

"It opened our eyes": how a project placement at RCOT broadened our view of occupational therapy

AHP principles in practice: real-world approaches to placements.

What you'll learn from this blog

Project placements can provide valuable opportunities to develop leadership, creativity, and professional skills while exploring occupational therapy beyond traditional clinical settings. In this blog, Melissa and Sherin reflect on their leadership placement with the Royal College of Occupational Therapists (RCOT), sharing how project-based learning helped them build confidence, independence, and a broader understanding of the profession. Their experience highlights how non-traditional placements can strengthen professional identity, support the application of occupational therapy theory, and contribute to meaningful real-world projects.

In this 10-minute read, you'll discover how:

- project-based placements can broaden learning beyond traditional clinical practice while providing opportunities to apply occupational therapy theory and develop professional identity in a non-clinical setting.
- learning in unfamiliar environments can develop confidence, adaptability, and independence.
- supervision and reflection can help learners connect project-based learning to occupational therapy practice while building confidence, critical thinking, and professional reasoning.
- creativity, leadership, and innovation can be developed through project-based work.
- non-traditional placements can strengthen professional identity and highlight occupational therapy's wider influence on policy, leadership, and organisational development.
- project placements can create meaningful outputs while helping learners explore future career opportunities.

For many occupational therapy students, placements are closely associated with clinical environments. But for **Melissa Kvisth** (left) and **Sherin Sunil** (right) second-year MSc Occupational Therapy students at the University of Liverpool, a six-week placement with the Royal College of Occupational Therapists (RCOT) offered something different.

Their experience provides a powerful insight into how project-based placements can expand learning beyond traditional settings, building confidence, creativity, and a broader understanding of the profession.



Stepping into the unknown

Unlike more familiar placement models, Sherin and Melissa began their RCOT experience without a clear sense of what to expect, approaching the placement with curiosity, flexibility, and an open mind.

"We went into this placement with no expectations...
we just did not know what to expect."

What drew them in was the opportunity to experience occupational therapy from a different perspective. As a professional body, RCOT provided exposure to areas they knew they wouldn't typically encounter.

"It's just such a unique experience... something that we probably won't ever get the opportunity to do again."

What is a project placement?

Sherin and Melissa describe their placement as a non-traditional, role-emerging experience, centred on leadership-focussed project work and organisational development.

Their work included:

- developing blogs, videos, and podcast content
- designing and carrying out interviews with leaders
- presenting their learning and recommendation to the senior leadership team
- working on a business case plan for an upcoming project

Some activities were completed individually, while others were collaborative, helping them build both independence and teamwork skills.

Learning on the go

Preparation requirements for the placement were minimal, which initially added to their uncertainty. However, this quickly turned into an opportunity to develop adaptability and independence.

Much of their learning came through doing, reflecting, and adapting in real time, supported by structured weekly supervision sessions.

Supervision played a key role in guiding their learning:

- sessions were initially joint, then individual
- a reflective model supported focused discussion
- longer sessions gave time for deeper exploration

They found this approach "highly beneficial" for organisation and reflection.

Bringing theory into practice

One of the biggest challenges was applying occupational therapy theory in a non-clinical environment. "It was a bit more difficult to transfer the model."

However, with support from their practice educator, Karin Orman, Director of Practice, Innovation and Advocacy they learned to integrate occupational therapy theory into their work using the Person-Environment-Occupation (PEO) model to structure interviews and analyse activities.

Their practice educator played a key role:

"She's been really good at prompting us, asking... 'how can you transfer this into practice?'"

This helped them maintain a strong professional identity, even outside a clinical setting.

Building skills that go beyond the classroom

The placement supported development across a wide range of skills, including:

- leadership skills
- project design and management
- communication skills including influencing and presentations.
- teamwork and collaboration
- confidence and adaptability
- time management and prioritisation
- understanding of business processes

Working largely independently often in a virtual environment pushes Melissa and Sherin to take ownership of their learning.

“We’re having to be very independent.”

They adopted practical strategies to stay organised, including daily check-ins, shared calendars, and prioritising tasks effectively.

Creativity and innovation in practice

A standout feature of the placement was the opportunity to be creative. The placement enabled Melissa and Sherin to be creative through the development of blogs, videos, podcast content, and designing interview questions. They were able to shape outputs using evidence and professional judgement, supporting innovation within their projects. This gave them a sense of ownership and achievement and a chance to create resources with real-world impact.

Seeing occupational therapy differently

Perhaps the most transformative aspect of the placement was the insight it provided into the wider role of occupational therapy. Through meetings and collaboration across RCOT, they gained a deeper understanding of how the profession influences policy, leadership, and organisational development.

“The placement gave me a real appreciation of the work that happens behind the scenes to represent occupational therapy and influence policy. It opened my eyes to the impact RCOT has beyond clinical practice, particularly in shaping policy.”

Achievements and lasting impact

By the end of the placement, both learners reflected on how far they had come. For Sherin, it meant overcoming personal challenges:

“I don’t like speaking in public... but I was so proud of myself presenting at a Senior Leadership Team meeting.”

For Melissa, it was about recognising the value of her contributions:

“If I saw it on the website... I’d think, I made that.”

Their outputs including presentations, digital content, and project business cases will continue to contribute to RCOT’s ongoing work, leaving a legacy.

Shaping future career thinking

The placement also influenced their future aspirations. Both students expressed a greater openness to non-traditional career paths, while recognising the importance of clinical grounding.

“I would still consider doing a non-traditional role.” and “It’s important to get clinical background experience first as a foundation.”

Advice for future learners and educators

Reflecting on their non-traditional experience, Sherin and Melissa share simple but valuable advice:

For learners:

- approach the placement with an open mind
- communicate regularly with supervisors
- actively link learning back to occupational therapy practice

“Don’t feel overwhelmed... come in with an open mind.”

For practice educators:

- provide structure alongside flexibility
- use supervision to support reflection and application of theory
- incorporate short-term, achievable tasks to maintain motivation

A different kind of learning experience

Sherin and Melissa describe their time at RCOT as transformative not because it followed a traditional path, but because it didn’t. Through project-based learning, they developed confidence, leadership skills, and a richer understanding of occupational therapy’s reach beyond clinical practice. Their experience highlights an important message.

Project placements are not just an alternative they are a powerful way to expand what learning in practice can look like.