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Abstract

Abstract of paper presented at the 5th Exercise & Sports Science Australia Conference 2012.

Keywords

professional, you, clinical, learning, experiences, exercise, physiology, students, get, online, enhance, can

Disciplines

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Can you get it online? How to enhance professional and clinical learning experiences for exercise physiology students.

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Introduction

Clinical placement provides the essential transition from university setting to the real-life clinical environment. Placement provides a number of challenges for both student and supervisor that can limit the educational, professional and social support available for students^{4,5}. Student adjustment to these challenges, particularly those on placement in isolated areas, can have a large impact on student learning and self-confidence⁴. There is a need for strategies to be developed that enhance peer learning and support, allowing students to develop early mentorship skills through reflective practice. The use of online technology to enhance peer interaction and clinical learning on work placements has been evaluated in many other professions^{1,2,3,4}. The purpose of this project was to evaluate the effectiveness of online discussion in facilitating reflective practice and peer collaboration as a strategy to enhance student learning of exercise physiology students while on clinical placement.

Methods

This study was approved by the University of Wollongong Human Research Ethics Committee, with all participants providing online informed voluntary consent. This investigation involved 3 phases: i) Phase one, a literature review to assess the use of online technologies relating to clinical placement. Key search words used were: online education, online assessment, online discussion, online learning community, clinical education, practicum, work experience, and peer learning; ii) Phase two, an online subject called EXSC 421/921 Clinical Practicum was developed where assessment and forum discussions based on the students' clinical placement experiences and patient case studies were now facilitated online; and, iii) Phase three, all students were invited to complete an online survey at the end of teaching session. The survey instrument of 15 questions, using a combination of 5-point Likert Scale and short-answers questions, evaluated the broader online subject intervention, and the effectiveness of online discussions in enhancing support and overall experience on clinical placement. A thematic analysis was then conducted from the survey to identify common themes and areas for variance or improvement within the students' qualitative answers.

Results

Fifteen out of 17 final year exercise rehabilitation students responded to the survey. Eighty percent (n=12) of students agreed the online subject format was effective in providing support while out on placement. The majority of students (n=12) reported that the online discussion on ethics and confidentiality for specific clinical scenarios contributed to their understanding of clinical placement and professional practice. No students rated the placement-focused discussion as ineffective, with 14 out of 15 students agreeing or strongly agreeing that sharing their own placement experiences with peers was beneficial. Thematic analysis of student comments highlighted improvements could be made in the following areas: i) having a whole class discussions (not small groups of 5-6 students), ii) removing the assessable requirement of the discussion content, iii) removing the restrictions to discussion topic areas; and iv) having access to the discussion forum for the entire duration of the placement term.

Conclusion

The students' views of the online support and reflection process were overall very positive. Common themes analysed from qualitative feedback parallel those found in earlier literature from other allied health and medical professions.

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