Coronavirus (COVID-19) – Advice for RCOT Accredited Education Providers
Amended Programme Structures

UPDATED 4th May 2020

Context

In this time of unprecedented pressure and challenge in health and social care services, the Royal College of Occupational Therapists (RCOT) has been working alongside the Health and Care Professions Council (HCPC), Council of Deans of Health, Health Education England and the Chief Allied Health Professions Officers from the four nations to help shape the national response to the COVID-19 pandemic.

This is clearly a fast-paced and emerging situation requiring new ways of thinking and working from all of us on an equally fast-paced timescale. The Coronavirus Bill 2019-21 has made it possible for final year students who have successfully completed their required practice placements to volunteer to enter the workforce via a temporary HCPC register before they formally complete their studies and are eligible to enter the full HCPC register. As very-nearly qualified professionals, their contribution to the national effort will be invaluable.

Adapting programme structures

The significant pressures on the system and the need to ensure that front-line services are fully supported during these exceptional times means that it is not possible for students at earlier stages of their professional education to continue on their programmes in the manner originally intended.

For 1st year (and 2nd year in Scotland) undergraduate students, this will mean continuing with academic studies while practice-based learning is paused. These students are, of course, free to volunteer or undertake paid work in a health and social care setting outside their studies, should they so wish. As is currently the case, any such volunteering or paid work will not count towards the practice-based learning requirements of their programme of study.

To further expand the available workforce, pre-registration students in their 1st year of postgraduate studies, 2nd year (or 3rd year in Scotland) of undergraduate studies and those in their final year who have not yet completed their required practice placements will be invited to opt-in to a nationally organised arrangement enabling them to work in remunerated Agenda for Change Band 3 positions. In some cases, this will be alongside their academic studies; in others it might be over the summer holidays in an employment role entirely unrelated to their university studies. Where students do take up this option in parallel with their academic studies, it is anticipated that they will spend approximately 60% of their time working in practice, and approximately 40% of their time in academic studies. The arrangement will be reviewed at quarterly intervals, unless review is required more urgently.

To enable students to take up these roles in parallel with their academic studies, education providers are being asked to revise their RCOT accredited programme structures as may be required. To the extent that individual University regulations allow and School/Faculty senior
leadership teams are in agreement, programme teams are encouraged to apply their well-established professional judgement and experience to decisions about how best to achieve this in the context of their programme/s and within the spirit of the RCOT Learning and Development Standards for Pre-registration Standards (2019). In parallel with supporting the national response to the pandemic, it is of the utmost importance that we retain the workforce supply pipeline of competent graduates who will contribute to the health and social care sector when we emerge from the other side of this national crisis.

There are no easy answers regarding how to go about re-structuring established programmes, and there is no one-size-fits-all. RCOT encourages each education provider to draw on the collective wisdom and experience of its programme and broader teams to work their way through the challenge as pragmatically as possible. They will need to work differently and creatively within the principles of the Standards and assure themselves of the ongoing quality of provision and learning. Many programmes are already making changes to how they deliver and assess learning as a result of COVID-19, so may already have been reconsidering structural elements as well. Any undertaken in response to this national request will be an extension of that already in progress.

RCOT recognises that, in these exceptional circumstances, it will not be feasible to adhere to the usual RCOT major change processes. We have previously issued advice on this matter (please see earlier correspondence and the FAQs on our website: https://www.rcot.co.uk/coronavirus-covid-19-0). Further, it is anticipated that the need for these altered programme structures will be time-limited. At this stage, we propose to incorporate a reflective review of changes made in response to COVID-19 in our Annual Monitoring Report template, but will communicate further on this issue as soon as we reasonably can.

Practice-based learning requirements

It is important to note that where students do opt-in, the time spent in Band 3 employment may contribute towards the required 1000 hours of successful practice-based learning, where agreed with the education provider and where undertaken in parallel with their academic studies. The extent to which this is feasible will depend very much on the nature of the role that a student goes into (which could potentially vary widely from those with which the profession is very familiar to those that are very new to us), and will require discussion and negotiation on an individual level. For example, a student may take up a Band 3 role in community rehabilitation, which would be likely to afford a good deal of learning directly related to developing their occupational therapy skills. Alternatively, they may be working in a context on an acute ward where the development of more generic skills in communication, leadership, multidisciplinary team-working and systems understanding may be relevant to learning outcomes to focus on.

It will be essential that appropriate supervision is in place, recognising that it may take a range of forms, along with a learning agreement or similar. Programme teams will need to consider adapting placement assessment documentation to record those aspects of students’ learning and achievements in their Band 3 roles that can reasonably contribute to meeting established practice-based learning outcomes and hours.

While bearing in mind that this is an opt-in arrangement, programme teams will need to make informed judgements about whether it is appropriate for all of their students in the target groups to take up the opportunity to contribute to the COVID-19 national response. For example, while those in a group particularly vulnerable to the effects of the virus, or caring for someone who is, might have the opportunity to contribute in a non-patient-facing environment, those who have been struggling with or failing on their programme may need careful consideration. This may necessitate some very honest and potentially challenging
discussions. Plans will need to be in place for those students who choose not to opt-in, or for whom it is not appropriate to opt-in for whatever reason, alongside continuing their academic studies. This may mean focusing solely on the continuation of the academic elements of their programme for the time being, which will doubtless have an impact on the overall duration of a student’s period of study.

Post-pandemic planning

Once the UK emerges from the COVID-19 crisis, plans will need to be in place to enable all students to complete outstanding practice-based learning alongside the remainder of their studies. Given the pre-existing workforce supply challenges, there is a national emphasis of facilitating graduation as close to original timelines as reasonably possible, given the circumstances. It is, however, highly likely that the completion date of a good number of students will be unavoidably delayed. RCOT continues to lobby for a national response to address any financial disadvantage that may result with regard to additional tuition fees, etc.

RCOT quality assurance and monitoring processes

RCOT is committed to supporting the national response to the COVID-19 pandemic. We recognise that in doing so, we need to be flexible and pragmatic in the application of our quality assurance and monitoring processes in relation to established programmes. Within the spirit and principles of RCOT’s Learning and Development Standards for Pre-registration Education (2019), we encourage education providers to assess local needs and contexts, exercise their professional judgement and experience as gate-keepers to the profession, and explore innovative solutions that will contribute to addressing the national crisis. As always, staff in the pre-registration education team are happy to discuss and advise on developing plans, although it is not a requirement to take up this offer and we are unable to formally agree or approve proposed changes in this way.

Like education providers, RCOT doesn’t have all the answers. We are all doing our best to respond swiftly to incredibly complex, challenging, and rapidly-evolving circumstances. We need to work through how we monitor the temporary changes introduced to programmes, the impact they have had, what can be learned from them and how programmes move forward when we emerge from the pandemic. We will communicate further on this issue as soon as we reasonably can.

Additional Information

This nationally devised arrangement to allow pre-registration students in their 1st year of postgraduate studies, 2nd year (or 3rd year in Scotland) of undergraduate studies and those in their final year who have not yet completed their required practice placements to play a role in the UK’s response to COVID-19 is supported by advice and guidance produced within the context of each of the four nations. This includes information about mechanisms for opting-in, employment arrangement, student finances, professional indemnity insurance and how the learners working in the system will be tracked. RCOT’s guidance does not seek to repeat this information, but sits alongside it to provide a profession-specific perspective and position the ‘ask’ within the context of our Learning and Development Standards for Pre-registration Education (2019).

RCOT accredited education providers will be aware of previous COVID-19 related advice that we have issued and are directed to the regularly updated FAQs on our website: https://www.rcot.co.uk/coronavirus-covid-19-0