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Mapping the student experience of UK-wide virtual placement initiative in physiotherapy

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Abstract

Purpose

During the COVID-19 pandemic it has become increasingly necessary for healthcare teams to diversify their approaches to frontline delivery. 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 nuanced impacts of their working in a virtual healthcare space over a six-week period.

Methods

The research team contacted all students 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. Coordinative investigation of the transcripts, using Reflexive Thematic Analysis, was undertaken by the full research team.

Results

Thematic analysis revealed three core themes in the data. 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.

Conclusion(s)

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.

Impact

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.