



Martin Riley
Head of Education, Commissioning & Quality
Health Education and Improvement Wales

10th June 2019

Dear Martin,

RE: Consultation on HEIW Education Commissioning and Training plan for 2021/22

The Royal College of Occupational Therapists (RCOT) is the professional body representing the diverse and thriving community of approximately 34,000 occupational therapy staff across the UK. We set the professional and educational standards for the occupational therapy profession and represent the profession at national and international levels. Thank you for giving us the opportunity to participate in the consultation regarding HEIW's Education Commissioning and Training Plan for 2021/22.

We have reviewed the plan thoroughly and have consulted with colleagues in Wales as part of formulating our response. Before providing specific feedback on the Education Commissioning and Training Plan as it currently stands, we believe it would be helpful to reflect briefly on the current and anticipated enduring impact of the COVID-19 pandemic. We believe that these factors will shape the future demand for, and nature of, health and social care services and are therefore pertinent in relation to current workforce planning.

Growth in demand for rehabilitation services

Occupational therapy is firmly grounded in the belief that health and well-being is enhanced by enablement and individual choice, and that people thrive when they are able to live the life that matters to them. Occupational therapists working in rehabilitation teams support people with physical and mental ill-health to re-gain and maintain independence in the occupations (or activities of daily living) that matter to them.

The joint statement from the UK's four Chief Allied Health Professions Officers (dated May 15th 2020) highlighted that rehabilitation is critical to ensuring our population's recovery from the impacts of the pandemic and the long-term sustainability of the health and social care system. As echoed in the recently published *Rehabilitation: a framework for continuity and recovery 2020 to 2021* for Wales, it has become increasingly clear that the demand for rehabilitation services is growing, and crucial for:

- People recovering from COVID-19, including those who remained in the community and those who have been discharged following extended critical care/hospital stays.
- People deconditioned from shielding (self-isolation/social distancing), e.g. those at risk of falls due to reduced muscle strength and mobility.
- People experiencing mental health problems either caused or exacerbated by social isolation.



- People with a range of conditions whose planned care or rehabilitation has been interrupted or paused during the pandemic.
- People who avoided accessing health services during the pandemic and are now at greater risk of ill-health as a result of delayed diagnosis and treatment.

Wales' framework for rehabilitation focuses on guiding service planning in response to the immediate needs highlighted by the pandemic. However, it is not unreasonable to anticipate that the models of service delivery adopted during this period will pave the way for rehabilitation as we move forward beyond the pandemic.

Alongside other allied health professionals, occupational therapists have a crucial role to play in addressing the population's rehabilitation needs. As the only profession to practice across physical and mental health with a focus on occupation (peoples' everyday activities), occupational therapists within rehabilitation teams are specialists in self-management approaches and personalised care, and are vital in ensuring people are enabled to live as independently as possible. Deployed within primary care and 'front-door' services, occupational therapists can facilitate quicker and more effective rehabilitation. Occupational therapists skilfully deliver rehabilitation services in a holistic manner that encompasses the physical, emotional and psychological needs of the individual. Combined with the use of technology, provision of aids and necessary adaptations, an occupational therapist has the potential to strongly influence:

- the reduction of a lengthy hospital stays,
- the avoidance of hospital admissions,
- the reduction of costly long-term services, and
- the ability to enable people to re-enter the workforce and become active contributors to the economy.

Investment in the growth of the occupational therapy workforce in Wales will contribute considerably to meeting the population's rehabilitation needs. It is likely to result in cost savings, enhanced quality of service provision, and better quality of life and outcomes for individual citizens accessing those services.

Feedback in response to the Education Commissioning and Training Plan for 2021/22

As it currently stands, the Education Commissioning and Training Plan 2021/22 appears to focus primarily on medical and nursing personnel. To meet the needs of the citizens of Wales in the coming years it is vital to consider the required skill mix across all healthcare professions, particularly taking into account the growing understanding of increasing demand for rehabilitation.

RCOT fully acknowledges the extraordinary complexity of workforce modelling, even under 'normal' circumstances. Given the considerable uncertainty regarding the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on re/entry to, retention of and retirements from the workforce, we do wonder whether calculating future needs on the basis of averages over the past three years and an assumption of stability in attrition is the optimal model in the current circumstances? Without being in a position to offer a clear alternative, we offer the observation that there might be even *less* certainty than is ordinarily the case that the future will mirror the recent past. With the recognised growth in demand for rehabilitation services, which is unlikely to be short-lived, the current workforce modelling calculations may benefit from further consideration.

Notwithstanding, RCOT welcomes the initially planned 71.2% growth in pre-registration occupational therapy student numbers between September 2019 and 2025. We are aware



that most occupational therapy students graduating in Wales this summer have already secured jobs in Wales, which is excellent news. The ready availability of graduate employment opportunities reinforces the value of planning to grow the occupational therapy profession.

As you will be aware, even before the recent impact of COVID-19 on pre-registration practice placements, the capacity of the system to facilitate practice-based learning opportunities was of concern and constrained growth in student numbers. Collaborative work is already underway to address this issue, and to support education providers and service providers to think creatively about how they support practice-based education within the requirements of professional and regulatory body standards. This work will, however, need to continue beyond the immediate crisis to effectively support the planned growth in numbers across the full range of disciplines in Wales.

As we have indicated, occupational therapists are skilled in delivering rehabilitation interventions addressing physical and mental ill-health and long-term needs. Occupational therapists are in a prime position to lead rehabilitation services in the community, reduce hospital stay, avoid readmission, reduce financial cost of long-term care provision and facilitate the return of individual citizens to work or otherwise contributing to the economy. Investing in the occupational therapy workforce will make a valuable contribution towards meeting the ambitions set out in *A Healthier Wales*.

Thank you once again for inviting us to contribute feedback as part of your consultation. For further information on any aspect of this response, in the first instance please contact Maureen.Shiells@rcot.co.uk

Yours sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Jo Watson'.

Dr Jo Watson
Assistant Director – Education & Research

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Maureen Shiells'.

Maureen Shiells
Pre-registration Education Manager