

Occupational transition experiences of international occupational therapy students studying at a university in the United Kingdom

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ABSTRACT

Introduction: The occupational transition of starting university education is typically a time filled with anticipation and enthusiasm. The transitional phase can be anxiety-inducing, more so for individuals relocating to another country to study. The primary aim of this study was to explore the experiences of international occupational therapy students during occupational transitions associated with moving from their home country to study occupational therapy at a university in the United Kingdom (UK).

Methods: A qualitative phenomenological study design was used in this study. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with nine participants who were recruited through purposive sampling. NVivo 14 software was used for conducting thematic analysis.

Findings: Three themes captured participants' experiences of occupational transition. "I'll just say in summary, it was difficult" described challenges with 'doing', including academic pressures, cultural differences, homesickness, and increased responsibilities. "I pretty much felt alone" reflected the amorphous nature of support, characterised by limited assistance, delayed communication, and gaps in support systems. "Adaptation is learning the lifestyle" highlighted coping strategies enacted through 'doing', such as building new friendships, maintaining regular contact with family and friends, exploring new occupations, and drawing on informal support networks.

Conclusion: International occupational therapy students' transitions to a UK university involve navigating intertwined academic, social, and cultural challenges that impact engagement in meaningful occupations. Embedding an occupational lens when supporting international students through clear signposting, timely responses, peer mentorship, inclusive activities, and opportunities to sustain or adapt familiar occupations can create environments in which international students not only manage the transition but thrive academically, socially, and personally.

Key Words: occupational transitions, occupational therapy students, higher education, international students

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INTRODUCTION

International students represent an important demographic within higher education, significantly enriching the academic, cultural, and social fabric of universities around the world (Migration Advisory Committee, 2018). This qualitative study was conducted at a single higher education institution located in England, between June, 2023 and December, 2023. The university is recognised as one of the UK institutions with the highest number of international students (Bolton et al., 2023). The university has students coming from diverse national and cultural backgrounds covering over 150 countries, with a significant percentage coming from China, Nigeria, India and Singapore. In this study, the term 'international student' refers to individuals enrolled on international fee-paying places and holding temporary UK visas for education purposes. This definition acknowledges that citizenship status does not always align with fee classification in the UK. For example, a British passport holder may still be classified as an international student, while some refugees may be categorised as home students (UK Council for International Student Affairs, 2024; Boliver et al, 2019).

Occupational transitions can be defined as a notable alteration in a person's repertoire of occupations, involving the change, disappearance, or replacement of one or more occupations (Christiansen & Townsend 2010; Wiseman and Whiteford 2009). Engagement in meaningful occupations contributes to wellbeing, identity, and a sense of purpose (Townsend & Polatajko, 2013). Inversely, barriers to such engagement can contribute to distress, alienation, and reduced health outcomes (Whiteford & Townsend, 2011). The occupational transition of commencing

university education is typically a time filled with anticipation and enthusiasm, the transitional phase can be anxiety-inducing, especially for people moving away from home their country (Worsley et al., 2021). This study focuses on changes in occupations experienced by international occupational therapy students at a UK university.

Literature shows that some challenges experienced by international students include culture shock, language barriers, academic challenges, financial constraints, feelings of loneliness, visa and immigration complexities and accommodation issues (Cayetano-Penman et al 2021; Ryan & Twibell, 2000). While the experiences of international students have been explored in literature, there is a scarcity of occupational therapy and occupational science literature about occupational transitions among international occupational therapy students. The article was written during a period marked by ongoing uncertainty regarding visa policies, significant reforms to graduate and post-study work visas, and a resurgence of anti-migrant sentiments in the UK and other Western countries, including the USA.

Reflexivity

This research was grounded in the lived experiences and scholarly commitments of the authors. The author was a postgraduate occupational therapy student who relocated from Zimbabwe to live in the UK at an early age. Her personal journey of negotiating identity, adapting to cultural shifts, and reconstructing daily occupations across vastly different sociocultural environments deeply informed the conceptual foundation of this study. These experiences provided a unique lens through which she engaged with the research topic, allowing for a nuanced

understanding of occupational transition, identity, and wellbeing.

The author acknowledges that some study participants were her peers in a postgraduate occupational therapy program, and she had prior knowledge of aspects of their lived experiences. This familiarity may have led an atmosphere of openness and trust during data collection, enriching the depth of the narratives shared. She recognises the possibility that her own experiences and assumptions could influence the interpretation of participants' narratives. Fully aware of these risks, the first author engaged in ongoing reflexive practice, including journaling and bracketing, to critically examine and set aside personal perspectives during data collection and analysis (Creswell & Creswell, 2023). Her dual position, as both insider and researcher, was approached not as a limitation, but as a strength that enhanced the authenticity and richness of the data (Liu & Burnett, 2022).

Literature review

International students often endure these sacrifices, driven by the perceived transformative value of academic credentials and long-term professional gains frequently deemed to outweigh the immediate struggles (Oduwaye & Sorakin, 2023). Many also make the move without fully appreciating the enormity of ensuing challenges such as financial pressures, visa complexities, cultural dislocation, racism, discrimination, and hostile immigration policies (Oduwaye & Sorakin, 2023). Despite the fact that international students contribute billions to the UK economy they are often disparaged (UK Council for International Student Affairs, 2025).

Occupational deprivation, whereby individuals are prevented from engaging in

meaningful occupations can have profound negative effects on an individual's mental and physical wellbeing (Wilcock, 2006; Mori, 2000). Occupational deprivation stems from the absence or restriction of access to occupations that are essential for health and a sense of meaning, as a result of factors external to individual (Whiteford 2000; Wilcock, 2006). Similarly, occupational alienation relates to a state in which individuals feel disconnected, disengaged, or estranged from their meaningful occupations, leading to a sense of loss, dissatisfaction and detachment (Ashton-Hay et al, (2016). Therefore, it is crucial to investigate how the process of transitioning affects international students' participation in meaningful occupations (Blair, 2000).

Relocating to a different country triggers changes that affect individuals, their occupations, and the environments in which they function (Suto, 2008). Transitions often compel individuals to adopt new occupations that often lacks the familiar meaning or personal significance they once held, owing to shifts in daily routines, roles, and the temporal structure of life (Menzies & Baron, 2014; Ecochard & Fotheringham, 2017; Alharbi & Smith, 2018). Furthermore, being unable to partake in meaningful occupations and the obligation to engage in activities that lack personal choice or significance can negatively impact an individual's well-being (Durocher et al, 2014; Henning et al, 2012).

Evidence shows that international students employ various coping strategies, such as engaging in physical exercises, participating in religious activities and talking therapies, to navigate the transition from their home countries to host countries (Saravanan et al., 2018). While many coping strategies facilitate adaptation, research also highlights that some approaches may be maladaptive,

with potential negative consequences for health and wellbeing. For example, some students report turning to occupations such as drug and alcohol use as means of coping with stress or isolation (Hammell, 2018). This underscores the importance of investigating the coping strategies employed by international students. Such an exploration can identify if there is a need for additional measures to prevent students from resorting to occupations that are on the 'dark side' (Twinley, 2023) as a way of dealing with their occupational transitions.

While challenges such as administrative delays, housing difficulties, and academic stress are commonly reported by international students, it is important to note that such issues may also be experienced by home students. However, international students may face these issues with fewer familial support networks, language barriers, and limited institutional familiarity, intensifying their impact. Moreover, given the wider higher education crisis in the UK, including funding cuts and academic staff redundancies, institutional capacity to support students may be under strain (McIntyre, 2023; Universities UK, 2025). Occupational therapy students learn occupational science concepts that underscore the significance of meaningful engagement, including the constructs of occupational balance, identity, and transitions. Drawing upon these theoretical foundations, this study seeks to investigate the occupational transitions experienced by international occupational therapy students as they negotiate changes to their occupations, roles and environment.

METHODOLOGY

Ethics approval was obtained from Coventry University Ethics Committee with reference

ID P162876. An interpretivist epistemological viewpoint was used in this study (Bryman, 2016). A qualitative phenomenological study design was used (Cleland, 2017). The phenomenological approach was considered to be more appropriate for this study to explore how the participants make sense of their occupational transitions (Holloway and Galvin, 2016).

Participants were recruited using purposive sampling, from current students at the institution who met the inclusion criteria. The inclusion criteria included the following characteristics: international students, 18 years and above, currently studying occupational therapy at the institution. Purposive sampling was chosen because it allowed the researcher to identify and recruit participants with the richest information to address the study aim and objectives (Ames et al., 2019). Therefore, there was no predetermined sample size at the beginning of data collection for this study, data was collected until data saturation when additional sampling no longer yielded new or additional information (Guba and Lincoln 1994; Vasileiou et al, 2018). Data saturation for this study was achieved after nine participant interviews. Given the diverse nature of international students' occupational transition experiences, a semi-structured approach allowed for a more nuanced exploration of their challenges and perceptions of their occupational transitions.

A participant recruitment flyer was posted on the university learning platform announcements page to recruit participants. Potential participants who expressed their interest in participating in the study received a participant information sheet containing study details and were given the opportunity to ask questions and receive answers about

the study. Participation was voluntary, all participants provided written consent to participate in the study and to be recorded. Confidentiality and anonymity were maintained. Following this, interviews were scheduled based on the participants' preferences on dates and times. The duration of the interviews was between 45 and 60 minutes on Microsoft Teams.

The recorded interviews were transcribed verbatim for data analysis. Cleland's (2017) six-phase thematic analysis method was followed to provide a systematic approach to identifying, analysing, and reporting themes within the qualitative data. NVivo 14 software was used to organise and manage data during thematic analysis. Trustworthiness was enhanced through reflexive journaling and bracketing, with data analysis focusing exclusively on verbatim participant responses to uphold credibility.

FINDINGS

Nine students participated in this study of which four were female and five were male. The participants' ages were 22 to 38 years having relocated from Hong Kong, Nigeria and India within the past two to three years. Participants were assigned unique identifiers ranging from A to I. Three main themes emerged from the study which were captured by the statements from the participants as follows: I'll just say in summary- it was difficult; I pretty much felt alone and Adaptation is learning the lifestyle. Table 1 shows the main themes and the respective subthemes.

Table 1: Main themes and subthemes

Themes	Subthemes
<i>"I'll just say in summary, it was difficult"</i> Challenges with 'doing' during occupational transitions	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Academic Challenges • Cultural differences • Away from home • Increased responsibilities
<i>"I pretty much felt alone"</i> Amorphous support during occupational transitioning.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Lack of support • Delayed responses/ communication • Gaps in support systems
<i>"Adaptation is learning the lifestyle"</i> Coping with occupational transitions through 'doing'	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Making new friends • Regular contact with friends and family • Exploring new occupations • Using informal support systems

I'll just say in summary, it was difficult

This theme captures the challenges with 'doing' which the international students faced during the occupational transition. The challenges are multifaceted and shaped by various factors. This theme was informed by four distinct subthemes, including academic challenges, cultural adjustments, away from home and increased responsibilities.

The essence of this theme relates to difficulties encountered by the participants. The two quotes below describe sentiments which resonated with all participants.

'I'll just say in summary, it was difficult, very difficult... (sigh)...' (Participant B)

'You're like a flower, living in a warm house and you don't know what kind of things are happening outside. And when you leave the warm house, everything will be straight on you.' (Participant I)

Findings show a consistent trend indicating heightened academic pressures during the settling time. Participants expressed a lack of awareness regarding the learning and teaching style and expectations set by the university prior to starting the first semester. Seven participants were unfamiliar with the use of asynchronous online lectures. Participants described feelings of being overwhelmed by the numerous tasks outside of their academic responsibilities, such as

navigating the visa process and ensuring the timely submission of required documents to relevant authorities. Four participants specifically highlight the highly stressful nature of the visa application process, citing uncertainty about the Home Office immigration policies and the duration it would take for their visa approval, which impacted their concentration on academic work.

Participants shared their experiences of the difficulties they faced when navigating the UK culture. They discussed the food available posed a significant challenge because it differed from the cuisine, they were accustomed to in their home countries. Two participants even mentioned that they continue to struggle with adjusting to the local foods. Participant C said *'I still don't eat foreign food'*. In contrast, two participants expressed that while local foods did not match with their preferences, it provided them with an opportunity to explore and sample new dishes, some of which they found enjoyable.

Another recurring pattern discussed by all participants was surrounding the social and emotional impact of their transition. The absence of a support system from home and the challenges of building a new social network had an impact on their overall wellbeing. All the participants discussed the challenges of being away from home and away from their family and friends.

I pretty much felt alone

This theme is centred around inadequate support as described by the participants. Seven participants expressed that the institution lacked substantial assistance for international students during their transition. For example, Participant B stated that *'I don't feel like there's people to support us'*

and similar sentiments were shared by Participant G who said *'To be honest, I don't really know what support systems are out there, I tried but I pretty much felt alone'*. One participant attributed the perceived lack of support to being overlooked maybe due to being a postgraduate student. While participants were aware of the institute for international students, they were not aware of the support services available to them and had not accessed the services. The participants collectively emphasised that when emailing the department and admission team, there was often a delay in responses.

Additionally, four of the participants noted that often they would be signposted to other department who would also signpost them somewhere else, *'it was like a ball kick to different places'* (Participant D). Three participants highlighted that they were often given multiple email contacts for various issues, but using these emails often led to further redirection, resulting in prolonged waiting times for a response and often futile outcomes.

Interestingly, out of the nine participants, only one participant mentioned any welcome events specifically organised for international students to demonstrate the support readily available and provided by the institution. This participant highlighted reaching out to the institution for assistance during their transition, through Instagram and Outlook. They expressed satisfaction with the help they received, particularly regarding mental health and general practitioner (GP) services. The participant mentioned that they had to persistently search for help until they found it. Furthermore, another participant talked about the academic assistance provided by the Centre of Academic Writing,

which they found highly beneficial, particularly because they faced challenges with written English. The participant underscored the significance of having this support system in enhancing their academic performance.

All participants pointed out areas where the university could have made improvements to aid their transition. Two participants specifically mentioned the potential benefits of a university society targeting international students, where they could connect with individuals facing similar challenges and receive valuable advice and tips to facilitate their occupational transitions. It is worth noting that although the university promotes itself as having students from over 150 countries, participants still reported a lack of peer support structures in their course or cohort. Three participants emphasised the absence of peer support, expressing the belief that having peers in the same course, whether a year ahead or behind, would have been instrumental in supporting their occupational transition. This suggests a disconnection between institutional diversity messaging and students' day-to-day experiences. Peer support was not experienced equally; some participants found it helpful, while others described its absence.

Three participants emphasised that their transition could have been positively influenced if they had been assigned a designated staff member as a point of contact for any queries related to international student concerns. Moreover, participants suggested need for having student representatives, who are current students at the university, assigned to offer additional support to new international students. Participants discussed the idea

that more events tailored specifically for international students, especially at the beginning of the academic year, would have been advantageous for providing helpful hints and tips to support their adjustment. Five participants whose programme started in January expressed a sense of being "*alienated*" due to the perception that less attention and support is provided to those commencing their studies in January compared to those starting in September. One participant expressed frustration with unclear communication regarding fee deadlines and erroneous payment notifications, which compounded existing pressures.

Adaptation is learning the lifestyle

This theme was informed by three subthemes, which included making new friends, maintaining regular contact with friends and family and exploring new occupations. Participants report that these factors played a pivotal role in shaping how they navigated the challenges associated with transitioning to a new environment.

All participants highlighted that keeping regular contact with their family and friends was a coping strategy that helped their transitions. Being able to speak with friends and family regularly allowed participants to connect with familiar people and a sense of familiarity. Participant E described their coping strategy, "*my coping strategy was always ensuring that there's communication with my family, and just blurting out my feelings*". This underscores the significance of this coping mechanism in helping participants navigate the challenges associated with the occupational transitions. Participants noted that establishing social connections had a positive influence on their transition.

All nine participants emphasised that forging new friendships served as an effective coping strategy during their transition, with a specific emphasis on forming bonds with individuals from their home country. Participants shared that having friends in their host countries provided a support system to rely on. The significance of making friends from the same country was emphasised as participants discussed that this made the transition more manageable due to shared experiences. Participant C expressed this sentiment by stating: *"I had a study buddy in my class. We used to study together, encourage each other, cry together, help each other out"*. One participant mentioned that befriending local students also contributed to making friends and fostering a sense of belonging in their new host country.

Exploration served as a vital coping mechanism for participants. The process of exploration allowed them to become familiar with their environment, discover new opportunities, and engage in occupations that created new meaning to them. Five participants highlighted that picking new occupations to occupy time was helpful in their overall health and wellbeing. Participant B stated, *"I picked up a lot of new things because of the environment and the culture and it's a good thing for my health and wellbeing"*.

Five participants discussed that, given the limited availability of the occupations they once enjoyed in their home countries, adopting new occupations emerged as a practical coping strategy for them. Participant C shared *"I picked up something new. I go to the gym most days because it helps my mental health. My mood is*

elevated. I feel refreshed". Participant F said *"I developed an occupation which is cooking and cooking wasn't something I did back home"*. Additionally, participants reported that travelling and spending time alone as part of self-care was another way, they were able to cope with the transition. Participant A stated that *"I tend to travel around more"*. Seven participants noted that their transition was driven by their personal initiatives rather than receiving active support from the institution. Participant D said: *"I honestly just Google or watch on YouTube what people say."*

Two participants mentioned that they managed to sustain their involvement in occupations they previously enjoyed by establishing friendships with individuals who guided them. One participant shared that in their home country, they were deeply spiritual and desired to continue this practice in their host country. They located a nearby church where they could attend, allowing them to continue their meaningful occupation. Another participant expressed a passion for a sport they played professionally in their home country. Initially facing challenges in pursuing this interest in the UK, they found support from friends within the university who directed them appropriately. As a result, the participant is now able to actively participate in their meaningful occupation, noting that this significantly aided their transition.

In contrast to picking up of new 'positive' occupations as a way to cope with the challenges, a participant highlighted that they resorted to overeating which then negatively affected their body weight and self-esteem. Participant C stated that *"I cried a lot. I ate a lot as well, so that's something I do when I'm stressed, and that's why I've*

gained so much weight and I'm still struggling to lose the weight that I gained then".

DISCUSSION

Academic expectations, coupled with the demands of processes like visa applications and finding accommodation, contributed to an overwhelming transition experience for participants in this study. This aligns with Khanal and Uttam's (2019) assertion that differences in teaching and learning styles pose primary challenges and barriers to academic success for international students. These challenges can impact on their ability to engage in meaningful occupations. Similarly, Marginson et al. (2010) reported that adapting to new teaching styles and expectations, along with the pressure to meet academic standards, constitutes a significant challenge for international students. Participants noted that added responsibilities sometimes hindered their ability to make friends, also impacting their social connections with other people in their host countries. These findings highlight that occupational engagement can be impacted by academic pressures, meaning that international students can find it hard to find time to engage in other enjoyable meaningful occupations (Andrade, 2006).

Furthermore, participants discussed the emotional challenges of being separated from their loved ones, leading to feelings of loneliness and homesickness. According to Menzies and Baron (2014), transitions are likely to be difficult due to the experience of homesickness. Participants shared the challenges of adapting without the presence of their close family and friends due to the increased responsibilities in their host country compared to their home country. Research highlights that there is pressure on international students to quickly adjust to

their host countries including tasks such as securing housing, building social connections, navigating public transportation, adjusting to local cuisine and weather, and familiarising themselves with the healthcare system (Ramachandran, 2011). Alharbi and Smith (2019) emphasise that the act of leaving one's home can profoundly affect individual wellbeing, especially for international students in unfamiliar cultural contexts.

Participants experienced varied food-related transitions: some welcomed the chance to explore new cuisines, while others encountered difficulties reflecting the broader phenomenon of dietary socialisation. Previous studies show that international students indicated their eating habits suffered due to cultural variations between the food in their host country and their home countries (Martirosyan et al, 2019; Bauch et al, 2023). This aligns with the current study's findings, as some participants communicated their displeasure with the food culture in the UK; nevertheless, they managed to adjust in their unique ways having gained knowledge about occupational science. The findings indicate that, despite being a challenge, other participants expressed enjoyment in acquiring the skill of cooking for themselves, an occupation previously considered to be a responsibility of their family members in their home countries. This points to the significance of everyday occupations, such as food preparation, not just as survival tasks but as central to maintaining identity and wellbeing during occupational transition.

Marinenko (2021) emphasises the need for international students to receive additional support in areas like academic writing, participation in classroom activities, and

comprehension of assignments. Adequate academic support services, including language assistance, tutoring, and orientation programs, contribute to improved academic outcomes (Marginson et al., 2010; Marinenko, 2021). The majority of participants reported feeling insufficiently supported during their transition, underscoring the need for targeted, low-cost support strategies such as peer mentoring and clearer signposting that directly address international occupational therapy student needs. These strategies are especially relevant amidst ongoing financial strain across UK universities, where widespread staff redundancies, course cuts, and budget deficits are placing institutional capacity under immense pressure.

When seeking assistance, participants noted delayed response times and frequent redirection to other sources, creating a cycle of signposting. Largely, participants indicated a lack of awareness regarding the available support systems at the university. Notably, among the nine participants, only one expressed a positive acknowledgment of the institution's support in facilitating their transition. According to Costello (2015), inadequate support contributes to higher dropout rates, increased feelings of loneliness, and heightened culture shock. Thus, recognising these findings it is crucial to explore ways in which international occupational therapy students can receive improved support for a seamless occupational transition.

Vasileiou et al. (2018) found that participants often sought support from family, friends from home, partners, or new acquaintances, highlighting the value of social connections during loneliness. Similarly, in the present study, all participants stressed the

importance of building relationships in the host country while maintaining contact with family and friends. From an occupational perspective, this reflects the maintenance of meaningful relationships as a stabilising occupation, supporting the sense of belonging identified by Hitch and Pepin (2021), who note that belonging, feeling valued in one's environment enhances wellbeing, participation, and engagement. Difficulties in belonging can diminish the meaningfulness of occupational engagements (Mori, 2000). Building connections locally while sustaining family ties helped participants cope with separation and adapt more smoothly. This adaptation also addressed culture shock, which Mulyadi et al. (2024) describe as arising from differences between host-country practices and familiar routines. Participants in this study navigated such challenges by engaging in new occupations such as traveling, climbing, and going to the gym which served as adaptive strategies to maintain wellbeing and compensate for the loss of familiar activities in their home countries.

Limitations

This study's findings should be interpreted in light of certain limitations. Firstly, the sample was drawn from a single UK university, limiting the generalisability of results to other institutional or regional contexts. Secondly, all participants were postgraduate students, whose experiences may differ from undergraduate students in terms of workload, maturity, and coping strategies. Thirdly, the qualitative design relied on self-reported accounts, which may be influenced by recall bias or selective disclosure. Participants were from Hong Kong, Nigeria and India, so their experiences may differ compared to international students from

other countries including Western countries. Future research should explore a more diverse student population, include multiple universities, and examine how different occupational domains evolve throughout the transition period.

CONCLUSION

This study provides insight into the occupational transition experiences of international occupational therapy students at a UK university, showing how academic, social, and cultural challenges intersect to shape participation in meaningful occupations. Transition emerged as a multifaceted occupational process encompassing adaptation to new institutional norms, immigration and housing systems, and daily routines. Academic pressures, homesickness, and cultural dissonance often limited engagement in leisure, self-care, and social occupations, making the maintenance of meaningful connections and development of new routines vital coping strategies. The findings urge the university to recognise occupational transitions among international students as key to both wellbeing and academic success, expanding support beyond academics to foster social integration, provide culturally responsive wellbeing initiatives, and simplify access to administrative support systems. Embedding an occupational lens when supporting international students through clear signposting, timely responses, peer mentorship, inclusive activities, and opportunities to sustain or adapt familiar occupations can create environments in which international students not only manage the transition but thrive academically, socially, and personally.

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