



An investigation into
occupational therapy
practice education across
the UK

Royal College of
Occupational
Therapists



Introduction and rationale

There is growing acknowledgement about the issues which face practice education for the allied health professions (AHPs) today. A fast and fluid landscape of change in the way that practice education will be funded and arranged in England from August 2017 is only one of the many areas which will influence the way forward for practice placement arrangements across the whole of the UK. Many other issues on a much broader perspective are evolving as a result of shifting environments in health and social care. The population is living longer, services are facing increasing constraints in budgets and workforce numbers; the need to provide excellent occupational therapists and other AHPs who can provide solutions to many of these issues, has never been greater.

Practice based education makes up a third of an occupational therapy degree programme. Students must gain a minimum of 1000 successful hours in a practice setting to enable them to qualify and register with the Health and Care Professions Council, and every Higher Education Institute who delivers an occupational therapy programme must demonstrate how it meets the Learning and development standards of occupational therapists' education (COT 2014). As members and guardians of the profession, we have a duty to devote time and our expertise to supporting our students to become the occupational therapists of the future. The Royal College of Occupational Therapists (RCOT) has conducted a multi method investigation to raise and highlight awareness of the challenges and opportunities which link to practice education for both the student and the educator.

An action plan has been drawn up from the findings of the work to date; the level of success of this plan will depend on the continued engagement of the participants to date. The Royal College will take a lead on this work, facilitating collaboration with all involved.

Overall aims of the investigation



Many rich sources of information created the foundation to this work.

- An article discussing the benefits of delivering practice education as a highly effective CPD opportunity was published in OTnews (Elis and Tempest 2016) in Autumn of 2016.
- Further exploration into the topic was carried out at a day-long event hosted by the College when a group of educators, students and professional body staff gathered to explore the issues on a UK wide basis.
- Meanwhile, as Social Media has rapidly grown into a recognised platform for discussion, debate and learning to occur, a Tweetchat(2) was hosted by COT in collaboration with the Higher Education Academy (HEA), focusing on practice education.

Using a collaborative approach, all strands of the investigation have been drawn together and the key points identified.

Explore wide ranging issues facing occupational therapy

Participants of the work collaborated in various ways to build a picture of their hopes and concerns about the future of practice education. Thoughts, ideas, suggestions and concerns were debated and discussed. This section explores the various issues expressed.



The 'Out of Our Hands' graphic show some examples of concerns emphasised by the participants. As the investigation unfolds you will see some interesting developments in relation to these comments.

Four nation perspective on financial and sustainable models of practice placement education across the UK

ENGLAND	SCOTLAND
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Large geographical spread of placement locations, impacting on travel and accommodation costs for students ● After 2017 HEE is likely to cease regulating practice placement provision ● Due to funding restructures, applications for mature students already reduced for 2017/8 ● Opportunity to harness the potential to expand role emerging placement uptake 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● All placements organised via Practice Placement Agreements drawn up by NHS Education Scotland (NES) ● Each Health Board and associated Local Authority agree to provide a minimum number of placements ● A robust cancellation policy exists ● Issues can arise in certain workplaces where placement provision isn't always valued
NORTHERN IRELAND	WALES
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Northern Ireland has 5 health and social care trusts who establish the parameters for placement provision ● Department of Health provides 50 funded student places ● Tripartite agreement exists between Trust, HEI and Department of Health ● Practice education committee safeguards best take-up of placements 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Students are randomly placed on either side of the Welsh/English border ● Health Education Wales to introduce a new system from 2017/8 where graduates who study in Wales must stay and work for two years ● Rural nature can make it difficult for community placements ● Language barriers in certain areas can provide challenges for placement provision

Key points from a four nation perspective are highlighted in this table. Perhaps unsurprisingly there are as many similarities as there are differences. There is an opportunity to learn from each other as we move forward.

Challenges and opportunities

Many rich and varied resources are available to support practice education. Dr Kate Cuthbert, from the Higher Education Academy (HEA) shared some key areas of importance to students on practice placement with us. Dr Cuthbert claimed that practice placement has the potential to be transformative and has the power to change how the participant behaves forever. This knowledge is based on a 'threshold concept' theory which can be explored further by listening to a podcast by Ray Land (Land 2010). Research carried out by the HEA also shows that during their experience on placement, practice learners (students) aspire the following in their practice placements;

- Feedback
- Respectful communication
- Competence of practice educators
- Availability
- Encouragement
- Enthusiasm
- Consistency
- Fairness
- Belonging
- Role modelling
- Stimulation

A range of resources contributed by delegates and entitled the 'Wall of Innovation' were displayed at the open session, and can be located at; www.cot.co.uk/cot/practice-placement-educators-day-12-december-wall-innovation These resources are compiled from published articles, unpublished work, a blog on coping with practice education, charts and graphs, a student example of work completed on placement and a HEI educator's perspective on role emerging placements and widening participation. These are listed at the end of the document for non-RCOT members.



Challenges and opportunities

Students and practice educators were invited to join a jointly hosted Tweetchat to explore how to prepare for the first practice placement.



Tweetchat questions:

1. What 3 words best describe how you feel about starting a new placement?
2. What should happen before a new placement begins?
3. How do you build confidence in the partnership between practice educator and student?
4. How do you make the link between placement experience and theory?
5. How do you capitalise on learning after the placement experience?
6. What advice would you give to others on their first placement?

Challenges and opportunities

The following tables are separated into themes according to the data gathered from all of the above situations. They explore challenges, opportunities and solutions in the areas relating to;

- Practice placement provision
- Cultures of practice placement delivery
- Challenges and opportunities for students

Challenges to practice placement providers

CHALLENGES TO PRACTICE PLACEMENT PROVISION	POTENTIAL SOLUTIONS
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Academic language in HEI practice placement assessment paperwork can be complex and time consuming to complete ● Timing of student placements can overlap, placing a heavy workload on staff/teams ● Professional resources to support practice educators not widely available ● Variation in skills and knowledge among educators leads to variable placement experience ● Cancellation at short notice 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Simplify language used in assessment documentation to support busy practice educators ● By working collaboratively, placement providers even out the spread of placements throughout the year, maximising availability whilst removing undue pressure on providers ● Develop CPD resources to support practice educators ● Link guidelines to assessment criteria for HEI, make clear that student professional aims are distinct from educator personal aims ● Explore setting up practice placement agreements and cancellation policy for each region

Challenges and opportunities

The culture of delivering practice placements

CULTURES OF PRACTICE EDUCATION DELIVERY	POTENTIAL SOLUTIONS
<ul style="list-style-type: none">● Changing models are required to support ongoing practice placement numbers in current landscape – UK wide, for example 2:1, small groups of students entering MDT settings, 2 x part time staff ‘sharing’ a student, etc● Myths persist about the ‘special’ nature of certain clinical areas and tribalism occurs when educators refuse to provide placements in these areas● Many practice educators believe that they can’t give an ‘A’ in certain practice placements● Many occupational therapists will choose to opt out of delivering practice education● There is a need to build capacity for educating students on placement.● Some discrepancies around how long arm supervision is carried out and by whom when a student is in a non-traditional OT setting.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">● Explore securing practice placements in broader areas – with clinical academics, researchers, non-clinical roles, leadership posts, professional bodies, in entrepreneurial settings. Encourage collaboration across organisations● Remove the myth that any particular area is too ‘special’ for a student to participate in placement.● Ensure the practice educator is aware of the criteria that a student is being marked against● Ensure that all OT personnel are aware of their responsibilities in relation to supporting the education of future generations of occupational therapists● Prepare students in their final year of study to be ready to educate new students. Use support workers as a resource to help educate students. Consider offering awards/incentives eg. Practice placement of the year, best student experience, etc.● Publish an OTnews special edition celebrating student experience in different settings

Challenges and opportunities

Practice placement challenges related to students

STUDENTS	POTENTIAL SOLUTIONS
<ul style="list-style-type: none">● Student expectations can be unrealistic● Encourage students to support each other● Students may not be well prepared for particular settings on placement● Concerns about 7 day working and students being left alone during weekdays if practice educator is working at weekend	<ul style="list-style-type: none">● Information about background to practice placement arrangements could help increase understanding● Consider buddy systems● Resources are required to prepare students for placement types and solutions● Clarity and consistency required on long arm supervision arrangements for students on role emerging placements

Create a collaborative plan of action

Finally, for this stage of the investigation into practice placement education in the UK, the action plan has been created using: prospective and retrospective lenses; gathering together the wide range of data provided; sifting and sorting into themes which focus on the potential to improve the practice education experience for all concerned in this important area of work.

Action \ Responsibility	COT	HEIs	Practice educators	Students
Develop and refresh resources to support practice education	✓	✓	✓	✓
Develop and promote more diverse practice placements	✓	✓	✓	✓
Engage final year students in preparing to delivering practice education	✓	✓	✓	✓
Build communities of practice educators across all placement locations	✓	✓	✓	✓

The table highlights four proposed actions, with the ticks indicating which stakeholders hold the responsibility to ensure that the proposed actions are implemented

We are grateful to everyone who has taken part in this exercise so far. Further ongoing engagement with relevant stakeholders will ensure that the vision and energy will be sustained and the learning and development will continue. It is possible that the next stage of investigation may lead us into broader collaborations across the allied health professions and even beyond the UK.

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Tel: 020 7357 6480

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