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Building a strong academic workforce: Challenges for the profession

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Building a strong academic workforce: Challenges for the profession

Abstract

Over the last 20 years Australia has seen a huge growth in new occupational therapy programs. Each new program is an historic event that changes occupational therapy's national profile. Each new course raises expectations. Governments fund universities expecting a civic and economic return on public investment through teaching, community engagement and research. Universities expect occupational therapy academic staff to fulfil this institutional obligation and bring a return on staffing and infrastructure costs. Students expect their employability, life and career opportunities will be enhanced. The profession expects the program will be high quality and will add to occupational therapy's esteem. Clients and the community expect ethical, safe and competent graduates will help them.

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Editorial June issue

Creating a strong academic workforce: Challenges for the profession

Over the last 20 years Australia has seen a huge growth in new occupational therapy programs. Each new program is an historic event that changes occupational therapy's national profile. Each new course raises expectations. Governments fund universities expecting a civic and economic return on public investment through teaching, community engagement and research. Universities expect occupational therapy academic staff to fulfil this institutional obligation and bring a return on staffing and infrastructure costs. Students expect their employability, life and career opportunities will be enhanced. The profession expects the program will be high quality and will add to occupational therapy's esteem. Clients and the community expect ethical, safe and competent graduates will help them.

Occupational therapy academic staff are the key to whether or not these expectations are met. The profession knows this. Consequently, occupational therapy program accreditation carefully examines staff numbers, qualifications and expertise. The profession needs to know whether staff can deliver what is expected in teaching, research and community engagement. Universities want to ensure their staff have the qualifications and capacity to deliver on government, student and community expectation. Research is a defining attribute of a university and this is why universities must employ research-trained and research productive occupational therapists. Development of research-trained academics is, however, a lengthy process. A 2014 bachelor graduate for example, who has achieved first class honours can apply for entry into a three year full-time PhD. Therefore, uninterrupted full time enrolment from undergraduate commencement to PhD completion is at a minimum, around seven years. But Standard full time PhD progression is uncommon. By the time a 2014 honours graduate has completed a PhD it could be anything from 2018 to 2024. Current occupational therapy academic program leaders must therefore operate with 2024 staffing agendas and outcomes in mind.

One strategy to staff academic programs is to "grow your own". However, a new occupational therapy academic program has to wait about 10 years for members of the first cohort to be qualified for an academic role. More often it takes longer because occupational therapists like to practice before committing to research training; or they prefer research training part-time while they practice. Academic workforce planning has a long term horizon

Although the number of PhD graduates has increased, the number of programs that want them has too. Since the 1970s Australian occupational therapy programs have more than doubled. More are on the way. Anecdotally academic workforce demand outstrips supply; in part because of the long lead time needed to develop entry level academics; in part because Australian academics rarely move institutions; and in part because international recruitment has limited impact. Competition between universities for PhD qualified and experienced academic staff is thus intense.

In this context is it not surprising that a local default "grow your own" workforce development strategy has emerged. A program's bachelor graduates already know supervising staff and their expertise; they enter research training programs, experience supervised part-time teaching along the way, develop a research record, and teaching, research and community engagement collaborations. They enter the program's academic workforce "fully formed".

“Growing your own” requires deliberate and strategic mentoring where personal and program related development is balanced with the need for future leaders of the profession. Homogeneity is a program risk, but this can be moderated with thoughtful research and career development. But is “grow your own” the best way forward when the quality and viability of Australian occupational therapy academic programs is at stake? To date, there have been few nation-wide efforts to build the occupational therapy academic workforce. A rare example targeting curriculum renewal and evaluation capacity, was the project lead by Professor Sylvia Rodger, sponsored by the Australian government through the Office for Learning & Teaching in 2011 (www.olt.gov.au). Still issues of academic workforce supply and demand have yet to be seriously and strategically considered. This is in contrast to sustained national attention on practitioner supply and demand, for example through the government funded Australian Institute of Health and Welfare and Health Workforce Australia. As the number of occupational therapy programs continues to increase, we suggest now is a good time to examine occupational therapy academic programs from a workforce planning perspective.

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