An integral component of the Sydney School of Veterinary Science’s revised postgraduate curricular design is the incorporation of student-centered learning activities that foster the development of learner self-efficacy.

An essential component of competency-based veterinary education is supporting students to develop procedurally based technical skills competencies essential for a safe transition into the veterinary profession. In our clinical skills training program, which commences in year 1 of the Doctor of Veterinary Medicine (DVM) program, students explore the pedagogical principles of effective psychomotor skills learning, which involves memorizing the mandatory procedural steps of a skill, followed by engagement in spaced repetitive practice, forging incremental improvements in technique that build proficiency.

As well as implementing a scaffold of self-guided learning resources to support this practice, the success of our clinical skills program has forged ahead by implementing specific training to develop evaluative judgment. Novice learners are required to engage in clinical skills assessment tasks to work with quality standards and learn to critically appraise the quality of a skills performance. They use a rubric-based competency evaluation checklist to assess exemplar skills performances of varying standard. They use these skills to engage in a peer-assisted learning activity in which they review and provide meaningful feedback regarding the skill performance of a peer (Figure).

Dr Mills’ research in veterinary education is inspired by the following question: how do you support students to go from having been taught or shown a clinical skill once to developing competence? Simply building a clinical skills hub and providing resources only goes partway to help students develop these important competencies. Providing them with a step-by-step matrix and thereby unraveling every component of skill development transforms the ability of novices to assess their own competency and that of their peers. A survey of second-year DVM students found a significant increase (31.7% to 94.6%) in the percentage of students who perceived they could accurately judge the quality of their skill performance after undertaking this training.

Students were better able to understand the quality of their performance and become less passively reliant on expert critique. They were empowered to understand and reflect on the quality of their work, learning to become self-regulatory, independent learners.