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# PMI2<sup>1</sup>, Physiotherapy and international placements: our experience

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A chance comment back in 2006 at a Health & Social Sciences Faculty event: “I have a contact in Malaysia who is a physio manager if you are interested ...” started what has been an enduring and constantly evolving partnership between Pantai Hospitals Group in Malaysia and the Rehabilitation Sciences Group in the Faculty of Health & Social Sciences. The aim of this article is to reflect upon some of the challenges and rewards of developing international placements.

Being new in the role of practice placement co-ordinator for the Rehabilitation Sciences group I was keen to establish and develop a pool of elective placement contacts for our MSc (pre-registration) and BSc (Hons) Physiotherapy courses that met the required university and professional body requirements. Little did I realise at the time how challenging, frustrating and complicated this process would turn out to be and what an exciting learning curve international placements would take me, the team and our students on.

The demand for international placements had grown over time, not only from our students requesting to be able to ‘go away’ but also through the publication and awareness of Leeds Metropolitan University’s Internationalisation Strategies 2004–2008 and 2008–2012 (Leeds Metropolitan University, n.d.) We were keen for our students to have international placement opportunities but faced the difficult issues of securing appropriate Physiotherapy placements and then funding them. Our professional body, The Chartered Society of Physiotherapists, has a student travel fund to which student members can apply. I felt at the time that the BSc students were at a disadvantage in terms of being able to secure funding owing to constraints on the timing of their placements during the course. The dates for application to the

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CSP travel fund close before the BSc students know where their Level 6 placements have been allocated and no placement in Level 6 is 'elective', unlike on the MSc (pre-registration) where students have a summer placement that they plan and organise themselves.

## Funding

We decided to develop the Pantai partnership for the BSc students and also to apply for British Council PMI2 Connect Student Mobility Funding (<http://www.britishcouncil.org/learning-pmi2-connect.htm>). Putting together the application was a fairly straightforward process and in the end the Physiotherapy and Occupational Therapy placement co-ordinators submitted a joint bid for eight placements. The partner was very keen to take both sets of students on placement but only had the scope to place that number of students safely. Allied Health Professional students are usually supervised 1:1 or 2:1 by experienced educators/mentors in line with professional guidelines on practice placement learning (Chartered Society of Physiotherapy, 2003) and are required to be supervised by an educator who has a recognised professional qualification (Health Professions Council equivalent), which placed limitations on the number of students we could place at any time. We were successful in our initial application and have since been awarded a further three years of continuation funding. Getting the funding was, however, just the start of the process.

## Developing the partnership

In order for the placements to be a success for both the students and the educators the Occupational Therapy placement co-ordinator and I undertook a visit to the Pantai Hospital group in Kuala Lumpur (KL) to facilitate a Practice Educators' Preparation Course. The content was similar to a regional course that Leeds Metropolitan runs in conjunction with Bradford, Huddersfield and York St John

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Universities, and one that all Physiotherapy and Occupational Therapy educators are expected to attend before undertaking student supervision. Our visit enabled us to meet the team in KL, explain assessment requirements, discuss the placement paperwork and understand the type of environment and likely client groups our students could expect to meet during their placements. It was also pivotal in the development of the partnership and how it would expand over the years. On reflection, I would say this first visit was the key to the success of the partnership and why it has worked so effectively over many years.

Since that first visit, the Rehabilitation Science team has undertaken two further training courses with the Pantai clinicians in Malaysia, one in conjunction with the Nursing Group, and more are planned for the future. We are in regular contact with the Pantai Therapy Manager and individual clinical specialists from several professions. We work together to meet the reporting requirements of the British Council and the professional requirements of the Ministry of Health in Malaysia and the Health Professions Council in the UK. We are constantly looking to explore further funding and educational opportunities that will be of benefit to both partners.

## **Managing the placement**

We had not anticipated how popular the final-year, five-week placement at Pantai Hospitals would prove to be. That first year I panicked a little: we had a fantastic placement set-up and educators raring to go, and £800 per student funding in place towards flights, vaccinations and accommodation. The placement was due to start on 3 January, which meant flying out over the Christmas holidays. I wondered whether the students would all get on; indeed, would we have any students wanting to go? I needn't have worried; in the end we had to instigate an application process as so many students requested the placement. While on placement the students kept in touch with the University just as they would on a normal 'home' placement. At the half-way point in the placement Physiotherapy tutor 'visits' were conducted using Elluminate web conferencing software, and a Facebook group was set up so that previous students (now graduates) could advise the current students on any queries

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about the placement and what else there was to do during their time in Malaysia. Time was built into the five-week placement for the students to have an opportunity to explore Malaysia as well as meeting the requirements for practice placement. While on this placement and as part of the funding agreement students were asked to keep a blog or video diary so that on return to university they could share the experiences with their peers. We also asked them to write a reflection on their time on this placement as part of their professional development. Here are several recent student reflections on the placement:

*“I feel the placement gave me an appreciation for government hospitals and how they work in relation to private ones. It opened my eyes on the quality of our education in England with things such as manual handling and the importance of the mandatory training we do here. The placement enabled me to enhance my communication skills in ways I would not readily be able to do in this country, working in a multi-cultural country has made me more aware of diversity issues and increased my respect for individuals from different religions and cultures.”*

*“I felt that Malaysia was a really beneficial experience for me in terms of training to be a physiotherapist. It improved my communication skills in a number of ways, mainly by making me aware of how much communication is not dependent on language. It made me more adaptable to different settings and meant I can make the most of a situation regardless of how familiar the surroundings are. Also, I now have a new found respect and appreciation for the NHS, I never realised ... the standard and quality of public healthcare available in this country before I had the opportunity to compare it to somewhere else. Overall this was a fantastic experience, one that I would highly, highly recommend.”*

*“The placement allowed me to experience working in a different environment, both culturally and in private healthcare. The private healthcare environment has given me an insight into different attitudes of healthcare professionals and*

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*patients when payment is made at the point of delivery. It has made me appreciate many aspects of working in the NHS, and given me valuable experience if I work in private healthcare in the UK.”*

*“The cultural difference challenged and developed my communication and interpersonal skills: working with barriers of language and different attitudes to aspects of physiotherapy such as self management of conditions. It was a valuable experience to be part of a team of Malaysian physiotherapists, and be able to share knowledge, techniques as well as discuss the differences in healthcare, learning to be a physiotherapist, and culture in our respective countries.”*

This particular partnership has not only involved student placements, staff visits and the opportunity to facilitate training courses: graduate internship and employment opportunities have also been explored with ten graduates spending between six and 12 months working as fully qualified ‘staff’ therapists.

## **Extra considerations**

Following the success of this particular partnership I was encouraged to develop further partnerships with other organisations. Consequently we now have placement agreements with universities and hospital groups in Canada, the USA, India, Hong Kong and Tanzania. Several of these are reciprocal and we have placed numerous international students in the UK National Health Service (NHS) for their elective placements. Volunteering opportunities have been developed with charities in Nepal and the UK. Each new partnership is slightly different and has required a different approach; visa requirements, insurance, and cultural and professional qualification differences need to be taken into account. The costing of flights, accommodation, vaccinations, daily travel to and from the placement, jet lag and the expectations of a different healthcare system all need to be discussed with the students. I always say to students that an international placement is a massive undertaking and not all placements will come to fruition.

Paperwork can be frustrating and slow; placement agreements or 'understandings' may need to be written and agreed several times; insurance documents and contracts may need to be exchanged and signed in duplicate by the appropriate officials. It is important to plan well ahead of the planned start of the placement. In my experience there is support within the University for reviewing legal paperwork, contracts and affiliation agreements which can be complicated and very time-consuming. It is vital that any paperwork that needs to be signed is reviewed at the right level within the Faculty, as there can be much red tape and legal documents may take weeks to be agreed and signed off. An experience of having to delay a placement because of missing paperwork or students turned back from border control because they didn't have the correct visa made me learn the hard way. We plan a year in advance now, as the procedures can take that long with some organisations and government bodies. The requirements change frequently so it is important to keep up to date and keep the students on track with where they should be in the process. The Physiotherapy international placement pool is competitive and small and in this situation the early bird most definitely gets the worm!

## **The benefits**

This may all seem very daunting and at times frustrating. Looking back on my experiences of setting up and managing international placements I have learnt how to find and apply for project funding, I have participated in British Council research which has led to other projects and the opportunity to liaise with many interesting contacts all over the world. Our graduates are now educators in many corners of the world, and keeping in touch with them has opened up new placement opportunities for current students. The international perspective we have gained on Physiotherapy education has fed into course development and re-approval and even though I don't think I will ever enjoy legal paperwork I can now at least understand (some) of it. Graduates have told us that at interview the international placements have allowed them to demonstrate organisational skills, cultural awareness, team working, pro-activity and use of initiative in a different context, which has given them something more to offer than the usual 'physio' graduate. Several of the students who went on

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the PMI2 placements have chosen to take part in international volunteering after graduation, inspired by their experiences on placement.

Patience, perseverance and flexibility are all key requirements of a placement coordinator but the rewards and sense of satisfaction are wonderful for you and your students.

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<sup>1</sup>PMI2: Prime Minister's Initiative for International Education