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An exploration of physiotherapy students' experience of Problem Based learning in the UK and Greece

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Teaching Fellowship Award Scheme: Final Report

The final report should consist of a two-page summary of the project and its findings (using the fields below as a guide).

Along with this form, please also send (where relevant):

- Ethical approval forms
- Conference papers and/or articles for publication
- (If your initial TFAS application was 'approved with conditions') Evidence that these conditions have been met (in 'Other')

Send all forms to: adam.fisher@plymouth.ac.uk

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Title of project: An exploration of physiotherapy students' experience of Problem Based learning in the UK and Greece

Type of project (e.g. Survey/ Case Study/ Action Research/ Development):
Qualitative research project

Keywords (that describe/reflect the project): PBL experience, Athens and Plymouth.
Email interview, thematic analysis

Aims of project:

- To explore students experiences of PBL in Athens and Plymouth
- To identify barriers and facilitators to engaging in the PBL process
- To identify the impact of different educational systems on students' perspectives on the PBL process

Background/context to project:

The physiotherapy programme at Plymouth University utilises a hybrid Problem Based Learning (PBL) curriculum, with learning structured around patient case scenarios, supported by practical skills classes and lectures. The objectives of PBL are to foster clinical reasoning skills, acquisition retention and application of knowledge, (Norman and Schmidt, 1992; Barrows, 1984). This approach requires students to take an active and collaborative role in their learning; however, a recent CEPPL project conducted by the Physiotherapy Programme team at Plymouth suggested there is variability in students'

engagement with this process, with some appearing to find it more challenging to adapt to this learning approach, (Gunn et al, 2012). However, this study did not investigate this variability or identify factors which impacted on engagement.

Previous studies have identified time pressures, workload, ability to search for relevant information and understand the breadth and depth of knowledge required, as stressors associated with PBL, (Solomon and Finch, 1998). Beaten et al, (2010) suggest that factors which influence the effectiveness of student-centred learning include teacher approach, perception of learning environment, student personality, self-confidence and self-efficacy.

From September 2011, the physiotherapy programme has been franchised to Attico College, in Athens, Greece. Richardson (1994) suggests that students approach learning in a variety of ways and that cultural factors can have an impact on this approach. Anecdotal reports from student representatives in Athens suggests students may face additional challenges adapting to a new approach to learning. A greater understanding of the student experience of PBL will enable lecturing staff on both courses to identify students who are struggling with this process and develop effective strategies and training to support and facilitate students' engagement with the process.

Methods used: A qualitative approach was utilised. Data collection was undertaken via email interview and conducted by a research assistant. Thematic analysis of the interview transcripts identified the emergent themes.

Results: 6 themes were identified.

1. Expectations

All respondents appeared to have a good understanding of the concept of PBL and its aims in fostering self-directed learning skills and reflecting the clinical context. They varied however on the degree to which they perceived PBL fulfilled their expectations.

2. Workload

Students' ability to engage fully with PBL is affected by their perception of their current workload. Key factors which influenced this were assessment deadlines, timing of feedback sessions and time taken to research objectives.

3. Group dynamics

The interaction between group members is perceived as a positive and negative influence on learning. Students would like more guidance from the tutors on how to manage the negative affect of group dynamics. They highlighted that although common issues had been discussed they did not have any strategies to manage these problems.

4. PBL Facilitator

The facilitation of groups was found to vary amongst lecturers. Participants highlighted the benefits of interacting with the lecturing staff in what they perceived as a more relaxed environment of the small group sessions. They felt this gave them more confidence to ask questions.

5. Acquired skills

There was general agreement from the respondents regarding the skills they felt they had developed as part of the PBL process. Communication skills, team working and research skills (retrieving information and evaluating sources) were all highlighted by students.

6. Previous educational experience

Students from both the Plymouth and Athens cohorts reported needing to adapt to the PBL approach to learning. However, there was more emphasis from the Attico students who attributed this to their lack of preparation, being used to a very didactic learning style within the Greek educational system.

Associated publications: Posters presented at VC teaching and learning conference 27th June 2014 and Pedrio conference 2nd April 2014. A paper will be submitted for publication in physiotherapy and medical education journals.

Other: Findings from this project have been disseminated to the physiotherapy programme teams and also to the students. It will also be presented at the Universities PBL research group.