



Guiding principles for competency in occupational therapy

The World Federation of Occupational Therapists recognises the essential need for all occupational therapists to be competent in their work in occupational therapy. Occupational therapists are expected to meet or exceed competency requirements for the safe and effective practice of occupational therapy, both at the start, as well as throughout their careers.

Competencies

Competencies for occupational therapists include an integration of individual behaviours that are measurable and critical to the practice of occupational therapy; knowledge regarding occupational therapy concepts, theories and processes; and personal values and attitudes that enable effective occupational therapy work performance. Competencies focus on what can be learned, demonstrated and measured in order to have capacity for safe and effective occupational therapy practice.

Competencies are generally described in a conceptual model or competency framework. Competency frameworks are important tools to ensure occupational therapy education and practice are congruent with workforce expectations for the knowledge, skills and attributes of occupational therapists.

The Minimum Standards for the Education of Occupational Therapists published by the World Federation of Occupational Therapists (WFOT) outline specific requirements for education programmes in occupational therapy that must be met for approval by WFOT¹. The Minimum Standards outline a competency framework that describes the expected knowledge, skills and attitudes of all graduates of occupational therapy educational programmes in six areas. The competencies relate to the person-occupation-environment relationship; therapeutic and professional relationships; the occupational therapy process; professional reasoning and behaviour; the context of professional practice; and the application of evidence to ensure best practice¹.

The *WFOT Minimum Standards for the Education of Occupational Therapists* place high importance for occupational therapy to be relevant to the local health system, social and community context, as well as the prevailing health needs and priorities. Development context-specific competency frameworks for particular countries or regions is therefore encouraged by WFOT to customise the knowledge, skills and personal attributes expected of graduates of all WFOT approved programmes to respond to the unique situations and needs within particular jurisdictions. Such competencies should be defined through collaboration between occupational therapy practitioners, educators, member associations and society. Mechanisms to implement and to monitor the defined competencies also need to be established. The Rehabilitation Competency Framework developed by the World Health Organization was designed for use across rehabilitation professions and settings and may serve as a starting point to develop a context-specific competency framework².

Responses to a 2021 WFOT survey from all WFOT member organisations indicated that a variety of occupational therapy competency frameworks are used around the world that build upon the areas of competence outlined in the *WFOT Minimum Standards for the Education of Occupational Therapists*. The most frequent uses of such competency frameworks include the development of education curricula, approval and accreditation processes and establishment of entry-to-practice standards. Less commonly, the frameworks are used to define continuing competency standards, plan professional development, and assist with workforce recruitment and planning³.

Continuing Competency

Continuing competency requires that occupational therapists are able to demonstrate minimum levels of required knowledge, skills and attributes for safe and effective practice throughout their careers. Competency demands in any situation are influenced by numerous factors, including consideration of what types of services are provided, where the work is undertaken and who is providing and receiving the occupational therapy services. Occupational therapists are expected to respond to changes in competency demands through a process of life-long learning that ensures their work is always based on best available evidence.

Occupational therapists may gain proficiency in some competencies beyond expected minimum levels, demonstrated, for example, through ease of performance, professional sophistication and artistry of practice. Competencies exist along a continuum; the level to which an occupational therapist attains higher levels of proficiency changes over time and is influenced by experiences, role expectations and personal strengths and interests.

Advanced Competencies

With career progression, occupational therapists may engage in additional education and gain experience that result in the acquisition of advanced competencies that enhance and augment their occupational therapy practice. Advanced competencies include knowledge, skills and abilities needed for activities within the context of occupational therapy practice that are performed beyond the breadth of responsibilities traditionally assumed by occupational therapists. Some career profiles of occupational therapists may be described in relation to the clustering of different advanced competencies that are needed in particular job functions. While occupational therapists work most frequently as practitioners, some also assume a wide variety of other functions in research, education, administration and policy. Such functions may require the use of advanced competencies, for example, in relation to human resources management, finance and information technology.

Advanced or specialist competencies may be recognised in occupational therapy in some jurisdictions, providing the opportunity for occupational therapists to use specific titles or credentials to indicate their areas of specialty. Competence at advanced levels of occupational therapy is required for occupational therapists to be considered to have the skills, knowledge and attitude to be a specialist in occupational therapy. WFOT expects that any member organisation that recognises occupational therapy specialist competencies have a structure in place by which to accredit such levels of practice. This structure should outline specific eligibility requirements for gaining specialist status, in addition to describing the processes for approval and reapproval.

Educational preparation as an occupational therapist provides a rich base of knowledge, skills and attributes that can be used in a variety of practice environments, with a wide range of population groups. The characteristics of occupation-based enablement are broad and relevant to occupational therapists working in many contexts. As a result, occupational therapists have extensive opportunity to pursue mobility within their career paths in occupational therapy. With career development, occupational therapists have the opportunity to gain greater proficiency in required competencies; some may also

progress to attain advanced competencies to augment their occupational therapy practice. Within their career continuum, all occupational therapists are expected, however, to have as a minimum, the ongoing capacity to demonstrate the skills, knowledge and attributes required for safe and effective practice in occupational therapy.

References

1. World Federation of Occupational Therapists. *Minimum Standards for the Education of Occupational Therapists*. Geneva, Switzerland: WFOT; 2016. 79 p.
2. World Health Organization. *Rehabilitation Competency Framework*. Geneva, Switzerland: WHO; 2020. 52 p.
3. World Federation of Occupational Therapists. *Education Survey*. Geneva, Switzerland: WFOT; 2021. 36 p.

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