

# An exploration of students' experiences of the PPD pre-arrival task: Its feasibility and impact

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## 1. Teaching Professionalism

The General Medical Council provides medical schools guidance on the professional standards expected of students. Various curricula and teaching methods have been designed, although there are currently no guidelines outlining how to teach professionalism.<sup>1,2</sup> This challenge is made more complex by cultural differences and the lack of an agreed definition of professionalism.<sup>3,4</sup>

In order to support this aspect of the curriculum at the University of Southampton, a **Personal and Professional Development (PPD) module** was first piloted in 2013. Following the initial evaluation and subsequent modifications, a **pre-arrival task (PAT)** was introduced in 2014 for the new entrants to the BM5 / BM(EU) programmes, which have a combined intake of 240 students.<sup>5</sup>

Elsewhere, PATS are already in use. For example, both King's College London and Warwick University use pre-arrival tasks to increase student engagement and the transition to university. However, as far as we are aware, **no UK medical school has used a pre-arrival task to foster engagement with professionalism teaching.**<sup>6,7</sup>

## 2. The PPD pre-arrival task

The PAT aimed to engage students with the new PPD module and over the summer, each individual was asked to identify professionalism issues that were of particular interest to them personally.

New entrants were sent the PPD PAT in their offer packs prior to starting. The task involved:

1. Reading the article provided: <http://www.kevinmd.com/blog/2014/08/professionalism-wellness-medical-education.html>
2. Spending 2 hours researching aspects of professionalism
3. Identifying 3 aspects that were personally relevant
4. Writing 300 words (max) about the one particular aspect.

The students were asked to submit their task online and given a deadline of 18th September 2015.<sup>5</sup> In October, a follow-up lecture provided a summary of responses.

## 3. Project aims

To research the student experience of the PAT, by exploring its feasibility, what participants understood that the PAT asked them to do, how participants approached the PAT and the PAT's impact.

## 4. Methods

Four Focus groups were conducted with year 1 students three months into their programme, ranging from 42-77 minutes. With participants' consent, these were audio-recorded, transcribed and analysed thematically. In total, 7 themes were found. These were grouped on the timeline of the students' experiences (presented below), differentiating between school leavers and those who had joined medicine as graduates.

Demographics: 22 participants in total, 9 graduates, 10 direct school leavers, 1 mature student, 1 BM(EU) student and 1 former BM6 student. Out of the 22 participants 20 had completed the task.

### Undergraduate entrants

*"I found it quite tough to decide what they wanted me to write"*

*"I was like getting ready for Uni. But I was also trying to meet up with all my friends, like just before we all left."*

*"I know we weren't being marked on it, but I thought we'd be judged on it."*

*"So when err one of the lecturers told us that it wasn't compulsory, the whole room just gasped."*

*"It opened my eyes to see that there is so much more to professionalism than I realised."*

*"We could do, you know half an hour of the lecture just showing us slides and then at the end we could have a discussion about it. That would bring more to it I think"*

*"I've also kind of thought about it in relation to MiP. Like when we watch how the GP talks to patients, it kind of does really improve your take on professionalism"*

### 1. Summer    2. PAT arrives    3. Making sense by doing    4. Wrapping Up    5. Encountering medical school response    6. Other connections    7. Suggestions

*"I was lucky cause I had already quit my job, I decided to have a nice summer holiday. But I know that if I hadn't, it [the PAT] would have been a struggle along with everything else I was trying to do"*

*"I would have been scared not to do it, like I'm finally in and it's the first task"*

*"I felt like if I'd written something that was really terrible, someone could have looked into it."*

*"I was unsure about the degree of analysis that was going to go into each paper"*

*"Well I felt it was a bit anticlimactic, because it was just a lecture and then no further group discussion"*

*"It hasn't really been linked in with anything"*

*"There could have been some small tutorials and there could have been some really interesting discussions about medical professionalism and using that as the basis of it"*

### Graduate entrants

## 5. Discussion

During the analysis, it emerged that students' experiences of the PPD PAT differed between graduate entrants (GE) and undergraduate entrants (UE). The task was feasible for most students, with the exception of 2 participants who had issues with timing. Both UEs and GEes thought the task was compulsory and had concerns about being judged. Many participants were unsure about what was expected of them, GEes were less worried than the UEs, however the GEes also had concerns over the anonymity of the task.

GEs and UEs approached the task in different ways. GEs tended to expect some pre-arrival materials and approached the researching for the PAT with articles and the GMC. Whilst UEs were inclined to resist the PAT at the start, questioned the article's purpose, sought advice from family and the University website and struggled to meet the required length.

Once at medical school UEs and GEes expected something to happen to the task and were shocked to discover the PAT wasn't compulsory in the PPD PAT lecture. GEes felt the task wasn't relevant to year 1 and wanted more than the lecture. UEs in particular felt more negative towards the PAT when it was revealed to have been an optional activity.

The impact of the task was more prominent for UEs: they reported that it helped them to refocus back to studying, facilitated a greater understanding of professionalism issues and had highlighted the importance of professionalism within the context of becoming a doctor. UEs also related the PAT to the early patient contact module (Medicine-in-Practice, or "MiP").

**6. Conclusion**  
The feasibility of the PAT, participants understanding, approach and the impact varied between GEs and UEs. This raises the question whether these differences might apply also to the taught components of PPD.

## 7. Recommendations

Recommendations for future iterations of the PAT:

- Set up small group discussions to consider the different aspects of professionalism that students had picked out in the PAT. To be organised at the beginning of the year and in connection with the PAT lecture.
- To improve feasibility of the PAT: changing the deadline to just prior to the small group discussions would enable completion by all new students.
- Alter the wording of the instructions to clarify the purpose of the PAT.
- Explain how and why professionalism matters in the first year of a medical degree. For example, by linking the PAT findings explicitly to expectations of student behaviour and appropriate clothing during early patient contact.