

ACCREDITATION OF PHYSIOTHERAPY EDUCATION PROGRAMS IN CANADA: Links Between Regulation and Accreditation

What is Professional Education Accreditation?

Specialized or professional education accreditation is both a process and a condition. The process involves an integrated system of continuous assessment, evaluation, and improvement to comply with established accreditation standards. The condition or state of being accredited provides a credential to the public and regulators that assures an education program has accepted and is fulfilling its commitment to educational quality.ⁱ

About ACCPAP

The Accreditation Council for Canadian Physiotherapy Academic Programs (ACCPAP) is an independently incorporated body under federal law. The ACCPAP mission is to assure the quality of physiotherapy education in Canada through accreditation.

ACCPAP has formal links, through its governance structure, with a variety of stakeholders including the Canadian Alliance of *Physiotherapy* Regulators (The Alliance), Canadian Physiotherapy Association (CPA), Canadian Universities Physical Therapy Academic Council (CUPAC), the National Student Assembly, and the public.

Stakeholders in Accreditation

ACCPAP, like many accreditation organizations, has designed its processes to be relevant and responsive. With the input of a variety of stakeholders ACCPAP continually evolves its systems and processes to incorporate changes in the education, practice and regulatory environments. Further, the accreditation program is designed so that the outcomes and processes of education program accreditation are of value to many stakeholders:

- For *educators* education program 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 of standards and consistency of learning outcomes;
- For *regulators* accreditation provides assurance that education programs are evaluated against national standards and ensures that graduates have met one of the requirements for licensure; and
- For *students*, accreditation provides a measure of educational quality.

Physiotherapy Professional Standards and Quality

The four national physiotherapy groups in Canadaⁱⁱ develop and maintain a continuum of guidelines and standards to ensure the competency of entry-level practitioners. Guiding documents and processes along the continuum include the

- Core Curriculum for Entry-Level Physical Therapy Education,
- Accreditation Standards for Physiotherapy Academic Programs,
- Essential Competencies for Physiotherapists in Canada,
- Physiotherapy Competency Examination,
- Regulatory Standards for Entry to Practice and Continuing Competency, and
- Membership in the Canadian Physiotherapy Association.

ⁱ Association of Specialized and Professional Accreditors (1993). Chicago, IL.

ⁱⁱ The four national physiotherapy groups include ACCPAP, The Alliance, CPA and CUPAC.

Links between Accreditation of Education Programs and Regulation of Physiotherapists

Since its inception, the main purpose of accreditation in higher education was to “achieve an ideal in education as preparation for practice by defining and meeting explicit standards. In this way, accreditation could protect both the health of the general public and the futures of students seeking education.”ⁱⁱⁱ Therefore, if an education program is in compliance with established accreditation standards, there is some assurance that there is high quality education for students that will in turn lead to high quality physiotherapy service provided to patients or clients by graduates of the program.

Many health professionals must graduate from an accredited program in order to take licensure examinations, therefore the link between professional education accreditation and regulation is an important one. While accreditation evaluates the education program, regulation focuses on the competency of the individual. The two processes are complementary as they focus on the same outcomes, that is, competency based performance assessment.^{iv}

Other professions use a range of approaches in the relationships between the accreditation programs and the regulatory agencies. For example, in some professions:

- Accreditation of educational programs is governed by a related stakeholder group or organization, such as educators, professional organizations or regulators;
- Accreditation of educational programs is done by an independent organization that has formal/direct links to regulators and/or professional associations through, for example, a Board of Directors and Council; or
- Accreditation of educational programs is carried out by an organization that has informal links with regulatory agencies through, for example, the consideration or use of a common set of standards or competency profile.

Maintaining links between accreditation and regulation is beneficial for facilitating consistency between entry-level education standards and regulatory entry to physiotherapy practice standards. Informal links that exist in physiotherapy between accreditation and regulation currently include consideration and use of the physiotherapy Competency Profile, Analysis of Practice for the Physiotherapy Competency Examination and consideration of provincial regulatory frameworks in the accreditation standards. Formal links include The Alliance membership on the accreditation Council and the inclusion of a member with regulatory experience on the ACCPAP Peer Review Teams, which are established to conduct the on-site review of an educational program.

ⁱⁱⁱ Gelmon, S., O’Neil, E., Kimmey, J., & The Task Force on Accreditation of Health Professions Education. (1999). Strategies for change and improvement: The report of the Task Force on Accreditation of Health Professions Education. San Francisco Centre for the Health Professions.

^{iv} Gelmon, S., O’Neil, E., Kimmey, J., & The Task Force on Accreditation of Health Professions Education. (1999).