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Occupational therapy and the occupational therapist role

When occupational therapists talk about occupation, they mean all of the activities that people do.

Occupations are key to people’s health and wellbeing, because they make us who we are and shape our roles and responsibilities in life. Think about how you answer questions like ‘what do you do?’ ‘what do you do when you’re not working?’

Often, occupational therapists think about these occupations as divided into self care (things like washing or eating), work or being productive (attending school or university, working, volunteering, caring for others) and leisure (having fun, socialising and doing hobbies). Sometimes, illness or disability, getting older or a change in personal circumstances may mean it becomes more difficult to do some or all of the normal and usual occupations of life. Occupational therapists help people of all ages to find ways to carry out the occupations that are important to them.

An occupational therapist will spend time finding out about a person’s usual occupations and what the issues might be. They will then develop a plan with the person, and their carers if appropriate, to find ways to enable participation in occupations that are important to that person. This might include suggesting alternative ways of doing things, learning new approaches to doing things, or making changes to the environment so it is easier to do the occupation.

What can an occupational therapy career offer you?

Occupational therapists enjoy variety, flexibility and immense job satisfaction. Once qualified, you can specialise in a wide range of areas, such as mental health, learning disabilities, neurology, and oncology to name a few. You can also work in a range of roles, for example, as a clinical practitioner, a manager, consultant, lecturer or researcher.

Where occupational therapists work

Occupational therapists work in a variety of settings, including:

- Charities
- Community centres
- GP practices/primary care
- Hospitals
- Housing associations
- Commercial organisations
- Job centres
- Patients’ homes
- Prisons
- Residential and nursing homes
- Schools, colleges and universities
- Social services
Occupational therapists make a real difference

Some examples of what occupational therapists can do:

- Enable people to learn new or different ways of carrying out everyday activities after, say, a total hip replacement or following a stroke – like taking a bath, or shaving, or cooking a meal.

- Find ways for children to participate fully in day-to-day activities – such as playing, or learning to dress themselves, or having lunch in the school canteen.

- Work with a person recently diagnosed with dementia to develop strategies that help to remind them of everyday events and tasks – for example – using a diary or mobile device to set reminders, labelling cupboards with their contents, or using coloured dots to help them use a microwave or washing machine.

- Support a person with depression to reconnect with interests that once brought them joy and pleasure – for example, by trying them out again, and working up to attending something like a local book group.

- Work with people who experience exclusion from society (such as the homeless, or asylum seekers) to make meaningful connections and use or develop, their skills – for example, through volunteering.

Case study

“I suffer with Borderline Personality Disorder and have been admitted to psychiatric wards three times.

Whilst in the mental health ward, once the medications began to work, I found myself consciously lost, it was chaotic and frightening. I was in a mixed ward with over 20 patients with different diagnoses. I had nothing to do and this plunged me into further despair.

However, every morning the OTs would hold a meeting where we could express concerns and they would provide us with scheduled activities, including relaxation, drumming and poetry reading. A young patient really blossomed during the poetry reading, it was extremely moving watching patients that were so locked within themselves suddenly appear, when they took part in creative activities.

Every OT I have met has listened to me, never judgemental, and a positive influence. They play a vital role in treating mental health and my experience in hospital would have been far worse without them.”
How to become an occupational therapist

To qualify as an occupational therapist you need to complete an occupational therapy degree programme at one of 31 universities across the UK.

Entry requirements

Entry requirements to study occupational therapy vary throughout the UK. You are advised to visit the websites of the universities of interest to you, to check their entry criteria. Non-academic requirements might also be stipulated, such as meeting an occupational therapist to gain a greater understanding of the role.

To become an occupational therapist, you need to complete a pre-registration programme. There are a number of different pre-registration educational programmes across the UK at undergraduate and post-graduate levels:

**Full time BSc (Hons) degree** – these are three years (four years in Scotland).

**Part-time BSc (Hons) degree** – these usually take four years and require two days a week attendance at university, you do not need to be employed in health or social care.

**In-service BSc (Hons) degree** – these four-year programmes are for those students who have the support of their employer to study for the degree qualification whilst continuing to work. The programmes usually require two days a week attendance at university.

**Postgraduate programmes** – these are normally full time for two years for graduates (people who already have a degree). These programmes will award a postgraduate diploma in occupational therapy or an MSc in occupational therapy (pre-registration).
Course content
The occupational therapy programme combines practical and academic study. Topics include:

- Biological sciences
- Behavioural sciences
- Management and leadership
- Therapeutic interventions
- Environmental adaptations
- Research
- Occupational therapy knowledge and skills
- Humanities

A minimum of 1,000 hours (approximately one third of the programme) is required to be spent on practice placements, where you put into practice all the theory and knowledge you have learnt at university. You may find yourself on placement in physical rehabilitation, learning disabilities, mental health, social care or in the voluntary sector, using a variety of skills.

During your practice placement, you will be under the guidance of a qualified occupational therapist, and as a student, by the time you are in your final year, you will see service users on your own.

The College of Occupational Therapists programme accreditation
The College is the UK professional body for occupational therapy staff. It sets the practice and educational standards for occupational therapy and represents the interests of the profession across the UK and internationally.

All the UK occupational therapy degree programmes are currently accredited or awaiting accreditation by the College of Occupational Therapists. This is a voluntary quality standard that indicates that the programme meets the College’s standards.

Accreditation by the College of Occupational Therapists is recognised by the World Federation of Occupational Therapists, which means your qualification will be accepted in over 60 countries*. Some countries may stipulate additional entry criteria.

Visit www.COT.org.uk for up-to-date information on all the accredited occupational therapy degree programmes.

The Health and Care Professions Council approval programme
All degree programmes must be approved by the Health and Care Professions Council, the regulatory body for the occupational therapy profession, as meeting their minimum standards. This approval is mandatory to enable graduates to be registered to practise.
Applying for a university place

Applications to three or four year full-time pre-registration occupational therapy programmes should be made through UCAS (Universities and College Admissions Service) at the following address:

UCAS, Rosehill, New Barn Lane, Cheltenham, Gloucestershire, GL52 3LZ.
Tel: 0871 468 0468   www.ucas.com

You are advised to check the UCAS deadline to ensure you complete the necessary application in time as it often closes many months in advance of the programme starting.

Applications to two-year accelerated programmes and four-year part-time/in-service routes should be made direct to the university. Check the appropriate university websites for deadlines.

Completing your university application

- Do your research – talk to an occupational therapist to improve your understanding of the profession
- Visit the College of Occupational Therapists website to find out more about the profession: www.COT.org.uk
- If possible, find referees who know about occupational therapy
- When applying for an occupational therapy programme, either through UCAS or to the university direct, you will be asked to write a personal statement. This is the opportunity to sell your skills. In your personal statement make sure you:
  - Explain why you are interested in occupational therapy as a career.
  - Describe any experiences you have of working in, and/or visiting, occupational therapy departments, and what you think you gained from the experience.
  - Outline your personal qualities and skills and try to relate these to what may be required as an occupational therapist.
  - Provide a brief account of your interests.
What an occupational therapy student says...

“Studying occupational therapy opens up your eyes to how important occupations are in everyday life and how these occupations are affected by illness and disability. Taking the journey to becoming an occupational therapist involves learning about the relationship between humans and their occupations. You will then gain your experience on practice placements, allowing you to identify tools of assessment and different approaches of the profession. The best element of occupational therapy is the diversity of the profession, you will see and meet so many different people on your journey as well as experience different settings. As an occupational therapist you help individuals to help themselves.”

Nikki Lawrence, 1st year undergraduate OT Student – University of Derby
Financial support
Students with UK citizenship (who are resident in the UK) are normally eligible to have their tuition fees funded for full-time or part-time pre-registration undergraduate occupational therapy study. The funding arrangements for postgraduate pre-registration study differs around the UK. For more information about funding arrangements, contact the universities directly.

Additional financial support through an NHS bursary may also be available, but this will vary according to each student’s circumstances. The NHS bursary is a means-tested annual payment awarded to assist with day-to-day living costs while you are studying. If you are offered a place at a university to study occupational therapy, and if you are eligible, you will be contacted by NHS Student Bursaries who will explain the application process.

Please note that funding is subject to current political and financial policies and may change at any time. The most up-to-date information will be provided by the universities.

Additional funding options

Student loan
The financial help a student can receive will depend on the programme, where they live while they are studying, and their individual circumstances. For more information visit: www.slc.co.uk

Career development loan
A professional and career development loan could help you to pay for learning that enhances your job skills or career prospects. It is a bank loan, so you’ll have to pay it back once you’ve left university. However, you do not pay interest for the period when you’re studying. For more information visit: www.direct.gov.uk
Frequently asked questions

How much do occupational therapists earn?
- A newly qualified occupational therapist can earn in the region of £21,000
- A more experienced occupational therapist can earn over £40,000
- A consultant occupational therapist can earn between £63,000 and £79,000

What are the working hours?
Many services expect occupational therapists to work across 7 days and may also expect their team members to work shifts and out of office hours.

I haven’t studied for a long while. I am an adult learner. Can I apply?
All programmes welcome applications from career changers. The individual universities will advise on how to prepare for study. Some adult learners prefer or are required to do a foundation degree or access course in a related field, such as health and social care to help prepare them for the return to academic study. Visit the university websites for more information.

Can the College recommend a particular programme?
All university occupational therapy programmes in the UK have to be approved by the Health and Care Professions Council, the independent regulatory body. This is the minimum requirement for practising as an occupational therapist. All programmes are currently accredited by the College of Occupational Therapists and the World Federation of Occupational Therapists, ensuring that graduates are fit for purpose and fit to practise.

Are the entry requirements the same for each university?
Each university has its own entry requirements and they vary from programme to programme. Specific entry enquiries should be made direct to the university. You will find information about the programmes and the entry criteria on the university websites.
What is the difference between in-service programmes and part-time programmes?
Some programmes provide access to study for professional qualifications for people who are already working in health and social care, and these are called ‘in-service’. Other programmes enable students to study part-time irrespective of their employment status.

Both programmes of study include daily or weekly attendance, and all include full-time periods of practice placements.

How do I arrange to meet an occupational therapist?
Use your network – do you know someone who knows an occupational therapist?

Alternatively, contact your local hospital or social services for information on visiting institutions where occupational therapists work. Residential nursing homes, homeless shelters or charities may also employ occupational therapists who could spend time discussing their role with you. Visit our website for more information and advice.

Do the universities check for criminal records?
Yes, enhanced disclosure and barring checks will be required before taking up a place on a university programme. The procedure is initiated by the university.

Will I need to have a health check before starting the programme?
All students will be required to undertake a health check, and you may have to pay for some vaccinations before going on a placement. The university will provide further details.
I already know I want to work with a specific group of service users. Do I still have to complete a practice placement in another practice setting?

Yes, it is the university’s responsibility to provide you with a range of practice placement experiences. Although you may develop a preference for a particular area of occupational therapy practice during your time as a student, you will be expected to complete placements in a range of different settings.

I am an international student. Can I still study occupational therapy in the UK?

International students can find information on the entry requirements for each university in the course listings at www.COT.org.uk. For more information, please contact the university directly.

The UK Council for International Student Affairs (UKCISA) produces guidance notes for international students wishing to study in the UK. Visit www.ukcisa.org.uk, or write to UKCISA, 9–17 St Albans Place, London N1 0NX or call +44 (0)20 7288 4330.

The British Council provides information for international students wishing to study in the UK. Visit www.britishcouncil.org

International Education Financial Aid (IEFA) provides information on financial aid, scholarships and grant information for international students wishing to study abroad. Visit www.iefa.org

NB: Whilst all UK pre-registration OT courses are accredited by the WFOT, if you are an international student this does not automatically mean you will be able to register and work in your home country – you may need to apply, submit documentation, complete extra study and sit exams, as each country sets its requirements differently, and also has the right to decide not to accept an overseas qualification.
Programmes accredited by the College of Occupational Therapists

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<th>England</th>
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*Programmes awarded by these universities are offered at more than one location  **Pending accreditation

Recognised support worker programmes

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<td>HNC Occupational Therapy Support</td>
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<tr>
<td>Agored Cymru</td>
<td>Level 3 Diploma in Occupational Therapy Support</td>
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Disclaimer

Every effort has been made to ensure the information in this handbook is accurate at the time of publication. The information outlined in the handbook is subject to subsequent changes in political, legislative and funding policies. The College is not responsible for any changes made to the information contained in the handbook, once it has been printed.
Occupational Therapy
Helping people to live life their way

To view a video about studying to become an occupational therapist, visit: www.COT.org.uk/study-ot