



ASA POSITION STATEMENT | CLINICAL TRAINING PLACEMENTS FOR SONOGRAPHY STUDENTS IN AUSTRALIA

SUMMARY

- Clinical training placements within a patient care environment are an essential component to the education and training of sonography students and are a core requirement of all accredited sonography courses.
- The primary purpose of a clinical training placement is for the education, training and professional acclimatisation of the student. All placements must be genuine and provide relevant and necessary resources, supervision, and learning opportunities for the student to develop an appropriate level of competency within a reasonable time.
- The Australasian Sonographers Association (ASA) supports the delivery of appropriate, properly supervised, clinical training opportunities for the future generation of sonographers, and acknowledges the strength of the existing quality training programs made available to sonography students in the public and private sectors.

SCOPE

This document focuses on the clinical training needed to complete an accredited sonography course in Australia. However, the principles also apply to the wider variety of clinical training opportunities undertaken by sonography students.

- Education providers offering an accredited post-graduate qualification typically require the student to secure a placement themselves, with some requiring evidence in writing before accepting enrolment. Students that do not have existing connections with an imaging practice or department, including those coming from a non-radiography background, can find it particularly challenging.
- Education providers who offer an undergraduate entry, commencing with a bachelor's degree, typically organise placements for the students. These are often unpaid and commonly referred to as a *clinical placement*. This pathway often appeals to students who do not already hold a relevant undergraduate qualification.
- In addition, there are also occasions where employers or education providers offer short, focused, fee-based training. This may act as pre-placement intensive program, after which time the student commences an accredited course; or may be part of a company-specific induction process prior to employment.

DEFINITIONS

Clinical supervision: Supervision provided by an accredited medical sonographer, or a suitably qualified and experienced medical practitioner working in the clinical context, who takes responsibility for the oversight and guidance to a student undertaking a course for entry to the sonography profession.

Clinical training placement: A learning position undertaken in a clinical setting for the education and training of a student undertaking a course of study.

Student: Anyone undertaking an ASAR accredited sonography course.

BACKGROUND

- The education of students is the responsibility of all stakeholders; and should be viewed as a long-term investment. High quality teaching and training produces high quality sonographers and helps to retain sonographers in the workforce.



CLINICAL TRAINING PLACEMENTS FOR SONOGRAPHY STUDENTS IN AUSTRALIA

- Clinical training placements are an essential component to the education and training of sonography students, providing the opportunity for the student to integrate theory into practice; become familiar with a variety of practice environments; and build the knowledge, skills, and attributes essential for professional practice and registration.
- To be eligible to become an accredited medical sonographer, students must complete an accredited course of study¹ that includes a comprehensive clinical training program. The ASAR recommends that students be engaged in ultrasound practice for a minimum of 3 days per week over a 2-year period, full-time equivalent, in an Australian or New Zealand clinical setting.²
- The clinical supervisor plays a vital role in supporting the student during the placement, with the quality of supervision key to student learning.³ The student will initially require close supervision and instruction, but over time as they progress towards achieving competency, they will be able to undertake tasks more independently and increasingly apply their own judgement, while still requiring supervision for the overall tasks. Supervisors should also be aware of their obligations under the ASA Sonographer Code of Conduct.⁴

DISCUSSION

- There is currently a significant lack of clinical training placement positions available, with the majority of those that do exist occurring in private practice. The lack of placements reflects the significant resources and financial cost required to train a student, the limited availability of clinical supervisors, and the ongoing sonographer workforce shortage. The ASA estimates there to be a current undersupply of accredited sonographers of 20-30% and expects this to continue over the next decade.⁵ The shortage of clinical placements is the most significant barrier to overcoming the workforce shortage.
- The shortage of clinical training placement positions can place students in a vulnerable position. The ASA has been made aware of a variety of clinical training placement offerings, that we believe are not in keeping with the best interests of students or the profession.

Examples include where students are:

- given insufficient or misleading information about the clinical training placement position
- provided with insufficient supervision or resources
- asked to undertake clinical tasks unsupervised and beyond their experience and skill, or undertake unsuitable tasks such as acting as chaperones⁶
- asked to undertake unreasonable or unsuitable tasks such as reception or cleaning duties, in return for clinical training
- asked to pay unreasonable amounts of money or agree to unreasonable bonding arrangements to receive training.

In addition, examples where students:

- have opportunities intentionally withheld to unreasonably delay them from completing clinical training placement requirements, or
- experience delays when there are insufficient clinical training placement opportunities to match the size of the student cohort.
- Students may be required to relocate or travel significant distances to undertake a clinical training placement. Students need to consider the financial and other costs associated with this.
- Clinical training placements can incorporate a variety of arrangements, both paid and unpaid. In some instances, the student may pay to receive training. The arrangement can depend on the model of training being provided, whether it is undertaken in the public or private sector, the scope of practice, the education pathway, and the student's level of experience and competence.

- In all cases, clinical training placement positions must:
 - Be genuine, with a primary focus on student learning and the requirements towards professional accreditation
 - Comply with employment law⁷ and other relevant legislation
 - Provide appropriate resources, mentoring, and supervision relative to the student's stage of learning, that enable them to fulfil their course requirements and gain competency in a reasonable timeframe
 - Be undertaken in a professional manner, built on mutual respect between the student, employer, supervisor, and education provider.
- Education providers arranging student placements must ensure an equitable distribution of opportunities that ensure sufficient placements are available to meet course requirements and protect students through appropriate insurance coverage and completion of mandatory training.
- Employers should ensure they have a reasonable expectation of student competency and skills; and ensure patients receive safe and accurate examinations. Employers offering positions should ensure they clearly and accurately outline the details of the arrangements, preferably in writing. In the ASA's view, access to equipment and patients does not necessarily equate to appropriate clinical training.
- Students should ensure they understand the full details of the placement arrangement before commencing and seek advice where needed. Students who are considering paying for a clinical training position should carefully consider the total proposed cost over the duration of their course. Students should ensure they are covered by appropriate insurance; if they are undertaking tasks outside of those required by their education program, they may need to secure additional insurance themselves.
- The ASA acknowledges that the shortage of clinical training placements is a complex problem. Resolving the shortage will require sector wide collaboration between educators, employers, industry bodies, and government. Solutions to overcoming the shortage may consider incentives and support for providers, students and / or clinical supervisors particularly those in regional and rural areas, together with the development of supporting guidelines and frameworks.
- The ASA welcomes the many examples of high quality, student-focused, clinical training placements already in place, and acknowledges the commitment and ongoing support provided by employers, educators, clinical supervisors, and sonography sector stakeholders to ensuring high quality sonographer future graduates.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- The ASA advocates for sector wide collaboration to identify solutions to overcoming the shortage of clinical training placements to support existing and future sonography students.
- The ASA supports the development of guidelines and frameworks to ensure appropriate, consistent, quality clinical training placements and supervision for sonography students.



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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Sonographer Policy and Advisory Committee (SPAC)

DOCUMENT GOVERNANCE

1. **Executive sponsor/Endorsed by:** ASA Board of Directors
2. **Date of endorsement:** November 2024
3. **Area responsible:** Sonographer Policy and Advisory Committee
4. **Consumer review:** No
5. **Version:** 2 (Updated references only. July 2026)
6. **Date of Review:** November 2027