

RCOT programme accreditation - a highly valued kite mark



RCOT has recently published learning and development standards for pre-registration education. In line with revision of the standards, **Rebecca Khanna** and **Clair Parkin** consider the process and benefits of programme accreditation

“Meeting professional body criteria is meant to safeguard quality and should aid the employability of students.
Occupational therapy professional lead”

The Royal College of Occupational Therapists (RCOT) has a rigorous and supportive role in the quality assurance and enhancement of pre-registration education, especially in the accreditation, or reaccreditation, of programmes.

It works collaboratively with educators, practitioners, employers and students to enhance the quality of pre-registration education within universities and across practice education sites.

RCOT, as the sole professional body for the profession in the UK, supports, develops and protects the UK domain knowledge. It has the right and responsibility to ensure that programmes using the title ‘occupational therapy’ or ‘occupational therapist’ are educating pre-registration students in a manner that is consistent with the values, beliefs and overall philosophy of the profession.

Successful RCOT accreditation ensures that newly-qualified practitioners have the capability to meet RCOT’s standards for professional practice, which are, and remain, above the threshold required for registration with the Health and Care Professions Council (HCPC).

The current Learning and Development Standards for Pre-registration Education (RCOT 2019) incorporate the World Federation of Occupational Therapists’ (WFOT) essential requirements. RCOT has delegated authority to confer WFOT approval and through this process offers providers the opportunity to streamline their approval journey.

Accreditation process

RCOT accreditation is the process of reviewing, evaluating and quality assuring pre-registration programmes. This service is offered to any education provider considering developing or delivering pre-registration occupational therapy education or reaccreditation.

‘Going through the accreditation process, ensures that you strive for excellence in a broad range of performance indicators which are often more relevant and more aspirational than the university quality indicators.’

Occupational therapy programme director

Within the process, each education provider is appointed an RCOT accreditation panel. Panel members include an RCOT officer, and one or two accreditors.

Accreditors are professional members, who demonstrate substantial involvement in the development and delivery of pre-registration programmes. An essential aspect of accreditation or reaccreditation is the critical review of programme documentation, holding meetings with students, service users, practice education partners and senior leaders.

Evidence received is evaluated against the RCOT Learning and Development Standards, with a view to recommending the programme for accreditation with, or without, conditions or recommendations.

It is not unusual for RCOT accreditation to occur alongside other quality assurance activities. In these situations, the RCOT process is designed to dovetail with those of other stakeholders including, HCPC or the higher education institutions’ method for validation.

Tangible benefits

RCOT accreditation can also provide tangible benefits for applicants and employers by providing a benchmark of quality. For example, to inform a decision regarding the particular merits of a programme, or when considering the capability of graduates to be ‘fit for profession’.

In particular, the promotion of professionalism and the ethical practice of students and newly-qualified occupational therapists is central to accreditation requirements, as is demonstrating the links between practice, education and research across the curriculum. Plus, the sharing of forward-thinking, exemplary innovations in curriculum design and content are also encouraged.

Particularly at a time of substantive change in practice, programme teams are able to benefit from the distinctive support of the professional body through its offer of leadership, guidance and access to professional networks.

RCOT members are able to access significant data to inform programme development via the RCOT summary report of annual quality monitoring; returns are submitted by the directors of all accredited occupational therapy pre-registration programmes.

At a recent meeting of the Council of Occupational Therapy Education Directors, opinions regarding the importance and value

placed on RCOT accreditation was captured in a word cloud (see diagram one).

RCOT accreditation as a professional good

Whilst external monitoring of any kind could be viewed as a tick box exercise, it is evident from across the occupational therapy community that RCOT accreditation is identified as a professional good, which strengthens the standing and profile of the profession.

Based on feedback from directors of occupational therapy programmes and programme team members, accreditation moves beyond the surface demands of aligning curriculum to external reference points.

Instead, added value is derived from the process through having a reasoned dialogue about professional futures, educational practices, the ways occupational therapy curriculum respond to national and global issues and how these factors influence the learning requirements of students as future healthcare professionals.

Increased uptake for accreditation

In recent years, changes in government policy has had a notable influence on the nature of pre-registration courses, along with the development of education providers and number of accreditation requests.

Increasing the diversity of pre-registration training routes within occupational therapy is helping to address local workforce shortage, whilst also enhancing the added-value profile of occupational therapy to meet service demands.

Since the academic year 2014-2015, where there were 32 education providers delivering a total of 57 pre-registration occupational therapy programmes, RCOT is currently working with 42 education providers who are delivering and/or developing a total of 75 pre-registration programmes between them, including traditional BSc (Hons) and Postgraduate Diploma/Masters (pre-registration) programmes, and new integrated Masters (MOccTh) and integrated BSc (Hons) Degree Apprenticeships.

‘Students on occupational therapy programmes highly value the kite mark that the accreditation brings as it helps them establish professional identity even before their career begins.’

Occupational therapy programme director

