

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

LEARNING OUTCOMES AND CURRICULUM DEVELOPMENT IN AUSTRALIAN PHYSIOTHERAPY EDUCATION

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This report identifies, describes and evaluates curriculum development and review processes and pedagogical innovations in Australian physiotherapy education. The review focuses on these issues in relation to the requirements of new areas in health education, which include multidisciplinary practice and information and communications technology (ICT), as well as to the needs of key stakeholders such as students and employers.

Data were collected using a range of qualitative and quantitative methods. The project team consulted nationally with stakeholders including current physiotherapy students, recent graduates, clinicians, academic staff, heads of schools of physiotherapy, employers, representatives of the peak professional body, education experts and international physiotherapy educators. In addition, the heads of schools have provided the project team with examples of effective learning and teaching practices in their courses. A selection of these is listed in this report. More information on these examples of good practice will be disseminated in Stage 2 of the project.

Demographic data for physiotherapy students shows similar patterns of diversity to those seen in the wider national student body in Australian universities. This diversity stems from a number of factors including age, ethnicity and levels of prior education. Accompanying the growing student diversity has been a rapid increase in the number of schools of physiotherapy and also in the range of course types offered. These include entry level masters courses and double degrees.

In order to contextualise this review of curriculum processes in physiotherapy, the report outlines the national role of the Australian Council of Physiotherapy Regulating Authorities (ACOPRA). The fact that registration is a requirement to practise as a physiotherapist in every state and territory has significant implications for physiotherapy curriculum development at the national level. ACOPRA was established in 1995 to maintain a consistent national approach to physiotherapy registration, to advise on standards and processes relevant to the recognition of physiotherapy qualifications and to act as the custodian of the Australian Physiotherapy Competency Standards (APCS). The primary function of ACOPRA is that of accreditation of physiotherapy courses. Clear specification of learning objectives both for entry level physiotherapy courses overall, and for individual subjects is a requirement of the ACOPRA accreditation process; as is the need for

universities to demonstrate the outcomes of the course through the performance of graduates in relation to the APCS in all key areas of physiotherapy practice.

Employers of recent physiotherapy graduates are generally highly satisfied with graduates' level of competence across a range of areas. In particular, they rate new graduates' professional behaviour most highly, along with their openness to new ideas and receptiveness to the use of information and communication technologies (ICTs) in healthcare settings. Despite the many strengths identified by employers, they also perceive some weaknesses including: that some physiotherapy graduates do not integrate some elements of theory and clinical practice and that, in some cases, this was due to limited clinical experience during their undergraduate course. This was particularly evident in their lack of preparedness to work in private practice. Other areas of clinical practice that employers perceive to be somewhat lacking among recent graduates include paediatric physiotherapy and critical care physiotherapy.

Recent graduates' satisfaction with physiotherapy courses is evaluated through the Course Experience Questionnaire (CEQ). The outcomes of the CEQ provide a valuable overview of new graduates' views of their course experiences. National responses over a number of years have consistently shown high levels of graduate satisfaction with the quality of their course, along with consistent reporting of high workloads.

Document analysis and discussions with academic staff and heads of schools of physiotherapy confirm that entry level physiotherapy curricula are comprehensive, respond to the need to include an increasing knowledge base and changing health practices. Physiotherapy curricula across Australia also reflect an awareness that new physiotherapy graduates are increasingly likely to begin professional life as practitioners of first contact without the benefit of mentoring or preceptorship from experienced physiotherapists in an increasingly constrained health sector.

As part of this review, the project team investigated the role of learning outcomes in physiotherapy pedagogy and curricula. Our findings confirm that learning outcomes in pedagogy and curriculum processes are considered to be important at all levels of curriculum design, delivery and review, from the day-to-day class level to the year-by-year course level. Academic staff, attach a high level of importance to writing objectives, at all levels of the curriculum. Feedback from students suggests that they are familiar with the concept of learning outcomes, which they most readily equate with objectives; yet they do not necessarily appreciate the value and role of learning outcomes in facilitating their learning. Our findings suggest that the discipline would benefit from a more clearly articulated discussion of the distinction between and complementarity of learning outcomes and objectives, as outlined in ACOPRA requirements.

The project team found considerable evidence of assessment and monitoring of learning outcomes on a national level from external bodies, such as ACOPRA, and through government initiatives such as the Australian Universities Quality Agency audits. Curriculum review at the institutional level is informed by quality of teaching surveys and various forms of student feedback. As well, there is widespread evidence of monitoring and, increasingly, of evaluation of support programs such as mentoring,

transition programs and specific programs to support students from Non-English Speaking Backgrounds (NESB).

Many examples of good practice in learning and teaching were cited during the course of this project. Students and graduates alike emphasise the value of small group teaching, integration of theory and practice and learning in context. Early clinical exposure is seen as highly desirable but not always available. Multidisciplinary teaching is incorporated in all schools with a number having explicit subjects covering this area. All schools report extensive use of ICTs in learning and teaching. Graduates and students comment on the dedication of teaching staff and the support given to students for their learning.

Concerns were expressed at the increasing amount of content required to be included in the curricula and the challenges facing curriculum developers in preparing students to practice in increasingly complex work environments, with rapid increases in knowledge and treatment approaches used in physiotherapy. Concerns about the increasing workload imposed by the overcrowded curriculum were voiced by both staff and students. Feedback from academic staff confirms the need for ongoing educational research in the field of physiotherapy so as to inform curriculum change and support existing good practice in physiotherapy education.

Several comments focussed on the fact that, throughout their working lives, physiotherapy graduates need access to professional development to broaden and deepen their skills and knowledge and formal postgraduate study to develop specialist areas of knowledge. Employers expressed the need for graduates to have further education in fields such as paediatrics, disability management, rural physiotherapy, community physiotherapy and physiotherapy in the schools sector.

The issue evoking most concern and comment is that of the ability of schools of physiotherapy and their professional clinical colleagues to continue to deliver appropriate clinical education within current resource constraints. This is one of the most significant challenges currently facing physiotherapy educators and the profession as a whole. Appropriate clinical education is fundamental to preparing safe and effective graduates reaching the expected competency levels as designated by ACOPRA and the demands of the workplace. A considerable number of comments related to the lack of funding or the small amount of funding available for clinical education. Many respondents referred to the need for a post-graduation year of funded supported practice as occurs in nursing, or a funded intern year as occurs in medicine.

Overall, the findings of this study confirm that Australian physiotherapy curricula prepare students to work in Australian as well as overseas contexts. There is widespread evidence of good practice and innovation in the learning and teaching of physiotherapy. The study also confirms that Australian physiotherapists are highly regarded both locally and internationally, reflecting the strength of Australian physiotherapy education. Nevertheless, there is continued scope for enhancement of current practice and an imperative to plan strategically for future developments in the discipline. It is with these aims in mind that the project team makes the following recommendations arising from the study.

Recommendations

The project team acknowledges the good practice in the learning and teaching of physiotherapy that is taking place across Australia. We are making the following ten recommendations as a result of the evidence gained in this project, which involved extensive consultation with a wide range of stakeholders. These recommendations are designed to enhance the good practices in the learning and teaching of physiotherapy that are currently taking place.

The project team recommends the following:

Clinical education

1. that the Federal Government should review the Commonwealth Course Contribution Schedule and reclassify physiotherapy as a clinically based medical science.
2. that a feasibility study be instigated to explore the merits of a regulated preceptorship/mentoring system for new graduates in the workplace that recognises that new graduates require support during their first year of employment.

Physiotherapy education research

3. that federally funded competitive research grants should recognise the importance of research into education in the health sciences, including physiotherapy.
4. that schools of physiotherapy value and promote physiotherapy education research. Specifically, there is a need for research into:
 - 4.1. innovative approaches to the design, delivery and review of physiotherapy education, including clinical education, with a view to enhancing learning outcomes
 - 4.2. different approaches to the complex issue of multidisciplinary pedagogy and practice
 - 4.3. cost effective and high quality multimedia learning and teaching tools in physiotherapy education
5. that schools of physiotherapy establish a collaborative research program to provide evidence of good practice in clinical education. This will inform the profession, in both the public and the private sectors, who are critical to the delivery of clinical education.

Physiotherapy curriculum

6. that schools of physiotherapy and employers address the issue of 'the overcrowded curriculum' in the light of recent research; new areas of practice; the need to value private practice and issues pertaining to clinical education in public and private practice.
7. that schools of physiotherapy further explore and implement strategies to include the profession and many stakeholders in physiotherapy curriculum development, delivery and review processes.

Physiotherapy learning outcomes

8. that schools of physiotherapy explicate the role and value of learning outcomes in order to clarify the relevance of learning experiences for students and provide them with a more coherent learning framework.

Collaboration

9. that physiotherapy educators and curriculum developers collaborate to determine the most appropriate means of developing, sharing, promoting and disseminating effective strategies in physiotherapy education.

Accreditation and quality assurance for physiotherapy education in Australia

10. that the Australian Council of Physiotherapy Regulating Authorities (ACOPRA) continue to be the sole national standards advisory body for pre-registration physiotherapy education in Australia.