

Educational standards for developing an entry-level occupational therapy program: an overview

Abstract

The objective of this article is to provide an overview of the minimum educational standards required for developing an entry-level educational program in occupational therapy and to encourage continual quality assurance for developments required to advance the profession in an inter-professional and global context. Impacting the profession through the establishment of international standards is the key to provide a global unifying approach to the curriculum ongoing development of quality entry-level programs in occupational therapy. These standards ensure that the design and delivery of occupational therapy educational programs are internationally consistent and identify the essential knowledge, skills, and attitudes that encourage a more competent practice of occupational therapy.

Keywords: educational standards, entry-level, occupational therapy, curriculum, world federation of occupational therapy

Volume 1 Issue 5 - 2018

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Received: October 22, 2018 | **Published:** October 29, 2018

Introduction

Occupational therapy (OT) is recognized by the World Health Organization¹ as a health profession which is represented by the World Federation of Occupational Therapy.² The WFOT was established in 1952 and is the official international organization that supports and promotes occupational therapy profession. As members of health teams, occupational therapists work with other health professionals and share the occupational therapy's unique body of knowledge on occupation. Occupations are those purposeful and meaningful functional activities of everyday living. The occupational therapists knowledge and practice embrace a client-centered, holistic, and dynamic perspective of the person, the occupation, and the environment.³ This integrated practice approach makes occupational therapy's contribution to rehabilitation, recovery and health so effective.⁴

Curriculum design and development is one of the first stages in developing a new educational program. In 1958, the WFOT established a program for the Education of Occupational Therapists. The education program area of the WFOT is charged with evaluating a qualifying educational program from countries applying for membership of the WFOT⁵ Since then, the minimum standards have shaped the global curriculum development of occupational therapy entry-level programs (Bachelor's Degree or Equivalent Credential). The WFOT provided the Minimum Standards for the Education of Occupational Therapists (MSEOT) and has been thoroughly reviewing and updating them. These international standards provide a global unifying approach to the curriculum design and development of quality entry-level programs in occupational therapy.⁶ They ensure that the design and delivery of occupational therapy educational programs are internationally consistent and help identify the essential knowledge, skills, and attitudes that encourage a more competent practice of occupational therapy. This practice helps occupational therapist to be able to work in a diversity of multiple settings and cultures and educate the next generation of therapists to manage and adapt services from local to global contexts.⁷ While these standards shed light on the broader perspective of international practice, they also encourage a strong emphasis on local contexts and cultural

differences. MSEOT state that the preparation of entry-level occupational therapists to meet the challenges of the 21st century requires continuous modifications to learning experiences as well as new strategies to develop the knowledge, skills, and attitudes that are needed to achieve the necessary entry-level competencies. In addition, occupational therapy's entry-level education must be anticipatory not just responsive to growing health challenges. Furthermore, it should prepare capable students for the complexity of emerging academic and evidence-based practice.⁴ Additionally, the MSEOT don't only look at technical, clinical, and professional skills but also help enhance leadership, adaptability as well as soft skills (i.e., communication skills, political awareness, advocacy, etc.)⁸ that are essential within the 21st century for advancement of all knowledge based occupations.⁹

The individuals who design an occupational therapy curriculum and those who educate occupational therapy students need to be well-informed of the MSEOT. Therefore, the purpose of this article is to provide an overview of the minimum standards required for developing an entry-level educational program in the field of occupational therapy and to encourage continual quality assurance for developments required to advance the profession in an inter-professional and global context.

Methods

The most recent version of the MSEOT revised in 2016 was reviewed. The minimum standards required for developing an entry-level occupational therapy educational program were highlighted. Our review focused on knowledge, skills, and attitudes that encourage a more competent practice of occupational therapy and provided an overview of the essential components of the entry-level occupational therapy educational program.

Summary of results⁴

Philosophy and purpose of the program

Occupational therapy educational programs¹⁰ are guided by a unique philosophical understanding of local and international perspectives of occupation. The programs philosophical understanding of occupation

may include but not limited to: the nature and meaning of occupation, individual's participation in occupation, and cultural understandings of occupational performance and outcomes. When developing an educational program, the curriculum designers and educators need to understand the social and educational background of students entering the program, such as the educational methodologies that the students are familiar with, the student's preexisting knowledge, and the demands of external roles of adult students (i.e., worker, spouse, and parent). The purpose of the educational program refers to the kind of work the students are primarily being prepared to do and the range of settings within which they are expected to be able to work. Both philosophy and purpose are central to the educational program and guide all aspects of the program design, curriculum content, professional development, program delivery and outcomes.

Essential knowledge, skills, and attitudes for competent practice

All graduated occupational therapists are expected to have knowledge, skill, and attitudes in the following areas:

- The person-occupation-environment relationships
- Relationship of occupation to health and well-being
- Therapeutic and professional relationships
- The occupational therapy process
- Professional reasoning and behavior
- The local and global contexts of professional practice

Factors of the local context

In order to produce graduates with these knowledge, skill, and

attitudes, the following five factors of the local context that influence what needs to be taught in an occupational therapy educational program and how it is taught need to be taken into consideration:

- The students ability to complete the program successfully
- Local health and social needs
- Local health, societal, disability educational and legal systems
- Local beliefs, values, and meaning of occupations in the local context
- Local occupational therapy history

Components of the educational program

All occupational therapy educational programs should include five components, all of which should be developed to be consistent with the program philosophy and purpose.

These components are:

- Curriculum content and sequence
- Educational methods
- Practice placements (fieldwork)
- Expertise of educators
- Educational resources and facilities

Figure 1 summarizes and illustrates the relationship between the program philosophy and purpose, the essential knowledge skills and attitudes for competent practice, the factors of the local context, and the components of the occupational therapy educational program.⁴

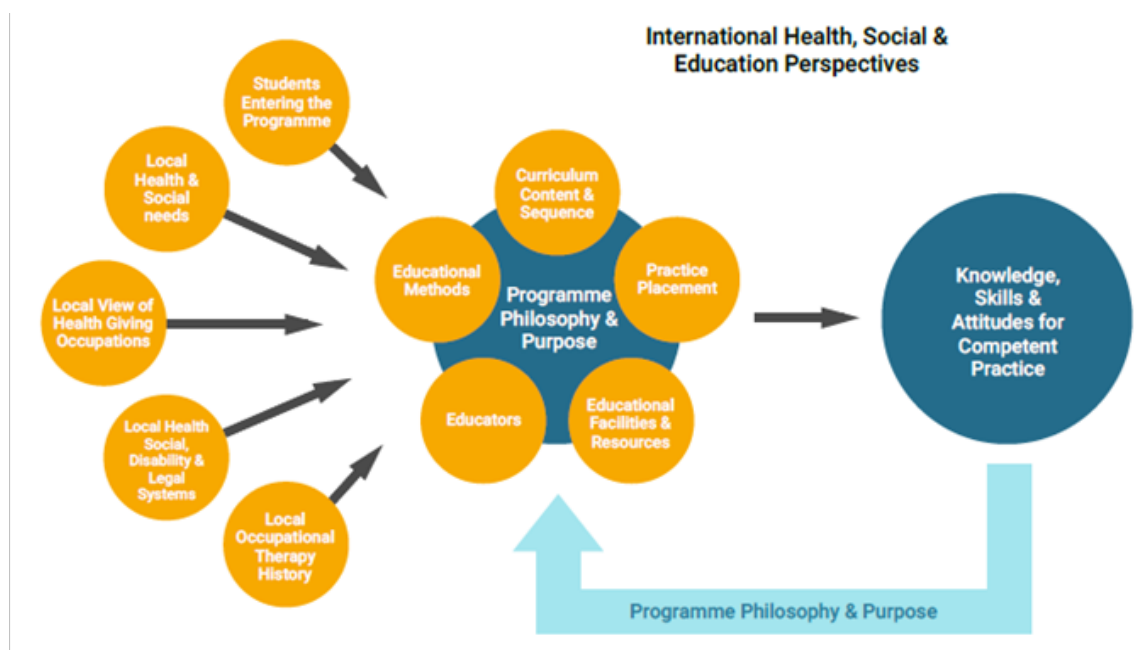


Figure 1 The Relationship between Program Philosophy and Purpose, Essential Knowledge Skills and Attitudes for Competent Practice, Factors of Local Context, and Components of an Occupational Therapy Educational Program (adapted from WFOT MSEOT, Revised, 2016).

Discussion

The WFOT MSEOT are intended to set a minimum standard and encourage a continual quality assurance for developments required to advance the profession in an inter-professional and global context.⁵

The MSEOT to prepare entry-level occupational therapists are organized in the 2016 revised version under six headings. Under each heading, the minimum standards address five issues. Table 1 summarizes the WFOT MSEOT.³

Table 1 A summary of the WFOT MSEOT⁴

Standard	Congruence	Depth and breadth	Local context	International perspective	Quality assurance
Philosophy and purpose	The elements of the philosophy and purpose statements fit together well, and provide a comprehensive basis for the program. ¹⁰	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -The philosophy addresses an occupational view of humans, the occupational challenges humans face, and how to enable occupation. -The purpose includes individual, community/group and population approaches to health and well-being. 	The philosophy and purpose of the program are aligned with current or predicted health and well-being needs, occupations, and systems and priorities of the nation or geographical region in which the program is located.	The philosophy and purpose of the program reflect concepts of occupation and occupational therapy shared by the international community of occupational therapists.	The philosophy and purpose statements are reviewed in an on-going manner, and revised in response to local changes and development of international knowledge.
Curriculum content and sequence	The curriculum content and the sequence of content fit well with the program philosophy and purpose.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -The curriculum is designed and developed by occupational therapists. -A minimum of 60% of a program is focused on occupation and occupational therapy -10-30% of the program is focused on knowledge of body structures and functions, biomedicine, psychological and sociological concepts -10-30% of the program is focused on knowledge of the human and social environments -Occupational therapy undergraduate programs in higher education are a minimum of 3 years or 90 weeks. 	The curriculum content is congruent with the local social, cultural and institutional environments.	The curriculum content is based on contemporary international theories, research findings, occupational therapy practice, international documents (i.e., WHO ICF), & links with the international occupational therapy community	The curriculum is reviewed on an on-going basis and revised at least every 5 years (for 2 or 3 year programs) or 7 years (for 4 year programs) including (i.e., peer and self-review, student feedback, monitoring processes, advisory boards, external examiners)
Educational methods	The educational methods selected are consistent with the views of people and occupation that are illustrated within the philosophy and purpose of the program.	The range of educational methods used (i.e., case studies, skills training, small scale projects, reflective exercises, literature review, experiential learning, problem-based learning, inter-professional learning) supports the development of graduate knowledge, cognitive and practice skills, and fosters lifelong learning. ¹	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -Local experts are utilized as well as people with occupational dysfunction. -Local traditions of teaching and learning are valued and incorporated. 	Educational practices are informed by international educational theories and research, and utilize information and communication technology.	Processes for continual improvement that use multiple information sources (i.e., peer review, student & graduate feedback, examination boards, educational experts)
Practice Education	Practice education experiences are consistent with the philosophy and purpose of the program.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -Students practice a range of practice education (age groups, diagnoses, and contexts) -Each student will complete sufficient hours of practice placements -A minimum of 1,000 hours is expected. -Supervision will progress from close, on-site supervision to independent practice as student progresses. -Supervision models are not limited to a 1:1 student-therapist ratio. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -The roles and responsibilities of students on practice placement, practice educators within the educational programs are known, clear, explicit and relevant to the local context. -Students and practice educators are adequately prepared and supported to fulfill their roles and responsibilities. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -Practice education experiences are informed by international expectations of professional service provision. -Practice is guided by theory and research findings, and service is provided to all people without prejudice. 	Evaluation of student performance on practice placements is consistent with the philosophy and purpose of the program, clear and explicit, and appropriate to the level of the student.

Table Continued...

Standard	Congruence	Depth and breadth	Local context	International perspective	Quality assurance
Educational facilities and resources	The educational resources fit well with the philosophy and purpose of the program.	<p>-The size of the student intake is in proportion with the number of educators.</p> <p>-There are sufficient resources, including library resources, internet access, teaching materials, specialist equipment and funding to support effective teaching and learning.</p> <p>-There is adequate and accessible teaching space, offices for educators and support staff, venues for specialist learning activities, and storage space.</p>	Examples of equipment that would be used with the recipients of occupational therapy and materials for therapeutic occupations fit the local technology, economy, values and geography.	<p>-Library resources are up-to-date, and supported by internet access.</p> <p>-The program has student and staff recruitment and selection policies and procedures to ensure equal opportunities for all.</p> <p>-Learning resources need to include access to international databases and journals.</p>	Plans for continual improvement of facilities and resources are in place and consistent with planned curriculum development.
Educators	The mix of professional backgrounds, qualifications and experience of the educators enables delivery of an educational program that fits its stated philosophy and purpose.	<p>-Qualifications and experience of the educators support the curriculum content and educational methods.</p> <p>-Educators demonstrate excellence in teaching¹¹ and have qualification that is higher than the qualification received by graduates of the program.¹²</p> <p>-There is a staff policy that addresses a balance of teaching, research and administrative functions.</p>	The educators have, or can access, knowledge of local contexts of practice (i.e., understanding local occupations, social structures, cultural beliefs and practices, health needs, and occupational opportunities).	The educators access international occupational therapy, health, disability, societal and educational thinking and practice (i.e., international professional literature, visiting educators, and interational conferences, networking).	The educators update continually the knowledge, skills and attitudes relevant to their teaching (i.e., gaining further formal qualifications, international collaboration with experts and organizations, engaging in research, student feedback, critical appraisal of teaching practice).

Conclusion

Curriculum design and development is one of the first and most important stages in developing a new educational program. For occupational therapy programs, the minimum educational standards play a vital role and have shaped the global curriculum design and development. The WFOT MSEOT is a platform impacting the profession through the establishment of international standards and is considered the key to provide a global unifying approach to the curriculum design and development of quality educational programs in occupational therapy. These standards ensure that the design and delivery of occupational therapy educational programs are internationally consistent. They also help identify the essential knowledge, skills, and attitudes that encourage a more competent practice of occupational therapy which would have a positive significant impact on our profession.

Acknowledgements

I owe a special acknowledgment and respect for the World Federation of Occupational Therapy (WFOT), and I would like to give my deepest appreciation and gratitude for their priceless efforts and invaluable continuous support to our profession. This study is dedicated to all occupational therapy students and occupational therapy educators in the whole world.

Conflict of interest

Author declares that there is no conflict of interest.

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