

# **Occupational Therapy in Germany - A Profession trapped in a cul-de-sac?**

## **An Open letter by German Occupational Therapy professors on World Occupational Therapy Day**

As occupational therapy professors at German public universities, we would like to take the World Occupational Therapy Day 2020 as a suitable occasion to draw attention to the genuinely concerning situation regarding the German occupational therapy profession. Whilst occupational therapy qualifications all over the world require a university degree, Germany is among the only four (together with Uganda, Malaysia and Japan) of the 101 countries organized in the World Federation of Occupational Therapists (WFOT) where an undergraduate degree in occupational therapy is not yet standard. Currently, the vast majority of OT qualification in Germany takes place at training colleges. It makes Germany one of the worst performers in the world when it comes to the issue of academic education of occupational therapy. This in turn has fatal consequences not only for the OT profession, but also for the quality of health care in Germany. In addition, the international exchange and connectedness of German occupational therapists is endangered.

We live in a society where people are living increasingly longer whilst also facing a growing number of chronic and multiple diseases. It is thus becoming more and more important to develop tailor-made therapeutic support and evidence-based interventions. This can enable those affected to live their everyday lives independently for as long as possible and assist them to remain within their familiar living and working environments. In this way, Occupational Therapy focuses on the everyday occupations of patients, enables participation and health of people or groups of people in a variety of situations and thus contributes to building an inclusive society.

Current changes in society and the German healthcare system require advanced qualifications and competencies from health professionals. For occupational therapists to be able to meet these requirements, a university qualification is imperative. Switzerland and Austria, who also used to have a non-academic OT qualification, made such change in 2006 and 2008 respectively, and have trained occupational therapists since exclusively at universities. Germany, in contrast, has merely explored this option experimentally under a so-called 'model trial' (Modellklausel), allowing a few universities to offer bachelor programs in occupational therapy in addition to completing the current state exam which allows graduates to practice as OTs in Germany. Although this experimental phase has been running since 2009 and the evaluation of these programs has been overwhelmingly positive, the model trial has already been extended in 2017 instead of being put into regular operation. As a result, only about 5% of German occupational therapists have an academic degree. There is a risk that the few existing occupational therapy university programs will become a 'long-term experimental model' if this model trial is extended even further. This widens the gap between Germany's current OT training college education and the higher education OTs are granted worldwide. In addition to falling behind internationally, it also results in a lack of scientifically trained occupational therapists who ensure an evidence-based and person-centered occupational therapy practice, as well as in a lack of academics and researchers in occupational therapy. Indeed, teaching, research, and evidence-based practice in occupational therapy in Germany cannot be developed sufficiently by a handful of academics. It is not sufficient to allow access to an academic

qualification to only a fraction of occupational therapists – such decision places the development of occupational therapy in Germany in a cul-de-sac.

Evidence-based practice requires professionals to understand and evaluate current research results to make scientifically sound clinical decisions together with their clients/patients. The existing knowledge and proof of effectiveness from international research in occupational therapy needs to be integrated and applied in practice, and occupational therapy research is urgently needed in Germany.

Occupational therapy focuses on the concerns of people in different life situations. Therapists need to combine person-centered and evidence-based approaches, which in turn require analytical, critical, and comprehensive ways of thinking and acting in order to meet the complex needs of those affected. At the same time, resources of the German health system need to be understood and effectively applied. To develop occupational therapy research and ensure the quality of health care in Germany, and to obtain the required theoretical, scientific, and clinical competencies, occupational therapy qualifications need to be at university level.

In accordance with this year's motto of the World Occupational Therapy Day “Reimagine Doing”, we as occupational therapy professors in Germany urge decision-makers at the various levels to “reimagine their doing” in:

- prioritizing the planned procedure for reorganizing Germany’s therapeutic professions in Germany and reconsidering occupational therapy’s academization
- advocating and implementing an entry-level university qualification for all occupational therapists in Germany
- ensuring the development of occupational therapy research and the further development of the profession through creating a regular academic qualification for all
- actively enhancing through their decision the international compatibility and connectedness of German occupational therapy through regular higher education
- rescuing the German profession from being trapped in a non-academic cul-de-sac in order to enable a shared understanding of knowledge and values as well as a scientifically sound qualification for occupational therapy.

It is our strong conviction that this is the only way to ensure modern, evidence-based and individualised occupational therapy health care services for the benefit of all clients.

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