



**The development of a distance supervision protocol for
Allied health profession students on practice placements in
Non-traditional areas.**

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CONTENTS

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

1. INTRODUCTION

- 1.1 Background to the project
- 1.2 The wider picture
- 1.3 Funding arrangements
- 1.4 Project aims
- 1.5 Project objectives
- 1.6 Description of the project

2. REVIEW OF LITERATURE

3. METHOD

- 3.1 Summary of method
- 3.2 Identification of practice placements
- 3.3 Development of Supervision Protocol
- 3.4 Practice Placement
- 3.5 Data Collection
- 3.6 Analysis

4. FINDINGS

- 4.1 Participant data
- 4.2 Interviews
 - 4.2.1 Planning and organisation
 - 4.2.2 Key Benefits
 - 4.2.3 Key challenges
 - 4.2.4 Factors for success

5. DISCUSSION

6. THE WAY FORWARD

7. DISSEMINATION

8. CONCLUSION

9. REFERENCE LIST

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

A small scale research project was funded by the Higher Education Academy (formally LTSN) to explore and evaluate the use of role emergent practice placements for allied health profession students at the School of Allied Health Professions (AHP), University of East Anglia.

The research team comprised the course director for the BSc in Occupational Therapy (AHP), the practice placement director (AHP) and a part time research associate. The participants were two third year occupational therapy students during their final practice placement, a Youth Offending Team, a mental health resource centre and three academic tutors.

Project Aim:-

The aim of the project was to evaluate and develop a protocol for the distance supervision of students in role emergent placements i.e. placements which do not routinely employ a profession specific supervision. The diversification of practice placement experience would reflect the current trend of inter-agency and cross-sectoral working and additionally increase the number and range of placements available to AHP students.

Methodology:-

The project adopted an action research methodology known as participatory evaluation to inform and improve practice. Data was collected by individual interviews, transcribed and then analysed by the three researchers.

Summary of findings:-

Analysis of the data was used to identify the following themes which were then explored in detail, using quotes to support specific statements. The themes were:

- Planning and organisation
- Key Benefits
- Key challenges
- Factors for success

The findings provided evidence that in this small scale study:

- The role emergent placements were highly successful and well supported using distance supervision.
- Both students and placement providers benefited from the experience and would be happy to repeat the venture thus expanding the range of placement provision. The students developed as secure professionals in a remarkably short space of time.
- Time must be allocated to preparation prior to the placement, supervision of the placement and quality assurance evaluation after the placement. Role emergent placements are not a 'quick fix' for placement shortages.
- A rigorous protocol should be developed and used to ensure that all aspects of planning and quality control are in place, and to deal with problems within the placement as they may occur. If role emergent placements are undertaken at a geographical location remote from the higher education institute then more

creativity is needed when considering who will provide the profession specific supervision.

- In the placements studied the role emergent placement model has been beneficial to the occupational therapy profession in general as the value of this service provision was exemplified. This however may not be the case if the placement was problematic, highlighting the importance of careful selection of student, placement and supervisor.

This project is limited in scope but presents an in depth evaluation of two role emergent practice placements and the supervision process used to support them. As a result of this evaluative study a dedicated protocol is being written to support future occupational therapy students in this type of placement and to encourage other allied health profession students to explore the possible use of non traditional placements.

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1. INTRODUCTION

1.1 Background to the project.

Practice placements are an integral component of the pre registration programmes delivered within the School of Allied Health Professions. The curricula for both occupational therapy and physiotherapy require the students to undertake a minimum of 1000 hours of assessed practice to meet the statutory and professional requirements of a competent practitioner. (CSP, 2002, Hocking and Ness, 2002) Whilst these have traditionally been undertaken in areas of health and social care there is an increasing need, especially for occupational therapy, for the placement experience to reflect a wider range of learning opportunity, which better reflects communities with a variety of occupational needs. The school has taken a proactive approach to achieving this experience through engaging with role emergent placements, i.e. services which traditionally do not have an occupational therapist in post (Huddleston, 1999). Two placements, one in the voluntary sector of mental health, and the other in the judicial service provided an eight week final year placement. It was this learning opportunity which led to a research project to develop a supervisory protocol to underpin and support the learning process.

1.2 The wider picture.

There are three key criteria which impact on the organisation and delivery of practice placements.

- The current UK government agenda continues to increase the numbers of allied health professionals in training, (DOH, 2000), at a time of diversification of health and social care services, thus raising a tension between supply and demand.
- There is a recognised national shortfall of placement availability which constrains the development of educational programmes, (Fisher & Savin Baden, 2002, Healey, 2005, Craik & Turner, 2005).
- An increased need exists to assure the quality and standards of placement provision to ensure best practice (COT 2004, CSP 2002, HPC 2004, QAA 2001).

Historically there has been a perception that occupational therapy placements would be undertaken within traditional health and social care environments, with other opportunities being accessed to address the shortfall of availability. However, the current need to develop a more independent and autonomous practitioner, in response to the re-provision of services, has led to a more dynamic system of professional practice where clients are accessed within other forms of care. These non traditional placements can be seen as offering some unique perspectives to professional experience, thus enhancing the student experience. A mind shift therefore has occurred between using these resources as a supplement to placement provision, to developing them as a quality learning experience in their own right.

The School's infrastructure to support all aspects of placement provision has also been traditionally focussed on the areas which dominate the practice context. Thus formal agreements are in place between the higher education institution (HEI) and the placement provider, (the Trust). Profession specific departmental staff have been available to supervise the students, and the whole is supported by the network which surrounds these organisations. Accessing learning opportunities within the emerging

areas of care, the judicial system, the private sector, voluntary agencies and independent sectors (COT 2004b), requires new strategies to enable these areas to meet the learning objectives of the students. The development of these strategies informed the development of the distance supervision protocol for role emergent placements.

1.3 Funding arrangements

A bid from the School of AHP was submitted to the Higher Education Academy (formally LTSN) for research assistant, transcription and administrative costs. Financial support for the academic staff involved in the project was provided by AHP.

1.4 Project aims

The aim of this project was to develop strategies to enable role emergent placements that do not normally provide placement experience to offer a high quality experience which would enable the student to meet their learning objectives.

1.5 Project objectives

The key project objectives were:-

- to identify the needs of the two role emergent placements offered to enable the placements to be undertaken
- to support the students and the placement personnel throughout this process
- to provide distance supervision from the HEI
- to evaluate the learning process through discussion with all key players, i.e. the school, the placement personnel and the students.
- To develop a protocol for use in role emergent placements
- To disseminate this information to enable the process to become a multi-disciplinary approach

1.5.1 Description of the project

The project was carried out over the academic year of 2004/5.

Personnel comprised the project supervisor who is also the course director for OT, the School's Placement Director, and a part time research assistant. All were based at the School of AHP University of East Anglia.

The overall objective was to ensure in depth consultation with the placement providers, the students and those offering supervision of the process through individual interviews. The participants were purposely selected as an agreement to proceed with these non traditional placements had to be reached between the HEI, the student, the learning environment and the faculty member offering supervision prior to the learning experience being undertaken.

2. REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Professional literature within occupational therapy has focussed on issues of supply and demand in relation to the changing provision of placement education. This imbalance has been explored from a number of perspectives, (Huddleston, 1999, Healey, 2004, Craik and Turner, 2005). Fisher and Savin Baden, (2002) recognised the potential of modernising practice in relation to the changing face of health and social care, but reflected some professional caution from managers regarding the identity and ethos of occupational therapy when accessing role emergent learning environments. Strategies to address the national shortfall are offered, eg taking more than one student, offering an inter-agency model, using part time supervisors, (Fisher and Savin Baden, (2002), and developing the placement pool through accessing non traditional opportunities which reflect the client's occupational needs eg working with the homeless, (Heuber & Tryssenaar, 1996, Totten & Pratt, 2001), and within mental health, (Featherstone, 2003). Clear, effective and regular supervision was the main recommendation of these experiences, stating the need for a defined mentor within the workplace for daily contact, and a supervisor appointed from the HEI or the occupational therapy service to provide the professional supervision required to enable the student to meet the learning outcomes.

Bossers et al, (1997) explore the unique learning opportunity offered to students through role emergent placements, seeing this as a liberating experience which focuses on the life of the client, rather than on a defining referral. They commented on the personal growth required of the students within these environments, recognising the reflection on action which occurred when engaged in distance supervision. They viewed the lack of traditional structure as a positive attribute, which encouraged attributes such as initiative, independence, confidence and motivation to develop as a result of, rather than a requisite to, the placement experience. These outcomes were reflected by Huddleston, (1999) and Higgs & Titchen, (2001) who considered the advantages of this type of placement experience. These professional qualities relate to the competencies required of a registered professional. (HPC Standards of Proficiency 2004, COT Standards for Education, 2004).

The professional and statutory bodies have produced specific standards to assure the quality of placement provision, (QAA Placement Learning, 2001, the HPC standards of Education and training, 2004, the COT Standards for Education, 2004) which provide guidance in establishing practice learning environments. The COT Curriculum Framework, (2004) requires programmes to 'actively seek placements which reflect the rising flexibility in workplace patterns and locations', whilst the Standards for Practice Education, (2004) recognises the dominance of the NHS placements and recommends developing experience in emerging areas.

The justification for expanding learning opportunities to the role emergent sector seems evident, but it was apparent from the literature that there had to be a defined structure which accompanied and underpinned this experience. Supervision and organisation were key factors, and it was the need to formalise these procedures to ensure a quality learning opportunity for the students that led to the development of this project.

3. METHOD

The aim of this project was to evaluate a practice in a way which would then inform the theory and improve that practice (Robson 2002). A form of action research known as participatory evaluation was used to achieve this aim; this has been described as creating ‘a learning process for the program recipients that will help them in their effort to reach desired goals’ (Greenwood & Levin 1998 p239). This section outlines the process used within this mini project.

Key stakeholders:

- Undergraduate allied health profession students
- The Higher Education Institute, - University of East Anglia, (UEA)
- Health and social care providers who do not currently employ OTs

Environments:

- Statutory and non statutory health and social care providers
- Higher education establishment

3.1 Summary of method i.e. stages of project

Method	Participants
Identification of non-traditional practice placements ↓	Placement Director (UEA) 2 students (undergraduate year3)
Development of proposed supervision protocol ↓	Placement Director (UEA) Practice placement teams Academic tutors
Practice placement ↓	Practice placement teams Academic tutors
Evaluation interviews	Students
Evaluation interviews	Academic tutors Placement Director
Evaluation focus groups ↓	Practice placement teams
Analysis of findings ↓	Research team
Plan for future	Research team

3.2 Identification of Practice Placements

The objective of identifying additional practice placement opportunities was to explore settings in health and social care which currently do not employ an occupational therapist but where there may be a valid role to fulfil i.e. role emergent placements. For the purposes of this small scale project the intention was not to discover an exhaustive list of potential role emergent settings but to find two or three that would be willing to trial such a placement.

This project was undertaken within the student’s final 8 week placement before qualification, Placement 5. It was assumed that by this stage a student would be

knowledgeable about the roles occupational therapy can engage in, and have a clear understanding of the philosophy of the occupational therapy process.

Within the occupational therapy curriculum, placement 5 is an elective placement which the students set up and organise individually with support and guidance from the placement team at UEA. There appeared to be no reason why this practice should be changed for the project and two students identified practice placements in settings which did not employ a registered occupational therapist within the organisation.

These settings were:

- Youth offending team (statutory agency)
- Mental health resource centre (non-statutory agency)

Once negotiation between the student and placement provider was initiated and outline agreement obtained, the Practice Placement Director at UEA began discussions to ensure the quality assurance of the potential practice placement experience. The two agencies chosen were The Youth Offending Team (YOT), part of the judicial service and a mental health resource centre (MIND) both of which were local to UEA.

3.3 Development of Supervision Protocol

The aim at this stage of the process was to enable the agencies to provide a high quality learning experience which was of benefit to both student and placement provider. It was necessary to identify a day to day practice educator (non occupational therapist) and a professional educator (occupational therapist) two months before commencement of the placement to allow for pre-planning and goal setting. One role emergent placement had been undertaken the previous academic year, and this experience provided an evaluation which guided the process. Meetings were arranged between the student, the university tutor who would be providing professional supervision, and the practice placement team to ensure practices and procedures were in place to support the initiative.

3.4 Practice Placement

The practice placements were undertaken simultaneously during January and February 2005. The students completed, and in fact, exceeded the learning outcomes, demonstrating a highly professional approach to competent practice. This outcome assured all members of the teams that the required learning could be successfully achieved. On completion of the placements the next stage of data collection was initiated.

3.5 Data Collection

All personnel involved with the role emergent practice placements were interviewed to represent the views of all stake holders in the project. Seven interviews were undertaken, lasting between forty five minutes and one hour. The interviews were all recorded and transcribed.

The project team intended that two focus groups would be organised with each of the placement provider teams to gain further insight into the experience of taking an occupational therapy student within the team.

Unfortunately, this was not possible due to the inability to convene such a group within the timescale of the project in one case and the unwillingness of team members to allocate the time for this in the other. Therefore all data gathered from the placement providers comes directly from the individual working most closely with the student and who provided supervision on a day to day basis.

3.6 Analysis

The data was analysed by the three researchers to reveal key themes about strength of the process, weaknesses, opportunities and challenges. These themes were used to develop recommendations for a way forward with this type of practice placement opportunity and the development of a distance supervision protocol.

4. FINDINGS

4.1 Participant data

Participant	Gender	Age	Experience
OT student 1 (OTS1)	Female	21	Third year undergraduate
OT student 2 (OTS2)	Female	22	Third year undergraduate
Academic tutor 1 (AT1)	Female	58	Qualified OT 13 years teaching experience
Academic tutor 2 (AT2)	Female	48	Qualified OT 5 years teaching experience
Academic tutor 3 (AT3)	Female	42	Qualified OT 2 years teaching experience
Placement educator 1 (PE1)	Female	70	Qualified nurse YOT Health co-ordinator
Placement educator 2 (PE2)	Female	41	Mental health worker Centre manager

4.3 Interviews

The findings from the seven interviews have been analysed and grouped into four themes. The information from all participants has been combined for the purpose of this report. The four themes generated are:

- 4.2.1 Planning and organisation
- 4.2.2 Key Benefits
- 4.2.3 Key challenges
- 4.2.4 Factors for success

These themes are discussed in further detail in the following sections.

4.2.1 Planning and organisation

Respondents highlighted the importance of pre-planning and organisation on all sides as vital for a role emergent placement to take place. A number of key factors required managing to support and maintain a practice placement in an atypical setting; these factors included:

- Assessment of practice placement viability
- Identification of distance supervisors
- Allocation of time for pre-planning activity
- **Assessment of practice placement viability**

An essential component of developing role emergent placements is the need for a careful judgement to be made by the educational institution as to the viability of the suggested placement. This is critical to ensure that the required learning outcomes are achievable within the workplace setting. This was accepted by all participants to be the role of the profession specific practice placement director to ensure quality and equity for all students:

‘...my responsibility was to make sure that the learning experience is actually suitable and students can achieve their learning goals and basically it was a viable placement. That’s the role I had, if that had not happened, then the student would say that they had not had a fair experience...’ (AT1)

The supervising tutors highlighted the potential for conflict of expectations between the parties involved. Careful assessment of the placement viability was required to ensure the expectations of the university and the learning goals of the student had been met:

‘...(the placement) could have been quite happy to have another pair of hands, from that point of view the placement could have been fine, but from the student and what they should be achieving at in their third year, that would have been way off the mark.’ (AT3)

It was clear from both practice placement educators that their main expectation for the placement was that the student learned about the service and client group. It was essential for the university tutors and director to extend this level of expectation and ensure that the placement could provide a learning environment which would achieve all the required learning outcomes, thus enabling the student to demonstrate their professional competence.

- **Identification of distance supervisors**

The organisation of distance supervision and allocation of tutors was undertaken by the practice placement co-ordinator at UEA. For the purposes of this project tutors were asked to volunteer if they were interested in trialling this role. The role differed from the usual visiting tutor role for this final placement as students are not routinely visited on their elective placement but have email contact at the halfway and final assessment stage only. The practice placement co-ordinator maintained overall responsibility for the supervision process. The requirement for a clearly defined channel of communication was identified early on in the project, when one of the students approached the university with some difficulties, action from which demonstrated the importance of a cohesive approach:

‘When things were happening I contacted AT2 and AT3 reasonably regularly to make sure everything was in place... it was very important that we did not get mixed messages, if AT3 said one thing and I said another and the student was in the middle of it and it would have been very difficult...’ (AT1)

It was necessary for the tutors to familiarise themselves with the practice placement setting that the students were entering. In the case of the YOT placement this was not an environment that any of the academic staff had experience of and therefore required some work on the part of the tutor to familiarise herself with the working environment that the student was entering:

‘I did have to take time to read up on the purpose of YOTs, what they were trying to do and get familiar with their aims and objectives and the constraints on them. I had to understand the setting that OTS1 was in, it was unfamiliar to me as well...’ (AT2)

- **Allocation of time for pre-planning activity**

Prior to the placements taking place there was a need to spend time visiting the practice placement educators and planning with the students how supervision would be utilised. Both placement educators were visited on site by academic tutors to discuss the required learning outcomes for the placement, expectations on and of the student and how all parties could best work together to achieve these.

The data from all participants indicates that this pre-planning was successful in ensuring that the students and educators felt supported throughout the placement and had a clear knowledge of how to access help or advice when required:

‘...AT1 and 3 came, no problem, I knew where to go if I needed any help.’ (PE2)

‘My tutor came out to check everything is okay, in terms of the OT side, if I had any queries regarding knowledge, whether I was doing the right kind of thing, and also the paperwork...about how we have done overall.’ (OTS1)

‘It was a good arrangement that AT3 and I had...in the beginning it helped me keep on track, afterward, lots of it was just facilitation and listening to what I did ...covering issues.’ (OTS2)

It was apparent from the data that time spent prior to the placement beginning to understand the placement setting, build relationships with the educators and explain placement goals was beneficial for the final outcome.

4.2.2 Key Benefits

All participants highlighted significant benefits of this type of placement provision to both the professional development of the student and to the practice placement provider organisation. These benefits included:

- Reinforced learning of core skills
- Dissemination of the value of occupational therapy
- Thinking ‘outside the box’

- **Reinforced learning of core skills**

A striking benefit highlighted by all the participants was the way in which working within a role emergent setting allowed the students to think deeply about their core occupational therapy skills and the unique contribution they can make to the therapeutic setting:

‘I had to really develop my clinical reasoning skills, had to be able to justify what I was doing and why, I think in a lot of placements you have your supervisors there also as a therapist as back up, this time I did not, I had to do it all by myself, I think my confidence as a therapist really grew...’ (OTS1)

Each student gave a presentation to their practice placement team which were received extremely well and made a lasting impression on the personnel involved. Both of the educators spoke of the different perspective that the occupational therapy student brought to the team and the positive effect of this:

‘OTs look at the strengths of people, and address solutions by using , maximising a person’s own strengths and capabilities, and that was a very positive thing for us as a team to take on board, and we all said that afterwards...we don’t always look at the person solving problems with their own strengths.’ (PE1)

It was recognised that this might prove professionally demanding for some students but that this is appropriate for a final year placement. The students participating in this project were allowed the opportunity to work independently with creativity and flexibility.

- **Dissemination of the value of occupational therapy**

Tutors from the university highlighted the importance of role emergent placements in expanding the boundaries of the occupational therapy profession. It was felt that meeting and working with a range of service providers who are not usual providers motivated and enlightened others about the philosophy of occupational therapy which can be deceptively simple. This outcome was helpful to the students who encountered services / agencies new to their professional experience, for example, the police and probation service. It was also extremely important in enabling the university to expand and develop professional networks within the community:

‘...increasingly the government is taking much of the care for chronic situations out of the health service and this is going into the community typically within partnership working with non-statutory organisations ... it emphasises to the students that there are possibilities and it emphasises to the organisations what benefits this profession can bring.’ (AT3)

The challenge for these students was that an in-depth understanding of their chosen profession was required to enable them to promote this positively within an alternative environment. It was evident from all participants that using prior learning and on-going support from the educational provider the students proved equal to this demand and succeeded in introducing the value of occupational therapy to the teams they worked with:

‘If I were to leave tomorrow and my job was advertised and (the student) applied as an OT she would be given an interview, because she had a placement here and it was so successful. Because it opened people’s eyes that health is not just about nursing...’ (PE1)

- **Thinking ‘outside the box’**

The students and academic tutors felt strongly that the role emergent placement helped the student to think beyond a traditional professional structure. They had to be creative within a non OT environment and rapidly develop a profile of how occupational therapy can be practiced within diverse settings. The demanding nature of this requirement was recognised by academic tutors and was reflected in the success that both these students achieved:

‘I think it’s quite demanding on an individual to actually do that and it just pushes them a bit farther, both of them rose to the challenge which is absolutely great and they left a mark behind them which has been very well thought of in both instances.’ (AT1)

The placement teams highlighted that they had learned new skills and approaches from their student which have had a lasting impact and that they continue to use afterwards:

‘Thinking out of the box really for people, creative thinking...she influenced peoples’ thinking, people found her so easy to get on with and she put a lot into the work and the planning of the work. And she delivered a high quality service... the packs that she left behind we are all going to use as part of our resource.’ (PE1)

The value of this outcome was acknowledged in terms of the students’ professional development, the beneficial effects on service provision to their users and the essential progression of occupational therapy as a developing field with a valuable approach to contribute to health and social care environments.

4.2.3 Key challenges

This section addresses issues which were raised, generally by students and tutors, as factors that could impact on the achievement of a high quality practice placement. These issues did not necessarily arise during this project but they were identified as concerns which may have a negative effect. These issues were:

- Knowledge base available to students
- Time
- Lack of informal learning and supervision
- Raising service users' expectations

- **Knowledge base available to students**

It was acknowledged by most participants that specific knowledge of occupational therapy may not be offered by the placement to the student. This potential weakness puts greater emphasis on the distance supervision process and the possibility of accessing occupational therapist support from other local sources. One of the students in particular valued peer supervision with fellow OT students in similar settings and the support offered by the university tutor on OT specific issues to keep her 'on track' (OTS2).

Alternatively, it was acknowledged that the students learned from service users and benefited from the exposure to a range of clients that they had not encountered on previous placements. One placement educator highlighted the wealth of knowledge to be gained from the service users that the student encountered and the rich and unique opportunity this offered:

'They can gain an enormous amount of knowledge from the members themselves...you are going to hear about their lives and what they do and how they feel...you know 40 odd people a day with personality disorder there are not many places you can meet (various conditions) and see the changes, it is so good when the student says so and so doesn't look quite herself today how am I going to deal with her today?' (PE2)

Although not a problem in the pilot project, it was acknowledged by both students and academic staff that the purpose of occupational therapy in a role emergent placement could be confusing for a student. The generic role modelling from the on site practice educator could blur the student's understanding of their unique contribution to the team in which they were working. The students involved in this study demonstrated a deep understanding of their professional roles but highlighted that for student who was uncertain, the lack of professional support on a daily basis could be problematic.

- **Time**

The supervision of role emergent placements required a considerable time investment from academic tutors both before and during the experience. Prior to the placement the tutor needed to research and learn about the service provider, negotiate with the student and placement educator and plan meetings for regular supervision..

Additionally, time had to be booked out for sessions with the individual student and dates for undertaking the halfway and end of placement assessments in collaboration with the placement educator. This involved considerable pre-planning to allow for the flexibility to meet the needs of both the student and placement educator, and to find a way around everyone's commitments. It was generally felt that the supervision process was successful by being flexible and responsive to needs and events. The process was much more intensive than for other elective placements, involving time

to discuss what the student was doing on a daily basis, thus developing and enhancing their clinical reasoning.

The students invested considerable time in organising their placements, in one case having to 'sell' her case to the potential placement team. They also worked very hard before and during placement to prepare and gain knowledge and understanding of the settings and approaches that they were taking part in. Both students were highly motivated in their chosen setting and this was acknowledged to be a pre-requisite for success.

The placement educators identified the time commitment involved. This was particularly the case for one educator who had not taken any students in their setting:

'Placements are quite hard work for supervisors, you have to fore plan. You have to give up your time to supervise people; it is quite a lot to think about. I think 2 placements a year would be the most I would ever think about.' (PE1)

This educator also raised the issue that a student could create problems in the work place that would then entail considerable time for the educator to resolve. This did not occur in any way during these placements but had been a concern prior to the student starting.

- **Lack of informal learning and supervision**

A challenge identified by the students was missing the informal contact with other occupational therapists which occurs during the day when on placement in an occupational therapy service setting. The extent to which they missed this lack of informal professional liaison appeared to surprise the students and was not something they had taken into account when considering their placements. It was also an issue that was more apparent in the early stages of the placement:

'In the early days OTS1 said "I miss at the end of the day sitting down opposite another OT", so we said she could email me at 4pm every day and I would reply to supplement that, but she never did. Once she had said it, it wasn't really a problem again; she did not really need to...' (AT2)

The students were proactive in arranging an informal peer support meeting and would meet once or twice a week after work. This was only possible because they were geographically close, and alternative methods would need to be identified for a more isolated student.

- **Raising service users' expectations.**

The School, and everyone involved in the role emergent placements were aware that the students would be engaging in activities which would increase opportunities for service users and these would be withdrawn when the placement finished. It was necessary to ensure that the aims and objectives for each intervention were carefully presented by the student, to ensure that the service users were fully informed that these were short term interventions. Whilst this was not an issue on the two placement experiences used this aspect does need to be explicitly considered to ensure ethical practice.

4.2.4 Factors for success

This section addresses the issues which emerged from the data indicating factors that facilitated a successful placement experience for all parties. The following issues were raised and discussed:

- Student motivation
- Placement location
- Flexibility
- Preparation

- **Motivation**

All participants in the project were highly motivated to achieve a successful outcome.. The students were keen and enthusiastic; they had identified an area of work that interested them and then selected and negotiated placement settings. This involved taking the initiative to inform potential placements of the contribution they could make to the team both before and during the placement. The students held their own caseloads and initiated new interventions for the clients, completing the experience by giving highly praised presentations to the placement teams.

Each team was open and willing to accept a student from a different professional background. It was evident that the main placement educator planned the placement carefully and gave considerable thought to others who might be involved in the student's support and learning. The comments made during data collection highlight their enthusiasm for the learning potential of their service team:

'The expectation I had of OTS1 was for her to be able to acquire the knowledge and the skills of the service that we offer, had to be a learning curve for her really. Anything she gave to us would be a bonus...'

The academic tutors took the responsibility of informing the placement teams about the aims and objectives for the students, and to assess the placement potential early on in the process. They additionally took a very flexible approach to distance supervision aiming to troubleshoot potential problems quickly and allocating sufficient time for the students within the general constraints of university workload.

This determination to work together towards a common aim was highly influential in the success of the project and the distance supervision protocol.

- **Placement location**

The geographical location of these two placements close to the university made a flexible approach to distance supervision viable. Travel to and from supervision sessions was minimal and the academic tutor could be available to student and/or placement educator at relatively short notice. The proximity of the two placements also enabled the students to arrange informal peer support meetings.

Placements that are at a greater distance from the educational establishment or isolated from other students could present greater problems. The visiting arrangements may have to be more rigidly planned and the cost of travel would have to be a consideration. The benefits of being geographically close were highlighted by the students and their academic tutors; it was not raised as an issue by the placement educators.

- **Flexibility**

The term 'flexibility' was used on a number of occasions by all participants. The need for flexibility with regard to the supervision process; the requirement for the students to be flexible when integrating into a team which had little or no understanding of their possible contribution, and the flexibility of the placement team to accept a student who could cause an increased workload for a very busy and close-knit team. Additionally there was a need for the university to be flexible and willing to negotiate a new approach to placement experience which does not necessarily fit the mould of traditional occupational therapy provision.

- **Preparation**

Careful preparation from all parties ensured that the placements were successful:

'...thinking clearly before getting involved, so that we are well prepared and we don't ever do it a s a last minute to just pick this one up and run with it; it is actually a well prepared and well reasoned decision to use that placement...I will always recommend sensible preparation and get all the paper work and process sorted out.' (AT1)

Everyone involved with the project put in time and effort to ensure that detailed planning occurred to ensure clarity of expectations around issues such as learning goals, placement outcomes, assessment and evaluation. It was generally felt that the time invested prior to the experience was influential to the smooth running of the placement and avoided 'crisis intervention'.

Some challenges for the team developing and planning this type of practice placement provision were identified during data collection, although they were hypothetical in both cases. None of these challenges were felt to be insurmountable but it was recognised that the issues raised must be considered when developing a formalised distance supervision model for role emergent placements. The challenges highlighted were the time required for planning and running the process; raising service provision and users expectations and then withdrawing; dealing with conflict or a struggling student; and maintaining an occupational therapy focus in a team of other professionals.

5. DISCUSSION

It is acknowledged that the focus of the project broadened from simply looking at the supervision process to considering the whole role emergent placement experience and the value of this approach to placement education. The project has emphasised the need for a clear protocol to support not just the supervision process, but role emergent placement management in its entirety.

The project has shown that practice placements in role emergent settings can be undertaken very successfully providing key issues are planned for and organised early in the process. A role emergent placement can not be undertaken without the necessary time allocation prior to and during the placement. This time allocation is required from all of those involved: academic tutors, placement educators and, importantly, the student. The responsibility on, and work required, by the student must be understood as they are central to the process and therefore ensuring that students are carefully advised about the challenges of this type of placement is essential.

A distance supervision protocol must be accepted by all with clear delineation of roles and responsibilities to avoid confusion for the student once out in the placement team. In our project the placements' location made supervision from the university convenient but in the case of a role emergent placement at a distance from the HEI this may not be so achievable. It may be possible that distance supervision could be provided by an experienced occupational therapist placement educator working in the locality but whether this would involve financial remuneration would need to be considered. In addition one of the findings from the project is the support students gained from their peers.. An exploration of how peer support groups could be utilised in a particular area, either with students from their own HEI or from a similar HEI course, would be beneficial to future role emergent placements.

A clear feature of the distance supervision model must be for the profession specific supervisor to ensure that support and reflection on core skills is available to the student as this can not be provided by the placement educator. The theories underpinning the profession's clinical reasoning must be explored and strengthened which can be achieved through face to face sessions or by email / telephone contact on a regular basis. The student must contribute to this process by careful preparation for professional supervision and with the use of CPD tools such as a reflective diary or critical incident sheets. If more than one student is placed in one geographical location group supervision could be explored.

The impact on the organisation providing the practice placement must be considered. The required time and resource implications have been discussed extensively but there are benefits to be gained by a team taking on this role. This project demonstrated that in both cases the student contributed significantly to the work of the team and made a lasting impact by their approach to their work. Both students introduced new concepts and new ways of thinking about the settings they had entered. Although this was a positive experience, discussion must occur with a potential role emergent placement regarding changes in service provision. This raises some ethical issues

around service users' expectations and experiences as an intervention is offered for a limited period, and then withdrawn.

The overwhelming finding from this project is that role emergent placements can be of tremendous benefit to all concerned. The student, placement provider, HEI and the wider profession can all gain positive outcomes from the experience. The key to achieving such benefits is shown to be careful planning and preparation and a clear protocol that all parties can adopt and understand. In this way overlap of roles and confusion over placement supervision and outcomes is easily avoided. The following section highlights the important features for such a protocol.

6. THE WAY FORWARD

The purpose of this research project has been to devise a protocol to support the role emergent placement experience. This has been informed by evidence from the findings of the project and a previous placement experience. The protocol addresses the key findings of the project and identifies actions to be taken in a chronological order:

- Early identification of a suitable placement
- Direct communication and identification of key personnel
- Undertake a placement visit to establish the suitability of the proposed learning environment
- Completion of a Clinical Placement Agreement (if HEI practice) between the placement provider and the HEI
- Identification of suitable students who meet the following criteria:
 - a clear sense of professional identity
 - an ability to understand and articulate their professional role
 - an ability to work within professional isolation
 - an ability to establish clear and succinct learning goals for the placement
 - a willingness to engage in an alternative experience
- Identification of the day to day supervisor on site and with clarification and agreement of their role
- Allocation of the distance supervisor within the HEI / alternative clinical area, with clarification and agreement of their role
- Confirmation of arrangements with the placement provider
- Establishing a supervision contract between the student and the distance supervisor
- Establishing a contract between the distance supervisor and the day to day educator to include being present at the assessment process
- Evaluation of the placement on completion using the mechanisms for placement monitoring
- De-brief of personnel engaged in the placement.

7. DISSEMINATION OF INFORMATION

Research should not occur in isolation and this project has important findings that can inform and develop placement practice education for the professions allied to medicine. Dissemination of the findings to a wider audience is, therefore, vital and the methods of disseminating the information from this mini-project are as follows:

- **Conference papers**

Jepson J, Wells C (2005), The development of a distance supervision protocol for health profession students in role emergent placements, First International Clinical Skills Conference, from the skills laboratory to the workplace: Making the connections, Monash University, Prato, Italy

Jepson J, Wells C (2005) Developing Role Emergent Placements with Distance Supervision Multi-professional Practice Placement Educator's Conference, University of East Anglia – November 2005

- **Papers submitted**

Jepson J, Wells C Should we support students on practice placement in role emergent settings? Seminar abstract for College of Occupational Therapists Annual Conference 2006, Cardiff

Jepson J, Wells C Role emergent practice placements for allied health profession students 1st Pedagogical Research in Higher Education (PRHE) conference 'Pedagogical Research: Enhancing student success 2006, Liverpool Hope University

- **Publications**

Jepson J, Wells C (2005), The development of a distance supervision protocol for health profession students in role emergent placements, First International Clinical Skills Conference Publication, Monash University

- **Publications in preparation**

Journal article for British Journal of Occupational Therapy

- **Other**

Liaison and discussion with Anna Wood, Education Officer, College of Occupational Therapy re. national role emergent placement project

8. CONCLUSION

It should be acknowledged that this was a small scale project which related to two clinical areas offering learning opportunities to two final year students. The methodology chosen to both evaluate the experience and to provide evidence to underpin the draft protocol was appropriate as it provided meaningful engagement for the participants. It was important to respect the amount of work which the role emergent placement personnel had contributed to the student's learning experience, and not to impose on their professional time too greatly. The use of interviews enabled each participant to reflect on the experience, and in a sense to de-brief from this in a constructive manner.

The findings from the project have been used to develop the draft protocol. This is essential in ensuring that role emergent placements are underpinned by the quality initiatives which are used for traditional placements. The key objective of the protocol will be to enable the student to undertake a learning experience which addresses their personal and professional development, thus making role emergent placements a viable practice experience. The protocol needs to recognise that structures which are in place for the more traditional placements may have to be specifically addressed.

This project is timely as the outcome addresses the need to expand placement networks and recognise that other agencies are well equipped to offer opportunities for health students. The national shortage of placements is a highly pertinent topic, and the current re-organisation of health and social care will impact on availability for the rising numbers of health care students. The College of Occupational Therapy has expressed an interest in this work, and it is intended that the project findings will inform future national policies.

A development from the project would be to undertake future research which seeks the views of the service users. Whilst it was evident that they fully engaged in activities which were offered by the students, their views were not sought regarding this addition to their normal programmes.

Confidence in the process of engaging in a role emergent placement has been expressed by the Youth Offending Team who have offered a further placement to a current third year student, and this will provide an opportunity to trial the protocol.

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