Augustus erected the 'Milliarium Aureum' (Golden Milestone) in the heart of Ancient Rome, all roads were designed to begin at the monument. Metaphorically, the ancient proverb 'All roads lead to Rome' means there are many different ways of reaching the same goal or conclusion. QSEP training is a bit like that, with trainees engaging with so many different types of clients, settings, cultures, approaches and interventions that no two portfolios of work look alike. Yet, the competency demonstration 'end goal' is the same. The ancient Romans were also wise; they knew that in building their Roman empire (or for us building relationships and competence as Sport and Exercise Psychologists), doing something important or creating a masterpiece takes the time it takes; 'Rome wasn't built in a day' and, metaphorically, QSEP is not something to rush or smear with impatience either.

The 'Rome' that is QSEP has now been built for 10 years. Over that time, 71 trainees (at the time of writing) have created their own important masterpieces and become part of the registered Sport and Exercise Psychologist 'empire'. They all have stories about the road they built to get there and lessons learnt along the way. From an assessment perspective, this equates to circa 142 hours of viva material and 213 assessment feedback reports. Based on this volume of data, the QSEP assessors are uniquely placed to offer their observations of

the good roads being taken by trainees, but also the roads that still need to be built and those that have some potholes and need a little resurfacing.

This article aims to explore assessors' observations and experiences of QSEP in relation to trainee competence development and demonstration, and help QSEP trainees and supervisors to identify some of the potholes in the road and consider ways to avoid them. Specifically, assessors have written a short review of their QSEP observations and commentary about what they want to see more of in the future. Their views are forthright, but given in good faith in the spirit of providing advice to candidates, and guidance to supervisors, about the nature and scope of QSEP submissions.

The assessors contributing to the article have a range of QSEP backgrounds and experiences. In some cases, the assessor voice comes from individuals who only assess, and have been doing so for all, or a large part of, the last 10 years. Thus, the observations of *Ruth Lowry, Richard Thelwell and Tim Woodman* come exclusively from that perspective. Other voices come from those with a dual role, namely those who are experienced assessors but also experienced supervisors. The 'supervising-assessor' is both a sender and receiver of candidate feedback, so some of the observations informing the commentary from *Tim Holder, Andrew Manley, Ian Maynard and Jenny Smith* are influenced by being on 'both sides of the fence'. Finally, a contribution is made from another important dual-role perspective, namely the 'alumnus-assessor'; *Alister McCormick* is someone who has 'been in the candidate's shoes' but now wears the 'boot on the other foot'. Seeing a number of QSEP 'graduates' step into supervisor and assessor roles over recent years has been one of the most rewarding legacies of the Qualification. Alumni have so many insights about the best ways to navigate QSEP, and this experience is invaluable when offering feedback to current trainees in an assessor capacity. It would be gratifying to see many more QSEP alumni 'give

back' in this way to support those seeking to qualify, and in the longer term be in a position to step-up into senior roles if we are to celebrate 20 years of QSEP in another 10 years-time! Right now, for the purposes of this article, the alumnus-assessor perspective is a good place to start…

Commentary from the 'Alumnus-Assessor' Perspective

Dr Alister McCormick

How did my experience completing Stage 2 between 2011 and 2014 shape the way I assess? What can candidates learn from my experiences in the trainee and assessor roles?

I think that my experience of completing Stage 2 benefits the assessment process because of three main reasons. First, I understand the demands of being a trainee. I worked on Stage 2 in my evenings, weekends, and annual leave. I read journal articles on the bus to and from my day job in a pensions company. I offered to work for free and was still turned down. I learned about key aspects of the consultancy process through working with amateur sportspeople (McCormick, 2014). I questioned whether to quit the qualification midway through, and experienced the stress and anxiety relating to assessment and feedback. I hope that the assessment advice I give in my reporting and that I provide in this commentary reflects an appreciation of what candidates go through along the way. As my second reason, however, I also have a good idea of what candidates can reasonably do within their training – I only suggest things that I did, or would have been willing to do. As my third reason, I can share pieces of advice that I benefited from myself.

The importance of reading and doing your admin

My first piece of advice is that Stage 2 offers a chance to read. A lot. There is a wealth of literature available to support competent and excellent practice in sport and exercise psychology, and candidates can reasonably expect to have to demonstrate Doctoral-level

understanding of the literature available. In the viva, we may ask about the papers that have had the most impact on you. Getting caught out and giving a poor answer will cast doubt in the minds of the assessors about whether you are well read or not. I see engaging with literature as CPD, and the QSEP handbook requires candidates to complete an indicative 200 hours or 25 days of CPD as part of Stage 2. For my own Plan of Training, my supervisor and I agreed that I would read at least two journal articles a week and write a synopsis of what I had learned from each. I read about philosophies of practice, ethics, reflective practice, needs analyses, interventions, evaluation of practice, and so on, throughout the Stage 2 process. Bear in mind that if you want reading to count, then you need to evidence it. In my first submission, I demonstrated my engagement with the literature by submitting an electronic appendix of 102 synopses. In my final submission, I submitted a list of 10 books and 251 articles that I had read. I also integrated my reading into my reflective diary and case studies, which is something I encourage trainees to do to optimise development but also because the assessors are looking for it! The first step towards acting on much of the feedback that I now give as an assessor is doing some more reading.

My second piece of advice is that the assessments assess your development and demonstration of competence, and this has two aspects to it: (1) becoming competent and (2) demonstrating it through excellent admin. A paper that stands out in my memory from my Stage 2 reading discussed a "hot potato game" relating to addressing professional competence problems among psychologists in training (Johnson, Elman, Forrest, Robiner, Rodolfa & Schaffer, 2008). A takeaway message for me is that, as an assessor, I am one of the people responsible for judging whether a *Trainee Sport and Exercise Psychologist* is competent enough to practice independently and represent the title *Sport and Exercise Psychologist* at the end of the QSEP training process. That comes with a lot of responsibility,

and I am making a judgment based on only three (admittedly substantial) pieces of written work, and a two-hour viva. The cases that candidates put forward to evidence competence in the key roles are therefore very important, and the time commitment needed to *demonstrate* competence should not be underestimated. I have memories of working late nights and working in my Christmas annual leave on getting the admin right, and I am confident that, having now been an assessor, this time investment made a difference. How might you approach it? My suggestions are to stay on top of your admin throughout the qualification, to use a cover letter and your EPC form to provide a narrative of how you can evidence competence for each of the key roles, to back these arguments up with proof such as through submission of appendices, and to make your submissions easy to navigate. It also helps greatly if you (and your supervisor) read the candidate handbook, which contains the admin detail you need to know. Assessing a submission is a substantial undertaking. Make it easy for me to agree with your claims about competence – I really do want to!

Commentary from the 'Supervising-Assessor' Perspective

Dr Jenny Smith

<u>Professional Philosophy</u>

As we all know, our professional philosophy underpins what we do as applied practitioners. That is why candidates are required to reflect on this in their Stage 2 documentation and I am not giving away any trade secrets when I say that assessors will ask candidates about this in their Stage 2 viva! However, the degree to which candidates have been clear about how their professional philosophy guides the consultancy process is mixed. I will use Keegan's (2016) book and Poczwardowski, Sherman, and Ravizza's (2004) paper on professional philosophy to guide my point.

We often see candidates stating how their professional philosophy guides certain elements of the consultancy process. For example, we might see reflections or case studies based on how an individual's professional philosophy influences their choice of needs analysis tools. Alternatively, we might see reflections or case studies based on how their theoretical paradigm influences the consultancy process. We might also see reflections or case studies based on how their theoretical paradigm influences their choice of intervention.

While the alignment of practice philosophy '*in-to*' consultancy process is often presented, congruence between practice philosophies *'back-to'* the aspects that define the 'person behind the practitioner' is much less prevalent and far less secure. Through the reflections and case studies, we would like to see how the different elements of professional philosophy (i.e. personal core beliefs and values, theoretical paradigm, models of practice) interact, to then know how this interaction influences each stage of the consultancy process (intake, need analysis, case formulation, choosing an intervention, planning the intervention, and delivering and monitoring). This will enable us to see why you do what you do. My advice is "Don't be shy in your documentation" – be clear who you are as a practitioner and how this influences the process. We know we do things differently from each other and your Stage 2 documentation should celebrate this – just be confident that you know why you work in the way you do and can provide the underpinning philosophical justification to support it.

Professor Ian Maynard

The value of research in QSEP

While the format and content of the QSEP research Key Role (Key Role 3) was subject to extensive debate when the qualification was developed, the ability to conduct research is a

requirement of the BPS Standards for Chartered Psychologist status. From a QSEP perspective, research is one of the fundamental components that gives the qualification its Doctoral or 'Level Eight-ness', and is an element that requires demonstration of new knowledge and evidence that a candidate can work and perform at a Doctoral standard. Moreover, it constitutes an element of the qualification that has and will become more and more important with time.

Many (including some QSEP trainees and supervisors) have questioned the inclusion of Key Role 3 (Research Competence) within the Stage 2 process – "why do I have to do research, I want to do applied work"? A current concern of the profession is the need for practitioners to be aware of, and understand, cutting-edge research and professional developments that can help to inform their practice, to ensure we are giving our clients the best possible chance of improved performance and/or wellbeing. Historically, feedback from National Governing Bodies (NGBs) of Sport in the UK was that their practitioners were still using the same approach and techniques they had been using up to a decade beforehand, and NGBs were questioning if that was appropriate or best practice. Of course, the use of tried and tested approaches or techniques will always have a place, but the worry was that many Sport and Exercise Psychologists were stagnating because they were not accessing the contemporary research or professional practice literature, but were also not research active. In effect, a practitioner was 'past their sell-by date' within about three years of entering the profession. To counter this, many NGBs took to creating more extensive continuous professional development programmes (often generously funded by UK Sport), exemplified within the National Institutes of Sport. In turn, our response was to try to ensure that at the outset, young practitioners were given high quality research experience and hence confidence to interrogate and critique the literature to ensure their 'currency'.

Interestingly, the influence of Key Role 3 has had two potentially profound effects on the day-to-day lives of Sport and Exercise Psychologists. Firstly, it seems we are moving at some pace towards becoming a Doctoral level profession as more and more organisations advertise and appoint to positions at this level. Secondly, we see more and more evidence of 'practice to theory' in the literature. Somewhat ironically, we encounter situations in practice that are not well explained by the current research or professional practice literature, hence studies are devised 'in vitro' that lead to better insights into theory (i.e., practice sometimes drives theory, rather than theory always driving practice).

In terms of the research undertaken on QSEP, I would also take this opportunity to ask/advise candidates and their supervisors to design and conduct more 'applied' research studies or research that will have practical implications. Please do not always rely on the 'researchers' to do the relevant investigations, do attempt controlled interventions. Granted, they are often difficult to execute, but at least it is 'real world' and may produce a meaningful finding that will make a difference. Let us all aspire to be scientist-practitioners!

Dr Tim Holder

There is no doubt that the opportunity to both supervise and assess has reciprocal benefits – supervision informs my assessing practices and assessing informs my supervision. From these experiences, two particular features stand out for me as areas for consideration for candidates and supervisors alike.

Deepening the case study

Firstly, the qualification requires candidates to submit four case studies during the process. These pieces of work demonstrate how the candidate has conducted consultancy work within their practice and assist in the demonstration of the range of approaches used. In addition, there are guidelines for the content of the case study provided within the

candidate handbook. It is clear that most candidates choose to follow the guidelines in a rather prescriptive manner, and, as a result, this can stifle the potential benefits for the candidate in examining their practice and dissemination of this to others in the future. Rather than candidates tending to approach the case studies in a "tick box" manner, dutifully fulfilling the basic expectations, it would be valuable to encourage the adoption of a more adventurous and focused utilisation of the case study opportunity. This could result in a wide range of case study outcomes. For example, case studies can be incredibly useful as a way in which a focused and deep examination of a particular feature of the candidate's applied practice can be 'mined' to demonstrate competence and explore avenues for further development. Therefore, case studies may benefit from exploring assessment processes, case conceptualisation, monitoring and evaluating practice etc. as a significant focus, rather than always including all the guided elements in every case study. In short, candidates and supervisors can legitimately consider some case studies to be less a straightforward method for providing evidence of competence, and instead prioritise more the developmental potential they possess to explore candidates' real world experiences.

Secondly, and somewhat disappointingly, a regularly observed gap within candidate submissions is the explicit use (and knowledge of) the professional practice literature evident within case studies and their discussion at viva. One of the most significant developments within Sport and Exercise Psychology in the last thirty years must surely be the plethora of professional practice-focused texts and the emergence of practice-focused sections and entire case study journals that provide platforms for practitioners to disseminate and consume professional practice knowledge. These exemplify the opportunities now available for candidates to make connections between theory, research and practice and to demonstrate within submissions the impact of what they have read on

their overarching practice philosophy and consultancy practice. In addition, knowledge from allied disciplines that have the potential to influence Sport and Exercise Psychology practice is rarely evident and is another missed opportunity. These sources of evidence provide candidates with another excellent opportunity to demonstrate the Doctoral level knowledge and understanding required by the qualification.

Dr Andrew Manley

As a "Supervising Assessor", there is a benefit to "wearing both hats" and being well placed to help candidates "take the sting out" of assessor feedback! In my time as both assessor and supervisor, I have learned that all feedback provided by assessors is done so with a genuine intention to assist the candidate in their continual professional development. That said, when empathising with candidates, it is easy to recognise where written feedback from assessors can be interpreted in a way that makes for a rather uncomfortable, demotivating, and potentially threatening learning experience (it reminds me of how I felt when reading my most recent rejection letter from a well-intentioned associate editor)! Having worked closely with and learned from some very good assessors, I have become better equipped as a supervisor to ensure that the candidate interprets feedback in a way that informs the next steps in her or his learning journey. In this regard, the supervisor and assessors can function as a team of peers, where each offers different yet complementary views on how the candidate can sharpen and hone their emerging knowledge, skills, and competencies.

Observation of practice

My work as an assessor has also helped me to reflect on and enhance my own supervision, particularly in the area of reciprocal observation with candidates. When reviewing some of the submissions of past candidates, the extent to which observation of applied practice is happening between candidate and supervisor is often unclear. This prompted something of

a realisation for me in the early stages of my development as a supervisor. With the help of other collegiate assessors, I could identify that the formal planning and documenting of mutual and reciprocal observation with my candidates was an important area for me to work on. In heeding the advice of assessors and my own reading of useful publications on the topic (e.g., Holder & Winter, 2017), I was able to become much better at supporting candidates to provide explicit examples of how, where, and when observation of applied practice was happening.

My final comment is a positive reflection on the number of beneficial changes made recently to the way in which assessors, supervisors, and candidates are being encouraged to engage in greater levels of transparent and "user-friendly" knowledge exchange. The hard work of many within the QSEP team and the wider DSEP community has led to the instigation of a number of promising initiatives, including biannual training for supervisors and assessors with networking opportunities embedded within them; special issues of *SEPR* devoted to professional training, and the advent of DSEP Applied Hubs in regions across the country. These encourage open and honest communication across roles and with candidates at the heart of discussions. Furthermore, such innovations represent an increase in the levels of consistency and appropriate accountability of all stakeholders, ensuring that all have a clear idea of what they should expect of themselves and each other.

In the spirit of transparency and equivalence, I find it hard to understand why assessors remain anonymous to the candidate until the day of the viva. With other D-level qualifications, it is typical for the candidate to know who their examiners are in advance of the viva. Furthermore, many candidates of higher-level qualifications, such as PhDs and equivalent Stage 2 Professional Doctorates, are actively involved in the process of identifying and appointing appropriate examiners, yet with a clear expectation that they

cannot contact their examiner(s) prior to the viva itself. While selection of QSEP assessors by candidates and supervisors is not possible, a more transparent approach that informs the candidate of who the assessors are, perhaps after the submission of the final piece of written work, would be a positive change. In my view, this would likely enhance the viva experience for the candidate as well as the anticipated outcomes, without diluting the challenge and stimulation implicit with a D-level viva process.

Commentary from the 'Assessor' Perspective

Professor Tim Woodman

When a candidate's submission lands in my Inbox, I ask myself some first-order questions. I have listed these below. I have also provided a tip for candidates to consider in relation to each question.

1) **Does the candidate back up what they practice with theory?** This is most relevant to the QSEP case studies. In good case studies, the candidate fully explains and justifies the theoretical reason behind doing X (e.g., the intervention) rather than Y; and the candidate explains what X is.

Tip 1: Provide a genuinely clear theoretical justification for doing X instead of Y and state clearly what you did when you did X.

2) **Is the candidate fully engaged in KR3 (Research)?** – Research underpins everything. QSEP candidates would not be QSEP candidates if there were not researchers doing research in Sport and Exercise Psychology. Seeing KR3 blank on candidates' first submission concerns me. Level 8 research takes time to conceptualise and then to develop through to completion.

Tip 2: In your initial meeting with your supervisor, put KR3 on the agenda from Day 1 (and choose a supervisor (or add a Key Role supervisor) who can show you evidence of publishing Level 8 work).

3) **Can the candidate think clearly?** Before the viva, the only evidence that I have of candidates' ability to think clearly is their ability to write clearly – clear thinking and clear writing go hand in hand.

Tip 3: Write precisely and concisely. Proofread very carefully before you submit your work (asking someone else to read your work aloud is effective; *Microsoft Word* has spell-checkers and grammar checkers, with blue/red squiggly lines under words! – use these features).

4) **Does the candidate tell us everything?** You do not need to tell us everything. For example, writing reflections does not mean telling us "everything"; it means telling us about the key elements of reflection that are pertinent and personal to you. Reflections, like the rest of the submission, should be precise and concise, and aligned with the QSEP guidelines given in the candidate handbook.

Tip 4: Help the assessor focus on what is important by not including that which is unimportant.

5) **Is the candidate a clone?** – Are you a clone of your supervisor; or have you embraced a single paradigm at an early stage of QSEP? If assessors can predict that a candidate will almost certainly conduct a case study using the intervention that is 'flavour of the month' (currently ACT/mindfulness!), that is a dangerous state of affairs for our profession.

Tip 5: Ask yourself, is my philosophical stance genuinely informed, such that my chosen interventions are congruent?

6) **Is the supervisor supervising the candidate?** I have seen a wide array of examples of supervision, from the fully engaged to the seemingly less engaged. That spectrum often then plays out in the quality of the candidates who we assess.

Tip 6: Candidates pay a lot of money for this qualification; establish very clearly and early on (at the contractual stage) what the respective expectations are and stick to these (e.g., by initiating the agreed meeting frequency). This is your qualification. You pay for it; own it.

Professor Richard Thelwell

Deeper reflection on practitioner development

My first observation from having assessed a number of submissions is the importance of 'using' the reflections. Specifically, many candidates are very good at stating their descriptive observations of what happened, how it made them feel, and (perhaps) what it made them think – this is especially the case in first submissions. It is fair to say that a feedback comment provided at this point would be to 'give an indication to how the action associated with the reflection is now being integrated within practice'. This can be levelled at reflections from practice experiences across the four Key Roles, including CPD, reading tasks, and observations. It is somewhat strange that too few candidates provide a commentary about how they are developing as a result of observations; be it of themselves, of supervisors, of fellow trainees, or indeed others operating within the Sport and Exercise domain. If I could insist on one thing, it would be to have candidates track how observations have developed them throughout their QSEP registration. Linked to the above, candidates are making better use of information sources to enhance their self-awareness of the values and beliefs they hold. Typically, however, this occurs towards the mid-latter stages of the QSEP training process. While practice philosophy and alignment to practice approaches will

develop over time (certainly longer than the QSEP enrolment period), it has always been interesting to observe the variation in candidate clarity and conviction as to the values and beliefs held and how it informs their work. There is a sense that this is happening too late in the training process, fuelled perhaps by a lack of knowledge and theoretical discussion on the topic in Stage 1 MSc. programmes. Many candidates report that they only become aware of this when they embark on Stage 2. In my experience, it would be beneficial to consider the philosophical underpinnings of practice much earlier in the training and development process.

Professional Practice and Practitioner Development Literature

One of the most insightful questions posed at viva relates to the literature that has shaped thinking and practice. As an assessor, I am always keen to know what the candidates are reading, how their practice is being shaped, and are they up to date? It is often surprising that many candidates have not fully considered the influences of literature, yet many of them will discuss role models/things that have helped to shape their clients! There is now a wealth of theoretical, conceptual, and importantly, professional practice and practitioner development literature available, and candidates are in a privileged position to engage with it and to use it in their submissions. Examples of key outlets for this type of literature include; *Sport and Exercise Psychology Review*; *Case Studies in Sport and Exercise Psychology*; *Journal of Sport Psychology in Action*; *Journal of Applied Sport Psychology*. With the above in mind, it is a shame that many more candidates do not share their experiences in these same outlets. We often read (within KR4) that individuals have ambitions to publish, but we do encourage candidates to consider this beyond just the Key Role 3 research product, and to submit their case studies and other applied practice accounts for publication in these outlets.

Consider the 'braver' case study

We have the pleasure of reviewing many excellent case studies, but it is a shame when they all tend to be the 'safe' approaches where the report of the needs analysis, case formulation, triangulation, intervention, evaluation, and reflections are on a single client. Many are rather descriptive (especially with regard to the intervention process) – the more enlightening case studies are those that report the 'how', the 'struggles', the 'challenges', and the 'professional practice' issues faced. As a good compromise, candidates might confidently consider producing a mix of 'safe' and 'braver' case studies to demonstrate consultancy competence. Candidates are also encouraged to report 'alternative' case studies (e.g., working at an organisational/systemic level, working with coaches, reporting when things have gone wrong, or detailing work with other specialists within a multi-disciplinary team context).

The value of the cover letter

Finally, having spent many an hour providing feedback with a 'second' assessor, it is important for candidates to note that we give feedback in a manner that we hope will facilitate development. Whilst not wanting thanks, it is useful for assessors to see that the candidate has read and acted upon the feedback given, and it is positive that this is now a requirement of the second and final QSEP submission. As well as helping the candidate to track and inform their own development, there is nothing an assessor will appreciate more than knowing the candidate and supervisor have bothered to read, consider and respond to the assessor's feedback – this is a good way to get them on side!

Dr Ruth Lowry

My experiences as an established QSEP assessor seek to provide some observations that focus on informing candidates' use and documentation of reflection to inform their practice.

Demonstrating levelness in reflections

It is common, particularly in early submissions, for QSEP assessors to find very sparse reference to the literature in candidate reflections. These reflections often have an intuitive feel, and whilst logical choices are often made candidates need to demonstrate Doctoral level by articulating how the choices made are evidence-based. In the quest to engage literature, it is also worth remembering that there is a world of pertinent Psychology literature beyond the domain of Sport and Exercise. Indeed, some applied work may require practitioners to draw on core Psychology literature. A good example of this is in the adaptations made for youth athletes. Assessors often read reflections that make certain claims, such as young athletes have a short attention span or they need to engage in activities to disrupt continuous delivery in one mode. This may indeed be true but 'youth' or 'young' is a sweeping term that encompasses a number of developmental changes in cognitive processes such as attention, cognitive flexibility and reasoning, to name just a few. This is an opportunity for candidates to investigate and demonstrate their knowledge regarding cognition and lifespan development as well as research evidence from education pedagogy, and the child and adolescent counselling literature.

Reflecting on workshop delivery

Assessors also receive a number of reflections regarding workshop delivery, particularly as evidence of Key Role 4 or Key Role 1 (unpredictable situations). Typically, we learn that: (1) the session over-ran; (2) candidates had too much to cover in the time allowed; (3) last minute changes to the room, the time, the size of group occurred. These issues reflect that there was no plan B, C ... and the designed lesson did not or could not run in the manner expected. This is a very predictable and common situation to find yourself in so can be

problem-solved ahead of time. Consider the literature on lesson planning, and make use of a "What If" scenario approach so you can see the problems coming!

<u>Reflecting on Observation</u>

As part of your Stage 2 Qualification, observation should be a regular feature of your supervision. There are several structured models of formalising observation, be it an observation of a more experienced Sport and Exercise Psychologist (e.g., your supervisor), a peer (e.g., another neophyte practitioner or candidate), or someone observing you. Surprisingly, very few reflections formally reflect/critique this element of development. This is a documented requirement of the qualification, so best to consider how to include this from the 'get go'.

Summary from the QSEP Chief Assessor

Dr Martin Eubank

I would like to thank the eight QSEP assessors for taking the time to provide their honest observations and experiences of what they see and want to see in candidate submissions. I hope the final product will be helpful to the QSEP community, in particular the trainees and their supervisors who are navigating the QSEP assessment process. While there are many specific and excellent insights in each assessor's commentary that are worthy of note, what follows is a short summary highlighting four dominant assessor observations, which in turn represent 'key' action points for trainees and supervisors to consider. These observations, which span reflection, research, case studies and the use of literature are not new (see Eubank & Hudson, 2013; Eubank, 2016 from previous *SEPR* Professional training special editions and the candidate handbook). Rather, they do effectively reinforce the importance of the assessors' observations for the future quality assurance and enhancement of trainees' work.

Firstly, the need for greater evidence of professional practice *literature*, and how it informs the candidate's practice and development is one dominant observation. Wider reading needs to be more evident, particularly within consultancy case studies and Key Role reflections to deepen and enrich the documentation of trainees' work and learning experiences and illustrate more effectively how practice is informed by theory. In some cases, more reading needs to be undertaken!

A second dominant observation relates to the nature and scope of candidate *reflection*. QSEP submissions should include reflections across all four Key Roles (including research for those trainees on the 2018 version of the candidate handbook), but there are some components of coverage that are being missed. This includes: i) reflections on observation of, and by, the candidate, including observation by their supervisor); ii) reflection on practice philosophy that includes alignment 'in-to' consultancy process but also more secure congruence 'back-to' the trainee's core values and beliefs; iii) reflection that consistently uses a reflective framework and engages Sport and core Psychology literature where appropriate to inform ongoing learning.

Thirdly, the role of *research* in QSEP and the importance of doing practice-informed research to maintain research-informed currency and avoid stagnation as a Sport and Exercise Psychologist was a dominant observation. While reference to relevant literature in this Key Role is not deficient, the 'appeal' from the assessors is to encourage trainees and supervisors to more proactively consider applied/theory-to-practice research investigations. Better portfolios are found to be those where the trainee has treated the research component as an integrated part of QSEP and demonstrated significant Key Role 3 activity across their submissions and enrolment period.

A fourth dominant observation relates to the format and content of consultancy *case studies*. While there is an understood innate desire to carry out a 'standard' case study that effectively demonstrates consultancy process and Key Role 2 competencies, candidates are also encouraged to produce alternative case studies that are more adventurous and focused, and that 'mine' a specific element of case study process or experience based on the context of the candidate's work.

More generally, these key areas of improvement are all connected to a better understanding of what a Doctoral level qualification represents and how the resultant reflection, case study and research products can better evidence 'Level 8' though stronger understanding of the current literature base. In examination of a PhD, examiners are hoping to answer "yes" to questions in the thesis preliminary report pertaining to the originality, significance and rigour of the thesis they have read. The D-level criteria applied to the QSEP portfolio are no different, so before you submit ask yourself (and ask your supervisor) where the originality, significance, impact and rigour is evident in your work. The observations of the assessors provided in this article will, if heeded, also help trainees to produce and defend work deemed by the assessors to be at Doctoral level.

Arguably, our scientific training focuses more on how to evidence critical evaluation and theory-to-practice synthesis within traditional forms of assessment (e.g., essay writing, oral communications, and research projects), and traditional modes of Doctoral-level work (e.g., a PhD). Thus, there is plentiful amount of knowledge, education and training done to produce original, significant, impactful and rigorous research of publishable quality. In contrast, there is relatively less education about how to document D-levelness in more practice-oriented reports and reflective writing. As a discipline that is increasingly reliant on Doctoral-level qualifications to work *and* practice as Sport and Exercise Psychologists, this

represents an evolving training need that we should not overlook and actively seek to address.

If this article has helped in some way to navigate the potholes, speed humps, diversions, incidents and delays on your own road to Rome as a trainee, or the road you might suggest to your trainee as a supervisor, it has been worth us writing it and worth you reading the result! To put the article into a broader context, many trainees have already navigated the road to QSEP completion successfully, and that remains the genuine aspiration of all the QSEP assessors. Their feedback is always well intentioned, and their advice seeks to help trainees achieve their common goal in the time they decide to take. If you are on, or contemplating, your own road to Rome, we wish you the best of luck in navigating it!

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