

An Interdisciplinary Employability Curriculum Intervention for Occupational Therapy Students

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Abstract

This emerging initiative paper reports on an interdisciplinary curriculum intervention designed to enhance the employability of occupational therapy (OT) graduates. Two guest lecturer marketing workshops were introduced to a final-year OT course to address the need for OT graduates to have business and marketing knowledge. Occupational therapists are increasingly working in private practices and need to be able to successfully run their own practices. However, student responses to the intervention were mixed, mainly about the need for business and marketing knowledge being taught in their degrees.

Introduction

In 2024, 35.11% of occupational therapists were based in private practice compared to 19.54% in 2014. Thus, the sustainability of health services now relies on sound business practices as well as clinical expertise (Loria, 2021). However, business-related education is not explicitly mandated in the Accreditation Standards for Australian Entry Level Occupational Therapy Education Programs (Occupational Therapy Council Australia Ltd, 2020), but programs are required to ensure that graduates are competent to deliver services to a range of client groups across a range of practice settings. Furthermore, universities are expected to equip graduates with employability skills sufficient for them to transition to the workforce and manage their careers (Bridgstock, 2017). In the case of occupational therapy (OT) students, employability knowledge now includes the need for business and marketing knowledge. However, given such knowledge is not mandated, it is rarely included in OT university curriculums. This paper reports on a curriculum intervention that introduced basic marketing knowledge to final year OT students to understand their reactions and the intervention's success and reception.

Methodology

The curriculum intervention was two guest lecturer marketing workshops, held one week apart, in a final-year OT course at a Queensland university. Sixty-two students were enrolled in the course. The workshops were co-designed and run by the first author, a university marketing academic, who has won awards for teaching, and the second author, the course coordinator, a qualified occupational therapist with extensive clinical experience. The workshops aimed to introduce four key areas of marketing knowledge: (1) value propositions; (2) identifying a target market; (3) brand management; and (4) marketing communication. These topics were determined in discussions between the first and second authors. A mixed-methods approach was adopted to understand student reactions to the curriculum intervention. Students were invited to complete anonymous surveys before the first workshop and after the second. Forty students completed the first survey, and 22 students completed the second. Fifteen students

completed both the first and second surveys and a code was created that allowed their responses to be matched. These surveys asked students if marketing was important for OT graduates, students' emotional responses to marketing, students' confidence in the marketing topics explored in the workshops and if students wanted to learn more about marketing in the future. Additionally, semi-structured interviews with two students were undertaken after the second workshop and analysed using thematic analysis.

Results and Future

The surveys revealed limited changes in students' responses towards marketing. When asked if marketing was important for new OT graduates, 30.9% disagreed or strongly disagreed in the pre-workshop survey and 27.3% in the post workshops survey. 52% of first survey respondents indicated they did not want to learn more about marketing in the future, and 45% of students indicated the same in the second survey. Students selected frustrated and annoyed as emotions that marketing inspired at similar rates in both the pre and post surveys. However, there were statistically significant changes between the fifteen students, who completed both surveys, in their confidence to create marketing communications (average change 0.73, statistical significance 0.005), design marketing activities generally (average change 0.73, statistical significance 0.005) and identify a target market (average change 0.60, statistical significance 0.02). Thus, OT student responses to the inclusion of marketing within the occupational therapy curriculum were mixed at best. The results of the two semi-structured interviews shed light on why. Both the students interviewed expressed that they struggled to see the relevance of learning about marketing during their undergraduate degrees given that they did not intend to enter private practice immediately after graduation. If they needed marketing and other business skills in the future, they would learn about them then. However, given that small business owners struggle to find the time and resources to enhance their marketing skills (Curado & Sousa, 2021), this would appear to be a dangerous assumption. Therefore, providing evidence to students about the dangers of postponing gaining marketing knowledge until after graduation could help make the relevancy of including marketing in their OT curriculum clear. The authors are considering refinements to the workshops before running them again and are preparing a journal publication.

References

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