Understanding Art Therapy Graduate Employability: A Mixed Methods Study

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Abstract

Understanding employability for art therapy graduates is crucial for training programs because it allows for tailored teaching approaches and better preparation for students entering the job market. Employability includes student attributes such as professional and discipline-specific skills and competencies, as well as contextual or structural factors that influence work abilities. However, there is little evidence on what contributes to employability in art therapy. This study surveyed placement supervisors to identify the strengths and challenges they perceive in student competencies and report on contextual factors impacting employability at their organisations. Thirty placement supervisors from various community and clinical settings completed a 26-item mixed-methods online survey. The findings highlighted the strengths of art therapy students, such as their use of client-centred approaches and engagement in reflective practice. However, the results also pointed to a greater need for work-life balance and knowledge of culturally safe practices. Limited budgets were found to affect employability prospects for recent graduates as well as the need for more advocacy efforts was emphasised to demonstrate the benefits of art therapy in healthcare settings. This paper offers several recommendations for teaching programs and art therapy professional bodies to improve employability outcomes for graduates.

Keywords
Employability, art therapy, graduate, mixed methods

Key contributions

- This article contributes to the understanding of employability within art therapy by identifying key competencies and contextual factors that influence job market success for graduates.
- The study provides new evidence on the strengths and challenges perceived by placement supervisors regarding art therapy students, particularly in areas like client-centred approaches, reflective practice, and the need for knowledge in culturally safe practices.
- The findings underscore the importance of enhancing work-life balance and promoting advocacy efforts to increase the visibility and recognition of art therapy in healthcare settings, offering actionable recommendations for training programs and professional bodies.

Introduction

Employability extends beyond individual skills and attributes to encompass broader contextual factors that influence a graduate's job opportunities. In terms of individual capabilities, employability involves a comprehensive set of achievements including skills, understanding, and personal attributes that enhance a graduate's likelihood of securing employment and succeeding in their chosen occupations (Jackson & Bridgstock, 2018; Yorke, 2006). Graduates need both discipline-specific knowledge and interpersonal and practical skills to navigate and adapt to professional and personal challenges (Haselberger et al., 2012; Okolie et al., 2022). Training programs bear the responsibility of equipping graduates with these desirable workplace skills.

The professional role of an art therapist involves using art-based processes to support clients in exploring their emotions, developing self-awareness, and enhancing coping skills (AATA, 2022). As a mental health profession, art therapy draws upon a diverse range of disciplines, including art, art education, counselling, social work, and psychology. Art Therapy training programs emphasise theoretical and experiential in-class learning, complemented by hands-on experiences through clinical and community placements. Reflective practice skills are also crucial for developing inter- and intra-personal awareness, which are essential to establishing an art therapist identity (Feen-Calligan, 2005). Combined together, these learning opportunities enable graduates to integrate creative processes with psychotherapeutic techniques, providing a strong foundation in both research and practical aspects of the profession (Van Lith & Voronin, 2016).

A global comparison of art therapy education standards has shown an increase in the standardisation of training requirements set by professional associations (Potash et al., 2012). The Australian, New Zealand, and Asian Creative Arts Therapies Association (ANZACATA, 2023) has published the Professional Standards and Core Competencies for Creative Arts Therapists, delineating the essential knowledge art therapy graduates in the Asia-Pacific region must possess. This includes a thorough understanding of creative arts methods, techniques, and high ethical practice standards, providing a clear framework for institutions to prepare graduates for their professional life. All affiliated master's courses are required to adhere to these competencies as part of retaining their approval status.

However, understanding core learning competencies alone is insufficient; a broader appreciation of structural and contextual factors is necessary to grasp how a graduate can navigate the labour market (Tomlinson & Nghia, 2020). Art therapy graduates may face additional employability challenges due to the profession having a relatively young status compared to more established fields within mental health. Established professions benefit from a more extensive evidence base, long-standing positions in therapeutic contexts, and

greater recognition among managerial roles that influence hiring decisions (Jue & Ha, 2018). In addition, increased funding for mental health services from the Australian government in response to COVID-19 pressures has created more employment opportunities for (Rossell et al., 2021). The National Disability Insurance Scheme (NDIS) has also opened numerous job prospects for art practitioners in Australia (Hadley & Goggin, 2019). Conversely, the lack of approval for art therapy services under the Medicare Benefits Schedule (Australian Government Department of Health and Ageing, 2023) may deter some healthcare services from hiring graduates who cannot offer rebates to clients. Additionally, the broader Australian job market has seen a decline in full-time employment, with a rise in part-time, casual workers, and multiple job holders (Bennett, 2018).

Placement experience has proven effective in supporting the formation of art therapy professional identities (Feen-Calligan, 2012; Friedland et al., 2019), thereby enhancing graduates' preparedness for employment (Van Lith & Voronin, 2016). Research across various disciplines indicates that graduates highly value placement learning during their studies and subsequent employment (Crebert et al., 2004). Key takeaways for graduates included the importance of teamwork, responsibility, and collaborative learning, which translate into relevant professional knowledge (Crebert et al., 2004). Placement learning also significantly contributes to employability (Ferns et al., 2019) and work readiness (Business Industry and Higher Education Collaboration Council, 2007). As part of the ANZACATA requirements, Master of Art Therapy students are required to complete at least 750 placement hours, engaging in work-based learning that helps them develop a professional identity (ANZACATA, 2021).

Placement supervisors play a crucial role in evaluating the employability of art therapy trainees. Placement supervisors not only assess the competencies and skills of art therapy graduates but also provide insights into contextual factors affecting employability, such as budgeting or structural challenges. Their external perspective on student learning enhances understanding of how students develop therapist identities and apply knowledge in real-world environments. Furthermore, industry-specific knowledge regarding employment prospects and desirable graduate attributes deepens the understanding of graduates' preparedness. Despite extensive literature on graduate employability (Clarke, 2017; Succi & Canova, 2020), the employability of art therapy graduates still remains underexplored. By surveying placement supervisors, we can gain valuable insights into the factors influencing the employability of art therapy students, leading to more tailored approaches to support graduates in their career preparations.

Study aim

The aim of this study was to identify the key factors that enhance the employability of art therapy graduates. By surveying placement supervisors, the study sought to pinpoint the

professional and discipline-specific skills that are most valued for employability in the field of art therapy. Additionally, the research aimed to uncover structural and contextual barriers within agencies that may affect graduates' job prospects.

Method

Study design

This study involved administering a mixed methods survey to La Trobe University (LTU) art therapy placement supervisors between September to November, 2023. An exploratory mixed methods approach was deemed the most appropriate for several reasons. First, it allows for the collection of specific, quantitative information related to employability, providing a broad overview of the trends and patterns among placement supervisors. Second, it enables the capture of qualitative data through written responses, which offers a deeper, more nuanced understanding of the issue by allowing participants to elaborate on their experiences and perspectives (Creswell & Clark, 2018).

Ethics approval

Ethics approval was granted by the La Trobe University Human Ethics Committee (HEC23305). To take part in the study, participants read and agreed to a participant information and consent form.

Eligibility and recruitment

We used a purposive sampling strategy to recruit placement supervisors from the Placement contact details spreadsheet. We included participants who (i) were LTU Master of Art Therapy placement supervisors, (ii) had supervised an LTU art therapy student in the past two years, (iii) had supervised at least two LTU art therapy students, and (v) could speak and read basic English.

Data collection

We created a mixed-methods survey using QuestionPro Survey Software, designed to take only at most 20 minutes to complete. We employed a numerical coding system to track each respondent's answers across the data set. The questionnaire first asked about participants contextual questions regarding the placement setting, their experience as supervisors, and the number of students they had supervised. Next, a series of questions related to professional skills, based on the code of conduct principles from the Australian Health Practitioners Regulation Agency (AHPRA, 2024), followed. This code outlines principles expected of health professionals, such as prioritising clients, ensuring professional behaviour, and maintaining practitioner well-being.

Participants then answered questions about art therapy-specific skills grounded in the

Professional Standards and Core Competencies for Creative Arts Therapists (ANZACATA, 2023). Items included examples such as collaboratively establishing client goals and demonstrating proficiency in arts-based modalities. Following this, questions focused on barriers to employing art therapy graduates, aiming to identify how the socio-economic landscape or work-related processes might impact employability prospects. Finally, we explored strategies for overcoming these barriers to employability.

Data analysis

Descriptive quantitative analysis methods, including calculating frequencies, percentages, and mean values, were applied to examine trends in the quantitative data. For the qualitative data, thematic analysis was employed to identify and analyse patterns and themes, following Braun and Clarke's (2006) framework. A theme was defined as a concept that was prevalent in at least four participant responses. The first and second study authors independently highlighted statements of meaning and keywords, tabulated alongside corresponding quotes to facilitate organization and comparison.

Through thematic synthesis, individual responses were grouped into seven initial themes, which were further refined into three overarching themes by identifying similarities and overlaps (Squires, 2023). This process ensured that the final themes were comprehensive and accurately represented the data. Transparency in identifying themes was maintained by documenting each step of the analysis, from initial coding to theme development, allowing for clear tracking of how themes were derived.

To ensure authenticity, the first and second study authors collaborated on the thematic analysis, fostering a rigorous examination of the data. The third author, serving as the Course Coordinator, reviewed the entire process, including the final themes and narrative account. With their expertise and oversight, they verified that the themes were relevant to the study's intention and consistent with the original data.

Results

Study participants

Out of the 152 contacts invited to participate in the study, 53 consented (see Figure 1). After screening for eligibility, 21 respondents were excluded (seven had not been placement supervisors in the previous two years, nine had only supervised one LTU student, and five terminated the survey before completing the eligibility questions). Additionally, two participants were excluded because they terminated the survey before completing questions related to employability. This left a total of 30 placement supervisors included in the analyses, of which two terminated the survey early without completing all responses.

While the survey response rate was limited, the relevance of this low return must be considered in the context of the cohort size of students at placement (around 32 students in most placement subjects) and the specific nature of the sample. Placement supervisors constitute a relatively small and specialised group, and the responses obtained provide valuable insights into their experiences and perspectives.

Figure 1

Participant Flowchart
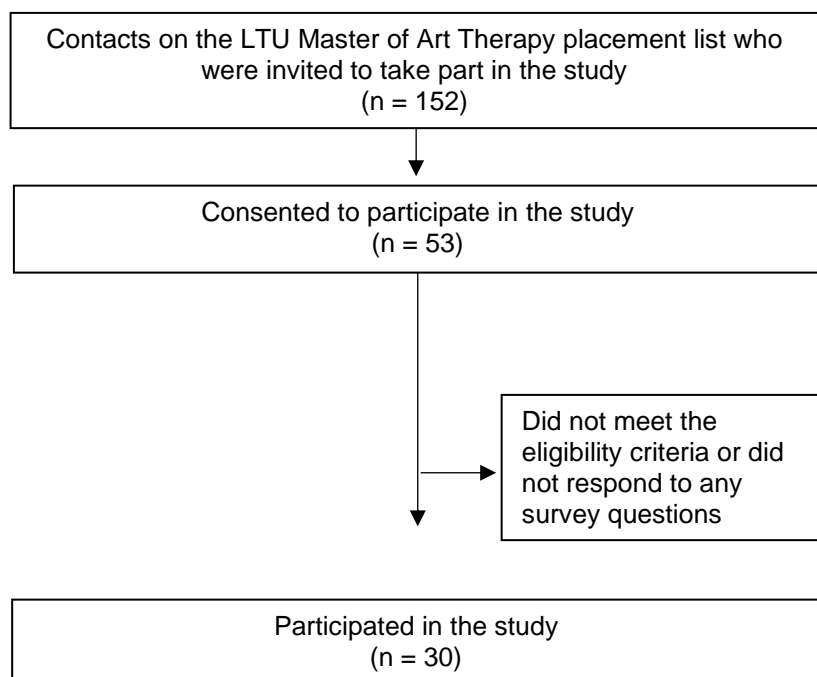
Supervisors' experience

Supervisors reported their current settings had been working with the LTU Master of Art Therapy placement program for between one and 16 years (M = 5.57 years, SD = 4.22 years, n = 30). During this time, they had supervised between two and 20 past or current LTU art therapy students (M = 4.43, SD = 3.93, n = 30). Of the supervisors, 70% worked with second-year placement students over two semesters (typically 8 months), and 30% worked with first-year placement students over one semester (typically 3 months).

Supervisors' professional backgrounds

Forty percent of the supervisors were either art therapists (n = 11) or creative arts therapists (n = 1), with a range of other job titles including psychologists (n = 3), teachers (n = 3), volunteer and/or lifestyle coordinators (n = 3), occupational therapists (n = 2), spiritual care

manager (n = 1), social worker (n = 1), principal (n = 1), assistant principal (n = 1), clinical educator (n = 1), mental health nurse (n = 1), and physiotherapist (n = 1). Most art therapists and creative art therapists reported a clear understanding of what art therapy is (92%, n = 11). Supervisors with other job titles reported varying levels of knowledge: some (33%, n = 6), good (44%, n = 8), or clear (22%, n = 4).

Placement settings

The placement sites were diverse, including educational (n = 11), clinical (hospital n = 4; mental health n = 7; physical health n = 1), aged care (n = 4), and community (n = 3) settings (see Table 1). The art therapists and creative art therapist predominantly worked in clinical settings (n = 6), but also in educational (n = 3) and community settings (n = 3).

Table 1

Placement Settings

Which criteria best describes the placement setting?	Frequency	Percentage
Educational	11	36.67
Clinical (mental health)	7	23.33
Aged care	4	13.33
Clinical (hospital general)	4	13.33
Community setting (centre, not-for-profit)	3	10.00
Clinical (physical health)	1	3.33

Client age ranges

Supervisors reported a broad age range of clients at the placement settings, including children and adolescents (n = 13), young adults and adults (n = 11), and older adults (n = 5). One supervisor noted that people of all ages attended the setting (see Table 2).

Table 2

Client Age Ranges at Placement Settings

Which criteria best describes the clients of the placement setting?	Frequency	Percentages
Adults (18 – 65 years)	10	33.33
Children (0 – 11 years)	6	20.00
Older adults and/or the elderly (65+ years)	5	16.67
Both children and adolescents (0 – 17 years)	4	13.33
Adolescents (12 – 17 years)	3	10.00

Which criteria best describes the clients of the placement setting?	Frequency	Percentages
Other: All of the described age ranges	1	3.33
Other: Young adults (17-25 years)	1	3.33

Client experiences

Supervisors reported a broad range of prevalent client experiences at the placement settings, with complex needs, trauma, and mental illness being the most frequently reported experiences (see Table 3).

Table 3

Prevalent Client Experiences at Placement Settings

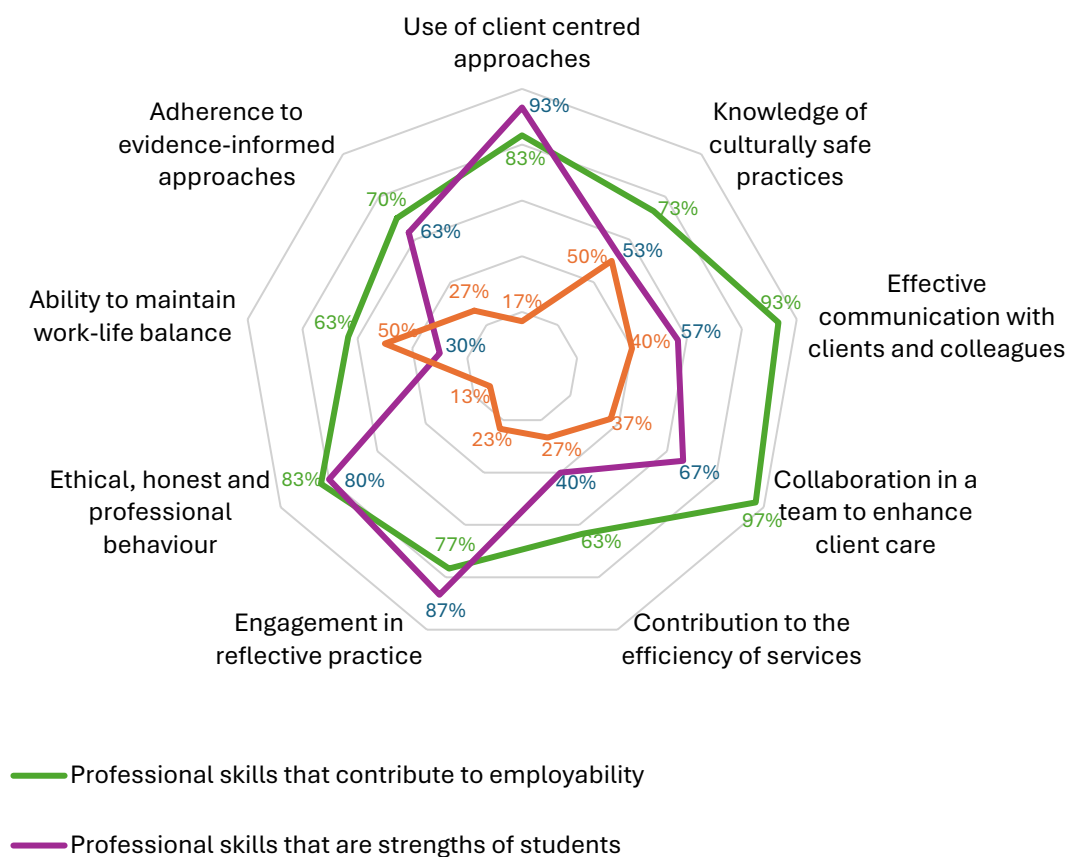| Most prevalent experiences of the clients	Frequency	Percentages
Complex needs	26	86.67
Trauma	23	76.67
Mental Illness	22	73.33
Disability	16	53.33
Psychosocial health	16	53.33
Isolation	14	46.67
Grief and loss	13	43.33
Learning and education	11	36.67
Physical Illness	10	33.33
Medical needs	9	30.00
Medium safety risk	9	30.00
High safety risk	8	26.67
Low safety risk	7	23.33
Homelessness	6	20.00
Rehabilitation	5	16.67
Other – Holocaust survivors/ Dementia	1	3.33
Other – Family violence	1	3.33

Quantitative results

Skills that contribute to employability - Professional skills

When participants were asked to select professional skills they believe contribute most to the employability of art therapy graduates, the most frequently selected skills were 'collaboration in a team to enhance client care' (97%) and 'effective communication with clients and colleagues' (93%) (see Figure 2). Participants identified 'use of client-centred approaches' (97%), 'engagement in reflective practice' (87%), and 'ethical, honest, and professional

behaviour' (80%) as the strengths of LTU art therapy students. Skills that could be further developed included the 'ability to maintain work-life balance' (50%). This was highlighted across all settings, including educational (*n = 6*), clinical (*n = 5*), community (*n = 2*) and aged care (*n = 2*). In addition, 50% of supervisors selected 'knowledge of culturally safe practices', which was predominantly reported from supervisors in clinical settings (*n = 7*), and then educational (*n = 4*), community (*n = 3*) and aged care settings (*n = 1*).

Figure 2

Professional Skills that Contribute to Employability

Use of client centred approaches — 93% / 83%
Knowledge of culturally safe practices — 73% / 53% / 50% / 17%
Effective communication with clients and colleagues — 93% / 57% / 40%
Collaboration in a team to enhance client care — 97% / 67% / 37%
Contribution to the efficiency of services — 63% / 40% / 27% / 23%
Engagement in reflective practice — 87% / 77% / 13%
Ethical, honest and professional behaviour — 83% / 80% / 30% / 50%
Ability to maintain work-life balance — 63%
Adherence to evidence-informed approaches — 70% / 63% / 27%

—— Professional skills that contribute to employability

—— Professional skills that are strengths of students

Contribution to employability – Art therapy specific skills

Participants highlighted the abilities 'to build rapport and empathise with the client' (90%) and to 'understand the limits of art therapy practice and seek advice or make referrals to other professional services' (83%) as key art therapy-specific skills contributing to employability (see Figure 3). They viewed the abilities to 'build rapport and empathise with clients' (76%) and to 'support clients in the use of creative expression' (76%) as strengths of LTU art therapy students. The ability to 'understand the limits of art therapy practice and seek advice or make

referrals to other professionals/services' (55%) was noted as an area for further development. This opportunity for further development was predominantly reported from supervisors in clinical ($n = 9$), and educational ($n = 4$), aged care ($n = 3$) and community ($n = 1$) settings.

Figure 3

Art Therapy Specific Skills That Contribute to Employability
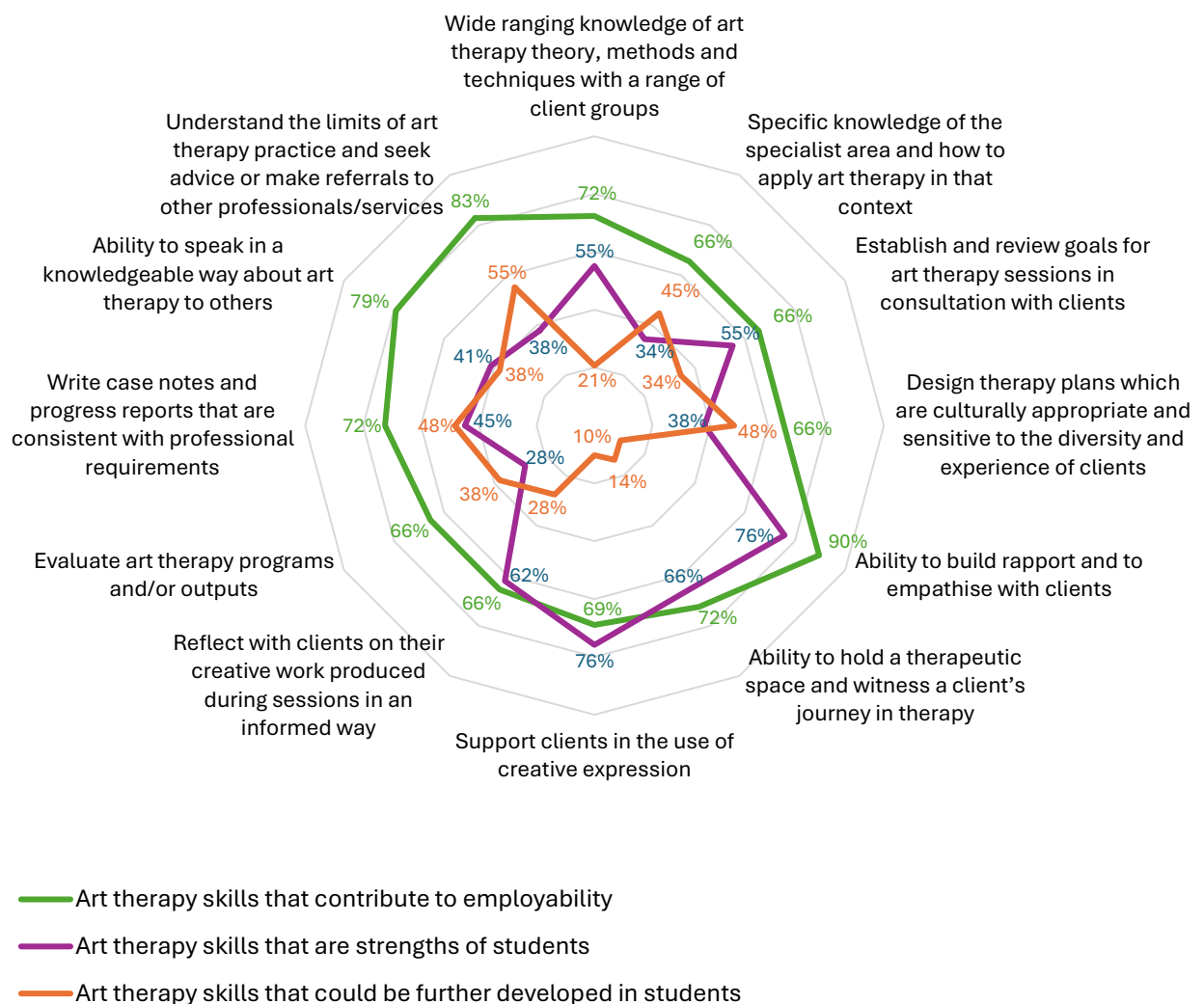
Barriers to employability

Most supervisors reported that an art therapist was employed at their organisation (Yes 57%, No 39%, Unsure 4%, n = 28), and the majority agreed there were barriers to employing art therapy graduates (Yes 64%, No 32%, Unsure 4%, n = 28). The most frequently reported barriers were limited budget and the current financial climate (see Table 4).

Table 4

Barriers to Employing an Art Therapy Graduate

Barriers to Employment	Frequency	Percentage
Limited budget at the organisation	16	84.21
Current financial climate	9	47.37
Lack of understanding of how to employ an art therapist due to the profession not being listed in relevant award agreements	6	31.58
Structural or managerial support for a position is lacking	4	21.05
Uncertainty about a sufficient need for the service to justify a position	4	21.05
Preference for engaging art therapy students over employing an art therapist	3	15.79
A lack of certainty around how art therapy will integrate into client services	2	10.53
Lack of regulation of the art therapy profession	2	10.53
Preference for recruiting an art therapist who has been working in the field for longer than a recent art therapy graduate	2	10.53
Suitability/cultural fit of an art therapist within the multidisciplinary team	2	10.53
Current ineligibility of graduate art therapists to offer financial rebates (such as through Medicare)	1	5.26
Other	1	5.26

Strategies to support employment opportunities

When asked which strategies might support their organisation in hiring an art therapy graduate, 50% of supervisors selected a 'greater understanding of the unique contributions of art therapists as opposed to other health professionals' (see Table 5). Most supervisors agreed that their organisation would be open to hiring an art therapy graduate in the near future (Yes 67.9%, No 3.6%, Unsure 28.6%, n = 28).

Table 5

Strategies To Support the Hiring of an Art Therapy Graduate

Strategies to Support Hiring	Frequency	Percentage
Greater understanding of the unique contributions of art therapists as opposed to other health professionals	14	50.00
Greater understanding that art therapists are governed by a professional body (ANZACATA) and their requirements for membership (i.e. ongoing supervision and professional development)	13	46.43
Greater understanding of salaries and renumeration	12	42.86
Greater awareness that certain art therapists can access NDIS	11	39.29

funding and Private Health Insurance rebates		
Evidence fact sheet on the effectiveness of art therapy for the specific client population	10	35.71
Other	3	10.71
Presentation or information on art therapy from university (such as a flyer that can be circulated for staff)	0	0.00

Qualitative findings

Twenty-four out of 30 participants (80%) provided text answers to elaborate on their responses to the multiple-choice questions. As shown in Table 6, we identified seven themes from the data, which we grouped under three overarching themes: (i) Art therapy students bring diverse skill sets to placement settings, (ii) challenges and barriers to employing art therapy graduates, and (iii) professional development areas for art therapy students.

Art therapy students bring diverse skill sets to placement settings

Twenty-two participants (92%) highlighted the diverse skills that art therapy students brought to their placements. Supervisors frequently noted that placement students provided clients with a safe space to express their creativity and emotions, which is beneficial for those who don't want to engage in talk therapy. Many supervisors also praised the students' knowledge of art therapy frameworks, theories, and processes, including their client-centred approach and understanding of evidence-based practice. Additionally, students contributed unique skills and perspectives to multidisciplinary teams by offering a creative and reflective outlet within an otherwise medical model of healing.

Challenges and barriers to employing art therapy graduates

Thirteen participants pointed out budget constraints as a significant barrier to employing art therapy graduates, often preferring to hire more experienced art therapists or those with broader skills who can take on multiple roles. One participant noted, "Due to financial constraints, we can only provide very limited hours of work for an art therapist for art therapy-specific activities as we need to offer a broad range of activities of interest to our aged care resident cohort." Participants also emphasized the need for greater recognition and advocacy for the profession, suggesting that more organisational-level work is needed to include art therapy in public health and clinical spaces.

Professional development areas for art therapy students

Nine participants identified professional development areas that could enhance employment opportunities for art therapy students. They suggested that placement preparedness and clinical skills could be strengthened, such as gaining greater confidence in risk and safety assessment and planning. Additionally, participants highlighted the importance of self-care and professional boundaries to ensure the longevity of careers in art therapy.

Table 6

Thematic Synthesis

	Overarching Themes		Themes	Example Quotes
1.	**Art therapy students bring diverse skill sets to placement settings** (*n* = 22)	1.	A safe space is provided to clients to support their creative and emotional expression (*n* = 15)	*"They … are able to engage students in wellbeing supports where often other services have failed to do so."* (Participant 5) *"The' art' of AT is that the medium is non-threatening for mental health patients… they are then able to allow their feeling to be expressed without any perceived judgement."* (Participant 11)
		2.	Art therapy students demonstrate knowledge and application of art therapy frameworks, theories, and processes (*n* = 12)	*"All students of La Trobe that I have supervised have been deeply reflective with a solid understanding of psychotherapy principles and self as therapist… Art therapy students hold strong understanding of foundational therapy skills including engagement, containment, and personal centred treatment planning."* (Participant 25) *"A good grounding in evidence-based practice; and theoretical and clinical knowledge that is consolidated through practical experience in the clinical setting during placements."* (Participant 26)
		3.	Unique skills and perspectives are contributed to multidisciplinary teams (*n* = 9)	*"Provision of a creative and reflective outlet in an otherwise medical model of healing."* (Participant 4) *"A fresh perspective in how to work with student with specific needs. They ensure the school can better meet the needs of students who have a complex background/intellectual disability."* (Participant 9) *"Art Therapists hold a unique skillset, that differs from any other discipline in clinical settings. By being able to provide Art Therapy specific dialogue within clinical spaces allows other health disciplines an opportunity to reflect upon their mutual clients utilising an alternate therapeutic lens."* (Participant 22)

	Overarching Themes		Themes	Example Quotes
2.	Challenges and barriers to employing art therapy graduates (*n* = 13)	4.	Due to budget constraints, it is preferable to hire an art therapist with more experience or with broader skills (*n* = 11)	*"If there is only funding for one art therapy role an organisation may be more inclined to fund someone with more experience."* (Participant 6) *"We can see the value of an Art Therapist we just don't have the allocated funding or support from corporate upper management."* (Participant 10) *"Due to financial constraints, we are only able to provide very limited hours of work for an art therapist for art therapy specific activities as we need to provide a broad range of activities of interest to our aged care resident cohort."* (Participant 17)
		5.	There is a need for greater recognition and advocacy of the profession (*n* = 6)	*"If art therapy was endorsed and backed by the governments mental health graduate program this would prompt large organisations to employ graduate art therapists."* (Participant 6) "*More work needs to be done at an organisational level to advocate for Art Therapy to be included in public health and clinical spaces"* (Participant 22)
3.	Professional development areas for art therapy students (*n* = 9)	6.	Placement preparedness and clinical skills could be strengthened (*n* = 6)	*"An understanding of the area for placement. Give a short time in that placement for orientation prior to beginning the placement time. Particularly mental health"* (Participant 11) *"It would be great to see students having more exposure and confidence in risk and safety assessment and planning – both mental health and family violence."* (Participant 25)
		7.	Self-care and professional boundaries could be enhanced (*n* = 4)	*"Clearer development of therapeutic and professional boundaries."* (Participant 12) *"I feel more education on how to self-care for longevity of services could be imparted at this level of training."* (Participant 16)

Discussion

This study explored placement supervisors' perspectives on the professional and art therapy-specific skills that contribute to the employability of art therapy graduates, highlighting potential barriers to employability. The data revealed strengths in art therapy students, areas for development, budgeting challenges, and a lack of understanding of the profession that impact graduate employment outcomes.

Skills and competencies

Employability extends beyond individual skills and attributes to encompass broader contextual factors that influence a graduate's job opportunities (Yorke, 2006). The art therapy students demonstrated diverse skill sets in their placements, including reflexivity and client-centred approaches, which support creative and emotional expression. These strengths align with the values of art therapy as a profession (ANZACATA, 2023) and reflect the development of professional identities and skills that positively contribute to employment prospects. Supervisors highlighted the students' abilities to build rapport, develop empathy, and engage in reflective practice as key strengths, which are also crucial for successful art therapy practice (Feen-Calligan, 2005).

However, maintaining work-life balance, understanding when to make referrals, and knowledge of culturally safe practices emerged as areas for further development. The need for work-life balance is critical, given the high prevalence of burnout among healthcare professionals (Clements-Cortes, 2013; Fowler, 2006; Orkibi, 2016). Addressing this in the curriculum could better prepare students for the demands of the profession. Work-life balance training in a master's course could include modules on time management, stress reduction techniques, self-care practices, and strategies for setting professional boundaries. This training could also involve creative based activities and reflections that focus on the importance of maintaining personal well-being while managing professional responsibilities.

Overall, this finding is consistent with a longstanding trend observed across multiple courses, as documented by Robb (2014). Although the course includes a subject on culturally responsive practices in art therapy, the findings suggested that students may understand the theoretical concepts but face challenges in applying this knowledge in real-world placement contexts (Talwar et al., 2022). This indicates that further strategies are needed to bridge the gap between theoretical knowledge and practical application. An ethnographic case study on medical students' cultural competence development during clinical placements found that this development is an individually varied process that occurs through immersion in diverse healthcare environments, observation of practices, interactions with professionals and patients, and reflective thinking (Liu & Li, 2023). These findings suggest that art therapy training programs could benefit from a similar approach, providing students with immersive and reflective experiences to enhance their cultural competence.

Some potential strategies to enhance cultural responsiveness in art therapy training include facilitating opportunities for students to observe culturally appropriate practices, such as through shadowing experienced art therapists and participating in debrief sessions, which allows for practical learning and critical reflection on these experiences (Johnson et al., 2021). Organising placements in a variety of community and clinical settings that serve diverse populations can help students understand different cultural contexts and healthcare needs, and can encourage interaction with a wide range of healthcare professionals, clients, and their families. This exposure to diverse perspectives and communication styles allows students to experience and navigate differences in cultural norms, values, and practices. Integrating more intentional reflective practice into the curriculum by requiring students to maintain art-based journals during their placements and holding regular reflection sessions with supervisors can help students critically analyse their experiences and deepen their understanding of culturally responsive practices (Potash et al., 2012). Implementing a feedback system where supervisors provide regular, structured feedback on students' cultural humility development can highlight strengths and areas for improvement, guiding students toward more relevant and impactful practices (Jackson, 2020).

Barriers to employability

Budget constraints were highlighted as a significant barrier to employing art therapy graduates. Supervisors noted that financial limitations often lead to part-time or casual positions, with a preference for hiring more experienced therapists or those with broader skills who can take on multiple roles. This issue is not unique to the course but reflects broader challenges in the field. While the course curriculum includes discussions on the economic aspects of the profession, additional emphasis on advocacy and financial management might help graduates navigate these challenges (Haselberger et al., 2012).

The lack of recognition and understanding of the art therapy profession also contributes to the difficulty in justifying entry-level art therapy positions (Tomlinson & Nghia, 2020). Supervisors emphasised the need for greater awareness of the unique contributions of art therapists compared to other health professionals. Promoting understanding of the practice can support employability prospects, as evidenced by positive placement experiences leading to employment opportunities for many students (Crebert et al., 2004). Advocacy by professional bodies, practicing art therapists, and students is crucial in this regard (Jue & Ha, 2018).

Limitations of the study

This study contributes valuable knowledge about art therapy graduate skills and employment opportunities in an under-researched area. By surveying placement supervisors, this study has highlighted perspectives of industry professionals who can provide unique insights into desirable professional and art therapy-specific skills, and how art therapy training and awareness of the field can further support work prospects for graduates. However, several limitations should be acknowledged. One significant limitation is that the results cannot be

generalised to reflect the opinions of all art therapy placement supervisors, as the participants included only a small number of supervisors to art therapy students from one master of art therapy course.

Additionally, the design of the study, which included an anonymous online questionnaire, meant that the study authors were unable to follow up with participants to clarify answers or ask further questions. For instance, some supervisors might have had nuanced opinions on certain skills or training needs that were not fully captured in their initial responses. Furthermore, although the surveys were based on competency guidelines for art therapists and affiliated mental health professionals, understanding desirable graduate attributes in this field remains complex. This complexity arises from the variety of clients and settings that art therapists work with, each requiring diverse skill sets and client-specific knowledge. For example, the competencies needed to work effectively with children in a school setting may differ significantly from those required for working with elderly clients in a clinical setting.

To address these limitations and improve future research, several recommendations can be made. First, future studies should aim to include a larger and more diverse sample of art therapy placement supervisors from various institutions and regions to ensure a broader representation of perspectives. Second, incorporating follow-up interviews or focus groups could provide deeper insights and allow for clarification of responses, enhancing the richness and accuracy of the data collected. Third, research should consider the specific competencies required for different client groups and settings, potentially through case studies or targeted surveys that explore the unique demands of various contexts. Finally, conducting longitudinal studies that track art therapy graduates over time could provide valuable information on how their skills and employment opportunities evolve, offering insights into the long-term impact of art therapy training programs.

Conclusion

Graduate employability in art therapy is an under-researched area that requires further investigation. This study highlighted key professional and art therapy-specific skills that placement supervisors believe contribute to positive employment outcomes. These skills include the use of client-centred approaches, engagement in reflective practice, and ethical, honest, and professional behaviour. The ability to build rapport with clients and support their creative expression were also identified as key strengths of art therapy students. However, the study also identified areas for further development, such as maintaining work-life balance, enhancing knowledge of culturally safe practices, and understanding the limits of art therapy practice, including when to make referrals.

Despite the small sample size, the findings underscore the diverse strengths that art therapy students bring to placement settings. These insights can inform future curriculum development and training programs to better prepare graduates for the professional challenges they will face

in the future.

Further investigation is warranted into how art therapy graduates may be employed under different professional titles and whether this increases their career prospects. Additionally, the role of advocacy in promoting the understanding of what art therapists do and how this differs from other healthcare roles is crucial. Training institutions, practitioners, and professional bodies should emphasise advocacy to enhance recognition and support for the profession. Another area of inquiry should focus on how art therapy graduates enter the job market, including whether they start under different professional titles and if they typically begin in casual roles before transitioning to part-time or full-time positions. Understanding these career trajectories can provide valuable insights for training programs, helping to equip students with the skills and knowledge necessary for successful transitions from graduation to employment.

Disclosure Statement

The authors report there are no competing interests to declare.

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