

## EDUCATION AND FIELDWORK



AD HOC REVIEWER:  
SUSAN MULHOLLAND

# How role-emerging placements compare to each other and contribute to occupational therapy practice: A national snapshot

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### Fieldwork and role-emerging placements

The practical experiences gained through fieldwork form a crucial component of occupational therapy education. Every year, fieldwork programs are challenged with the task of locating a sufficient number of placements and ensuring that student occupational therapists gain a breadth of high quality learning experiences. These placements must be relevant to, and reflective of, the current and evolving practice diversity in Canadian health care and social service contexts. Role-emerging (RE) placements have been used across Canada for many years to help fulfill these requirements.

Using offsite or indirect occupational therapy supervision (i.e., provided by the university or contracted from the local community), RE placements provide a unique opportunity for entry-level students to engage in learning within settings in which a role for occupational therapy has the potential to be developed or enhanced (Bossers, Cook, Polatajko, & Laine, 1997). In some cases, the service being provided by the RE placement is new to the local setting, despite being established in other geographic areas (e.g., occupational therapy for clients with low vision is role-established in some communities but is RE in others). In addition to providing students with broad learning experiences, RE placements provide opportunities for the expansion of occupational therapy practice while addressing placement shortages in more traditional settings (Dancza, Warren, Copley, Moran, McKay, & Taylor, 2013).

Students are challenged by, and benefit from, RE placements and have reported that “navigating the occupational therapist’s role in an alternative setting allows [them] to explore the therapeutic potential of occupation as well as the importance of occupation in determining health and well-being” (Carey & Mechefske, 2016, p. 19). This learning provides transferrable skills that lend themselves well to a variety of settings (Bossers, Cook, Polatajko, & Laine, 1997). In RE placements, students are given the chance to practice professional representation and self-representation, as well as to engage in formative learning opportunities “to promote and advocate for the occupational therapy profession by explaining our unique skillset” (Bussiere, Goldberg, Kolber, Tam, & Wong, 2016, p. 11). These opportunities allow students not only to promote the profession, by demonstrating the value of occupation, but also to partner with individual and systems-level clients to support advocacy efforts in filling service gaps (CAOT, 2012).

### Examining the use of role-emerging placements in Canada

This article provides a summary of the findings from a program evaluation undertaken by the national Committee on University Fieldwork Education (CUFE), which profiles the use of RE occupational therapy fieldwork placements in Canada. CUFE, a subcommittee of the Association of Canadian Occupational Therapy University Programs (ACOTUP), is composed of the fieldwork coordinators from all of the 14 Canadian occupational therapy programs. Recently, the CUFE membership compiled information about the number and type of RE placements that occurred across Canada in a single academic year. This collaborative program evaluation was completed with the aim of “mapping” as well as of increasing our mutual understanding regarding where, when, and how RE placements are created and supported. We hope this article will encourage occupational therapists and other health/social service providers to consider potential venues and projects that could involve RE placements within their own areas of practice.

A total of 13 of the 14 Canadian occupational therapy programs participated in this national collaborative program evaluation by providing a snapshot of information regarding all of the RE placements that occurred in the 2013-14 academic year and augmenting that information with a comprehensive survey regarding how and why RE placements are being used within their fieldwork programs. Each RE placement was classified using a primary and secondary practice area category to capture the breadth and scope of general service provision at the placement site, as well as the specific focus of occupational therapy involvement and the activities that occurred during the placement period. The quantitative data was then compared to the national Canadian Institute of Health Information (CIHI) occupational therapy practice data from a similar period (2014) to compare and contrast RE fieldwork to actual reported Canadian occupational therapy employment positions. The qualitative data that was collected has been used to inform national discussions among fieldwork educators, informally and during semi-annual meetings, and to further develop innovative and operational strategies for the continued use of RE placements.

Across the country, fieldwork coordinators described how RE

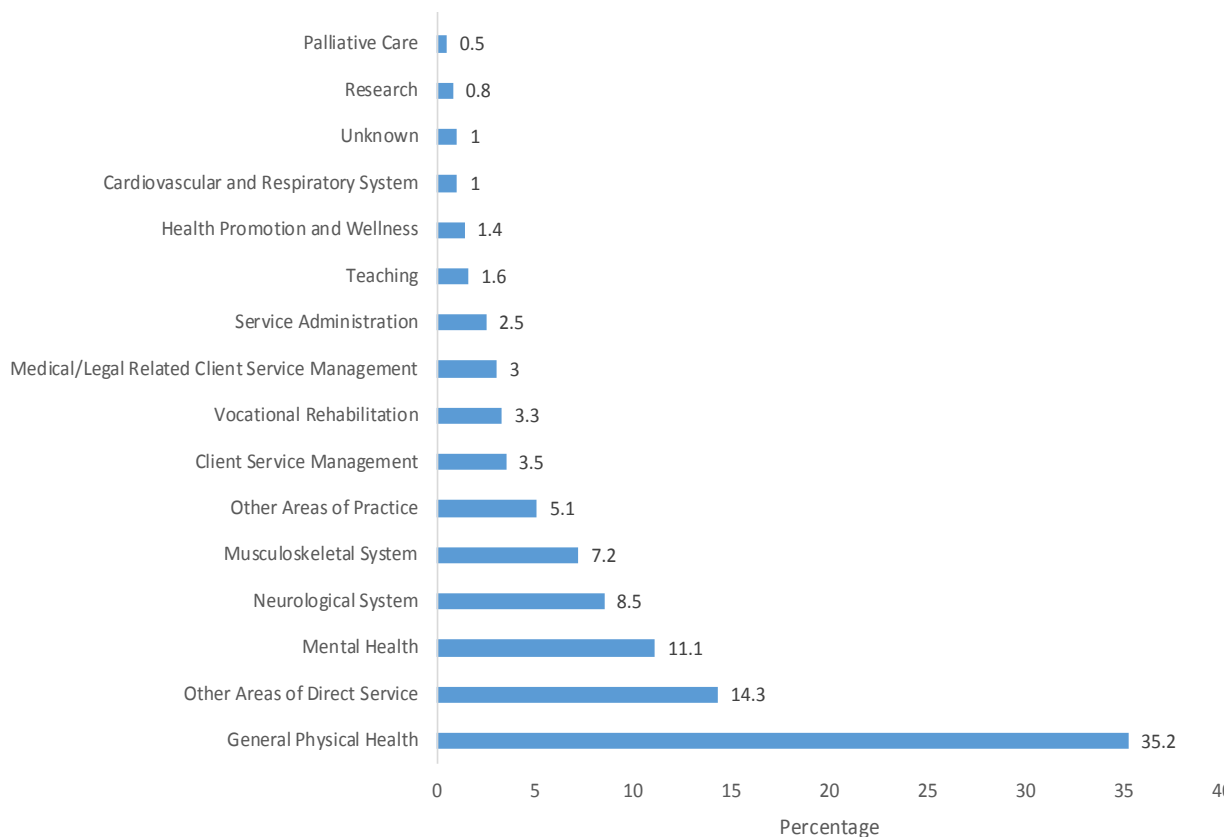


Figure 1. Occupational therapy workforce by area of practice for primary employment, 2012 (n=9931)

placements are most often used to strategically generate placement opportunities in specific areas of practice or to supplement capacity due to a shortage of role-established (or traditional) placements. In addition to addressing placement shortages, common reasons for developing such placements included:

- Promotion and development of the role of occupational therapy in new practice contexts
- Community service and engagement
- Provision of occupational therapy consultation
- Opportunities for students to develop unique, transferable skills
- Opportunities for students to grow professionally and personally

Fieldwork coordinators reported that both students and agencies/programs appreciated how RE placements enhance service provision and contribute to holistic client care.

### Occupational therapy services provided by role-emerging placements

More than 4,000 occupational therapy fieldwork placements occur in Canada each year. During the 2013-2014 school year, 248 student occupational therapists (approximately 5%) completed RE placements, at both novice and senior levels, in a variety of practice categories including: health promotion, social inclusion, mental health, work, and social justice. Practice settings for the placements included social agencies, schools, community health care agencies, commercial enterprises, chronic care facilities, and preschool child care centres. The occupation-centered activities

in which students engaged focused primarily on direct or indirect service provision to groups or individual clients but also included administration, program development, and research, all of which were accomplished at sites where occupational therapists were not formally employed! This breadth of novel service creation demonstrates the small but significant contribution of RE placements in widening the scope of occupational therapy fieldwork opportunities available to students.

### Role-emerging placement settings compared to occupational therapy practice settings

Interestingly, available CIHI data regarding occupational therapy practice from the closest general period (2014) indicated that only a small percentage (~16%) of the nearly 10,000 Canadian occupational therapists were practicing in the areas in which the RE placements most often occurred: health promotion and wellness, mental health, and vocational rehabilitation (Figure 1). When compared with CIHI practice data (2014; Figure 2), this type of fieldwork can indeed be classified as RE. RE placements can be seen as contributing to the growth of occupational therapy by providing services on a “trial” basis so that the benefits of occupation-centred assessment, treatment, and programming can be demonstrated in settings where it has been limited or not previously available.

### Examples of role-emerging placements developing into occupational therapy positions

Some RE placements evolve into role-established positions. Although this desirable outcome has been difficult to track and

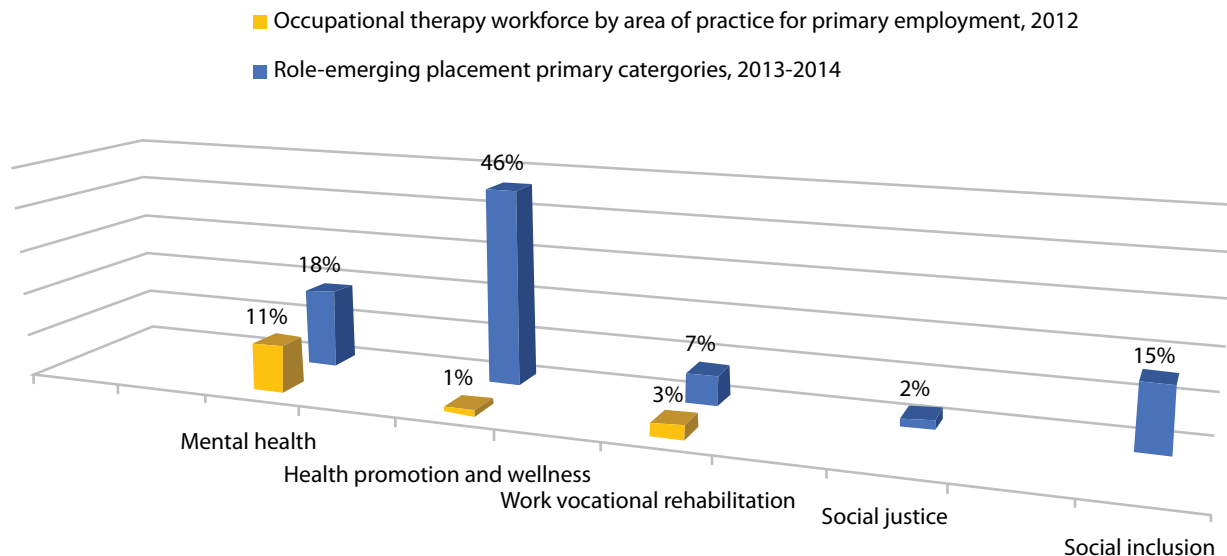


Figure 2. Comparison of CIHI workforce data and role-emerging areas of practice

measure over the years, fieldwork coordinators across the country have witnessed or heard anecdotally that new occupational therapy roles have been a direct result of successful RE placements. Here are three examples of this evolution from various regions of Canada: In 2015, soon after a pair of students had completed a new, six-week RE placement within Alberta Health Services at Henwood Treatment Centre in Edmonton, the addictions and mental health treatment service secured funds to hire a part-time occupational therapist to join its interprofessional team. Also in 2015, the Quebec Society for Disabled Children's integrated daycare in Montreal successfully hired two full-time occupational therapists following three summers of student service provision using the RE learning model. In Halifax, Nova Scotia, recent success with a grant application will allow year-round access to occupational therapy following five years of RE fieldwork with Women in Supported Housing (WISH) under the auspices of the YWCA (White & O'Keefe, 2017). And these are just a few examples of RE placements turning into occupational therapy positions or contracts!

RE placements are an established tool for occupational therapy fieldwork programs to strengthen community engagement and partnerships, forge new ground in occupational therapy service provision for a diverse range of clients, and fill gaps by providing novel student learning opportunities. Agencies benefit from additional professional resources, clients benefit from attention to their occupations, and students benefit from experience with a wider variety of client populations. By sharing our ideas and building on existing RE experiences, these valuable outcomes can continue to be realized.

For more information about RE fieldwork placements or to share your ideas, please contact the fieldwork coordinator at the occupational therapy program nearest you: <http://www.acotup-acpue.ca/English/members>

**Acknowledgement:** This collaborative project would not have been possible without the cooperation and contribution of the entire CUFÉ membership.

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