



THE UNIVERSITY OF
MELBOURNE

The role of the School Psychologist in ADHD and Autism diagnosis

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National Guideline for the Assessment and Diagnosis of Autism in Australia

The big ideas

Highlight the inequity and inaccessibility of ADHD and Autism diagnosis.

Explore the role of the school **psychologist** as a system-based **resource to help overcome** these **issues of inequity and inaccessibility**.

- Research indicates significant reductions in access to diagnosis based on health inequities such as ethnicity, gender and socioeconomic status (Bergey et al., 2022)
- There is evidence that students are waiting up to 2 years to access a diagnosis and then subsequent care
- This represents a significant burden on families and schools to support students as they wait for diagnosis
- Pursuit of this idea leverages from the recent release of clinical guidelines for diagnosis and treatment of both ADHD (ADHD Professionals Association, 2022) and Autism (Whitehouse, Evans, Eapen & Wray, 2018).

Why a focus on school psychologists?

Can they even diagnose?

1. All registered psychologist can diagnose.
2. School psychologists are ideally placed to observe children in situ.
3. Capacity to complete a psychosocial assessment.
4. Understand the educational context and impact of learning challenges.
5. Shared language with medical and allied health professionals and ability to write reports for different audiences.
6. Inform diagnosis, at a minimum.

The Study



Figure 1
An AI-generated image of neurodiversity.

Note. Image obtained from Pixabay (<https://pixabay.com/illustrations/ai-generated-neurodiversity-8616311/>) on February 11, 2026. Image described on the website as AI-generated.

Data collection and methodology



Quantitative

Participants: 74

Tool: Online survey using Qualtrics

Data Analysis: Frequencies identified using SPSS

Qualitative

Participants: 15

Tool: Semi-structured interview via Zoom

Data analysis: NVivo software, following Clarke and Braun's (2013) method for thematic analysis.

Data was collected from May to August 2024, with data protection procedures. The study was ethically approved by The University of Melbourne Human Research Ethics Committee (Ethics ID: #28563).

Participants' Demographics



Table 1 – Participants' Demographics		Whole Sample
Participants		74
Gender	Female	89% (66)
	Male	9% (7)
	Non-Binary/ third gender	1% (1)
State	New South Wales	20% (15)
	Queensland	7% (5)
	South Australia	3% (2)
	Tasmania	23% (17)
	Victoria	40% (30)
	Western Australia	7% (5)
Type of School	Primary	26% (19)
	Secondary	24% (18)
	Primary and Secondary	50% (37)
School Setting	Government	60% (45)
	Independent	23% (17)
	Catholic	16% (12)

Participants' Demographics



Table 2 – Participants' Demographics cont.		Whole Sample
Participants		74
Years of Experience as a School Psychologist	<1 year	10% (7)
	1-5 years	50% (37)
	6-10 years	15% (11)
	>10 years	26% (19)
Endorsement	Endorsed	27% (20)
	Ed&Dev	73% (54)
	Clinical	4% (15)
	Ed&Dev + Clinical	3% (2)
	Currently in Registrar Program	11% (8)
	Ed&Dev	7% (5)
	Clinical	1% (1)
	Clinical Neuropsychology	1% (1)

Context - Study 1



In childhood, ADHD is 3 times more common in boys



50%

of people continue to experience ADHD in adulthood

ADHD has become the most prevalent neurodevelopmental disorder in Australia (AADPA, 2022). This has drawn significant public attention to ADHD, emphasising the need for precise and timely diagnosis, evaluation, and treatment.

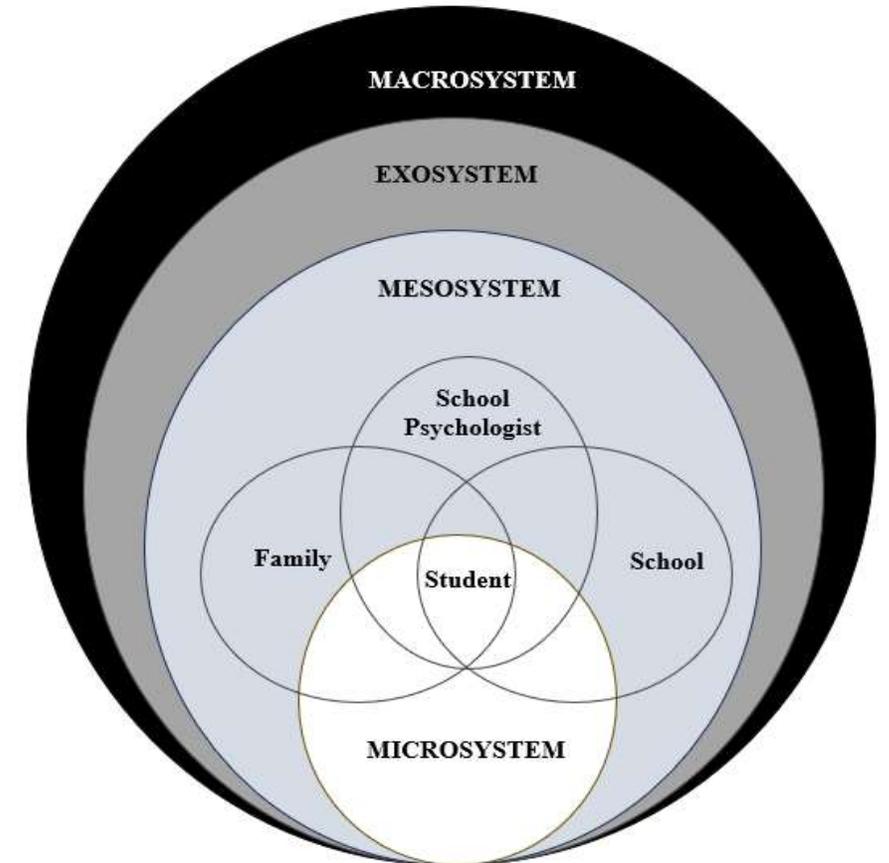
Despite the importance of diagnosis access, barriers such as high costs, lengthy wait times, and inequitable service access (Deloitte Access Economics, 2019) delay an individual's receipt of the appropriate support.

Rationale



Bronfenbrenner's ecological framework (1979) offers a comprehensive lens to understand how school psychologists are well-positioned to support students with ADHD diagnoses.

This framework highlights their influence within the interconnected systems that shape a child's development and educational experience (Crawford, 2020).



Adaptation from Bronfenbrenner's (1979) Framework

The study was designed to explore the role of school psychologists in diagnosing ADHD in school settings to enhance diagnostic access for children in Australian schools.

This study can potentially increase awareness and advocate for enhanced systemic support for school psychologists in their contribution to the diagnostic process.

The study questions:

1. What are the experiences of school psychologists regarding their involvement in the ADHD diagnostic process?
2. How does the school system influence the role of school psychologists in the diagnostic process of ADHD?
3. What are the impacts for an individual diagnosed with ADHD within a school setting?

Results



Table 3 - Quantitative Results	
School psychologists who see value in providing a diagnosis	99% (73)
School psychologists Involved in the diagnostic process for ADHD	97% (72)
School psychologists who believe ADHD should be diagnosed in the school setting	92% (68)
High Demand for ADHD diagnosis in schools	92% (68)

Thematic Analysis



School Psychologist Experiences

Multifaceted Role (67%)

Direct Involvement (53%)

Unethical School Practices (47%)

Influence of the School System

Resources and Support (40%)

Pressure and Challenges (47%)

ADHD Diagnosis for the Student

Self-Understanding (80%)

Accessibility (60%)

Family Stigma (33%)

Discussion



Challenges and Support in Schools

The school system can influence the role of the school psychologist positively and negatively. While some schools provide the necessary resources for school psychologists to support ADHD diagnoses, most face systemic pressures. These include demands for diagnoses and heavy caseloads, which hinder the quality and comprehensiveness of their assessments.

School Psychologists' Role in the Diagnostic Process

The majority of school psychologists' experiences are being actively involved in the ADHD diagnostic process, with many facilitating assessments, screenings, and diagnoses. However, concerns about unethical practices within schools often complicate their work.

The Value of Diagnosis

School psychologists recognise the value of an ADHD diagnosis, as it fosters self-understanding and informs schools and families about the student's needs, ultimately empowering students. However, the stigma surrounding ADHD can hinder some families from accepting the diagnosis, which affects the student's ability to access support.



Study 2 - Autism



While reliable Autism diagnosis is possible at **18 months**, the Australian average remains **5 years** (Eaves & Ho, 2004)

- **Inconsistency in ‘Best Practice’**

- Only **50%** of practitioners use standardised tools, often lacking a multidisciplinary approach (Taylor et al., 2016)

- **Barriers to Access**

- High costs of private assessment (Rogge & Janssen, 2019)
- Regional disparities and "wait-and-see" clinical approaches (Hussain et al., 2023)
- Significant wait time in public health settings (Bernie et al., 2021)

Approximately 31% of children start school without a formal diagnosis, placing the burden—and the opportunity—on the school system (Gibbs et al., 2019)

Research Questions



1. What is the **role** of school psychologists in the school-based Autism diagnostic process?
2. What is their perceived **competency** in conducting the process?
3. What **experiences** have been most effective in enhancing their competency in Autism assessment?
4. What are the **benefits** and **barriers** of conducting the Autism diagnostic process in school settings?

Research Question 1



1. What is the school psychologist **role** in the school-based Autism diagnostic process?
 - **99%** were involved in at least one aspect of the process
 - Only **14%** were involved in comprehensive Autism diagnostic assessment

Aspects of Autism Diagnostic Process	Involved	Not Involved
Identification of Signs	88% (65)	12% (9)
Referral to External Services	95% (70)	5% (4)
Cognitive Assessment	81% (60)	19% (14)
Educational/Academic Assessment	75% (55)	26% (19)
Developmental History	81% (60)	19% (14)
Strengths-Focused Assessment	45% (33)	55% (41)
Assessment of Functioning	72% (53)	28% (21)
Needs Assessment	24% (18)	76% (56)
Mental Health Assessment	62% (46)	38% (28)
Autism Specific Screeners	72% (53)	28% (72)
In-depth Autism Assessment	14% (10)	87% (64)
School-Based Observation	93% (69)	7% (5)
Collaboration with Allied Health Professionals	91% (67)	10% (7)
Identification of Support Needs	81% (60)	19% (14)

Research Question 2 & 3



2. What is school psychologists **perceived competency** in conducting the diagnostic process?

- Survey participants reported **moderate** level of competency in conducting the school-based Autism diagnostic process ($M = 3.66$, $SD = 1.03$)

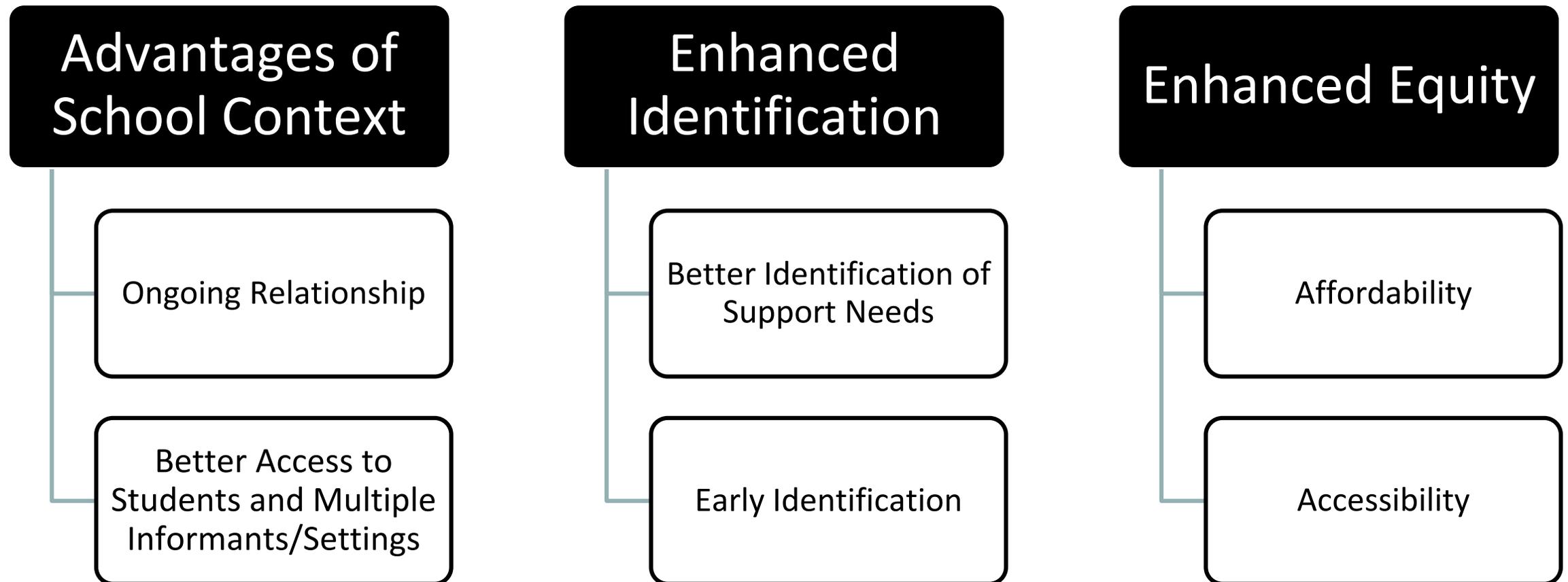
3. **What experiences** have been most effective in enhancing school psychologists **competency** in Autism assessment?

- **On-the-job training & Autism-specific diagnostic assessment training** contributed **higher** perceived competency

Research Question 4



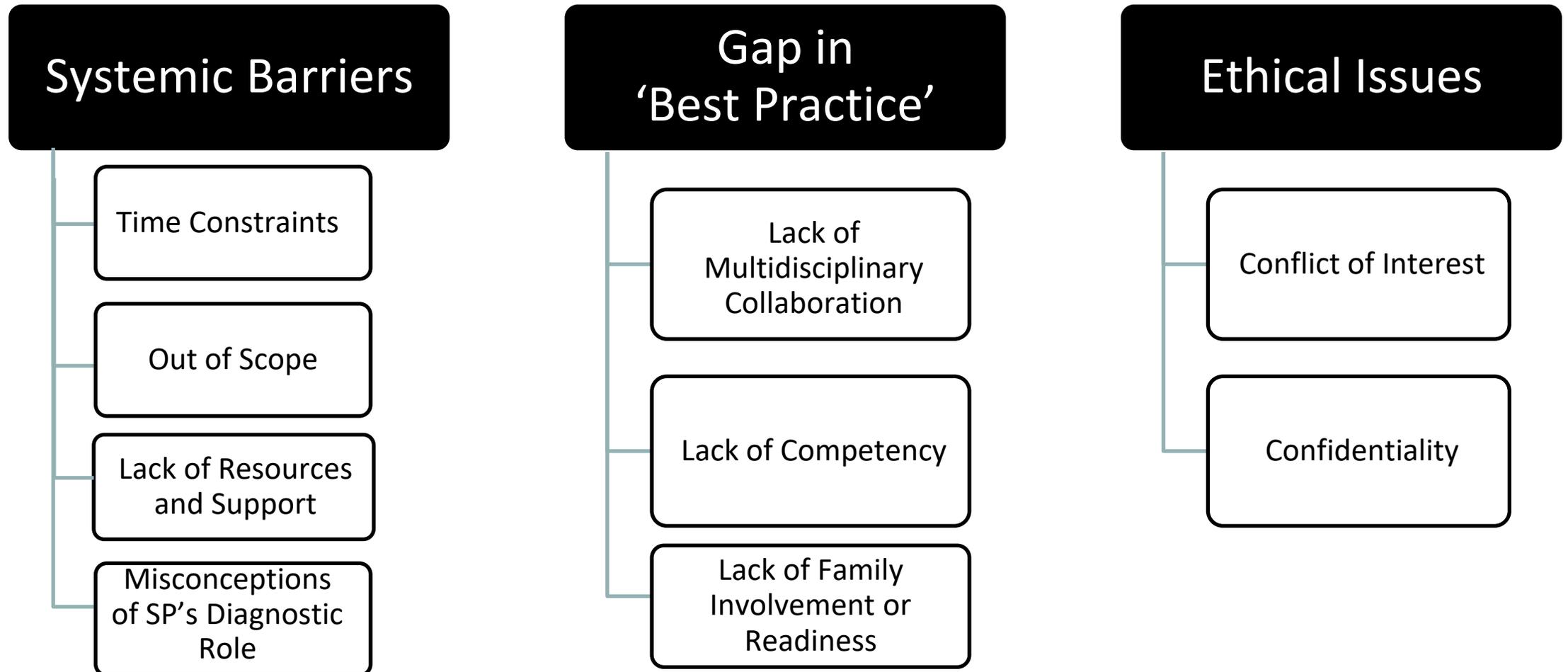
4. What are the **benefits** of conducting the Autism diagnostic process in school?



Research Question 4



4. What are the **barriers** of conducting the Autism diagnostic process in school?



Discussion



Current Roles of School Psychologists in School-based Autism Diagnostic Process

- Screen, then refer out
- Aligned with the national guideline
- Although 50% reported the diagnostic process was “out of scope”, 99% reported that they were involved in the process
 - Go beyond their scope to meet student needs?
 - Confusion between identification vs diagnosis?
 - May hesitate to assume diagnostic responsibilities?

National Guideline

For the assessment and diagnosis
of autism in Australia



Discussion



School Psychologists' Competency and Training Experience

- Moderately competent to identify Autism, not to diagnose
- Comprehensive training is beneficial not only for diagnostic accuracy but also identifying 'red flags' (Mazurek et al., 2018; Swanson et al., 2014; Nowell et al., 2020)

Benefits and Barriers of School-Based Autism Diagnostic Process

- School-specific advantages allow SPs to provide insights that external professionals may not have the capacity to offer
- Only 14% actively diagnose Autism in schools due to the barriers identified

Conclusion of Study 1 & Study 2



- Offers valuable insights into the unique roles Australian school psychologists contribute to the diagnostic process
- Highlights the potential for school psychologists to reduce delays in ADHD and autism diagnosis by improving timely access to assessment and student support
- Emphasises the need for adequate resources and clearer role definition to support effective involvement in diagnostic practice

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