The experience of putting together a research project, whether as a ‘theoretical proposal’ or primary research you can test out ‘in practice’, can be an exciting and rewarding opportunity to develop and apply your research competencies.

Developing and using the profession’s evidence base is the responsibility of all occupational therapists, and will be a requirement of your registration with the Health and Care Professions Council as one of the professional proficiencies. Your ability to demonstrate that you can find and appraise the evidence effectively, and meet ethical and research quality standards, is therefore key not only to your project, but also to your future career.

**WHAT TOPIC TO CHOOSE?**

One of your first priorities is to identify what topic you are going to research. Occupational therapy is very diverse and therefore you are potentially spoilt for choice, but this can mean the decision-making is even harder! Aim to choose a topic that you could potentially research in practice in the future, if not during your pre-registration education.

The Royal College of Occupational Therapists’ publication, *Building the Evidence: priorities for research* (2007), gives you some ideas about topics that are a priority to the profession and includes priorities of the Specialist Sections.

Other points you might find useful to consider when narrowing down your topic:

1. **Specialist Sections** may have details of the latest research priorities in their field so check out their web pages if you have an interest in a particular area.

2. Practice guidelines and published research articles often give details of the gaps in the research and can therefore be a good resource for ideas. RCOT has published a number of occupational therapy specific [practice guidelines](http://example.com) which may be useful to review, and you can also explore published articles via the RCOT Library [ejournal collection](http://example.com).

3. Think about your own areas of interest in occupational therapy – are there particular areas of practice or theory that you have found interesting either during your studies or out on placement? Is there a topic that you feel passionate about and which will keep you personally motivated?

4. Find out about what research is being undertaken by academic staff or the research topic areas for which your university has a reputation. Does this create an opportunity for contributing to a real project or to the university’s priority areas?

5. Think about what you would like to know – is it to understand a problem in more depth, to evaluate whether an intervention works or something else……?

**Expertise gained through your research project at pre-registration level will not only assist you in becoming an evidence-informed practitioner, it will equip you with the skills needed to undertake audit and service evaluation activities, and set you on the road for future research activities.**

**It is important to choose a topic that is relevant to the profession and to ‘occupation’.

The overarching research priorities for the profession are:

- **Effectiveness and cost-effectiveness of occupational therapy interventions**
- **Occupation, health and well-being**
- **Service delivery and organisation**
- **Involvement of service users and carers.**
DEVELOPING YOUR RESEARCH QUESTION

Be realistic when defining the scope of your research.  
A good research question will be clear and specific. If it is too broad it will be unmanageable as a project; this is where the task of defining your research question becomes very important.

A well-formulated question should also make clear what kind of research design would provide the best answers (there are plenty of text books that explain about the different methodological approaches) and will, as such, enable you to develop your proposal in detail.

A carefully considered question will guide your literature search towards relevant publications.

Could your research question make a contribution to the wider arena of national or local policy (no matter how small)?

Make sure that you cross-reference your plans and thoughts to your university assignment briefing and marking criteria so that your project ends up matching the required task, time available and learning outcomes.

GETTING TO GRIPS WITH THE LITERATURE

Your university library and librarian will be able to assist you with literature searching and you can find additional resources on search skills and access to specialist occupational therapy literature on the RCOT Library webpages.

You may find from your literature search that you have a lot of articles; from these you will need to decide what is relevant as reference material in your own project and carry out critical appraisal of the evidence.

1. Think about what you would consider to be the criteria indicative of high quality research.

2. Examine each research article carefully to identify the type of research design that has been used – this should be clearly stated in the article (it may be for example a randomised control trial, a qualitative study, or a cohort study etc.).

3. Be aware that different research designs vary in terms of their robustness and the risk of error and bias in their results, and the criteria for appraising them.

4. Consider how you might detect if the research is biased in any way.

5. Always look for the authors’ comments on the limitations of their research – see whether they have acknowledged and addressed the issues of possible bias.

6. Take a look at some of the critical appraisal tools available (there are different forms for different research designs) which can guide you through the appraisal process.

Your critical appraisal of the evidence means that you will be able to discuss the strength, content and relevance of the research to your own project.

Further information can be found in the RCOT Guide on Evidence-based practice.
If you will be putting your proposal into practice, then you will need to take into account the practicalities of actually carrying out the research, and what is realistic within your time frame.

Think carefully about your participant recruitment strategy as you need to maximise your chance of participant engagement. Your decisions about your target group of participants will also directly affect the ethics approvals and permissions required to carry out the research.

The Royal College of Occupational Therapists and its UK Branches (Specialist Sections and Regional Groups) receive requests from students for use of its membership database or mailing lists to access RCOT members for research. The College does not permit researchers to use these data sources to directly contact members with research recruitment information in line with the requirements of the Data Protection Act, and in the best interest of its members.

Specialist Sections and Regional Groups may be able to distribute information about your project but this cannot be assumed. The decision about who they can assist (which may be Specialist Section members only) is the prerogative of the individual Specialist Section or Regional Group. Given it is where the intended participants are working, rather than the mode of recruitment that is important, access to occupational therapists this way does not override any necessary requirements for permission from an occupational therapist’s employer/organisation.

Recruitment of RCOT members for your research via social media, or OTnews, can seem like an attractive opportunity. However, the potential response rate is unknown and cannot be predicted. If this is the only approach in your recruitment strategy it could leave your project vulnerable. These options should not therefore form the primary means of accessing participants. A preferred method can be to identify and access members through relevant workplaces, although note access will be subject to research governance permissions.

Find out the requirements for the specific ethics approval process that you need to follow and carefully check the relevant guidance notes and information on timescales. Information can be found about research governance and ethics in the RCOT Research Guide: Research governance and ethics. Make sure you plan the ethics approval process into your project timescales – it may take longer than you think.

Whatever your recruitment strategy, or the ethics and approvals required, do discuss your research proposal with your supervisor who will be your primary source of support and guidance.
This OT student resource offers a few pointers on some of the key issues when planning your research proposal, and aims to act as a supplement to the knowledge and resources available to you within your formal course programme.

The Royal College of Occupational Therapists also provides a number of other products and services that can support student members during their studies. One of the benefits of being a RCOT member is that you can obtain access to a range of online, occupational therapy specific, research and library resources.

A range of resources to support evidence-informed practice and research activities can be found on the RCOT website. Visit the research resources pages at: www.rcot.co.uk/practice-resources/research-resources

For further information contact: Lesley Gleaves
Research and Development Administrator
Email: lesley.gleaves@rcot.co.uk

All occupational therapists need to be effective consumers of research, and therefore you will need to be able to ‘recognise the value of research to the critical evaluation of practice; be aware of a range of research methodologies and be able to evaluate research and other evidence to inform your practice’ (HCPC 2013, p15). You research project is an excellent way to start to develop confidence in those skills.

‘..we need to have gathered evidence to support our profession’s role, using profession-specific research to articulate the value of occupational therapy…’

(Hunter 2013, p350)
