



Canterbury Christ Church
University College

Promoting Diversity in Occupational Therapy



PROMOTING DIVERSITY IN OCCUPATIONAL THERAPY – SUMMARY REPORT

Introduction and Context

People from ethnic minority communities, those with disabilities, males and those from socially disadvantaged backgrounds are under-represented in the occupational therapy (OT) workforce. Arising from and supported by equal opportunities legislation, Government policy in relation to the health and social care sectors and the widening participation agenda in Higher Education, there is a recognition by the health and social care sectors, workforce development confederations, the profession and Higher Education Institutions (HEI's) of their joint responsibility to develop a workforce that reflects the communities they serve.

This summary reports on a study undertaken by Canterbury Christ Church University College (College) in 2001-2002 and funded by Kent, Surrey and Sussex Workforce Development Confederation and North East London Workforce Development Confederation. Its purpose was:

- to identify issues that impact on the recruitment, selection and accommodation of people from these under-represented groups to higher education programmes leading to state registration in OT, and subsequently into employment
- to make recommendations and suggest strategies for higher education institutions and the profession that would enable them to enhance or develop their existing policy and practices in relation to the aim of attracting and retaining a diverse workforce in OT

Method

A total of 368 participants contributed to the study through interviews, focus groups or survey.

At a local level the focus of the study was on the course at Canterbury Christ Church University College and on the views of current students; staff directly involved in the recruitment, selection and accommodation of occupational therapy students and middle/senior management with input to the diversity agenda within the College. Potential students from the under-represented groups contributed their views of occupational therapy as a career, together with local community groups serving people with disabilities, males and ethnic minority populations.

At a national level, a survey of careers advisers and Higher Education Admissions Tutors informed the project about issues related to the guidance and recruitment of students to occupational therapy.

Both course programme specific and national recruitment materials for occupational therapy and health and social care sectors careers in general were critically reviewed with regard to their appeal and representation. A number of recommendations are included in the report.

Summary of key findings and recommendations

People from Ethnic Minorities

Recruitment

Most participants from ethnic minority communities lacked awareness of occupational therapy, found the job title misleading and confused it with other careers. Careers advisers received few enquiries about it from students from ethnic minority communities. It was also anticipated that some adults from ethnic minority communities would be unaware of careers within the health and social care sectors other than doctor or nurse. Investing in a degree course for OT was seen by some as a risk and by others as unnecessary for this 'caring' occupation, which was also regarded as requiring 'female' qualities. Some adults regarded the opportunity to 'try out' an area of study through a free course as a relatively 'risk free' means of making a decision.

The influence of parents and community on career choice was seen to be central, however, both students and careers advisers considered that parents and those from certain ethnic minority communities would regard OT as of lower status than doctor, which would be more highly valued.

Further deterrents raised by those from ethnic minority communities included problems which some anticipated in communicating with clients; fears for personal safety; and exposure to racial discrimination, both within the profession and institutionally in the health and social care sectors.

Selection

Staff involved in the selection of students expressed concerns that applicants from ethnic minority communities would potentially be exposed to discrimination if there was no representation from these groups on the selection panel.

Accommodation and Support

Issues related to lack of an inter-cultural approach to both the teaching and programme content were voiced. A variety of views were held by staff and clinicians concerning the extent to which different cultural practices were recognised and accommodated on the OT programmes.

A lack of cultural awareness amongst work colleagues and clients, and a shortage of role models and mentors from ethnic minority communities on placement was expected to be problematic for ethnic minority students.

Summary of recommendations and examples of suggested strategies

Recruitment

- **Raise awareness amongst ethnic minority communities that occupational therapy is a distinct profession within the health and social care sectors, and as having value in its own right**
 - e.g. Consider ways to raise the profile of OT with ethnic minority communities - through community radio stations, local TV channels, community newspapers

- **Attitudes within ethnic minority communities need to be challenged to demonstrate that males may also possess the qualities required of an occupational therapist**
 - e.g. Talk directly to ethnic minority community leaders about occupational therapy, either through inviting them in, or through presentations in the community
 - Produce careers literature that 'speaks' directly to different ethnic minority communities
 - Consider using male occupational therapists to give presentations to groups of pupils and parents in schools with ethnic minority populations

- **Communicate the complexity of the job to justify its status as a graduate level profession**
 - e.g. Produce more specific illustrations in recruitment materials of the link between the programme content and requirements of the job
 - Give more focused talks to adults on Access courses explaining its relationship to the degree course and profession

- **There is a need to demonstrate to ethnic minority communities that currently there are employment opportunities as state registered occupational therapists for those who successfully complete their degree programme training**
 - e.g. Produce case studies of OT graduates from ethnic minority communities who have gained employment
 - Inform local ethnic minority communities of job availability through placing articles and job vacancy advertisements in appropriate ethnic minority publications

- **Clinicians, working in conjunction with HEI's to provide more focused opportunities for potential applicants from Access courses to 'try out' the occupation before making a financial commitment to the occupational therapy degree programme**
 - e.g. Programmes to arrange 'taster days' within a local professional setting for those studying on appropriate Access courses in areas serving ethnic minority populations

- **Courses and the profession need to demonstrate a desire to be multicultural through anti-racist initiatives**
 - e.g. Programmes need to promote their commitment by providing statements and illustrations of how they put into practice a multicultural policy
 - Increase the visibility of people from ethnic minority communities studying on courses and employed as occupational therapists in recruitment materials

- **There is a need for programmes and the profession to focus their attention on ethnic minority communities and parents in particular to raise their awareness of occupational therapy and also to seek to understand and address their concerns about this profession**

- e.g. Enable parents to raise specific concerns they have about the profession and have available appropriate information and resources with which to address these
Attend careers fairs/conventions within areas with high ethnic minority populations

Selection

- **During selection events there should be more representative evidence of the diverse cultures within British society to demonstrate a commitment to multiculturalism**

- e.g. A video illustrating the multicultural activities and student support available at the College to be shown on selection days
Take positive action to recruit department staff from ethnic minority backgrounds

Accommodation and Support

- **Review programme content in terms of its cultural sensitivity to students from ethnic minority communities and establish a common understanding of cultural diversity amongst the staff**

- e.g. Ensure all staff undertaking a personal tutor role are given time to participate in a 'race' awareness training session
Establish a departmental Equal Opportunities Committee with a brief to review the programme content, teaching processes, placements and to consult with appropriate outside organisations

Research implications

- **Research may be required to ascertain the degree of personal risk to Occupational Therapists from ethnic minority backgrounds**
- **Research may be needed to look at how students are placed, how diversity may be accommodated and the degree of understanding by placement providers of the needs of students from ethnic minority communities**

People with Disabilities

Recruitment

Occupational therapy was seen as likely to be an attractive career for those with disabilities, as it provides opportunities to use their experience as clients. It was also felt however that some may be deterred from considering health care professions if they had had negative experiences as clients.

Despite many having been service users, students with disabilities identified a lack of knowledge about the profession. It was suggested that those with disabilities were likely to be attracted to work with people with the same disability or to a relatively narrow range of careers within health and social care.

Further, careers advisers reported receiving few enquiries about OT from students with disabilities, some felt that others who have influence may encourage these students to adopt the view that 'active' careers are unrealistic and/or too physically demanding for them to consider. The provision of specific, accurate and accessible information was seen to be needed in order for advisers and people with disabilities to assess their ability in relation to OT. Due to an over- emphasis on cookery and art, OT was seen to be portrayed by the profession as a 'female' career, which may deter some from applying. In addition, educational requirements for entry to the course were seen as a barrier to those who had attended educational institutions outside the mainstream and had not had the opportunity to acquire academic qualifications. Potential OT students and course staff felt that a statement in recruitment advertisements encouraging people with disabilities to apply would have a positive effect.

Selection

Specific aspects of the selection process were considered to be potentially problematic for people with disabilities. For example, medical examinations for jobs within the health and social care sectors were seen to lack transparency and a fear of unfair discrimination against those with mental health disabilities was expressed. Difficulties with a group interview situation were anticipated by those with a sensory disability and a need for information in an accessible format, prior to selection was identified. Some felt that unexplained gaps in their career history on their CV, together with revealing their disabled status might initiate discriminatory practices on the part of selectors.

Staff involved in selection of students were concerned about the under-representation of disabled people on a selection panel. Some also felt that if accepted, those with severe and recent mental health disabilities would be likely to fail the OT course due to pressure and stress and some specific disabilities were seen as grounds for rejection. An unmanaged absence from work resulting in the provision of an inferior service to clients was suggested as a possible deterrent to OT employers employing people with disabilities.

Accommodation and Support

Universities were seen as the gateway to health careers for people with disabilities, and providing access to them was regarded as important. Support for disabled students was seen by admissions tutors to be provided through disability advisers, however there were differing views by HEI staff concerning whether they were adequately supported on the OT course, which was described as both physically and academically demanding. For students with mental health issues it was suggested that a joint understanding and management of unpredicted and periodic episodes of absence would be important.

Some admissions tutors felt that students with disabilities may experience constraints and restricted opportunities for their clinical placements. Although certain disabilities were considered likely to present insurmountable problems for entry to the profession, some disabled participants anticipated that the profession would be flexible concerning how the job is performed and would make adjustments to accommodate most disabilities. It was suggested however that limiting entry to the profession to those who have completed all modules of an OT degree was a narrow approach that excludes capable people with disabilities.

Summary of recommendations and examples of suggested strategies

Recruitment

- **The profession and those delivering programmes need to recognise and build on the potential interest and particular capabilities that disabled people may bring to this area of work, demonstrating how occupational therapy may be seen to be empowering**
 - e.g. Provide information in accessible form for those with sensory disabilities. Offer a 'hands on' experiential, practical day in a clinical setting as a way for people with a variety of different disabilities to make the career more accessible and 'real'
- **The profession and programmes need to consider ways in which they can provide opportunities for those with disabilities to contribute to occupational therapy in informal ways**
- **The profession and programmes need to raise awareness about the specific tasks involved within the occupation to enable disabled people to make decisions about their own capabilities in relation to OT**
 - e.g. Include in programme and career materials information that clearly defines the tasks in the job and responsibilities
- **The actual physical fitness and mobility requirements need to be more effectively communicated, so as not to deter applications from those with disabilities**
 - e.g. Analyse the job to determine any physical and mobility requirements for the profession to explore how specific job tasks can be allocated more flexibly to accommodate differing levels of disability
- **There is a need for the profession and programmes to counter the impression that traditionally female activities e.g. cookery and art are core components of OT practice**
 - e.g. Extend the range of therapeutic activities portrayed in recruitment materials to enable applicants with disabilities to see the variety of opportunities to use their particular capabilities as an occupational therapist
- **Departments need to actively encourage those with disabilities to apply**
 - e.g. Consider including positive statements in recruitment materials that welcome applications from those with disabilities

Selection

- **To allay fears that having a disability may automatically put them at a disadvantage, the selection process (including the medical examination) will need to be transparent, with opportunities provided for dialogue**

- e.g. Make it transparent to applicants how the information they provide in relation to their disability will be used in the selection process
Counsel disabled applicants on to the programme through discussing what courses they could feasibly complete
- **Selectors need to be clear about the medical criteria applied, the grounds for rejection or deferment and how to communicate these to applicants**
 - e.g. Design medical questionnaires that provide opportunities for applicants to include written explanations about their disability, in addition to factual information
Offer informal appointments to discuss specific needs. Possibly in conjunction with the disability advisor
- **The profession needs to address how unpredicted absence by disabled people can be managed and accommodated**
 - e.g. Employers need to communicate more directly in job advertisements their willingness to make reasonable adjustments to the job to accommodate people with disabilities who apply
- **During selection events there should be evidence that students with disabilities are welcomed at the institution, demonstrating a commitment to equal opportunity**
 - e.g. A video illustrating the facilities and adjustments made to accommodate students with disabilities, together with the student support available at the HEI to be shown at selection days
Take positive action to recruit Department staff with disabilities
- **Staff responsible for recruitment need to be aware of a disabled candidate's particular needs to ensure these will be accommodated prior to and within the selection process**
 - e.g. Prior to the day, determine the individual support required by applicants for them to complete the selection process

Accommodation and Support

- **Identify with the disabled person the appropriate equipment needed and ensure its availability on the programme and on placement**
 - e.g. Share experiences with other programmes that have accommodated students with particular disabilities to ensure that the most effective specialist resources are provided
- **For programmes to ensure that a disabled student has a nominated tutor who will discuss their particular needs with them and act as a mediator with other staff**
 - e.g. Ensure contact established with students as early as possible
Work out an individual action plan with the student which considers their needs and the possibility for programme flexibility

- **Recognising the physical and academic demanding nature of the course, coping and support strategies need to be considered and appropriate adaptations made**
 - e.g. For the College of Occupational Therapy to initiate a discussion across the wider profession concerning the provision of practice placements for students with disabilities
- **The profession needs to review the core components of the programme in relation to disabled people and consider the scope for changing or adapting the content/delivery**

Males

Recruitment

Both males and females expressed a lack of awareness and knowledge of the profession, which was supported by careers advisers who had few enquiries about it. Males and females viewed it as attracting those prepared to undertake 'mundane' rehabilitation tasks with clients. Although participants frequently pre-empted their views with a statement acknowledging their stereotypical stance, both sexes considered that women would be more likely to have the qualities required in this 'caring' profession. Careers advisers also anticipated that males would regard OT as a 'soft' career, lacking in excitement and glamour. The 'arty', care and community-centred image of the profession reinforced by some guidance providers was thought by HEI staff and OT students to deter males from the profession. Some younger males felt that they would be stigmatised if they were seen to be considering a 'female' job, such as occupational therapy.

It was felt by male potential applicants and HEI staff that the career prospects and salary would act to deter males with financial commitments and high aspirations. Males were seen to be more likely to choose a degree leading to a career with more recognition, better pay and working conditions. Further, males and females participants both questioned the need for a degree to enter OT.

Selection

No HEI staff identified any gender bias against males in the selection of students. However, the lack of males in the profession and on courses was thought to be a deterrent to males.

Accommodation and Support

Some College staff felt that males may encounter gender related problems in both the academic and placement aspects of the course. Working on placements with female clients or in paediatrics were both presented as potentially problematic. Male students were thought by some College staff to be side-lined or adversely targeted by other students during discussions related to gender.

Summary of recommendations and examples of suggested strategies

Recruitment

- **The profession needs to emphasise those aspects of OT that are dynamic and varied to demonstrate that it is an 'exciting' occupation that is constantly moving forward and developing**
 - e.g. In careers literature and through multi-media presentations and resources, provide specific examples of OT as a 'modern', forward moving profession with opportunities to acquire specific specialist skills and dispel its 'art and cookery' image
- **Awareness of the profession needs to be raised. Both the profession and programmes need to publicise more widely the range of programme routes both within and from OT, together with associated financial gains**
 - e.g. Specialist summer schools for occupational therapy might make links with particular schools to encourage male pupils to attend
- **OT needs to present itself as a profession that welcomes and supports males (as well as females)**
 - e.g. For qualified male occupational therapists to act as professional mentors to male students

Accommodation and Support

- **Sensitivity in the induction stage and throughout, enabling males and females to feel comfortable working together**
 - e.g. Programme providers to consider how to embed an attitude of acceptance and openness concerning gender issues within the teaching programme

People from Socially Disadvantaged Backgrounds

Recruitment

HEI staff involved in recruitment identified a number of factors that they felt influenced the recruitment of people from socially disadvantaged backgrounds. The additional financial burden to students on OT courses of placement accommodation and travel was thought to deter potential students from this under-represented group. The traditional predominance of middle class applicants entering Higher Education was also seen to have a direct and deleterious effect on attracting those from socially disadvantaged backgrounds which is further exacerbated by occupational therapy's image as a middle-class profession. College staff also felt that a lack of the required educational qualifications and a lack of familial support also acted as barriers to people from socially disadvantaged backgrounds entering OT courses.

Selection

The possibility of discriminatory practice arising in the selection process was raised by some College staff. They expressed concern that they would be unlikely to have 'shared experience' with applicants from socially disadvantaged backgrounds and that this might adversely affect the process.

Accommodation and Support

HEI staff and some OT students felt that the course was not sufficiently aware of the specific problems faced by students who are socially disadvantaged, and that this resulted in an inability to respond sensitively to their needs when arranging placements.

Financial issues were cited as presenting particular problems to these students, who due to the demands of the OT programme are not generally in a position to supplement their income through part-time work and have the added burden of the initial outlay for placement accommodation and travel expenses.

Summary of recommendations and examples of suggested strategies

Recruitment

- **Entry to occupational therapy courses needs to be facilitated by programmes working in a targeted way with Further Education Access courses, particularly those in areas of social disadvantage**
 - e.g. Programmes to arrange 'taster days' within the local professional setting and at the HEI for those studying on appropriate Access courses.
 - e.g. Focus recruitment literature on the practical benefits following qualification – career structure, opportunities and job security

Selection

- **Provide training for occupational therapy HEI staff involved in recruitment that addresses the ways in which social disadvantage impacts on applicants**

Accommodation and Support

- **Raise nationally the funding implications of OT students having to pay double rent whilst on placement**
 - e.g. Professional Bodies to work with the Department of Health to explore the possibility of introducing a loan scheme or other bridging arrangements
Consider introducing a part-time route to qualification, allowing students to earn and study
- **Review mechanisms to ensure that the needs of those with financial problems are given priority when allocating placements**

e.g. Introduce a systematic and transparent form of prioritising the allocation of placements to accommodate those experiencing financial hardship

- **Provide training for all OT HEI staff about ways in which the effects of social disadvantage may impact on students' learning and progression**

e.g. Enable staff to attend training sessions and to transfer this learning to their teaching and support roles

Recruitment Materials

With the exception of a video produced by the College of Occupational Therapists, all recruitment materials reviewed consistently gave prominence to white females. The vast majority of recruitment literature reviewed lacks reference to people with disabilities within the OT workforce and on degree programmes. Further, none of the pictures or videos representing the profession and courses depict people with visually apparent disabilities. Colleges' disability statements are displayed on the College of Occupational Therapists website, however no information about entry to or working in the profession is targeted at this under-represented group.

Males are under-represented in all the marketing materials reviewed. No reference is made to social disadvantage issues in the recruitment literature. Little information is made available regarding funding/financial concerns, educational support on OT courses, or assistance with expenses linked to attending for interview. No equal opportunities statements were included in any of the materials produced.

Summary of recommendations

- **There is a need for the profession and programmes to ensure that people from ethnic minority communities, males and people with disabilities are not under-represented in publicity materials**
- **Recruitment materials need an inclusive statement welcoming applications from individuals with disabilities, those from ethnic minority communities and both males and females**
- **Accessible, specific information for those with disabilities should be made available and referenced in recruitment materials**
- **Opportunities should be provided for occupational therapists from ethnic minority communities to speak directly to these communities about the professionalism of their role and the rewards it brings**
- **Sources of financial advice for potential applicants should be included in recruitment literature**
- **National initiative need to be undertaken to address funding issues**
- **National recruitment and retention drives need to be more sensitive and better targeted to reach broader groups**

Printed and electronic copies of the full report (also in large print) are available from:

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