Abstract

Title: Practice educator’s perspectives on half way visits by university staff during student placements.

Background- The half way visit occurs when a university staff member visits the student and their practice educator half way through the student’s placement. Despite the many benefits of this visit, there is limited research on them.

Objectives- This study investigated practice educator’s perspectives of the half way visits made by university staff in order to gather their perceptions of the purpose, benefits and limitations of the visit. The study also investigated suggestions for adapting and improving it.

Methods- Mixed methods research containing both quantitative and qualitative was used. An existing self-rated web-based questionnaire containing multiple choice and open-ended questions was utilized. It was completed by practice educators in the 2015/16 academic year. They were registered with The Association of Occupational Therapists of Ireland (AOTI) and had a University of Limerick student for placement. 59 participants responded and data was analysed using Statistical Packages for Social Science using version 22.0 (IBM SPSS Inc, NY, USA, 2013).

Results- From the perspective of practice educators, the visit supports both them and also students. The visit offered a means of communication between the University and the placement. Many of the practice educators have a firm understanding on the purpose of half way visits and their benefits. The study also highlighted potential adaptations and improvements which could enhance the half way visit.

Conclusion- This study offers insight into the purpose of half way visits as well as the benefits and limitations of them. It generates suggestions on how the visit can be adapted and improved. Future research regarding half way visits can draw on this study to gather a greater understanding of their existence.
Introduction

Placement
A comparative study by Juznic and Pymm (2011) states that student placement refers to periods of combining a certain level of practical experience with academic learning within a vast array of professional disciplines. The benefit of student placement is that it makes the student conscious of the changing requirements of countless individuals and groups and of the vast array of settings, which offer services to the students (Burrill and Hussain 2014).

The Half Way Visit
The half way visit is when a university staff member visits the student and their practice educator to support both members. This visit generally occurs half way through the student’s placement. The university staff tutor has a responsibility to hold a strong professional relationship with placement staff. The effectiveness of this relationship allows for excellence in learning for all that are involved (Martin 2005).

The half way visit process for occupational therapy students in Ireland is typically half way through the student’s placement period. The University of Limerick carries out its half way visits face to face. This is with the exception of its initial four week placements and its international placements, which are carried out via telecommunication. Other universities in Ireland vary in their method with these visits; many only carry out a face to face visit if it is deemed necessary.

University Staff
The university staff member’s job has been acknowledged for many years as it has been documented as a valuable asset, as recorded by Gore and Mitchell (1992) and Swinehart and Meyers (1993). There is a responsibility on university staff to converse and inform educators so that they can increase their chances to expand, revise and augment their skills in explaining and using theoretical knowledge to strengthen their practice (Towns and Ashby 2014).

Practice Educator
The growing acknowledgment of practice educators on student placement is equally important. Where student progress is concerned, practice educators are an essential providers of information to the university. The university has a responsibility to uphold a successful
communicative relationship with practice educators and offer adequate direction and assistance. This allows practice educators to fulfil their position so that students experience a practical and balanced placement where all associates requirements are met by the high standard of practice education (Burrill and Hussain 2014).

The half way visit allows practice educators to receive practical support, education and to gather information on students, their syllabus and their assessment procedure (Burrill and Hussain 2014). The practice educator can gain knowledge of new practices and theoretical literature, develop their ability to be an educator, reflect on and revaluate their own practice and service setting (Burrill and Hussain 2014).

The objective of this study is to explore, from the practice educator’s perspective, the purpose, benefit(s) and limitation(s) of the half way visits made by university staff within an Irish context. Gaining a better understanding of the half way visit could ultimately inform clinical therapy departments on the value of half way visits and how this process can be improved.

**Research Strategy**

See table 1. for search strategy. See table 2. for number of relevant articles that appeared. This search took place over a ten week period.

**Table 1.**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Databases Searched</th>
<th>Words Searched</th>
<th>Years Searched for Articles</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Academic Search Complete (Ebsco Host)</td>
<td>‘Practice educator’</td>
<td>1994</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>‘Placement’</td>
<td>1998</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>AMED (Ebsco Host)</td>
<td>‘Half-way visit’</td>
<td>1999</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Glucksman Library</td>
<td>‘Student placement’</td>
<td>2005</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Google Scholar (Ebsco Host)</td>
<td>‘Perspective’</td>
<td>2006</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Medline (Ebsco Host)</td>
<td>‘Learning’</td>
<td>2007</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PsycArticles (Ebsco Host)</td>
<td>Practice education’</td>
<td>2008</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PsycINFO (Ebsco Host)</td>
<td>‘University’</td>
<td>2009</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Web Of Science</td>
<td>‘Student’</td>
<td>2010</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wiley Online Library</td>
<td>‘Experience’</td>
<td>2011</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>‘Communication’</td>
<td>2012</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>‘Role’</td>
<td>2013</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>2014</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table 2.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Words Searched</th>
<th>No. Of Relevant Articles</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>‘Practice educator’</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>‘Placement’</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Practice education’</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>‘University’</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>‘Student’</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>‘Perspective’</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>‘Fieldwork’</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>‘Practice education’</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Literature Review**

Literature reviews can be tremendously beneficial as they permit the researcher to recap previous research by gathering overall conclusions from numerous individual investigations that tackle connected or indistinguishable hypotheses (Cooper 1998).

As universities aim to spend their money wisely and justify all costs that have been invested into educational areas, visiting students during their placement may seem like an extravagant cost that might be deemed unnecessary (Department of Health 2002). This is the case with some universities who have discontinued the half way visit, as there is a lack of research showing its benefits (Department of Health 2002).

Abolishing or substituting a face-to-face interaction with the university staff tutor, student and practice educator has consequences (Martin 2005). The excellence of the relationship between the placement practice educator and student as well as the atmosphere of the placement location cannot be measured so successfully when face-to-face interaction is absent. Furthermore, potential problems might be neglected that would be noticed with face-to-face interaction and responsive questioning (Martin 2005).

Mason (2006) found a deteriorating number of practice placement offers for students. The study revealed that the choice for practice educators to educate students was influenced by the amount
of support that they receive when supervising them (Mason 2006). In light of this, practice educators can seek support from the university staff tutor on how to achieve the most effective learning environment for the student on placement so that it attends to their learning needs (Martin 2005). The pressure of combining two roles, ‘therapist’ and ‘practice educator’, may add tremendous stress for practice educators and it would be encouraging to see if half way visits alleviate this stress by offering support.

Mason (2006) noted the increased need for practice educator support in mental health placements. Similarly, a study by Daniels (2010) found that practice educators require educated support and encouragement. It found that when this support is given, practice educators can instil confidence in students who have had restricted chances. This in turn will allow the student’s social and learning needs to be met. The university staff member can give the practice educator important information on techniques for supervising students, assisting them in appraising their work and consider and improve their skills more (Martin 2005).

The visiting university staff member’s of today have numerous challenges in planning and visiting student placements, particularly when students are located a considerable distance from the university, consuming time and money (Martin 2005). This asks the question; are the benefits of the half way visits significant enough to support their continuation?

This research aims to examine Practice Educator’s perceptions of the purpose of the half way visit by University staff. It also aims to identify Practice Educator’s perceptions of the potential benefits and limitations associated with the half way visit process. Finally, this study aims to gather Practice Educators suggestions for adapting and improving the practice education placement half way visit process.

**Methodology**

This study can be described as a mixed method study as it is a combination of quantitative and qualitative methods. The aim is to present a more intricate understanding of the relevance of the half way visit and to achieve greater assurance in the conclusions produced by this study (Johnson et al. 2007).

Quantitative methodologies reveal phenomena by gathering numerical data which is analyzed through mathematically based methods such as statistics (Aliaga and Gunderson 2002). The reason for quantitative research is to establish a hypothesis by means of statistical analysis of results. Random sampling is exclusive to quantitative research. It employs a random sample of
participants from a vast population (Gerring 2008).

Table 3. Advantages of Survey Research (Gillham 2000; Kielhofner 2006; Fowler 2013).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Cost Efficient</th>
<th>No cost per participant</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Data collection</td>
<td>Gather data on diverse variables.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sample Size</td>
<td>Unlimited number of participants can be accessed, guaranteeing a more precise sample to draw assumptions from</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Frank Responses</td>
<td>Anonymity of surveys permits candidates to feel more frank with their responses which generates more precise data</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Perform Statistical manipulation</td>
<td>Through data analysis which authorizes many uses of the data set</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interviewer Bias</td>
<td>This is not an issue</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The existing questionnaire was the selected tool for assessing the practice educator’s perspectives of the half way visit. It was cultivated to investigate the experiences, approaches and behaviours of practice educators towards half way visits. Due to the small response number (19) from the initial distribution of the questionnaire, it was re-distributed using the practice education database at the University of Limerick. The self-rated questionnaire collects general demographic information from the participants. The survey contains 29 multiple choice questions and 3 open-ended questions. The first 9 questions collect demographic characteristics of the participants. The remaining 23 questions are under the sub-scale “Half-way visit during student placement” (Brown et al. 2010). All of the questions were used in this research to produce specific data concerning practice educators insights and proposals on half way visits. A minor modification was made to the questionnaire with permission from the original creators of the survey to gather more precise information from question 19, regarding the structure of the halfway visit. The modifications comprised of adding two more optional answers to choose from this multiple choice question. Caution was taken to not alter the meaning of the questions. The existing questionnaire is valid as it has measured the content that it aimed to measure (Borg et al. 1993).
Content analysis methods were used as a systematic and objective way to describe and quantify the responses to the open ended questions (Sandelowski 1995). This qualitative approach provides an in-depth comprehension of research issues that holds the perspectives of the participants and their environment (Hennink et al. 2011). Words from the respondent’s answers were grouped into smaller content categories (Burnard 1996). It is believed that when grouped into the same categories, words and phrases share a similar meaning (Cavanagh 1997). Organization of this qualitative data was achieved through open coding, generating categories and finally abstraction (Elo and Kyngäs 2008).

**Participants**
The participants were the population of practice educators registered with The Association of Occupational Therapists of Ireland (AOTI) who have had a University of Limerick student for placement (AOTI 2015). They were of either gender, and over the age of 18. The exclusion criteria for the study were; practice educators who did not have a University of Limerick student for placement.

**Research Procedure**
Ethical approval was obtained from the University of Limerick Ethics Committee. The principal researcher was permitted from the course directors of the occupational therapy programme to contact potential participants. The researcher used The University of Limerick database to distribute web-based questionnaires via an e-mail invitation in April 2015. The e-mail informed participants about the purpose of the study, what the questionnaire contained and what it required them to do. Ethical procedures were stated and participants chose if they wanted to complete the attached questionnaire. It was explained in the email that participation is voluntary and participants were guaranteed anonymity and confidentiality. The email also informed the therapist that this survey was previously distributed through the professional body and that if they have already completed it, they can disregard so as not to waste time. No names or identification numbers were gathered, which ensured anonymity and confidentiality. Informed consent was implied by completing the questionnaire. It took approximately 15 minutes to complete. Responses were accessed via ‘Survey Monkey’ which only the primary researcher had access to (Neuman 2000).
**Data Analysis**

The Statistical Packages for Social Science version 22.0 (IBM SPSS Inc, NY, USA, 2013) was used for data analysis. Descriptive statistics containing percentages and frequency were calculated, and Chi-squared cross-tabulations were used to investigate if there were any differences across the different placement settings, practice educator’s professional experience or if having previous academic qualifications affected the participant’s responses.

The open ended question responses were analysed and themes were identified. Once the themes had been recognized, each theme was given a colour code. The open ended question responses were then re-read and anything associated with a specific theme was highlighted in the colour allocated to that theme. On completion, the highlighted findings associated to each theme were placed in individual documents (Schreier 2012).

**Results**

The information sampled in this data set was collected from 59 questionnaires that were completed and returned from the population of practice educators that have taken a student from the University of Limerick. In relation to the half way visits, over half of them (52.3%) lasted from 30 minutes to 1 hour.

It is evident from the statistical findings of this study that there is a lack of correlations found among the variables. For example, the participants with greater years of clinical or practice educator experience did not differ in their perspectives from those who had less of this same experience.

**The practice educators in this survey**

The data set contains a number of characteristics identified as attributes associated with a practice educator. These were derived from the candidates that participated in the investigation. The results showed that with each attribute there was a majority response by the practice educators. See table 4.
Table 4.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Attributes of the practice educators</th>
<th>Majority response</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Senior grade position</td>
<td>71.2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Occupational Therapist for 6+ years</td>
<td>87.7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6+ working years of experience in current post</td>
<td>61%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Post-graduate education</td>
<td>62.7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Completed an MSc</td>
<td>56.8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Supervised 5-9 students</td>
<td>39%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6+ working years of experience in current post</td>
<td>61%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Completed a practice education workshop</td>
<td>87.9%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The Purpose of the half way visit

The majority of practice educators (97.7%) agree that the purpose of the half way visit is explained to them as a practice educator. Similarly, 97.7% of the practice educators believe that the halfway visit purpose is clearly communicated at the beginning of the visit. The majority of practice educators (97.8%) also agree that they were clear on the purpose of the half-way visit before they had it. From the open-ended question responses, one practice educator states that the purpose of the visit is to allow the practice educator to interact with the University staff and “discuss student goals as well as therapist expectations”.

The half way visit as a means of support

The practice educators identified that the half way visit does offer valuable support. The majority (79.5%) of the practice educators strongly agree that the half-way visit addressed the students’ ability to transfer theory to practice within the setting. The majority (95.5%) of the practice educators also feel that the half-way visit encourages discussion of the strengths in the
students’ performance within the setting. Similarly, (95.5%) of the practice educators agree that the half-way visit encourages discussion of the areas of improvement in the students’ performance within the setting. Additionally, 83.3% of the practice educators believe that the university staff member offers advice on strategies to advance student learning for the remainder of the placement.

From the open-ended question responses, one practice educator expressed that the students “need the input of the academic staff” to support their application of theory into practice. Another practice educator believes that the visit enables better performance by the student and also detects issues which “may result in a poorer mark”. One practice educator stated that for students who are failing their placement, the visit allows for “extra support” to be put into place for that student. Another practice educator believes that it is a chance for the student to “express issues of concern” which otherwise might go unheard as that they “may not feel comfortable” bringing it to the attention of the practice educator without support from the university.

Apart from the support which practice educators feel the visit offers to students, it is also a means of support for them. The majority (90.7%) of the practice educators feel that the visiting university staff member offers support and guidance to them on grading the student based on the student’s performance on placement. See graph 1.
Similar to this figure, 83.3% of the therapists believe that the university staff member offers advice on strategies to advance student learning for the remainder of the placement. The majority of the practice educators (88.4%) agree that there is a clear plan of action created collaboratively with the university staff member to enable the practice educator to facilitate student learning for the remainder of the placement.

The open-ended questions reveal what this support means to them. One practice educator states that they have a lot of “responsibility and pressure” in their role and that the half way visits are “very important” to support them. Another practice educator commented that practice education staff offers a “great amount of support” to all parties and it is a “valuable asset” to the practice educator and student for support.

In light of this, the majority (93.2%) of the practice educators agree that they are satisfied with the half-way visit process. Similarly, (93.2%) of the practice educators agree that overall, the
The half-way visit is useful in supporting the practice educator in their professional role. Furthermore, (90.9%) of the practice educators agree that the half-way visit is worth the time taken for them to participate in it. To coincide with this, the majority (88.6%) of the practice educators agree that the half-way visits are essential to the practice education. This view is visible in graph 2.

Graph 2.

[Bar Chart]

Overall, I think half-way visits are essential to the practice education experience.

- Strongly agree
- Agree
- Neither Agree nor Disagree
- Disagree
- Strongly disagree

What is your current area/setting of work?

The majority of practice educators (81.8%) also agree that the half-way visit strengthened their relationships with university staff. See graph 3.
Graph 3.

Overall, the halfway visit strengthened my relationships with university staff.

Other benefits of the halfway visit

Many of the participants in this study identify the benefits of the visit. One practice educator believes that the halfway visit is “useful”, “a valuable resource” and “extremely helpful”. Another practice educators state that the visit “works very well” and meets the “expectations” of practice educators. The majority (90.9%) of the practice educators agree that the halfway visit is worth the time taken for them to participate in it. The benefits identified are outlined in table 5.
### Table 5.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Benefits of the half way visit</th>
<th>Number of respondents to mention this</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>The visit enables a collaborative discussion to review any difficulties or areas for improvement</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Allows the student to identify any such areas that they may not feel comfortable bringing to the attention of the fieldwork educator</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Enables better performance by the student</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The visit gives all parties an opportunity to discuss student goals and therapist expectations</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The visit allows the university to recognise the effort being put in on site by the practice educators</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The visit gives the opportunity for a positive between the practice educator and university staff member.</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Detects issues which may result in a poorer mark</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The half way visits carried face to face are of high quality in comparison to visits which are not carried out face to face</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Adapting and improving the halfway visit**

Almost one fifth of the practice educators (18.2%) feel that there are disadvantages or limitations to how the half way visit was carried out. See graph 4.
In light of this statistic, some of the practice educators made suggestions on how the half way visit could be improved. One of these suggestions is to make the half way visit optional. The basis for this suggestion is outlined in table 6.

**Table 6.**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Reasons for making the half way visit optional</th>
<th>Number of respondents to mention this</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>The visit didn’t seem overly necessary</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>If a student is academically strong on placement and does not require a visit.</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The visit should only be available to students who are struggling on placement</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The practice educators are quite busy and half way visits are a time constraint.

The students who do not receive a half way visit have managed well without it.

One practice educator suggests that telecommunication should be an option to as a means for half way visits. It is unclear as to why they suggested this. Other suggestions that some of the practice educators made are in relation to the structure of the visit. The basis for this suggestion is outlined in table 7.

**Table 7.**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Reasons for adapting the structure of the half way visit</th>
<th>Number of respondents to mention this</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>If a student is struggling on placement, the half way visit should be sooner</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>There should be increased follow up time on a visit for students that are having placement difficulties</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Some students require a shorter half way visit as no issues have arisen for that student</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A time limit should be put in place for each visit accordingly</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Half way visits need to be flexible in terms of which students are visited first by the university staff member.</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The progress of students might need to be discussed earlier than the scheduled visit as the student may need support and/or reassurance prior to the grading at the half way visit.</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Time allocated in the half way visit could be managed better

A framework for discussions could be provided to the practice educators prior to the visit which they could reflect on.

Extra time could be allocated in the half way visit for the student to present a case study to both the university staff member and the practice educator as a way of demonstrating the skills which the student has acquired and identify areas which they need to work on.

| Time allocated in the half way visit could be managed better | 3 |
| A framework for discussions could be provided to the practice educators prior to the visit which they could reflect on. | 1 |
| Extra time could be allocated in the half way visit for the student to present a case study to both the university staff member and the practice educator as a way of demonstrating the skills which the student has acquired and identify areas which they need to work on. | 1 |

**Discussion**

**The Purpose of the half way visit**

A large proportion of the practice educators within this study (97.8%) feel that they have a comprehensive understanding on the purpose of half way visits before they commence. The majority (87.9%) of the participants have also attended practice education workshops in relation to facilitating student learning. This may explain why practice educators have such a clear understanding of the purpose of these visits.

**The half way visit as a means of support**

The perspectives of practice educators in this study reveal that half way visits offer significant support to the students who are on placement. Peters et al. (2013) found that the relationship between higher education institutions (HEIs) and health service placement providers affects the value of clinical placements for students. Similar to this, Burns and Paterson (2005) have identified that it is the joint responsibility of Higher Education Institutions (HEI) in partnership with practice educators of clinical placements to support learning in practice for students. This partnership between the university and practice educator provides for sufficient mentor support and sufficient observation of the clinical learning environment.

If half way visits do offer significant support to students, then it would certainly support their continuation for students who are on a placement. Hinton (2016) identified that students
experience high levels of stress and anxiety while on clinical placements. Students emphasized discrepancies in their mentoring, intensified by mistaken information provided by the university. Students felt perplexed as a result. The study concluded that it is important for students to feel supported by the practice educator and university so that they can adjust into the placement. Information provided by the university must be precise and helpful which can only be attained if there is a close partnership between the university and the practice educator. Similarly, findings from Morrell and Ridgway (2014) reveal how difficult clinical placements can be for students. The study found that students feel under prepared for placement. This study reveals how important it is that students receive support while on placement, which the half way visit may provide.

The perspectives of the practice educators also reveal that half way visits offer noteworthy support to the practice educators themselves. This is reflected by O'Keefe et al. (2012). The study found that health service staff sometimes feels inundated by workload and resource restrictions. As a result, the stress of providing knowledge to students can be particularly challenging. In conjunction with this, Nedeljkovic et al. (2014) stressed the importance of sufficient support for practice educators so that they can successfully facilitate the vital training they offer for postgraduate students on placement. It is imperative that they are assisted in the performance of education and standard upholding approaches, which university staff can provide. It is not surprising that practice educators feel they need support from the university staff considering the universal expectations which are required of them. Burrill and Hussain (2014) state that practice educators must follow the professional Code of Ethics, value teamwork and be receptive and accommodating to the requirements of the student. They are also required to become a role model for the student, use clinical reasoning, exhibit an obvious professional identity, be certain in their own section of practice and evaluate and reflect with the student (Burrill and Hussain 2014). With this in mind, Domakin (2014) believes students have an increased chance of mirroring themselves in their own future practice from their practice educator. Practice educator’s influence on students is demonstrated further with a study by Towns and Ashby (2014). This phenomenological study concluded that practice educators have a role in determining students insight of theoretical knowledge applied in professional reasoning. With the high standard of expectations which are placed on practice educators, the findings from this study highlight the importance of support offered to them by the half way visit. In light of this, Martin (2005) states that Universities would be encouraged to maintain the half way visit if they were made aware of the level of support which these visits provide to the
practice educators. Furthermore, visiting university staff should arrange their visits to guarantee that the practice educator’s needs are a priority (Martin 2005).

**Other benefits of the half way visit**

This study has identified several benefits provided by the half way visit. One such benefit is the collaborative discussion between the practice educator and university staff member. This is consistent with Martin (2005) who states that practice educators use this visit from the university to converse on theory or practice links that exist in occupational therapy. The research also states that the visit updates placement sites on instructive philosophy and changes in the syllabus. Furthermore, this collaborative discussion allows the practice educator to ask about courses at the university which can further develop their skills as an educator. They can also receive advice on literature, which can help them to improve their knowledge of current models and theories in practice (Martin 2005).

Another benefit identified by this current study is the recognition given to practice educators by the university staff. This recognition for dedicated work that is put in on site by the practice educator is reflected in the findings of Martin (2005) who state that the half way visit is a way of faculty staff valuing the practice educators.

**Adapting and improving the halfway visit**

This study also identified possible adaptations and improvements for the half way visit from the perspectives of the practice educators. One of these adaptations is to make the visit optional. To some practice educators, the visit didn’t seem necessary as their student didn’t require a visit from the university. Other practice educators find the visit time constraining and suggestion of making the visits more flexible did emerge. The length of time allocated to each visit as well as which students are visited first by the university staff member are concerns highlighted by practice educators.

Another suggestion made is to have alternative methods of communication for the half way visit, such as telecommunication. In light of this, an evaluation study by Zournazis and Marlow (2015) explored the quality of support which students in rural and non-traditional health settings receive from academic staff within universities via video conferencing. The study highlights the potential for this technology as a way of facilitating for networking, information and education sharing and support among the university, student on placement and their practice educator.
Quinney (2005) explored the use of a website to support learning for students while they are on a placement. The website contained various features such as sharing of resources, networking and a discussion forum. It found that students used and appreciated the website for its capability to facilitate a relationship between student-to-student and student-to-university. It allowed for collaborative learning to be sustained during the placement and enabled resource sharing and networking. Personal qualities such as humour and warmth were communicated through the website and a caring approach between users was experienced. These findings uphold the belief that learning can be developed and continued from a distance. The users of the website agreed that the experience was coherent with face-to-face communication. Similar to this, Young et al. (2010) considers the benefit of using short message service (SMS) texting to offer support for health care students in practice placements. The pilot study found that staff and students were optimistic about the possibility of this type of communication as a form of support for students on clinical placements.

Perhaps the suggestion of telecommunication as an alternative method for visits could possibly improve time constraints and flexibility, eliminating the university staff member’s travel time to and from the placement site.

**Future Research**

A solely qualitative in depth study of current practice educators’ perceptions of their half way visit experiences may generate constructive results. Another possibility for future research is to send the questionnaire to international practice educators and compare those responses to the results of this present study. A potential longitudinal study to follow up practice educators cohort five years on in their careers to observe if their perspectives of half way visits has changed. A study that compares face to face visits with other alternative telecommunication methods.

**Limitations of the study**

It has to be recognized that there are definite limitations with this research. Data findings can be established by the perceptions and assumptions of the researcher (Thomas 2006). It is the researcher who determines the most important data that is included in the study (Thomas 2006). Other researchers may infer the data in other ways to generate other findings. Also, my own experiences as a student on placement and with half way visits may have introduced bias in the data analysis. There may also be bias in the inclusion criteria as the only perspectives considered
were practice educators who had a University of Limerick student for placement. The sample size of practice educators in this study is moderate. A larger sample of participants would have surely generated additional accurate and valuable data. The questionnaire tool may have posed a limitation as some of the questions may have been misinterpreted. A gap in the survey meant that there was no specific question on alternative methods for half way visits. Also, there was a repetition of questions that may have caused fatigue and confusion. The primary researcher was based in the University programme. Therefore, practice educators in this study may have had a working relationship with the primary researcher in the past. This leaves the potential for positive reporting bias. There were missing values in the dataset variables as some participants neglected to respond to questions. As the researcher was a novice, they had limited knowledge in statistics which may have resulted in relevant statistical tests not being run.

**Conclusion**

The evidence from this study has highlighted the purpose of half way visits and its numerous benefits according to practice educators. The visit offers valuable support to the practice educator and the student. The visit also offers a means of communication between the University and the placement. Another benefit identified is that the visit gives recognition to practice educators by the university staff. Practice educators also highlight potential adaptations and improvements which could enhance the half way visit. These include, making the visit optional, creating more flexibility with the visit and having alternative methods to carry out these visits. This research gives greater insight into the half way visit process and offers insightful knowledge for future research on these visits.
References


practice. FA Davis.


