Entry level occupational therapy core knowledge and practice skills

College of Occupational Therapists



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Author: College of Occupational Therapists
Writer: Elizabeth White
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Foreword

In the context of ongoing changes in the landscape of health, social care, and wider community services, occupational therapy continues to be a dynamic and responsive profession. Occupational therapists are well positioned to meet current and future needs of practice and provide quality services for service users and carers.

Graduates of the profession establish a professional skills set and capabilities for practice in a wide range of settings: the NHS, social care, third sector and wider community. With their core professional knowledge and practice skills, professionalism and leadership abilities, occupational therapy graduates have the potential to be agents of change and innovators to meet changing priorities and contexts of health and social care. Most importantly, occupational therapists have a valuable contribution to make in changing the lives of people, meeting service users' needs and supporting carers to fulfil their role(s).

This document sets out the scope of occupational therapists' core professional knowledge and practice skills to inform commissioners of health, social care and other public services, wider stakeholders, education providers and members of the general public. It was produced after consultation with the College's professional advisors, members of the Learning and Development Board and Council for Occupational Therapy Education Directors. The publication is designed to be a helpful reference resource to accompany the *College of Occupational Therapists Learning and Development Standards for Pre-registration Education* (COT 2014a).



Dr Ruth Heames
Chair, Learning and Development Board

Introduction

In June 2014, the College of Occupational Therapists launched its *Learning and development standards for pre-registration education* (COT 2014a). This document brought together previous work on education standards and curriculum guidance into a single publication with a focus on describing the entry-level profile for graduating occupational therapists in terms of outcomes. Whilst the content of the universities' curricula are not specified or constrained by the document, the *standards* aim to facilitate curriculum content being developed in combination with a range of stakeholders and tailored within each institution's unique strengths whilst promoting the core values, beliefs, knowledge and practice skills that are fundamental to the practice of contemporary occupational therapy.

Within the *standards* publication, Figure 1 (next page) represents the profession's relationship between its philosophical knowledge base and the core skills of entry level occupational therapy graduates.

In the time since publication of the *standards* document, the College has received a number of requests from commissioners of services and service managers to have an enhanced and more clearly articulated picture of the core skills that they could expect to see demonstrated by all occupational therapy graduates. There have also been a number of requests for replication of the Figure overleaf in a range of documents that relate to aspects of occupational therapy learning, thus reinforcing our awareness of the importance of core COT publications and their utility in supporting the development of the profession.

Such requests have presented opportunities for the College to be able to promote the unique contribution that occupational therapists can bring to a range of new and emerging job roles, as well as clarifying the core skills for employment in more conventional acute and community settings that occupational therapists possess on graduation. Such requests have prompted the need for an additional piece of work to supplement the Figure overleaf and the content of the 2014 *standards* publication (COT 2014a), by providing a context to the core professional reasoning skills and details of the practice skills possessed by new graduates in the highlighted areas of occupational therapy practice. It is noted that these core skills may be transferable from the areas of activity stated to others within the contexts that occupational therapists practice.

Mapping the core professional reasoning skills

The documents that have provided the background scrutiny for the contextual mapping of the core professional reasoning skills (Table 1, page 3) and described the application of these skills are the *COT learning and development standards* (2014a) and *Occupational therapy defined as a complex intervention* (Creek 2003 – currently subject to updating). It is noted in the latter document that the quality, depth and efficacy of professional reasoning differentiate the novice from the advanced practitioner, an important point when considering the skills and experience that new occupational therapy graduates bring to the workplace.

In addition, the SNOMED CT occupational therapy subsets that have been developed as part of the national clinical terminology mandated for use in recording patient data have been included within the mapping of these core professional reasoning skills, as use of such tools will be essential to support and record all aspects of the occupational therapy process in the NHS (England only in the first instance). Further information can be found in *Managing information: a 10-year strategic vision for occupational therapy informatics* (COT 2014b).

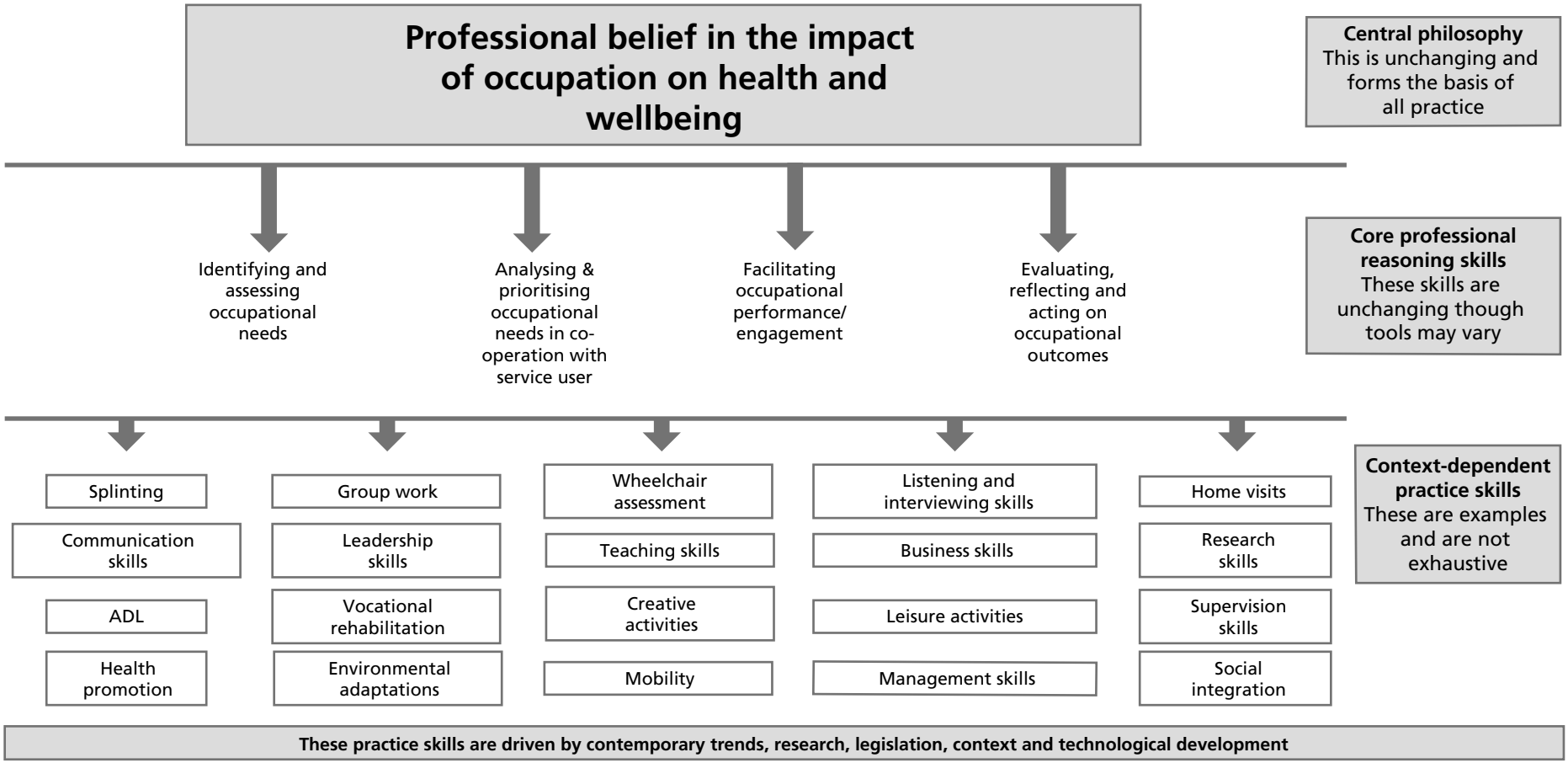


Figure 1 Relationship between knowledge and core skills (taken from COT 2014a, p5).

Table 1 Mapping entry level occupational therapy knowledge to contextual elements of the core OT process

	Identifying and assessing occupational needs	**Analysing and prioritising occupational needs in co-operation with service user**	**Facilitating occupational performance/ engagement**	**Evaluating, reflecting and acting on occupational outcomes**
Education and Learning standards	Identify occupational needs, make informed judgements supported by professional reasoning and application of theory.	Work in partnership identifying relevant occupations to promote participation, health and wellbeing.	Implement occupational therapy strategies to address occupational needs.	Critically appraise practice and occupational therapy service delivery.
OT defined as a complex intervention	Information-gathering to establish factors impacting on service user's functional ability, occupational performance and health. Commencement of therapeutic relationship.	Organisation of assessment information and negotiation of goals and problems with service user, prioritising those aimed at addressing most important aspect.	Action plan to shape interventions; activities are analysed, selected, adapted, graded and sequenced to achieve therapeutic goals.	Outcomes measured by change in service user's social, psychological, emotional and cultural needs in relation to occupational performance. Review and evaluation of OT process.
SNOMED CT subset	Main published assessment tools used by occupational therapists https://www.cot.co.uk/ehealth-information-management/ot-subset-assessment-tools	Occupational therapy problems (functional observables) https://www.cot.co.uk/ehealth-information-management/ot-subset-problems Goals of occupational therapy intervention https://www.cot.co.uk/ehealth-information-management/ot-subset-goals	Interventions recorded by occupational therapists https://www.cot.co.uk/research-development/ot-subset-interventions	Outcomes following occupational therapy interventions https://www.cot.co.uk/ehealth-information-management/ot-subset-outcomes

Identifying core practice skills of the graduating occupational therapist

Figure 1, displayed earlier, identifies the core practice skills demonstrated by graduating occupational therapists, noting that these are context-dependent and driven by external factors such as research evidence, legislation, contemporary trends in occupational therapy services and technological development. However, in 2015/6, further work was undertaken to provide a more detailed context to these practice skills, in order to more clearly evidence the skills of entry level occupational therapists and their delivery of the occupational therapy process, which could be applied to a range of settings. The following amended diagram and articulation of the attendant skills and knowledge were produced after consultation with COT professional advisors, members of the COT Learning and Development Board and members of the Council of Occupational Therapy Education Directors (COTED). The core requirement was considered to be a demonstration of the unique impact of occupational therapy by threading an occupational focus through the application of skills and knowledge. By articulating the fundamental knowledge base of the profession of occupational therapy, this publication provides a basis for demonstrating the application, benefit and impact of the professional contribution to the health and care agenda.

Figure 2 defines the revised framework for shaping and identifying the practice skills of entry level occupational therapists, developed within the structure of the *International Classification of Functioning, Disability and Health* (WHO 2001) and the COT *Learning and development standards* (COT 2014a).

The following section describes the core practice skills that are identified in Figure 2 whilst confirming that such skills may equally be transferred to other settings of occupational therapy service delivery.

Health and wellbeing

Possessing an understanding of the nature of a range of health conditions, how these interact and affect each other and their impact on occupational performance. An awareness of health promotion related to prevention and reduction of risk of secondary impairments.

- **Knowledge:** of the dynamic relationship between occupational therapy philosophy and health, social care and public health matters. Awareness of the policy contexts that shape current service delivery and prevention agendas and opportunities for occupational therapy interventions to promote wellbeing and public health awareness with service users.
- **Skills:** in being able to articulate the unique contribution of occupational therapy to health, social care and emerging settings. Able to promote health, wellbeing and self-management and, by enabling and empowering service users, to promote healthy living principles through occupational therapy interventions.

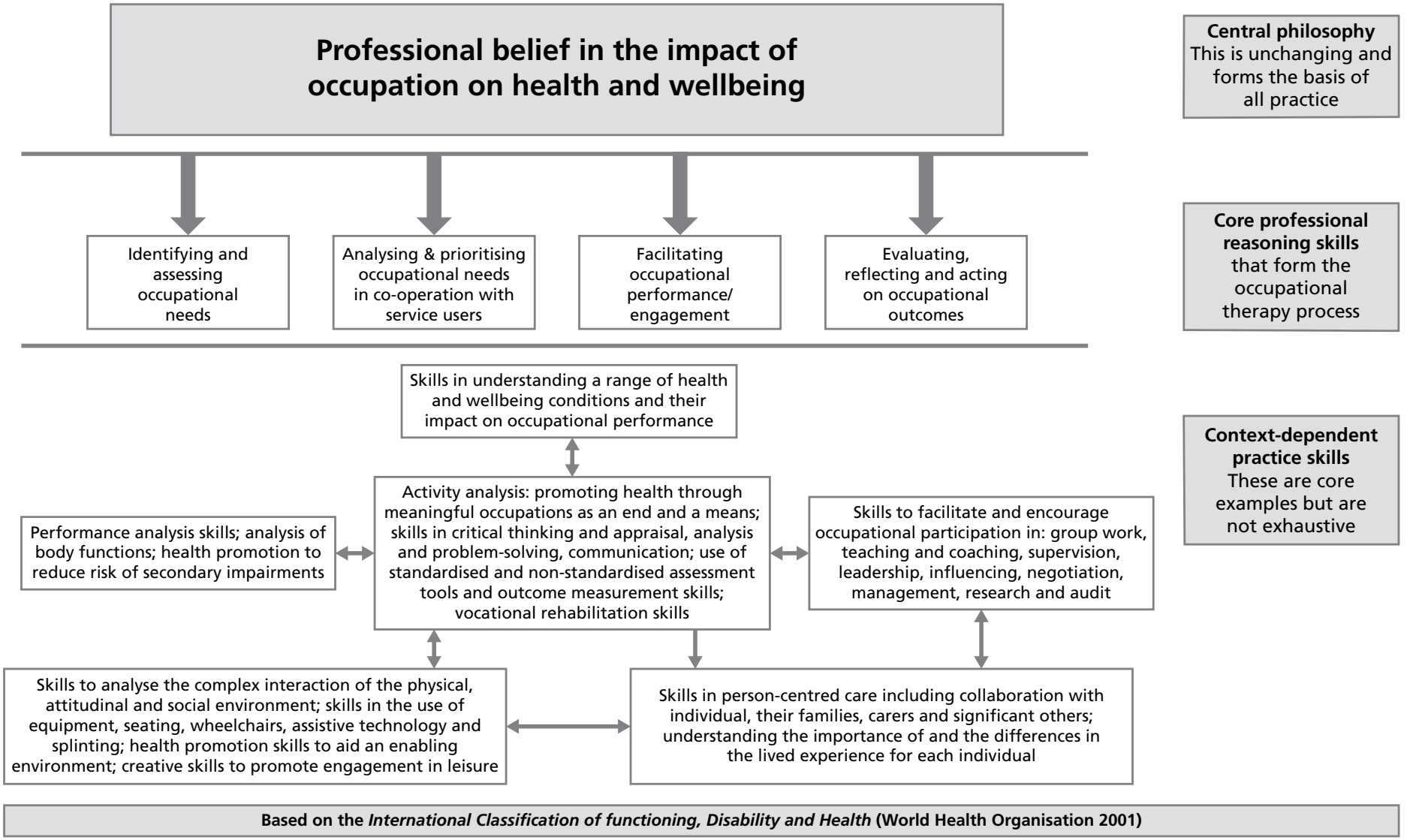


Figure 2 The practice skills of entry level occupational therapists (adapted from COT (2014a) and Turner and Alsop (2015))

Body functions and structures

Demonstration of knowledge of the body's structures and functions underpinned by analysis of occupational performance.

Analysis of body functions and structures

- **Knowledge:** of anatomy and physiology and how impairment impacts on activity and functioning.
- **Skills:** in understanding the structures and functions of the body and the impact of a range of impairments on setting and achieving a range of occupational performance goals.

Performance analysis

- **Knowledge:** of the physical and psychological components that act together to provide mind-brain-body performance, including health promotion knowledge to reduce the risk of secondary impairments.
- **Skills:** in understanding how the combination of musculoskeletal, neurological, cardiopulmonary, perceptual, cognitive and emotional components guide the body in planning, interpreting and producing actions and behaviours.

Observational skills

- **Knowledge:** of direct observational skills and their contribution to the assessment of occupational performance.
- **Skills:** in utilising direct observation as a core part of the assessment process in determining levels of disability or impairment and motor and cognitive functioning, and analysing performance in activities of daily living.

Activities

The ability to promote health through meaningful occupations as an end and a means.

Functional activity analysis

- **Knowledge:** of activities of daily living which include self-care, productivity and leisure occupations across the lifespan.
- **Skills:** to break down activities into their fundamental components, with awareness of the underpinning body structures and functions. An understanding of the connections between the person's skills, preferences and abilities, the steps, sequence and timing of the activity and the physical and social environment.

Standardised and non-standardised assessment skills

- **Knowledge:** of a range of standardised and non-standardised assessments utilised by occupational therapists.
- **Skills:** in selecting appropriate assessment measures, being able to utilise them with service users and analyse the results to inform intervention planning, progress measurement and outcomes, and their use in research and audit.

Outcome measurement skills

- **Knowledge:** of the importance of evaluating outcomes, gathering and utilising evidence to appraise and monitor the effectiveness of the intervention and service provided, and to contribute to audit, service development and research.
- **Skills:** of data management, analysis and reflection, carried out formally through use of specific measurements and informally through observation and discussion. Use of outcomes information to shape ongoing actions and interventions.

Listening and interviewing

- **Knowledge:** that listening is an active, important skill when developing rapport and gathering information to develop a service user's occupational profile.
- **Skills:** in asking open questions which enable service users to identify their occupational needs and performance issues, and to set appropriate goals. Ability to accurately record key information during interviews and ability to reflect back the service user's story, formally and informally.

Communication skills

- **Knowledge:** of a range of communication mechanisms and media that support professional practice, and appropriate application.
- **Skills:** in therapeutic use of self and the ability to develop effective, empathetic therapeutic relationships; advocacy skills; facilitation of group/team work; informatics, analytics and technology that support professional practice. An awareness of how recorded information can be used to support service evaluation, clinical audit and research.

Documentation skills

- **Knowledge:** of the need to accurately record interventions and other service requirements using a range of media, with an understanding of record keeping and clinical terminology within the nationally agreed record headings for integrated digital care records.
- **Skills:** in accurately recording all aspects of the occupational therapy process, including use of standardised/non-standardised assessment formats and with cognisance of departmental procedures and the professional and regulatory standards that apply.

Clinical reasoning skills

- **Knowledge:** of the need for connected and logical thought processes throughout the intervention, and the range of complex thinking skills that underpin professional practice.
- **Skills:** in advanced critical thinking, critical appraisal and analysis, and problem-solving skills.

Participation

An understanding of occupational performance and participation across the lifespan including the impact of occupational disruption and life events on the individual's performance and participation.

Group/team work skills

- **Knowledge:** of group dynamics and their influence in a range of settings, different types of groups and their application in practice situations. An understanding of the complexity of the group setting in contributing to individual occupational performance goals.
- **Skills:** in being able to create a suitable therapeutic environment for the group. An ability to set clear boundaries within the group setting and utilisation of a variety of approaches to groupwork.

Vocational rehabilitation skills

- **Knowledge:** of biopsychosocial sciences, current key policies and legislation influencing the work and employability environment and the implications of a range of conditions and impairments that impact on an individual's occupational performance and ability to remain in, or return to, work.
- **Skills:** in analysing activities and the use of graded occupations in return-to-work settings.

Teaching and coaching skills

- **Knowledge:** of how to create learning opportunities during interventions with service users and their carers, understanding the importance of giving measured feedback and encouragement to the service user to support performance improvement. An awareness of reducing feedback as the service user progresses to allow maximum opportunity for learning to become embedded.
- **Skills:** in teaching new competences, strategies, perspectives and outlooks as part of a whole task; awareness of own skills and the potential to provide early-stage mentoring to others.

Supervision skills

- **Knowledge:** of the purpose of professional supervision, its role in developing a culture of lifelong learning and understanding that good quality supervision can impact positively on service user care.
- **Skills:** in preparing for supervision and developing clear expectations around anticipated outcomes from the perspective of the supervisor and supervisee. Being active in participation in preparing for and undertaking supervision sessions.

Business skills

- **Knowledge:** an entrepreneurial attitude with an understanding of business models and customer needs. An awareness of the key drivers that impact on occupational therapy services (such as an ageing population, financial flows, policy directives).
- **Skills:** ability to recognise and adapt to future changes, challenges and opportunities as driven by policy, data and population need.

Leadership skills

- **Knowledge**: of the principles of leadership, the need to work across conventional boundaries and demonstrate where occupational therapy adds value.

- **Skills**: in articulating the unique contribution of occupational therapy in a range of settings, being able to act as an ambassador for the profession and responding positively to challenges and opportunities for change. Ability to provide a profession-specific contribution as part of a team whilst demonstrating skills in both influencing and leading others.

Management skills

- **Knowledge:** Understanding of the principles of good service and staff management, being able to recognise and respond to the business needs of occupational therapy services whilst fostering multi-professional interactions.
- **Skills:** The ability to manage self and others confidently in both planned and uncertain situations at team/department level, being able to articulate the economic benefits of the service and demonstrating good project management skills.

Research and audit skills

- **Knowledge:** of a range of research methods including their relevant application to research or audit questions and analysis of the quantitative and qualitative data collected. An understanding of research governance and ethics procedures that impact on occupational therapy research, and the importance of contributing to the profession's evidence-base to support practice.
- **Skills:** in identifying gaps in current evidence through undertaking literature searching and critical appraisal of research outputs. The ability to collect data and synthesise information gained from quantitative and qualitative research methods and apply it to practice settings, and the ability to participate in research led by others and contribute to the dissemination process.

Environmental factors

An understanding of the complex interactions that exist between physical, social, attitudinal, political and economic environments and their impact on occupational performance and participation.

Environmental analysis skills including home visits

- **Knowledge:** of how the environment impacts on health, wellbeing and occupational performance. An awareness of the principles of inclusive design and the need to adjust or adapt the environment to meet needs of the individual.
- **Skills:** in understanding the social model of disability, in analysing the physical environment, recommending basic environmental modifications that will facilitate occupational engagement and health promotion and an understanding of the relevant legislation.

Equipment, adaptive seating and wheelchair skills

- **Knowledge:** familiarity with a range of equipment, assistive technology, assessment principles and prescription, and health and safety legislation to facilitate achieving occupational performance goals for the service user and carer. Possessing and applying an understanding of the principles of self-directed and personalised care.

- **Skills:** in assessment for equipment, selecting appropriate products, with awareness of assessment principles, utilisation and contraindications. Ability to educate service users/carers in safe use whilst understanding the principles of moving and handling legislation, risk assessment, consent and mental capacity.

Splinting

- **Knowledge:** of anatomy, physiology and biomechanics, implications of a range of conditions on upper limb function and the user's occupational performance. An awareness of the principles of basic splinting and their application and of products and properties of materials.
- **Skills:** in undertaking basic skill splinting design and manufacture, educating the service user in correct techniques for use and potential contraindications.

Creativity skills

- **Knowledge:** of the value of creative activity, how this can be developed as a framework for therapeutic interventions and the range of media that can be utilised in occupational therapy settings.
- **Skills**: in identifying and using a range of creative activities and in creating a therapeutic environment to facilitate the service user's self-expression and purposeful engagement with recreation and leisure activities.

Personal factors

Possessing an understanding of the lived experience of each individual.

- **Knowledge:** of the complexities of society, the communities and cultures in which individuals live and engage. Understanding and working with the importance of and the differences in the lived experience for each individual.
- **Skills**: in person-centred, collaborative practice.

The knowledge and skills possessed by entry level graduates will be shaped by the core practice skills listed above, but this list is not exhaustive and many skills will be transferable from one occupational therapy setting to others. By identifying the range of attributes of occupational therapy graduates, education providers will be able to develop their unique programmes that can demonstrate the core values and beliefs of the profession whilst remaining responsive to local and national drivers. Furthermore, employers and potential employers will be able to understand the discrete contribution an occupational therapist will bring to the workplace and to facilitating health, wellbeing and the prevention agenda through enhancing the occupational performance of service users across a broad range of sectors.

The College of Occupational Therapists recommends the adoption of the model at Figure 3 in order to engage the relevant stakeholders in contributing to the development of individual programmes and in line with the requirements of the *College of Occupational Therapists learning and development standards for pre-registration education* (COT 2014a).

Through articulating the knowledge-base and practice skills demonstrated by new graduates, the elements that comprise the graduate competencies stated in the *College of Occupational Therapists Learning and Development Standards for pre-registration education* (COT 2014a) can be clearly identified by education and practice settings, the commissioners of current and future occupational therapy services, and by the new graduates who will be stepping forwards confidently and as autonomously practicing occupational therapists into their professional lives.

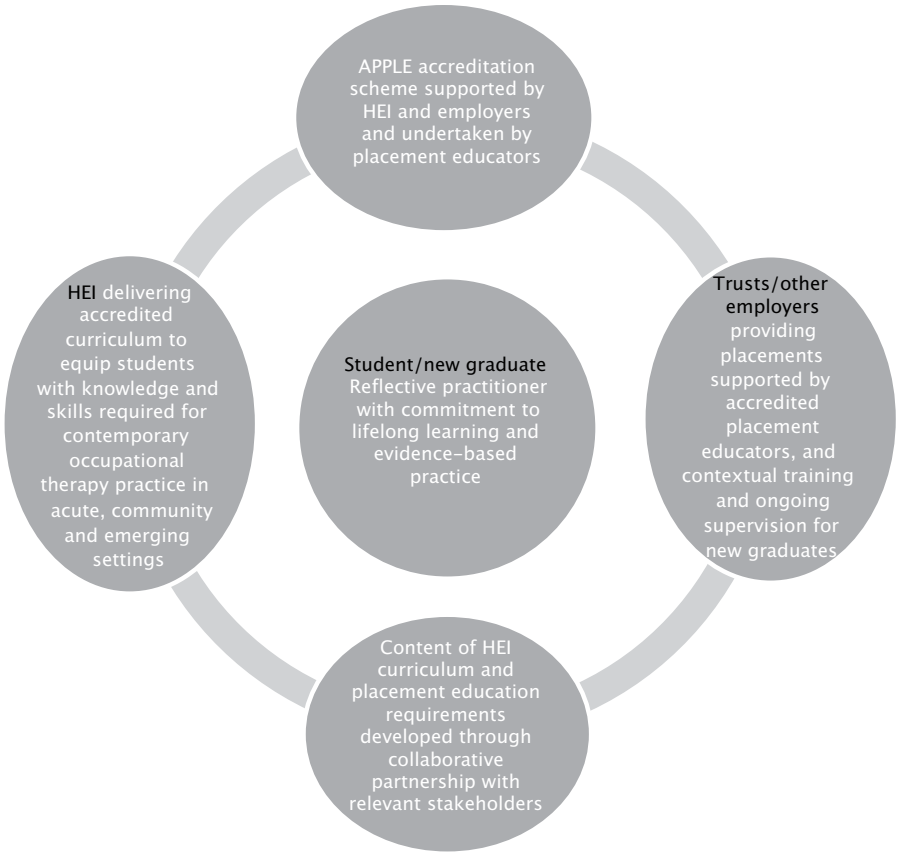


Figure 3 Education framework to develop graduate occupational therapy competencies

Other useful resources

As the professional body, it is the College's responsibility to support its members with their continued registration with the Health and Care Professions Council (HCPC). The College's *Code of ethics and professional conduct* (COT 2015) is produced to promote and maintain good and safe professional behaviour and practice in occupational therapy. It describes a set of values and principles that the College expects its members to abide by and follow. Produced in conjunction with the current version of the *Professional standards for occupational therapy practice* (COT 2011) , the purpose of the Code is to ensure that occupational therapists meet the requirements to remain registered with the HCPC.

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This publication builds on information from the College of Occupational Therapist's *Learning and development standards for pre-registration education* (2014), offering a more detailed analysis of the skills of the occupational therapy graduate and their delivery of the occupational therapy process, including:

- A revised framework, developed within the structure of the *International classification of functioning, disability and health* (WHO 2001)
- Description of the core knowledge and practice skills that can be expected of graduating occupational therapists
- A diagrammatic education framework to develop graduate occupational therapy competencies.

This information will be of particular interest and benefit to pre-registration occupational therapy education providers, service managers and commissioners/potential commissioners of occupational therapy services and occupational therapists.

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