



# Admission interview scores are associated with clinical performance in an undergraduate physiotherapy course: an observational study

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## Abstract

**Objective** The purpose of this study was to determine if there is an association between admission interview score and subsequent academic and clinical performance, in a four-year undergraduate physiotherapy course.

**Design** Retrospective observational study.

**Participants** 141 physiotherapy students enrolled in two entry year groups.

**Outcome measures** Individual student performance in all course units, practical examinations, clinical placements as well as year level and overall Grade Point Average. Predictor variables included admission interview scores, admission academic scores and demographic data (gender, age and entry level).

**Results** Interview score demonstrated a significant association with performance in three of six clinical placements through the course. This association was stronger than for any other admission criterion although effect sizes were small to moderate. Further, it was the only admission score to have a significant association with overall Clinical Grade Point Average for the two year groups analysed ( $r=0.322$ ). By contrast, academic scores on entry showed significant associations with all year level Grade Point Averages except Year 4, the clinical year.

**Conclusions** This is the first study to review the predictive validity of an admission interview for entry into a physiotherapy course in Australia. The results show that performance in this admission interview is associated with overall performance in clinical placements through the course, while academic admission scoring is not. These findings suggest that there is a role for both academic and non-academic selection processes for entry into physiotherapy.

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## Introduction

The admission interview is one component of the entry process for selection into a range of health professional courses. Its primary purpose is to assess the non-cognitive or personal qualities of each applicant, although there is

debate in the literature as to the most suitable qualities to assess [1–4]. The process of selection of candidates for health courses is ideally linked to the potential for candidates to achieve the graduate attributes desired by the universities and/or the professions. Kay *et al.* reviewed dental literature to determine which attributes to assess in developing an admission interview for a new dental school in the UK [5]. They differentiated between which of the desirable attributes of a dentist were innate and which were capable of being taught and determined that review of innate qualities should be the focus of the admission interview. The innate attributes then assessed at interview, included communication,

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sensitivity, judgement and analysis, management of people, conscientiousness, professionalism, reflectiveness and ethical behaviour.

The admission interview is widely utilised for admission into medical schools both in Australia and internationally, with growing agreement amongst stakeholders that applicants should not be chosen on academic performance alone [4,6–8]. Interviews are conducted less frequently for admission to physiotherapy and allied health courses. However, it has been suggested that a balanced approach to physiotherapy admissions should address both academic record as well as qualitative factors including attitude, motivation and communication skills [9].

A 2010 overview of the selection processes for the 17 universities that offer physiotherapy programs in Australia, revealed The University of Notre Dame Australia (Notre Dame) to be one of only two universities to utilise an admission interview for entry into an undergraduate physiotherapy program [10]. The School of Physiotherapy at Notre Dame has been interviewing its applicants since the program's inception in 2003. Since 2006, the program has adopted a semi-structured admission interview format, with the interview score contributing 50% towards the overall application score, following academic screening. The interview explores personal attributes in areas of achievement, challenges, motivation, problem-solving and communication.

The aim of this study was to explore relationships between the interview score on the physiotherapy admission interview at Notre Dame and subsequent performance during the course. Demographic variables were also considered as previous studies for the medical school population noted gender disparity with females outperforming males throughout course [7,11].

The primary research question for this study was: What is the predictive validity of admission interviews for selection into the School of Physiotherapy at Notre Dame?

Specifically, the following questions were addressed:

1. Is there a relationship between the Notre Dame physiotherapy admission interview and academic performance through the course?
2. Is there a relationship between the Notre Dame physiotherapy admission interview and clinical performance through the course?
3. What is the influence of gender and age on performance through the course?

This is the first study to review the predictive validity of an admission interview for the undergraduate physiotherapy population in Australia. The Consensus statement from the 2010 Ottawa Conference reported a lack of evidence from selection processes for health care professions outside medicine [12]. Findings will assist physiotherapy programs considering an admission interview in their entry process.

## Method

A retrospective observational study was designed to investigate the relationship of admission scores and demographic data with subsequent performance through the Notre Dame physiotherapy program.

### *Participants*

Physiotherapy students enrolled in their first year of study at Notre Dame in 2006 and 2007 were included in the study ( $n = 152$ ). Students who deferred their start or failed to complete a unit or year (including taking a leave of absence) were included. The exclusion criteria were students who withdrew in their first year of study prior to completing any first year examinations ( $n = 3$ ); students interviewed prior to 2005, when the interview structure was considerably different ( $n = 1$ ); and students for whom no interview score was recorded due to no paper record of their interview being kept past graduation ( $n = 7$ ). Consequently, 141 physiotherapy students from two year groups were included in the study.

### *Predictor variables*

The predictor variables for the study included admission scores and demographic data. The admission scores were Interview Score, Tertiary Entrance Rank and Educational Score. The Tertiary Entrance Rank was the entrance score utilised for university selection in Western Australia prior to 2009. Similar to the current Australian Tertiary Admission Rank, the Tertiary Entrance Rank was a ranking system based on each student's performance relative to other students of school leaving age. The Educational Score was calculated by the School of Physiotherapy and provided a common entry measure for both school leavers and mature age applicants. For school leavers it was determined from the Tertiary Entrance Rank and for mature age applicants, it was determined from the Mature Age Rank based on undergraduate performance in previously completed or partially completed undergraduate study. Demographic data included as predictor variables were: gender; age on entry; and entry level which was recorded as either mature age or school leaver.

### *Outcome variables*

Outcome variables included individual student results for year level and overall Grade Point Average, individual clinical placement results and overall Clinical Grade Point Average, individual unit scores and Objective Structured Clinical Examinations (OSCEs) results. In the case that a student repeated a unit, the first result was utilised. In total there were 54 outcome variables incorporating all aspects of performance through the undergraduate program.

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