

## **BRIDGING TRANSITION: DEVELOPING A COMMUNITY ONLINE PLATFORM FOR INTERNATIONALLY TRAINED OCCUPATIONAL THERAPISTS IN SINGAPORE**

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### **ABSTRACT**

Occupational therapy (OT) is a vital component of Singapore's healthcare system, enhancing the quality of life for individuals across all age groups. This study tackled the integration challenges and perception of available transition support experienced by internationally educated occupational therapists (IEOTs) in Singapore. While the number of registered OTs has been on the rise, the number of non-citizen OTs has declined over the years. This posed questions regarding the adaptation of the IEOTs to Singapore's healthcare landscape. To address such concerns, a transition online platform for IEOTs was developed. This study employed a descriptive-developmental research design using mixed methodology. Two phases of an online survey were administered. The first phase, a survey questionnaire, assessed the challenges and perceptions of IEOTs regarding existing support mechanisms using a 4-point Likert scale. Results indicated that IEOTs raised major challenges relating to social-cultural integration, emotional stress, and access to resources, recording a mean challenge rating of  $M=2.28$ . It was also found that IEOTs felt improvement should be made in the area of support for local OT resources ( $M=2.45$ ), access to adequate support and resources for qualifying examinations (2.21), and networking ( $M=2.30$ ). In the second phase, an online platform was assessed for compliance with the ISO/IEC 25010:2011 standard. The platform scored high on the criteria for security and maintainability with average scores corresponding to 4.5; further, the overall estimate was 4.42. The findings suggest that the proposed transition support program could facilitate integration into the healthcare system for IEOT in Singapore, resulting in improved patient care and a more welcoming environment for both residents and expatriates.

**Keywords:** Descriptive-Developmental Study, Internationally Educated Occupational Therapists, Transition support, Community Online platform.

### **INTRODUCTION**

Occupational therapy is a significant healthcare service in the Singaporean system, enabling healthy and happy lifestyles for all ages. OTs work with the patient to improve their physical and well-being. Such a profession is essential in Singapore since, with advancements in technology, population density, and growth rate, especially that of older people, there is a corresponding growth rate in the need for healthcare services (Kaleidoscope, 2023). According to the article by Jesus et al. (2022), the roles of Occupational Therapists (OTs) are crucial in practice worldwide. According to WFOT (2021), there is a need to support OTs

worldwide as there is an increased responsibility to address the growing need for healthcare, rehabilitation, and vocational services globally. The report highlights the ever-evolving roles of occupational therapists and demonstrates the specialized and diverse international professionals that practice the profession. This promotes recommendations to appreciate and support the OTs in increasing efforts to meet this population's health needs adequately. The profession of occupational therapy thrives on a diverse workforce, encompassing Internationally Educated Occupational Therapists (IEOTs) who bring unique perspectives and experiences to their practice in new environments. While the World Federation of Occupational Therapists (WFOT, 2020) champions the enriching experiences of working abroad as an occupational therapist, the literature reveals a notable increase in immigration among IEOTs. Transitioning to practice in a different country presents challenges to adapting to new environments or country settings, such as complex licensure processes, professional integration issues, a lack of support networks, and the need for cultural and language competency. The qualification requirements were perhaps the greatest of those difficulties, and the qualifications required could be entirely different from those in another country. Newly qualified OTs encountered several locally required policies and practices that they did not receive training in other countries (Safari et. al., 2022). Such differences could have acted as a barrier to entry for those looking to enter the profession or made transition opportunities relatively complex. However, these may not have been sufficient for overseas OTs who need help with locality culture and practice norms. With care towards the local needs for skills, the entry of an overseas OT into the health system might have become rather complicated.

According to the Allied Health Professional Council (AHPC) Annual Report, December 2023, the number of qualified occupational therapists (OTs) has increased yearly, with 1,550 OTs currently practicing in Singapore. The growth of the role of occupational therapists (OTs) has been driven by advances in general healthcare and an increasing recognition of their importance within the system. However, while the number of registered occupational therapists increased, the number of non-citizen occupational therapists declined. This raised questions about the adaptability of international occupational therapists who are new to the Singapore market. The Allied Health Professional Council (AHPC) has identified several barriers faced by internationally educated occupational therapists (IEOTs), including challenges related to qualification standardization and educational discrepancies. Many applicants hold qualifications from programs that do not align with local standards. Despite being offered employment, these individuals are required to pass qualifying examinations and undergo supervised practice before transitioning from conditional registration to full registration as occupational therapists. Additionally, educational requirements stipulated that applicants must hold qualifications equivalent to a postgraduate diploma. Cultural assimilation also presented challenges for overseas-trained OTs, as limited networking opportunities hindered their ability to connect with local colleagues.

In 2024, the IAHC (International Allied Health Conference) reiterated that support and camaraderie among the AHP community are growing. However, unless support mechanisms help new OTs in the integration of Singaporean society, socialization into it might have continued to be a challenge. The content and learning methodology of transition programs are thus essential in preparing new allied health professionals to be ready and competent when they are beginning their careers. To address these issues, this research aimed to develop a transition support program tailored for IEOTs. The program would assist them in overcoming local-oriented practice barriers. By enhancing its competencies and providing the necessary tools, it sought to facilitate a smoother integration into Singapore's healthcare sector. Building a more inclusive and efficient healthcare environment would benefit residents and

expatriates. The successful integration of IEOTs would improve patient experiences and positively impact Singapore's overall health landscape.

## **METHODS**

The proposed study used a descriptive-developmental research method, and a mixed-methods design to create a transition framework for internationally trained occupational therapists in Singapore. The recruitment of the respondents was carried out using a purposive sampling method involving internationally trained occupational therapists having <1 year of working experience in Singapore, who have worked in diverse settings, either completely or conditionally registered as OT's in Singapore, and in the process of attempting qualifying assessments and credentialing. The Raof calculator initially estimated a sample size of 116; however, due to accessibility and target group suitability constraints, only 33 participants met the selection criteria.

The study was divided into two phases. The first phase focused on data collection for website development, which included a researcher-created questionnaire designed to capture comprehensive insights into the challenges, perceptions, and experiences of internationally trained occupational therapists. Five expert occupational therapists with extensive international practice experience in Singapore validated this questionnaire, which included ten items covering three critical domains (demographic profile, encountered challenges, and support system perceptions). To maximize response, the questionnaire was distributed to respondents via email and social media platforms. While the second phase focused on evaluating the completed website, ten evaluators (five respondents from phase I and five IT evaluation specialists) were engaged to use the ISO/IEC 25010 Project Evaluation Survey. Data analysis incorporated descriptive statistical techniques, utilizing frequency and percentage distribution for demographic information and weighted means to analyze challenges, experiences, and perceptions. To gain a comprehensive understanding of transition support experiences, verbal interpretation methods were used. Throughout the research process, participant involvement remained entirely voluntary, with stringent anonymity protocols maintained. The Hostinger platform hosted the resulting website, which was designed to meet the identified needs.

## **RESULTS AND DISCUSSION**

Discussion of the Socio demographic Profile of Internationally Trained Occupational Therapists is presented in the tables and textual presentation.

**Table 1. Profile of the Respondents**

<b>Profile Variables</b>	<b>Frequency</b>	<b>Percentage</b>
<b>Age</b>		
28 - 30 years old	5	15.15%
31- 35 years old	8	24.24%
36 - 40 years old	8	24.24%
41 - 45 years old	7	21.21%
46 – 50 years old	5	15.15%
<b>Gender</b>		
Female	22	66.7 %
Male	11	33.3 %
<b>Nationality</b>		
Philippines	20	61 %
India	2	6 %
Ireland	2	6 %
Canada	1	3 %
UK	2	6 %
Australian	1	3 %
Hongkong	1	3 %
Taiwan	1	3.0 %
Singapore	3	9 %
<b>Highest Educational Attainment</b>		
BSOT	27	82 %
MA/MS in OT	6	18 %
<b>Years of Experience in Singapore</b>		
1 – 5 years	10	30.3 %
6 – 10 years	11	33.3 %
11 – 15 years	9	27.2 %
16 – 20 years	3	9.1 %
<b>Type pf Work Setting</b>		
<b>A. Private</b>		
School (Pediatric)	10	55%
Private Centre	8	
<b>B. Government</b>		
Social Sector	8	45%
Hospital	7	
<b>N = 90</b>		

The demographic profile of internationally trained occupational therapists (ITOTs) working in Singapore, as presented in Table 1, Table 1 summarizes the respondents' sociodemographic profiles, which describe their characteristics, such as age, gender, work experience, education, nationality, and work setting. It reveals a diverse and well-qualified workforce. The majority of respondents fall within the 31-40 age range, indicating a mix of early-career and experienced professionals. Gender distribution shows a significant female

majority (66.7%), aligning with global trends in healthcare professions as noted by Holgado et al. (2023). Nationality-wise, there is a notable Filipino majority (61%), complemented by professionals from various other countries, reflecting Singapore's appeal as an international healthcare destination. Educational qualifications are robust, with 82% holding bachelor's degrees and 18% possessing master's degrees, suggesting a highly educated workforce. Work experience varies, with most respondents having 6-10 years in the field, while some have as little as one year of experience. The distribution between private (55%) and public (45%) work settings indicates a balanced occupational therapy service across different healthcare sectors.

**Table 2. Transition Challenges Faced by Occupational Therapists in Singapore's Local Healthcare System**

Indicator	Weighted Mean	Verbal Interpretation	Rank
1. Difficulty understanding local workplace culture and expectations	2.30	Sometimes	8.5
2. Challenges in communicating effectively with colleagues and clients	2.30	Sometimes	8.5
3. Feeling isolated or lacking a support network.	1.94	Sometimes	13
4. Navigating the regulatory requirements for occupational therapy practice in Singapore	2.36	Sometimes	3
5. Adapting to different educational and therapeutic approaches used in Singapore	2.33	Sometimes	5.5
6. Managing work-life balance due to cultural differences	2.24	Sometimes	10
7. Coping with feelings of frustration or anxiety during the transition	2.52	Often	1
8. Accessing resources and information relevant to your role as an occupational therapist	2.12	Sometimes	11.5
9. Establishing professional relationships with colleagues	2.12	Sometimes	11.5
10. Understanding the healthcare system and policies in Singapore	2.33	Sometimes	5.5
11. Accessing resources available in preparation for the qualifying examination	2.31	Sometimes	7
12. Quality of mentor-mentee relationships	2.35	Sometimes	4
13. Availability of mentors to support my transition	2.42	Sometimes	2
Average	2.28	Sometimes	

As shown in Table 2, the level of the significant challenges faced by internationally educated occupational therapists (IEOTs) during their transition to practice in Singapore. The highest-ranking challenge was coping with frustration and anxiety ( $M = 2.52$ ), aligning with studies by Kim et al. (2017) and others that highlight the crucial role of work environment in shaping employees' emotional labor. The availability of mentors ( $M = 2.42$ ) emerged as the second most significant challenge, underscoring the importance of mentorship in successful transitions, as supported by research from Gelles et al. (2020) and Jackson et al. (2023).

Navigating regulatory requirements ( $M = 2.36$ ) was also a notable challenge, with Lim et al. (2022) emphasizing the importance of familiarity with local policies for effective system navigation. The average weighted mean of 2.28 indicates that respondents experienced these challenges "sometimes," with a high internal consistency (Cronbach Alpha = 0.822) among the items measuring challenges. Open-ended responses revealed varied experiences, with some IEOTs reporting smooth transitions due to strong support, while others faced difficulties in sociocultural integration, interaction, emotional aspects, and resource accessibility. These findings suggest that enhanced mentoring, improved access to information, and cultural orientation could significantly facilitate the integration of IEOTs into Singapore's occupational therapy profession.

**Table 3. Perceptions and experiences of the Internationally trained occupational therapist regarding the available transition support system in Singapore**

Indicator	Weighted Mean	Verbal Interpretation	Rank
1. I feel that I have adequate support from my employer during my transition to working in Singapore.	2.69	Often	8
2. I have access to resources that help me understand the local occupational therapy practices.	2.45	Sometimes	11
3. I receive sufficient guidance from colleagues regarding workplace expectations and protocols.	2.94	Often	2.5
4. The training provided by my organization meets my needs as an internationally trained occupational therapist.	2.67	Often	9.5
5. I feel comfortable seeking help from my peers when I encounter challenges in my role.	2.94	Often	2.5
6. The existing support networks (e.g., professional associations, online forums) are helpful during my transition.	2.30	Sometimes	12
7. I have received adequate information about the regulatory requirements for practicing occupational therapy in Singapore.	2.72	Often	7
8. I feel that my cultural background is respected and valued in my workplace.	2.97	Often	1
9. I have opportunities to engage in professional development activities that support my transition.	2.73	Often	5
10. I have access to adequate support and resources in preparation for the qualifying examination	2.21	Sometimes	13
11. The quality of the mentoring relationships I have experienced has been beneficial.	2.67	Often	9.5
12. I feel that mentoring has positively impacted my integration into the workplace.	2.73	Often	5
13. Overall, I feel satisfied with the support system available to me during my transition to working in Singapore.	2.73	Often	5
Average	2.69		

As shown in Table 3, it reveals insights into the perceptions of internationally educated occupational therapists (IEOTs) regarding support systems in Singapore. The findings indicate that IEOTs "Sometimes" experienced challenges in accessing resources for understanding local practices ( $M = 2.45$ ), utilizing existing support networks ( $M = 2.30$ ), and obtaining adequate support for qualifying examinations ( $M = 2.21$ ). These results align with studies by Toyin-Thomas et al. (2023), Safari et al. (2022), and Kadakia et al. (2022), which highlight integration challenges due to ineffective support systems and complex licensure processes. Lim et al. (2022) emphasized the importance of understanding local policies for effective system navigation and client advocacy. The average weighted mean of 2.69 and Cronbach Alpha of .85 indicate good internal consistency among the perception measurement



items. Open-ended responses revealed specific needs for improvement, including structured orientation, mentorship opportunities, cultural training, support networks, and professional development resources. These findings are consistent with Baptiste et al. (2020), who stressed the crucial role of professional organizations in providing necessary resources and guidelines for IEOTs. Overall, while respondents generally perceived adequate support, there are clear areas for enhancement in the transition process for IEOTs in Singapore's healthcare system.

**Table 4. Summary Table for the Assessment of the Online Platform using the ISO 25010:2011 Website Evaluation**

Indicator	Weighted Mean	Verbal Interpretation	Rank
1. Functionality suitability	4.43	Agree (Very satisfactory)	4.5
2. Performance efficiency	4.43	Agree (Very satisfactory)	4.5
3. Compatibility	4.35	Agree (Very satisfactory)	7
4. Usability	4.28	Agree (Very satisfactory)	8
5. Reliability	4.48	Agree (Very satisfactory)	3
6. Security	4.50	Strongly Agree (Outstanding)	1.5
7. Maintainability	4.50	Strongly Agree (Outstanding)	1.5
8. Portability	4.37	Agree (Very satisfactory)	6
<b>Overall Weighted Mean</b>	4.42	Agree (Very satisfactory)	

As shown in Table 4, presents an evaluation of the developed web-based resource network for internationally educated occupational therapists (IEOTs) in Singapore. The network received outstanding ratings for security and maintainability (average score 4.50), with an overall very satisfactory rating of 4.42. This indicates the platform's effectiveness in meeting user needs, particularly those of IEOTs. Bulan et al. (2023) suggest that such favorable ratings align with the trend of using information technology to foster connections and facilitate information exchange. The high portability rating likely stems from the convenience of mobile internet access, eliminating the need for specific applications. The emphasis on security and maintainability reflects users' desire for a secure and reliable platform, especially given the increasing prevalence of online scams. The development of this platform aligns with global initiatives like the World Federation of Occupational Therapists' (WFOT) Occupational Therapy International Online Network (OTION), which facilitates worldwide information exchange among occupational therapists. The creation of IEOT-specific platforms appears timely, supporting independent practice tailored to country-specific expectations and cultural norms.

## CONCLUSION

Internationally educated occupational therapists (IEOTs) transitioning to practice in Singapore face significant challenges, including emotional difficulties, interpersonal interaction issues, and limited access to essential learning materials. These obstacles highlight the inadequacies of existing transition programs in Singapore, particularly in providing

mentorship, peer networking opportunities, and access to critical learning resources necessary for effective integration into the local healthcare environment. To address these challenges, the I-GOT-U web-based resource network was developed, offering a platform for idea exchange and peer support to facilitate IEOTs' transition into the Singaporean healthcare system. This initiative aligns with the growing trend of utilizing information technology to foster connections and facilitate information exchange in professional settings, as noted by recent studies. The I-GOT-U community online platform has received a very satisfactory rating based on the Systems and Software Quality Requirements and Evaluation (SQuaRE) criteria, demonstrating its effectiveness in meeting the needs of IEOTs and achieving high user satisfaction. This positive reception suggests that the platform successfully addresses the gaps in support for IEOTs, potentially improving their integration into Singapore's healthcare sector and contributing to the country's efforts in developing a robust and diverse healthcare workforce.

## **RECOMMENDATIONS**

Internationally Educated Occupational Therapists (IEOTs) are strongly encouraged to utilize the I-GOT-U platform as a crucial tool for professional growth and integration into Singapore's healthcare system. Launched in May 2024, this platform offers comprehensive support services, including mentorship programs, resource hubs, and networking opportunities specifically designed for IEOTs<sup>1</sup>. Educational institutions offering occupational therapy programs can leverage I-GOT-U as a valuable resource for their graduates and students, integrating it into their career services to facilitate smoother transitions into practice in Singapore.

Healthcare organizations and employers can use I-GOT-U to support the integration of newly recruited IEOTs, helping them settle in and connect with other professionals in the field. The platform's resources, including cultural insights and healthcare system information, are particularly valuable for this purpose<sup>5</sup>. Occupational Therapy Education Programs can benefit from reviewing the platform's findings to develop curricula that address the specific challenges faced by IEOTs, with a focus on cultural competence training.

Professional bodies in Singapore can utilize feedback from the I-GOT-U community to advocate for improved frameworks and policies supporting IEOTs. They should encourage membership and participation in the platform to enhance professional development and networking activities. Researchers can analyze data from I-GOT-U to further investigate the integration processes of IEOTs, focusing on best practices and areas for improvement within support structures.

For future research, it is recommended to expand the response pool beyond IEOT graduates, potentially partnering with local OT associations and health networks to increase participation. Multiple follow-ups through various communication channels could improve response rates. These strategies could provide broader feedback and a more comprehensive evaluation of the platform's effectiveness in supporting IEOTs' integration into Singapore's healthcare system.



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