

ACCREDITATION OF PHYSIOTHERAPY EDUCATION PROGRAMS IN CANADA: Developing an Independent Organization

What is Education Accreditation?

Accreditation is both a process and a condition. The process involves an integrated system of continuous assessment, evaluation, and improvement to comply with specified standards. The condition or state of being accredited provides a credential to the public and regulators, assuring that a program has accepted and is fulfilling its commitment to educational qualityⁱ. Four main functions of accreditation are to:

- 1) Establish criteria for evaluation of physiotherapy education programs;
- 2) Conduct assessments that encourage universities to maintain and improve their programs;
- 3) Determine compliance with established criteria for accreditation; and
- 4) Provide ongoing consultation to physiotherapy education programs.

The Continuum of Professional Standards and Quality

Accreditation of physiotherapy education is supported by three major physiotherapy professional groups including: 1) the regulators represented by The Canadian Alliance of *Physiotherapy* Regulators; 2) the academic programs through the Canadian University Physiotherapy Academic Council; and 3) the professional association through the Canadian Physiotherapy Association. A continuum of guidelines and standards is developed and maintained by the three groups to ensure the competency of entry-level practitioners. Guiding documents and processes along the continuum include the:ⁱⁱ

- 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.

Stakeholders & Values of Accreditation

Accreditation must be a relevant and responsive process, continually evolving to incorporate changes in the education, practice and regulatory environments. Therefore, it is a process that requires input and is of value to a variety of stakeholders. 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 outcomesⁱⁱⁱ. For *students*, accreditation provides a measure of educational quality; and for *regulators* it provides assurance that education programs are evaluated against national standards.

The History of Accreditation for Physiotherapy Education in Canada

Accreditation of physiotherapy education programs in Canada has been conducted since the 1950s. The following are some highlights in the development of accreditation for physiotherapy education:

- The document “Basis of Approval of Schools of Physical and/or Occupational Therapy in Canada” was developed by the Committee on Rehabilitation of the Canadian Medical Association (CMA) in cooperation with the Canadian Physiotherapy Association (CPA) and the Canadian Association of Occupational Therapists. These standards served as a guide for the development of new programs and for approval of graduates for membership in the CPA and provincial licensure.
- In 1972 the CPA Board of Directors and the CMA Council on Medical Education approved a new document, “Accreditation Standards of Physical Therapy Education Programs in Canada”. A pilot test of an accreditation process using these standards was conducted in 1974. Following a final report of the pilot in 1976, the CPA established an Accreditation Committee: Physiotherapy Education to oversee the accreditation program.
- The program was revised in 1980 and, as of September 1982, graduation from a university physiotherapy program that met the CPA accreditation standards became a condition for CPA membership for new Canadian graduates. The accreditation standards were revised again in 1988 and all physiotherapy education programs were accredited by these standards in 1994.
- 1995, the Accreditation Council of Canadian Physiotherapy Academic Programs (ACCPAP) was created to implement and oversee a new accreditation process. This process was conducted in collaboration with the Commission on Accreditation in Physical Therapy Education (CAPTE) in the United States and involved two steps: 1) ACCPAP performed a pre-screening to ensure specific Canadian eligibility requirements were met; and 2) CAPTE evaluated the programs according to its standards, policies and procedures. Both ACCPAP and CAPTE grant accreditation status upon satisfactory compliance with a rigorous set of evaluative criteria. As of May 1999, all 13 of the Canadian physiotherapy education programs had completed this process.
- After December 31, 2001, CAPTE only accredited master’s entry-level physiotherapy education programs. As graduation from an accredited or approved university program is a licensure requirement for most Canadian graduates, a credible and valid accreditation process was required. As a result, in 1999, the members of ACCPAP began development of a Canadian accreditation program that would act as a catalyst for change by stimulating new ideas and practices in physiotherapy education while remaining responsive to evolving education, practice and regulatory environments.
- In 1999 ACCPAP hired an Executive Director and in March 2000 ACCPAP became an independently incorporated body with the purpose of accrediting physiotherapy education programs in Canada.
- By the end of 2006 all physiotherapist education programs in Canada had participated in the ACCPAP accreditation program and held accreditation status with ACCPAP.

ⁱ Association of Specialized and Professional Accreditors.

ⁱⁱ Gelmon, S., & Bobby, C. (June, 1999). A review of the accreditation process for Canadian physiotherapy academic programs. Accreditation Council for Canadian Physiotherapy Academic Programs.

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.