

Since the 1960s, there has been substantial research outside the United Kingdom (UK) on recruitment to occupational therapy education. Recent UK studies have explored the characteristics of mature students (Craik and Alderman 1998), first-year students (Craik et al 2001) and students with a first degree (Craik and Naphthine 2001). Based on these studies, a semi-structured, self-report, postal questionnaire gathered data from 50 students who entered the BSc(Hons) Occupational Therapy course at Brunel University, London, via the Universities and Colleges Admissions Service for the UK (UCAS) clearing system.

The students tended to be younger and were more likely to be female and Caucasian and to have similar or higher academic qualifications than standard-entry students at the same university. The majority first became aware of occupational therapy through previous work in a health care setting, although some did so while researching allied health professions. Although one-third originally had physiotherapy as their first career choice, 92% now considered that occupational therapy was what they wanted to do. The principal reason for applying through the clearing system was timing, with some applicants deciding late in the academic year to study occupational therapy. These findings add further weight to the need to promote the profession.

Characteristics of Students who enter Occupational Therapy Education through the Universities and Colleges Admissions Service (UCAS) Clearing System

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Introduction

In a series of reports since 2000, the National Health Service (NHS) in the United Kingdom (UK) confirmed a major expansion in the number of doctors, nurses and other health care professionals to be educated (Department of Health [DH] 2000a, 2000b, 2002). This increase in numbers included occupational therapists and augmented the more modest growth in the number of education places available in the UK noted over previous years (College of Occupational Therapists [COT] 1998, 1999, 2000, 2001). Unfortunately, this increase occurred at a time when there was a decrease in the number of applications to the profession (Craik et al 2001).

Craik et al (2001) noted that little of the research into recruitment to occupational therapy education since the 1960s had taken place in the UK. In summarising the literature, they identified that the principal features attracting applicants to the profession were working with people, especially people with disabilities, and aspects of the profession, such as interest, challenge and variety. In more recent studies, material factors such as salary and job availability began to feature more. These features might be

similar to those that attracted recruits to other health professions. However, most studies seemed to have assumed that students applied to occupational therapy alone and had made that decision before the age of 20 years. For example, in a national survey of occupational therapy students in the USA which encompassed 60 professional occupational therapy programmes, Wyrick and Stern (1987) obtained results from 1337 students. Of these, 55.5% had decided on a career in occupational therapy by the age of 19 years and 58.7% had applied to an occupational therapy course by the age of 22 years.

There is limited reference in the literature to applicants to occupational therapy education having considered other professions. Madill et al (1989) compared 114 occupational therapy, 46 physical therapy and 89 speech therapy students in Canada and found some similarities in their values before commencing their course. Although they were all consistently people orientated, the occupational therapy students placed greater importance than others on creativity and variety. The occupational therapy and physiotherapy students reported that they had considered medically related careers while the speech therapy students had more often considered education-related courses.

Cooperstein and Schwartz (1992) surveyed 350 recent occupational therapy graduates across the USA and 272 replied, representing a 63% response rate. Only 7/272 (2.6%) respondents had heard of occupational therapy before the age of 14 years; the authors contrasted this with studies of high school students' perceptions of nursing and physiotherapy which suggested that most had heard of these professions by a similar age. The two most influential reasons for not choosing occupational therapy as a career were the expense of education and not understanding what occupational therapy was.

Dudgeon and Cunningham (1992) surveyed students from three Northwest schools in the USA using a questionnaire that probed for sources of exposure to occupational therapy and achieved a high response rate of 135/163 (82.8%). Only 22% of the respondents had expressed an initial interest in occupational therapy alone, approximately 70% had considered a career in physiotherapy and 27% had applied to a programme other than occupational therapy, most frequently physiotherapy or nursing. Rozier et al (1992), in a survey of 403 first-year students at four randomly selected occupational therapy education programmes in the USA, obtained a 54% response rate. They noted that the students had chosen occupational therapy in preference to other caring professions because of job availability, salary, regular hours and prestige.

Fleming et al (1997) surveyed 86 students on the first day of the occupational therapy course at the University of Queensland in 1994 and obtained a high response rate of 83/86 (97%). They discovered that 14% of the students decided to study occupational therapy after failing to gain entry to another course. Esdaile et al (1997) explored the career choice of occupational therapy students at La Trobe University, Australia, in 1993 and 1994 and compared the data with previous studies of Canadian occupational therapy students. Of the students in the 1993 Australian cohort who stated a first career choice, 51/80 (63.75%) had chosen occupational therapy; however, 21/80 (26.25%) had preferred physiotherapy and the remaining 8 (10%) had preferred medicine or another career as their first choice. Similarly, in the 1994 cohort, 40/70 (57.14%) students had occupational therapy and 30/70 (42.86%) had physiotherapy as their first career choice. By their final year, 14 of the occupational therapy students who had initially preferred physiotherapy had changed their preference to occupational therapy. However, 'another larger sub-group of 24 students stated that they still preferred physical therapy for a career' (Esdaile et al 1997, p261).

In the UK, Craik and Alderman (1998) studied 37 mature students over the age of 30 and noted an average time of 7 years between students first considering occupational therapy as a career and beginning the course. Almost a third of the students stated that they were not aware of the profession when they were at school. In a later study of 330 first-year

occupational therapy students, Craik et al (2001) noted that although work in a health care setting was the most common method through which students discovered the profession, 39/330 (11.8%) first heard about occupational therapy while researching allied health professions. Students under 20 years of age were significantly more likely than their older colleagues to have discovered the profession through this method ($\chi^2 = 11.86$, $df = 2$, $p = 0.003$). In a study of 64 occupational therapy students already holding a degree, Craik and Naphthine (2001) noted that when applying to their previous degree, two-thirds of the students had not been aware of occupational therapy.

In summary, occupational therapy is not as well known to potential applicants as other professions, thus restricting their ability to make informed career choices (Cooperstein and Schwartz 1992, Craik and Alderman 1998, Craik and Naphthine 2001). Some studies indicated that students on occupational therapy courses may have first considered alternative careers, usually physiotherapy (Madill et al 1989, Dudgeon and Cunningham 1992, Fleming et al 1997, Craik et al 2001). Of more concern is the study by Esdaile et al (1997), which demonstrated that at the end of their occupational therapy course some students, perhaps a third, still preferred physiotherapy as a career.

In the UK, applicants to full-time first-degree occupational therapy courses apply through the Universities and Colleges Admissions Service for the UK (UCAS), currently by January of each year for entry in the autumn of that year. UCAS is the central organisation in the UK for processing applications to all first degrees and it aims to provide services and information to everyone interested in access to higher education (UCAS 2002a). As part of this service, UCAS organises a clearing system each August to enable people without a university place to find suitable vacancies (UCAS 2002b). It coordinates a matching process, whereby potential applicants who have not been successful in their first round of applications or have applied late can be linked with universities that have not filled all their places.

Applicants who come through the clearing system may constitute a separate group from standard applicants and may be less likely to have occupational therapy as their first career choice. Therefore, to complement previous studies of occupational therapy students' reasons for choosing their career, this study focused on those who had entered Brunel University through the clearing system.

Aims of the research

The aims of the research were to establish the characteristics of occupational therapy students who entered Brunel University through the clearing system and to explore what influenced their decision and motivation to study occupational therapy.

Method

Participants

The participant pool was all the full-time students enrolled on all 3 years of the BSc(Hons) Occupational Therapy course at Brunel University in the academic year 2000/2001, who had entered via the UCAS clearing system and remained on the course. Ninety-five of the total number of 298 students (31.9%) had entered through the clearing system. Of these, 92/95 (96.8%) remained on the course, one of whom (TW-R) as the second author was excluded from the study.

Data collection

A semi-structured, self-report, postal questionnaire was employed to obtain the views of the students. It was based on a design first used by Craik and Alderman (1998) in their study of mature students and later amended by Craik and Napthine (2001) for their study of students with a first degree. Following approval from the Brunel University Ethics Committee, the questionnaire was piloted on five students in their third year in 2000/2001 who had not entered the course via the clearing system, thus preserving the maximum number of students, and some minor amendments were made.

The final questionnaire was distributed through the university mailing system to 91 students. A covering letter provided an explanation of why the students had been chosen and the purpose of the study and assured anonymity and confidentiality. The results were analysed using Excel and content analysis.

Results

Response rate

Fifty-two of the 91 questionnaires were returned, representing an initial response rate of 57.1%. The breakdown by cohort according to year of entry is displayed in Table 1. Of the 52 questionnaires returned, 2 were incomplete and were therefore omitted from the data analysis. Thus, the total number analysed was 50, giving a final response rate of 54.9%.

Table 1. Response rate of 91 full-time students who entered the BSc(Hons) Occupational Therapy course through the clearing system

Cohort	N			%
	Original	At survey	Actual	
1998	28	26	18	69.2
1999	31	29	14	48.3
2000	36	36	20	55.6
Total	95	91	52	57.1

Demographic information

The majority of the students were Caucasian females. Two students were male and 48/50 (96%) were female. Two students were of African origin, one was of Asian origin and 47/50 (94%) were Caucasian.

Age of students

The students stated their current age-group as indicated in Table 2. The largest group of students was under 21 years of age and 41/50 (82%) students were under 30 years of age. The students in cohort 2000 were in their first year. Those in cohort 1998 were in their third year and those in cohort 1999 were in their second year; they would have been respectively 2 years and 1 year younger when they began their degree. Thus, the age distribution at entry to the course would have been younger than that indicated by these figures.

Table 2. Age distribution of 50 full-time students who entered the BSc(Hons) Occupational Therapy course through the clearing system

Cohort	Age (years)									
	18-21		22-30		31-40		41-50		Total	
	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%
1998	5	29.4	7	41.2	4	23.5	1	5.9	17	100
1999	8	61.5	4	30.8	1	7.7	0	0.0	13	100
2000	9	45.0	8	40.0	1	5.0	2	10.0	20	100
Total	22	44.0	19	38.0	6	12.0	3	6.0	50	100

Age and years since considering occupational therapy as a career

The students indicated how many years ago they had first considered occupational therapy as a career. Forty-one (82%) students stated that they had first considered occupational therapy between 1 and 5 years ago. Six had considered it between 6 and 10 years ago, two between 11 and 15 years ago and one between 16 and 20 years ago.

The students also reported their age at the time of deciding to study occupational therapy, with the results depicted in Table 3. Twenty-eight (56%) of the students were under 21 years of age when they decided to study occupational therapy.

Table 3. Age at time of deciding to study occupational therapy of 50 full-time students who entered the BSc(Hons) Occupational Therapy course through the clearing system

Age (years)	N	%
13-18	17	34
19-21	11	22
22-30	18	36
31-40	1	2
41-50	3	6
50+	0	0
Total	50	100

Entry requirements

The students indicated their highest level of academic achievement before enrolling at Brunel University. These results can be seen in Table 4, where the largest group of 22 (44%) had achieved A-levels followed by 17 (34%) who had a first degree.

Table 4. Level of prior academic achievement of 50 full-time students who entered the BSc(Hons) Occupational Therapy course through the clearing system

Level	N	%
MSc/MA	0	0
BSc/BA	17	34
A-levels	22	44
Access course	3	6
BTech	4	8
City and Guilds	2	4
Other	2	4
Total	50	100

Method of first hearing about occupational therapy

From a list of 18 items, the students selected the method through which they first became aware of occupational therapy. The results are presented in rank order in Table 5. The most frequently cited method was working in a health care setting, followed by while researching allied health professions. The 'other' methods included 'whilst working in housing and social services' and 'meeting an occupational therapist whilst working on psychology work placement'.

Table 5. Method of first hearing about occupational therapy of 50 full-time students who entered the BSc(Hons) Occupational Therapy course through the clearing system

Method	N	%
Work in a health care setting	12	24
While researching allied health professions	7	14
OT or OT student, family member or friend	6	12
Yourself or someone you know has received OT	5	10
College adviser	5	10
Non-OT family member or friend	3	6
School careers adviser or teacher	3	6
Other	3	6
Employers' career fair	2	4
Literature from school	1	2
Other periodical, newspaper, magazine	1	2
Visit to hospital or clinic	1	2
College/university careers fair/open day	1	2
Guest speaker in class or club	0	0
OT journal, OT News	0	0
Radio	0	0
Television	0	0
Vocational test	0	0
Total	50	100

Choice of career and university

From 11 options, the students selected their main reason for choosing a career in occupational therapy. These are displayed in Table 6 in rank order. The most frequently noted reason was to help others, followed by failure to gain admission to a course of their first choice. The three 'other' reasons were 'interested in the holistic

Table 6. Main reason for choosing a career in occupational therapy of 50 full-time students who entered the BSc(Hons) Occupational Therapy course through the clearing system

Reason	N	%
To help others	18	36
Failure to gain admission to course of first choice	11	22
An interest in people	6	12
Desire for a professional career	5	10
Other	3	6
Interest in the study of disease or disability	2	4
Community/volunteer work	2	4
Career prospects	1	2
Job availability	1	2
Interest in being of service to the community	1	2
Parents	0	0
Total	50	100

approach', 'family interest' and 'was not original choice as career, still isn't'.

Next, from a choice of 12 options, the students indicated their main reason for applying to Brunel University. The results are displayed in Table 7 in rank order. The most frequently cited reason was that of having applied late. Of the six students who noted 'other', two referred to the clearing system option and the others stated 'it felt like the right decision', 'wanted to do something in health care', 'easy to travel home during breaks' and 'visited open day, staff friendly'.

Table 7. Reason for applying to Brunel University of 50 full-time students who entered the BSc(Hons) Occupational Therapy course through the clearing system

Reason	N	%
Applied late	13	26
Close to home	10	20
Reputation	7	14
Other	6	12
Only 3-year OT course in London	5	10
Easier entry requirements	3	6
Course content	2	4
Recommendation	2	4
Colleague already applied there	1	2
Accommodation near campus	1	2
Child care facilities	0	0
Increase options alongside other applications	0	0
Total	50	100

For 37/50 students (74%) Brunel was their first choice of university, for 11/50 (22%) it was their second choice, for one student it was third choice and for one student it was fourth choice. For 33/50 students (66%), occupational therapy was their first career choice. Sixteen (32%) students had occupational therapy as their second choice, with all but one noting physiotherapy as their first choice. Their reasons for preferring physiotherapy were summarised as something that they had been interested in since a young age, the profession was well known or that they had previous

experience. The remaining respondent with occupational therapy as second choice had had social work as first choice and the final respondent who had occupational therapy as third choice had preferred medicine.

Next, the students indicated if they generally considered that occupational therapy was still what they wanted to do. For 46 (92%) students it was still what they wanted to do, but for three students it was no longer what they wanted to do: one because of a wish to do physiotherapy, one because occupational therapy was not physical enough and one who had worked in care for many years and was 'burnt out' but was interested in health research. The final respondent was still unsure about occupational therapy.

Reasons for applying through the clearing system

The students were asked to comment on why they had entered the course via the clearing system. Two students did not comment. The main reason for applying through the clearing system was timing, often because the students had only recently decided to study occupational therapy: 'I was encouraged to apply through clearing by friends. I was originally going to apply for next year' and 'I hadn't decided that I wanted to apply until July and therefore had to go through clearing'. The next group had occupational therapy as second choice: 'Originally applied for physiotherapy, but did not gain a place on the course, so applied to Brunel University as an alternative.' For other students, it was a sudden decision, they were not offered a place at their first choice of university or Brunel University offered them a place.

Discussion

Comparing the demographic profile of these students who entered through the clearing system with that of students from previous studies carried out at Brunel University revealed several differences. First, these students were younger, with 44% being between 18 and 21 years of age when the study was carried out, although as noted above this is an underestimate because more students would have been in this age-group when they commenced the degree. In the study by Craik et al (2001) of 330 first-year students at the same university, 30.3% were 20 years or younger. In the present study, the students were mainly female (96%) and Caucasian (94%). While this reflects the general trend in occupational therapy, it contrasts with the Craik et al (2001) study where 90.6% were female and 86.6% were white European.

Over 80% of the students had first considered occupational therapy as a career between 1 and 5 years ago and just over half had decided to study occupational therapy by the age of 21 years, similar to the figure noted by Wyrick and Stern (1987) but in contrast to the very small proportion of students in Cooperstein and Schwartz (1992) who had heard of the profession before the age of 14 years.

The largest group of students (44%) had achieved the A-level academic standard prior to the course, followed by

34% having achieved a BSc/BA. The percentage of students holding a first degree was similar to the 32.4% of the mature students in Craik and Alderman's (1998) study but higher than the 27.2% of the total student group noted by Craik and Naphthine (2001) in their study of students with a first degree, suggesting that this group had similar or higher academic qualifications before commencing their occupational therapy degree.

The most frequently reported method by which the students first became aware of occupational therapy was through their previous work in a health care setting, which was consistent with the results of Cooperstein and Schwartz (1992), Dudgeon and Cunningham (1992), Craik and Naphthine (2001) and Craik et al (2001). However, the second most frequently reported method (14%) was while researching allied health professions, which was higher than the 11.8% reported by Craik et al (2001) although they noted that this method was reported more by younger students. Few students had received specific advice from a careers adviser or other formal source, supporting the other studies which suggest that occupational therapy students become aware of the profession through informal means (Craik and Naphthine 2001, Craik et al 2001).

The students who entered through the clearing system reported that helping others was their main reason for choosing a career in occupational therapy, reinforcing the results of other studies reported by Craik et al (2001) in their summary of the literature. Second in rank order of reasons for studying occupational therapy, reported by 22% of the students, was the failure to gain admission to their first choice of course, a figure similar to the 27% reported by Cooperstein and Schwartz (1992).

The two principal reasons for applying to Brunel University, noted by 46% of the students, were pragmatic: students had applied late and the university was close to home. However, the reputation of the university was the third in rank order of the reasons identified and three-quarters of the students had applied to Brunel University as their first choice.

Two-thirds of the students had occupational therapy as their first career choice. For those who had it as their second choice, all but one had physiotherapy as their first choice. This reflects Fleming et al (1992), who found that 14% of their students decided to undertake occupational therapy after failing to gain entry to another course. It also echoes Esdaile et al (1997), who found that just under half of their Australian respondents had stated that they initially wanted to do physical therapy instead of occupational therapy, but that by the end of their fourth year the majority wanted to continue with occupational therapy. Similarly, in this study 92% of the students reported that occupational therapy was still what they wanted to do. Three of the four students who stated that occupational therapy was not what they wanted to do were ambivalent, rather than negative, about the profession.

This study reinforces the need to promote the profession to a wide range of people who, once they are aware of its unique characteristics, become convinced of its value. This

supports the findings of Craik et al (2001), who suggested that the high numbers of mature students in the profession, while commendable, may be a result of the low profile of occupational therapy, with potential recruits only hearing of it later in life and perhaps after completing another degree (Craik and Naphthine 2001).

Limitations of the study

The response rate at 54.9%, although similar to that of Rozier et al (1992), was lower than that in more recent UK studies. Craik and Alderman's (1998) study of mature students achieved a 77% response rate while Craik and Naphthine's (2001) study of students with a first degree achieved a 78% response rate. The larger study of 330 first-year students by Craik et al (2001) achieved an overall response rate of 75%. It is possible that the students in this study who did not respond were reluctant to acknowledge that they had entered the course via the clearing system or were unwilling to answer questions about their motivation if occupational therapy or Brunel University had not been their first choice and perhaps remained so. Therefore, applying these findings to other populations must be approached with caution.

Considering the first, second and third year students together gave a larger group to study but may have concealed differences between them; for example, those in the second and third years may have had limited recall of the original reason for choosing occupational therapy or this may have been altered owing to impressions formed during the course. The study was conducted at one large occupational therapy course in London which may not be typical; nevertheless, in the absence of other information about this group of occupational therapy students, the findings give some indication of their characteristics and motivation.

Conclusion and recommendations

It has traditionally been assumed that those people who apply to occupational therapy education will have chosen it in preference to other professions. Indeed, selection for some occupational therapy courses may be positively influenced towards those applicants who apply only to occupational therapy. With the increase in the number of recruits required for occupational therapy coupled with the decrease in the actual number of applicants, this view must be challenged if the profession is to meet NHS targets.

Those educators responsible for admissions to occupational therapy courses should be more flexible in considering both the candidates who apply late and those who have also applied to professions other than occupational therapy. Educators both in universities and on fieldwork may have to be more active in reinforcing the career choice of students once they embark on their occupational therapy education. Occupational therapy

practitioners in health and social care are in the unique position of having access to large numbers of potential recruits to the profession. Stakeholders with an interest in promoting the profession should consider how that opportunity could be enhanced.

This study suggests that some students entering occupational therapy education through the UCAS clearing system may have discovered the profession while researching other health professions, while others may have originally preferred another profession, usually physiotherapy; however, over 90% are now content with their choice of profession. More research into this group of recruits is required to explore their career choice in greater depth. Comparing the students who entered through the clearing system with other groups of students suggests that they may be younger and are more likely to be female and Caucasian; their academic qualifications are similar but the percentage of those holding a first degree is higher. Further study is required to establish if these findings are similar in other cohorts at Brunel University and at other universities.

The clear message from this and previous studies is that the profile of the profession must be raised to enable potential recruits to make informed and timely decisions about their career choice. In particular, ensuring that occupational therapy is promoted alongside other, more well known, professions may prove beneficial. This has never been more important if the profession is to meet the challenge of increasing the number of recruits to occupational therapy.

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