

Practice Evaluation

Practice placements are a crucial part of occupational therapy education, yet they can be a stressful experience for students, practice placement educators and the university. This may contribute to a shortage of placements. The effectiveness of a 4-week preparation, with second-level full-time students at Brunel University, prior to a practice placement was evaluated by a two-part analysis. First, the students' perspective on the effectiveness of the preparation is presented. This is followed by a comparison of placement grades between the current cohort of students (academic year 2006-2007), who attended the preparation, and the previous cohort of students (academic year 2005-2006), who did not have this opportunity.

Preparing Occupational Therapy Students for Practice Placements: Initial Evidence

Georgia Spiliotopoulou

Introduction

Practice placements are a crucial part of professional preparation for occupational therapists in all countries and a critical component of an education programme (American Occupational Therapy Association 1996, Tompson and Ryan 1996, College of Occupational Therapists 2006). They are considered as a means to put theory into practice and to develop appropriate practical and reasoning skills for students' future careers (Hummell 1997, Allison and Turpin 2004). Yet, practice placements can be a stressful experience for students (Mitchell and Kampfe 1990), practice placement educators and the university (Tyrrell and Smith 1996). This may be due to the poor performance of students if they are inadequately prepared and to the additional work and time required of the educators (Meyers 1995, Mason and Bull 2006).

Currently, there is an acknowledged shortage of practice placements, which is especially evident in the National Health Service (NHS) in the United Kingdom (Fisher and Savin-Baden 2002, Craik and Turner 2005).

Hence, it is of great importance for universities to develop practices enhancing the learning, the professionalism and the performance of students. This may minimise stress for educators and students, and may also result in increased placement offers. Given the above, when the BSc (Hons) Occupational Therapy programme at Brunel University was reappraised in 2005, a new 4-week practice placement preparation element was added to the placement module for second-level students prior to an 8-week placement.

The preparation was run for the full-time students in October 2006 and was delivered over 3 consecutive weeks in 2-hour, small-group seminars, each led by a member of staff. Peer and problem-based learning were encouraged. During the fourth week, a one-day moving and handling training session was conducted by an external trainer, facilitated by a staff member. Over the 4 weeks, 12 hours of lectures were linked with the seminar topics (see Table 1).

Purpose of the study

This study was conducted to obtain students' views on the relevance of the preparation element to achieving practice placement learning outcomes, and to elicit feedback regarding its strengths and any recommendations for improvement. It also aimed to evaluate the impact of the preparation on students' placement performance, as reflected in their placement marks. The findings would enhance understanding of the placement experience and inform the university's efforts in preparing students for successful experiences and transition into practice.

Correspondence to: Georgia Spiliotopoulou, Lecturer in Occupational Therapy, School of Health Sciences and Social Care, Mary Seacole Building, Brunel University, Uxbridge, Middlesex UB8 3PH.
Email: georgia.spiliotopoulou@brunel.ac.uk

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Table 1. Outline of the 4-week pre-practice placement preparation

Week	Content	
	Seminars	Lectures
1	Reflection on previous experiences Student roles <i>Duration: 2 hours</i>	Changes and challenges in current practice Practice placement issues <i>Duration: 3 hours</i>
2	The Subjective, Objective, Assessment and Plan (SOAP) notes <i>Duration: 2 hours</i>	Record keeping Professional conduct Organisational context <i>Duration: 3 hours</i>
3	Health and safety Risk assessment and management <i>Duration: 2 hours</i>	Health and safety Practice placement issues <i>Duration: 3 hours</i>
4	Moving and handling <i>Duration: 7½ hours</i>	Diversity and difference Preceptorship in health care <i>Duration: 3 hours</i>

Method

Ethical approval was granted by the Learning and Teaching Development Unit of Brunel University, and permission was given by the ethics officer of the School of Health Sciences and Social Care and the course coordinator for occupational therapy. Consent was implied by the completion and return of the questionnaire.

A self-report anonymous questionnaire, comprising closed and open questions, was developed (a) to obtain ordinal data regarding students' perceptions of the effectiveness of the preparation in facilitating learning at practice placement, and (b) to obtain qualitative data on the strengths of the preparation and possible recommendations for improvement.

The closed questions were divided into four sections. A 5-point Likert scale was used for scoring, ranging from 1 (= disagree strongly) to 5 (= agree strongly) for the first and second sections and from 1 (= very dissatisfied) to 5 (= very satisfied) for the rest. The first section aimed to determine whether the preparation helped students to

Table 2. Practice placement objectives for second-level students

Objectives
– An understanding of interdisciplinary team working
– An understanding of the NHS structure
– Risk assessment and management
– Record keeping
– Planning for clients' assessments and interventions
– Moving and handling
– Sociocultural awareness
– Student's role in the team
– Student-supervisor relationship
– Professional conduct

NHS = National Health Service.

meet the practice placement objectives (see Table 2). The second section explored whether students felt prepared for placement; the third sought students' views regarding seminars and lectures; and the fourth related to students' overall satisfaction with the preparation.

The questionnaire was pilot tested with five lecturers and five second-level students in order to enhance construct validity. For the same reason, on the front page of the questionnaire, the students were reminded of the lecture topics. Pilot studying also pursued clarity and appropriate wording to enhance reliability. Confidentiality and anonymity were observed for ethical issues and in order to reduce participant bias (Robson 2002). In January 2006, the questionnaire was distributed to 110 full-time second-level students who had just completed the 8-week placement. This took place during a placement debriefing session and the students were invited to complete voluntarily and return the questionnaires to the reception at the school. Reminders were emailed in February 2006.

The student feedback was matched with the inferential data gathered from the practice placement educators' assessments, which can be seen as their common indicator of success. Thus, the placement marks of the 2005 second-level full-time students (N = 121), who had not attended a 4-week preparation prior to placement, were compared with the placement marks of the 2006 cohort (N = 110). The two groups were unmatched but, since the recruitment criteria of the occupational therapy division were the same for both cohorts, it would be expected that the students would have similar characteristics on average. Also, in a large group of students, large differences between individuals should be cancelled out on aggregate.

The Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS), version 13.0, was used for the descriptive and inferential analysis of the quantitative data. To analyse the qualitative data derived from the open questions, the author went through the material to identify similar phrases and patterns, which were categorised into themes (Robson 2002).

Findings

Students' perspectives on placement preparation

Twenty-eight of the 110 questionnaires were returned, giving a response rate of 25.5%. Descriptive statistics, such as frequencies, percentages and median, were used to analyse the ordinal data collected from the closed questions, which evaluated students' feedback on preparation effectiveness. Twenty-eight students were reflected in the findings, as all students answered all questions.

The median (median = 4) indicated that the students agreed somewhat that the preparation equipped them well to meet the practice placement objectives in terms of interdisciplinary team working; NHS structure; the student's role in the team and as a supervisee; risk assessment and management; record keeping; sociocultural

Table 3. Data representing students' views on whether preparation helped them to meet the practice placement objectives and whether they felt prepared for placement

	Scale*	1	2	3	4	5
Interdisciplinary team working.....	Frequency.....	1.....	5.....	7.....	12.....	3.....
	Per cent.....	3.57.....	17.86.....	25.00.....	42.86.....	10.71.....
NHS structure.....	Frequency.....	2.....	4.....	5.....	14.....	3.....
	Per cent.....	7.14.....	14.29.....	17.86.....	50.00.....	10.71.....
Risk assessment and management.....	Frequency.....	0.....	2.....	5.....	14.....	7.....
	Per cent.....	0.00.....	7.14.....	17.86.....	50.00.....	25.00.....
Record keeping.....	Frequency.....	0.....	1.....	8.....	7.....	12.....
	Per cent.....	0.00.....	3.57.....	28.57.....	25.00.....	42.86.....
Planning assessment/intervention.....	Frequency.....	0.....	8.....	6.....	13.....	1.....
	Per cent.....	0.00.....	28.57.....	21.43.....	46.43.....	3.57.....
Moving and handling.....	Frequency.....	1.....	0.....	2.....	6.....	19.....
	Per cent.....	3.57.....	0.00.....	7.14.....	21.43.....	67.86.....
Sociocultural awareness.....	Frequency.....	1.....	2.....	3.....	15.....	7.....
	Per cent.....	3.57.....	7.14.....	10.71.....	53.58.....	25.00.....
Student's role in the team.....	Frequency.....	0.....	3.....	6.....	11.....	8.....
	Per cent.....	0.00.....	10.71.....	21.43.....	39.29.....	28.57.....
Student-supervisor relationship.....	Frequency.....	0.....	3.....	5.....	12.....	8.....
	Per cent.....	0.00.....	10.71.....	17.86.....	42.86.....	28.57.....
Professional conduct.....	Frequency.....	0.....	1.....	2.....	13.....	12.....
	Per cent.....	0.00.....	3.57.....	7.14.....	46.43.....	42.86.....
Students felt prepared for placement.....	Frequency.....	0.....	6.....	7.....	13.....	2.....
	Per cent.....	0.00.....	21.43.....	25.00.....	46.43.....	7.14.....

*Scale: 1 = disagree strongly, 2 = disagree somewhat, 3 = neutral, 4 = agree somewhat, 5 = agree strongly.

Table 4. Data representing students' views on preparation seminars and lectures and their overall satisfaction with the preparation

	Scale*	1	2	3	4	5
Seminars.....	Frequency.....	0.....	3.....	8.....	16.....	1.....
	Per cent.....	0.0.....	10.7.....	28.6.....	57.1.....	3.6.....
Lectures.....	Frequency.....	1.....	0.....	7.....	18.....	2.....
	Per cent.....	3.6.....	0.0.....	25.0.....	64.3.....	7.1.....
Overall satisfaction with preparation.....	Frequency.....	0.....	2.....	5.....	19.....	2.....
	Per cent.....	0.0.....	7.1.....	17.9.....	67.9.....	7.1.....

*Scale: 1 = very dissatisfied, 2 = dissatisfied, 3 = neutral, 4 = satisfied, 5 = very satisfied.

awareness; and professional conduct. The students agreed strongly (median = 5) that they were well prepared with regard to moving and handling. However, the median (median = 3.5) indicated that the students were less happy regarding planning for clients' assessments and interventions. The students agreed somewhat (median = 4) that the preparation made them feel well prepared before going on practice placement. They were also satisfied with the seminars and lectures (median = 4) and with the 4-week preparation overall. Tables 3 and 4 display the frequencies and percentages of students in each category response. Table 5 displays the median and mode for each question.

From the qualitative analysis of the comments derived from the open questions, the following themes emerged.

Themes

Students' perspectives on the strengths of the seminars

The students enjoyed sharing experiences from previous practice placements and discussing their concerns in the small and protective group environment of seminars. Discussions on previous negative placement experiences and reflection upon them enabled positive learning and the relief of stress, making them feel ready for the forthcoming placement. The students also practised moving and handling and improved their ability on risk assessment and management by exploring various case scenarios. Finally, they were made aware of appropriate professional conduct and their role as students.

Table 5. Data representing students' views on preparation effectiveness on different aspects of practice placement and students' satisfaction with preparation

	Median	Mode
Interdisciplinary team working.....	4.0	4
NHS structure.....	4.0	4
Risk assessment and management	4.0	4
Record keeping	4.0	5
Planning assessment/intervention.....	3.5	4
Moving and handling	5.0	5
Sociocultural awareness	4.0	4
Student's role in the team.....	4.0	4
Student-supervisor relationship.....	4.0	4
Professional conduct	4.0	4
Students felt prepared for placement	4.0	4
Seminars.....	4.0	4
Lectures	4.0	4
Overall satisfaction with preparation.....	4.0	4

Note: 'Median' is the median response of the sample using the 5-point Likert scale; 'Mode' is the most frequent answer in the sample on the 5-point Likert scale.

Students' perspectives on the strengths of the lectures

The students found the lectures to be relevant to practice placement needs, with a broad range of topics. They enjoyed the interactive nature of the topics and the variety of lecturers reflecting on their own practice experiences. They found particularly helpful the topics of health and safety and risk management, record keeping and the NHS framework.

Students' recommendations on improvements to the seminars

The students felt that there should be more emphasis on conveying clear expectations of second-level students on practice placement. Some requested the introduction of sessions on assessment tools that they might encounter on placements, and further sessions on the NHS structure. They also requested further practice on risk management and coping with difficult clients and staff.

Students' recommendations on improvements to the lectures

The students felt that they could benefit from further information on NHS and organisational structures and from clarification of practice placement educators' marking criteria. They would also like lectures to be as interactive as possible. Some students reported that they would appreciate practitioners giving talks about the reality of practice placements.

The impact of preparation on placement performance

To compare practice placement performance between the 2005 and 2006 cohorts, 121 and 110 students, respectively, were initially included in the analysis. After the exclusion

of outliers, 120 (2005 cohort) and 108 (2006 cohort) students remained. The one-sample Kolmogorov-Smirnov test was used to check whether the data were normally distributed. In this test, large significance values ($p > 0.05$) indicate that normal distribution is a good fit for the data (Norusis 2004). The 2005 cohort was skewed ($p = 0.034$, $p < 0.05$), whereas the 2006 cohort was normally distributed ($p = 0.115$, $p > 0.05$). Since the groups were not both normally distributed, statistics that do not assume normality were used.

Descriptives such as median and mode were therefore used to summarise the data. The 2006 cohort had slightly better performance on placement (median = 68, mode = 68) than the 2005 cohort (median = 65, mode = 65). The Mann-Whitney U non-parametric test was used to compare performances between the two groups and to check if they differed significantly. This test, which does not assume normality and can be used for two unmatched groups (Hicks 1999), showed that the difference was not statistically significant ($p = 0.481$, $p > 0.05$).

Discussion

The data suggested that the 4-week preparation helped students to meet practice placement demands. Most importantly, it gave them the opportunity to work on their concerns and reflect on previous experience and anxieties, resulting in positive learning. It also made them more aware of professional conduct and issues around their relationships with educators, an area that can be stressful for students (Llorens et al 1999) and has been identified as one of the predicting variables for placement performance (Best 1994). Quite importantly, the preparation made students feel well equipped for placement, a factor that may enhance proactiveness on placement (Mulholland et al 2006) and increase success within their profession (Llorens et al 1999). When students feel confident and ready, anxiety levels decrease and they are more likely to benefit from educational opportunities (Martin et al 2004, Tan et al 2004).

Although there was an overall slight increase in the median mark achieved by the 2006 cohort, there was no statistically significant effect on practice placement performance when compared with the 2005 cohort. However, the lack of a significant increase in students' performance may be due to different characteristics of the groups and different expectations from educators. Other emerging practical issues, related to moving campus at the beginning of the academic year and adjustment to the new situation, might have influenced the 2006 students' learning. Nevertheless, even the slight increase in students' performance is to be welcomed.

The most evident suggestions for improvement were the clarification of practice placement expectations from this level of students and of marking criteria. These could, indeed, help both students and practice placement educators because it has been shown that the orientation phase of a placement, where students are provided with information

on their expectations, objectives and standards, is particularly time-intensive for educators (Mason and Bull 2006). Thus, addressing these issues thoroughly during preparation could decrease the workload of educators.

Limitations of the study

This study falls into the limitations of a small sample and a low response rate, because 75.5% of students did not return the questionnaire. Sampling bias might be present, since the questionnaire data may come from students who had a positive experience with the preparation and practice placement. Therefore, the study should be replicated to see if similar results would be identified. Also, with regard to the distribution and collection of the questionnaire, there could be consideration of the ways to gain the experience of a wider range of students. Another step is to invite feedback on students' preparedness from practice placement educators, to be matched with students' feedback. Finally, the slight, or equally the non-significant, improvement in the performance of the 2006 cohort might be attributed to other non-controlled factors, such as their performance on other modules prior to the placement.

Conclusion

Although further investigation is required, this study provides Brunel University with initial evidence regarding students' perspectives on the effectiveness of the new pre-practice placement preparation element and its impact on placement performance, which may be used for guiding future developments. The findings might also indicate a need for the expansion of similar preparation in universities that may not currently run such sessions, in their efforts to support students and practice placement educators. Last but not least, it is important that this initial evidence is shared with practice placement educators in order to convey the message that the university has the same goal, which is always to work towards maintaining high standards of students' learning experiences.

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