

# Preparation for an uncertain world: international curriculum development for mental health occupational therapy

Wimpenny, K, Lewis, L, Roe, S, Desiron, H, Gordon, I & Waters, S

**Author post-print (accepted) deposited by Coventry University's Repository**

**Original citation & hyperlink:**

Wimpenny, K, Lewis, L, Roe, S, Desiron, H, Gordon, I & Waters, S 2016, 'Preparation for an uncertain world: international curriculum development for mental health occupational therapy' *World Federation of Occupational Therapists (WFOT) Bulletin*, vol 72, no. 1, pp. 5-15

<https://dx.doi.org/10.1080/14473828.2016.1161960>

DOI 10.1080/14473828.2016.1161960

ISSN 1447-3828

Publisher: Taylor and Francis

***This is an Accepted Manuscript of an article published by Taylor & Francis in World Federation of Occupational Therapists (WFOT) Bulletin on 30<sup>th</sup> March 2016, available online: <http://www.tandfonline.com/10.1080/14473828.2016.1161960>***

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# **Preparation for an uncertain world: international curriculum development for mental health occupational therapy**

**Authors:** Katherine Wimpenny, Coventry University (CU)<sup>1</sup>, Loren Lewis, University of Cape Town (UCT), Imogen Gordon (CU), Sarah Roe (CU), Huget Desiron (PXL University Limburg, Belgium, Sue Waters (CU).

## **Abstract**

*Occupational therapy graduates are entering an increasingly complex practice landscape, particularly in the field of mental health. Moreover, the role of higher education in effectively preparing graduates for the challenges they face in an uncertain world is still developing. An innovative, international online learning module involving three countries (United Kingdom, South Africa & Belgium) was created with the aim to improve graduates' preparedness for practice. A total of 215 final year occupational therapy students' engagement in an on-line discussion forum was analysed using case study design. The study revealed significant increases in inter-cultural sensitivity amongst students measured pre and post project, alongside numerous challenges in engagement and learning. Augmented learning opportunities within the curriculum are argued as vital to equip graduates with enhanced agency, greater resilience and improved tolerance for managing complexity. Further research is required to enable graduates to be better prepared for practice and to develop skills to help navigate and manage the 'not knowing'.*

## **Keywords**

Occupational therapy; Mental health; Online international learning; Cultural competence, Professional practice

## Introduction

This study explored the role of education in preparing graduate occupational therapists for the field of mental health and beyond. The study was deemed important and warranted due to the increasingly complex global landscape of occupational therapy practice along with growing evidence that graduates were not sufficiently prepared for the challenges of an uncertain world, particularly in the field of mental health (Wimpenny & Lewis, 2015).

Drawing on the WHO Mental Health Action plan (2013 – 2020) the project, funded by the World Federation of Occupational Therapists (WFOT) Thelma Cardwell Research Foundation, examined how the knowledge and skills of occupational therapists could be enhanced, not only in terms of delivery of evidence based, culturally appropriate and human rights orientated mental health care, but also through effective problem solving, leadership, advocacy of the profession, effective team work, and the strengthening of evidence and research for mental health.

The project involved the development, delivery and evaluation of a final year, online international learning (OIL) module, delivered amongst three occupational therapy pre-registration programmes to include Coventry University (CU) the University of Cape Town (UCT) and PXL Limburg University, Belgium (PXL). In particular the OIL project offered undergraduates the opportunity to explore a globalised picture of mental health occupational therapy practice through the use of pedagogy designed to encourage students to think creatively, engage in individual and group problem solving, develop innovative ways to deliver culturally-sensitive services, to discuss strategies, take calculated risks and consider ways and means of extending the reach of the profession (Pattison, 2006; 2008). Further, the project aimed to equip students with personal entrepreneurial capacities to deal with greater levels of uncertainty and complexity in their professional practice (Poon Teng Fatt & Hee Ang, 1995; Ravasi & Turati 2005; Gibb 2007). The opportunity for international exposure

allowed for the development of a richer understanding of occupational therapy in other contexts, including enhancement of students' skills in intercultural sensitivity. This paper will present the project and its delivery. Detail is included on how the research process was conducted. The main study findings are discussed in relation to four themed areas and recommendations for curriculum development are suggested.

## **Background literature**

Wimpenny and Lewis (2015) conducted a cross-contextual pilot study that examined recent occupational therapy graduates perspectives about the ways in which their education equipped them to work in enterprising ways across diverse communities and contexts in the mental health arena. The findings revealed that more opportunity is needed within the occupational therapy curriculum to embrace uncertainty, consider risk and organisational challenge and replace feelings of doubt and insecurity with improved agency in order to be able to manage the 'not knowing'.

It is widely recognised that commencing practice as an occupational therapist is a time of great professional development (Atkinson & Steward, 1997) coupled with a sense of being overwhelmed (Tryssenaar & Perkins, 2001). Graduates need to be adaptable and flexible in order to successfully transfer into the world of professional practice. This is especially important when considering the task graduates have in promoting the relevancy of occupational therapy as a key element of services for people with mental illness.

Contemporary practice is a fluid, challenging responsibility, which requires practitioners to work with heavy caseloads, in complex situations often of an indeterminate nature (Higgs, Andresen & Fish, 2004). Practitioners need to develop capacity to be knowledgeable about their specific contribution and to make explicit their professional understandings (Pettican & Bryant, 2001; Higgs et al., 2004). Consequently graduates need to project a strong

professional identity, demonstrate skills in evidence-based practice, critical thinking and resilience (Hodgetts, Hollis, Triska, Dennis, et al., 2007; Duncan & Alsop, 2006). Further, the accepted understanding of the role of occupational therapy practice must be widened to encompass the diversity of what the profession has to offer (Lorenzo, 2010).

Whilst there has been little focus on mental health occupational therapy practice preparation, a number of studies have taken a broader curriculum view (see for example, Hodgetts et al., 2007; Doherty, Stagnittii & Schoo, 2009; Scheerer, 2003; Lee & Mackenzie, 2003). Such studies, whilst addressing a range of practice and education themes, typically reveal that new graduates grapple with low confidence when entering the working world. They have difficulty making the shift from student to graduate and the need for support structures to be put in place is evident. Further, graduates have reported feeling inadequately prepared in the area of practical techniques and experience a large gap between their own perceived level of competence and perceived unrealistic expectations of themselves (Hodgetts et al., 2007). It is evident that it takes time for graduates to feel competent and gain professional confidence, including clarifying their professional role, and being clear of their responsibility when working within a team (Wimpenny & Lewis, 2015).

The 'will' to be a professional is not only a matter of past formation, but is an abiding presence in being, and continuing to be, a professional. Barnett (2009) contends that professional life may hinder professional will through systems that reduce professional autonomy. Professional staff may have unique responsibilities but often without the resources and authority required instigate change. An abiding presence therefore in being and continuing to be a professional is the willingness of professions to endure (Barnett, 2009). The role of education therefore is to form graduates as professionals who will be enterprising in such a way that they will endure, not least through professional education that can be adequately responsive.

The concept of a 'responsive curriculum' can be understood as the pedagogical design and delivery of teaching and learning approaches that seek to promote the growth and transformation of learners and the profession through socially appropriate activities (Duncan & McMillan, 2006). Further, knowledge frameworks that are contextually situated and responsive to the needs of communities where people live, work, learn and play are being developed and warrant curriculum inclusion (Kronenberg, Pollard & Sakellariou, 2012; Whiteford & Hocking, 2011).

With this backdrop in mind, this study sought to explore final year occupational therapy students' perspectives about how the delivery of an online international module might contribute to culturally appropriate and human rights orientated mental health care. Furthermore, this study sought to explore how effective problem solving, leadership, advocacy of the profession, team work, and the strengthening of evidence and research for mental health occupational therapy curriculum could also be targeted, in order to prepare graduates for the challenge of contemporary practice.

## **Project design**

215 undergraduate students were involved in the OIL project across the three occupational therapy programmes and were allocated to twenty international discussion forums. The students were linked to the discussion forums via a final year module on their respective course programmes. Each institution selected a final year module most appropriately suited to 'house' the international learning opportunity. Table 1 provides details of the modules in which the discussion forum was situated, an example of a key-learning outcome for that module, and the form(s) of assessment that students undertook.

***Please insert Table 1 here***

## **Graduate involvement**

Twelve graduate occupational therapists in their first post were recruited from across the three universities by a range of means, including approaching practice education coordinators, and through the university Alumni. Each graduate donated a 10 minute Vodcast<sup>1</sup> about a complex case scenario from their practice that included the following:

- Taking risks, seeing and making use of opportunities to extend our professional reach
- Integrated and responsive care
- Demonstrating professional artistry and competence, through coping effectively with situations of complexity and uncertainty with clients (following Schön 1987, 1983).
- Being visible and influential with others, and in the delivery of cost effective practices with a necessary understanding of professional discourse for contemporary occupational therapy practice
- Generating knowledge relevant to global health practice issues

Each Vodcast had an accompanying word document. Table 2 presents the graduates involved and the practice settings they represented across the three countries.

***Please insert Table 2: Graduate Vodcasts here***

## **Online Learning Platform**

The project used an Open Moodle platform to enable the international delivery of teaching and learning. Whilst this was an open platform it had the facility to be locked after a short registration period to ensure confidentiality of participants. The platform housed learning materials such as the graduate Vodcasts, graduate and student donated resources, website links, and other module resources. In order to engage with the site, students simply had to log on with their unique user name and password from any mobile or laptop device that had

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<sup>1</sup> A vodcast is a video stored in a digital form (using a mobile device, or other recording equipment) to enable it to be broadcast over the Internet.

access to the Internet. This pilot approach to flip-like e-pedagogy was a first for the three course programmes involved.

### **Learning technologist support**

The expertise of a learning technologist enabled development of a site for the project which was populated with website links to the three countries, news feeds, a photograph gallery, Google maps, as well as other module resources. Learning technologists from PXL and UCT were also on hand to support their respective staff and students.

### **Discussion forums**

The discussion forums were facilitated by a number of CU graduates (n=4) who donated the Vodcasts, along with academic support from module tutors across the three institutions. In these forums, over a six-week period, the students explored a minimum of two scenarios, considering their response to the challenges faced when promoting professional perspectives within interagency, multidisciplinary team working. This pedagogical approach was designed to complement, and supplement students' current educational experiences on the respective modules; to encourage students to think creatively, engage in individual and group reflection, problem solving, and develop innovative ways to deliver international culturally-sensitive services.

Each week on the Moodle platform the students were prompted to consider different issues related to the scenarios by a series of prompts developed by the project team, (see figure 1).

***Please insert Figure 1: Example weekly prompts for students on the online discussion forum here***

### **Evaluation**



The project was evaluated to:

- Objectively examine any shifts in occupational therapy students' intercultural sensitivity
- Explore students' perceptions about the international experience, the approach to learning and the educational value of the international learning opportunity
- Examine student, graduate and academic perspectives and experience of this approach to pedagogy including lessons learnt and next stage developments

## **Ethics**

Ethical approval to conduct the evaluation was gained from each institution's research ethics committee. Participant information documents were circulated and informed consent accessed for all those who have agreed to take part. Issues of institutional and participant confidentiality will be respected. The anonymity of service user and service confidentiality was ensured within the presenting scenarios.

## **Methodology**

Case study methodology was used as it provides opportunity to develop greater understanding of a case (Simons, 2009), in particular a descriptive case study methodology was used as this seeks to provide a detailed account of the subject of study (Savin-Baden and Major, 2012: 155) and was therefore best suited to the focus of enhancing understanding of the students' perspectives about the learning experience. We situated our researcher stance within a social constructionist perspective (Gergen cited in Gergen and Gergen, 2003) acknowledging multiple perspectives and the importance of accounting for differences in institutional, student and societal demographics and distinction between the European and South African cultural and educational policy contexts.

## **Data collection**

Perspectives of the teaching and learning experience were captured through both qualitative and quantitative approaches:

#### *Qualitative data*

- Interviews with students
- Interviews with learning technologists
- The 'cutup' technique <sup>2</sup> (adapted from Burroughs, 1963) with stakeholder groups (occupational therapy students and graduates, academic staff).

The 'cutup' technique was used as a reflective writing approach. Student volunteers sent the research team a maximum 50 words of reflections about their learning journey each week. At the end of six weeks the words were returned for the students to create into a storied narrative.

#### *Quantitative data*

- Results from each institution's respective student Module Evaluation Form
- The Intercultural Sensitivity Scale

The Intercultural Sensitivity Scale (ISS) (Chen & Starosta, 2000) was used pre and post the six-week discussion forums. The scale measures intercultural sensitivity through a 24-item scale with five factors. *Interaction engagement* (7 items) deals with participants' feelings of participation in intercultural communication. *Respect for cultural differences* (6 items) deals with how participants orient to or tolerate other cultures or opinions. *Interaction confidence* (5 items) deals with how confident participants are in the intercultural setting. *Interaction enjoyment* (3 items) deals with participants' positive or negative reactions towards communicating with people from different cultures. *Interaction attentiveness* (3 items) deals with participants' efforts to

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<sup>2</sup> The cutup method was a mechanical method of juxtaposition used by Burroughs, an acclaimed filmmaker, who literally cut up passages of prose by himself and other writers and then pasted them back together at random.

understand what is going on in intercultural interaction. Five choices exist for each item: strongly disagree, disagree, neutral, agree, strongly agree.

The ISS has been used with success in a number of studies (Chen & Starosta, 2000; Fritz, Mollenberg, & Chen, 2002; McMurray 2007).

## **Analysis**

Parametric and non-parametric methods were used for analysis of the quantitative data. Of the 24 items of the ISS, 9 items were reverse-coded for data analysis, as these items were negatively-keyed in the ISS. Documentary and thematic analysis were used for the qualitative data (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

A focus for the analysis was how the data sets revealed student perspectives about the international learning experience preparation as well as their consideration of practice within the mental health arena. The analytic process involved a progression from description, where the data from students across the three institutions were organised to show patterns in content, and summarised, to interpretation, to where themes were developed, illustrating the significance of the patterns and their broader meanings and implications. This required an iterative process of reading, re-reading, preliminary coding and generation of themes and their subthemes. The themed areas captured something important about the data in relation to the research question, and represented some level of patterned response or meaning within the data set. The researchers kept reflective notes, highlighting connections and differences between the themes and their subthemes. Themes were defined and contextualized with data evidence.

## **Plausibility**

While validity and trustworthiness have provided a base for researchers to document the integrity of qualitative research, we argue for the notion of plausibility, which we suggest is at the heart of what the researcher must strive to do. In short, it is important to present a

plausible case of the research context and participants' experiences. Plausibility, is defined here as the need for conceptual framing, design and a clear location of methodology, methods and data interpretation (following Major & Savin-Baden 2010). Further, researcher reflexivity, maintaining data integrity and being explicit about the research methods employed were key strategies used to maintain plausibility.

## **Study Findings**

### **Quantitative data**

#### **Intercultural Sensitivity Scale (ISS)**

The numbers of participants who used the ISS are indicated in Table 3.

***Please insert Table 3 Respondents to the pre-test and post-test ISS (by institution)***

***here***

#### *ISS Findings*

In order to analyse the pre-test and post-test ISS scores, it was important to first determine whether analysis using the mean would provide an accurate picture of the data. A Shapiro-Wilk test was undertaken to check for normality distribution, due to its suitability for smaller samples. The pre-test total scores were normally distributed ( $p=.054$ ), with skewness of  $-.816$  ( $SE=.350$ ) and kurtosis of  $2.177$  ( $SE=.688$ ), but influenced by an outlier. The post-test total scores were normally distributed ( $p=.863$ ), with skewness of  $-.196$  ( $SE=.350$ ), kurtosis of  $-.358$  ( $SE=.688$ ), and no outliers. Having satisfied the normality assumptions, a paired-samples t-test was then conducted to compare the means of intercultural sensitivity in both pre-test and post-test conditions. These findings show that there was a significant difference in the total scores for the pre-test ( $M=96.9$ ,  $SD=7.68$ ) and post-test ( $M=102$ ,  $SD=7.84$ ) conditions;  $t(39)=-3.72$ ,  $p=0.000627$ ), meaning that for those 40 CU students who responded

to both pre-test and post-test surveys, there was a significant increase in their intercultural sensitivity.

Subsequent analyses were then conducted to examine the mean scores and differences for the five factors of interaction engagement, interaction enjoyment, respect for cultural differences, interaction attentiveness, and interaction confidence. For each factor, the data satisfied normality assumptions ( $p > 0.05$ ) using Shapiro-Wilk tests. Paired sample t-tests were carried out for all five factors, and thus a bonferroni correction was applied in which the p value of 0.005 was divided by 5 to result in a significance value of 0.01. Findings indicated that there was a significant difference in the scores for the interaction engagement pre-test ( $M=28.75$ ,  $SD=2.52$ ) and post-test ( $M=30.03$ ,  $SD=2.79$ ) conditions;  $t(39)=-2.898$ ,  $p=0.006$ . There was also a significant difference in the interaction confidence pre-test ( $M=17.70$ ,  $SD=2.30$ ) and post-test ( $M=19.50$ ,  $SD=2.57$ ) conditions;  $t(39)=-4.102$ ,  $p=0.000202$ . These results suggest that the 40 CU respondents to the pre-test and post-test ISS felt more engaged and confident in intercultural communication after they had participated in the module, and that their intercultural sensitivity subsequently increased. Whilst the mean scores of the other factors also increased, these were not statistically significant. The means were not compared across factors as there were varying numbers of items in each factor<sup>3</sup>.

## **Qualitative data**

The qualitative analysis revealed five overarching themes:

1. Beginnings: Intrigue, interest, hopes, trepidation
2. Using real scenarios from graduates first posts
3. Negotiating the Moodle site
4. Challenges of international engagement

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<sup>3</sup> There are a number of limitations that should be taken into account in the analysis of the ISS data. Firstly, it was not possible to include the data from PXL University College and the UCT due to limited numbers. Additionally, the retention for CU students was only 44.44%.

## 5. Connecting and learning with others

Each theme is explored in turn.

### **1. Beginnings: Intrigue, interest, hopes, trepidation**

The theme captures students' anticipation about 'knowing what to do', and feeling 'able to do it' as well as a general excitement about the professional learning opportunity. Early responses can be seen from these students' reflections below:

*At first I was worried as I did not know much about the module, as the lectures and seminars happened I was able to understand more about the international perspectives and how it relates to OT. Also, participating in the group forum it was interesting to see others views and experiences they have within OT. (PXL student)*

*Admittedly I logged on this week with some slight trepidation as I anticipated what was to come. As of yet I just have questions that I hope will be answered throughout the exercise. Will I understand the case studies? Will I have anything of value to add? What learning can I take from this experience? (CU student)*

This beginning phase marked a process of discovery and adaptation. Students did not respond to the learning environment, content and website materials in consistent ways and came with different expectations, hopes, and ideas, as the following theme goes on to explore.

### **2. Using real scenarios from graduates first posts**

Moving into the first discussion week saw the students settle into exploring graduate scenarios from two different countries (although students were able to access to all the scenarios at the end of the module). Students were largely positive regarding the creative media used, including use of Vodcasts and found this enhanced their learning. The 'real life'

aspect of the video presentations was very well received and this seemed to encourage student engagement. However, many expressed their desire for more background case information and deeper links into the situational context. An appreciation of the differing cultural practices and experiences began to emerge:

*I now have a better understanding of occupational therapy in these different countries. I've received a lot of information about cultural influences, and the actions that are taken to guarantee the patients well-being in all different domains. Being able to discuss everyone's opinions, health care systems and all different possibilities in these countries was very insightful. I'm glad I had the opportunity to interact with students from other schools and countries. It was both fun and interesting. (PXL student)*

*It was more interesting than if we were given fake scenarios and having the videos and actually seeing the person talk about their experience was far more interactive than being given a fake scenario typed out in a word document. I think knowing it is something real that someone has experienced makes a difference in the motivation to actually give the scenarios real consideration. (CU student)*

At this point, students were clearly beginning to consider the national and international implications of their studies, and considering how practice might apply in different contexts. They then began to seek out interaction with students from other countries.

### **3. Negotiating the Moodle site**

It was evident the Open Moodle site proved challenging for some to navigate and others felt overwhelmed by the amount of information:

*If they had put headings in the Moodle page stating which week the documents and work belonged to I think that would have made things much easier. I think in this 3rd year we have that many different sites to navigate (Open Moodle, Learnium, Moodle) that simplicity would make people more motivated to participate in the work. (CU student)*

*I did not know which online seminar I was supposed to be watching or what I was meant to be reading that week. (PXL student)*

Support was on hand though, as this one student shared:

*On Monday I contacted the technical support as I could not access the transcripts for the videos, which was really important, especially as in one video the lady spoke in another language....This reminded me of the importance when communicating with people of the need to have information accessible in different means. (UCT student)*

In terms of engaging in the online discussion it was evident this required students to develop new skills and confidence to both initiate and continue discussion threads.

#### **4. Challenges of international engagement**

This theme acknowledges some of the challenges pertaining to international engagement across the student discussion forums which needed to be negotiated to meet learning outcomes. It illustrates how the students related to one another and sought to exchange ideas. It also highlights how student, graduate and tutor interactions prompted both challenge and disruption.

The difficulty that was most forthcoming was that of international representation amongst students from all three universities. In some discussion forums it was highlighted that there



was a lack of representation from UCT and PXL students. The need for more connection and input from international students on the forum is evident in the voices of the CU students below:

*The international perspective would have been provided a fantastic learning opportunity. It is always great to hear the views of my fellow cohort, but I wanted to also hear the perspectives from the two Cape Town University students. I am hoping that this week, they will participate and enlighten us with their views. (CU student)*

*Would there be a way of making it compulsory for international students to contribute, I feel we missed out on their opinions and experience. (CU student).*

On further reflection in grappling with understanding this complexity, it could be understood that the language barrier played a role in affecting international contribution. Students acknowledged the hurdles within communication when working with others across different cultures and language. The Belgium, students for example, were most affected by linguistic barriers due to English not being their first language:

*First of all I want to address the language use of question one during week two. My home language is Dutch and I had a hard time to translate the sentences used to formulate the question 1. ...It literally took me a half an hour to translate the question and I hope I interpreted it correctly. Would it be possible to divide long sentence to make them easier to read for the Belgian users (and maybe the South-African users also?). (PXL student)*

What was revealing though was how students were often keen to offer suggestions to help improve the delivery of the learning, rather than just raising their concerns.

It was further evident that managing one another's expectations, specifically with regards to knowing what to post on the international discussion forums presented an additional layer of challenge:

*I find online discussions a little intimidating as there is always a rush for people to post and sometimes it is difficult to come up with an original point when all of yours have been mentioned...Some members wrote quite lengthy posts which were hard to digest and, I feel discouraged others. (CU student)*

It was also evident that tutors' phrasing of the scenario questions prompted new levels of thinking, translating and interpretation in order that students' could figure out their response and contribute to the discussion. Students felt that at times the questions were too complex and difficult to engage with:

*The second question that was posed for the scenarios this week was very wordy. I was also slightly unsure as to whether we were meant to be thinking of ways we think they could have developed the service, or simply discussing the ways that they [the graduates] had already tried to be creative to develop the service. (PXL student)*

It was interesting to observe how students coped with the situation of being with others in a learning situation having to manage the 'not knowing' and needing to be responsive within situations of uncertainty. It was evident that the students wanted more guidance up front about their learning journey and what would take place over the 6 weeks. Some students remarked that if they had prior knowledge about the study themes it would have helped them engage in richer discussion:

*I felt like the last week was a bit disheartening. Barely anybody commented on my online forum last week to reflect on their experiences. Those of us that did had little to*

*reflect on because people had been so inactive about the whole experience. I heard many people claiming they had not made any online contributions at all. I felt slightly frustrated by this as I had been on consistently each week and answered the questions (CU student)*

It was also questioned by some that as students' online contributions were not summatively assessed the motivation to engage waned:

*This week there have been only a few of our group contributing to the scenarios. Whilst there may be a variety of reasons for this, and I should to jump to conclusions, I wonder if some people are not posting because it is unmarked work. (CU student)*

Using online discussion forums to discuss professional perspectives, and across different countries and cultures, was a new experience for all in many ways. Whilst the CU students were used to communicating their learning through such online learning platforms the anticipated practices and skills of international online discussion required a new and different skill set.

Whilst there were hurdles and challenges which impacted students' engagement, the opportunity to discuss professional perspectives with international peers and learn more about the role and scope of the profession across different contexts was clearly considered to be a positive educational endeavour, as the following section explores.

## **5. Connecting and learning with others**

This theme illustrates the enjoyment of interacting with students from other contexts as well as the learner gains the project offered the students. It illustrates the resulting insight it offered students about their (globalised) profession:

*We were given the opportunity to learn something new in and about our profession that we can certainly use in our internship and future jobs. (PXL student)*

Furthermore, as the excerpt below illustrates, the discussions prompted students to consider their professional values, therapeutic/clinical reasoning and professional identity:

*This week enabled me to think beyond my opinion but also identify legislations and policies and how these may impact on the service and the issues we identify. It was interesting talking to the international students. I didn't expect the case studies we were given, they really opened my eyes to issues and challenges occupational therapists may face within the wider context. They enabled me to think about how skills that can be represented with OTs for example being a problem solver and creativity can really help others (CU student)*

This final quotation resonates with a number of student reflections about the experience and the benefits and hurdles of shared learning for shared understanding:

*One of the highlights of our discussion is the use of a multi-disciplinary team and how it would be effective and beneficial for the patient's care if as many members come together to gain a better understanding of one another's perspective and somewhere in that discussion, we identified that this could be difficult at times as it is a challenge to bring lots of people together. I would say that (through this online discussion forum) that I've had a real life experience of how difficult it is to bring people together for a learning discussion despite how valuable it is, but how interesting is it that when people feel busy or overwhelmed by their work-case-load that the benefits of learning can easily be overlooked. (CU student)*

## Discussion

In considering how well the curriculum equips graduates for mental health practice, the contribution of propositional knowledge (professional theory, professional constructs, philosophical underpinnings) as well as the importance of process and ways of acting in the world (disciplinary values, reserves of strategies for practical implementation, the influence of academic staff) are of particular note (Wimpenny & Lewis, 2015).

Evidence from developmental psychology suggests that significant learning and personal growth can occur when one is exposed to unfamiliar experiences or ideas (Hurtado, 2001). This project was designed to encourage students to think creatively about their professional contribution, to discuss strategies and consider ways to manage levels of uncertainty and complexity in their professional practice (Ravasi & Turati, 2005; Gibb 2007). The projects' international discussion forum provided students with a real world opportunity to consider professional issues from a global perspective, aiming to facilitate students' confidence as occupational therapists in a global context, considering contemporary mental health practice. The focus was therefore not only to enable the exploration of theory underpinning the current context, but to up-skill students with practical means of contributing to their future mental health practice.

Technology enhanced learning continues to be a priority for further development educationally and professionally (Krutky, 2008; Rogers, Mulholland, Derald et al., 2011). Setting up this innovative international online forum involved a great deal of work that was agreed across partners led by Coventry. Complex scenarios donated by graduates on their first year of work provided students with clearly valued first hand content from the world of practice. Working in international groups offered students opportunities to interact with other students' cultural models, leading to the disruption of their respective ways of thinking, and to the generation of new discourse. Although UCT and PXL Limburg could only offer optional

engagement from students, having international scenarios to focus upon still required students to consider a globalised perspective of practice including entrepreneurship elements of professional practice. As expected, this was reflected in mid module and end of module evaluations.

As students engaged with one another and encountered difference in fellow student perspectives and epistemologies it was at first challenging for them to generate active dialogue or to reach productive consensus. In addition, as none of the PXL students were native English speakers, they expressed initial trepidation about being able to participate in the online conversation. To help problem solve this issue, PXL staff organised weekly participant meetings enabling students to overcome their initial fears, to express their difficulties and to encourage and help each other to engage in the new issues proposed.

The focus on mental health practice scenarios prompting students to think about how their core skills of occupational analysis, critical reflection, therapeutic reasoning and creativity are required was well received. Students and graduates together were able to examine socio-cultural-political challenges impacting client and community empowerment. They also were required to consider their role in promoting issues of social justice, social activism and advocacy with, and on behalf of people and communities. Students appreciated their need to be ever resourceful as practitioners, to articulate a robust evidence base for their practice, and to enhance the quality of life for those within whom they work through the power of meaningful occupation.

Education must also prepare students for a world that is increasingly interconnected, independent and diverse. Students need on-going practice and multiple opportunities to learn how to form and maintain relationships effectively communicate, and work co-operatively with people from different backgrounds (Krutky, 2008).

Students need opportunity in the curriculum to develop awareness, knowledge about others and skill development, even on campuses that explicitly promote diversity or internationalisation initiatives (Otten 2003: 14). However, as Smith (2010) argues, attention is needed to prevent intercultural learning being viewed as an add-on to existing pedagogy and curriculum, which may result in students not seeing the relevance or connection of such learning to their developing practice perspectives.

Preparing graduates for an uncertain world requires a curriculum that is willing to manage uncertainties; a curriculum whose pedagogy embraces open, interconnected and negotiated learning intentions, including recognition of the risks associated with such approaches (Savin-Baden, 2008). Further, a curriculum, which maintains the excitement about the philosophy of life that our profession offers is required, in order that graduates are prepared to be visible and influential practitioners, ready to challenge and broaden the scope and reach of occupational therapy in mental health (Wimpenny & Lewis, 2016).

## **Conclusion**

There is a pressing need to prepare occupational therapists to work in mental health and research is required to determine how the curriculum can prepare graduates to take on the challenge of working with colleagues when perspectives and assumptions differ. As a profession we need to explore strategies for breaking down barriers that stifle and restrict what occupational therapy can achieve. This includes how the educational experience prepares graduates to contain, support, seek change and manage political and professional structures to enhance the mental wellbeing of individual, groups and communities through occupation.

This study explored the role of an online international learning opportunity as a means of preparing graduate occupational therapists for the field of mental health and beyond. As evidenced in this project, when challenges in engagement and learning occur, is it important to interpret them and respond in ways that can deepen students' learning. Significantly, this study has revealed that more opportunity is needed within the curriculum to enable students to wrestle with uncertainty, risk and educational challenge, and to replace their feelings of doubt and insecurity with improved agency, in order to be able to manage the 'not knowing', to tolerate complexity, and be resilient.



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