Australian Psychology Accreditation Council

# Towards Good Practice Guide

## Simulated Learning Activities (SLA)

Version 1 (November 2026)

# APAC Towards Good Practice Guides: Simulated Learning Activities (SLA)

## Purpose

Simulated learning activities[1](SLA) is widely used in medical, nursing, and allied health education and training to support development of required competencies and is becoming a common tool for training health practitioners in response to an increased emphasis on safe practice and the advancement of technology (Aphra, 2025). Psychology education and training increasingly recognises pedagogically sound SLA as a way to develop competencies through structured and supervised, active learning experiences that are clearly linked to learning outcomes and professional competencies. SLA is an educational approach that uses interactive, realistic activities and scenarios to offer students practice with real-world tasks and make decisions in a safe, supported and supervised environment.

Following feedback from education providers and APAC assessors seeking greater clarity as to what may be an appropriate use of SLA, APAC, through a partnership with Australian Psychology Placement Alliance (APPA)(in consultation with Australian Association of Psychology Training Clinics (AAPTC), Heads of Psychology Australia (HPA), and Psychology Research and Innovation in Simulation (PriSIM) group), have developed this Towards Good Practice Guide document providing supportive guidance for developing and implementing SLA for accreditation evidence purposes. The guide covers SLA in the context of practical skills training, as a component of an accredited and approved program of study.

APAC's Accreditation Standards take an outcomes-focused approach and consequently, the Evidence Guide does not prescribe the use of SLA but does permit SLA as part of programs both in preparation for placement and as a component of placement. This document is intended to be used in conjunction with the Accreditation Standards and Evidence Guide as good-practice guidance, aligned with the Psychology Board of Australia (PsyBA) Professional Practice Standards, to assist education providers and APAC assessors in designing, evidencing and assessing SLA consistently and transparently across psychology programs.

## Relevant Accreditation Standards Criteria applying to SLA

The following 2025 APAC Accreditation Standards criteria relevant to SLA are:

**APAC Standard 1, criterion 1.6i** Before providing psychological services as part of a program, students: Have demonstrated appropriate knowledge and skills for safe practice under supervision.

**APAC Standard 3, Criterion 3.5** All programs have the learning and assessment resources to sustain the quality of education that is required to ensure the achievement of the program learning outcomes across all delivery sites and modalities.

[1] Also known as simulation-based learning (SBL) and simulation-based education (SBE)

**APAC Standard 3, Criterion 3.6** Learning and teaching methods and environments are designed and used to enable students to achieve the program learning outcomes when assessed.

**APAC Standard 3, Criterion 3.7** The quality, quantity and variety of professional practice education is sufficient to produce graduates competent to practise across a range of settings.

**APAC Standard 5, Criterion 5.3** Multiple assessment tools, modes and techniques are used to assess program learning outcomes.

**APAC Standard 3, Criterion 3.9** The principles of interprofessional education and collaborative practice are included as a learning outcome in the program.

## How does APAC recognise SLA?

APAC recognises high-quality SLA can contribute to competency attainment and demonstration as part of an accredited psychology program. Whilst this has previously been stipulated as a part of skills training within Level 3 programs, APAC has now introduced an allowance of up to a maximum of 10 percent of DCA within Level 3/4 and Level 4 programs. SLA is a valuable tool for the development of foundational skills and provides opportunities for students to engage in placement activities which they may not otherwise be exposed to in their placements but are required to meet graduate competency requirements. APAC requires education providers to demonstrate that SLA is of a high quality and meets the Accreditation Standards.

## What are Simulated Learning Activities (SLA)?

APAC defines SLA as "Simulation includes a wide range of simulated learning activities including roleplays and a range of simulated assessments, interviews, and interventions. They aim to provide opportunities for safe exposure to challenging or uncommon practice experiences or events; to support the application of specific relevant knowledge and skills; to provide experience with inter-professional practice; to increase student competence; and improve and evaluate practice-relevant performance in a controlled environment." (APAC, 2019).

SLA also provides the opportunity to:

- Support the scaffolded development of specific relevant knowledge and skills, bridging the gap between theory and practice,
- support safe learning experiences in which skills can be practiced and foundational competencies demonstrated without detrimental impacts to clients and/or students,
- practice risk management skills, address ethical issues, and ensure safe exposure to challenging or uncommon practice experiences, and low-prevalence presentations or events,
- enhance control over curriculum through supporting breadth and equality of learning experiences,
- provide experience in inter-professional and collaborative practice,

- improve student engagement and outcomes through increased confidence and competence in being better prepared for placements,
- to improve and evaluate practice-relevant performance in a controlled, standardised environment,
- allow opportunities for students to engage in, and demonstrate, practice in required cultural competency development,
- allow placement experiences to be reproducible and therefore consistent within and across student cohorts, and
- provide opportunities for remediation actions for students needing focused competency development

SLA can also address common barriers for traditional placement experiences, such as limited availability and geographical considerations, and consistency across placement experiences (Shelley, et al., 2025).

Further, results of a survey conducted by the APPESWG (2021b, p.12) suggest students "*perceived the benefits of SLA to include providing an opportunity to learn and apply skills in a safe environment and receive feedback where they were not placing the public at risk*" whilst also increasing confidence in skill development and application.

In a study examining the effectiveness of SLA in competency development, Rice et al. (2026) found core foundational competencies were significantly improved in all domains (specifically noting cultural awareness and self-reflection showing the most significant growth), as assessed by PsyBA Board-approved supervisors, using the COPPR standardised measure of trainee competency development (Rice et al., 2025).

SLA provides opportunities for education providers to make consistent placement experiences reproducible within and across cohorts (Rice et al., 2022) and can assist with benchmarking across education providers. It also provides opportunities for repeated practice to develop competence, which can be highly valuable when providing remediation for students needing focused competency development.

SLA that scaffolds learning in competency development and demonstration, that complements, rather than replaces, 'traditional' educational approaches, such as placements, is likely to enhance learning and preparation for 'real life' placement experiences.

SLA is recognised as a tool which can be used in work-integrated learning (WIL) to enhance the development of employability and workforce skills[2] and was identified as a viable interprofessional education and collaborative practice (IPE) opportunity for clinical psychology students through IPE simulated case scenarios and debriefs with other allied health and medical students[3]. This shows how SLA could be used to address criterion 3.9 of

[2] Refer to Orrell (2011). Good Practice Report: Work-Integrated learning, for more information on the use of SLA in WIL.
[3] Refer to Attoe et al. (2019). Student Interprofessional Mental Health Simulation (SIMHS): Evaluating the Impact on Medical and Nursing Students, and Clinical Psychology Trainees, for more information.

the APAC Accreditation Standards, requiring education providers to evidence the use of IPL in psychology training programs.

## APAC's position on the use of SLA in placement and skills training

APAC recognises the value of SLA as an opportunity to enhance the student learning experience and encourages education providers to develop justifiable methods to incorporate this into placement and skills training in programs.

For **Level 3** (5th year) programs, APAC permits the use of SLA, stating "*Placement and skills training may use simulation and other forms of skills training as part of direct client activities and client-related activities.*"(APAC 2026, p.24). Education providers should approach the use of SLA in Level 3 programs in a structured, stepped manner, focusing on foundational competency development in preparation for work with real clients in a traditional placement setting (if part of the program's design) and in preparation for the PsyBA +1 internship program.

Previously, APAC has not stipulated the number of SLA hours that could be recorded as DCA **Level 3/4** (5th and 6th or 5th, 6th and 7th) and **Level 4** (6th year) programs, however, APPESWG (2021) recommended APAC give greater recognition of SLA as an integral component of professional psychology training and recognition for students enrolled in these programs to demonstrate relevant graduate competencies. While variable and program-dependent, APAC's current position is that a maximum of 10 percent of DCA hours can include contemporary and high-quality SLA. Education providers are encouraged but not required to introduce or use SLA as part of their programs, and APAC does not prescribe what SLA activities can be used in programs. Rather, education providers evidence that the SLA included in their programs is evidence-informed and related to Graduate Competencies.

When considering if SLA can contribute to DCA, education providers are encouraged to consider the following:

- Does the SLA meet the APPESWG (2021a, b) nine key criteria ( "What is Good SLA?" )?,
- Has a clear rationale been provided for the use of the SLA?
- Has the SLA been embedded and structured within the program's design and pedagogical approaches? Rather than as a means to 'top up' students that may be low on DCA hours?
- When and why the education provider claims SLA as DCA:
    - To prepare students to demonstrate competent practice with real clients (typically best placed prior to direct client contact).
    - To prepare students for high acuity, low occurrence (HALO) events, which students may not encounter on placements but for which they are required to demonstrate competency.

## What is good SLA?

The Australian Postgraduate Psychology Education Simulation Working Group (APPESWG) (2021a, b) proposed **nine key criteria** for what constitutes acceptable SLA within psychology

training ("What is good SLA?"). APAC encourages education providers and assessors to consider these criteria when developing and evaluating SLA as part of programs:

- **Competency-based** – directly linked to the development and assessment of professional psychology competencies
- **Opportunity for new learning** - the SLA should be commensurate with the development stage of the student and provide opportunity for new learning/experiences or an extension of previously acquired skills
- **Parallels real-life psychology practice** – providing authentic, ecologically valid professional situations that students will encounter in their professional career
- **Trainee active participation** – experiential and active participation of the student, not simply passive observation, rote learning or didactic presentations
- **Structured processes** – SLA should be designed and implemented in a structured, targeted fashion with clear procedures documented for all involved
- **Supervised** – to ensure oversight of learning, safe implementation and review of outcome of the activity
- **Reviews and feedback on trainee performance** – provision of summative or formative feedback regarding performance, which is structured, allowing clear and direct linkage to the development of competencies
- **Opportunity for trainee reflection** – explicit reflection of learning and contribution to professional competency development and how this informs future practice
- **Opportunity for stakeholder feedback** – including program authority, assessors, supervisors, students, and simulated clients to ensure the activity remains fit for purpose

Further, Rice et al. (2022, p. 2) suggest "*presentations that are utilised within simulated placements should be authentic and mirror typical clinical presentations. Simulated placements should include simulation of scheduling sessions/appointments, note taking, administration, inter-professional liaison and reporting, report writing, ethical decision making, and demonstrating professionalism.*" Consistent with this, Oxlad et al. (2022) found students reported Simulated Based Learning benefits diminished when it is unstructured, unstandardised, and seemingly inauthentic.

Rice et. al. (2026) highlights the importance of placement experiences in developing both foundational and functional competencies in students. Given this, SLA has been demonstrated to be highly beneficial in the early stages of training, whilst also remaining relevant at all stages of training.

Some valid examples of SLA include, but are not limited to[4]:

[4] For more examples of SLA in psychology training, please refer to the Australian Postgraduate Psychology Simulation Education Working Group (APPESWG). (2021). A New Reality: The Role of Simulated Learning Activities in Postgraduate Psychology Training Programs.

- structured role-play with standardised patients or trained actors, in which the character is scripted and developed by a trained academic,
- computer-based simulation in the form of virtual chat or virtual reality (which includes two and three-dimensional sensory experiences to enhance authenticity),
- competency-based 'hurdle' or 'gatekeeper' demonstration tasks such as simulated intake, risk assessment, feedback, formulation, intervention, or consultation sessions,
- simulated psychometric testing or feedback tasks,
- observed or recorded simulations, or peer to peer simulation followed by active student engagement e.g. student reflection, note writing, formulation and treatment planning, commentary on decision points, and supervisor review,
- simulations mapped to specific competencies and assessed using rubrics or OSCE-like methods,
- experiential client experiences aimed at empathy development and perspective taking e.g. role-play 'client' experience in which students research and learn the perspectives of clients and construction of case scenarios (e.g. understanding diagnostic criteria) of typical presentations, and reflection of their experience.

Examples of activities that should **not** be considered as SLA:

- casual peer practice without structured design,
- unsupervised role-play,
- general classroom discussion,
- watching videos without active practice

To assist and support education providers in ensuring the SLA is sound and consistent with the (What is Good SLA?) nine criteria, the Psychology Research and Innovation in Simulation (PriSIM) group have developed a consensus measure for assessing SLA, based on the postgraduate psychology SLA best-practice guidelines (Keong, Y. et al., 2026). The 45-item Quality in Psychology Simulation Instrument (QPSI) is freely available to education providers to assist with the development of new and modification of existing SLA for accreditation purposes at all levels of psychology training curricula. Keong, et. al, (2026, p3) note *"Importantly, such an instrument can transform SBE in psychology from ad-hoc activities that are introduced by educators because "it is a good idea", into systematically and rigorously designed SLA that adhere to psychology-specific SLA quality criteria."*

## Ethical considerations in SLA

*"Considerations especially around supervision and the development of professional and ethical practice within a simulated learning environment need to be made to effectively apply the APPESWG Guidelines within a placement context"* (Rice, et. al, 2022, p3).

Education providers must consider the ethical issues related to the use of SLA in psychology training.

Whilst the ethical priority in 'real' psychological practice is public and client safety, in SLA the focus is ensuring the psychological safety of all participants whilst maintaining the quality and

integrity of the SLA. Education providers need to proactively design SLA that accounts for the potential of student participants to become distressed or be challenged by issues raised in the activity. The student participants should be briefed prior to the SLA that the aim of the activity is learning, not therapeutic gain. This briefing should include information on consent and opt-out procedures and confidentiality requirements.

The APPESWG (2021b) provides extensive guidance on the ethical considerations in the development, implementation, and review of SLA practices, particularly when another student/peer is the simulated client. It also discusses the roles and responsibilities of everyone involved in SLA, including academic staff, the supervisor, the simulated client, and the simulated therapist[5].

## SLA use in Level 3 programs

As noted above, for **Level 3** programs, APAC states "*Placement and skills training may use simulation and other forms of skills training as part of direct client activities and client-related activities*" (APAC, 2026, p. 24). An education provider can use SLA to fulfil the total placement and skills training requirements in a Level 3 program. However, whilst this is permitted and is currently occurring within some Level 3 programs, APAC advises education providers to carefully consider their use of SLA solely to meet the Level 3 placement and skills training requirements. Good-quality SLA should be seen as a foundational, competency development tool. Exposure to a range of placement experiences in a Level 3 program is likely to best prepare students to meet the APAC Level 3 Professional graduate competencies.

In circumstances in which an education provider has decided to use SLA for the entire 300-hour placement and skills training requirement, the education provider should consider the above nine key criteria ("What is Good SLA?") proposed by the APPESWG (2021b), and context provided by Rice et. al. (2022, p.3) "*the guidelines specifically for the use of simulation with professional psychology placements, with a focus on the Australian context*". When developing and implementing 'full' SLA placements for Level 3 programs, education providers and APAC assessors are encouraged to refer to these specific guidelines (referenced above). SLA should be focused on, and mapped to, the APAC Level 3 Professional graduate competencies to ensure graduating students meet these competencies and are prepared to enter the PsyBA (+1) internship program. These guideline documents denote supervision for these types of placements as requiring the activity to be appropriately supervised in accordance with the provider's supervision model consistent with that provided for 'traditional in-vivo placements' in keeping with relevant APAC/PsyBA requirements,

Considerations for SLA conducted online for Level 3 placements:

- Online SLA needs to be embedded in the program's design, monitoring and review

[5] When developing SLA, please refer to the Australian Postgraduate Psychology Simulation Education Working Group (APPESWG) (2021) A New Reality: The Role of Simulated Learning Activities in Postgraduate Psychology Training Programs.

framework, so that it is a key component and structure of the program, and the education provider has methods of monitoring how SLA is meeting the program learning outcomes and supporting students to meet APAC Level 3 Professional graduate competencies,

- the placement activity to have structured design and be interactive, with clear guidelines for students and supervisors in processes relating to practice and evaluation,
- opportunities for students to have authentic experiences and provide opportunities to have simulated experiences of 'non-clinical' aspects of professional psychological practice, e.g. appointment scheduling, practice management systems,
- online supervision requirements and processes need to be documented, and methods to assess professional competency domains, and
- competency development should be monitored and evaluated throughout the placement.

## Use of SLA in remediation processes and ensuring safe practice

*"Consistent with the concerns raised by both educators and trainees through our work, we agree that SLA should not take away from a trainee's opportunity for real-life client work. However, we would argue where a trainee has been identified as lagging in specific competency development, these remedial needs are best nurtured and assessed in the context of SLA, with criteria for satisfactory performance able to be standardized (sic) across trainees".* (APPESWG, 2021b, p.13).

When considering the use of SLA as a remediation management tool, education providers are encouraged to design remediation SLAs individualised to the student's competency development needs and incorporate them as part of a clear remediation plan.

See APAC Toward Good Practice Guide: Remediation for more information.

## References and Resources:

To produce these guidelines, the following resources were considered and referenced[6]:


- Ahpra Board Accreditation Committee. (2023). Glossary of accreditation terms. https://www.ahpra.gov.au/About-Ahpra/Who-We-Are/Ahpra-Board/Accreditation-Committee/Publications
- Ahpra Board Accreditation Committee. (2025). Guidance on embedding good practice in health practitioner education: clinical placements, simulation-based learning and virtual care. https://www.ahpra.gov.au/About-Ahpra/Who-We-Are/Ahpra-Board/Accreditation-Committee/Publications
- Attoe, C., Lavelle, M., Sherwali, S., Rimes, K., & Jabur, Z. (2019). Student Interprofessional Mental Health Simulation (SIMHS): Evaluating the Impact on Medical and Nursing Students, and Clinical Psychology Trainees. *The Journal of Mental Health Training, Education and Practice*.14 (1), 46–58. https://doi.org/10.1108/JMHTEP-06-2018-0037
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- Australian Psychology Accreditation Council (APAC). (2026). Evidence Guide. Retrieved from: https://apac.au/education-providers/standards/
- Australian Psychology Placement Alliance Direct Client Activities Working Group (APPADCAWG). (2023). Guidelines for Direct Client Activities: Principles and Considerations. Retrieved from: https://placementreview.net/appa
- Orrell, J. (2011). *Good Practice Report: Work-Integrated learning.* Australian Learning and Teaching Council, issuing body. Retrieved September 4, 2026, from http://nla.gov.au/nla.obj-4203826862
- Oxlad, M., D'Annunzio, J., Sawyer, A., & Paparo, J. (2022). Postgraduate students' perceptions of simulation-based learning in professional psychology training. *Australian Psychologist*, *57*(4), 226–235. https://doi.org/10.1080/00050067.2022.2073807
- Psychology Board of Australia (PsyBA). (2025a). Guidelines for the 5+1 internship program. Retrieved from: https://www.psychologyboard.gov.au/Standards-and-Guidelines/Codes-Guidelines-Policies.aspx


[6] Education providers are encouraged to refer to these documents for further information about SLA

- Psychology Board of Australia (PsyBA). (2025b). Code of conduct for psychologists. Code of Conduct for Psychologists. Retrieved from: https://www.psychologyboard.gov.au/Standards-and-Guidelines/Professional-practice-standards/Code-of-conduct.aspx
- Rice, K., Banner, S. E., Schutte, N., & Rock, A. J. (2025). A competency framework and measure for psychologists: The psychometric assessment of the competencies of professional psychology rating (COPPR) scales. *Australian Journal of Psychology*, *77*(1). https://doi.org/10.1080/00049530.2025.2457528
- Rice, K., Jaeva, S., Cosh, S., Davies, R., Clark, J., Martin, M., Schutte, N. & Rock, A.J. (2026). In support of simulation: effectiveness of an online, simulated practicum in professional psychology for development of psychologist competence, Australian Journal of Psychology, 78(1), https://doi.org/10.1080/00049530.2026.2665292
- Rice, K., Murray C. V., Tully P. J., Hone, A., Bartik, W. J., Newby, D., & Cosh, S. M. (2022) Commentary: An Extension of the Australian Postgraduate Psychology Education Simulation Working Group Guidelines: Simulated Learning Activities Within Professional Psychology Placements. Front. Educ. 7:840258. https://doi.org/10.3389/feduc.2022.840258
- Shelley, J., Rock, A. J., Schitte, N., Cosh, S. M., & Rice, K. (2025). Accessibility and competency development: student experiences of a simulated practicum in postgraduate psychology training. *Australian Journal of Psychology*, *77*(1). https://doi.org/10.1080/00049530.2025.2530961
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The following organisations/networks were consulted[7]:

- Australian Psychology Placement Alliance (APPA)
- Australian Association of Psychology Training Clinics (AAPTC)
- Heads of Psychology Australia (HPA)
- Psychology Research and Innovation in Simulation (PriSIM) group

[7] Thanks to those who provided feedback, advice, exemplars etc to assist with this project.

## Appendix 1: Table of Amendments

| Version Number | Date | Short description of amendment |
|---|---|---|
| Version 1 | 18/11/2026 | First Toward Good Practice Guide |