

## Short Report

This study replicated a survey of first-year occupational therapy students at Brunel University (Craig et al 2001) and 114 students (91.2%) responded. Their profile was similar to that of the students in the previous study, with 90% being female, 65% being over 21 years of age and 20% coming from minority ethnic groups. The most frequent way that the students had heard about occupational therapy remained through informal means, with variety and challenge continuing to be the most important factors in attracting potential students to the profession. The results of this study, taken with those of Craig et al (2001), provide data on 444 first-year students and further emphasise the importance of occupational therapists in encouraging recruitment to the profession.

# The Career Choice of First-Year Occupational Therapy Students: a Follow-Up Study

*Christine Craik and Jean-Marie Zaccaria*

## Introduction

The increase in the number of occupational therapists to be educated (Department of Health [DH] 2000a, 2000b, 2002) has focused attention on student recruitment, especially because there has been a decrease in the number of applicants for occupational therapy courses (College of Occupational Therapists 2002a). A study of 330 first-year students at Brunel University between 1996 and 1999 (Craig et al 2001) provided baseline data of how the students had discovered and investigated occupational therapy and established the factors that influenced the students' choice of career and of university. A subsequent national recruitment study by the College of Occupational Therapists (2002b) provided further information which supported many of these findings.

Establishing trends over a period of years provides additional information and may indicate changes in the profile of students. It may also indicate responses to previous recruitment strategies and guide future recruitment activity. This study aimed to gather data on a further cohort of first-year students at Brunel University to increase the existing database of student profiles, to compare the results with the previous study and to explore possible trends.

## Method

The method described by Craig et al (2001) was replicated to facilitate comparison of the results. However, Craig et al (2001) had noted the limitations of not updating their

questionnaire to include websites as a way of discovering or researching occupational therapy and that option was incorporated into the present questionnaire.

Following approval by the Brunel University Ethics Committee, the modified questionnaire was distributed to first-year students after their attendance at a lecture during 2001. They were invited to complete the questionnaire, having been advised that participation was voluntary and that they could withdraw at any time. In addition, they were informed that the questionnaire was anonymous, the responses would be confidential and the data would be kept secure.

The data were analysed using content analysis and the Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS), which was used to generate descriptive statistics.

## Results

### Response rate

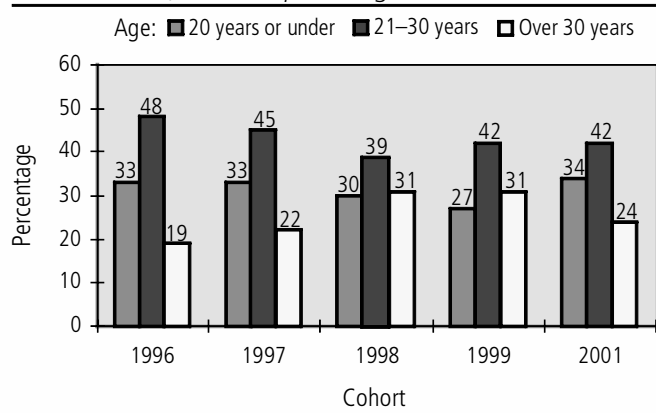
In 2001, 114/125 full-time and part-time first-year occupational therapy students completed and returned the questionnaire, representing a response rate of 91.2%. This was higher than the response rate of any of the 1996-1999 cohorts reported by Craig et al (2001), where the overall response rate was 75%.

### Demographic factors

Three students did not indicate their gender; of the remainder, 90.1% (100/111) were female and 9.9% (11/111) were male, almost identical to the 90.6%

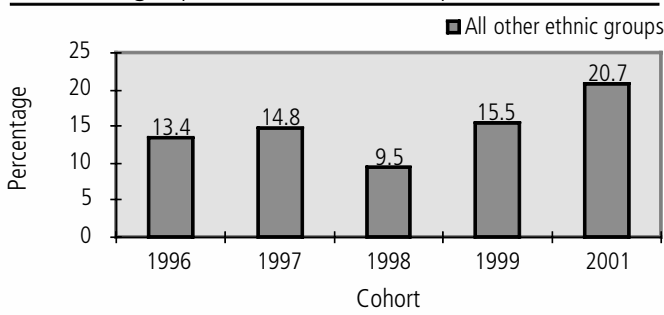
(299/330) female and 9.4% (31/330) male students in the previous study (Craik et al 2001). Similarly, three students did not report their age; of the remainder, 34.2% (38/111) were aged 20 years or under and 65.8% (73/111) were aged 21 years or over. The results for all 5 years are shown in Fig. 1, where the percentage of students under 21, which had been declining, demonstrates a small increase in 2001.

Fig. 1. Comparison of age at entry to occupational therapy education of first-year occupational therapy students between 1996 and 2001, shown in percentages.



The students were asked to indicate their ethnic origin from African, Afro-Caribbean, Asian, Oriental, White European and Other. Three students did not respond and 79.3% (88/111) classified themselves as White European. As with the previous study, the students from the other ethnic groups have been considered together. At 20.7% (23/111), this was the highest percentage of students from minority ethnic groups in the 5 years of the study and, apart from 1998, indicated an increasing percentage as shown in Fig. 2.

Fig. 2. Percentage of first-year occupational therapy students from ethnic groups other than White European.



## Work in health care

The students were asked if they had worked in a health care setting prior to starting occupational therapy education and 67.6% (75/111) reported that they had, a percentage similar to the 71.2% (235/330) that was reported in the previous study. Again, three students did not respond.

## Methods of first hearing about occupational therapy

From a list of options, all the students indicated the one method through which they had first heard about

occupational therapy. As displayed in Table 1, four of the top five methods, accounting for two-thirds of the responses, remained the same, with a slight change in order. Work in a health care setting remained the most prevalent method, although the percentage fell from 30% in 1996-1999 to 24.6% in 2001. While researching allied health professions moved from being the third method to the fifth and non-occupational therapist family member or friend moved from being the fourth to second equal. Six (5.3%) students reported using a variety of websites. Five students specified an 'other' method: two of them cited the Brunel University prospectus, two applied as occupational therapy technicians and one had met an occupational therapist at a nightclub. As before, the radio and occupational therapy publications were not chosen; nor were television, newspapers or guest speakers, although they had been noted previously. To simplify comparisons, these choices were omitted from Table 1; consequently, the totals are not 100%. The remaining 14 methods are displayed in rank order for the 2001 results.

Table 1. Comparison of the rank order of methods of first hearing about occupational therapy, reported by 444 first-year occupational therapy students

Methods	% of students	
	n = 330 1996-1999	n = 114 2001
Work in a health care setting .....	30.0	24.6
Occupational therapist/student family member/friend ...	16.7	15.8
Non-occupational therapist family member/friend .....	9.7	15.8
Visit to hospital or clinic .....	4.9	9.6
While researching allied health professions .....	11.8	8.8
School careers adviser or teacher .....	7.0	7.0
Websites .....	0	5.3
Other .....	6.4	4.4
College/university careers fair/open day .....	1.5	3.5
Literature from school .....	1.5	1.8
Self or other received occupational therapy .....	4.2	0.9
College adviser .....	2.1	0.9
Vocational test .....	1.8	0.9
Employers' career fair .....	0.9	0.9

## Methods of pursuing initial interest in occupational therapy

All the students chose from a list of methods the ones that they had used to pursue their initial interest in occupational therapy, creating a total of 195 choices. The results in 2001, shown in rank order, were similar to those in previous years, with the first five methods, accounting for almost two-thirds of the responses, being the same (Table 2). The College of Occupational Therapists moved from third to fourth place. Seven students noted an 'other' method: four through work experience, one reporting having no initial interest, one phoning the university and one going on a course.

## Importance of factors in the decision to pursue occupational therapy as a career

From a choice of very important, fairly important and unimportant, all the students rated 16 factors that had

**Table 2. Comparison of the methods used by 444 first-year occupational therapy students to pursue their initial interest in occupational therapy shown as the percentage choosing each option**

Methods	% of students	
	n = 748	n = 195
	1996-1999	2001
University/college prospectus .....	16.7	18.9
Contacting occupational therapy department .....	15.5	16.4
Occupational therapist friend/family member .....	10.2	11.3
College of Occupational Therapists .....	13.1	9.2
University/college open day .....	7.6	8.7
College careers office/adviser .....	7.1	7.2
School careers office/adviser .....	6.4	6.7
Employment in occupational therapy department .....	5.7	6.7
Library .....	7.1	5.6
Other .....	3.9	3.6
Local authority careers office .....	4.1	2.1
Purchase of careers guide .....	2.5	2.1
Websites .....	0	1.5

influenced their decision to pursue occupational therapy as a career. The results are shown in Table 3 and are in rank order of the number judging an option as very important. Overall, the ranking changed little in 2001. Variety of work settings and challenge/variety remained the top choices. Having a holistic approach moved down four places while one-to-one contact moved up four places.

**Table 3. Comparison of the rank order of importance of factors in the decision of 444 first-year occupational therapy students to pursue occupational therapy as a career**

Factors	Rank order	
	n = 330	n = 114
	1996-1999	2001
Variety of work settings .....	1	1
Challenge/variety .....	2	1
Client/patient appreciation .....	4	3
One-to-one contact .....	8	4
Lots of personal contact .....	3	5
Desire to help disabled people .....	6	6
Work in a health setting .....	7	7
Chance to use creativity .....	10	8
Holistic approach .....	5	9
Job availability .....	9	10
Combines crafts and medicine .....	11	11
Professional status/honours degree .....	12	12
Opportunity for promotion .....	14	13
Good salary .....	16	14
Regular weekday hours .....	13	15
Advice from someone .....	15	16

## Discussion

In comparing the results of the survey of these 114 first-year occupational therapy students in 2001 with those of the 330 students in 1996-1999 (Craik et al 2001), the gender profile remained almost identical. The age-groups were similar,

with a small reversal in the previously steady increase in the percentage of students over the age of 30 years. Craik et al (2001) suggested that the profession's success in recruiting mature students could also be seen as a difficulty in attracting younger students (College of Occupational Therapists 2002b). The present results could indicate that recent efforts to attract younger students have been successful, with the percentage of students under 21 years increasing from 27% to 34% between 1999 and 2001. However, two-thirds of the students were over 21 years of age, the definition of mature used by the Universities and Colleges Admissions Service (UCAS). There was an increase in the percentage of students from a minority ethnic background which reached over 20% in 2001, reflecting the population of the United Kingdom in general and the location of Brunel University in West London in particular. This trend, which has been advocated by the National Health Service (DH 2000b), is in contrast to the findings of the College of Occupational Therapists (2002b) in its national survey.

The percentage of the students with previous experience of work in health care was fairly constant over the period of the study. It remained the most prevalent method through which the respondents first heard about occupational therapy, confirming the results of related studies (Craik and Naphine 2001, Craik and Wyatt-Rollason 2002). This further emphasises the influence of informal methods, such as discussion with occupational therapists or friends and family (College of Occupational Therapists 2002b), as methods of discovering the profession. While researching allied health professions moved down from the third to the fifth most common method of discovering the profession, but this still supports the concept that occupational therapy may benefit from promotion with other related professions (Craik and Wyatt-Rollason 2002). Six (5.3%) students reported that they had used websites as a method of finding out about occupational therapy. Although this was a small number, it is likely to become an important method of promoting the profession in the future as use of the internet increases (College of Occupational Therapists 2002b).

The principal methods that the students used to follow up their initial interest in the profession were similar to those in the previous study, but there were some changes in the order. The percentage of students using the College of Occupational Therapists decreased while the percentage using university prospectuses and occupational therapy contacts increased.

These results add weight to the role of occupational therapists in practice to promote the profession, both to attract new recruits and, probably more importantly, to provide further information to those whose initial interest has already been captured. However, as Craik and Ross (2003) suggested, although occupational therapy managers considered that they should take an active role in promoting the profession as a career, few did so.

The factors considered important in the decision to pursue occupational therapy as a career remained similar, with variety of work settings and challenge/variety continuing to be the most frequently reported. However,

having one-to-one contact became a more important feature than having a holistic approach. Material factors, such as regular weekday hours, good salary and opportunity for promotion, remained at the lower end of the rank order, as indicated in an earlier study (Craik and Napthine 2001).

## Conclusion

Although there are limitations in considering students at only one university, examining the data from these two studies together provides an account of 444 occupational therapy students over a period of 6 years. Their gender and age profile remained similar, but there was an encouraging trend in their ethnic diversity. The profession remained successful in attracting mature students, but the recent increase in the number of students under 21 years of age might indicate that efforts to promote the profession to them had had some success. If the profession is to attract sufficient recruits to meet the workforce requirements then appealing to a wide variety of people is essential. In particular, occupational therapy may benefit from being promoted in conjunction with other health and social care professions, some of which may have a higher profile.

The students continued to have been attracted to occupational therapy by its variety and challenge and to be less interested in material factors. This information is important to those people in universities, the National Health Service and the College of Occupational Therapists who are responsible for designing promotional literature, which should emphasise these aspects. Work in health care remained the most frequently reported route through which the students had first heard about the profession. Again, this is valuable information for accessing potential recruits and further emphasises the importance of occupational therapy practitioners and managers in promoting the recruitment of future therapists. Equally, it suggests that other avenues of approaching potential recruits have not yet been successfully exploited and that innovative strategies are required to consider where potential recruits may be found.

This study adds to the developing literature on the recruitment of occupational therapy students (Craik and Napthine 2001, Craik et al 2001, Craik and Wyatt-Rollason 2002, COT 2002b) and provides information essential to the recruitment of future occupational therapy students. If the profession is to expand and flourish, this information must not be ignored.

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## Authors

- Christine Craik, MPhil, DMS, DipCOT, MCMI, ILTM, SROT, Director of Occupational Therapy, Department of Health and Social Care, Brunel University, Osterley Campus, Borough Road, Isleworth, Middlesex TW7 5DU. Email: Christine.Craik@brunel.ac.uk
- Jean-Marie Zaccaria, BSc(Hons), SROT, formerly Occupational Therapy Student, Brunel University.