


Determining Availability of Internship Opportunities for Professional Clinical Experience During Undergraduate Physical Therapy

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ABSTRACT

Background: Undergraduate clinical experience is vital for physical therapy students to develop professionalism and practical skills early in their education. However, securing internships can be challenging, particularly in private institutions.

Objective: To determine the availability of internship opportunities for gaining professional clinical experience among undergraduate physical therapy students in private institutes of Lahore, Pakistan.

Methods: A cross-sectional study was conducted involving 200 undergraduate physical therapy students aged 18-29 years, selected through non-probability convenience sampling. Data were collected using an internship-rating questionnaire distributed as handouts in the university. The data were analyzed using IBM SPSS Statistics version 21, with quantitative variables presented as means and standard deviations, and categorical variables as frequencies and percentages.

Results: Among the 200 participants (75 males, 125 females; mean age 22.88 ± 2.03 years), 80 students (40%) found internships available, while 120 (60%) did not. Reasons for unavailability included the need for references (47%), limited seats (21.5%), and preference for government students (7%).

Conclusion: Most students did not find internships easily due to systemic barriers such as the need for references and limited seats, highlighting the need for improved internship opportunities in private institutions.

INTRODUCTION

Physiotherapy plays a critical role in healthcare, focusing on pain management, rehabilitation, and the enhancement of functional abilities through non-pharmacological interventions. Physical therapists are integral in treating musculoskeletal and neuropathic conditions by employing a blend of theoretical knowledge, manual techniques, and clinical practice (1). A significant component of their training involves clinical experience, which is essential for developing practical skills and professional competencies. However, the availability of these clinical experiences, particularly through internships, is often limited, posing challenges for undergraduate students. These challenges include discrimination, limited clinical exposure, and a lack of clearly defined internship roles, which are especially prevalent in developing countries like Pakistan.

In Pakistan, the availability of internship opportunities for physical therapy students is particularly constrained within private institutions, where students often face systemic barriers that hinder their access to practical training. Research suggests that a significant proportion of physical therapy students experience mistreatment and discrimination during their training, with 52% and 66% of students, respectively, reporting such issues (4, 5). These

negative experiences not only impede students' ability to apply their theoretical knowledge in real-world settings but also undermine their confidence and professional development. Furthermore, the internship landscape in Pakistan's private sector is fraught with additional obstacles, including the preference for government institution students, a shortage of internship placements, and the unprofessional behavior of some clinical supervisors (8, 11).

Globally, the challenges faced by physiotherapy interns are not unique to Pakistan. For instance, in a study conducted in Nigeria, physiotherapy interns generally rated their experiences positively but highlighted issues such as inadequate supervision and insufficient preparatory training from educational institutions (7). Similarly, Nigerian physiotherapy interns have reported high rates of mistreatment, leading to increased stress, decreased self-confidence, and even depression (2). Other studies, such as those conducted in Brazil and Taiwan, reveal that interns frequently encounter difficulties with stress management and coping mechanisms, which adversely affect their learning outcomes and overall internship satisfaction (12, 13). These findings underscore the universal need for better-structured and supportive internship programs that prioritize the well-being and educational needs of interns.

Internships are a crucial component of physiotherapy education, providing students with the opportunity to apply their academic learning in practical settings and to gain firsthand experience in patient care. However, the limited availability of these opportunities in private institutions, coupled with the reported negative experiences, highlights significant gaps in the current educational framework. Addressing these gaps requires targeted interventions, such as enhancing the availability of internship placements, improving the professional conduct of clinical supervisors, and fostering a more inclusive and supportive training environment for all students, regardless of their institutional affiliation. This study aims to investigate the availability and quality of internship opportunities for undergraduate physical therapy students in Lahore, Pakistan, with a focus on private institutions. By examining the specific challenges faced by these students, this research seeks to provide insights and recommendations for improving clinical training and professional development in the field of physiotherapy.

MATERIAL AND METHODS

The study employed a cross-sectional design conducted at the Premier Institute of Government College University Faisalabad (GCUF) over a six-month period following the approval of the study synopsis. The sample comprised undergraduate physical therapy students aged 18 to 29 years, both male and female, who were seeking internship opportunities. The sample size was determined using Cochran's formula, resulting in a total of 200 participants selected through non-probability convenience sampling. The inclusion criteria involved participants within the specified age range who were currently enrolled in an undergraduate physical therapy program. Individuals who were unwilling to participate or those enrolled in other fields of study were excluded.

Data collection was conducted using a structured internship-rating questionnaire, which was distributed as handouts within the university setting. The questionnaire aimed to assess the participants' experiences during their internships, including aspects such as working style, communication skills, allocation of time, and practical

examination performance. Participants were asked to rate their experiences on a scale ranging from Very Good to Unsatisfactory. Prior to data collection, informed written consent was obtained from all participants, and the study adhered to the ethical guidelines outlined in the Declaration of Helsinki, ensuring the confidentiality and voluntary participation of all individuals involved.

The collected data were analyzed using IBM SPSS Statistics version 21. Quantitative variables, such as age and years of study, were summarized using means and standard deviations, while categorical variables, including gender and internship availability, were presented as frequencies and percentages. Descriptive statistics were employed to evaluate the reasons for the unavailability of internships, such as the preference for government institution students, the need for references, and the shortage of seats in clinical settings. The study also examined the participants' overall satisfaction with their internship experiences, categorizing their responses into various domains including practical exams, work style, and general assessment.

This methodological approach allowed for a comprehensive assessment of the availability and quality of internship opportunities for undergraduate physical therapy students in Lahore's private institutions. By identifying the barriers and facilitators associated with these clinical placements, the study aimed to provide insights into improving internship structures and enhancing the professional training of future physical therapists.

RESULTS:

A total of 200 undergraduate physical therapy students participated in this cross-sectional study, including 75 males (37.5%) and 125 females (62.5%). The participants' ages ranged from 18 to 29 years, with a mean age of 22.88 years (SD = 2.03). The academic year of study ranged from the first to the fifth year, with an average of 3.82 years (SD = 1.33). Out of the total participants, 114 students reported having prior internship experience, while 86 students had no history of internships.

120 students (60%) indicated that internships were not readily accessible. The reasons for the unavailability of internships are summarized in Table 2

Table 1: Descriptive Statistics of Participants

Variable	Mean	Standard Deviation	Minimum	Maximum
Age (years)	22.88	2.03	18	29
Academic Year of Study	3.82	1.33	1	5

Table 2: Reasons for Unavailability of Internships

Reason	Frequency (f)	Percentage (%)
Hospitals preferred government students	14	7.0
References needed	94	47.0
Shortage of seats	43	21.5
Small hospital/clinical setting	23	11.5
Internship was easily available	26	13.0

Among the 200 participants, 80 students (40%) reported that internship opportunities were available to them, while

Participants rated various aspects of their internship experiences, including time allocation, practical exams, work style, presentation skills, communication skills,

subject knowledge, general assessment, and contribution to the medical field. The detailed distribution of these ratings is provided in Table 3. Overall, the majority of students found the internship allocation of time and

practical exam experiences rated as good or satisfactory. However, aspects such as the need for references, limited seats, and preference for government students were significant barriers to obtaining internships

Table 3: Internship Experience Ratings by Participants

Aspects of Internship Experience	Very Good (f, %)	Good (f, %)	Satisfactory (f, %)	Unsatisfactory (f, %)
Allocation of Time	20 (10.0%)	100 (50.0%)	50 (25.0%)	30 (15.0%)
Practical Exam	37 (18.5%)	74 (37.0%)	72 (36.0%)	17 (8.5%)
Work Style	39 (19.5%)	85 (42.5%)	58 (29.0%)	18 (9.0%)
Way of Presenting	11 (5.5%)	88 (44.0%)	79 (39.5%)	22 (11.0%)
Communication Skills	39 (19.5%)	63 (31.5%)	74 (37.0%)	24 (12.0%)
Knowing the Subject	38 (19.0%)	77 (38.5%)	63 (31.5%)	22 (11.0%)
General Assessment	40 (20.0%)	54 (27.0%)	76 (38.0%)	30 (15.0%)
Contribution to Medical Field	66 (33.0%)	46 (23.0%)	57 (28.5%)	31 (15.5%)

These findings highlight the systemic challenges faced by undergraduate physical therapy students in securing valuable clinical experience in private institutions.

DISCUSSION:

The findings of this study revealed that the majority of undergraduate physical therapy students in private institutions of Lahore faced significant challenges in securing internship opportunities, with 60% of participants reporting unavailability. These results align with existing literature that highlights systemic barriers to clinical placements in healthcare education, particularly within the private sector. The need for references, limited seats, and small clinical settings were among the primary reasons cited for the lack of internships, which resonates with studies indicating similar constraints in other low-resource settings (4, 5). Such obstacles not only hinder students' access to hands-on training but also affect their ability to translate theoretical knowledge into practical skills, ultimately impacting their readiness for professional practice.

Previous studies have underscored the critical role of internships in the professional development of healthcare students, noting that clinical experience is fundamental for fostering practical skills, confidence, and professional identity (1). However, the current study's findings highlight a gap in the availability of these opportunities, particularly in private institutions where systemic issues such as preferential treatment for government institution students exacerbate the problem (8, 11). This disparity is reflective of broader challenges within the healthcare education system in developing countries, where resource constraints and inequities often limit the quality and accessibility of training programs.

In comparison to international contexts, the issues identified in this study mirror challenges faced by physiotherapy interns globally. For instance, Nigerian interns reported high levels of mistreatment and inadequate supervision, which led to increased stress and decreased self-confidence (2). Similarly, Taiwanese medical interns experienced significant stress during their training, which adversely affected their learning outcomes (13). These findings suggest that the quality of internship experiences is

not solely dependent on the availability of placements but also on the quality of mentorship, supervision, and the overall training environment. Addressing these factors is crucial for enhancing the educational outcomes of internship programs.

The study identified strengths, including the use of a standardized questionnaire to assess internship experiences, which allowed for a comprehensive evaluation of the challenges faced by students. Additionally, the study's focus on private institutions provided valuable insights into the specific barriers within this sector, which are often underrepresented in research. However, the study also had limitations. The use of non-probability convenience sampling may have introduced selection bias, limiting the generalizability of the findings. Furthermore, the cross-sectional design precluded the assessment of longitudinal outcomes, such as the long-term impact of internship experiences on career development.

Recommendations for future research include exploring strategies to improve the availability and quality of internships in private institutions. Interventions such as partnerships between educational institutions and healthcare facilities, enhanced mentorship programs, and policy reforms to address systemic inequities could mitigate the challenges identified in this study. Additionally, longitudinal studies examining the impact of clinical training on professional competencies and career trajectories would provide valuable insights into the long-term benefits of quality internships. Overall, the study underscored the critical need for improved internship opportunities for undergraduate physical therapy students in Lahore's private institutions. By addressing the identified barriers, stakeholders can enhance the clinical training landscape, thereby supporting the professional development of future physical therapists and contributing to the overall quality of healthcare services.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, this study highlighted significant challenges faced by undergraduate physical therapy students in private institutions in Lahore in accessing internship opportunities, with systemic barriers such as the need for references, limited seats, and institutional biases contributing to the

unavailability of placements. These findings underscore the critical need for targeted interventions to improve clinical training environments, particularly within the private sector. Enhancing the availability and quality of internships is essential for equipping future physical therapists with the practical skills and professional confidence necessary to deliver effective healthcare services. Addressing these gaps not only benefits students but also has broader implications for human healthcare, as well-trained physical therapists are integral to improving patient outcomes and advancing the quality of care within the healthcare system.

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