Introduction

Research is a vital and integral part of professional practice. From reading and appraising the latest evidence or contributing to a work-based 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 critically appraising papers, learning about different research approaches and developing a research proposal (whether hypothetical or for an actual study) provides a valuable opportunity to develop and apply your research skills.

This guide provides signposting to resources and information that may be helpful when formulating a student research proposal, particularly in terms of: choosing a topic, participant recruitment and ethics.

1. Choosing a topic

One of your first priorities will be to identify a topic. Whilst you will of course want to choose a topic that you are interested in, there are a number of other factors that may inform your decision making, such as:

Current priorities for health and social care / occupational therapy research

Research should be of relevance to practice and the people we work with. It is therefore important to consider current areas of priority for health and social care research and, more specifically, for occupational therapy research.

The James Lind Alliance (JLA) brings together people who access services, clinicians and carers in Priority Setting Partnerships (PSPs), to agree upon important priorities for research. These PSPs have identified the top ten research priorities for a number of areas of health and social care, for example: cystic fibrosis, depression and multiple conditions in later life. During 2019 and 2020, the JLA is working with the Royal College of Occupational Therapists (RCOT) on a Priority Setting Partnership to identify the top ten research priorities for occupational therapy in the UK.

The Royal College of Occupational Therapists Research Foundation web page provides details about current priority areas, and RCOT Specialist Sections may highlight research priorities for particular areas of practice.

It is also useful to consider whether there have been any announcements at a national level, for example through governmental departments/funding bodies such as the National Institute for Health
Current evidence and gaps in the evidence base

It is also important to explore current evidence relating to a particular topic/area and to identify whether there are any gaps in the evidence base. This will provide a context for your study; research that sets out to explore/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 a number of occupational therapy specific practice guidelines (the process for producing these guidelines has been accredited by NICE).

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 the RCOT Library information skills guides useful.

You may also find it helpful to look at summaries and synopses of evidence available through the National Institute for Health Research (NIHR) Dissemination Centre. For example, its 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. They are available through the Dissemination Centre’s Discover portal, an open access and searchable site.

Areas of expertise within your Higher Education Institution (HEI)

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

2. Research recruitment and ethics

There are various factors to consider when developing your research recruitment strategy, including:

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

Your research tutor will be able to provide advice and guidance to help you develop an appropriate strategy. You may find the UK Policy Framework for Health and Social Care Research (2018), which sets out principles of good practice in the management and conduct of health and social care research in the UK, useful.

3. Recruiting RCOT members as research participants
Many occupational therapy research studies seek to recruit occupational therapists as research participants. As the professional body for occupational therapists in the United Kingdom, the Royal College of Occupational Therapists often receives enquiries about recruiting its members as research participants.

A number of factors have been identified with regard to responding to such requests, including data protection requirements and the risk of overloading members with requests. RCOT therefore does not allow use of any of its data sources to directly contact members with research recruitment information.

There are, however, options for more broadly alerting RCOT members to research recruitment opportunities, primarily through: RCOT Specialist Sections/Regional Groups, OTNews and RCOT social media. We have produced further guidance on this on our website.

4. Research ethics

It is important that you meet with your research tutor to discuss the ethics of your research, and whether ethics approval is required (from your university research ethics committee or another approval body).

Please see the RCOT Research Guide: Research Governance and Ethics that offers general guidance and signposting to resources where more detailed information may be obtained on ethics approval issues.