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Accreditation in the Health Professions

Accréditation des programmes d'enseignement des professions de santé en Australie

Summary

Accreditation by an independent authority confirms that an educational programme has met the standards required for entry into a health profession. The concept of accreditation is introduced, and the expectations of the world body in physiotherapy identified. National physiotherapy standards are necessary before an accreditation process can be instituted. The expectations of a good practice accreditation model are developed through consideration of graduate learning outcomes, accreditation requirements and processes, the accreditation authority, its panel members and their activities and the accreditation decision. The article concludes with an emphasis on the Australian requirements for physiotherapy programme accreditation.

Level of evidence: Not applicable

KEYWORDS

Accreditation – Education – Physiotherapy – Standards

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Résumé

L'accréditation par une autorité indépendante permet de confirmer la conformité d'un programme d'enseignement aux standards requis pour exercer une profession de santé. Le concept d'accréditation est présenté ainsi que les attentes de la communauté internationale de physiothérapie. Des standards nationaux de physiothérapie sont nécessaires afin de mettre en œuvre le processus d'accréditation. Un modèle de bonnes pratiques en matière d'accréditation est présenté en considérant les résultats éducatifs, les conditions du processus d'accréditation et l'autorité d'accréditation ainsi que les membres du comité d'experts et leurs activités et décisions. L'article se termine par une présentation du programme d'accréditation australien pour l'enseignement en physiothérapie.

Niveau de preuve : Non adapté

MOTS-CLÉS

Accréditation – Éducation – Physiothérapie – Standards

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Introduction

The hallmarks of a profession are that it defines its body of knowledge and its standards. An accreditation process is frequently employed in order to ensure that the profession's standards are met. This process is completed to ensure that new entrants to the profession are suitably prepared in their knowledge, skills and professional attributes to undertake their professional duties. Additional accreditation processes are generally required to verify that those with specialist qualifications are adequately prepared to undertake their work.

Accreditation may be defined as certifying or recognising that a programme or organisation meets certain standards and thus accreditation officially authorises performance of

a function. The Encarta® World English Dictionary Microsoft Corporation thesaurus lists the following synonyms for 'accredit': recognise, sanction, endorse, authorise and certify.

For educators accreditation provides validation of an education programme, an opportunity for the

professional development of academic and clinical staff, and a framework for quality improvement in education. For the profession, accreditation provides an opportunity to influence the education process and promote consensus around evaluation standards and consistency of learning outcomes. For students, accreditation provides a measure of educational quality; and for regulators it provides assurance that education programmes are evaluated against national standards.

Accreditation relies on external professional standards, which are typically set by a professional body or by a government agency with the intent to ensure public or professional expectations are met. The accreditation process is governed by accreditation requirements (which may also be termed "standards") that are common across educational programmes in a specific discipline and support consistent quality.

Accreditation is primarily a summative assessment conducted by a specialist assessment panel that examines in detail all the elements that contribute to the educational programme and the learning outcomes as referenced to a set of accreditation requirements. It is a thorough process that results in a decision. The accreditation requirements serve as reference points for assessment that occurs during the teaching of the programme. The accreditation

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requirements adopted and the way they are used are major influencers on Universities and their programmes.

International guidelines

The international body for the physiotherapy profession, the World Confederation for Physical Therapy (WCPT) in its Declaration of Principle on Education (2007) states that physical therapy education is a continuum of learning beginning with admission to an accredited physical therapy school and ending on retirement from professional practice. These principles state that an accredited programme is regularly evaluated according to established educational standards. Detailed WCPT guidelines for standard evaluation processes for accreditation or recognition of physical therapist professional entry-level education programmes are under development (personal communication). The guideline states Accreditation/recognition of physical therapist professional entry level education programmes is a process of engagement, reflection, report and review. The satisfactory outcome of this process results in the accreditation/recognition of the programme, which then must be reviewed again at a specified future time. The reviewer of the programme, in the context of accreditation/recognition, is ideally an external, independent organisation.

Development of national physiotherapy professional standards

National standards for physiotherapy practice are a necessary prerequisite for accreditation of educational programmes and the universities, which deliver those programmes. Standards for physiotherapists entering the profession enable the public and governments to be assured that new graduates have reached appropriate levels of knowledge, skills and behaviours. Development of standards requires contributions from and iterative discussions with experienced and knowledgeable physiotherapists from a variety of backgrounds in academia, management and public and private clinical practice. The registering body and the national association for physiotherapists would usually participate in this development. The standards can usefully be guided by international requirements whilst reflecting the particular needs of an individual country. The experience of other health professional disciplines within a country may also provide guidance regarding the national requirements. Once a draft is prepared wide stakeholder participation to further develop and refine the standard is essential. To be effectively implemented the professional physiotherapy standards must be agreed by the universities offering programs, the professional bodies, practicing physiotherapists, regulatory authorities and in some countries by governments. In Australia the health professional accreditation authorities are responsible for the oversight of the process of setting standards concerning the knowledge, skills and attributes required

of graduates. Health profession accreditation bodies also set standards concerning the delivery of education and its assessment.

A model for development of an accreditation process

Educational standards and student learning outcomes

Educational standards are derived from the professional standards with the graduates' learning outcomes reflecting the professional standards. The Australian Learning and Teaching Council (ALTC) (2010) undertook research to establish national learning outcomes for 26 health professions including physiotherapy. The shared learning outcomes are that the newly graduating health professional can:

- Demonstrate professional behaviours;
- Assess individual and/or population health status and, where necessary, formulate, implement and monitor management plans in consultation with patients/clients/carers/animal owners/communities;
- Promote and optimise the health and welfare of individuals and/or populations;
- Retrieve, critically evaluate, and apply evidence in the performance of health related activities;
- Deliver safe and effective collaborative health care;
- Reflect on current skills, knowledge and attitudes, and plan ongoing personal and professional development.

Each learning outcome is defined by the professional standards for each health profession and has been mapped to the shared outcomes. The Forum of Australian Health Professions Councils (2011), a coalition of the accreditation councils for the 10 nationally registered health professions in Australia (nursing and midwifery, medicine, pharmacy, physiotherapy, psychology, dentistry, podiatry, optometry, chiropractic and osteopathy) supports these learning outcomes. The Forum considers the learning outcomes reflect the core attributes and capabilities that assure the community that the health practitioners' knowledge, skills and attitudes meet a standard that reflects the responsibilities which they carry in implementing diagnosis, care, treatment and management of patients and promoting health in their community.

Accreditation requirements

In addition to requiring educational institutions to fulfill the learning outcomes for accreditation they will also require the selection of appropriate students with the intellectual capacity and aptitude to complete the program, the curriculum and the pedagogy of teaching and learning, the qualifications and educational contributions from academic and clinical staff, the facilities and equipment provided for students and staff and the opportunities for postgraduate studies for graduates and research in the health

profession. The educational environment must reflect the scholarly pursuit of research evidence-based practice.

For health professional education the expectations concerning the relations between education providers and the health care services on mutual issues of education, supervision and research are integral to effective health professional education. The curriculum must fulfill the expectations of knowledge, skill and professional behaviours, including understanding of the scientific and evidence base of the discipline; communication skills; population, social and community health; clinical sciences and skills and preparation for lifelong learning.

Programs of study must address the importance of research in advancing knowledge and include formal learning about research methodology, critical appraisal of literature, scientific data and evidence-based practice, and to encourage the students to participate in research.

Educational institutions are required to incorporate developments in models of clinical care, in education, in scientific research and community needs.

The teaching and learning methods must stimulate enquiry, develop analytical ability and encourage the development of desirable professional attitudes, include comprehensive and integrated clinical education and provide students with the opportunity to learn with other professionals.

Accreditation authorities require programmes of study to comprehensively assess students' knowledge, skills and professional behaviours, their fitness to practise the profession and using clinical assessments their preparation for clinical practice.

Health profession accreditation authorities require programmes of study to include clinical education with supervised patient contact, so that students learn professional behaviour and clinical skills and have these assessed in the context in which they will practice their profession. The educational instruction must ensure students have experience in a range of clinical settings with a variety of patients. Clinical educators must be prepared by the educational intuition for their student education and assessment roles.

The accreditation authorities require educational instructions to provide student support services such as learning support and counseling.

For educators accreditation provides validation of the education program, an opportunity for faculty professional development, and a framework for quality improvement in education. For the profession, accreditation provides an opportunity to influence the education process and work towards consensus around evaluation standards and consistency of learning outcomes.

The accreditation process

The accreditation process is one of engagement with the accrediting authority, reflection, by the university,

submission of reports and review by a panel of peers. The satisfactory outcome of this process results in the accreditation of the programme, which then must be reviewed again at a specified future time. The accrediting authority is ideally an external, independent organisation. This authority may be governmental or non-governmental and may have a statutory regulatory function.

Each accreditation process comprises the following stages:

- Self-assessment by the institution seeking accreditation. This enables the university to identify its strengths and weaknesses and capacity to offer a health professional programme. It may provide the basis for the university to develop its accreditation submission;
- An external assessment of a detailed documentary submission by an assessment panel appointed by the accreditation authority, site visits and meetings, and the collection of stakeholder feedback;
- A final report by the panel containing recommendations regarding the decision on accreditation;
- The decision on accreditation made by the accreditation authority;
- Periodic reporting by accredited universities to the accreditation authority.

The process generally follows a similar pattern although universities and the programmes they offer may be at different phases of development. These stages comprise:

- Established programs and universities where the accreditation authority undertakes regular re-assessment of accredited programs and universities in order to verify that they continue to comply with the approved;
- New programmes or universities where the accreditation authority undertakes an assessment of capacity and initial accreditation or approval to proceed before students commence in the program;
- Major changes to established programmes where the accreditation authority defines the major changes that would affect the accreditation status of an already accredited program.

The accreditation process itself also requires the development of a clear and robust guide to conducting accreditation. The accreditation process requirements will have elements that are reflective of both the professional standards and the educational standards.

Principles of good practice in accreditation have been defined by Professions Australia (2008). These principles are based on the AS/ISO International standards for quality assurance: ISO 17011 on conformity and assessment (2004), the International Network for Quality Assurance Agencies in Higher Education Guidelines of Good practice (2011) and the international standards and benchmarking processes for the World Federation for Medical Education/World Health Organisation Guidelines For Accreditation which was initially developed in 2005.

In 2008 the Forum of Australian Health Professions Councils endorsed these Standards for Professional Accreditation Processes as a statement of good practice for assessing and accrediting educational programmes that lead to entry to the professions and subsequently identified principles of good practice in accreditation processes for health professionals and developed agreed common accreditation process expectations.

The accreditation authority

The key requirements of an accreditation authority are autonomy and freedom from bias, good governance and clear, publicly available processes.

As the accreditation authority has significant responsibility to the public, the health profession, the universities and students it should undertake its functions independent of outside influence. The accreditation authority must be a respected organisation providing comprehensive public information about its role and functions. This should include its legal structure, the membership and responsibilities of its board and committees and assessment panels, its accrediting functions and the process documents and the regulatory framework in which the accreditation system operates.

The accreditation authority complies with a recognised code of conduct, as appropriate for international accreditation bodies in its profession. This code of conduct would include matters such as confidentiality regarding documentation and proceedings and management of conflicts of interest. The accreditation authority has processes for appeals and complaints.

The accreditation authority defines the purpose of its accreditation of professional entry-level courses as assessing the capacity of education programmes to produce graduates who have the knowledge, skills and professional attributes necessary to practise the profession and to be prepared for lifelong learning to support practice and community needs. There is an expectation that the accreditation process will foster continuous improvement of the quality of professional education.

The accreditation requirements are based on research and reflect relevant international standards and statements relating to education in the profession, and the accreditation requirements used in countries with comparable education and practice standards for the profession.

Good practice requires that the accreditation standards and process requirements are reviewed regularly with contributions from educators, students, the profession, the community and governments.

Panel members

The accreditation authority delegates the assessment of programmes and universities to an assessment panel of members with the appropriate qualifications, experience

and training to assess professional education programmes and universities. The members should include a majority with a background in education or practice in the profession and other skills appropriate to the specific assessment.

Panel review, visits and meetings

The assessment panel members review the submission independently and then collaborate on a comprehensive draft report. Additional written materials may be sought and issues identified for discussion and inspection at the site visit. The accreditation authority details the purpose and procedures of site visits with the university, including visits to clinical education sites. Information provided at the site visit includes documents and statistics (for example, study guides, reading lists and statistical material on results in examinations); individual and group interviews (the dean, head of department, curriculum committee, advisory or industry committee, students, clinicians); and direct observation (at visits to student facilities, libraries, laboratories, departments and classrooms). The site visit enables the panel to pursue areas that have been identified for further investigation, facilitates the sampling of subjects, staff, students, permits a focus on a particular issue and can pursue it with questions asked of senior management, deans, heads of department, academic staff and students. It can be described as a process of triangulation enabling investigation of an issue by considering information on it from sources of different types in order to verify evidence such as committee minutes, course and teaching evaluations, programme reviews, reports of professional association accreditations, or external examiners' reports. The assessment panel will collate its final report and submit it through the appropriate channels to the accreditation authority.

The accreditation decision

The authority's accreditation decision is based on the assessment against the accreditation standards and is valid for a fixed period of time. Categories of accreditation decisions are:

- Full accreditation for the maximum period if the accreditation authority is reasonably satisfied that the programme of study and the university meet the accreditation standard;
- Conditional accreditation, if the accreditation authority considers that the programme of study, and the university substantially meet the accreditation standard and the imposition of conditions on the approval will ensure the programme meets the standard within a reasonable time;
- Withdrawal or denial of accreditation if the university and the programme of study cannot meet the standards within an appropriate period.

The report

The assessment panel's accreditation report addresses the performance of the programme and university against the accreditation standards with a summary of the evidence supporting the assessment. The report includes recommendations to the accreditation authority regarding the decision on accreditation. Once a decision is made the university is provided with a report and the accreditation authority also provides a report to the national health practitioner board for the profession so that the board may make a decision on approval of the programme of study and its graduates for registration purposes. Programmes and universities, which have approval for registration, are listed on the websites of the respective boards of the Australian Health Practitioner Regulation Agency (2011) as well as the accreditation authority maintaining a public list of the accredited programmes and universities.

Ongoing monitoring

The accreditation authority continues to monitor accredited universities regularly through a specified reporting process.

Physiotherapy programme accreditation

A number of national physiotherapy bodies have well-developed formal accreditation processes. These include the comprehensive accreditation processes in Canada, which began in the 1950s and has evolved to incorporate changes in the education, practice and regulatory environments. In 1995, the Accreditation Council of Canadian Physiotherapy Academic programmes (ACCPAP) commenced a new accreditation process in collaboration with the Commission on Accreditation in Physical Therapy Education (CAPTE) in the United States of America (USA). In 2000, ACCPAP became an independently incorporated body with the purpose of accrediting physiotherapy education programmes in Canada and is now known as the Physiotherapy Education Accreditation Canada (PEAC) (2011). In the USA the mission of the CAPTE serves the public by establishing and applying standards that assure quality and continuous improvement in the entry-level preparation of physical therapists and physical therapist assistants, and that reflect the evolving nature of education, research, and practice. CAPTE reviews its evaluative criteria every five years.

The Education Policy Statement of the European Region of the WCPT (2011) aims to protect students by advocating quality assurance mechanisms in physiotherapy education and to contribute to the concept of achieving a European Common Platform by highlighting the need for transparent pathways and equity in access to physiotherapy education programmes. The statement aims to provide confidence to the public and to public bodies and the wider higher education sectors promoting the international

standing of physiotherapy education in Europe (2011). This is not however an accreditation process.

Background to Physiotherapy Accreditation in Australia

Formal national accreditation of physiotherapy education programmes began in 1997 in Australia following the development of the first professional standards and the Procedures and Guidelines for Accreditation of New and Existing Physiotherapy programmes. Following periodic review and a second iteration of the Australian Standards for Physiotherapy (2006) a revised accreditation process commenced in 2009.

The Australian Physiotherapy Council (APC) (2011) is an independent national body responsible for the accreditation of physiotherapy education programmes in Australian universities. One of its functions is the maintenance and regular review of the Australian Standards for Physiotherapy (www.physiocouncil.com.au/Accreditation).

The APC is legislated in the Health Practitioner Regulation National Law Act (2009) for the accreditation functions of:

- Developing accreditation standards for approval by a National Board; or
- Assessing programmes of study, and the education providers that provide the programmes of study, to determine whether the programmes meet approved accreditation standards; or
- Assessing authorities in other countries who conduct examinations for registration in a health profession, or accredit programmes of study relevant to registration in a health profession, to decide whether persons who successfully complete the examinations or programmes of study conducted or accredited by the authorities have the knowledge, clinical skills and professional attributes necessary to practise the profession in Australia; or
- Overseeing the assessment of the knowledge, clinical skills and professional attributes of overseas qualified health practitioners who are seeking registration in a health profession under this Law and whose qualifications are not approved qualifications for the health profession; or
- Making recommendations and giving advice to a National Board about a matter referred to above.

Educational accreditation

The Australian Standards for Physiotherapy (2006) indicate the knowledge, skills and attributes of a safe and effective entry-level physiotherapist in Australia. The Australian Standards for Physiotherapy are embedded in the curricula of entry-level physiotherapy programmes and are integrated within the accreditation requirements.

The purpose of accreditation is to ensure high standards of physiotherapy for the Australian community by evaluating

the suitability of graduates for registration for autonomous primary professional practice.

The Australian Physiotherapy Council (APC) (2011) accreditation process is a collaborative quality mechanism for education based on precise criteria and focused on outcomes. The process has been based on a comprehensive review of the literature, and other relevant professional accreditation guidelines, as well as consultation with key stakeholders and persons experienced in accreditation. The process provides guidance for universities developing submissions as part of the process of application for, and maintenance of, accreditation.

The physiotherapy accreditation process comprises several stages. An optional Initial Assessment of the university planning to offer a physiotherapy programme may assist the university with planning and development of a new or substantially changed programme. This occurs at an early stage in the planning process and identifies matters that the university will need to specifically address as part of the process of Provisional Accreditation.

Provisional Accreditation begins prior to commencement of the first cohort of students with the university completing a self-assessment of its strengths and weaknesses in conjunction with submission of documents that address the accreditation requirements. A site visit is made half way through the programme to confirm the details of the written submission and to meet with university leaders, academic teachers, clinical educators, students, advisory committees and others involved in the delivery of the program. The Programme Specific Accreditation Panel compiles a report indicating whether the programme and the university delivering the programme fulfill the criteria for accreditation. The report will include commendations, affirmations and recommendations regarding the evaluation undertaken by the panel. Affirmations and recommendations include the matters, which must be addressed by the university either as conditions for this stage of accreditation or before the next stage. The report from the Programme Specific Accreditation Panel with a recommendation regarding accreditation status goes to the Accreditation Committee of the APC. The Council will then make a decision regarding Provisional Accreditation.

The university prepares a submission for Full Accreditation when the programme outcomes for the first cohort of graduates are available. A further site visit and surveys of the graduates and their employers confirm the accreditation period, which is for a maximum of five years. Maintenance of Full Accreditation requires the university to submit periodic reports during the period of full accreditation.

Confirmation of Full Accreditation is considered as part of the Accreditation Panel's evaluation of the final periodic submission prior to expiration of the current period of Full Accreditation.

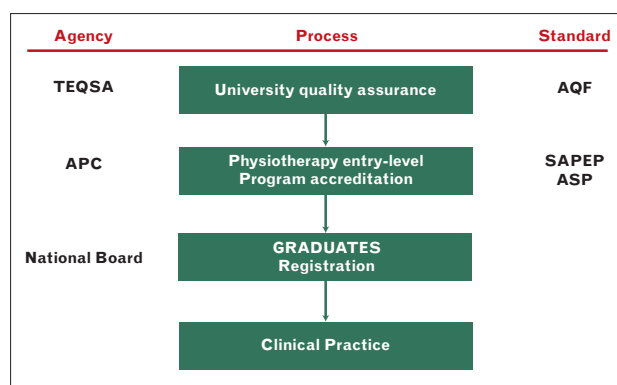


Figure 1. Physiotherapy Education and practice regulation in Australia. TEQSA = Australian Universities Quality Agency which assesses the overall quality of universities; APC = Australian Physiotherapy Council; AQF = Australian Qualifications Framework; SAPEP = Standards for Accreditation of Physiotherapy Educational Programs; ASP = Australian Standards for Physiotherapy (Note that the Australian Physiotherapy Association does not have a regulatory role).

Other accreditation outcomes are Conditional Accreditation, Accreditation is not granted and Accreditation is withdrawn. Conditional Accreditation may be granted when the requirements for Provisional or Full Accreditation have not all been met. The university must provide evidence that the outstanding requirements will be met within a reasonable time.

Innovation and diversity in educational delivery are encouraged and fostered (figure 1).

There is no national physiotherapy curriculum in Australia, although a standardised clinical assessment tool is used by clinical educators for many entry level physiotherapy programmes (Dalton, Keating, Davidson 2009).

National curricula are not favoured in the health science professions in Australia as they *would be in danger of being too inflexible, stultifying, and would make it very difficult to get the sorts of innovations that are going to be required...* (Smallwood 2010).

In 2005 McMeeken and colleagues undertook independent research for the ALTC that investigated the learning outcomes and curriculum development in Australian physiotherapy education. The report identifies, describes and evaluates curriculum and its development and review processes, pedagogical innovations and the incorporation of new areas in health education such as interprofessional education and information and communications technology. Students, graduates, educators and employers were surveyed and interviewed. This work emphasised the importance of feedback to the universities from external bodies such as the APC and the agency that assesses universities quality assurance processes on a national level.

Additionally the APC strategy to encourage innovation in education was realised in the wide diversity of approaches and ideas noted in physiotherapy education programmes (2005).

Australia also has a State Government based registration and accreditation process for higher education programmes delivered by private educational institutions that are not universities. In professions such as teaching or accountancy, which are generally taught in universities but are also available at some of these private institutions a joint accreditation process is undertaken by the State and the accreditation authority for teaching or accountancy (Private higher education institutions and technical and further education institutes offering higher education courses are also referred to as non self-accrediting higher education institutions).

Organisations, other than public universities, wishing to offer higher education courses in the State of Victoria for example must apply to the Victorian Registration and Qualification Authority (VRQA) for registration, and have their courses accredited by this authority prior to delivery of any programme (VRQA 2011). These private institutions are required to comply with national education frameworks (Australian Qualifications Framework 2011). As the primary purpose of a private university is profit, it is essential that the professional accreditation authority ensure full compliance with the professional standards. In summary an accreditation process for health professions such as physiotherapy is of benefit to the public, prospective students, educators and the profession. It provides evidence of a mature profession subject to high standards of education and professional practice.

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