



## Creative placements: expanding our reach

As the occupational therapy workforce faces critical shortages, role emerging placements are stepping into the spotlight. Could they hold the key to a more inclusive, sustainable future for healthcare?

**Helen Burgess and Kathryn Blair** look at the benefits.

**Above top:**  
Previous role  
emerging  
placement  
student Richard  
(centre) at  
Dementia Active  
**Above:** Helen  
and Eddie

**R**ole emerging placements have increased over the past few years in response to the need to expand the provision of occupational therapy placements.

The workforce gaps in occupational therapy dictate that creativity is required in placement provision, which has led to increased opportunities for areas where occupational therapy is not traditionally in place to experience the benefits of the profession. This has been particularly prevalent in the voluntary community and social enterprise (VCSE) sector.

### What are the benefits of role emerging placements?

The expansion of placement opportunities has potential benefits for students, organisations and the wider population, as the various experiences

these placements provide work towards producing truly holistic practitioners with an increased sense of professional identity.

This is evidenced in numerous literature sources, which discuss how occupational therapy learners benefit from the experience of role-emerging placements in non-traditional settings.

Cade (2023) states that: 'Benefits for students include a greater understanding of the role of occupational therapy in various settings, an increased feeling of professional identity, competence and resilience, alongside an openness to new experiences.'

The incentives for the VCSE sector to host students has been the opportunity to benefit from skills and training in such things as person-centred care, ideas and innovations the students bring to the services, as well as the tariff payment for placement provision.

The evidence within literature for placements having a direct impact on VCSE services however is limited. It is this evidence that can help open further placements and allow more organisations to benefit from what the students can offer.

The benefits to occupational therapy as a profession are discussed by Schmitz et al (2018), who say: 'Role emerging placements can be seen as contributing to the growth of occupational therapy by providing services on a "trial" basis, so that the benefits of occupation-centred assessment, treatment and programming can be demonstrated in settings where it has been limited or not previously available.'

Having access to students with occupational therapy training brings with it a variety of benefits to VCSE organisations, as it allows people who are not under a service where an OT is present to still benefit.

Due to the holistic, flexible approach of occupational therapy, it can be adapted to many areas, which increases the scope for these placements. Organisations benefit from additional professional resources, service users benefit from the focus on occupation as a tool for wellbeing, and students benefit from experience with a wider variety of client populations.

RCOT's Workforce Strategy (2024) highlights a crisis within the profession with some areas experiencing a 40% vacancy rate. The strategy calls for an increase in OTs working in a variety of settings; particularly within social care, as this will reduce pressure on the NHS, minimise the need for crisis intervention, and help people live in their own home for longer.

### An example in a charity setting

An example of a placement expansion is a role emerging placement for occupational therapy students being established at Dementia Active, a charity based in Banbury, Oxfordshire, which provides a place for people with dementia to be involved in both group and individual activities within a supported environment.

The focus is on promoting social interaction and participation in activities that both stimulate and provide opportunities for success and fun.

The disruption that dementia brings to people's lives creates many barriers to engaging in activities and limits people living with dementia to achieve a sense of satisfaction and productivity.

An individualised approach is required, due to the varying way in which dementia presents in each person, as well as the person's specific preferences and values. This emphasis on client centredness and meaningful occupation to promote quality of life lends itself easily to developing and practising core occupational therapy skills.

Placements in charities such as Dementia Active give a great grounding for students by offering experience of their work to reduce inequalities, social exclusion and create a sense of belonging.

Lopes and Malfitano (2017) discuss the social responsibility of occupational therapy to promote participation and challenge social injustice. The impact of health inequalities is something that all students are educated in.

Placements in a charity setting can expose students to ways of addressing these inequalities, helping to improve knowledge of occupational justice and promote inclusive practice.

Emilie, an occupational therapy student, comments: 'I thoroughly enjoyed my placement at Dementia Active and gained an insight into the amazing work the charity does to support their clients, which I will take with me into my future career.'

The students at Dementia Active participate in the day-to-day running of the centre, contribute to the sessions and use their skills and occupational therapy knowledge to enable participation through modifying activities to meet the needs of every member.

The students are responsible for information gathering about the members' strengths and limitations when it comes to participating in meaningful activities and using this to adapt existing activities, which take place regularly, and design bespoke ways of enabling everyone to get the most out of their time at the centre.

In a smaller organisation such as Dementia Active, the influence of the students is clearly evident and they can make changes in real time, which helps them grow and improve and provides positive reinforcement of their skills.

Students have been involved in creating and implementing interest checklists, mood charts and the Pool Activity Level (PAL) assessments.

The students complete the assessment and use this, along with their knowledge of the member, to create client-centred interventions. The use of PAL assessments with the interest checklist has provided a pathway to facilitate member involvement in planning activities and evaluating outcomes.

This helps demonstrate to stakeholders how Dementia Active adapts to the needs of all beneficiaries. This is not just important for the members, but also the wider organisation, as it can provide evidence for funding grants.

Other student-led projects have included literature reviews to investigate the evidence base for approaches and initiatives that are being considered for the centre, such as the PAL checklist, and leading education sessions on communication in dementia and manual handling techniques.



The students bring a fresh perspective to the charity; their thoughts and views are welcomed as a way of challenging the 'status quo' and making sure the organisation is working in a way that promotes continuous quality improvement.

They bring an attitude of curiosity and willingness to learn, as well as contributing to the practical daily running of the service.

### Challenges of role emerging placements

The increase in role emerging placements has necessitated a need to increase the number of practice educators who feel confident to support students on these placements. It can be a good opportunity for OTs working in non-patient facing roles to supervise students, but there can be challenges.

At Dementia Active, difficulties arose when there was miscommunication around expectations of the student and lines of escalation. Having both an OT supervisor and an on-site mentor/supervisor can lead to confusion, so clear communication is required so all involved understand the role of the student and how that differs from volunteers and session assistants.

This helps ensure staff know what tasks can and cannot be delegated to students. The student is accountable to both the practice educator and the organisation and must demonstrate professionalism and develop good working relationships with both staff and volunteers.

The practice educator and student use supervision to set goals that will grow knowledge and skills and provide evidence of competency. The student communicates this to the on-site mentor to ensure adequate opportunities are provided.

Practice educators support by ensuring plans are completed, as if not, then it can lead to loss of confidence for the student and them falling behind their peers in certain skills.

Examples of tasks given to students at Dementia Active include SOAP notes, activity analysis and regular reflections about their learning and how they are applying occupational therapy knowledge into practice. This ensures students develop the necessary skills in clinical reasoning and occupational therapy theory.

They also complete a written document about how the occupational therapy process could be demonstrated within the charity.

The student needs to be self-directed and proactive in creating opportunities for learning and use their time in supervision to demonstrate these competencies. The university also holds responsibility to ensure guidance and support are available for both students and organisations, to fully help them embrace the experience and navigate any challenges that may arise.

### The impact of these placements

The expansion of placements into the VCSE sector may have been born out of necessity to increase placements and enhance student skills and experience, but it has also been impactful on the lives of those who encounter these services and the charities themselves.

In Dementia Active, it has allowed for an increased population to benefit from the values and skills embedded in occupational therapy. Staff and volunteers have learnt about occupational therapy and have been given increased leadership responsibilities by working alongside the students.

It has also led to recruitment opportunities, with one student continuing in a paid role alongside her studies, which has only further benefitted the organisation.

Kayleigh, a former student and group leader, says: 'Dementia Active is a valuable placement that provided me with the opportunity to make a unique contribution to the wellbeing of the members. Since taking on the role as group leader, my understanding of occupational therapy values has continued to grow.'

It is important to grow the evidence base for the benefits to VCSE organisations to demonstrate the value of occupational therapy to local communities and the populations who are positively impacted from opportunities to engage with the profession. ●



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Words **HELEN BURGESS**, AHP Clinical Lead Adult and Older Adult Mental Health, [helen.burgess@oxfordhealth.nhs.uk](mailto:helen.burgess@oxfordhealth.nhs.uk), and **KATHRYN BLAIR**, Placement Lead and Lecturer, MSc (Pre-reg) Occupational Therapy, Royal Holloway University of London, [kathryn.blair@rhul.ac.uk](mailto:kathryn.blair@rhul.ac.uk)