

OT students' first year experience

Title

The first year experience of occupational therapy students at an Australian regional
University: Promoting student retention and developing a regional and remote workforce

Short Running Title

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Abstract

Objective: Student retention at regional universities is important in addressing regional and remote workforce shortages. Students attending regional universities are more likely to work in regional areas. First year experience at university plays a key role in student retention. This study aimed to explore factors influencing the first year experience of occupational therapy students at a regional Australian university.

Design: Surveys were administered to 58 second year occupational therapy students in the first week of second year. Data were analysed using descriptive statistics, inferential statistics (Pearson χ^2 ; Spearman Rho) and summarising descriptive responses.

Setting: An Australian regional university

Participants: Second year undergraduate occupational therapy students

Main outcome measures: Factors influencing students' decisions to study and continue studying occupational therapy; Factors enhancing first year experience of university

Results: Fifty-four students completed the survey (93.1%). A quarter (25.9%) of students considered leaving the course during the first year. The primary influence for continuing was the teaching and learning experience. Most valued supports were orientation week (36.7%) and the first year coordinator (36.7%).

Conclusion: The importance of the first year experience in retaining occupational therapy students is highlighted. [Engagement with other students and staff and academic support are important factors in facilitating student retention.](#) It is important to understand the unique factors influencing students' decisions, particularly those from regional and remote areas, to enter and continue in tertiary education to assist in implementing supports and strategies to improve student retention.

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Key Words: first year experience, regional university, student retention, occupational therapy, regional and remote practice

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What is already know on this Subject

- First year experience at university can influence student retention
- Students from regional and remote areas can assist in building and sustaining the regional and remote workforce

What does this study add?

- This research identifies a number of key factors influencing first year experience and decisions to continue studies for occupational therapy students in a regional university
- Further research into specific supports and strategies to promote student retention, particularly of students from regional and remote areas, is required

Introduction

Each year many people transition into tertiary education with most students entering straight from secondary schooling. Students' first year experience (FYE) of university can impact on their ongoing education and career direction and in turn impact on the development of a profession such as occupational therapy. Research on the FYE at university provides information about students' academic and social experiences, and can assist in the improvement of educational outcomes.¹ Understanding FYE provides insight into student retention as it plays a key role in a student's decision to continue or leave university.²

One fifth of first year Australian students leave university.³ Influencing factors include difficulties with travel, family commitments, paid work commitments, finding employment, fear of failure and physical health.¹

~~Underrepresented groups within higher education are Indigenous, low socioeconomic and regional and remote.⁴ The Australian Government higher education reform supports the attraction of people from different backgrounds to university education. The reform aims to increase the numbers of students from low socioeconomic communities and the number of 25 to 34 year olds obtaining a higher education degree by 2020.^{4,5}~~

Student retention rates directly impact Federal Government funding Australian universities receive, placing increased pressure on universities to improve student retention rates; a challenge that is particularly complex at regional universities.⁴ Regional universities are often smaller, geographically isolated and face additional costs in providing education services.⁵ Low socioeconomic and Indigenous students are more likely to be from rural areas¹ which are underrepresented groups within higher education⁵ and a target group of regional universities.⁶ The Australian Government higher education reform aims to increase the number of university students from low socioeconomic communities.^{5,7} Therefore, students'

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FYE at regional universities is important, particularly as it can have workforce implications in regional and remote areas.⁷

Challenges associated with recruitment and retention of occupational therapists in regional and remote Australia have long been recognised.^{8,9,10,11} Reasons occupational therapy graduates work in regional and remote locations include: an interest in the type of position (not location); the diversity offered by the position; having previously lived or worked in a regional and remote area; and having friends and family in the regional and remote location.¹² Conversely, both personal and professional reasons have been posited for wanting to live in metropolitan areas including: moving because of a partner; wanting to be closer to family; and accessing professional development, collegial support and supervision.¹⁰

This study is based on an undergraduate occupational therapy course at an Australian regional university. A unique focus of this course is preparing students to work in Indigenous and regional and remote communities. The course is offered via internal and flexible delivery modes in which studies during first year can be completed mainly online with minimal on campus commitments. A curriculum review commenced in 2009 with the first year of the revised curriculum implemented in 2012.

A large amount of research exists on the FYE of university students,^{1,13} however, there is a lack of research specific to first year occupational therapy students in Australia. It is important to consider the FYE of occupational therapy students in light of its significance to student retention at university to assist in the development of an occupational therapy curriculum that supports regional and remote practice. The aim of this study was to explore factors influencing the FYE of occupational therapy students at a regional Australian university following the implementation of the revised curriculum. The three broad research questions were:

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1. What are the main factors influencing students to enrol in and continue studying occupational therapy?;
2. Which support services are most valued by occupational therapy students in promoting student retention in first year?; and
3. How do occupational therapy students rank the importance of first year subjects in supporting their learning?

Methods

Participants and Procedure

Second year occupational therapy students were surveyed in February 2013. The survey was distributed to 58 students in class at the start of the second year core occupational therapy subject. Completion of the survey implied consent to participate in the study. The study was approved by (*removed for blind review*).

Instrument

A reference group of occupational therapy academic staff (including the authors) devised a survey (Appendix A) with several revisions of the survey undertaken within this group to improve clarity and ease of reading. As the content of the survey was specific to the occupational therapy curriculum at this university, no existing survey was available for use.

The survey collected information on demographics, factors influencing students' decisions to study and continue studying occupational therapy, reasons why students considered or did not consider leaving the course, supports which enhanced FYE, and perceived importance of the first year subjects to learning. A variety of question formats were used including open and closed questions, selecting one or multiple options from a list and ranking the importance of options.

Data Analysis

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Data were analysed using the Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) (version 20; SPSS Inc, Chicago, IL, USA). Descriptive statistics were calculated and percentages used to explore variables. Inferential statistics (using Pearson χ^2 ; Spearman Rho) were used to explore the main factors that influenced students' decisions to continue studying occupational therapy. Open ended responses to why students did or did not consider leaving the occupational therapy course were summarised and categorised.¹⁴ The Remoteness Areas from the Australian Statistical Geography Standard (ASGS) was used to convert home town post codes into remoteness areas.¹⁵

Results

Of the 58 second year occupational therapy students who were invited to participate, 54 (93.1%) completed the survey. Participants' demographic details are summarised in Table 1.

INSERT TABLE 1 ABOUT HERE

Students identified the main factor influencing their decision to study occupational therapy as having a long term intention of studying occupational therapy (Table 2). Students also identified the main factor which enhanced their FYE of the course as being orientation week (36.7%) and the first year coordinator (36.7%) (Table 3). Orientation week occurs the week prior to teaching commencing in semester one and two and involves both social and educational activities to assist in preparing students for university life. The first year coordinator is an academic occupational therapy staff member who provides support to first year students. Other factors identified were student mentors (second and third year occupational therapy students) who support new students during the first semester and a support service for students with a disability, injury, illness or health condition (Access Ability Services).

INSERT TABLES 2 AND 3 ABOUT HERE

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A quarter (25.9%) of students considered leaving the occupational therapy course during their first year. The most common reasons were home sickness, the perceived academic demands of the course and feeling overwhelmed. Students indicated “I was homesick and stressed myself out”; “[it] was hard”; and “[I] don’t enjoy being so far from home, friends and family”. Students who did not consider leaving the occupational therapy course (74.1%) predominantly identified course enjoyment as the main reason. Students reflected “[I] really enjoyed it and felt that this is the path I wish to take”; and “... enjoying the course and the two placements especially”.

The main factors that influenced students' decisions to continue studying occupational therapy were enjoying the learning and teaching experience (57.1%), the mid-year practice placement (24.5%), close relationships with fellow students (8.2%), the campus experience (4.1%) and the second semester community organisation practice placement (4.1%).

There was no correlation between the main influence to study occupational therapy and the main influence on the decision to continue studying occupational therapy. There was a significant relationship between having commenced or completed another tertiary course and the main decision to continue studying occupational therapy (Pearson $\chi^2 = 10.31$; $p = 0.035$). No other significant correlations were found.

The most important subject to students' learning was the first semester core occupational therapy subject: an introduction to occupation and occupational therapy (ranked by 54.7% of students as the most important subject).

Discussion

This study explored factors influencing the FYE of occupational therapy students with particular focus on the support and learning experience and its effect on student retention.

The key findings indicate that: a) the decision to stay in a course is independent from the

initial reasons to enrol, and b) providing early support is necessary to promote student retention.

Given that there was no correlation between the main factors that influence students to study occupational therapy and the main factors that influence their decision to continue studying occupational therapy suggests that deciding to continue a course appears to be a dynamic decision and is influenced by a number of factors. Perceived stress levels is a strong predictor of students' intention to withdraw, but not actual withdrawal rates; indicating healthy coping strategies may contribute to student retention rates.¹⁶ Pre-admission grades and age have been shown to influence retention levels, showing that previous experience and acquired skills positively impact academic confidence.¹⁷

Similarly, family and peer support have a positive contribution to student retention; whereas financial difficulties, personal pressures, poor placement experience and academic difficulties can influence a student to consider leaving.³ Literature has identified associations between being from a low socioeconomic background and being the first person in the family to attend university, which can result in a lack of social and cultural capital required to support informed decision making about university studies.¹ This suggests that no matter how motivated a student is to initially choose the occupational therapy course, efforts still need to be directed to support students to stay, particularly those from regional and remote areas.

While it is a concern that a quarter of students in this study reported that they considered leaving the course, this figure is lower than the national figure which suggests that one in three students consider leaving their course (while one in five actually do leave).⁷ The retention of regional university students, particularly those in health related courses, has significant implications for the broader community. Regional universities play a key role in attracting groups that are underrepresented in tertiary education, such as students who are from rural, remote or indigenous communities.⁶ Providing education to individuals from

these communities is seen as important in addressing inequities in health service provision and support the growth and retention of health professionals in regional, rural and remote communities.¹⁸ Determining factors that support retention is therefore important from both a university and a community perspective.

Unfortunately, despite high stress levels and the need to provide support early, students are reluctant to seek support.³ Key areas to focus efforts for student retention include enhancing mechanisms supporting students around financial, personal, clinical and academic pressures³ and being learner centred.¹⁹ Creating positive, autonomy supportive learning environments in which to improve student satisfaction and success have been shown to improve first-year student retention.²⁰ Virtual learning environments contribute to feelings of enhanced confidence, ownership and sense of control for students, therefore positively effecting retention rates.²¹

Our findings highlight the need for early support. As such student retention may be promoted ~~One way of achieving this may be through the implementation of support structures in the first few weeks of the course. Orientation week activities were perceived to enhance the FYE of occupational therapy students. As well as university wide orientation activities, first year occupational therapy students are introduced to staff, student mentors and students in their cohort through a range of formal and informal gatherings. Receiving support, particularly from the first year coordinator, was also perceived to enhance the FYE.~~ Literature also notes the importance of early engagement of students through orientation week educational and social activities⁴ and the support from academic staff in the transition and retention of students into university.²²

Social factors also influenced the FYE. Students reported being away from home and homesickness as factors influencing students' consideration in leaving. This finding is similar to Harrison's (2006) who reported a strong sense of homesickness and the inability to form

strong social networks as motivators for students to leave their studies, particularly those who study a long distance from their home town.²³ This highlights the importance of social support, in addition to academic support, in promoting student retention.

Programs that focused on first-year students and supporting their integration into the campus community improves overall grades and likelihood of graduating, independent of other factors.²⁴ Students enrolled in a first year seminar including topics on campus resources, time management, test and note taking, goal setting, wellness, stress management and career orientation were consistently retained in significantly greater numbers than those in a matched comparison cohorts.²⁵ This is also true for online learning environments. Comprehensive orientation to online learning courses, redundant communication and spaced information and reminders improve retention and engagement for traditional undergraduate students.²⁶

~~No correlation between the main influence to study occupational therapy and the main influence on the decision to continue studying occupational therapy suggests once students are enrolled at university they still need to be convinced (by themselves or possibly others) to stay. This is of particular importance as a quarter of students considered leaving the course.~~

~~This finding contrasts with other authors who have indicated a link between clear career direction and student retention.¹⁵ The absence of correlation in this study may be explained by the university's unique geographic focus (indigenous, regional and remote). Given that 70.4% of the students surveyed are from outer regional and remote areas, they are also likely from low socioeconomic backgrounds.¹⁶ Students from low socioeconomic backgrounds are more likely to have difficulty comprehending material, find the workload heavy, experience difficulty adjusting to university teaching and have lower grades.¹ Similar difficulties with managing academic demands were reported by students in our study who had considered leaving the course. This could be a plausible explanation as to why the teaching and learning~~

~~experience ranked highly as a factor influencing students' decision to continue studying occupational therapy; a factor previously reported to support student retention.⁶ Literature has identified associations between being from a low socioeconomic background and being the first person in the family to attend university, which can result in a lack of social and cultural capital required to support informed decision making about university studies.⁴ This suggests that no matter how motivated a student is to initially choose the occupational therapy course, efforts still need to be directed to support students to stay, particularly those from regional and remote areas.~~

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Further research is needed to explore the specific academic and social supports required to assist in student retention. This research did not qualitatively examine the way in which

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specific strategies aimed at supporting students in their first year of study contributed to their overall lived experience. Such research would help in identifying and refining supports and strategies aimed at facilitating student retention, particularly among those students being identified as 'at risk' in the first weeks of enrollment¹; particularly students from regional and remote backgrounds. Further research into matching appropriate strategies and supports with students' needs is warranted.

Limitations

This study did not include students who were not enrolled in the second year core occupational therapy subject, which could have led to response bias. It is likely these students had not met the prerequisite (successfully completing all first year subjects to enrol in this subject) and thus may have had a different FYE. An attempt to recruit these students via email was made. No response was received.

Due to the small sample size, findings cannot be generalised to other disciplines within this or other universities. This article may inform further research within occupational therapy and other disciplines.

The cross sectional survey design did not allow in depth exploration of the FYE which was not the intention of this study. Future research should incorporate a qualitative approach to explore students' experiences of supports and strategies, including specific aspects of orientation week and teaching and learning experiences which assisted in retention. such as orientation week.

Conclusion

This research highlights the importance of the FYE at university in the retention of occupational therapy students. Factors which influenced retention point to the importance of engagement with both other students and staff to combat issues of homesickness, particularly from students from regional areas. Academic support to assist in management of workload is

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also important. Retention at a regional university has implications for the development of the health workforce in regional and rural communities. Understanding factors that influence students' decisions to enter and continue in the course can assist in identifying specific supports and strategies to improve student retention, thus assisting in addressing health inequities in regional Australia. ~~This is particularly important for students from regional and remote areas.~~

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Table 1*Demographics of occupational therapy students*

Demographic Information	Percentage (n)
Age (n = 53)	
< 20 years	63.0% (34)
20 – 30 years	20.4% (11)
> 30 years	14.8% (8)
Gender (n = 54)	
Female	87.0% (47)
Male	13.0% (7)
Home Town (n = 50)	
Inner Regional Australia	22.2% (12)
Outer Regional Australia	68.5% (37)
Remote Australia	1.9% (1)
Course Enrolled (n = 54)	
Bachelor of Occupational Therapy (on campus)	83.3% (45)
Bachelor of Occupational Therapy (flexible delivery)	16.7% (9)
Year Enrolled (n = 54)	
2012	79.6% (43)
2011	20.4% (11)
Enrolment Type (n = 54)	
Full Time	96.3% (52)
Part Time	3.7% (2)
Previous Tertiary Experience (n = 54)	
No previous tertiary experience	77.8% (42)
Commenced or completed previous tertiary studies	22.2% (12)

Note. n denoted within parenthesis

Table 2

Main factors influencing students' decision to study occupational therapy

Factors (<i>n</i> = 48)	% (<i>n</i>)
I have wanted to be an occupational therapist for a long time	31.2% (15)
An occupational therapist has treated myself or someone I know	22.9% (11)
Someone provided me with career advice	22.9% (11)
I did not know what else to do	8.3% (4)
An occupational therapist I know personally influenced my career choice	8.3% (4)
I was not accepted into my preferred career option	6.3% (3)

Note. *n* denoted within parenthesis

Table 3

Main extra-curricular support which enhanced FYE

Influencer (<i>n</i> = 30)	% (n)
Orientation week	36.7% (11)
First year coordinator	36.7% (11)
Student Mentor	10% (3)
University social clubs and teams	6.7% (2)
Access Ability Services	6.7% (2)
Independent Learning Plans	3.3% (1)

Note. n denoted within parenthesis

Appendix A

2nd Year Occupational Therapy Student Survey

1. Demographic Information

Personal Information

Age: _____

Gender (*please tick*): Male Female

Home Town Post Code: _____

Course in which you are enrolled (*please tick*)

- Bachelor of Occupational Therapy (on campus student)
- Bachelor of Occupational Therapy (for graduates)
- Bachelor of Occupational Therapy (post graduate – conversion)
- Bachelor of Occupational Therapy (flexible delivery)
- Bachelor of Occupational Therapy (IHCAP)

Year of enrolment (*please tick*)

- 2012
- 2011
- Other (*please specify*) _____

Type of enrolment (*please tick*)

- Full time
- Part time
- Other (*please specify*) _____

Previous Tertiary Education Experience (*please tick*)

- Commenced Diploma or Certificate at another institution but did not complete
- Completed Diploma or Certificate qualification at another institution
- Commenced an undergraduate degree at another university but did not complete
- Completed undergraduate degree at another university
- Commenced another undergraduate degree at (*removed for blind review*) but did not complete
- Completed previous undergraduate degree at (*removed for blind review*)
- Completed Diploma of Health Sciences
- No previous tertiary education experience

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2. What was the main influence in your decision to study the Bachelor of Occupational Therapy (please tick only ONE)
- I have wanted to be an occupational therapist for a long time
 - An occupational therapist I know personally influenced my career choice
 - An occupational therapist has treated myself or someone I know
 - Someone provided me with career advice
 - I was not accepted into my preferred career option
 - I did not know what else to do
 - Other (please specify) _____
3. a) Which of the extra-curricular supports listed below have enhanced your first year experience of the Bachelor of Occupational Therapy (please tick all that apply)
1. O'week activities
 2. Independent learning plans
 3. First year coordinator
 4. Student mentors
 5. University social clubs and teams
 6. AccessAbility Service
 7. Student Counselling Service
 8. Indigenous support unit
 9. Other (please specify) _____
3. b) In order of priority, list the number (from above) of the 3 most important extra-curricular supports (if applicable)
1. _____
 2. _____
 3. _____
4. a) What influenced your decision to continue in the Bachelor of Occupational Therapy (please tick all that apply)
1. I have enjoyed the teaching and learning experiences in the degree
 2. I have made close friends with other students
 3. I feel supported by the staff
 4. I enjoyed the campus experience and being at (removed for blind review)
 5. I was inspired by the mid-year occupational therapy placement
 6. I was inspired by the second semester community organisation placement
 7. The expectation of other people (parents, siblings, spouse, friends. etc)
 8. I would leave but I do not know what else to do
 9. Other (please specify) _____
4. b) Please write the number (from above) of the MAIN factor that influenced your decision to continue in the Bachelor of Occupational Therapy _____
5. During the first year did you ever consider leaving the Bachelor of Occupational Therapy program? (please tick)
- No (if no why?) _____
 - Yes (if yes why?) _____

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6. Subject Experience

Rank the subjects you have studied according to how important these have been to your learning in this degree. Each subject must be given a different number from 1 (most important) to 8 (least important). If you have not studied the subject (given credit or studying this year) enter n/a

Subject Code and Title	Rank
OT1011 – Introduction to Occupation & Occupational Therapy	
RH1002 – Communication Skills for Therapy	
RH1004 – Allied Health Professionals in the Health Environment	
BM1031 – Anatomy & Physiology for Rehab Science 1	
OT1012 – Enabling Occupation through Partnerships	
HS1003 – Lifespan Development for Health A	
HS1401 – Health and Health Care in Australia	
BM1032 – Anatomy & Physiology for Rehab Science 2	