CORA Cork Open Research Archive
Cartlann Taighde Oscailte Chorcaí

Title	Innovative occupational therapy service provision on college campuses: supporting student wellbeing and success
Authors	Hunt, Eithne;Lewis, Kieran;Nolan, Clodagh
Publication date	2025-07-01
Original Citation	Hunt, E., Lewis, K. and Nolan, C. (2025) 'Innovative occupational therapy service provision on college campuses: supporting student wellbeing and success', British Journal of Occupational Therapy, 03080226251351488 (3pp). https://doi.org/10.1177/03080226251351488
Type of publication	Article (peer-reviewed);journal-article
Link to publisher's version	10.1177/03080226251351488
Rights	© 2025, the Authors. Reprinted by permission of SAGE Publications. This is a post-peer-review, pre-copyedit version of the following article: Hunt, E., Lewis, K. and Nolan, C. (2025) 'Innovative occupational therapy service provision on college campuses: supporting student wellbeing and success', British Journal of Occupational Therapy, 03080226251351488 (3pp). The final authenticated version is available online at: https://doi.org/10.1177/03080226251351488
Download date	2026-11-03 10:42:36
Item downloaded from	https://hdl.handle.net/10468/17863

UCC
University College Cork, Ireland
Coláiste na hOllscoile Corcaigh

Innovative Occupational Therapy service provision on college campuses – supporting student wellbeing and success

Authors' names
Eithne Hunt, College Lecturer/Director of Postgraduate Studies, Department of Occupational Science and Occupational Therapy, University College Cork, Ireland.

Kieran Lewis, Disability Service Mental Health and Wellbeing Supports Manager/Occupational Therapist, Trinity disAbility Service, Trinity College Dublin, Ireland.

Clodagh Nolan, Assistant Professor, Discipline of Occupational Therapy, Trinity College Dublin, Ireland.

Name, postal address and email address of the corresponding author
Eithne Hunt, Department of Occupational Science and Occupational Therapy, Room G24, Brookfield Health Sciences Complex, University College Cork, Ireland.
e.hunt@ucc.ie; 00353-21-4901531

Research ethics
Not applicable

Consent statement
Not applicable

Declaration of conflicting interests
The authors confirm that there is no conflict of interest.

Statement of contributorship
EH conceived the editorial and wrote the first draft of the manuscript. All authors reviewed and edited the manuscript and approved the final version of the manuscript.

Funding
This research received no specific grant from any funding agency in the public, commercial, or not-for-profit sectors.

Acknowledgements
Not applicable

Patient and public involvement data
Not applicable

Editorial

Innovative occupational therapy service provision on college campuses – supporting student wellbeing and success

Many universities internationally are committed to widening participation and increasing access to higher education for all. Increasingly, higher education institutions (HEIs) are establishing occupational therapy services to address a range of student needs including those of students with physical and sensory disabilities, specific learning difficulties and mental health conditions, as well as neurodiverse students and students from marginalised communities (Eichler and Keptner, 2023). Occupational therapy practitioners working in higher education also play an important role in improving the learning experience, success and wellbeing of all students. Worryingly, the number of UK undergraduate students reporting mental health difficulties has tripled over the past seven years requiring novel responses to complement and extend traditional supports already in place on many campuses (Sanders and Ellingwood, 2025). Occupational therapy practitioners are well placed to design and deliver interventions to better equip students to be well and succeed at university (Hunt, 2021). In June 2025, the International Health Promoting Campuses conference takes place in Limerick, Ireland. We will host a symposium at this international conference showcasing the role of occupational therapy in HEI in Ireland. In this editorial, we present one of the main international policy drivers for this work and share some of the ways that occupational therapy practitioners are enacting this policy relating to student mental health, creating significant value and benefit to HEIs and the students they serve.

Okanagan Charter

The June 2025 conference celebrates the 10-year anniversary of the Okanagan Charter, the International Charter for Health Promoting University and Colleges. The Okanagan Charter has two calls to action. The first is for colleges and universities to embed health into all aspects of campus culture including administration, operations, teaching, learning and research, for the benefit of students and staff; and the second is to lead health promotion action and collaboration locally and globally. Occupational therapy practitioners are actively responding to both calls to action.

Call to action #1: Embed health into campus culture – occupational therapy practice examples

Occupational therapy practitioners are delivering innovative interventions at each of the three major tiers of service delivery in campuses across Ireland: universal ('beneficial for all'), targeted ('necessary for some'), and individualised ('essential for a few') (Royal College of Occupational Therapists (RCOT), 2024).

Everyday Matters: Healthy Habits for University Life® (Hunt and Coombes, 2024) is a free, online, asynchronous, co-curricular digital badge now available to all students at University College Cork (UCC). In this innovative occupational therapy intervention, students learn about brain and body health, and how to create and maintain daily habits

and routines that support physical and emotional wellbeing for learning and life. Across 2021-2023, 359 undergraduate and postgraduate students registered for the online version of the course. Parallel optional pre-post evaluation (N = 93) showed statistically significant improvements across all standardised wellbeing measures. Everyday Matters: Healthy Habits for University Life® is typically offered once per semester in partnership with the university's academic Skills Centre, thus situating this universal intervention within mainstream academic services rather than health/disability/therapeutic services, thereby reducing barriers due to stigma and maximising appeal. It features as a case study in the Higher Education Authority (HEA) Healthy Campus Self-Evaluation Toolkit. Funding has been secured for a 3-year (2025-2028) expansion and evaluation of the programme to further embed it in the teaching and learning offering at UCC and develop training for other HEIs who wish to offer the programme in their setting.

The importance of inclusive practices in higher education has gained prominence in recent years, with a specific emphasis on the need to create inclusive environments for neurodivergent students. Occupational therapy input is essential in the effective design of college campuses and spaces. Trinity College Dublin (TCD) recognised the challenges posed by sensory issues in its bustling campus environments (Nolan et al. 2022), leading to the initiation of the occupational therapy led TCD Sense (2024) project. The TCD Sense Map provides detailed, customisable information about sensory-friendly spaces, and has become a key resource used by students in TCD with over 20,000 unique visitors in the academic year 2024-25. Paid neurodivergent interns have co-created the TCD Sense Map and delivered social media campaigns and in-person training to support its implementation.

The transition to university can pose occupational performance difficulties for many students, including students with mental health disabilities. The Trinity Student Occupational Performance Profile (TSOPP) (Lombard et al., 2022) is a valid and reliable self-report measure of occupational performance difficulties within the student role for students with mental health disabilities. The TSOPP facilitates a strengths-based, recovery-oriented, occupation-focused approach to assessment at the individualised level of service delivery.

Call to action #2: Lead health promotion action and collaboration locally and globally

There are many examples of local and global collaboration in this rapidly evolving area of occupational therapy practice. In June 2021, the first author convened a national seminar entitled Showcasing a Tiered Public Health Occupational Therapy Approach to Supporting Student Participation, Health, Wellbeing and Success in Higher Education, funded by the Irish National Forum for the Enhancement of Teaching and Learning in Higher Education. Attended by almost 100 people, it resulted in a publicly available free compendium of practice-based case stories (Hunt, 2021). These stories spotlight the important role of occupational therapy specifically in supporting the mental health and success of students and are a valuable resource for national and international university senior management, professional services units including student health, access and disability services, teaching, learning and academic support centres, as well as campus buildings and estates units.

Building on the momentum generated by that seminar, the first author worked with the Association of Occupational Therapists of Ireland (AOTI) to lobby the Irish government for occupational therapy representation at national committees overseeing policy development and service provision in Irish HEIs. After three years of lobbying, AOTI now has membership of the newly formed HEA Student and Staff Health and Wellbeing Advisory Group which is tasked with overseeing the implementation of the HEA Healthy Campus Charter and Framework and the HEA National Student Mental Health and Suicide Prevention Framework. In January 2025, an AOTI Working Group was established to advance the provision of occupational therapy services in universities in Ireland. Thirty-five occupational therapy practitioners across Ireland have joined this working group, which will map current service provision and develop best practice guidelines.

Globally, we contributed to the inaugural Occupational Therapy-University (OT-U) International Research and Practice Symposium which took place in August 2024, when 130 delegates joined from seven countries. OT-U is a welcoming international learning community of occupational therapy practitioners who provide services or support to students in post-secondary settings.

Call to action for occupational therapy practitioners

In the 2022/23 academic year, there were 296 higher education institutions in the United Kingdom with an estimated 2.94 million students (Statista 2024, 2025). Expanding the occupational therapy workforce in higher education will support the achievement of health and education equity for all students, in line with the RCOT (2024) Workforce Vision and Priorities. To that end, occupational therapy practitioners are urged to:

- Develop interventions explicitly grounded in occupation that target occupational participation, with a particular emphasis on prevention and early intervention.
- Demonstrate the impact and value of occupational therapy services by gathering quantitative and qualitative evidence.
- Lobby for occupational therapy representation at institutional, local and national committees that oversee allocation of funding to student supports.
- Align with and strategically use the language of policy drivers in higher education e.g. retention, completion, student success.
- Collaborate with academic and professional services colleagues in teaching, learning and student support as well as those in disability and health services.

Every student deserves the opportunity to live and learn well at college. Occupational therapy practitioners can be changemakers in higher education.

References

Eichler JR and Keptner KM (2023) Defining occupational therapy practice for students in higher education: A census from practitioners. British Journal of Occupational Therapy Epub ahead of print 19 May 2023. DOI:10.1177/03080226231168008

Hunt E (2021) Showcasing a tiered public health occupational therapy approach to supporting student participation, health, wellbeing and success in higher education. Available at https://doi.org/10.17605/OSF.IO/AJCVM (accessed 23 April 2025).

Hunt E and Coombes L (2024) A feasibility study on a novel well-being intervention for university students. Irish Journal of Psychological Medicine 41(2): 233–237.

Lombard K, Nolan C and Heron E (2022) Refining the psychometric properties of the Trinity Student Occupational Performance Profile – A self-report measure of occupational performance difficulties within the student role. British Journal of Occupational Therapy 86(4): 265-274.

Nolan C, Doyle JK, Lewis K and Treanor D (2022) Disabled Students' perception of the sensory aspects of the learning and social environments within one higher education institution. British Journal of Occupational Therapy 86(5): 367-375.

Royal College of Occupational Therapists (2024) Occupational therapy with children and young people. Available at https://www.rcot.co.uk/explore-resources/practice-guidance/children-and-young-people (accessed 22 May 2025).

Royal College of Occupational Therapists (2024) Our workforce vision and priorities. Available at https://www.rcot.co.uk/support-the-profession/workforce-strategy/vision-priorities (accessed 22 May 2025).

Sanders M and Ellingwood J (2025). Student mental health in 2024. Available at: https://cdn.taso.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2025-02-20_Student-mental-health-in-2024-How-the-situation-is-changing-for-LGBTQ-students_TASO.pdf (accessed 23 April 2025).

Statista (2024). Number of students enrolled in the United Kingdom 2009-2023. Available at https://www.statista.com/statistics/875015/students-enrolled-in-higher-education-in-the-uk/ (accessed 22 May 2025).

Statista (2025) Number of higher education institutions in the United Kingdom from 2016/17 to 2022/23. Available at https://www.statista.com/statistics/915603/universities-in-the-united-kingdom-uk/ (accessed 22 May 2025).

TCD Sense (2024) Available at https://www.tcd.ie/disability/services/tcdsense.php (accessed 23 April 2025).