



Return to practice

Returner handbook

Acknowledgments

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Thank you to Health Education England (HEE) for support in writing this guide.

Congratulations!

RCOT would like to congratulate you on your decision to return to practice! We hope it will be an exciting and rewarding experience, updating your knowledge and skills and regaining your confidence to return to work as an occupational therapist (OT).

As a returner, you're responsible for your own period of updating. This handbook provides information and resources that will help you through the process. There are also some signposts for further organisations and material should you be interested.

At the back of the handbook are several templates, please use them if you find them helpful.

Throughout this handbook we've used the terms 'practice' and 'to practise' to mean the use of your OT knowledge and skills in a work situation. This would include specialisation in a particular field or with a particular client group, or a movement into roles in management, research or education and training.

If we can be of any further assistance, please do not hesitate to contact our Professional Practice Enquiries Service. We would be happy to discuss your returning to practice plans and answer any questions you may have:

professional.enquiries@rcot.co.uk or 020 3141 4630

The service is open Monday - Friday from 9am-5pm

What is a return to practice programme?

A return to practice (RTP) programme is an organised process that enables you to regain your professional registration with the Health and Care Professions Council (HCPC) so that you can practise again. You can find opportunities and support in updating your professional skills and knowledge and regaining your confidence through:

- the support of a named supervisor
- a supervised practice placement
- learning opportunities and resources
- networking opportunities
- the possibility of employment if vacancies exist; and
- funding in some circumstances.

Some health and social care organisations and universities are already providing organised programmes. If you can't access one of these, this handbook will help you to organise your own.

Who are the Health and Care Professions Council (HCPC)?

By law, you have to be registered with the HCPC, (regulatory body), to practise as an OT, or use the title 'occupational therapist', in the UK.

The HCPC's primary role is to protect the public which it does by:

- setting standards of training, professional skills, behaviour and health
- approving programmes that professionals complete to register
- keeping a publicly available register of professionals (registrants) who meet the standards; and
- taking action if registrants do not meet the standards.

If you've been unregistered because you have not practised, or did not practise after graduating, the HCPC have specific requirements that must be met before you can register and thereby return to practice.

What do I need to do?

Although several steps have been listed here, you do not necessarily need to follow them consecutively.

Step 1 – gather your information.

Download the HCPC *Returning to practice: Information about our requirements for professionals returning to practice.*ⁱ Alternatively, you can read the guidance on the HCPC website: <https://www.hcpc-uk.org/> They have some guidance you can download.

You'll see that HCPC require you to spend some time updating your skills and knowledge. The amount of time depends upon how long you've been out of practice (i.e., how long you have been off the HCPC register), as follows:

- **0 to 2 years out of practice** – no requirements
- **2 to 5 years out of practice** – 30 days of updating
- **5 or more years out of practice** – 60 days of updating¹

Look for any local or national information for your UK country of residence. Although they all abide by the HCPC requirements, some have further support and funding available to assist the returner and the organisation that provides a supervised practice placement.

Make yourself aware of how you can obtain assistance in your country and at what stage of the return process. You may need to register with them to access this help.

England:

Health Education England have set up a return to practice programme designed to provide additional support alongside the HCPC RTP guidance by offering clinical, academic, and financial support to returners who live in England. It has several acceptance criteria.

<https://www.hee.nhs.uk/our-work/allied-health-professions/return-practice-allied-health-professionals-healthcare-scientists-practising-psychologists>

Scotland:

NHS Scotland Careers Return to Practice website page:
<https://www.careers.nhs.scot/ahp-return-to-practice/>

Northern Ireland:

In Northern Ireland enquiries should be made locally. Trusts may take requests on a case-by-case basis and try to support where possible.

Wales:

In Wales the updating arrangements are managed individually by Heads of Departments within Health Boards/Trusts.

<https://heiw.nhs.wales/careers/education-and-training/return-to-practice/return-to-practice-for-allied-health-professionals-and-health-care-scientists/>

Step 2 - work out how long it has been since you were last registered to practise.

This will tell you how many days of updating you need to complete. Don't worry if you've been away from practice for several years, or you didn't practise after you trained. This updating time is your opportunity to re-launch your career with all the support that you need.

If you are unsure how long it is since you came off the register, you can contact the HCPC Registration Department who will be able to tell you.

Step 3 - consider in which area of practice you want to work.

You may want to return to an area in which you've worked before, or your interests have changed, and you would like to work in a new field. Either is possible, but it may influence how you spend your updating time.

Step 4 – begin to consider your learning needs.

Planning your updating may seem overwhelming at first, but you can take one step at a time. Start by identifying what knowledge and skills you might need to update. When you have a supervisor, they can help you with this.

Consider looking at three key areas:

- **Professionalism:** the core values and principles of OT; the professional conduct, attitudes and aspirations that create excellence in practice. These are captured in RCOT and HCPC standards and seen in practice.
- **Knowledge:** your understanding of the nature of occupation and its significance to individuals, communities and populations. Also, the relationship of occupation to health and wellbeing and the unique role and approach of OT. These may be found in publications, through courses and seen in practice.
- **Skills:** including having a broad range of critical thinking, problem-solving, reasoning and communication skills, OT process skills and skills in the analysis and use of activities as therapeutic media. Added to this is having adequate computer and data literacy to capture and process information. These may be found in publications, through courses and seen in practice.

To identify areas for updating, there are some key documents that you can use as checklists, assessing yourself against professional expectations.

HCPC:

- *Standards of conduct, performance and ethics* (HCPC 2016).²
- *Standards of proficiency for occupational therapists* (HCPC 2013).³

It's important that you read these standards as HCPC state that you need to meet them before you return to practice. The RCOT standards are in line with HCPC's own, but are more extensive, detailed and applied.

RCOT:

- Professional standards for occupational therapy practice, conduct and ethics (RCOT 2021)⁴
- Career development framework: Guiding principles for occupational therapy (RCOT 2022)⁵

The career development framework supports the professional development of the whole OT workforce. It offers a structure with an overarching set of guiding principles to inform career, learning and workforce development within the profession. The framework is structured around four interacting Pillars of Practice, namely:

- professional practice
- facilitation of learning
- leadership
- evidence, research and development.

These are an effective way to consider what you already know, what you can do and where you want to take your learning and development next.

If you aren't already, we would encourage you to become a member RCOT. This will give you access to the full range of RCOT publications, resources and benefits, including liability insurance and tailored professional advice to suit your needs.

The templates in the back of this handbook can be used to record your identified areas for updating and to keep a record of your learning.

Step 5 – plan your updating.

As stated by HCPC, your period of updating can be made up of any combination of:

- supervised practice
- formal study; and
- private study.ⁱ

You don't need to carry out updating in all three ways. HCPC allows for flexibility and enables you to complete your updating in the best way for you. HCPC's only requirement is that **private study must not make up any more than half the total time**. You can complete your updating as full-time or part-time, according to your personal circumstances and what learning opportunities are available. HCPC treat one day as 7 hours.ⁱ

You can also spread your learning over time. Currently, HCPC's only requirement for the timescale is that all your updating needs to be completed, from start to finish, **within 2 years** before you apply for registration.ⁱ

Step 6 – look for funding.

There may be additional funding available to support your learning, but there are different criteria and systems for each of the UK countries. **You are advised to read the relevant guidance material signposted previously in this guide** as it may influence how you manage your updating and your choice of placement.

Step 7 – find a supervised practice placement.

Although we would recommend that you do complete a supervised placement, especially if you've been out of practice for some time, you don't have to. It is the best way to bring together all your updated skills and knowledge and to become familiar and confident within the work environment once more.

You may need to approach several organisations before you find a placement opportunity. It often depends on their current circumstances or their familiarity with the return to practice process. It may be more difficult to find a placement in a particular setting, so we would recommend that you take any opportunity that you are offered.

If you live in England and are eligible to receive support through the Health Education England (HEE) Return to Practice scheme, HEE will help you to find a practice placement.

HCPC also accept virtual practice placements. Some universities have developed online return to practice courses which combine practice-based skills and the theoretical underpinning of current developments and influences.

You can also make use of your old networks – friends who are OTs. If you're not already a member, join RCOT and use the Regional or Specialist Section networks. Keep an eye on health and social care recruitment sites and social media also. Some organisations are beginning to advertise return to practice posts.

Decide the geographical area within which you can realistically travel. Identify the local OT services in your location, keeping in mind the field in which you would like to work. Consider looking at OT services in:

Acute hospital services	Schools
Community services	Independent practice
Integrated care services	Charity or voluntary sector
GP practices	Equipment
Local authority/social services	Prisons
Housing	Hospices
Care homes	Employment
Children, young people and families	Teaching
Neonatal services	Research

Make contact with the service lead or contact the Human Resource services. You can try by telephone and/or email. You may find that the organisation/service already has a return to practice programme in place, or you may need to do some explanation and promotion of practice placements. You can direct them to the return to practice information available from RCOT, HCPC and/or the country-specific information which has funding details and criteria for host organisations if available.

Some places might ask you for a CV or personal statement, although they are not always required. Spend some time updating yours. Tailor it to highlight the skills you have that would appeal to the setting you want to go into. Be prepared to sell yourself – what can you give them in return? How might you benefit their service? Remember that as a returner, you're already fully qualified, with experience and knowledge, and bringing your life experience.

Some organisations might ask you to formally apply for a practice placement. If this is the case, take your time completing the application form. Without exaggerating any of your information, consider what will make your application stand out. You need to communicate and present yourself well. Consider also how you can show an understanding of the values of the organisation that you are applying to.

If you are offered a visit or meeting, or an interview, take the opportunity to ask lots of questions. Be prepared to explain your hopes for the placement and perhaps for future work. If you need flexibility in terms of hours or days to manage other situations or commitments, you'll need to explain and negotiate this. Consider discussing the funding system that is in place in your country of residence.

If you have health or wellbeing concerns or needs, discuss this as early on as possible. They should be accommodated as much as reasonably possible, with additional support or flexibility provided if required. It is important that you're not excluded or discriminated against if you have health and wellbeing needs. You may be required to have an occupational health interview before you start your placement. This enables the organisation to know and understand your needs to know how best to support you and to be sure that you can practice safely and effectively. You should be made aware of any health and wellbeing support that is available within the organisation. This is important for you coming back into a demanding work environment.

You may be offered a placement with a volunteer agreement/honorary contract, or you may be offered a paid assistant role. Under any circumstances, you will be expected to abide by legislation and local policy.

In any setting, you will be required to have a safety check before you start your placement (DBS or equivalent). You may want to know how long the organisation takes to process a safety check so that you can take this into account when planning. If you know the check will bring up a past event, be open and honest about this and explain what you have done to negate its impact.

You'll also need to complete the organisation's induction programme. The time taken to complete this may be included in your total placement hours.

By having a contract of any sort with the host organisation, you should be covered by their insurance; it's important to check this.

Step 8 – find a supervisor and a counter signatory.

The HCPC state that **any professional providing supervision to a returner, or who acts as a counter signatory, needs to have been on the relevant section of the HCPC Register for at least the previous three years and not been subject to any fitness to practise proceedings or sanctions** (such as a caution or conditions of practice). On receipt of your application forms at the end of your updating, HCPC will confirm the named person is on their Register.

If you've arranged a supervised practice placement, you'll have a named supervisor.

The supervising OT should only supervise activities which are within their own scope of practice and level of competency. This ensures they can provide relevant input and guidance, and that you and they are practising safely and effectively. For example, an experienced OT practising in the mental health field may only provide supervision in relation to mental health.

HCPC believe that the level of supervision given is best decided between you and the supervisor, based on your learning needs.ⁱ Throughout the placement the supervisor needs to be sure of your competence before they fully delegate tasks to you. Initially, you'll work closely with them. As they get to know your skills, knowledge and experience, they can delegate increasingly complex tasks for you to carry out. They'll help you to regain your competence and confidence to practise autonomously, safely and effectively.

Consider Section 6 of the RCOT *Professional Standards for Occupational Therapy Practice, Conduct and Ethics* (RCOT 2021)^{vi} and Section 4 of the *HCPC Standards of conduct, performance and ethics* (HCPC 2016)^{iv} to understand the relationship between supervision, delegation and competence.

A practitioner:

- May ONLY provide services and use techniques for which they are qualified by their professional education, ongoing learning and/or experience.
- These MUST be within their professional competence, appropriate to the needs of those who access the service, and relate to their terms of employment; and
- They MUST have sufficient knowledge, skills and experience to make reliable professional judgements, suitable to their level of responsibility and scope of practice.

If you're not seeking a placement, you would still benefit from having a supervisor/supporter to help you through the return process and to help you reflect upon your learning.

This could be a past colleague or a friend who is a registered OT. They'll still need to meet the HCPC requirements, only providing direction and advice that is within their level of experience and competency. Some independent practitioners provide supervision support, but usually for a fee.

When you finish your period of updating and apply to register with HCPC, a registered OT, who meets the HCPC criteria above, needs to countersign your forms. They are not confirming that you are fit to practise. They are confirming, as far as they can be sure, that you have carried out the number of days of updating as described on your forms. The counter signatory can ask to see course certificates or to see your study records.

Although your supervisor is also likely to be the counter signatory for all your forms, they do not have to be. They are separate roles. They need to countersign this form to confirm that the information you have provided about your placement is correct.

Step 9 – complete your placement (if you have organised one).

The purpose of a placement is for you to update your skills and knowledge and to gain confidence in the practice of OT.

You might find it useful to refer back to the publications previously listed on in this guide as you go through your placement, demonstrating to yourself and your supervisor what you have learned. If your placement provider has a preceptorship scheme, you may also find the structure and material useful. Although you are responsible for deciding if the updating that you are doing is enough, as your supervisor gets to know you, ask for some feedback. Are there areas that they consider you need to update or develop further?

If you have the opportunity to visit other organisations and services, please note that you may only act as an observer if you don't have a formal contract with them. In such circumstances, HCPC would view this as private study.

Keeping Records

Record keeping should be viewed as any other clinical responsibility. It is something that you can do under supervision initially and fully delegated when your supervisor is confident that you can carry out the task appropriately.

The signing of records is a legal requirement. You must identify yourself and your role in the records, e.g., OT returner or OT assistant, according to your route of return. You don't need your supervisor to countersign your records unless local policy requires it.

The organisation should provide any system and necessary data protection training available and set up access to records, e.g., passwords, and digital signatures.

For further information please see RCOT's current guidance on *Keeping Records* which is available to members only.⁶

What if I am struggling on the practice placement?

It is rare, but sometimes returners do struggle, maybe in confidence or capability, maybe with the practicalities of managing both work and home circumstances. A breakdown in the supervisory relationship could be a possibility. If this is your situation, look for any support provided by your placement. If you have a good relationship with your supervisor or the service manager, discuss the situation. Try to find a way to resolve any problems. This might mean extending your placement period, working differently, with shorter days, with a different supervisor or in a different location. Consider contacting the RCOT Professional Practice Enquiries Services as they may be able to advise you.

As stated previously, it is not your supervisor's role, or the organisation's, to confirm your competence or your fitness to practise with HCPC, although they can highlight to you when they consider more learning is required.

If your supervisor has serious concerns about a returner, HCPC has two suggestions:

- Your supervisor can explain their concerns about signing the HCPC return to practice forms and may help the returner to plan additional updating activities.
- They may sign the forms, and then raise a fitness to practise concern with HCPC.¹

Serious concerns about a returner's conduct, competence, health, or character that suggest they are unfit or unsafe to practise their profession without restriction, or at all, are likely to be concerns that raise a question about their fitness to practise. The placement provider may consider contacting HCPC in such a case. HCPC will consider this information should the returner apply for registration.

In rare cases, a returner's lack of skills or professional demeanour may make it necessary for the placement provider to terminate any contract with them, in which case the returner will be unable to meet the HCPC requirements. Please note that this is extremely rare.

Step 10 – complete your formal study.

Formal study comprises structured learning provided by an individual or an organisation. It might be a short course provided online, or it might be an ongoing course provided by a university. Count the hours spent studying and ask for a certificate as evidence of completion.

If you attend a formal course provided by your placement host organisation you should allocate these hours to formal learning rather than your placement hours.

Step 11 – complete your private study.

Private study provides the most flexibility in terms of time and learning materials. It can't make up more than half of your total recorded updating time. There is nothing to stop you from doing more unrecorded private study in your own time.

HCPC state that you can count the time spent reflecting upon and recording your learning as private study. You will only need to provide HCPC with a summary of your private study, not your full records. HCPC has some information on reflection on their website. There are also some resources at the back of this handbook.

If you spend time observing or shadowing another practitioner without a formal supervision/placement contract in place, HCPC treats this as private study.

Step 12 - record your learning.

HCPC state that *"returning to practice is a self-directed process. It is your responsibility to make sure that you meet the appropriate requirements and can practise safely and effectively within your scope of practice, in line with our standards."* (HCPC 2017, p3)ⁱ

How much of a learning record you keep is up to you. You do not need to send all your records in when you apply for re-registration as HCPC only asks for a summary of your learning. They can contact you if they want further information. We would suggest that you will be better prepared if you take the time to reflect upon your experience. In your future professional work, you'll need to evidence any continuing professional development (CPD) to maintain your registration. Use your placement as an opportunity to get into this habit. You can use the recording form at the back of this handbook if it will help you.

Step 13 - Apply for your registration.

You'll need to complete the HCPC *Returning to practice application forms* (HCPC 2019)^{ix} available to download from the HCPC website.

You're advised to read the forms and the guidance carefully. On the cover form HCPC state, 'Please fill in a form for each activity you have completed' (HCPC 2019). As stated, you only need to provide a summary of each activity. They then need to be signed by your supervisor/counter signatory.

HCPC may contact you, a placement provider, or a course organiser if they require more information or to verify the number of days completed. They'll consider the information that is sent to them and decide if you can go back onto the register based on the information provided.

Once HCPC has processed your details, they'll set up an online account which you need to activate. Once your application has been checked, HCPC charges a readmission fee which includes the first year (or part year) of registration. Check their website to confirm the current amount. You pay the fee through your online account. HCPC aim to process all applications within 10 working days. Once complete, successful applicants will be added to the Register.

When you apply to re-register with HCPC you should tell them about any health condition you may have, but only if it affects your ability to practise safely and effectively, or if you're not sure whether your health condition might affect your ability to practise. You don't need to tell them if your health condition does not affect your practice or if you're sure you can adapt, limit, or stop your practice as needed to remain safe and effective.

All convictions, cautions and other potential character issues or health issues must be declared to the HCPC. If you are in doubt about whether to declare information, then you should declare it and allow them to consider it. Each matter is assessed on its unique circumstances. For more information, please read *HCPC Guidance on Health and Character* (HCPC 2021).¹⁰

In summary

Returning to practice is not as difficult as you may think. You're not alone, and RCOT will support you with your journey towards becoming a HCPC registered OT again.

Good luck with your returning to practice as an OT!

Example study record

You will learn from your updating activities by reflecting on them and applying your learning to future practice. It might help to use a simple but effective model for reflection. It can be used for a practical task, courses, and private study. It can become cyclical as continuous learning.

This is a model developed by Borton¹¹ that can be seen in several later formats.

What?

What activity did I do?

What did others do?

What was the reason to do it?

So what?

What did I experience or learn?

What else could I have done?

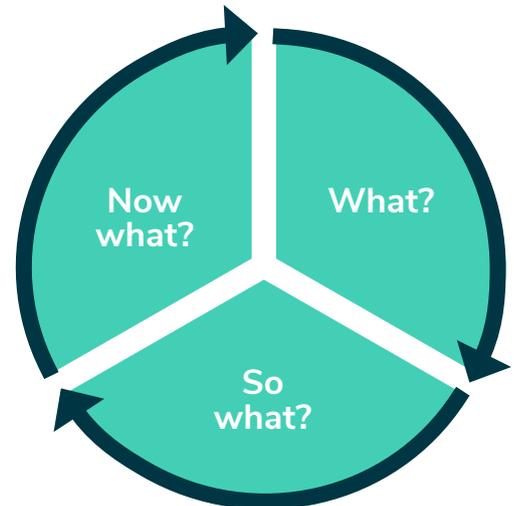
What are the possible outcomes of having this skill/knowledge?

Now what?

What change or improvement could this make to my practice?

What do I have to do to enable the change or improvement?

What more do I need to research/learn?



For example:

What?

Under supervision, I used a hoist to move Mr A from his bed to a chair. Mr A wanted to sit out but cannot transfer independently. We also needed to assess him to ensure we ordered the right slings for use in his home environment.

So what?

I was reminded how to fit the slings and use the hoist. I saw the importance of asking for consent in an activity like this - how hoisting can be scary and not very dignified. I could see how clear and calm communication helped to involve and reassure Mr A. Clear instructions also helped the process to be safe.

Now what?

I believe my practice will be safer, but also that I can make the process better for the individual. I would like to have more opportunities to gain confidence.

I would like to do a course to familiarise myself with the different types of hoists/slings.

Another way to reflect and record your learning is to use a form such as the one over the page.

Example learning activity record

Date Time taken	Activity
Why did you do this activity?	
What key things did you experience or learn?	
How could you use this skill or knowledge to improve your practice?	
How could this skill or knowledge benefit those who access your service?	
Is there any further learning that you need in this area?	

References

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- ¹¹ Borton T (1970) Reach, Touch and Teach. London: Hutchinson.