

REP Enhanced Practitioners: The impact of Role Emerging Placements on graduate occupational therapists employability and career path: an Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis exploration.

Abstract

Background: Although Role Emerging Placements (REP) are now a common feature in pre-registration occupational therapy curricula, there is a need to expand the understanding of the impact of this experience on employability and longer term practice and career path.

Method: Mixed methods exploratory sequential design was employed, using a case finding online survey to create a purposive sample for Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis of semi-structured qualitative interviews with practicing occupational therapists from one cohort.

Results: The case finding survey (n=19) led to recruitment of 6 participants to be interviewed. The qualitative findings generated a conceptual model by which to understand the impact of a role emerging placement experience on employability and career path. Participants acknowledged the complementary features of the more traditional placement and the role emergent type of placement. The internal impact of a REP within the therapist was the passion and the why you do occupational therapy and builds confidence to promote self and the profession. The outward impact was in extras skills for practice particularly in innovative service development and added value for employability.

Conclusion: Role emerging placement experience is of interest to employers irrespective of setting. The skill set offers additional benefits to practice once qualifying, particularly in service development. The REP experience facilitates confidence and entrepreneurship matching the generation Y characteristics that lasts into career development.

Key words: Role emerging placements; occupational therapy, employability, career path, entrepreneurship.

Introduction

Future graduate employability and career pathways for occupational therapists require both clinical competence and the ability to promote and develop occupational therapy roles within a widening range of health and social services (College of Occupational Therapists 2016; Dancza, 2013; Baptiste and Molineux, 2011). Graduate occupational therapists are increasingly required to adapt their knowledge and skills to work in complex and ever-changing health care systems, with an emphasis on accountability, cost cutting and service development (Britton et al 2015).

Increasingly opportunities are available for entrepreneurial therapists to look for employment outside of established roles within the traditional health sectors. To ensure that graduates are adequately prepared to take advantage of these new employment opportunities, occupational therapy education should reflect the skills and environments in which they could *potentially* as well as typically work; graduates need to be 'fit for purpose' (DoH 2010). It has been suggested that Role Emerging Placement (REP) provide such learning experiences and may help graduates to pursue wider opportunities for employment (Clarke et al 2015; Clarke et al 2014a; Thew et al 2008).

Role emerging placements are now a key element of most occupational therapy curricula within the UK (Clarke et al 2014a; Cooper and Raine 2009). The literature suggests that such practice placement experience supports the scope for occupational therapy practice to move into future areas of need, i.e. supporting people living with chronic conditions, health promotion and preventative interventions for people with a variety of health conditions (Kearsley 2012; Cooper and Raine 2009; Overton et al 2009). However, there is a limited evidence that supports the theoretical supposition that students who undertake REP are taking up new roles or really 'making their mark' (Clarke et al 2014a; Hamilton et al, 2015). Although one study did suggest that graduates find a REP rewarding yet challenging, and matched what was taught in university, but was frustratingly unrealistic in statutory services (Clarke et al., 2015) there is a need to explore this further and with a more longitudinal view

Method

Study Aim

This study aimed to understand the impact of a Role Emerging Placement undertaken whilst a student occupational therapist on subsequent employability, practice and career path post qualifying.

Design

Mixed methods exploratory sequential design using both an initial case finding survey and subsequent semi-structured interviews was employed (Creswell and Plano Clark 2011). This methodology offers benefits in addressing a research question in terms of innovation, creativity, synergy, and subsequently, the data generated (Johnson et al 2007; Creswell and Plano Clark 2011). A qualitative approach allows the researcher to engage, explore, describe and interpret the personal and social experiences of participants; in order to a detailed account of human experience which is likely to be complex (Smith et al., 2009).

Following ethical approval for the study via through Leeds Beckett University ethics process, all alumni (n=130) from one occupational therapy education programme where students mandatorily attend a REP were approached using the university alumni network. A purposive sample of participants were recruited, anonymity was preserved via an online principally quantitative, questionnaire. Participants who completed the online survey (Survey Monkey) were subsequently given a self-selecting option to be interviewed by telephone to further explore and understand the initial findings suggestive within the quantitative data.

Analysis

Descriptive statistics provided information about participants experience and perceptions of their REP and of their subsequent work histories. A content analysis strategy was employed to explore and understand data that emerged from the open ended questions in the online survey, this is considered an effective way in which to 'examine language intensely for the purpose of classifying large amounts of text into an efficient number of categories that represent similar meanings' (Hsieh and Shannon, 2004 p. 1278).

The interviews were recorded and transcribed verbatim prior to analysis by the first author. The data analysis method utilised an **Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) approach** described by Smith et al (2009), which aimed to capture meaning and to move away from merely describing what was said (Larkin et al., 2006). IPA studies typically use small samples, semi-structured interviews, and an inductive approach (drawing meanings rather than imposing priori constructs from the data) and involve the researcher to take a reflexive stance throughout (Larkin et al., 2006; Smith et al., 2009). The reflexive stance of the researcher was made transparent, making clear notes whilst transcribing and cross referencing own interpretations derived from experience in organising REPs, but also from published evidence. By following this approach, the elements of the REP that shaped the participants career path were extrapolated to expand the knowledge base in the current occupational therapy literature (Finlay, 2011). Further analysis by the other authors allowed for further iterative interpretation of the data and initial themes leading to the development of a conceptual model by which to frame the themes that emerged.

Results of the case finding survey:

The anonymous on-line survey was completed by 19 participants (15% of potential sample), respondents ranged in time since completing their REP from 6months to 7 years, thus representing a range of years spent in the field, and providing some longitudinal data. 26.3% described worked in role emerging settings.

All participants were successful at their first interview for an occupational therapy post, with 2 participants claiming that they turned down one post in favour of another. All stated that they had talked of their role emerging project at interview. Responses regarding whether all occupational therapy students should have a mandatory REP experience ranged, there was a positive correlation between those who worked in a REP and whether they considered all students should receive a REP mandatorily. Survey respondents indicated that the REP experience was 'very' (73.68%) or 'somewhat' relevant to the setting in which they worked and agreed 'somewhat' (31.68%) or 'definitely' (68.42 %) that the skills learnt were valuable in relation to their current practice.

<<Insert Figure 1 here>>

As Figure 1 indicates, 74% responded favourably to future working in a role emergent setting, there were a variety of positive comments, such as: *"I feel REP's provide you with the confidence and ability to identify the need for OT and to be able to back it up with evidence"* and *"REP's teach you to transfer the core skills of OT's in a variety of ways"*.

Comments from respondents currently employed in a REP settings indicated the reasons for this choice was *"to gain experience in a setting I was interested in and could see the potential for OT"* or it was *"a fairly emerging area and similar to my REP which I felt was very relevant preparatory experience"*.

Those that were not as sure about working in a non-statutory service in the future (36%) , identified that they had *"Some concerns re: pension, job security, and registration"* or a wish to consolidate and develop experience first as a role emergent setting was perceived to be more challenging and would *"prefer a more balanced work to home life"*.

Findings of the Interpretative Phenomenology Analysis

Six survey respondents were selected to take part in telephone interviews, there was a range of between 6 months and 7 years' experience as qualified occupational therapists prior to the interview, 5 were employed and 1 participant was between jobs (although within the study time frame has gone on to take up a post in the NHS). The focus of the role emerging placement and their current employment is outlined in table 1 below. Pseudonyms have been used to ensure confidentiality. <<Insert table 1 here>>

There were five initial themes which were then following the iterative process and in keeping with IPA, analysed further (Smith et al 2009). The outcome of this process revealed three broad overarching themes with interrelated sub-themes, which offer a conceptual model by which to understand the impact on practitioners following the experience of a role emerging placement (see diagram 1 below). These themes are described in full and illustrated with direct quotes derived from the data (Braun and Clarke, 2013).

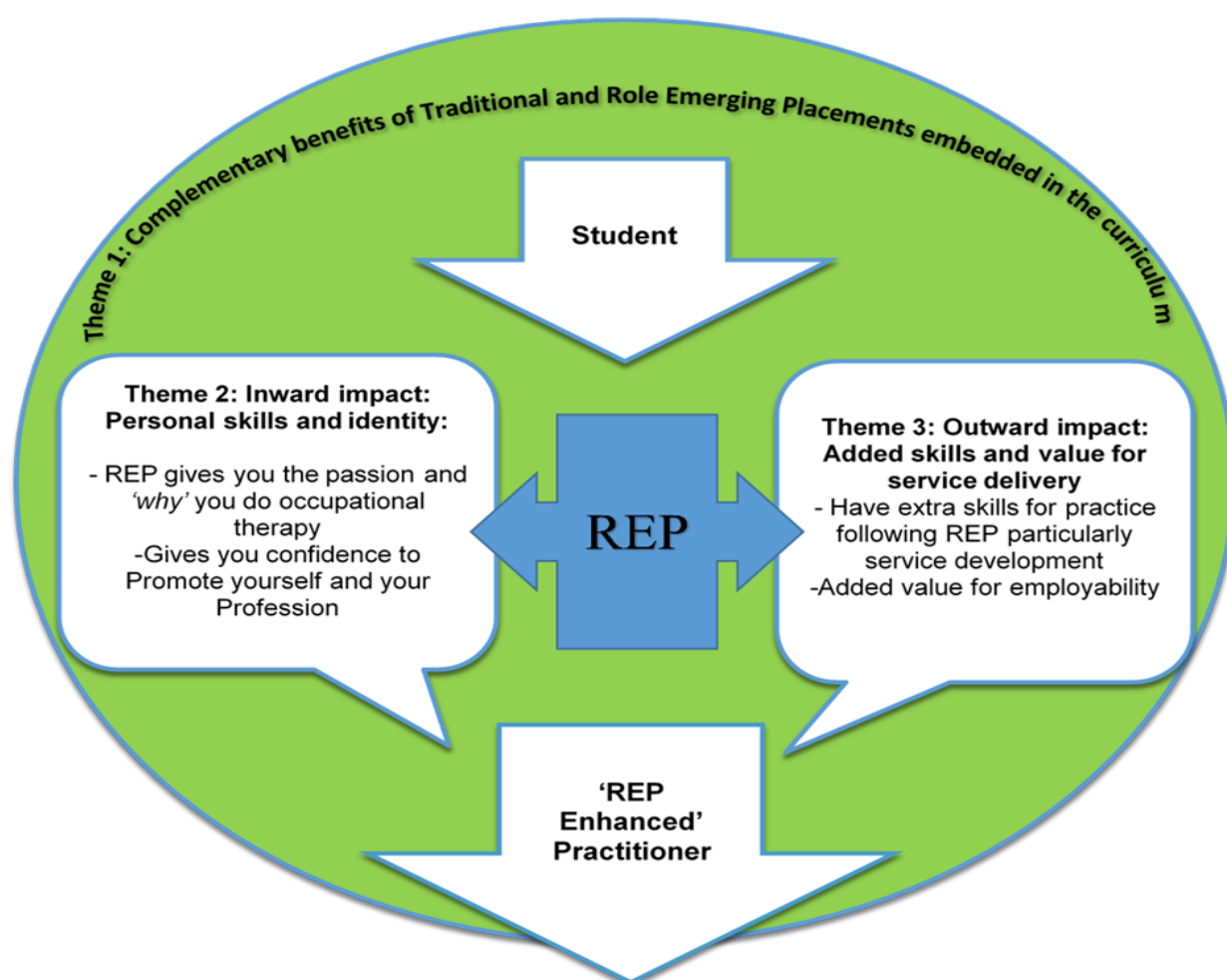


Diagram 1: The REP Enhanced Practitioner Conceptual Model to understand the impact of a REP experience on practice post qualifying.

Theme 1: Complementary benefits of traditional and REP embedded within the curriculum

Participants discussed the positive experiences gained from both traditional and REP placements, there was agreement that professional skills gained from working alongside practicing occupational therapists in traditional practice

were essential to working within the statutory sectors; whilst acknowledging the limited opportunities for occupation-focused interventions especially within the acute hospital settings and within more generic mental health teams, echoing some of the findings of the Clarke et al., 2015 study.

"... OTs (in mental health) are working in a generic way, whereas in a REP you can use occupation focused skills and assessments, this helps in actually seeing the value of occupation focused practice at first hand" (Helen) "Traditional placements give you experience in working in an MDT, working with colleagues in the clinical team, got confidence of being a professional amongst other professionals; a REP reflects the other side of my career, in developing services, understanding my role as an OT, justifying it, giving me the confidence in what OTs do" (Josie).

This mix of traditional and role emergent practice education provides graduates with complementary experience, skills and competences, for expanded roles or entrepreneurial practice;

"I'm glad I got some practical/core skills from the traditional placements, as I wouldn't have been able to work in the sector I have; but I'm also now able to take up additional roles that I couldn't have done without the REP" (Jemma).

Theme 2: Inward Impact: Personal skills and identity

All participants without exception, described personal skills or intrinsic factors that were developed and that the REP had a personal impact which although challenging, led to confidence, self-belief and an ability to promote themselves and their profession on graduating.

2.1 The REP gives you the passion and the 'why' you do occupational therapy.

As there is no established occupational therapist in situ typically within a REP setting, students are required to justify, create or expand the role of an occupational therapist, using current research based evidence and that of current governmental drivers. This was seen as challenging, but motivating and helps to augur the 'why' they were carrying out their practice to their managers.

"I think that it is in the REP that you develop the passion for OT, the traditional.. the core skills...the 'what' and 'how', but the REP is the 'why' we do it...the reason..." (Lesley)

Lesley stated that her current role in a traditional setting meant that although she was busy, she was frustrated that her work does not have a strong evidence base, so she used the REP skills to effect change. *"In a REP, you have to justify what you are doing and why you are doing it" This ultimately led to me being able to argue for an OT service..."*

Jemma and Caroline felt understanding the evidence based rationale for occupational therapy helped in their current practice and that they may not have gleaned those skills on a traditional placement.. *"I have been able to use my REP skills in choosing best evidence to support what I do, the traditional placements don't always explain why they do what they do, you just have to do it their way..." (Jemma).*

"Being really concise about the best evidence to use, it (REP) puts pressure on you to work to high standards... justify through outcomes measures, but also using for example, NICE guidelines and best practice, ... all important and relevant to my current practice and ..supervisors" (Caroline).

2.2 Confidence to promote and develop Occupational Therapy

The experience of working in settings where no prescribed role existed, requires students to understand the potential value of occupational therapy, and to be able to communicate this to others. All participants stated that this, although challenging, resulted in an ability to be able "to promote myself and what I can offer" (Caroline). *"I came out of my REP feeling much more confident in my knowledge and my skills and how an occupational therapist can practice...and to be able to promote OT."* (Lesley)

All participants identified that the confidence that was gleaned, allowed them to be creative and entrepreneurial in developing occupational therapy roles and services; *"freedom to think outside the core OT skills box..."* (Caroline). The process of developing new services in turn, boosted self-belief in delivering something that they had originated. *"REP gives you a blank canvas... the freedom to find the gap, and to bring the OT solution to that gap"* (Lesley).

Many of the participants spoke of how the REP experience provided additional and valuable personal skills for practice such as self-efficacy, advocating and being more enterprising *"... liaising with NGOs and coordinating for and advocating for clients...this matches with working with the 3rd sector"* (Caroline). From this position of confidence, and with clear knowledge of what occupational therapy can offer, graduates were able to articulate their own potential and to *"sell my skills"* (Josie).

Theme 3: Outward impact on practice and in service delivery:

All participants described how they felt the skills that they had learnt within the role emerging placement was proving useful in their current practice, particularly that of the service development skills and matching best evidence with occupation focused practice. They all spoke about how at interview the employers were keen to know the details of the REP project that had been carried out and how this led to participants seeing themselves as offering added value in terms of employability.

3.1 REP offered relevant skills and knowledge for practice, particularly in service development

The REP was a valued experience, and provided relevant development enterprising skills to *"hit the ground running"* (Selena). Indeed, some felt that without that experience they would not have been able to take on the new positions that they had.

"... making (job) applications, a lot of the criteria being asked, e.g. a willingness to take part in service development and clinical governance...that is the skills-set that I now have a result of the REP....move towards integration, any qualified providers....not sure if I hadn't have been on a REP that I would have those skills" (Caroline).

Helen, a recent graduate, also claimed that without the REP she would not have had sufficient skills to carry out her current role. *"...I don't think I would have been able to have got the job, or coped in it without the experience (of the*

REP) ... I am having to develop everything from scratch, referral pathways, criteria, assessment tools, outcome measures...etc. This was something we did as part of our REP" (Helen). Similarly Selena, who was more experienced, felt the REP was crucial to her current role: "Without the REP I wouldn't have flourished in the current post that I'm in...I wouldn't have been able to take the direction I have" (Selena).

The REP experience appears to have a direct influence on the career aspirations of participants. Commonly participants aspired to gain positions that allowed them to practice occupational therapy more occupationally. "I would want to be seeking more non-traditional posts to keep the opportunity to be doing OT specific work...a lot of other posts are having to work in generic ways which is not what I want" (Helen).

Some suggested that following a REP, they were able to identify the limitations of established occupational therapy roles in some services, and a desire to work "more occupationally" (Jemma). The creativity of developing something from scratch, or to influence the direction of a service to ensure an occupational perspective appeared to affirm the value of the profession and a sense of professional identity. It was clear from the participants that this is not always evident in other placements nor in current traditional posts "Occupation focused therapy is the essential bit of a REP that you may not get the opportunity to do otherwise" (Jemma). "My current post is mainly discharge planning, you don't have the time to really make a difference, as opposed to a less traditional setting...which I will aim to apply for..." (Lesley).

3.2 We offer 'added value' to employers following a REP;

All participants had talked about their REP within their interview, with some taking along evidence of the project that they had set up. For some the REP experience played a significant role in them gaining the job over the others interviewed, as Josie and then Helen state:

"The interviewing panel were very keen to hear about the REP, as they are an enterprise, so it was really relevant and allowed me to get the job..." (Josie).

"... fairly confident it was influential...as they told me that it was the REP that got me the job!" (Helen).

Participants felt that the REP experience meant that their skills offered something above and beyond other candidates at interview to a potential employer, all were successful at interview first time, and in Helens case, she turned down one job over another! "Actually, I was added value! That's what I sold myself as! My REP helped me to apply theory into practice more" (Selena). Suggesting the REP adds or enhances what the graduating occupational therapist has to offer.

This understanding was perceived as advantageous in obtaining positions and in demonstrating the skills required by employers. "I needed my student REP experience to demonstrate that I could develop services, my three years in a traditional post didn't give me that opportunity."(Jemma). "...being able to demonstrate occupational need and the evidence of the project which absolutely matched the skills they were looking for" (Helen).

Discussion of findings

The findings from this study provides further evidence to address the gap in knowledge regarding how Role Emerging Placements influence employability and career path (Clarke et al 2015; Clarke et al 2014b; Rodger et al 2007). The findings suggest that the experience of REP or non-traditional placement appears to mediate well between the evidence base and theoretical underpinning of occupation focused interventions taught in university and practice which is in keeping with the Clarke et al (2015) previous study.

All participants felt the balance of both traditional and emergent placement was beneficial to their current practice and there was no indication that substituting a traditional placement for one that was diverse in nature had left graduates under prepared for practice, even in statutory services, in which most were employed.

Providing demonstrative skills in relating theory to practice within the REP (Dancza et al 2013) and offering skills in advocating and expanding the roles within the profession perhaps also creates 'REP Enhanced Practitioners' in that they are potentially 'added value' (as participants said) compared to other candidates without a comparable placement experience. This kind of 'REP enhancement' also offers candidates at interview tangible evidence that they can work autonomously, and can 'hit the ground running' needing little direct supervision or shadowing which should be advantageous to the employer. This could therefore indicate that it is not the setting nor the emergent area of practice that is totally at play here, but the model of supervision (Warren et al 2013).

The placement by its nature, forces students to clearly articulate what occupational therapy potentially offers, this appears to have resulted in confidence in how their occupational therapy skills can have an impact in a variety of settings, it also keys in with offering a tangible example of the unique skills that an occupational therapist can offer (Rodger et al., 2009). The participants were proud that the project that they undertook on placement had made a difference, and that they had left something tangible behind to enhance service delivery rather than being in solely a learner or apprentice role. This key element links to the increased sense of identity and self-belief participants felt, and resulted in greater self-confidence and knowledge of the kind of occupational therapist they want to be (Clarke et al., 2015; Clarke et al 2014b). This may be what employers are looking for, given the success rate of graduates in gaining the posts that they wanted, mainly at their first interview.

The REP offers an 'aha' moment of matching practice with the literature and allows the student to see evidence of how occupational therapy is well matched to the current and projected health policy and agendas. This study shows some frustration in the limitations of statutory services posts in offering opportunities to totally apply all the skills learnt in a REP, however it was not a key feature compared with the Clarke et al (2015) study.

This study adds further weight to the evidence that the REP experience results in the desire and ability to develop new and innovative occupation-focused services (Clarke et al 2015; Clarke et al 2014a; Baptiste and Molineux, 2011). Additionally, it supplies them with different or additional skills to traditional placements and can influence future career aspirations (Doherty et al., 2009; Thomas et al., 2007). Participants in this study were all considering a future in working within a non-traditional or 3rd sector setting, and most had already taken on a service development role despite being

newly qualified. The skills and experience gained in the REP, are directly applicable to creating new services and maximizing the scope of the occupational therapy to develop services that '*meets the needs of the current generation*' (Kearsley 2012, p.246).

Current political drivers are towards less acute services and more empowering of service users to maintain independence at home and create a more efficient use of healthcare resources (Alderwick et al., 2015); there is even more emphasis on developing services that are holistic, preventative and evidence based, along with occupational therapists being particularly highly valued in the community (Brindle 2015). Correspondingly, occupational therapy students need to develop skills in new and innovative models of service delivery (Scaffa et al., 2014), and it does appear that students following a REP are 'more than ready to accept this challenge' (Baptiste and Molineux 2011, p.150).

While the promise of job security, generous pension schemes and other benefits may be valid reasons for graduates to look to work in traditional roles by preference, the flexibility and opportunity for graduates to develop occupation focused services to meet client needs offers its own rewards. Indeed, if the profession is not quick to take up these opportunities, other professions could steal the potential thunder of the occupational therapists impact. This study suggests that the REP can and does provide occupational therapists with the commercial and entrepreneurial skills to exploit opening markets and to think outside the 'box' (Withers and Shann 2008).

Diverse placements appear to be proving an increasingly popular feature of pre-registration education of occupational therapists and this may in some part due to the 'Generation Y' features of young adults. Generation Y adults (also known as 'Millennials') who were born in the early 2000's are characteristically technologically 'savvy', wanting more independence, receive rapid feedback and to be less desirous of micromanagement within their working lives (Espinoza et al., 2011); these features could auger well with diverse work areas or role emerging placements. This population of adults are also more inclined to be multitaskers, but with a short attention span and desire greater professional development compared to their older adult working age adult peers (Hills et al, 2013). This could explain why the participants all spoke favourably about wanting to develop new services, and all found work easily as well as some quickly gaining more senior positions. Indeed, research suggests that Generation Y occupational therapists could be the 'entrepreneurial drivers, needed to ensure the continuation and expansion of the profession to meet changing health-care needs' (p.274, Hills et al 2013), the project carried out on the REP could offer the platform to demonstrate such skills.

Limitations

Although participants constituted a homogenous sample, and data saturation could be argued to have been reached the single cohort design meant that the influences of other elements of the curricula were not taken into account, and therefore cannot be accepted as a definitive view (O'Reilly and Parker, 2012). The fact that the curriculum is at Masters level and follows a Problem Based Learning pedagogy, may be contributing factors (Whitcombe, 2013). The model of placement has been proved to be successful with the dual integration of offsite qualified occupational therapists external to the university to supervise, peer student support, and formal reflection on clinical reasoning underpinning the whole experience (Edwards and Thew 2011). Indeed, students value working with peers and using reflection to

best consider the evidence base to meet the collective need which has been established in previous studies (Dancza et al 2013). Therefore, the placement experience of graduate in this study may not be generalizable.

The sample size exceeds recommendations for Interpretative Phenomenology Analysis (Smith et al., 2009) and sample sizes are typically small and purposeful in phenomenological studies enabling an in depth insight into the experiences rather than being representative of a population (Bowling, 2009) however, it is important that similar, but larger, multi-cohort studies are conducted, especially those at undergraduate level.

Implications for practice.

The findings suggest that qualified occupational therapists use their experience on their REP to demonstrate skills in service development, carrying out occupation focused interventions and confidence in promoting and articulating the value of occupational therapy, both at interview and in their practice irrespective of the setting in which they are employed. It could be argued that such an experience produces 'REP Enhanced Practitioners' in that they offer the market additional skills to that of graduates with traditional practice placements alone. The internal impact of such a placement match with the 'Generation Y' traits of young adults emerging into the work place and translate well into a variety of working environments and help the qualified practitioner hit the ground running. The external impact of carrying out a project based on the needs of a population offers skills in service development, the ability to relate occupational science theory to practice and can be applicable to any setting, even in traditional sectors of health-care. None of the participants in either the survey or interview felt that a diverse placement had disadvantaged them at interview or within their career path and all stated that the experienced had set their sights on diversifying their practice beyond the constraints of the statutory services.

With the rapidly changing markets that newly graduated occupational therapists are facing offering new and exciting opportunities and the view that 'skills, characteristics and roles of occupational therapists mirror those of entrepreneurs' (Scaffa et al., 2014. P. 114), perhaps it is now more a case that the student may actually *need* a role emergent placement to match the future market for contemporary practice.

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