

Professional Issues Forum

Occupational therapists as researchers

WFOT 2006 Congress

28 July 2006

Key messages

- There are a wide range of issues currently facing occupational therapists as researchers, which are summed in the question ‘How do we incorporate the doing/implementation of research into the activities of all occupational therapists – at whatever level they are working?’
- This report provides a useful starting point for the WFOT work stream on research agreed at the Council in Melbourne. Examples of where WFOT needs to take action include,
 - more active promotion of WFOT/ scholarship programs,
 - embed research evidence based practice in WFOT mission statement and definition
“Occupational therapy is a research active profession in which evidence is continually generated and applied to determine the most effective way of meeting clients needs”,
 - support maintenance of OT Seeker, and
 - develop a research specific website (linked to OT seeker) that includes linking “Hubs” of researchers.
- There is a pool of people willing to contribute to WFOT’s work stream on research (see appendix 1).
- There were a number of groups not represented in this forum, e.g. people from developing countries and the USA. So the concerns of these groups also need to be established.

1. Background

Natasha Lannin and Katrina Bannigan facilitated this forum and between 40-45 people participated in it (see appendix 1). The participants were asked to brainstorm issues generally for occupational therapists as researchers (see box 1). A wide range of issues were identified that can be summed in the question: 'How do we incorporate the doing / implementation of research into the activities of all occupational therapists – at whatever level they are working?' The group were then asked to decide on the key issues that need to be addressed (see box 2). Small groups within the forum considered each of the key issues identified and their responses are reported in this report. We are aware that WFOT agreed at its Council in Melbourne that research will be one of its work streams and we would like this report to be a contribution to this work.

Box 1: A summary of the issues generally facing occupational therapists as researchers identified by the participants in the 'Occupational Therapists As Researchers' Professional Issues Forum (in no particular order)

- **Evidence based practice** - do we apply it when accessing; large group is impossible; need to produce our own research evidence (OT specific); balance between evidence base and quality; critically analysing research papers.
- **Challenges** – there is a push for research but no dedicated time; randomised controlled trials are difficult – need higher profile for single subject studies; lack of confidence and support for fledgling researchers; lack of post-doc and long term research appointments; will OT become a doctorate level entry degree?; not much outcomes research; fear/mystery/scary (fear factor for clinicians); if you are going into research be prepared for rejection; extent to which research is valued by clinicians; lack of understanding about how to “survive” in the research world; how to get information about MSc; research culture of occupational therapy; important to bridge the gap between academia and practice; understanding statistics; issues with ethical approval for undergraduate research (UK); dearth of research in mental health in core or areas; issue of female profession not recognised in system; how to test the water without biting off too much; researchers losing track with clinical issues; learn which buttons to push; time release from work; prioritising time; capacity.
- **Funding** - Funding is out there but you need to learn how to access it; funding for research training and post doc.

- **Dissemination** - Gaining writing skills; publish widely – not only occupational therapy journals; always publish; publication; rejection letters.
- **What is needed?** - Research built into job descriptions; more professional body support (WFOT / OT Aus help with this); larger studies across more sites; replication of other studies; participation in multidisciplinary studies; push buttons; “Research for dummies” training; ongoing mentorship/ mentorship structure; academic and clinical partnerships; split load clinical / research being legitimised; clinical professional appointments; clinicians engaging in research in work places; mentor in local association; specific website to make research accessible to occupational therapy researchers world wide; silverbacks of research – find them to be your friend; need to develop and sustain research at program grant level; need to establish clinical research priorities in occupational therapy; better communication between researcher and clinician; role more as enablement; needs for international collaboration/ globalisation; regional health regional alliance workshops for six weeks and then microgrants; health care integration research – national initiative (UK); “Apprenticeship” at grant application level is useful; Challenge CEOs to build research of outcomes for programs; helping demystify research so that clinicians become empowered; programs of research that are multidisciplinary; need occupational therapists on NHMRC and ARC panels; hearing stories of people’s success and failure; appreciating different roles in developing and using research.
- **Resources** - including time and energy; Barriers to enter research – funding money to have clinical time out; money for part time research / clinicians as research; practice development occupational therapy posts; training.
- **Politics** - Rules of game; how to play the research game; Using national and international policies e.g. Stroke good button to push and next button will be mental health; not good at big picture; politics of grant writing; use well known researches and join in with them; networking; politics of publication; politics of research terms and conditions; occupational therapists are not savvy about working in grant system – need to be street smart; impact factors (Policy about what is valued); RQF (Aus) / Research Assessment Exercise (UK).

Box 2: A summary of the key issues identified by the participants in the occupational therapists as researchers professional issues forum (listed in no particular order).

- Promoting and valuing a research culture in occupational therapy;
- Resources; Funding (especially for clinical researchers);
- Politics of research;
- Clinical research resource person and structures (for example OT Seeker) within organizations;
- Networking with researchers/funders and strategic leaders; Collaborating;
- Managing clinical and research demands.

2. Promoting and valuing a research culture in occupational therapy

This issue involved considering how to develop a research culture within occupational therapy, particularly:

- how we incorporate the doing of research and the implementation of research into the activities of ALL occupational therapists at whatever level they are working, and
- how we promote research and clinician-researcher roles.

| Actions | Strategies |
|---|---|
| <p>Developing value of research in undergraduates (Bottom up).</p> | <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Set the expectation that occupational therapists must research 2. Continue evidence based practice undergraduate subjects 3. Discuss clinical practice and research as integrated practice 4. Ensure the minimum standards of research in accreditation process is reviewed to ensure practice research is integrated |
| <p>Develop culture amongst managers / organisational value of research (Top down).</p> | <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Promote evidence based practice 2. Expectations that clinicians participate in research |

| | |
|--|---|
| <p>Profession demonstrates development of a culture of research</p> | <p>Examples of activities could include:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • more active promotion of WFOT/ scholarship programs, and • allocate a percentage of funds to be tagged / prioritised and be promoted at a national and international level. |
| <p>Set up a task force to address clinical practice – research divide</p> <p>(e.g. honours students even on graduation say they need to be a real occupational therapists before they can be a researcher).</p> | <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Embed research evidence based practice in WFOT mission statement and definition “Occupational therapy is a research active profession in which evidence is continually generated and applied to determine the most effective way of meeting clients needs.” 2. Support maintenance of OT-Seeker database for free access to OT relevant research 3. Develop a research specific website (linked to OT-seeker) that includes linking “Hubs” of researchers internationally. |

3. Resources and funding

There were a number of topics identified that need further consideration but this group also suggested minimum standards and a vision for the WFOT.

3.1. Topics for further consideration:

- International funding opportunities; where to find funding? and how to access it?
- The need for guidance on international opportunities – perhaps with WFOT website for members?
- Knowledge of who has achieved grants internationally and making links with them for advice. Making the information about who has been successful with grant applications available via web for WFOT members only. This would also foster international links.
- Paid position at WFOT for research opportunities co-ordinator.
- Links to corporate sponsorship sites

- Mentorship from people who have successfully achieved grants
- Funding opportunities for multidisciplinary / multi-site studies
- Need for chat rooms, open access to resources, professional bodies advocating for research
- All occupational therapists to be involved in research - how do we do that?
- Need to be aware of research levels

3.2. Minimum standards suggested to be adopted by WFOT:

- All occupational therapists throughout the world have access to latest research evidence
- Occupational therapy schools need to educate students in how to access funding resources
- All occupational therapists should have involvement in research in its broadest sense

3.3. A vision for WFOT:

- OT seeker is supported and provided internationally
- WFOT hosts a web list service for sharing skills / knowledge

4. Politics of research

This issue relates to knowing about the politics of research (i.e. rules of the game, overcoming fear etc.) and becoming research savvy. It was noted that:

- **Fear** is not unreasonable because rejection is a part of being a researcher.
- **Laboratory research and real world research** need more support from real world research but also need to use laboratory research for funding

- **Knowledge to empower** and reduce fear factor and understand strategy research
- **Be more confident about occupational therapy**

| Possible ways forward | |
|--|---|
| WFOT to collaborate/ direct | <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Different pathways to developing research careers 2. Different pathways to using research in practice <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • impacting in the real world • research utilisation and knowledge transfer 3. Action research 4. Helping us to “catch up” with <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • participatory action research and appropriate research design • understanding rejection and gaining support 5. “Risk”: research is risky, outline the risk 6. Commitment for occupational therapy departments and managers to support staff to research at hospital and health service level 7. WFOT to put research list together in a website so occupational therapists know where to go and how to get help <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • WFOT collated and directed • Local occupational therapy associations (BAOT/COT/ OT Australia/ CAOT) establishing WFOT link to national associations mainframe and it should not just be for members. |
| WFOT to encourage | <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Occupational therapists to be generous with knowledge/ mentorship (which is contrary to the research world) 2. The reduction of “snobbery” in the research world to develop occupational therapy culture and support other researchers. |
| WFOT working party / group / taskforce about: | <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Research culture and knowledge (academia) 2. Stories or success and failure (collected and updated, networking) 3. Understand 5 star academia and politics 4. Direct appropriate critique and strategies for academics 5. Culture of not publicly humiliating colleagues to foster new workers 6. Directing how to foster <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • new research • acknowledging limits |

5. Clinical research resource person and structures (for example OT-Seeker) within organisations

This requires a focus on:

- a) Evidence based practice and the efficacy of interventions, which requires more mixed methods, more research to acute settings and developing the link between research and clinical practice
- b) Promoting research through collaboration, becoming research savvy, resolving difficulties with time management and balancing clinical and research demands
- c) Funding models/ methods including cost effectiveness.

6. Networking with researchers/funders and strategic leaders; Collaborating

In order to achieve this, the profession globally needs to aim to have research hubs (need not be physical hub) internationally. They should be theme oriented and “co-ordinate” research in this theme and decide on a research agenda and priorities. This enables the consolidation of expertise and researchers. For example, Curtin University has three themes within which all research must be in, i.e. work, self care and community. This model means they can attract collaborators from elsewhere. The hubs may be

- multidisciplinary “hubs”
- develop ideas / guidelines on how to develop research relationships eg how to approach others, attend conferences, email authors, invite others to be on the research team
- have database of researchers in the profession and outside of occupational therapy.
- implement this collaboration as occupational therapy based and use stakeholders effectively and promote quality research

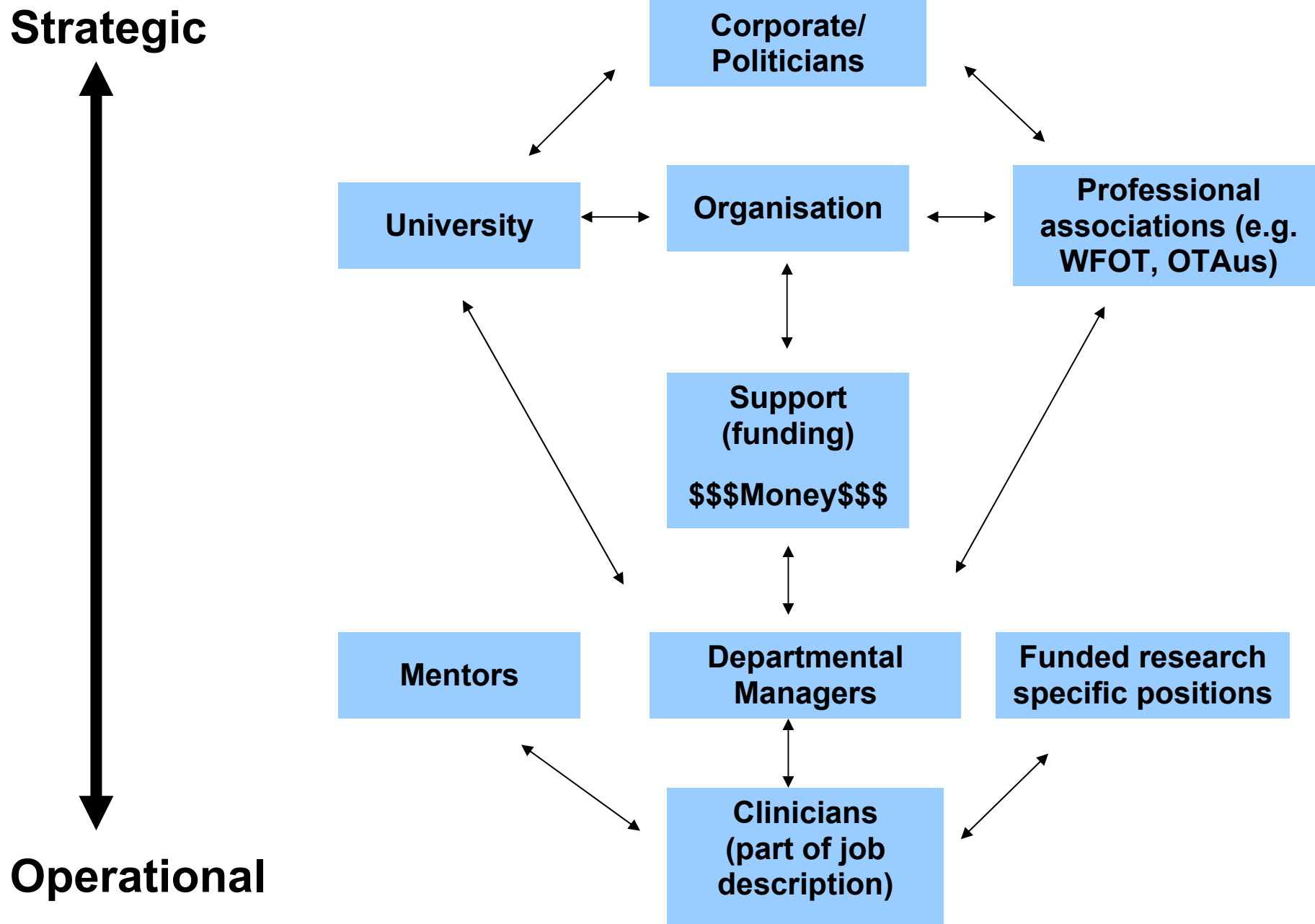
It makes sense for the hubs to belong to universities with access to all resources but it is important to have strong clinical networks. Hubs need not be geographical orientated but with

organisation and technology may have a base/ administrative office, and be electronic in their access and communication. There could also be research “hubs” conferences / satellite meetings.

7. Managing clinical and research demands

This group’s focus was strategies for managing clinical research and demand and they identified that a top down approach was needed where executive managers have to support the importance of research as a core business. This support has to be more than lip service; they need to have a model and funding for research infrastructure within the organisation. Organisations also need to work collaboratively with associations. This has been summarised in a model (see figure below).

Figure: Model for managing clinical research and demand



8. Conclusion: Way forward

This forum has clearly indicated that there is a wide range of issues currently facing occupational therapists as researchers. However, the participants also generated a number of ideas for possible solutions to these challenges. The level of engagement of participants in the forum means we have been able to develop a useful resource to provide an excellent starting point for the WFOT work stream on research agreed at the Council in Melbourne. The forum has also highlighted a pool of knowledgeable people committed to and willing to contribute to WFOT's work stream on research (see appendix 1). However, there were a number of groups not represented in this forum, e.g. people from developing countries and the USA, so the concerns of these groups also need to be established.

August 2006

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9. Appendix 1: Participant email list

The following people have indicated their willingness to be involved in future WFOT consultations about research in occupational therapy.

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