

Final Report on Occupational Therapy Academic Learning Network (OTALN)

Final Report 2014

Institutions

The University of Queensland

Australian and New Zealand Council of Occupational Therapy
Educators (ANZCOTE)

Occupational Therapy Australia Limited (OTAL) (Program
Accreditation Committee)

Occupational Therapy Council (OTC)

Project Team

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Dr Merrolee Penman (Project Consultant)
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**THE UNIVERSITY
OF QUEENSLAND**
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Network summary

Network Objectives

The OTALN aimed to capitalise on the substantive work already undertaken by Professor Rodger during her Fellowship program to develop the occupational therapy academy in Australia and New Zealand by building on and extending the emerging leaders network (ELN). The involvement of new, emerging and established academics provided opportunities for mentoring, career development, and discussion of curriculum, and teaching and learning matters across the OT academy. The OTALN has promoted connections with existing structures/organisations that will ensure sustainability of the OTALN beyond the funding cycle.

List of Outcomes and Deliverables

1. Establishment of Reference Group, employment of project manager (Dr Aplin) and networking consultant (Dr Penman)
2. Survey of preferences for teaching and learning topics and use of technology to guide planning of OTALN activities, and establishment of an OTALN listserv for ongoing communication undertaken February 2012.
3. Peer co-mentoring and more formal mentoring opportunities established for emerging leaders with 11 taking part as mentees and 11 as mentors.
4. First face-to-face workshop (2 days) focussed on current issues in curriculum design and sharing current practice linked with annual meeting of ANZCOTE and fieldwork academics ANZOTFA in Sydney 20-21 June 2012.
5. Three webinars available to OT academic community in Australia and New Zealand held in 2012 - 27th September, 16th October, and 25th October.
6. Second face-to-face one day OTALN workshop held in Melbourne 16th May 2013 associated with ANZCOTE and ANZOTFA meetings.
7. Third face-to-face OTALN workshop held in Adelaide 23rd July 2013 as Education Day attached to the OT Australia National Conference as pre-conference workshop.
8. Three webinars held in 2013 - 20th March, 24th October, and 13th November.
9. All webinars were recorded and were made available to the network via the listserv.
10. Plan for establishment of joint meetings of OTALN and ANZCOTE from 2014 and Education Symposia run concurrently with biannual national OT conference.
11. Listserv established, monitored and evaluated.
12. All workshops, webinars, and mentoring activities evaluated by electronic survey or paper based methods at workshops and outcomes summarised.
13. External evaluation undertaken by Professor Margaret MacMillan, University of Newcastle, December 2013 - January 2014.

Factors contributing to productive networking

Successes

The OTALN's activities have provided many opportunities for occupational therapy academics to meet, discuss, debate, and enhance their teaching and learning skills and capacity through face-to-face workshops and virtually via webinars and the listserv. In particular the **face to face workshops** which allowed time for personal meetings and discussion were extremely well received. Positive feedback was received on the workshop content/material covered, the high quality of the presenters, the innovative use of showcase presentations of work in progress and "how to" sessions by academics (which illustrated the more theoretical/pedagogical presentations), and opportunities for in vivo discussions, enabling the growth of individual's personal learning networks. The project leader focussed the workshops on learning, collaboration and sharing of ideas and resources. An atmosphere of shared understanding, respect and collegiality was created which enabled an open climate for discussion and collaboration versus competition between universities. Some examples of feedback from the workshops include:

"Absolutely fantastic opportunity. I felt privileged to be part of a passionate, committed, focused and expert group of OT academics" (Quote from Sydney Workshop feedback survey)

"Thank you - great to be able to participate with such great material and with such a great variety of people. Much appreciate having the opportunity to do so" (Quote from Melbourne Workshop feedback survey)

"This was great. 2 days would be fantastic. Great location too. This is a community of practice extraordinaire!!" (Quote from Melbourne Workshop feedback survey)

"Another excellent OTALN education day! Thank you for providing this opportunity. It provided a good level of discussion on relevant topics. Well-structured program" (Quote from Adelaide Education Day Feedback survey)

The **webinars**, using Adobe Connect were a newer format for some members of the OTALN but with the use of practice sessions prior to each webinar, the project manager was able to ensure that novices to webinar formats were able to master audio testing, talking within the webinar, chat in the side bar and became familiar enough with the format to engage as actively as they wished to. These practice sessions were critical to the success of the webinars. Other critical aspects were having a master of ceremonies managing the introduction of speakers, progression of the webinar, taking questions and summarising the 'chat' screens, while the project manager and consultant could assist participants with technical issues with the headsets, audio, or managing the webinar platform. This allowed the webinars to progress in a timely fashion without holding up the whole audience with one individual's technical issue. Other factors contributing to success included; (1) restricting numbers to 20-22 participants to enable some discussion to occur, (2) sending the presentation slides in PDF mode out to participants after the webinar, and (3) sending

the chat feed out afterwards for those who wanted to read this separately, this allowed participants who were unable to keep up with the chat feed during the webinar to reflect on the conversations and references/resources that were shared in this space. Some examples of webinar feedback include:

“Thank you to Merrolee, Sylvia and Tammy. I learned a lot. I was exposed to new ideas, new medium, new ways of doing things and although I am now exhausted I feel it was very worthwhile and I will be recommending it to my colleagues who missed it. Thank you for a very useful resource” (Quote from Social Networking Webinars feedback survey)

“Fantastic introduction to webinars - will now not avoid them in the future!! Thanks!” (Quote from Early Career Academic Webinar feedback survey)

“Thanks for the time and effort that went into this webinar, keep up the good work” (Quote from Occupational Justice Webinar feedback survey)

The **mentoring relationships** were successful for most of the mentees with only one mentee respondent being dissatisfied. The success of these relationships was largely due to the project leader’s networks established with the ANZCOTE, ANZOTFA and the ALTF Fellows network. This allowed matching with mentors who could assist them in meeting their specific goals. The mentees described the benefits of the relationship, including being able to share experiences with a person external to their university, being challenged to think more proactively about career progression and desirable leadership qualities in higher education, and specific advice on grant applications, joint projects, writing, publishing, teaching, academic politics, and workload management. An example of feedback is provided below:

“This has been a fantastic experience. The key benefits were: (i) tapping into my mentors experience/wisdom; and (ii) it has also made me think/act more proactively on my career progression”.

Recommendations re: networking methods

A combination of both face-to-face and webinar formats seems to be an appropriate mechanism for engaging busy academics who appeared to gain equally from both formats. Face-to-face meetings are needed for personal meetings/networking and to enhance collegiality between members of the network. It was also beneficial to have the face-to-face workshop as the first OTALN activity as this set the scene for future activities and helped establish a sense of community. The mentoring relationships were positively received by mentors and mentees alike. We found that the listserv which was accessed by 72 academics had mixed success and did not inspire a significant amount of interaction beyond the posts made by the project team members. Academic workloads and a lack of confidence and willingness to raise issues particularly by early career academics seemed to contribute to this. Further feedback from listserv members suggested they needed more direction in the listserv discussions to prompt use.

Barriers to productive networking

Challenges experienced by the network

The key challenges faced relate to the engagement of occupational therapy academics nationally with social networking technology such as Facebook and the listserv. A Facebook site was created as part of the Emerging Leaders' Network (ELN) as part of Professor Rodger's ALTC Fellowship program and this continued to be a part of the OTALN. Unless participants were regular users of Facebook, they tended not to be drawn into the OTALN posts there. The key activity tended to be by project team members posting interesting links and comments with fairly limited two-way discussion occurring beyond a few comments from regular users. Those not engaged socially in Facebook, tended not to engage with it.

Despite the request at the end of the first face-to-face workshop, and from the findings of the survey, that academics would like to be networked virtually using a listserv (rather than Twitter, Facebook or other social media avenues), there was also limited traffic on this listserv apart from the project team who tended to be the key posters of information such as CPD events, interesting links, YouTube clips and posing questions for discussion. The final survey of OTALN activities revealed that the listserv was found to be less useful by subscribers with only 27% of respondents finding it useful or very useful. The survey however also revealed that OTALN members wanted to connect online and that their preferred method was through the listserv. Reasons for not engaging in the listserv included high workloads and therefore not having enough time, not feeling confident or safe to post on the listserv, and a lack of shared understanding or sense of community within the members of the listserv.

More information could have been provided to new members joining the listserv about its purpose to develop this shared understanding. Comments suggested that listserv members wanted a leader to pose questions and posts, that posing questions themselves was difficult and this seemed due lack of confidence or not feeling safe to post. These comments seemed to be particularly reflective of early career academics' imposter feelings, or fears of being revealed in the academic community of not knowing what they are doing. Asking questions to an unknown audience of peers was quite daunting for members of the listserv. This suggests that more work could have been done by the OTALN to provide more information about the values, purpose and shared respect the listserv hoped to bring and that a leader for the listserv who could ask questions may have assisted to create a greater sense of community, respect and confidence for others to post.

Challenges of networking in general

Challenges to networking included the difficulty in maintaining momentum of the network, finding a balance between content and discussion time in workshops and webinars, and finding the "just right challenge" for experienced versus novice academics. After each workshop and webinar there was a buzz of excitement and enthusiasm from academics to change their practices or seek further information and relationships from the discussions and connections made. However, it is unclear whether these positive experiences of the workshops and webinars translated into practice after the events. The listserv was a

potential vehicle to keep the conversations and momentum of events flowing, however this did not transpire. It is likely that people preferred to follow-up on information privately, with their colleagues or with a key few people involved in their discussions at the webinar/workshop. The OTALN was more a vehicle for starting discussions/connections and providing opportunities for future ideas/connections to foster rather than a body or fully functioning community of practice providing an ongoing voice for these new ideas and connections.

Finding the right balance between providing enough content to generate discussion, ideas and learning but also provide enough discussion time was also challenging. Participants in the workshops enjoyed the extended refreshment breaks which allowed for discussion time. Being time poor, attendees commented that it is a luxury to have time to discuss learning and teaching issues with a wider group of OT academics. As such the value of discussion time cannot be underestimated. During the last two OTALN workshops the last session was left for round table discussions on topics which were identified during the day's activities. These were particularly useful to target people's interest and focus discussions.

In contrast, it was more difficult to find a balance of content versus discussion time in the webinars. Many people preferred not to ask questions or contribute to discussions in the webinars. Being more anonymous and lacking the face to face contact that allows for the 'reading' of non-verbal cues, webinars seem to lend themselves more to didactic teaching, rather than sharing as people can easily choose not to contribute. Feedback suggested that more discussion time was needed. Perhaps more structured discussion is required in webinars, with questions being posed to the group rather than open question and answer format. In addition, it must also be acknowledged that this was a new learning experience for many which may have impacted on willingness to share in a new environment. Some participants also lacked microphones, and thus had to rely on using only the chat box, which in itself can be a slight barrier related to individual's ability to touch-type, and thus produce speedy responses.

There was a wide range of occupational therapy academics who attended the OTALN activities from current PhD students and new academics to academics with 20+ years' experience. There were also fieldwork academics and clinical educators who attended OTALN events. Targeting the content therefore became difficult with such a range of experience attending the events. This was addressed in the webinars through use of the registration form, where attendees could openly write what they hoped the webinar would include and what they hoped to learn from it. This was extremely useful in targeting the content provided by the guest presenters. The round table discussions at the end of each workshop were also very useful in gathering academics with similar interests or experience together to discuss topics identified throughout the day and this helped to better target the information to particular groups. Feedback was also sought after each workshop via the post survey on what content to include in future webinars and workshops.

Solutions to challenges

Providing a range of professional development avenues for occupational therapy educators seems important. Webinars were more accessible to those who could not travel, were less

of a time commitment and allowed a range of presenters including those from overseas to be involved; while the face-to-face workshops were essential for gaining momentum of the network, establishing connections and providing educators with much needed discussion time.

It is important to prepare well for the webinars and trial sessions to provide support for those people who have not used to the modality before or were unfamiliar with the program (both for the presenters as well as the attendees). During webinars it is difficult to conduct organic discussions due in part to the lack of non-verbal cues, and attendees varying levels of technology literacy, hence more structured approaches may be more appropriate with questions posed to the group, rather than open discussion. The listserv may have been more successful if participants were provided with more support, for example a leader posting questions, monthly discussion topics and more guidance on the aims/purpose and scope of the listserv. Feedback could have also been sought earlier on the listserv to ascertain areas for improvement.

Feedback from members of any network is essential to providing content which is relevant to their needs. Regular surveys and questions on registrations forms are very useful to guide content and presenters.

What the network offers

The network has offered members opportunities to engage via an electronic listserv to canvass teaching and learning conundrums and alert colleagues to relevant activities and events. The OTALN has provided opportunities for face-to-face networking in one or two day events that have been strategically linked to existing activities such as meetings of ANZCOTE and ANZOTFA which already bring all university heads of programs and fieldwork academics together, and pre conference workshops (Education Day) linked to the national biannual conference. By bolting on to existing meetings and conferences where academics are gathering, it should be possible to utilise their networks to provide at least half day or full day teaching and learning workshops/forums, even with a modest cost for refreshments. Venues are easily accessed via universities with minimal expense. A brief online survey provides an easy way to identify top teaching/learning topics as stimulus discussions for the day and the format of showcase sessions we trialed seems to have significant practical utility as a way of engaging everyone, not just the 'expert' presenters.

The Emerging Leaders' Network (ELN) participants were mentored and as such have potentially extended their personal learning networks, having a much larger network to call upon for advice, to discuss teaching and learning matters, and with whom to collaborate. The ELN participants' summaries in Part 2 attest to the benefits they have found in four years of engagement with both the ELN and OTALN networks. All have taken on more senior positions, embraced leadership opportunities, taken up positions on editorial boards, worked together to edit a book on teaching and learning in health care professions and used the skills learned and network opportunities to foster their own careers and leadership capacity.