

## Are physiotherapy students adequately prepared to successfully gain employment?

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### Abstract

**Objectives** To explore the preparedness of final-year physiotherapy students for their progression into employment, and identify what universities can do to facilitate a smooth transition.

**Design** A single-cohort study, utilising a qualitative design incorporating a survey followed by transcribed and coded semi-structured interviews.

**Setting** Interviews were held in the Placement and Careers Centre at Brunel University, London.

**Participants** Sixty final-year full- and part-time students participated in the survey, and 12 final-year full- and part-time students participated in the semi-structured interviews.

**Methods** Sixty students completed a questionnaire which explored their preparedness for employment. Questions related to the current job situation, the application process and the student's ideal first post. Responses from the questionnaire were analysed and discussed further through a digitally recorded interview. Twelve students were interviewed by an experienced interviewer from a non-physiotherapy background.

**Results** Students felt unprepared for employment. Forty-seven per cent wanted a rotational post, but 26% would only spend 6 months and 39% would only spend 1 year looking for a job. Seventy-one percent would change career and 99% would work abroad if they were unable to secure a post in the UK. Most importantly, students could not identify transferable skills required by potential employers; only 25% cited effective communications, and 10% cited flexible working as a transferable skill. Self-management skills (e.g. prioritisation, time management and documentation) were not perceived as essential for employment.

**Conclusions** The job market requires physiotherapy graduates to possess transferable skills which can be applied to any situation. Many are integral to the profession and the undergraduate curriculum; however, analysis and assimilation of these skills cannot be assumed. Universities should reflect on their curriculum delivery to produce graduates who meet employers' expectations and make a smooth transition into the workplace.

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### Introduction

Following graduation, physiotherapists used to be in an enviable position; vacant posts were plentiful, which allowed new graduates the luxury of selecting the geographical location in which they would like to work and, in some instances, the institution [1]. However, over the past few years, the situation has completely reversed with newly qual-

ified physiotherapists experiencing difficulties gaining their first National Health Service (NHS) post [2]. Changes in NHS structure and service delivery, the presence of NHS trusts with deficit budgets, and the recent economic downturn have led to a change in the job market making junior physiotherapy jobs scarce [2,3]. This change in circumstance has led to intense competition for graduate employment [4], together with the realisation amongst graduates that effective self-marketing is essential in order to secure a junior post. Whilst most undergraduate programmes and the Chartered Society of Physiotherapy (CSP) [5] provide guidance for physiotherapy students about making applications for

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employment, it is becoming increasingly apparent that this area of the undergraduate curriculum must evolve continually to meet the changing requirements of employers [6,7]. Limited numbers of jobs have led to oversubscription for most advertised junior posts [4]. The number of accepted applications is often capped, leaving graduates disappointed when they are not immediately offered an interview. Even if short-listed, employers are increasingly using pre-interview selection methods, such as written evaluation of clinical knowledge or skills, holding practical assessment days or group interviews. As such, graduates are now required to demonstrate a wide variety of professional and, in particular, transferable skills which highlight their strengths and, therefore, employability even prior to interview. Transferable skills are defined by the Department for Education and Employment [8] as ‘those cognitive and personal skills (application of number, communication, information technology, problem solving, personal skills, working with others and improving own learning and performance) which are central to occupational competence in all sectors and at all levels’.

At Brunel University, the development of transferable skills is integral to the undergraduate physiotherapy programme. Communication, interprofessional team working, reflective practice, documentation, organisation and self-management skills are all taught and reinforced both academically and clinically throughout the course. Additionally, final-year students receive education covering the application process; writing curriculum vitae (CV) and personal statements, interview skills, strategies for their continued professional development (CPD), plus information regarding changes to healthcare provision in London. However, is this curriculum provision effective in matching current employment demands [9]? Perhaps more importantly, are students able to recognise and assimilate this information in order to achieve a successful application? Graduate employment is an ongoing issue [10]; however, there is a paucity of physiotherapy literature regarding successful transition into the workplace. The overall aim of this research was to establish whether physiotherapy students from a single UK university cohort were adequately prepared to gain employment. Specifically, this study aimed to explore students’ perceptions of the application process, determine how prepared they felt to make job applications, and identify what universities can do to facilitate a smooth transition.

## Methods

Following ethical approval from Brunel University, data were collected using two methods: a questionnaire and a semi-structured interview. Initially, a pilot questionnaire was formulated following a brainstorming session undertaken by two experienced physiotherapy lecturers and a placement and careers centre consultant. This was completed by a group of 10 final-year students and analysed to evaluate both clarity

and content; where appropriate, amendments were made [11]. Eighty-seven final-year physiotherapy students (both full- and part-time) who had completed all taught elements of the course were invited, via e-mail, to complete the final questionnaire (available on request from the corresponding author). The completed questionnaires were returned anonymously to a central collection to limit the Hawthorne effect [11]. The questionnaire aimed to determine students’ perceptions of the employment process and, specifically, how prepared they felt to make job applications to potential employers [11]. Students were asked to answer both open and closed questions which explored their views on the current job situation, the application process and their plans for their first post. The responses (60/87, 69%) from this questionnaire were analysed and subsequently used to identify areas for further in-depth discussion in the interview stage of the research.

Following completion of the questionnaire, an e-mail was sent to all final-year students inviting them to attend an interview. Twelve respondents volunteered for interview, which lasted a maximum of 1 hour and utilised a semi-structured approach. Although randomly self-selected, the interview group provided a representative sample of the whole cohort (36% mature, 64% female, 27% part-time students). The interviews were undertaken by an experienced interviewer from a non-physiotherapy background. Each session was digitally recorded and later fully transcribed for analysis. Due care was given to ensure informed consent prior to participation, confidentiality and secure storage of all data.

## Analysis

The closed questions from the survey were analysed and presented using descriptive statistics. Analysis of the open questions illustrated common themes and concerns which were explored further in the in-depth interview. The primary aim of the research was to explore students’ preparedness to gain employment; therefore, an inductive approach to interview analysis was adopted, which is firmly located within the qualitative research paradigm [12]. An independent researcher from a non-physiotherapy background utilised a systematic approach to analysis, identifying codes, subcategories and emergent themes that arose from the data [13,14].

## Results

### *Questionnaire*

The response rate to the questionnaire was 60/87 (69%). All respondents completed every question in each section. Data are expressed as percentage of total response ( $X/60$ ); detailed responses are displayed in [Tables 1 and 2](#).

The questionnaire provided some interesting employment characteristics. Forty-seven percent of respondents stated that a traditional junior rotation would be their ideal first post,

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