

Professional learning through community development projects: Perceptions of graduates in Aotearoa New Zealand



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Community Development Placements:

- Critical Occupational Therapy practice
 - Addresses community need
 - Participation and collaboration
 - Promote occupational justice
- (Peters et al, 2025)

Otago Polytechnic students work in teams on an 8 week community development placement, with a community partner.

The Aim of the Study:

To explore the benefits of Community Development Placements, from the perceptions of graduate Occupational Therapists

Method

Qualitative descriptive methodology using mixed methods:

- Online survey
- Online face-to-face interviews

Participant Included:

- Graduates (6 months after completing the course)
- Occupational Therapists (18 months after graduation)

Community Placement Partners include:

- Community organisations
- Social care providers (eg homeless hostel)
- Schools
- Local Council departments and Trusts
- Workplaces
- Tertiary student support

Survey Participants	2024	2025	Total	Interviews
Graduates (6 months after completion)	22	9	31	5
Occupational Therapists (18 months after completion)	19	17	35	0

Survey Results:

“How beneficial would you rate the placement to you as a learning experience?”

Rating	Graduates (n=31)	Occupational Therapists (n=35)	Together (n=66)
Excellent	4 (13%)	3 (9%)	7 (10.5%)
A lot	9 (29%)	12 (37%)	21 (32%)
Some	10 (32%)	13 (17%)	23 (35%)
Minimal	6 (19%)	6 (17%)	12 (18%)
None	2 (6%)	1 (3%)	3 (4.5%)

- Overall participants perceived the placement was beneficial to their learning
- Occupational Therapists perception of the learning benefits were higher than graduates

“Rate the extent to which your project addressed occupational need or occupational injustice in the community?”

Rating	Graduates (n=31)	Occupational Therapists (n=35)	Together (n=66)
Extensively	2 (6%)	3 (9%)	5 (7.5%)
Clearly	14 (45%)	10 (29%)	24 (36%)
Somewhat	10 (32%)	12 (34%)	22 (33%)
Minimally	4 (13%)	7 (20%)	11 (16.5%)
Did not Address	1 (3%)	3 (9%)	4 (6%)

- Overall participants perceived that most projects addressed occupational needs or injustice
- Graduates rated this more highly than occupational therapists

Qualitative Data and Interview Results

Six Key Themes



Project Outcomes & Impact

Desire to see the real-world application of their work; uncertainty if it made a difference



Collaboration with Community Partners

Need for earlier, ongoing engagement with CPs to align goals and expectations



Misconceptions about OT

Many CPs and students started without clarity about OT's scope or role



Realistic Planning & Growth

Challenges around scope, time, and feasibility of delivering project outcomes



Skill Development & Growth

Despite challenges, many students reflected on learning and confidence gained



Occupational Justice Lens

Recognition of OT's role in addressing systemic barriers and enabling participation

Quotes

“The community project itself was amazing. But it is hard to say if we added any value - things we suggested were probably things they were going to find out anyway.”

“Really enjoyed it!!! Definitely grateful for the experience... but it didn't seem to have a lot of relevance to working as an OT.”

Discussion

Graduates perceptions of a community development placement, 6 months and 18 months after graduating were mixed.

Despite some very positive responses, others question the value of the placement to themselves, to the community partner, or to their professional development as occupational therapists.

Overall graduates highly valued:

- Teamwork
- Exposure to communities
- Developing a broader perspective of Occupational Therapy

Differences between responses at 6 months and at 18 months after graduation suggests that the value of the placements may become more apparent as the graduates careers progress, and they begin to adopt a broader range of roles and especially if working in community settings.

Initially the placements were not perceived as valuable preparation for clinical roles.

Implications and Recommendations

Community development placements aim to ensure that graduate occupational therapists have the skills and confidence to partner with communities and require a different orientation to practice, when compared to clinical placements. Graduates who gravitate towards clinical roles may not value the relevance of a community development placement learning.

Recommendation:

Strengthen links between the skills and knowledge gained in community development placements to a range of occupational therapy roles.

The positioning of the placement at the very end of the course, results in uncertainty about the impact and benefit of the placement to the community partner.

Recommendation:

Longer engagement periods between the students and the community partner and opportunities for post-placement feedback to be explored.

A copy of this PowerPoint is available here:

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