

1 **Full title**

2 **Perceived Impacts of Confucianism on Placement Experiences of Hong Kong Pre-**  
3 **registration Occupational Therapy Students in the United Kingdom**

4

5 **Abstract**

6 **Introduction** This study explored the views of Hong Kong pre-registration  
7 Occupational Therapy (OT) students in the United Kingdom (UK) about how Chinese  
8 culture influences their practice placement experiences. Students from diverse cultural  
9 backgrounds may encounter various challenges during OT placements, but little is  
10 known about how OT students from Hong Kong—where Confucianism traditionally  
11 shapes workplace expectations and the hierarchical teacher-student relationship—  
12 experience placements in the UK.

13 **Method** Two online focus groups to collect qualitative data were conducted in  
14 November 2022 with four participants who were UK-based OT students from Hong  
15 Kong (N=8 in total), two facilitators (OT students from Hong Kong, based in UK), and  
16 one silent observer (research supervisor).

17 **Results** Findings indicate that participants held a vertical hierarchical mindset with an  
18 awareness of social positions. They interacted with placement educators using the  
19 expected bottom-up attitude and behaviours. While their participation in discussions  
20 reflected eagerness to learn in UK placements, participants defined respect as not  
21 challenging or rejecting their superiors. Students described challenges in relationships  
22 with supervisors associated with differences between common UK work practices and  
23 the traditional Confucianism teachings. However, exposure to supportive and  
24 collaborative placement environments also facilitated adaptation, fostering confidence,  
25 communication, and professional development.

26 **Conclusion** Learning experiences and academic outcomes of Hong Kong OT  
27 students were significantly impacted—positively and negatively—by Confucian work  
28 culture. While students described challenges rooted in cultural differences, exposure  
29 to supportive UK placement environments also promoted professional and personal  
30 growth.

31

32 **Keywords**

33 **occupational therapy, culture, Hong Kong, international students, practice**  
34 **placement(s)**

1 **Main article**

2 **1. Introduction**

3 **Confucian work and education culture**

4 Hong Kong (HK) students are increasingly mobile and now account for the fifth-largest  
5 international cohort in the United Kingdom (UK) higher education (Studying in UK,  
6 2023). Consequently, growing numbers are enrolling in UK occupational therapy (OT)  
7 programmes. Students from East Asian countries, such as HK, are traditionally raised  
8 under the cultural and educational values of Confucianism, originating with Confucius  
9 (Ahmed & Zhang, 2017). Confucius suggested that relationships are hierarchically  
10 categorized into 'the Five Cardinal Relationships', advocating that people act  
11 according to their conventional roles and norms (Chan et al., 1997). When the  
12 subordinates are obedient and committed to their superiors according to obligations  
13 and rituals of civility, relationships and cohesion are assured (Kim & Strudler, 2012).  
14 In the workplace, the Confucian organizational culture indicates distinct power  
15 dimensions with anticipated mentality and behaviours. Hence, decisions made by  
16 leaders are always undebatable, while subordinates habitually seek superiors'  
17 approval or opinions even for daily tasks (Wang et al., 2005).

18 In education, Sun (2015) confirms that HK students are educated with hierarchical  
19 Confucian values and culture, including directive teaching and exam-driven practices  
20 (Forestier & Crossley, 2015). The Asian vertical teacher-centred pedagogy implies that  
21 Chinese teachers are the authority responsible for conveying knowledge to students,  
22 while students are expected to 'absorb' it quietly to demonstrate respect and  
23 obedience by refraining from questioning and challenging teachers (Li & Du, 2013;  
24 Sun, 2015). In contrast, Western pedagogy values whole-person development through  
25 active discussion and cooperative learning within supportive teacher-student  
26 relationships (Hassan et al., 2010; Zhang, 2014). This Western learning style is vastly  
27 different from the Confucian virtue of ritual propriety ('*li*'), which leads students to seek  
28 approval from superiors and withhold judgments unless invited (Wang et al., 2005).  
29 Consequently, students shaped by these traditions may participate less in discussions  
30 or questioning, which can be misinterpreted in Western educational contexts as a lack  
31 of engagement or initiative.

32

33 **HK OT students in the UK**

34 UK pre-registration OT courses require a minimum of 1,000 hours of practice-based  
35 learning in diverse health and community settings under the supervision of qualified  
36 practitioners who support their educational and workplace learning needs (National  
37 Health Service England, 2020; World Federation of Occupational Therapists [WFOT],  
38 2016). However, students from HK may face difficulties adapting to UK learning and  
39 working practices. International healthcare students often face significant challenges  
40 during practice placements, particularly related to cultural adaptation and language  
41 proficiency. For instance, Attrill et al. (2016) analyzed 854 speech-language pathology  
42 students and found that international students were 1.83 times more likely to receive  
43 an 'at-risk' placement outcome, with English as an additional language being a  
44 significant predictor of poorer results. Similarly, Kalembo et al.'s (2025) scoping review  
45 identified cultural challenges as a major barrier to educational experiences in 13  
46 studies of international nursing students. Schoeb and Chong (2019) further highlighted

1 that HK physiotherapy students in Western universities experienced stress during  
2 placements due to differences in cultural expectations, communication styles, and  
3 learning approaches. Collectively, these findings underscore how cultural and  
4 language mismatches can induce stress and negatively affect placement outcomes  
5 for international healthcare students, but the experiences of OT students are unknown.

6

## 7 Occupational Therapy Education

8 **The dominance of Western, English-speaking perspectives in OT have shaped**  
9 **professional identity and team-based practice, imposing epistemological,**  
10 **ontological, and axiological assumptions that could create cognitive injustices**  
11 **for non-Western practitioners and students (de Sousa Santos, 2014; Guajardo,**  
12 **2015; Maturana, 2025). Hammell (2019) highlights that colonial cultural**  
13 **assumptions have inequitably limited individuals' opportunities. While OT**  
14 **principles emphasize inclusivity, empowerment, and respect for clients' cultural**  
15 **backgrounds (Royal College of Occupational Therapists [RCOT], 2021),**  
16 **placement educators must also demonstrate cultural humility and awareness to**  
17 **support diverse learners, promote power balance, and enhance training**  
18 **outcomes (American Occupational Therapy Association, 2020; Hammell, 2013;**  
19 **Tervalon & Murray-Garcia, 1998).**

20 In the context of OT education, practice-based education is grounded in educator-  
21 facilitated, dialogic learning, in which students are expected to externalise their  
22 thinking to develop professional reasoning through supervision and reflective dialogue  
23 (Turpin et al., 2024). The Health and Care Professions Council (2023) identifies  
24 professional reasoning as a key competency that is pivotal for readiness for practice.  
25 Accordingly, unlike other healthcare professions where competence can be evidenced  
26 through procedural clinical skills, participation in formative supervision and  
27 engagement in team discussions are pedagogically critical for demonstrating  
28 reasoning in OT placements.

29 However, these educational expectations may not always align with culturally diverse  
30 learners' communication and reasoning styles. While recent studies highlight that  
31 culturally-minority OT practitioners and students frequently experience challenges  
32 related to cultural identity and sense of belonging in predominantly white, English-  
33 speaking environments, culturally responsive supervision through decolonial  
34 pedagogies enhances satisfaction and learning outcomes (Galvaan et al., 2022;  
35 Serrano-Diaz et al., 2025; Vekaria et al., 2023). OT advocates culturally responsive,  
36 inclusive practice and the right to meaningful occupation by enabling individuals'  
37 cultural rights, beliefs, decisions, and needs (RCOT, 2021; WFOT, 2019). **Identical**  
38 **placement expectations, regardless of background and culture, may therefore**  
39 **contradict these core values.**

40 **The impetus for this study arose from the first author's (UK-based OT graduate**  
41 **from Hong Kong) personal experiences, who encountered cultural**  
42 **misunderstandings during training—such as being perceived as passive or**  
43 **lacking initiative—despite these behaviors indicating respect and reflection in**  
44 **their own Confucian cultural context (Biggs et al., 2022). While frameworks like**  
45 **those of Trompenaars & Hampden-Turner (1997) and Hofstede (2011) highlight**  
46 **differences between HK and UK cultures, international students' identities and**

1 adaptation processes are dynamic and influenced by various personal and  
2 contextual factors (Heng, 2018; Khanal & Gaulee, 2019; Yan, 2020). Law et al.  
3 (2021) identified language barriers, communication styles, and learning  
4 approaches as key challenges for international OT students. However, to our  
5 knowledge, no research has specifically examined how Confucianism shapes  
6 the lived experiences of HK OT students in the UK, undervaluing the impact of  
7 East-West cultural differences in health education and clinical training. Hence,  
8 this study aims to address this gap by exploring HK students' placement  
9 experiences, with the goal of informing more culturally responsive supervision  
10 and support for future cohorts.

11

## 12 **2. Aims**

13 To explore HK pre-registration OT students' views and lived experiences of how the  
14 Chinese culture and upbringing, specifically practices around Confucianism, have  
15 affected their practice placement experiences in the UK.

16

17

## 18 **3. Methods**

### 19 **Study Design**

20 This cross-sectional qualitative research was chosen to develop rich and  
21 comprehensive data focusing on the impact of Confucianism on the practice  
22 placement experiences of HK OT students in the UK. It utilised (n=2) online **focus**  
23 **groups**, conducted with four participants in each; (n=8) overall. **Focus groups** elicit  
24 data from in-depth discussions, aiming to foster unanticipated and comprehensive  
25 answers (Braun & Clarke, 2013). The **focus groups** were conducted with a size of four  
26 participants, which aimed to encourage effective discussions among participants on  
27 the given topic (Braun & Clarke, 2013). Krueger and Casey (2014) suggested that  
28 **focus groups** comprising four participants are both adequate and effective for  
29 generating rich qualitative data. Additionally, Guest et al. (2017) found that 80% of  
30 themes typically emerge within two to three **focus groups**. Hence, conducting two  
31 **focus groups** with four participants each was considered sufficient to achieve the  
32 research objectives.

33 The **focus groups** were facilitated by two OT students—the first author and another  
34 OT student working on a related research topic—both of whom are from HK and based  
35 in the UK. Each **focus group** was divided into two parts, with each facilitator leading  
36 their respective section. A silent observer, who is the research supervisor and third  
37 author, was also present at both **focus groups**. This study aimed to recruit participants  
38 nationally; hence, online **focus groups** were used to overcome the geographical  
39 barrier.

40

## 41 **Participants**

42 This study aimed to reach HK OT students in the UK. Non-probability convenience  
43 and snowball sampling were employed to facilitate access to participants capable of  
44 providing rich and in-depth data (Patton, 2002). These methods also supported

1 achieving the desired sample size by beginning with a small group of initial  
2 participants, who subsequently recruited additional respondents from their own  
3 networks (Parker et al., 2019). Participants meeting the inclusion and exclusion  
4 criteria (Table 1) were recruited and invited to the **focus groups**. The diverse inclusion  
5 criteria aimed to explore common themes and variations among the comprehensive  
6 perspectives within the targeted population.

7

8 *Table 1 Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria*

<b>Inclusion</b>	<b>Exclusion</b>
HK students currently studying any pre-registration OT courses, including pre-registration Bachelor's (BSc) degree, pre-registration Master's (MSc) degree, pre-registration postgraduate diploma, and apprenticeship, in all UK universities	OT assistant programme in any educational institutions
Undergone any education pathway to enter university, including Hong Kong Diploma of Secondary Education Examination (HKDSE), UK or International General Certificate of Education Advanced Level (GCE A-Level/international A-Level), International Baccalaureate (IB), etc.	Aged under 18
All genders: male/ female/ other	
Has undergone at least four weeks of practice placement in any settings in the UK	
Cognitively able to participate in the study and provide written consent.	
Able and willing to have access of the internet and laptop/ computer in order to participate in the online study	

9

## 10 **Recruitment**

11 For the purpose of this study, 'HK students' are defined as individuals who were either  
12 born in HK, hold permanent resident status in HK, or have parents originating from  
13 HK, regardless of the location of their primary and secondary education. With HK OT  
14 students in the UK as potential participants, recruitment was conducted through social  
15 media, including Instagram™ and X™ (formerly known as Twitter™). One promotional  
16 post was uploaded to the two abovementioned platforms respectively. Participants  
17 were also recruited through printed flyers posted around the UK University hosting the  
18 research. Participant recruitment was conducted over a one-month period on a  
19 first-come, first-served basis and closed once the target number of eligible participants  
20 was reached.

1

2 **Procedure**

3 A Qualtrics™ form, including a participant information sheet, consent form, and  
4 demographic questionnaire, was created and included as a Quick Response (QR)  
5 code in the flyer for participants to sign up for the study.

6 Both **focus groups** were conducted and recorded using Microsoft Teams. As illustrated  
7 in Table 2, each **focus group** started with introductions, an explanation of the study,  
8 informed consent procedures, and a clear definition of aspects and values of  
9 Confucianism. The role of the observer was also clearly explained, which was to  
10 observe group dynamics and identify noteworthy points that might otherwise be  
11 missed during the discussion.

12 A question guide, as demonstrated in Table 2, was used to lead the key direction of  
13 the **focus groups**, but no detailed script was used, and the follow-up questions were  
14 asked based on the individual group interactions.

15

16 *Table 2 Focus Group Guide*

<b>Definition Statement</b>	"Confucianism, which is the ancient Chinese belief system, it has constructed the fundamental principles/ of the practical culture in East Asia. Specifically, Confucius suggested that everyone has a fixed position in the society, which relationships are hierarchically categorized into 'the Five Cardinal Relationships' (which is known as <i>Wulun</i> ). Also, social morality and ethics are advocated as 'the Five Constants', including humanity, righteousness, propriety, wisdom, and faithfulness, which is known as " <i>Ren, Yi, Li, Zhi, Xin</i> "; as well as other social elements, such as filial piety ( <i>Xiao</i> ) and loyalty ( <i>Zhong</i> )."
<b>Focus Group Guide</b>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"><li>1. How does Confucianism affect your communication with your supervisor(s) during placement(s)?</li><li>2. In your opinion, does Confucianism conflict with meeting the academic and culture expectations in placement(s)? why or why not?</li><li>3. How does Confucianism impact your communication, rapport building, and relationships with patients during placement(s)?</li><li>4. How does Confucianism impact your perception and sense of belonging of being the therapy team/ staff team?</li><li>5. In your perception, how much does Chinese culture and upbringing affects your placement experiences?</li><li>6. In your point of view, how could the teaching staff or educator(s) provide more support regarding to practice placements?</li></ol>

1

2

3 **Data Analysis**

4 Transcriptions generated automatically by Microsoft Teams were used as an initial  
5 source and subsequently checked and corrected by the first author. They were then  
6 cross-checked by the other OT student who had collaboratively conducted the **focus**  
7 **groups**. Data collected were interpreted and analysed under the framework of Braun  
8 & Clarke's Seven Stages of Thematic Analysis (2013).

9 The data collected were coded inductively, meaning that codes were generated  
10 directly from the data rather than being pre-determined. This allowed for the  
11 emergence of new and unanticipated themes grounded in participants' unique  
12 experiences (Braun & Clarke, 2013). The coding process involved a thorough, detailed  
13 examination of the transcripts, with codes iteratively reviewed and refined as analysis  
14 progressed. Following the initial coding, related codes were grouped to identify  
15 broader patterns within the data. These patterns were then organized into potential  
16 themes, which were further reviewed and refined to ensure they accurately  
17 represented the data. Throughout this process, the themes were continually compared  
18 against the data set to confirm their relevance. Similar or relevant themes were then  
19 merged to create coherent overarching themes. Final themes were defined to capture  
20 the key patterns and insights that emerged from participants' experiences.

21

22 **Quality of Data**

23 To ensure rigor and credibility, the entire research process was supervised by the first  
24 author's academic **advisors**, namely the second, third, and fourth authors, as part of  
25 an undergraduate research project. The study's validity and credibility were enhanced  
26 through double coding and peer review of the analysis with an OT student who co-  
27 facilitated the **focus groups** (Henry, 2015; Morse, 2015). This research also formed  
28 part of a broader study in which member checking was conducted by the entire  
29 research team—including students and supervisors—who reviewed selected sections  
30 of the data to ensure accuracy and credibility.

31 The positionality of the first author is a HK OT student based in the UK, is disclosed to  
32 enhance transparency. Since the **focus groups** were peer-facilitated by OT students  
33 with similar backgrounds, potential effects on peer-to-peer dynamics, including  
34 heightened rapport and openness alongside the risk of social conformity, are  
35 recognized. Transparency and credibility were reinforced by emphasising  
36 voluntariness and confidentiality and by adopting non-leading questioning. To further  
37 strengthen rigor and trustworthiness, negative case analysis was conducted by  
38 actively seeking and examining data that challenged emerging themes (Morse, 2015).

39

40 **Ethics**

41 A formal ethical approval (ERGO number: 77409) was granted from the Faculty of  
42 Environmental and Life Sciences Ethics Committee of the **University of Southampton**  
43 before the research process. Online informed consent was obtained from all  
44 participants prior to the **focus groups**. The right of free withdrawal at any time of the

1 study was also informed at the start of the **focus groups**. Pseudonyms were used to  
2 uphold confidentiality during data handling. The **focus group** recordings and data  
3 obtained were stored in a two-factor authentication online storage platform.

4

#### 5 **4. Findings**

6 All participants were female and were enrolled in a BSc (Hons) programme (Table 3).

7 *Table 3 Participant Information*

Age	Education Background (Primary)	Education Background (Secondary)	Geographical Area of University in the UK	Type of Practice	Number of Practice Placement(s)*
21	HK – local school	HK – local school	South	CP	1
20	HK – local school	HK – local school	North	AP & CM	3
20	HK – local school	HK – local school	South	CM	1
18	HK – local school	HK – local school	South	AP	1
21	HK – local school	HK – local school	South	AP	1
20	UK	HK – local school	South	AP & CM	3
19	UK	UK	South	AP	1
21	HK – local school	UK	South	AP & AM	3

\*AP = Acute Physical; CP = Community Physical; AM = Acute Mental; CM = Community Mental

8 Following data analysis, three themes were constructed - 'Hierarchy and Social  
9 Positions', 'Adverse Learning Consequences', and 'Positive Learning Experiences'.  
10 To aid the illustration of themes, direct quotes from the participants were used.

11

12

#### 13 **Theme 1: Hierarchy and Social Positions**

14 Participants consistently described educators, team colleagues, and other healthcare  
15 professionals as authority figures or those in positions of superiority who deserved  
16 respect and obedience. Recognizing the respective roles and powers, participants

1 view themselves in lower positions within the team, shaping their attitudes, behaviors,  
2 and boundaries during placements.

3 Education in HK was identified as a major factor in shaping these cultural attitudes.  
4 Students are taught from a young age to listen, obey, and not challenge teachers or  
5 seniors.

6 *“Since I was a child, I was taught like, you need to respect your teachers,  
7 like not to challenge them.”* (Participant F)

8 This upbringing emphasized deference to seniors, leading them to avoid challenging,  
9 questioning, or disagreeing with educators, even when they felt uncomfortable with  
10 certain requests or decisions. Reflecting the ingrained sense of hierarchy,  
11 participants—particularly as the youngest members in the workplace—perceived  
12 themselves as occupying the lowest position and felt compelled to listen and obey  
13 seniors rather than express their own opinions.

14 *“It just feels rude to say no to someone senior ... cause they know a lot more  
15 than you and you're just a student.”* (Participant H)

16 When placed in the UK, participants encountered a contrasting culture where  
17 educators encouraged open discussion and treated students more as equals.  
18 However, students struggled to adapt to this approach, finding it challenging to  
19 communicate casually with educators or to participate actively in discussions.

20 *“Even if they often tell jokes, and treat others like friends, I tend to refrain  
21 from it, because I think that he is still my educator, and I can't act like this.”*  
22 (Participant E)

23 The difference in learning styles was also evident. While HK teachers often “spoon-  
24 feed” knowledge, UK educators expect students to explore, ask questions, and  
25 discuss. This shift was difficult for participants, who were accustomed to self-learning  
26 and saw frequent questioning as a sign of inattentiveness, disturbance, or disrespect.

27 *“It's kind of not common for us to keep asking questions, and it seems like  
28 you're not paying attention when you're asking a lot of questions ... but in  
29 the UK, asking questions means that you're actually engaging in the  
30 process”* (Participant H)

31 Many HK students developed a reserved personality and learning style, often  
32 suppressing their thoughts and opinions due to the Confucian value of respect entails  
33 not challenging or correcting others.

34 *“Respect means some kinds of action, like stay quiet”* (Participant A)

35 Consequently, participants struggled to initiate or enter conversations.

36 *“I will find it very difficult, very nervous, or afraid to stop the meeting... We  
37 always have the mindset that we should talk after the other OTs or physios”*  
38 (Participant D)

39 They often hesitated to actively engage in meetings during their placements, instead  
40 waiting for the perfect opportunities to contribute.

1    **Theme 2: Adverse Learning Consequences**

2    Participants' ingrained anxiety about speaking up, rooted in hierarchical Chinese  
3    cultural values, hindered their learning experiences during placements. Many felt  
4    uncomfortable asking questions or contributing to meetings, often delaying their  
5    queries and sometimes forgetting them altogether, which influenced the learning  
6    effectiveness.

7        *"I can't ask the question immediately, I will need to write down on the notes.  
8        Some of the question I will forgot after the meeting"* (Participant D)

9    This hierarchical mindset was particularly prominent at the beginning of placements,  
10   with participants profoundly aware of professional boundaries and power dynamics.

11      *"At the start of the placement, it's kind of difficult for me to... being in a part  
12      of the MDT [multidisciplinary team] team, and being friends with colleagues  
13      because I'm quite aware of the boundaries... the roles and also the powers  
14      of different professionals"* (Participant G)

15   While some participants attempted to adjust their mentality and behaviours to align  
16   with UK norms, others found the influence of their cultural upbringing persisted  
17   throughout the placements.

18   Acknowledging the importance of communication in OT, the contrast in academic  
19   expectations led to negative feedback from educators, influencing their academic  
20   outcomes. Participants' reserved behaviours—intended as a sign of respect—were  
21   often misinterpreted as being too quiet and a lack of proactiveness or initiative.

22      *"If the student is tend to be quiet and shy and they don't raise their opinion  
23      or they don't ask the questions when they don't understand... the educator  
24      may think that, 'oh, the student is not learning, and he or she is not proactive  
25      enough'... it really impacts the academic."* (Participant C)

26   Despite educators' friendliness and encouragement, the process of adapting to new  
27   learning and working styles created additional stress. Some participants felt a  
28   persistent barrier between themselves and their colleagues, leading to feelings of  
29   isolation and discomfort.

30      *"I feel like there's always like a barrier between me and the other staff in my  
31      team... it's quite a lot of extra pressure for me ... inside, I don't actually feel  
32      like I belong to the group or I'm actually very comfortable."* (Participant H)

33   Overall, the deep-rooted cultural norms around hierarchy and communication not only  
34   affected students' participation and learning outcomes but also contributed to  
35   additional stress, anxiety, and uneasiness.

36

37

38

39   **Theme 3: Positive Learning Experiences**

40   Several participants highlighted the gains of adapting their mentality and behaviours  
41   during placements in the UK. As they grew more comfortable in the non-hierarchical

1 and welcoming environment, students became increasingly confident in asking  
2 questions and voicing concerns, while their nervousness about approaching senior  
3 colleagues reduced. This supportive atmosphere encouraged them to speak up more  
4 openly and feel more comfortable making mistakes.

5 *“I learned to talk more and engage more within the team... It also helped*  
6 *me to build up my personality to become a more outgoing person.”*  
7 (Participant D)

8 The inclusive team culture also helped participants develop close relationships with  
9 educators and fostered a genuine sense of belonging. Participant A described the UK  
10 placement experiences as “positive and unique”.

11 *“They don't really mind that if you are student or you are a colleague that*  
12 *work in the team. Once you are in the team, they see you as a team*  
13 *member, and then they really value your opinions.” (Participant B)*

14 Regarding academic outcomes, two participants found that focusing on clinical  
15 reasoning and personal development allowed them to maintain their academic  
16 performance. Short-term adjustments and determination were seen as effective  
17 strategies for overcoming cultural barriers and enhancing learning experiences.

18 *“Within a short period of time, or like, at least when I'm focusing on my*  
19 *academic, I know I have to achieve it. I know I have to do it if not I will ruin*  
20 *my academic.” (Participant A)*

21 The UK placements provided a supportive environment that empowered students to  
22 grow personally and professionally, build meaningful relationships, and successfully  
23 navigate cultural differences.

24

## 25 **5. Discussion**

26 The present study is a pioneering initial exploration of how Confucianism shapes the  
27 UK placement experiences of HK OT students. Consistent with previous research  
28 (Law et al., 2021; Mikkonen et al., 2016), this study highlights notable cultural  
29 differences in learning approaches and communication styles among HK students and  
30 suggests that such differences may be significantly impacting the placement  
31 experiences of OT students from HK in the UK. However, our results indicate that  
32 these distinct cultural influences can have both positive and negative effects on OT  
33 students' learning during placements.

34

### 35 Theme 1: Hierarchy and Social Positions

36 Participants consistently viewed educators as superiors and demonstrated respect by  
37 listening, obeying, and minimal questioning, aligning with earlier studies that  
38 Confucian pedagogy emphasises the high social status and respect accorded to  
39 teachers (Sun, 2015; Tan, 2017). They demonstrated that social positions are  
40 determined by age, experience, and education, with more respect given to those who  
41 are more educated or experienced—consistent with findings that such attributes  
42 confer authority within Confucian-influenced workplaces (Li, 2012; Rarick, 2007).

1 Hence, the respondents felt frustrated when educators and colleagues treated them  
2 as equals during placements, reflecting the tension between ingrained hierarchical  
3 expectations and Western workplace norms.

4 Participants were conscious of appropriate attitudes, behaviours, and boundaries  
5 within these hierarchies, often choosing to obey rather than question instructions, as  
6 challenging a supervisor could be interpreted as disrespectful. This resonates with  
7 Li and Du (2013), who describe questioning teachers as a challenge to authority.  
8 Respect for seniority also appeared to involve acceptance of unequal power  
9 relations—echoing Lu et al. (2021), who noted similar tolerance of inequality to  
10 preserve harmony. Hence, as the youngest and yet-to-be-qualified students,  
11 participants positioned themselves at the bottom of the hierarchy and felt obligated to  
12 conform by agreeing to opinions, requests, or suggestions, even when contradicting  
13 their own beliefs. Such reticence aligns with Bell et al. (2025), who identify face-saving  
14 and deference as features of Confucian respect.

15 Given this power distance, participants adopted a reserved communication style—  
16 waiting for the perfect opportunity to speak and refraining from casual conversations  
17 or friendly banter with educators and colleagues. This pattern aligns with expectations  
18 in Confucian-influenced workplaces, where juniors are expected to obey and respect  
19 seniors, whose decisions are viewed as unquestionable and open to input only when  
20 invited (Rarick, 2007; Wang et al., 2005). Participants defined respect as not  
21 challenging, correcting, or rejecting superiors, which could be seen as demanding or  
22 disrespectful. Their self-directed, reflective learning style further reflects Confucian  
23 pedagogy values of discipline and attentiveness, where students are expected to  
24 absorb knowledge quietly (Tan, 2017). Consequently, even in friendly placement  
25 settings, hierarchical norms limited informal interaction and open dialogue, leading  
26 some students to distance themselves socially. These patterns align with  
27 Law et al. (2021), who also found that awareness of hierarchy shapes international OT  
28 students' communication and learning behaviours.

29

### 30 Theme 2: Adverse Learning Consequences

31 The pedagogic mismatch and Confucian-influenced hierarchical deference fostered  
32 reserved participation, a weakened sense of belonging to the team, and constrained  
33 communication. While UK placements valued proactive, interactive learning,  
34 participants were accustomed to a teacher-centred learning approach. Students  
35 tended to ask fewer questions, delay entry into discussion, and hesitate to offer  
36 unsolicited input, which is consistent with prior work that Confucian-based educated  
37 students are habituated to learning passively and quietly (Choi & Nieminen, 2013; Law  
38 et al., 2021; Tran, 2013). Participants tended to wait for opportune moments and avoid  
39 spontaneous questions, leading to restrained informal talk and selective help-seeking.  
40 This aligns with Tran (2013) and Zhang (2014), who found that Confucian-educated  
41 students are anxious about asking questions and tend to wait for an opportune  
42 moment before speaking.

43 Within OT specifically, the present study suggests that culturally shaped participation  
44 patterns may lead OT practice supervisors from a Western pedagogy to misinterpret  
45 behaviors by HK OT students, which were intended to demonstrate respect, as

1 actually representing a lack of interest or lower initiative. This cultural  
2 misunderstanding, which we have highlighted, may negatively influence how  
3 competence is perceived and evaluated, given the dialogic models of learning which  
4 are established in UK OT practice placements (Turpin et al., 2024). Our findings are  
5 consistent with Attrill et al. (2016), who found that international healthcare students  
6 are significantly correlated with poorer placement academic outcomes, suggesting  
7 that this is a pertinent concern for the OT profession as well as multidisciplinary  
8 colleagues.

9 Some participants reported that deeply ingrained cultural norms shaped their entire  
10 placement experience. With the high power-distance sensitivity, day-to-day  
11 conversational norms also differed. Despite positive encouragements and a  
12 welcoming environment, maintaining hierarchical deference in informal exchanges  
13 added cognitive load, contributing to acculturation stress and lower perceived  
14 psychosocial belonging. Such stress, arising from unfamiliar pedagogical and  
15 sociocultural expectations, fosters reduced engagement during placements, including  
16 lower participation in clinical interdisciplinary decision-making, hesitancy in  
17 help-seeking, and difficulty integrating into MDTs (Edgecombe, 2013; Law et al.,  
18 2021). This cultural unfamiliarity has further been linked to feelings of isolation, fear,  
19 and helplessness among international healthcare students (Mikkonen et al., 2016).  
20 Similarly, Khan et al. (2015) and Shanley (2023) indicate that such mismatches and  
21 the complexities of cross-cultural adjustment erode students' sense of belonging and  
22 confidence, impede professional socialization, and strain supervisory relationships.  
23 Together, acculturation stress acts as a barrier to engagement and help-seeking,  
24 which can degrade assessment feedback and grades at times.

25 Given OT's emphasis on inclusion, adaptation, and participation, these findings reveal  
26 a gap between professional ideals and the learning realities of culturally diverse  
27 students. Experiences of exclusion and reduced belonging suggest that core values  
28 of empowerment and cultural respect were challenged within their educational  
29 experiences, underscoring the need for OT education to uphold its commitment to  
30 inclusivity and cultural humility.

31

### 32 Theme 3: Positive Learning Experiences

33 Participants widely described placement climates as friendly, inclusive, and  
34 welcoming. Exposure to non-hierarchical Western supervision practices and team  
35 cultures facilitated the progressive externalization of professional reasoning, enabled  
36 by self-expression empowerment, acceptance of mistakes as learning opportunities,  
37 and active team engagement, which are core to OT practice (Turpin et al., 2024).  
38 Being valued and respected, participants increasingly felt treated as team members  
39 rather than subordinates, which fostered both academic engagement and personal  
40 growth, including greater self-confidence, leadership skills, and improved  
41 communication. These patterns add perspectives from OT to prior research showing  
42 that Chinese international students demonstrated positive personal development,  
43 including progressing from passivity to confidently voicing views, during their study  
44 abroad experiences in the West (Gu & Schweisfurth, 2015; Guo & Guo, 2017).  
45 Mikkonen et al. (2016) likewise reported that, despite initial adaptation challenges,  
46 adapting to a distinct clinical environment was perceived as a rewarding learning  
47 experience that fostered meaningful development.

1 Central to these positive experiences were strong educator relationships and a  
2 growing sense of belonging within the placement teams. Consistent with Morgan  
3 (2017), this acceptance facilitated acculturation and acclimatization across successive  
4 practice placements. Some participants emphasized that a clinical-development focus  
5 and academic determination enabled short-term cultural adjustments that mitigated  
6 cultural barriers while maintaining academic outcomes, aligning with Kamau et al.  
7 (2022), who found that international nursing students overcome cultural adaptation  
8 challenges through determination and aspiration.

9

10 **6. Study limitations**

11 While this study has limitations, it provides valuable and unique insights that contribute  
12 to the existing literature. Regarding the sample, all participants were female and aged  
13 18-21 years. This homogeneous sample may reflect age- and gender-specific  
14 interpretations of Confucian values and educational experiences. Participants of  
15 different ages and life stages may interpret professional hierarchies and workplace  
16 expectations differently, which could influence how they communicate and establish  
17 boundaries with supervisors and colleagues. Similarly, as all participants were female,  
18 the findings may reflect gendered patterns of communication specific to this cohort. In  
19 addition, seven of eight participants were based in Southern UK placements. This  
20 geographic clustering likely reflects region-specific organizational cultures, including  
21 supervision practices, interprofessional dynamics, decision-making, and expectations  
22 of students. Overall, the insights may be skewed toward the perspectives of young  
23 women in the Southern UK and may not capture variations by gender, age, or region.

24 Although this study contrasts HK and UK contexts, students' experiences are  
25 heterogeneous. Cultural identities are fluid, responses to placements vary, and prior  
26 international exposure may shape adaptability, expectations, and confidence. While  
27 these nuances may be underrepresented, future work should sample more diverse  
28 ages, genders, and regions to enhance transferability.

29 This study centers on education and does not examine how Chinese culture shapes  
30 therapy quality or client communication. Placements also span a wide range of  
31 settings and academic years of the course, each with distinct workplace cultures and  
32 practices. Nonetheless, this study captures general experiences and impressions  
33 only. Future research should target specific settings and year groups.

34

35 **7. Implications for OT Education**

36 Findings provide deep insights into the cultural rationale shaping HK students'  
37 placement mindsets and behaviours. Culturally shaped deference could reduce the  
38 visibility of placement competence, negatively affecting academic experiences and  
39 outcomes. Drawing on the study findings and existing literature, this section outlines  
40 multi-level recommendations for placement educators, OT course organisers, and  
41 professional bodies aimed at promoting culturally responsive supervision,  
42 strengthening student engagement, and enhancing inclusion within pre-registration  
43 OT programmes.

1    *For Placement Educators*

2    Targeted continuing professional development (CPD) in cultural humility and  
3    supervisory power dynamics can equip educators to recognise culturally shaped  
4    participation patterns and respond appropriately. To mitigate respect-as-silence and  
5    delayed questioning, we encourage educators to establish co-constructed supervisory  
6    agreements. Informed by learning-style inventories at placement onset, agreements  
7    should set explicit expectations that questions are welcomed during and after  
8    supervision, disagreement is framed as collaborative problem-solving, and upward  
9    feedback is encouraged. To enhance the visibility of professional reasoning for  
10   reflective learners, supervisors can incorporate think-aloud prompts within supervision  
11   sessions and case debriefs, and provide alternative modes for evidencing reasoning  
12   (e.g., brief written reflections or structured reasoning notes) where verbal participation  
13   is limited.

14   *For OT course organizers*

15   Institutions are encouraged to deliver pre-placement orientations for international  
16   students that address UK workplace norms, local practices, and common cultural  
17   differences to align expectations, anticipate challenges, and develop communication  
18   strategies. Pre-placement professional reasoning and MDT discussions simulations  
19   can support reasoning externalisation and reduce performance anxiety. Sharing  
20   sessions with senior international students on firsthand experiences and practical tips  
21   can enhance students' placement preparation. Institutions should also establish  
22   mentorship programs that pair incoming international students with senior international  
23   students to provide ongoing, peer-level practical guidance and psychosocial support.

24   *For professional bodies*

25   The RCOT can integrate cultural responsiveness into accreditation and placement  
26   evaluation processes. This includes requiring evidence of staff training in cultural  
27   humility, access to culturally sensitive support resources, and structures that  
28   specifically support international students across placement sites. The RCOT should  
29   also support the development of CPD courses on supervision with cultural humility to  
30   cultivate positive learning climates and enhance international students' engagement  
31   and sense of belonging. Furthermore, culturally inclusive assessment approaches that  
32   validate diverse, effective communication styles for demonstrating professional  
33   reasoning should be promoted.

34   *Transferability*

35   These education-focused implications are likely transferable to international students  
36   from Confucian-influenced education systems and may inform placement preparation  
37   across allied health programs with similar supervisory and assessment practices.

38

39   **8. Conclusions**

40   This study aimed to identify the impacts of Confucianism on HK pre-registration OT  
41   students studying in the UK during practice placements. Findings reveal that  
42   participants' Confucian educational backgrounds fostered a hierarchical respect for  
43   authority that shaped their interactions with educators. This deference translated into

1 reserved communication and limited questioning during placements, shaping their  
2 approaches to learning and professional development.

3 The distinct educational styles yielded both positive and negative influences on  
4 students' learning experiences. Some participants reported that the process of  
5 acculturation introduced additional pressure and hindered their academic  
6 performance, whereas others valued the non-hierarchical placement environment that  
7 encouraged self-expression and enhanced confidence.

8 Overall, this study offers an illustration of how Confucian values can impact HK OT  
9 students' cognitive and behavioural approaches, as well as their lived experiences  
10 during practice placements. These insights underscore the importance for pre-  
11 registration OT programmes and placement educators to recognize and  
12 accommodate cultural differences, thereby supporting HK students in adapting to  
13 diverse educational contexts.

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