Research Guide for learners

Introduction

Research is a vital part of professional practice. The Royal College of Occupational Therapists' research and development strategy 2019 –24 sets out our vision for the future and we support a UK-wide culture where it is every occupational therapist's business to engage in and with research regardless of where they work. From reading and appraising the latest evidence or contributing to a research project, through to embarking on a clinical academic career pathway and becoming a principal investigator or senior academic, every occupational therapist should engage in and with research at some level.

Your research journey begins during your pre-registration education, where the experience of finding the literature, critically appraising papers, learning about different research approaches and developing a research proposal (whether hypothetical or for an actual study) provides valuable opportunities to develop and apply your research skills.

This guide provides signposting to resources and information that may be helpful when developing a student/learner research proposal, including: choosing a topic, participant recruitment and ethics. Remember though, it's important to follow the specific guidance given by your university to support your research studies.

Choosing a topic

One of your first priorities will be to identify a topic for your research. Whilst you will want to choose a topic that you are interested in, consider these other factors:

   a. Current priorities for health and social care/occupational therapy research

Research should be relevant to practice and the people we work with. It is important to consider current priorities for health and social care research and, more specifically, for occupational therapy research.

The James Lind Alliance (JLA) brings together people who access services, practitioners and carers in Priority Setting Partnerships (PSPs), to agree on important priorities for research. These PSPs have identified the top ten research priorities for several areas of health and social care, for example: cystic fibrosis, depression, and multiple conditions in later life. The Top 10 research priorities for occupational therapy in the UK were published in July 2020. Our website provides details about the process and our current research priority areas. RCOT Specialist Sections may also highlight specific research priorities for their areas of practice related to the Top 10 occupational therapy research priorities.

It is also useful to review any national announcements, for example through government departments or funding bodies such as the National Institute for Health Research (NIHR), the Health and Social Care Research and Development Division in Northern Ireland (HSC R&D), the Chief Scientist Office in Scotland and Health and Care Research Wales.

   b. Current evidence and gaps in the evidence base

Exploring the current evidence for a particular intervention or area of practice to identify whether there are any gaps in the evidence base is a practical way to identify research topics. This will

provide you with a strong rationale for your proposed study; research that sets out to explore or investigate unanswered questions can be extremely valuable. Practice guidelines and published systematic reviews or research articles often identify gaps in the evidence base. The National Institute for Health and Care Excellence (NICE) and the Scottish Intercollegiate Guidelines Network (SIGN) both produce guidelines on a wide range of topics and RCOT has published several NICE accredited occupational therapy practice guidelines.

Carrying out a literature search is integral to any research project and will enable you to identify relevant articles. Your tutor or university librarian will be able to provide advice about literature search strategies. You may also find our RCOT Library information skills guides useful.

Looking at summaries of evidence available through the National Institute for Health Research (NIHR) Dissemination Centre can also help you find relevant literature and where the gaps might be. For example, NIHR Signals are short summaries of recently published research, accompanied by an expert commentary. Each Signal explores why the study was needed, what was involved (design/methodology), the findings and implications, and how it relates to current guidelines. You will find them through the Dissemination Centre's Discover portal, an open access and searchable site.

c. Areas of expertise within your Higher Education Institution (HEI)

The tutors and academics at your university will have areas of interest/expertise, and there may be opportunities to contribute to a larger research project being led by academics at your university.

Research recruitment and ethics

There are other factors to consider when developing your recruitment strategy to find participants to take part in your research, including:

- Recruitment/sampling method and potential for bias.
- Inclusion and exclusion criteria.
- Sample size required (number of participants).
- Ethics and informed consent.

The UK Policy Framework for Health and Social Care Research (2021) is a helpful guide that sets out principles of good practice in the management and conduct of health and social care research in the UK. Your university research tutor will also be able to provide advice and guidance to help you develop an appropriate recruitment strategy.

Recruiting RCOT members as research participants

Many occupational therapy research studies want to recruit occupational therapists or learners as research participants. As the professional body for occupational therapists in the UK, we often receive enquiries from learners about recruiting our members to take part in research studies. Several factors need to be considered, including data protection. We can't use our membership data sources to enable you to directly contact members with research recruitment information. However, there are other options for more broadly alerting RCOT members to your research recruitment opportunity through RCOT Specialist Sections/regional groups, OTnews and RCOT social media. We have produced further guidance on this on our website.

Research ethics approval

It is important that you meet with your university research tutor to discuss the ethics approval of your proposed research, and whether ethics approval is required (from your university research ethics committee or another approval body). Our RCOT Research Guide: research governance and ethics offers general guidance and signposting to resources that you might find helpful too.