

Practice readiness of newly qualified occupational therapists in the United Kingdom

Key findings

- **Practice-ready vs profession-ready:** Full practice readiness at graduation is unrealistic; readiness develops post-graduation through experience, reflection, and ongoing learning. Managers report gaps in practical skills and confidence, with consequences for distress, attrition, and supervision/resource pressures.
- **Developmental trajectory shaped by variability:** Readiness builds across pre-university experiences, academic preparation, placements, and workplace induction, with substantial variability at each stage. Differences in curricula, practical training opportunities and placement quality yield uneven readiness
- **Insights for practice-ready education:**
 - Address gaps in foundational biomedical knowledge (anatomy/physiology), hands-on skills (manual handling, equipment use), and theory-to-practice application.
 - Increase simulation-based learning, involve people who access services, new graduates, and clinicians in teaching, embed digital literacy/emerging technologies, strengthen skills training.
 - Placement learning: Placements are pivotal yet inconsistent. Improve through structured supervision, clearer pre-placement guidance, and cross-institution collaboration to standardise outcomes and address capacity constraints.
 - Life experience, maturity, apprenticeship routes, international background and neurodiversity shape readiness; one-size-fits-all undergraduate approaches are insufficient. Adopt differentiated teaching, assessment, and support.
 - Intentional, stakeholder-informed curriculum design and standardised placement experiences are key to enhancing NQOTs' practice readiness and smoothing transition to professional practice.

Project aims

- To explore newly qualified occupational therapists' (NQOT) perceptions of their readiness for practice.
- To examine workplace managers' views on newly qualified occupational therapists' readiness to practice.
- To identify educational strategies used by academic faculty to prepare students.
- To investigate workplace and external support for newly qualified occupational therapists.
- To explore factors contributing to variations in practice readiness.

Background

Around 3,000 occupational therapists (OT) graduate annually in the UK (RCOT, 2022), but evidence shows variability in their readiness for practice (Moir et al., 2021). Newly qualified occupational therapists (NQOTs) often require additional workplace training, incurring additional costs. The Royal College of Occupational Therapists (RCOT) prioritises research into the effectiveness of occupational therapy practice. Stakeholders influencing practice readiness include university lecturers, placement educators, and workplace colleagues, yet their perspectives are not well-documented. This study aimed to explore these perspectives comprehensively.

Methodology

This qualitative study used interpretive description (Burdine et al., 2021), adopting a constructivist perspective to capture diverse stakeholder views and achieve a comprehensive understanding of practice readiness. Participants included NQOTs, workplace OT managers, OT university faculty and OT practice educators. Purposive sampling was used to recruit information-rich participants between October 2024 and February 2025 via stakeholder group emails and snowball sampling. Four online focus groups (MS Teams) were conducted, one for each subgroup. NQOTs (n=8), workplace OT managers (n=9), OT university faculty (n=4) and OT practice educators (n=8). Sessions were audio/video recorded, transcribed verbatim with pseudonyms, and recordings deleted post-analysis. Data were analysed thematically within the interpretive description approach (Burdine et al., 2021) integrating themes with disciplinary knowledge. The research adhered to epistemological and methodological congruence. Reflexivity was maintained through journaling, transparency of researcher positioning, dual coding of data, and member checking with participants.

Recommendations and conclusion

The main conclusion from the research is that expectations at the point of graduation is only towards profession readiness and not practice readiness and substantial variability across curricula and placements contributes to uneven preparedness for practice. Key recommendations include:

- Co-development of a minimum competency framework, such as a “Day-one OT” profile may provide programs with clearer educational targets and offer workplaces a consistent benchmark for induction and support.
- Rebalancing curricula toward practice-centered learning and structuring placements intentionally with standardized expectations, mandatory exposure to core practice settings.
- Tailoring education pathways to learner profiles through differentiated tracks and/or modules
- Tracking graduate outcomes for two years might improve continuous curriculum refinement and support strategies.
- Formalizing stakeholder collaboration to keep the education system responsive to evolving needs.

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