

Smith, Sarah ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0009-0007-0708-0022> , Godley, Simon, Anderson, Adele, Heap, Samantha and Miller, Paul K. ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-5611-1354> (2021) Employing a coaching model of supervision during physiotherapy placements: Charting the student experience.

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Mapping the Student Experience of UK-Wide Virtual Placement Initiative in Physiotherapy

Simon Godley,¹ Sarah Smith,¹ Rory Twogood² and Paul K. Miller¹

Purpose

During the COVID-19 pandemic it has become increasingly necessary for healthcare teams to diversify their approaches to frontline delivery (Dalal et al. 2021). One key change in outpatient services has been the introduction and/or proliferation of virtual platforms to safely conduct assessments and ensure sustained patient contact, even within the traditionally tactile domain of physiotherapy. Consonant with these developments is the need for physiotherapy students to gain experience of working through such platforms, as they are highly likely to remain an integral element of service delivery in the post-COVID environment. The research reported herein explores student experiences of a UK-wide physiotherapy Virtual Placement (VP) scheme, run by ConnectHealth in 2020 and 2021, with a view to better understanding the impacts of their working exclusively in a virtual healthcare space over a six-week period.

Methods

With full approval from the University of Cumbria Ethics Panel (ref: 20/04) all students were contacted who had (a) completed a ConnectHealth VP, while also (b) having prior experience of conventional placement(s). These students, registered at a wide array of UK universities, were informed that participation would involve taking part in a semi-structured interview, during which they could critically discuss their experiences of the VP itself. Given pragmatic concerns around time and funding, the first N=20 students to register interest in participating were invited to take part in an online interview. All invited students provided interviews, with a mean duration of 30 minutes. Interviews were transcribed verbatim, though redactions were made where issues of participant identity protection were at stake, in line with ethical mandate. Finally, coordinative investigation of the transcripts, using Reflexive Thematic Analysis (Braun and Clarke 2006) was undertaken. Three global themes emerged.

Results

1. **Workload and Flexibility**; all participants had anticipated that the VP would involve less direct work than a conventional placement, but most actually found the inverse to be true, with technological problems adding significant additional time. However, the VP was widely considered to be more flexible, helping with independent time-management skills, while also providing greater opportunities to exercise and 'take a break', and the absence of travel time was often reported to shorten the overall working day. 2. **Variety of Experience**; all participants lauded the rich variety of working contexts afforded by their geographically decentred VP, and the opportunity to work with other students from UK-wide universities. 3. **Contact and Isolation**; variety of contacts was universally taken to enrich multi-disciplinary working skills, but at the expense of depth. Most participants reported a sense of active isolation at times, particularly where their clinical supervisor(s) took a light-touch approach. While some viewed this as having enhanced their independent problem-solving skills, all explicitly missed more direct and consistent contact with clients and colleagues.

Workload and Flexibility

"[Without commuting] I had time to sit down and have my breakfast in the morning and...I just felt a bit more prepared, thinking 'Right I have had a, had a nice like half an hour relax before I get into it'."

"[T]he nature of the placement gives you the chance to advance your time-management skills, you get to decide how you want to design your day and what you want to focus on."

Variety of Experience

"I could just log in...to an app where [they are] asking advanced, further questions that I probably wouldn't have thought to ask or...seeing things then that I would probably not have had the opportunity to see."

"[T]here were many different clinics [and] you got to choose...in which area you want to focus the day. For example, you had, we had the chance to choose an OT clinic, a pain management clinic..."

Contact and Isolation

"I couldn't assess my educator's patients because she was the Advanced Practitioner. [T]here was another physio, I did get to see the patients but...he was quite busy taking on a lot for other students as well."

"With COVID we've kind of been online for university since September, for the majority of it. And I think just another six weeks of you on your laptop, it was quite draining, erm and quite hard to [self] motivate."

Conclusions

Findings indicate that the VP had many strengths for participants, particularly around variety of experiences. Future research should not, however, overlook the role of workplace social contact in student wellbeing.

Implications

These findings ideally give some provisional direction on how prospective physiotherapy VPs might be shaped to best mitigate issues of isolation, while preserving richness of diverse experience.

References

Braun, V. and Clarke, V. (2006) 'Using thematic analysis in psychology', *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, 3(2), pp. 77-101. doi: 10.1191/1478088706qp063oa.
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