

Member diversity makes COTEC a stronger representative

Anu Söderström The Council of Occupational Therapists for the European Countries (COTEC) is the Europe-wide organisation for all Occupational Therapists through their National Associations. The aim of COTEC is to enable National Associations of Occupational Therapists to work together to develop, harmonise and improve standards of professional practice and advance the theory of Occupational Therapy throughout Europe to best address the social and health issues affecting European citizens. COTEC strives to make Occupational Therapy visible, valued, accessible and available for all European citizens by supporting its Members and by collaborating on a European level.



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COTEC currently has 32 Full Members. Full Members are the National Associations of Occupational Therapists in the member states of the Council of Europe. This is a broader group of nations than the members of the European Union and brings with it a great diversity of geography.

Different Members, different perspectives

COTEC Member associations differ greatly – both in their numbers of members and when they came into being. There are some very established National Associations and some very new ones – each bringing different perspectives of occupational therapy.

There are also differences in the activities and roles of our members – some participate very actively in national decision-making, lobbying and safeguarding while others are professional networks, not necessarily legally recognised as a stakeholder in the decision making of the health and social care policies in their country. Some belong to a larger umbrella organisation whose mechanisms can be used to work in the interests of the profession.

Our diversity grows continuously

Our older Members were already established in the 1930s, whilst the youngest one has just turned five. This, and our national heritages, naturally lead to the associations having different working cultures and processes, also not forgetting the very different levels of both human and financial resource available in our different Member bodies.

The smallest Member has only about 20 individual members, while the largest has nearly 30,000. As membership of COTEC for an organisation means that all its members automatically become part of COTEC this means that altogether COTEC represents over 190,000 Occupational Therapists, all with their own diverse individual characteristics such as age, ethnicity, gender and gender identity, national origin, physical ability, political beliefs, religion, language, socio-economic status and so on.

We are conscious not to view individuals within countries as homogenous and understand the diversity that exists within countries also. The bigger the association, the more diverse their membership which also often reflects how our Members raise equality and diversity issues in the work of COTEC. It has been great to see how not only diversity but also inclusion and equality have been more frequently discussed by our Members in the recent years. Putting in place clear plans and policies to promote this is important to COTEC. Documents and Annual plans have been prepared based on the proposals and arguments from our Members and raising these themes is an integral part of our future activities.

Stimulating exchange of experiences

We feel fortunate in the range of countries we encompass and when we meet – either in person or more recently virtually – the exchanges of experience, sharing successes and seeking and offering support are varied, stimulating and sometimes surprising!



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Of key importance is the history of Occupational Therapy in all our respective countries. The narrative of our profession is unique in each country but there are some common themes we have noticed. In countries where the profession is relatively young, the first Occupational Therapists often have a previous degree in health care or medicine. They are competent to develop the profession and occupational science research and there is a relatively large number of masters level Occupational Therapists.

Occupational Therapy is vital

However, our Members have much in common despite the diversity. We all believe that Occupational Therapy is vital in supporting our citizens to live their best life - working with them to ensure they are as involved and engaged as possible in their own health-care and well-being.

In COTEC we think that the whole is greater than the sum of its parts. We strive to maximise the benefit of the diverse group we represent. Each Member is welcome to take part in the discussion and decision making. By welcoming and encouraging all our Member Associations to nominate their members to the various committees and working groups or to join our OT-Europe Register of Experts we want to empower

all our Members despite their size, status, level of human resources and language.

In order to strengthen the culture of diversity we must provide opportunities for reflection and critical reflexivity in order to evaluate existing systems and structures, also we must have multiple channels for communication in order to hear the Member's voices – COTEC is an organisation of the Members and for the Members.

To learn more about the COTEC Member Associations, please take a look at the Summary of the Occupational Therapy Profession. The document is published annually and can be found on COTEC website:
www.cotec europe.eu/updates/summary-of-the-profession