Reviewer’s report

Title: Students with specific learning disabilities experiences of pre-registration physiotherapy education: A qualitative study

Version: 0 Date: 08 Mar 2019

Reviewer: Riikka Hofmann

Reviewer's report:

This manuscript addresses a highly relevant topic but there are a number of weaknesses in the design and reporting of the study and the focus is unclear. Detailed comments are made below for the improvement of this manuscript.

Focus and Literature review

Focus on their experiences of education - is there a specific enough way in which this focus is being connected to the overall purpose of the study on understanding attainment differences?

The vagueness of focus is apparent in the findings - e.g., it is not clear how the category 'it was such a relief' is related to the study's focus on attainment gaps. A tightening and clarification of the focus is required. For example the focus on students' experiences of adjustments in assessments (theme 2) is clearly relevant for the focus, especially when it pushes past the notion of additional time.

The notion of disability is only vaguely discussed. Which group of students is this study focusing on? The criticisms and problems of the social model of disability are not addressed. There is no mention of the more recent affirmative model. This is a clear limitation of the study.

I also wish that there would have been a more explicit focus and considering of issues specific to physiotherapy given that the rationale for this study was that existing research from other clinical fields is not sufficient.

Sampling, Design and Methods

Connected to this, I would like the authors to provide a clear rationale as to why the chosen methods are the best ones to address the issue at hand. Various other methods are conceivable, starting from survey methods (given that they do state that ideas exist from other fields as to what the barriers might be), which would have enabled a broader perspective and potentially the analysis of associations between factors.

The rationale currently provided is that phenomenological methods were chosen "in-keeping with the focus on the students' experiences of life as a student physiotherapist with a disability" (p.5), but this is not the focus that has been delineated above in the Introduction.
Regarding sampling, a rationale and criteria used in the inclusion of participants is needed so that we can know whom and what the study's conclusions may apply to. A 'Convenience sample' as strategy is proposed and I think this entirely insufficient: 'Convenience' is not a sampling strategy, the authors define this as: "those students who volunteered" but this applies to every sample, we never force anyone to take part even in probabilistic sampling. We need a clear understanding of who was targeted and why, why such a target group is relevant for the study and the possibility of contributing some novel to knowledge, which group was ultimately achieved and what opportunities and limitations this creates for the knowledge contribution from this study. If the study is only based on some opportunistic participants then publishability is strongly questioned.

The authors also need to state, given the sample, which groups of students are the findings able to say something about, particularly given the strong focus on dyslexia in the sample. Similarly, the majority of participants were not diagnosed until University.

I would like to know how the focus group schedule drew on existing literature and gaps in the existing literature to ensure new insights could be gained, a range of experienced elicited and stereotypical assumptions avoided.

The authors mention that in the data analysis "Negative case analysis was conducted to check thematic development" but there is no evidence of this in the findings section.

Results

Some comments have already been made above. There are some very relevant insights coming out of this study but there are also opportunities for further analysis and reflection. For example, the authors discuss the challenge that since these students struggle to follow the standard pace of lectures which other students can follow, they are frustrated because they have to spend extra time trying to understand the material. The authors do not comment how this could be otherwise - how could these students acquire the same knowledge and understanding in the same amount of time as others? Or should other adjustments to time demands elsewhere be made to compensate?

I would also have liked the authors to comment on the nature of the target expertise that is required - is the matter of adjustments for knowledge-based assessments only a matter of enabling these students to gain marks comparable to other students in these assessments, or is there an acknowledgement that they will need to develop comparable skills of engaging with such knowledge and materials as professionals in the field once they leave education. I wonder if this might call for additional or different types of adjustments to the ones discussed?
Are the methods appropriate and well described?
If not, please specify what is required in your comments to the authors.

No

Does the work include the necessary controls?
If not, please specify which controls are required in your comments to the authors.

No

Are the conclusions drawn adequately supported by the data shown?
If not, please explain in your comments to the authors.

Unable to assess

Are you able to assess any statistics in the manuscript or would you recommend an additional statistical review?
If an additional statistical review is recommended, please specify what aspects require further assessment in your comments to the editors.

Not relevant to this manuscript

Quality of written English
Please indicate the quality of language in the manuscript:

Acceptable

Declaration of competing interests
Please complete a declaration of competing interests, considering the following questions:

1. Have you in the past five years received reimbursements, fees, funding, or salary from an organisation that may in any way gain or lose financially from the publication of this manuscript, either now or in the future?

2. Do you hold any stocks or shares in an organisation that may in any way gain or lose financially from the publication of this manuscript, either now or in the future?

3. Do you hold or are you currently applying for any patents relating to the content of the manuscript?

4. Have you received reimbursements, fees, funding, or salary from an organization that holds or has applied for patents relating to the content of the manuscript?

5. Do you have any other financial competing interests?

6. Do you have any non-financial competing interests in relation to this paper?
If you can answer no to all of the above, write 'I declare that I have no competing interests' below. If your reply is yes to any, please give details below.

I declare that I have no competing interests

I agree to the open peer review policy of the journal. I understand that my name will be included on my report to the authors and, if the manuscript is accepted for publication, my named report including any attachments I upload will be posted on the website along with the authors' responses. I agree for my report to be made available under an Open Access Creative Commons CC-BY license (http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/). I understand that any comments which I do not wish to be included in my named report can be included as confidential comments to the editors, which will not be published.

I agree to the open peer review policy of the journal