

Occupational Therapy Perspectives on Saudi Arabia's Vision 2030: Insights from Practitioners in the Field

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Abstract:

Purpose: Saudi Arabia's healthcare system has undergone significant transformation in recent decades, largely driven by the Vision 2030 reform plan. This study examines the structure, funding, and challenges of the Saudi healthcare system, and explores how occupational therapy (OT) aligns with Vision 2030's healthcare objectives. Additionally, it investigates occupational therapists' perspectives on the challenges, opportunities, and impact of these reforms on their profession.

Methodology: A comprehensive literature review was conducted using peer-reviewed journal articles, official reports, and statistical yearbooks to analyze the Saudi healthcare system. Primary data were collected through a validated questionnaire distributed to 135 licensed occupational therapists across Saudi Arabia. Qualitative analysis was employed to identify key themes and patterns in responses.

Results: Participants acknowledged the need to address gaps in occupational therapy services by 2030, with male respondents more likely to strongly agree. The primary barriers identified included limited awareness (23.7%), staff shortages (17.8%), and low professional autonomy (12.6%). Additional challenges included insufficient research, inadequate communication, a lack of incentives, and limited postgraduate programs. Participants emphasized the importance of integrating OT into primary healthcare to improve accessibility and community-based care, aligning with Vision 2030 goals.

Conclusion: Addressing workforce shortages, enhancing professional autonomy, expanding research, and integrating OT into primary healthcare are essential steps for advancing the profession and achieving the goals of Vision 2030. Advanced education is pivotal in aligning occupational therapy practice with national healthcare reforms.

Keywords: Vision 2030, Health Care, Occupational Therapist, Saudi Arabia

Introduction

Saudi Vision 2030 aims to improve the quality of life for individuals with disabilities. Occupational therapists play a crucial role in this mission, helping individuals develop the skills necessary for daily living, academic achievement, and active social participation. With initiatives like the King Salman Disability Research Center and the Saudi Arabian Society for Occupational Therapy, the role of OT in providing care and services to those with disabilities is becoming increasingly important. Occupational therapy, also known as ergo-therapy, is a branch of medicine that promotes health and well-being by enabling people to participate in everyday occupations. Originating in the US in the 1910s, occupational therapy (OT) initially focused on treating World War I veterans (Alanazi, 2023). The profession gained international recognition with the establishment of the World Federation of Occupational Therapists (WFOT) in 1952 and the first International Congress of Occupational Therapists held in Edinburgh in 1954—landmark events that significantly advanced its global growth and development (Spackman's).

Today, Occupational therapy has become a specialized healthcare discipline that provides evidence-based, client-centered interventions to address the diverse needs of individuals. These interventions help individuals overcome functional limitations due to physical, cognitive, developmental, or psychosocial challenges, allowing them to engage in meaningful activities. (American Occupational Therapy Association, 2021,).

Awareness about occupational therapy in Saudi Arabia is currently limited among both the general public and healthcare professionals. It is often mistaken for physiotherapy due to some overlap in the services provided for rehabilitation. The low number of referrals to occupational therapy services by healthcare professionals may be a reason for the lack of awareness about this field (Meny, 2021). With ongoing reforms and expansions under Vision 2030, conducting awareness programs and campaigns is crucial. This includes social media campaigns and the Internet, followed by TV, radio, and community events. Organizing events like Occupational Therapy Week or Occupational Therapy Day in collaboration with the Ministry of Health could help spread knowledge about the profession and its significance in enhancing the population's overall well-being (Alanazi, 2023).

Daily life in Saudi Arabia revolves around religious practices, social gatherings, education, work, and sports. Individuals with disabilities may face barriers that limit their participation in these areas. OT can be transformative by helping them overcome physical, cognitive, and social obstacles, enabling full engagement in spiritual, social, and occupational activities. As Vision 2030 advances, the profession will play a pivotal role in improving accessibility and fostering inclusion, ultimately supporting a more equitable society (Aljabri et al., 2024).

In alignment with Vision 2030, the OT profession in Saudi Arabia is steadily expanding through academic program development, public awareness initiatives, and innovative service delivery models such as telerehabilitation (Aljabri et al., 2024).

Currently, WFOT has accredited three bachelor's degree programs in the country, offered by King Saud bin Abdulaziz University, Princess Nourah bint Abdulrahman University, and Batterjee Medical College. Despite these advancements, barriers remain. These include limited communication between institutions, a shortage of qualified OT staff, and insufficient awareness of OT programs. In some cases, program directors from unrelated fields are appointed, resulting in weak leadership and hindering professional recognition (Al-Heizan, 2023).

Saudi Arabia's healthcare sector faces challenges from an aging population and rising long-term conditions. Occupational therapists support older adults and individuals with disabilities in living independently, reducing reliance on long-term care (Alanazi, 2023). Disability prevalence is high, with 45% of the elderly affected by neurocognitive impairments and 7–10%

of children having developmental, physical, sensory, or learning disabilities (Ministry of Health, 2017).

Despite these needs, OT services remain concentrated in secondary and tertiary care, with only 0.03 therapists per 10,000 population in Ministry of Health facilities, compared to 0.69 physiotherapists (Reham et al, 2024). Workforce shortages, limited awareness (75%), financial constraints, insufficient research, and lack of postgraduate programs further hinder OT development (Al-Heizan, 2022; Aljabri et al., 2024).

Given these realities, exploring practitioners' perspectives on how OT aligns with and contributes to the goals of Vision 2030 is critical. Understanding both the opportunities and barriers facing the profession will provide valuable insights into strengthening occupational therapy's role in promoting accessibility, inclusion, and meaningful participation for individuals with disabilities in Saudi Arabia.

Study Objectives:

1. Examine the Role of Occupational Therapy in Saudi Arabia's Vision 2030
2. To explore how the principles and practices of occupational therapy align with the broader goals of Vision 2030, particularly in enhancing the quality of healthcare services and promoting well-being.
3. Gather Insights from Occupational Therapy Practitioners on Vision 2030

Methodology

Study Subjects:

The study targeted male and female occupational therapists currently working in hospitals and healthcare facilities across Saudi Arabia.

Inclusion Criteria

Licensed and registered occupational therapists actively practicing in Saudi Arabia. Occupational therapists in good professional standing, as verified by the relevant licensing authority. Have at least 5 years of clinical experience in occupational therapy.

Study Design

This study employed a qualitative cross-sectional design to explore occupational therapists' perspectives on the alignment of their profession with Saudi Arabia's Vision 2030. Data were collected through a combination of structured interviews and validated questionnaires containing both open and closed-ended items. Thematic analysis was used to identify key trends, challenges, and opportunities reported by practitioners, providing a comprehensive understanding of how Vision 2030 influences occupational therapy practice in the Kingdom.

Sample Size Calculation

A total of 135 participants (male = 95, female = 40) were targeted. The sample size was determined based on the estimated effect size, desired precision, and confidence interval. Considering logistical and time constraints, this sample was deemed sufficient to yield meaningful insights and represent practitioners' perspectives.

Sampling Technique

Convenience sampling was employed to recruit participants. Health facilities, professional networks, and occupational therapy associations across Saudi Arabia were contacted to identify potential volunteers. Occupational therapists who were available and willing to participate were invited to take part. While convenient and practical, this sampling method may introduce

selection bias; efforts were made to minimize this by including participants from multiple regions and healthcare settings.

Data Collection methods, instruments used, measurements

The data for this study were collected using a validated questionnaire designed for occupational therapists. The survey included multiple-choice questions and a Likert scale to gauge the participants' knowledge and perspectives on Vision 2030 and its potential impact on the occupational therapy field. The questionnaire comprised 21 questions, including demographic information, closed-ended, and five-point Likert scale questions. To ensure the validity and reliability of the questionnaire, independent subject experts evaluated the content validity, while expert clinicians assessed the face validity. The questionnaire was pre-tested with a group of 35 occupational therapists not involved in the study, and the reliability (Cronbach's alpha $\alpha = 0.82$) was confirmed to be acceptable.

Data management and analysis

Microsoft Excel was utilized for data entry and management. The data were organized in a structured spreadsheet to facilitate cleaning and ensure accuracy. Descriptive statistics—such as means, frequencies, and percentages—summarized the participants' responses. Inferential statistics, including chi-square and two-way ANOVA tests, were also employed to explore relationships between variables. The study team used JMP statistical software for data analysis, setting a significance level of $p < 0.05$.

Results:

The research involved 135 licensed occupational therapists from the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia. Of the participants, 40 (29.63%) were female, and 95 (70.37%) were male. Table 1 provides a detailed breakdown of the demographics.

Table 1: Demographic Details and Participant Characteristics

Gender	No. of participant	% of total
Male (M)	95	70.37%
Female (F)	40	29.63%

The participating occupational therapists had an average of 8.2 years of clinical experience ($SD = 4.6$ years), ranging from 2 to 28 years. Of the 135 respondents, 75 held a bachelor's degree in occupational therapy, while the remaining 60 possessed a master's degree.

A. Familiarity of Vision 2030 among Occupational Therapists according to qualification and gender: Master's holders are more familiar with Vision 2030 (more in 4 & 5). Bachelor's holders are more in the 2 & 3 categories. Female participants were slightly higher in familiar in both education groups. The two-way ANOVA revealed familiarity with Vision 2030 was significantly influenced by education ($F = 18.77$, $p < 0.001$), but not by gender ($F = 0.14$, $p = 0.707$) or the interaction between education and gender ($F = 0.08$, $p = 0.778$). The detailed breakdown of familiarity with Vision 2030 among OT is shown in Table 2.

Table 2. Familiarity with Vision 2030 among occupational therapists categorized by qualification and gender (N = 135)

Familiarity	Likert	Master (Male)	Master (Female)	Bachelor (Male)	Bachelor (Female)	Total
Very Unfamiliar	1	1	1	4	4	10
Unfamiliar	2	2	4	7	15	28
Neutral	3	7	12	12	15	46

Familiar	4	10	12	5	9	36
Very Familiar	5	5	6	2	2	15
Total	—	25	35	30	45	135

B. Perception of the Need to Address Errors or Challenges in Occupational Therapy:

Regarding the perception that errors or problems in occupational therapy need to be corrected by 2030, the responses were as follows: Among the female participants, 15 (11.11%) agreed, 6 (4.44%) disagreed, 4 (2.96%) were neutral, 13 (9.63%) strongly agreed, and 2 (1.48%) strongly disagreed. Among the male participants, 23 (17.04%) agreed, 4 (2.96%) disagreed, 19 (14.07%) were neutral, 46 (34.07%) strongly agreed, and 2 (1.48%) strongly disagreed. The need to address errors and Challenges in OT is shown in Table 3.

Table 3: Perception of the Need to Address Errors or Challenges in Occupational Therapy by 2030 (N=135)

Gender	Response	Number of participants (n)	Percentage (%)
Female	Agree	15	11.11%
Female	Disagree	6	4.44%
Female	Neutral	4	2.96%
Female	Strongly agree	13	9.63%
Female	Strongly disagree	2	1.48%
Male	Agree	23	17.04%
Male	Disagree	4	2.96%
Male	Neutral	19	14.07%
Male	Strongly agree	46	34.07%
Male	Strongly disagree	2	1.48%

The chi-square test was used to evaluate the relationship between gender and the perception of the need to address errors or challenges in occupational therapy as outlined in Vision 2030.

The results showed a statistically significant difference, $\chi^2 (4) = 5.321$, $p = 0.0257$, indicating that the perception differed between male and female participants.

C. Barriers or limitations to advancing the occupational therapy profession:

The findings in Table 4 highlight several barriers to advancing the occupational therapy (OT) profession. The most frequently reported limitation was a lack of knowledge and awareness of the OT profession, identified by 32 respondents (23.7%). A shortage of staff was the second most common barrier, reported by 24 participants (17.8%). Low professional autonomy was also noted as a significant challenge, with 17 respondents (12.6%) highlighting it as a concern. Other barriers reported included limited research activity ($n = 14$, 10.4%), ineffective communication between institutions ($n = 13$, 9.6%), insufficient financial incentives ($n = 13$, 9.6%), and a lack of postgraduate programs ($n = 13$, 9.6%). Financial barriers were the least frequently reported limitation, noted by only nine respondents (6.7%).

Table 4. Barriers or limitations of advancing the occupational therapy profession (N=135).

Barrier	Male Respondents (n)	Female Respondents (n)	Total Respondents (n)	Percentage (%)
Ineffective communication between institutions	9	4	13	9.63
Shortage of staff	17	7	24	17.77
Financial barriers	6	3	9	6.66

Lack of knowledge/awareness of the OT profession	21	11	32	23.70
Limited research activity	9	5	14	10.37
Insufficient financial incentives	9	4	13	9.63
Few postgraduate programs	8	5	13	9.63
Low professional autonomy	11	6	17	12.59

D. Perceptions of OT Development and the Need for Facility Expansion in Saudi Arabia". (Figure 1,2 &3)

Figure 1 illustrates participants' perceptions of occupational therapy development in Saudi Arabia, with the majority expressing dissatisfaction. Additionally, as shown in Figure 2, participants highlighted the need to integrate occupational therapy services into primary healthcare centers, underscoring the importance of embedding OT within community-based care as part of broader healthcare reforms. Figure 3 illustrates that participants consistently emphasized the urgent need to expand occupational therapy facilities throughout Saudi Arabia to meet the growing demand for rehabilitation services.

Figure 1: Pie Chart Showing the Percentage of Participants' Perception of Occupational Therapy Development in Saudi Arabia.

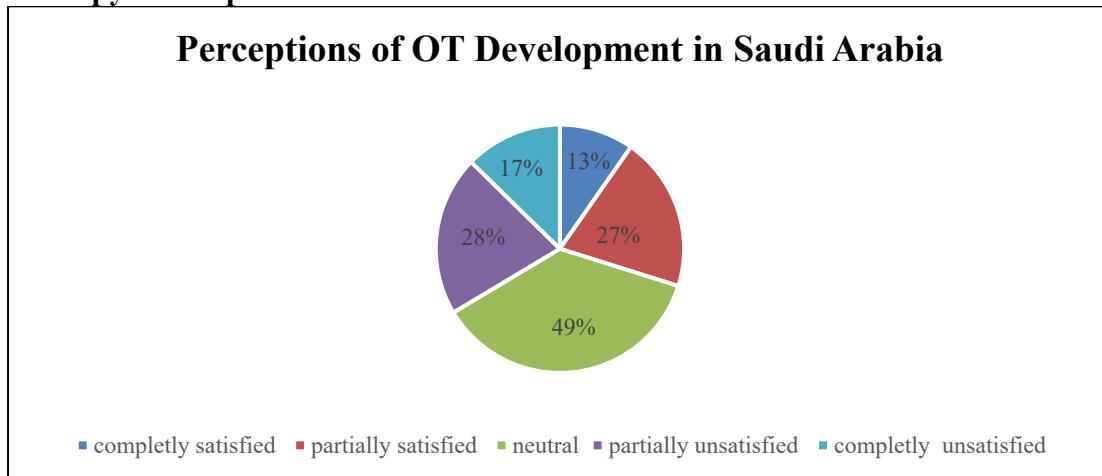


Figure 2. Participants' views on the need for Occupational Therapy Support in Primary Healthcare in Saudi Arabia

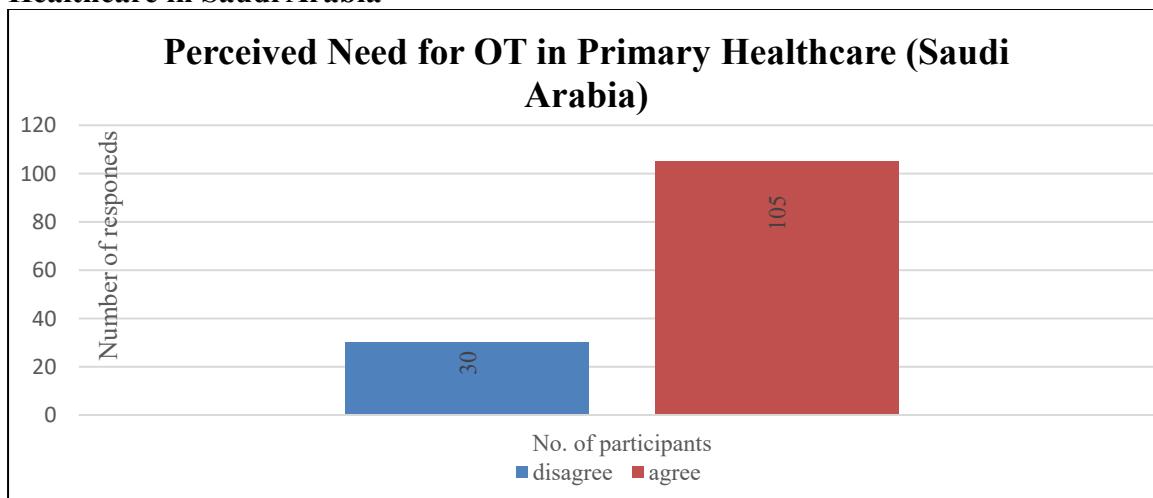
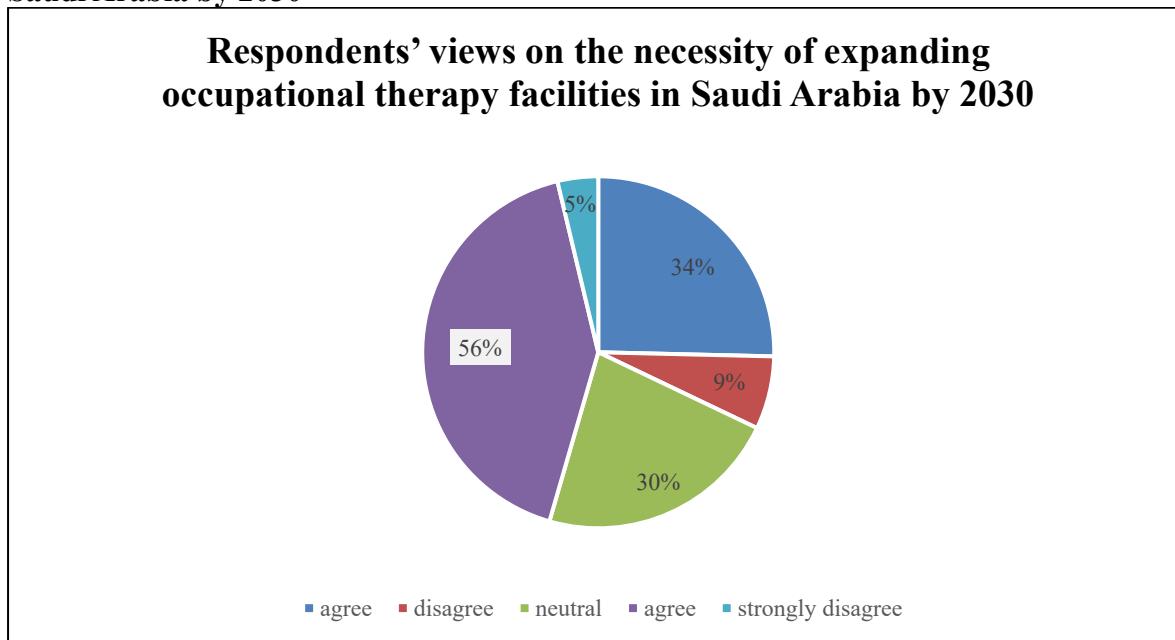


Figure 3. Participants' Views on the Need to Expand Occupational Therapy Facilities in Saudi Arabia by 2030



Discussion:

This study provides valuable insights into the awareness and perceptions of occupational therapists (OTs) in Saudi Arabia regarding Vision 2030. Overall, participants demonstrated moderate familiarity with the goals and priorities of the national strategic plan, although their understanding varied across contexts, highlighting areas requiring further clarification and professional development. The study's integration of both quantitative and qualitative methods enabled a comprehensive assessment of OTs' knowledge, attitudes, and experiences, thereby strengthening the robustness of the findings.

Consistent with prior research on healthcare professionals' understanding of national initiatives, this study identified disparities in familiarity with Vision 2030. For example, (Groves 2021) reported variations in nurses' knowledge of national healthcare reforms, emphasizing the need for targeted education. Similarly, (McLaney 2022) highlighted the importance of professional development and collaborative approaches to ensure consistent understanding among practitioners. In the present study, OTs with master's degrees showed greater familiarity with Vision 2030 than bachelor's degree holders, whereas gender did not significantly influence awareness. These findings underscore the pivotal role of advanced education in enhancing engagement with strategic initiatives and suggest that educational attainment may be more influential than demographic factors in shaping familiarity with national policies.

Participants recognized the need to address challenges within OT practice by 2030, including limited awareness of the profession (23.7%), workforce shortages (17.8%), and low professional autonomy (12.6%). Additional barriers included limited research activity, ineffective communication between institutions, insufficient financial incentives, and a lack of postgraduate programs. These findings align with previous studies reporting similar workforce and professional development challenges in OT and allied health professions globally (Alotaibi, 2022; Al-Heizan et al., 2023; Loh et al., 2021).

The study also revealed strong support among participants for integrating OT services into primary healthcare and expanding facilities to meet growing rehabilitation needs. This aligns with the Vision 2030 goal of improving accessibility and embedding rehabilitation services

within community-based care. Evidence from international contexts suggests that early integration of rehabilitation services into primary care enhances patient outcomes and service efficiency, supporting the relevance of these recommendations (Wilding, 2012; Chowdhury, 2021,).

To address gaps in awareness and professional capacity, several strategies are recommended. First, enhancing professional development through workshops, continuing education, and targeted training programs can strengthen OTs' understanding of Vision 2030 and its implications for practice. Second, improving communication and knowledge sharing between professional associations, healthcare institutions, and government bodies can ensure the timely dissemination of relevant information (Sawada, 2023). Third, fostering interdisciplinary collaboration can facilitate the integration of OT services within national healthcare priorities. Finally, tailoring occupational therapy curricula to include national strategic initiatives can prepare future practitioners to align clinical practice with policy objectives (Spaeth, 2016).

The study's main limitation was its geographic scope, as data were collected solely within Saudi Arabia, which may limit generalizability to other contexts. Self-reported data may also introduce response bias or social desirability effects (Bowling, 2005). However, strengths include the use of mixed methods, a diverse sample of OTs from various health facilities, and rigorous data analysis, providing a comprehensive and nuanced understanding of OTs' perspectives.

Conclusion: Occupational therapists in Saudi Arabia recognize the need to address professional challenges by 2030, yet barriers such as limited awareness, workforce shortages, low autonomy, and insufficient research remain. Integrating occupational therapy into primary healthcare was identified as critical for achieving Vision 2030 goals. Master's holders were more familiar with Vision 2030, highlighting the role of advanced education. Strengthening education, workforce capacity, and research will be essential to advance the profession and align it with national healthcare reforms.

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Conflict of interest:

The authors declare no conflicts of interest related to this study.

Ethical Approval:

The Institutional Review Board at King Abdullah International Medical Research Center granted ethical approval for the study under Approval No: IRB/1645/23. The board approved the research protocol, questionnaires, and consent forms for study number NRA23A/021/05 before the study commenced.

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