

There has been little research in the United Kingdom into the recruitment of occupational therapy students. This study focused on one aspect and surveyed students already holding a degree, in order to ascertain the factors that attracted them to occupational therapy and why they chose a further 3-year degree course in preference to postgraduate alternative routes to qualification.

Sixty-four students, holding degrees predominantly in the human sciences and the arts, were motivated to study occupational therapy at Brunel University through a desire to obtain a vocational qualification and to pursue a career that helped others and offered variety and personal satisfaction. The majority of the students learned of the profession through working in health and social care environments, and chose to study at Brunel University owing to its location in London and its reputation for attracting mature students. Although 90% of the students had been aware of the 2-year accelerated postgraduate diplomas in occupational therapy, more than a third preferred to undertake a 3-year degree course because it allowed more time for study and part-time employment.

The need to target recruitment at school leavers, graduates in related degrees and those already working in health or social care was identified.

Students' Choice of Occupational Therapy as a Second Degree

Christine Craik and Clare Naphine

Introduction

Blom-Cooper (1989) recommended that as the number of school leavers declined, it would become increasingly important to attract mature students and graduates to the profession. He noted that 'few, if any, academic disciplines have no relevance to the practice of occupational therapy' (p60).

Much of the literature on occupational therapy as a career choice over the past 40 years has been published outside the United Kingdom (UK) and has concentrated on school leavers. In summarising the literature, Craik et al (2001) noted that the main attraction, which remained consistent, was working with people, especially those with disabilities. Other important features were the interest, challenge and variety of the profession, with material factors such as job availability and salary becoming more frequently mentioned in later studies. In their survey of 330 first-year occupational therapy students, Craik et al (2001) noted a reversal in the order of the first two categories, with aspects of the profession such as variety and challenge being more important than an interest in people and a wish to help disabled people; however, material aspects, such as job availability, opportunity for promotion and salary, remained least important.

In the literature from other countries, there has been some reference to the recruitment of those with a first degree. However, as educational systems vary from country

to country, direct comparisons are difficult, especially with more recent studies in the USA when entry level master's programmes had been developed.

In Townsend and Mitchell's (1982) national survey of 421 occupational therapists in the USA, fewer than 1% (35/421) held a degree other than one in occupational therapy. Such a degree was most commonly in psychology, sociology or education, although it was not clear whether these degrees were obtained before or after the occupational therapy qualification. Nevertheless, the authors considered that 'the interests, background information, and experience of students with baccalaureate degrees in other fields add a richness and diversity to the profession which suggests that recruitment efforts toward this group may be desirable' (Townsend and Mitchell 1982, p529).

Supporting this view, Strickland (1987) surveyed directors of occupational therapy programmes in the USA and recommended strategies to accommodate mature students, including college graduates. Wyrick and Stern's (1987) national survey on the recruitment of occupational therapy students in the USA encompassed 60 professional occupational therapy programmes. Results were obtained from 1337 students, of whom 14% (190/1337) already held a first degree. The most commonly cited degrees were in psychology, the developmental sciences and education. Wyrick and Stern (1987) also recommended that recruitment should be targeted at college students.

Dudgeon and Cunningham (1992) investigated 135 applicants to the three occupational therapy programmes in the north-west of the USA. Of these, 38% (51/135) already held a first degree and were studying for a second or master's degree. For students with a degree, job flexibility emerged as an important attraction to the profession. Dudgeon and Cunningham (1992) agreed with earlier authors that recruitment should target groups other than school leavers.

Fleming et al (1997) studied 83 students entering the occupational therapy course at the University of Queensland in 1994. Of these, 4% (3/83) had completed another degree, with 47% (39/83) having partially completed one. In contrast in the UK, 35% (13/37) of the mature students in Craik and Alderman's (1998) study had a first degree, with one of these also holding a master's degree. Although this was a small study, the percentage of graduates was higher than the national figure of 15.7% (266/1697) students with a degree entering occupational therapy courses in the UK in 2000 (College of Occupational Therapists [COT] 2001).

In summary, studies on recruitment to occupational therapy over the past 20 years have advocated attracting graduates to the profession, although there is little evidence to suggest that this has occurred. However, from the COT's figures it appears that the number of such students in the UK has remained stable over the past 5 years, ranging from 14.4% (217/1503) of the 1998 intake to 17.8% (270/1519) of the 1999 intake (COT 1996, 1997, 1998, 1999, 2000, 2001). As there is no literature focusing on this group, it is not possible to state whether this is by chance or in response to recruitment strategies. This small-scale study was devised to build on other studies of recruitment to occupational therapy courses and begin the process of investigating this group of recruits to the profession.

Aims of the research

The aims of the research were to gain an understanding of the factors that attracted students already holding a degree to consider a career in occupational therapy and why they chose to pursue a further 3-year degree course at Brunel University in preference to the alternative routes available to graduates.

Method

Data collection

Based on the design of a previous study (Craik and Alderman 1998), a semi-structured postal questionnaire was employed to obtain the views of students. A similar format was adopted but some of the questions were altered to make them more relevant, the wording was simplified and fewer options were included. Having obtained approval from the Brunel University Ethics Committee, the questionnaire was piloted on four third-year students who had a degree and some minor amendments were made.

Sample

The participants consisted of full-time and part-time students who had a first degree and were enrolled on the BSc(Hons) Occupational Therapy course in the academic year 1999/2000. Of the total number of students, 27.2% (86/316) were graduates. The four students who participated in the pilot study were excluded and a questionnaire was sent to the remaining 82 students. The covering letter assured anonymity and confidentiality. Students on fieldwork had the questionnaire posted to their placement. The results were analysed using Excel and content analysis.

Results

Response rate

Sixty-four of the 82 questionnaires were returned, representing an overall response rate of 78%. The breakdown by cohort is displayed in Table 1.

Table 1. Response rate of 82 full-time and part-time students with a first degree on the BSc(Hons) Occupational Therapy

Cohort	N	Replies	Response rate	% of total
1999	31	25	81%	39
1998	23	18	78%	28
1997	28	21	75%	33
Total	82	64	78%	100

Age-group

The respondents indicated their age-group when they started the BSc(Hons) Occupational Therapy, as indicated in Table 2.

Table 2. Age-group of 64 students with a first degree on the BSc(Hons) Occupational Therapy

Age	N	%
21-25	22	34
26-30	23	36
Over 30	19	30
Total	64	100

Academic and career background

The respondents indicated how many years had elapsed between completing their previous degree and commencing the BSc(Hons) Occupational Therapy. This time gap was 0-27 years, with 28% (18/64) having a gap of 6-10 years and 64% (41/64) a gap of 0-5 years, including five students who commenced within the year that they completed their first degree.

The subjects of the previous degrees were categorised according to those used within the university. The most frequently cited were the human sciences (42%), followed by the arts (17%) (Table 3). One respondent had a higher degree in addition to a first degree.

Seven students (11%) reported that their degree had been vocational while the majority, 89% (57/64), considered that their degree had not been vocational. Of these, 73% (41/56) declared that the nonvocational nature of their previous degree had influenced their decision (one did not respond).

Table 3. Title of degree held by 64 students on the BSc(Hons) Occupational Therapy

Degree	N	%
Human sciences	27	42
Arts	11	17
Environmental studies	4	6
Business management	4	6
Science	4	6
Health studies	4	6
Languages	3	5
Religious studies	3	5
Economics	2	3
Politics	1	2
Sports science	1	2
Total	64	100

Awareness of occupational therapy

At the time of application to their previous degree course, one-third of the respondents had been aware of occupational therapy but 66% (42/64) had not. Three stated that although they had been aware of the profession, they had not clearly understood what it entailed. Of those 42 respondents not initially aware of the profession, 12 (28%) stated that if they had been aware of it, they would have chosen to study occupational therapy instead; 36% (15/42) would not have done so, with an equal number stating that they were unsure.

In response to an open question, 62 of the respondents described how they became aware of occupational therapy. For 48% (30/62) this was through previous employment while for 31% (19/62) it was through friends and family.

For almost two-thirds of the respondents (41/64), their former employment had involved contact with the profession. Of these, 95% (39/41) had previously worked alongside or had come into contact with occupational therapists in health or social care environments. The posts included hospital administrator and care worker, with 28% (11/39) of the respondents having worked as occupational therapy assistants or technical instructors.

Reasons for choosing occupational therapy as a career

From a choice of nine options, the respondents ranked their five most important reasons for choosing occupational therapy. Six of the 64 respondents did not rank their answers and so data were analysed from the remaining 58. Their ranked answers were weighted, with those items ranked the highest at 1 scoring 5 and those ranked the lowest at 5 scoring 1. The most frequently chosen reason was job satisfaction followed by helping people, with variety of settings as the third most frequently chosen option, as displayed in Table 4.

Awareness of BSc(Hons) Occupational Therapy at Brunel University

Sixty-one respondents reported how they became aware of the occupational therapy course at Brunel University, with 49% (30/61) reporting information from the COT as the most frequent method, as shown in Table 5.

Table 4. Reasons for 58 students with a first degree choosing occupational therapy as a career

Reason	Weighted score
Job satisfaction	211
Helping people	191
Variety of settings	149
Professional status	79
Job security	70
Previous experience	66
Opportunity to work abroad	39
Promotion prospects	17
Salary	6

Table 5. Methods by which 61 students with a degree learned about the BSc(Hons) Occupational Therapy course at Brunel University

Method	N	%
College of Occupational Therapists	30	49
Personal contact	10	17
Clearing	6	10
UCAS	5	8
Prospectus	5	8
Internet	2	3
Other	3	5
Total	61	100

Reasons for studying at Brunel University

From a list of six options, the respondents selected the reason(s) that they chose to study at Brunel University. The most frequently selected options were its location in London and its reputation for attracting large numbers of mature students. An opportunity was provided for additional reasons and these are included in Table 6.

Table 6. Reasons why 64 students with a first degree chose to study at Brunel University

Method	N	%
Situated in London	52	39
Attracts large numbers of mature students	22	16
Recommendation	14	10
Method of teaching	12	9
Hope to find employment in London	12	9
Not accepted at other choices	6	4
Impressed by course/staff/reputation	5	4
Made late application	4	3
Geographical location	2	1.5
Focus on creative media	2	1.5
Course did not require OT assistant experience	1	1
Term dates suited child care commitments	1	1
Challenging course	1	1
Total	134	100

Importance of improving on degree classification

Asked to rank how important it was to improve on their previous degree classification, the largest percentage of respondents, 41% (26/63), indicated that it was neither important nor unimportant to improve on their previous

degree classification. For 37% (23/63) it was either important or very important to do so, while for 22% (14/63) it was unimportant or very unimportant.

Reasons for choosing the BSc(Hons) Occupational Therapy instead of a postgraduate diploma

Fifty-eight (91%) of the 64 respondents had been aware of the 2-year postgraduate courses and 56 outlined their reasons for choosing to undertake the 3-year degree instead. The results are shown in Table 7. The reason given by 30% of the respondents was that the postgraduate diploma was too intensive. However, 16% had not been successful in their postgraduate application and 14% had either been too late in applying or did not fulfil the entry requirements, so the postgraduate diploma may have been the preferred option of 30% of the respondents.

Table 7. Reasons for 56 students with a first degree choosing the BSc(Hons) Occupational Therapy instead of a postgraduate diploma

Reasons	N	%
Postgraduate diploma too intensive	17	30
Not accepted on postgraduate diploma.....	9	16
BSc course allows time to work (paid).....	5	9
Too late in applying for postgraduate diploma.....	4	7
Did not meet postgraduate entry requirements.....	4	7
BSc course better suited to family commitments	4	7
Registered on 4-year part-time BSc course	3	6
Less distance to travel to BSc course	2	4
Miscellaneous given by only one respondent.....	8	14
Total	56	100

The respondents then speculated as to whether they would have chosen a postgraduate course for a master's degree in occupational therapy in preference to the BSc(Hons) Occupational Therapy course. Half of the 64 respondents were unsure; 27% (17/64) would have chosen a master's degree rather than the BSc and the remaining 23% (15/64) indicated that they would not.

Discussion

Just over two-thirds of the students surveyed (45/64) were between 21 and 30 years of age. Two-thirds (41/64) commenced their occupational therapy degree within 5 years of completing their first degree, which supports the argument that potential recruits to the profession may be found within the universities. Almost 90% (57/64) of the respondents reported that their previous degree had not been vocational and 73% (41/56) quoted this as the factor that had influenced their decision to study occupational therapy. The most frequently reported first degrees were in the human sciences (including psychology and sociology), echoing the findings of Townsend and Mitchell (1982) and Wyrick and Stern (1987).

Two-thirds of the respondents had not been aware of

occupational therapy when they applied to their previous degree courses and, of these, 28% (12/42) reported that if they had been aware of occupational therapy, they would have chosen it in preference to the subject of their first degree. The methods by which 79% (49/62) of the respondents became aware of occupational therapy were through previous work experience and through friends and family. These informal routes are similar to those reported by 70% of the 330 first-year occupational therapy students in the Craik et al (2001) study. This supports the need to promote the profession to school leavers, both to engage potential recruits earlier and to save the costs of additional education. It adds further weight to the need for planned promotional and recruitment strategies rather than leaving it to chance and suggests that the steady state of graduates entering occupational therapy education is not in response to active recruitment.

The most frequently cited reason for choosing occupational therapy as a career was job satisfaction followed by the desire to help people, findings in accord with those of Craik and Alderman (1998). The third most frequently cited reason was the variety of settings; this differed from Craik and Alderman's (1998) mature students over the age of 30 who chose job security as the third most frequently cited reason, which ranked fifth in this study. It may be that job security is valued more highly by students over the age of 30, whereas the variety of settings was of greater importance to students under the age of 30 who represented 70% of the respondents in this study. This is further supported by Craik et al (2001), where the variety of work settings and the challenge and variety of the profession emerged as the most important features attracting 330 first-year occupational therapy students, of whom 73.6% were under 30 years of age.

The COT emerged as an important source of information, with half the students reporting it as the means by which they learned about the degree at Brunel University. The location of the university in London and its reputation for attracting large numbers of mature students were the most popular reasons for choosing to study there.

Just over one-third indicated that it was either important or very important for them to improve on their previous degree classification. For the majority it was less important, suggesting that academic incentive is less important than becoming an occupational therapist. This reflects the findings of Craik and Alderman (1998), whose mature students ranked obtaining a degree sixth out of 12 reasons for choosing a career in occupational therapy.

At the time of the survey, there were two routes to state registration as an occupational therapist for students with a first degree: a 2-year accelerated postgraduate diploma course or a full-time or part-time bachelor of science degree. Over 90% of the respondents (58/64) had been aware of the postgraduate diploma option when they applied to the BSc(Hons) Occupational Therapy course and more than a third preferred the latter since it was less intensive and allowed more time to study and also allowed time to obtain part-time employment. Only 27% of the respondents

indicated that, had it been available, they would have chosen a master's degree in preference to a bachelor's degree. The respondents may have taken into account the fact that the entry requirements and academic demands would be higher for a master's degree than for a bachelor's degree. This adds further weight to altruistic or practical reasons rather than academic qualifications as the motivation for studying occupational therapy. It may also indicate that the demand for master's degrees as a pre-registration qualification does not come from students, as Waters (2000) speculated.

Limitations of the study

In order to create a large enough group to study, full-time and part-time students from three cohorts were included. However, there are differences between these groups. First-year students may have recalled their motivation to study occupational therapy more accurately than second and third year students. Furthermore, the importance they placed on improving their previous degree classification may have differed from second and third year students, who may have been influenced by their academic performance on the BSc(Hons) Occupational Therapy course. Similarly, most of the part-time students were working in a health or social care setting and were sponsored by their employer, which may have affected their responses.

The study focused on the student population of one university, which at 27.2% has a higher percentage of graduates than the national figure of 15.7% (COT 2001). This had the advantage of increasing the number of participants, but could be seen as limiting the relevance of the study to that university and its applicant pool. In particular, funding arrangements outside England are significantly different for occupational therapy students with a previous qualification. Issues of gender and ethnicity which are relevant to recruitment were not included in the study. Nevertheless, the study does provide valuable data on a previously unstudied group of recruits to the profession.

Conclusion and recommendations

There continues to be a 20% nationwide shortage of occupational therapists and, although the number of validated places on occupational therapy courses in the UK has increased, this has coincided with a reduction in the number of recruits (Craik et al 2001). The Government in *A Health Service of All the Talents* (Department of Health [DH] 2000a) announced its intention to expand the workforce and in *The NHS Plan* (DH 2000b) proclaimed an increase in numbers of therapists as well as doctors and nurses, creating greater competition for potential recruits.

Graduates bring different perspectives and scholarship both to the student population and later to the profession itself. However, more rigorous promotion of occupational therapy as a career would have enabled at least some of these students to become occupational therapists earlier and at less cost to the country. It is therefore essential to increase

promotion efforts to school leavers and thus attract those students who, had they known about occupational therapy earlier, would have studied it in preference to their first degree.

Even with increased promotion, there will always be some prospective applicants who do not hear of the profession at an appropriate time; therefore, it is important to target recruitment in the university sector. Those students who are about to complete a nonvocational, but related, first degree would appear to be the most likely candidates. There is an obvious opportunity for occupational therapy schools to target such students within their own or neighbouring university. As the postgraduate diploma and bachelor's degree appear to attract different types of student, there would be merit in such courses working together to increase recruitment efforts.

In addition to increasing promotional activity to school leavers and those with first degrees, people already working in a health or social care setting are a further group of potential recruits to occupational therapy. This study and that of Craik et al (2001) have indicated that health and social care are fruitful areas for recruitment. This should be considered more widely than encouraging people already working as occupational therapy support staff to undertake a 4-year in-service or part-time degree. There are staff with or without degrees who work in health or social care, in the housing or voluntary sector or with disadvantaged people in many settings who are prime targets for recruitment to occupational therapy.

This study has identified the need to target recruitment at school leavers, graduates and those working in health or social care. A variety of recruitment strategies will be required if the profession is to attract sufficient students in the future and the Government has indicated its support for highlighting occupational therapy in its future recruitment ventures (DH 2000c).

Further studies are required both from individual universities and nationally to establish more information about current students, their characteristics and their motivation to study occupational therapy, to help to devise these recruitment strategies and later to evaluate their effectiveness.

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Congratulations to the following who have achieved the qualifications in occupational therapy indicated. The Journal wishes them every success in the future and hopes that their careers will be both interesting and rewarding.

The list contains the names of successful candidates who qualified between June and August 2001 from all occupational therapy education centres in the United Kingdom notified to the College of Occupational Therapists prior to 31 August this year. A further list will be published in the January 2001 issue.

***With Distinction **Merit**

Newly Qualified Occupational Therapists 2001

Brunel University (London School of Occupational Therapy)

BSc (Hons) Occupational Therapy

First Class: HJM Barnes; SM Lutchmaya; J Martin; M McGuire; EA Pandit; IR Sawko; J Thomas.

Second Class (Upper Division): EK Abraham; D Bellamy; C Bond; CR Bruce; RAC Eisenbraun; AM Foley; LM Francis; BMJ Galley; ML Gowland; H Green; D-M Guidera; RMN Hanmer; SE Hardy; PR Harris; GMR Holmes; SM Houston; EK Howells; E Hughes; CE Hunter; TM Ilett; MA Knight; SJ Kyle; D Lane-Stott; S Moore; A Nicod; LK Papworth; JM Parnham; KM Penn; MH Posen; KJ Prout; L Rogers; S-M Senior; LH Tobin; A Want-Sibley; CM Ward; RD Windsor; ZL Wood.

Second Class (Lower Division): CG Barrow; A Budge; NA Carrig; DJ Chinery; C Freeman; MA Freemantle; TA Gohel; KE Griffiths; SL Lancefield; EC Lewis; EF Malcolm; AJ Mitchell; BJ Norris; HC Northway; B O'Neill; LJ Parkes; AL Pemberton; J Pemberton; CLS Poon; SY Rodger-Smith; VB Rubins; VL Russell; B Sheeran; K Singaravelou; LC Titchin; CA Turner; M Uemura; LC Weightman; G Williams; VJ Williams.

Third Class: LL Drysdale; DMA Reid; W Spicer.

Canterbury Christ Church University College

BSc (Hons) Occupational Therapy

First Class: KJ Al Khina; CF Belcham; E Holness; A-M Kehoe; L Mooring; TM Sidwell.

Second Class (Upper Division): DJ Ayres; AF Bridgland; EL Cole; T Cowley; LM Duxbury; VM Hughes; N Kingsland; R Lewis; VJ Potter; CL Richardson; AL Simmons; WE Simms; LK Underwood; RP Webb; JES Williamson.

Second Class (Lower Division): S Brickwood; HL Buggs; SL Dee; NJ Greenaway; CJ Mulligan; LM Powell; MD Reilly; JJ Rham; SE Slater; HL Smyth; EM Steenhoff; RJ Taylor.

Third Class: AJ Pearson.

Coventry University

BSc (Hons) Occupational Therapy

First Class: AC Bennett; AM Bird; J Frusher; JE Grainger; CL Hankin; KA Harris; R O'Sullivan; RL Roberts; CA Seale; H Smart; EJ Webber.

Second Class (Upper Division): J Allison; JC Armitage; IK Atkinson; J Bachegalup; LN Baker; RE Banner; P Baxter; C Bithell; CH Boulton; K Braithwaite; M Carson; CA Chambers; D Charter; SJ Chew; SJ Cooper; MH Darby;