

Role Emerging Placements in Physiotherapy: Student Experiences and Practical Considerations

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Purpose

Physiotherapists work in increasingly diverse areas of practice across both health and social care sectors. Consequently, education providers are being urged to ensure students graduate with the necessary skills to work flexibly in a range of environments in both traditional and emerging roles (1). Role emerging placements (REPs) – i.e. those conducted in settings where there may be little or no existing therapy provision – are commonly used within occupational therapy (OT) to help prepare students for contemporary practice by providing opportunities to improve their problem-solving skills, leadership and autonomy through development of their own professional role (2).

There is, however, little published literature on the use of REPs in Physiotherapy. This poster will consider the practicalities and student experiences of REPs in Physiotherapy (3).

Methods

Staff collaborated with OT colleagues to develop REPs with local partners who had identified a need for Physiotherapy. REPs were allocated to a selection of 2nd year and 3rd year students. Students were supported on a daily basis by an onsite-supervisor, and a qualified clinician provided off-site or 'long-armed' supervision to help students draw on their knowledge of theory to develop their own role.

Students who had undertaken a REP were invited to take part in a focus group, which used a research informed semi-structured topic guide to explore their experiences (3). Six participants volunteered to take part. Group discussions were digitally recorded, professionally transcribed verbatim and thematically analysed. Ethical approval was gained from the University of Worcester. University staff who had been involved in establishing REPs were asked to share their experiences regarding the practicalities of successfully implementing REPs.

Results

Students successfully completed REPs in a range of settings including; residential and nursing homes, learning disabilities, neurological charities and mental health. Thematic analysis of student focus group data revealed 5 main themes:

Establishing a Physiotherapy Role Independently

"I think I do better working things out for myself rather than having someone watching over me all the time"

Developing Professional Identity

"Some educators try and mould you into a smaller version of them but you don't have that on this placement...you can sort of work out who you are as physio on one of these placements"

Finding a Voice and Influencing Change

"...rather than saying, "This is rubbish. Don't do that" just maybe giving suggestions on my point of view on things and I think in the end they appreciated it because it helped them run their exercise group better. But it is quite daunting when you feel like you're, kind of, going in and treading on their toes a little bit"

Professional Development

"it prepares you to then go out and get a job and be on your own with a little bit of support so I think if available, everybody should be offered one...I think it teaches you different skills which really everybody should have, coming out as a newly qualified"

Support

"Cause it is a new thing and if it's a new environment you can't predict what's gonna happen...then the fact that uni listens to what you have to say as well as what the management are saying helps to just keep working through and change what needs to be changed"

Practical Considerations: University Staff Experiences

Planning

- Ensure students & onsite staff are appropriately briefed prior to starting placement; pre-placement meetings or visits are advisable
- Ensure a structured induction is set up to allow students time to observe the existing organisation/service

Support

- Establish a suitable communication method between the 'long armed' supervisor, on-site supervisor and students
- Organise supervision dates & times in advance
- Where possible, pair students to facilitate peer support and learning

Logistics on Placement

- Set clear expectations from the start in terms of communication and scope of practice
- Negotiate the focus of the placement based on the students' previous experiences, strengths, weaknesses, areas of interest and negotiate this with the organisation; give students time to work this out
- Have a clear structure for communication between students and onsite staff for handover & feedback
- Identify how the students will document their interventions and how/when these will be countersigned
- Ensure appropriate time is built into working hours for research, study and reflection
- Consider access to computers, internet, telephones, study area & lockers

Conclusions

REPs appear to offer a non-traditional developmental learning opportunity where physiotherapy students can develop the skills required to deal with change and adapt to new roles. Students reported both positive and negative experiences, but most students felt the REPs had resulted in a number of professional and personal benefits. Adequate time and resources are required to ensure all parties are prepared and supported.

References

1. Chartered Society of Physiotherapy (2015) *Learning and Development Principles for CSP Accreditation of Qualifying Programmes in Physiotherapy*. [online] available from: <https://www.csp.org.uk/publications/learning-and-development-principles-csp-accreditation-qualifying-programmes>
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Implications

- REPs have the potential to both increase placement capacity and equip students with the skills to deal with a changing healthcare environment. However, it is important to publicize both the challenges and benefits associated with this placement model.
- Successful REPs require careful planning and provision of adequate support mechanisms.
- Development of good practice CSP guidelines would help to facilitate wider use of REPs and educate the profession on their value.