

Exploring the experiences of Occupational Therapy (OT) staff involved in the onboarding of internationally trained Occupational Therapists (ITOT's) in the East of England

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INTRODUCTION:

Between 2020 and 2024, there were significant workforce shortages in the UK health sector.



Figure 1.
 East of England AHP vacancies
 Data Source: NHS Digital (2023)

To address that shortage, international recruitment became a strategic solution.

Table 1 (HCPC,2019; HCPC,2023) illustrates the increase of up 49,3% in the recruitment of ITOTs because of the intentional “boosting of international recruitment” (Iacobucci, 2018) through initiatives such as the NHS England “International Occupational Therapists Programme” that ran from mid-2023.

| Occupational therapists | Grandparenting | International | UK | Total |
|-------------------------|----------------|---------------|--------|--------|
| Dec-19 | 2 | 2,669 | 36,885 | 39,556 |
| Oct-23 | 2 | 3984 | 41236 | 45222 |
| Headcount increase | 0 | 1315 | 4351 | 5666 |
| % increase | | 49.3% | 11.8% | 14.3% |

The result is that the UK is increasingly relying on international recruitment as a strategy to mitigate the significant workforce shortages in health and social care.

AIM:

This study investigated OT staff experiences with onboarding ITOTs in the East of England, addressing an under-explored area amid the rise of international recruitment.

The findings aimed to highlight onboarding practices for OT staff and make recommendations to improve this process

METHODOLOGY:

- Exploratory research design
- Interpretative Phenomenological Approach (IPA).
- **Participants:** Ten participants; purposive sampling
- **Data collection:** Semi-structured interviews
- **Data analysis:** IPA's six-stage framework.
- Meaning comes from personal experience (interpretivist constructivism)
- Duality as researcher

THEMES & SUB-THEMES

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|--|---|
| Theme 1: “We did not come out of the box with it” | 1. No ITOT-specific onboarding process in place at time of recruitment 2. An ITOT-specific process is needed |
| Theme 2: Onboarding ITOT’s is complex and demanding | 1. Being an experienced clinician does not make it easier 2. It is resource intensive, time-consuming and stressful 3. It burdens the team 4. Benefits outweigh the challenges |
| Theme 3: Getting through the barrier: How cultural differences shape the onboarding experiences | 1. Highlights cultural differences 2. Creates complex team dynamics & relationships |
| Theme 4: The struggle is real: Frustrations and adjustments of onboarding staff. | 1. ITOT’s are not fit for role 2. ITOT’s need significant pastoral support and guidance |

Theme 1:
 “we did not come out of the box with it”

“...it's a work in progress.”
 -Jane

“We don’t have a separate process....I don’t know in detail what nurses and doctors do, but I know they have a programme, they have more resources” - Esther

“There has been a lot of complaints of how our teams speaks to each other...”– Sheila

“... if you’re not seeing someone that looks like you, It’s going to impact on how you relate to a, to a team. I think for her, our team is...well, pretty white. It’s going to impact how you relate....on a deeper level.”
 -Jade

Theme 3:
 “Cultural Differences shape the experience”

Theme 2:
 “...it’s complex and demanding”

“...struggling. Okay, emotionally as well as physically. You are giving a lot of support, And lots of joint support, apart from holding on my caseload as well! “ -Rose

“...a lot of support is need day-to-day. Just with things like a phonecall...Just on-going, really from, from all the senior members in the team”
 - Daisy

“They’re a bit like a deer caught in headlights. They don’t know the wards...how it works. They are unsure of how general life in England works, so they’ve got it from both angles.” -Bobbie

So even on weekends... I did more checking, check in calls...” -Esther

“...sometimes you're annoyed that I'm an assistant...you're like the qualified! -Lilly

Theme 4:
 “The struggle is real”

Conclusion:

“Not a quick fix, but long-term investment”

- OT-specific onboarding programmes
- Flexible policies
- Senior manager involvement
- Peer support (self and ITOT)
- Use of digital tools for communication and training
- Improved preboarding/ communication with teams

Solutions:

- Structured mentoring programs
- Onboarding support forums
- Cultural awareness training- all staff
- Collaboration between UK professional bodies and international OT communities
- Clinical skills training
- Identify transferable skills.

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