



Exploring the Effectiveness of Virtual Orientation Sessions: Preparing Physiotherapy Students for Simulated Placements

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Simulation-based learning is central to physiotherapy education, yet students often experience anxiety and cognitive overload when entering unfamiliar simulated environments. Virtual orientation tools aim to mitigate these challenges by supporting early familiarisation and preparation. Guided by principles of cognitive load reduction and scaffolded experiential learning, this mixed-methods study explored Level 4 physiotherapy students' perceptions and experiences of virtual orientation sessions preceding simulated placements. A sequential design was employed, comprising a post-simulation questionnaire measuring perceived usefulness, confidence, and preparedness (Phase 1), followed by semi-structured interviews with a purposive sample (Phase 2). Quantitative data were analysed using descriptive statistics, and qualitative data were examined through Braun and Clarke's thematic analysis. Findings indicate that virtual orientation significantly enhances cognitive preparation by clarifying expectations and reducing uncertainty, while also contributing to emotional regulation through reduced anxiety and increased confidence. Students highlighted the value of structured, step-by-step learning and multimodal resources in supporting engagement and linking theory to practice. However, participants emphasised that virtual orientation is most effective as a preparatory scaffold rather than a substitute for hands-on clinical experience, with some limitations noted in relation to immersion and initial usability. The findings suggest that embedding virtual orientation within simulation-based curricula can improve learning readiness, optimise use of physical resources, and support inclusive educational practice. Implications include the need for guided facilitation, iterative design improvements, and integration with experiential learning activities to maximise pedagogical value.

Keywords

simulation-based learning, physiotherapy education, virtual orientation, student confidence, experiential learning

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