

Policy Statement on Physiotherapy Education of the ER-WCPT

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POLICY STATEMENT ON PHYSIOTHERAPY EDUCATION OF THE ER-WCPT

European Region of the World Confederation for Physical Therapy (WCPT) Education Matters WG

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1. INTRODUCTION

1.1 Purpose of the Education Policy Statement Policy

The purpose of this statement is to provide information to physiotherapists, educators and the appropriate authorities and organisations within the European Union on the principles that underpin programmes of physiotherapy education, and to supply the European perspective and context in addition to the WCPT policy statement on Education (2011, a). This statement covers entry level education (minimum bachelor, EQF61), advanced level education (master, EQF7) and doctorate level (EQF8) as well as the continuum of continuing professional development (CPD) opportunities. The document should inform planning and long term thinking about the educational needs of the autonomous profession of physiotherapy. 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.

1.2 Higher physiotherapy education in Europe

The European Higher Education Area (EHEA) reform has provided a framework to modernise higher education and has achieved significant results making the educational systems of the different countries transparent and comparable. It promotes improvement in the quality and international competitiveness of higher education in Europe and strives to remove barriers and make it easier for students, teachers and researchers to perform their academic activities in other educational institutions or in other countries. The aim is that 20% of the graduates have had a study period abroad (The Bologna process 2020).

The Bologna Declaration, which contained the fundamental principles of developing a European Higher Education Area (EHEA), was signed in 1999 by 29 European countries out of the 47 countries participating today. The importance of qualifications framework is emphasised as significant instruments in achieving comparability and transparency within the EHEA. It should also help higher education institutions (HEIs) to develop study modules and educational programmes, which are based on learning outcomes and the European credit transfer system (ECTS), and improve the recognition of qualifications as well as all forms of prior learning (Education, Audio-visual and Cultural Executive Agency 2012).

The EU's Growth Strategy for the coming decade (Europe 2020) highlights higher education as a key policy area where collaboration between Member States and the

¹ The European Qualification Framework (EQF) relates different countries' national qualifications systems to a common European reference framework aiming to better understanding and comparing qualifications levels of different countries and different education and training systems. The core of the EQF include eight reference levels describing what a learner knows, understands and is able to do – concerning the 'learning outcomes'. Levels of national qualifications will be placed at one of the central reference levels, ranging from basic (Level 1) to advanced (Level 8).

EU can deliver positive results for a global knowledge economy. Higher education, with its links to research and innovation, plays a crucial role in personal development and economic growth, providing competent and highly qualified professionals who contribute to developing prosperity and sustainability. This implies both educational and societal responsibilities. Globalisation has resulted in an increasingly international working life, which also requires higher qualifications of the professionals (European Commission 2011).

The European Research Area (ERA) aims to strengthen its scientific and technological bases by international exchange in which researchers, knowledge and technology circulate freely in order to improve competence utilisation. According to the ERA Progress Report (2013) 75% of the member states have defined a strategy for research, development and innovation but public efforts in research funding have been declining since 2009. Physiotherapy education must be informed by research. Both teachers and students should actively be involved in research projects. A prerequisite for success is that researchers and lecturers in physiotherapy actively take part in research projects. The ER-WCPT briefing paper (2012) *“Promoting research and research careers within physiotherapy in Europe”* provides a description and analysis of the situation, policy dimensions and implications, and includes suggested recommendations for action concerning physiotherapy research and it is therefore also important to consider research across the spectrum of education.

2. VISION FOR THE PHYSIOTHERAPY EDUCATION OF THE ER-WCPT 2020

The vision of the European region is excellence of entry level and post qualifying physiotherapy education across Europe, which is internationally recognised and based on a common consensus among educators, students, employers, public opinion, other health professions and stakeholders. The education should meet the future societal needs for physiotherapy in order to improve health, functional ability and well-being of the population. High quality educational programmes lead to enhanced employability of European physiotherapists. This in turn will enhance free movement and the right of establishment of physiotherapists across Europe.

This document is aligned with the ER WCPT strategic plan (2012) and relates to the strategic objective 3: *“To promote high standards of Physiotherapy led research, education and practice”*.

The physiotherapy education policy statement emphasises the following main expectations described in chapter 4:

1. Provide underpinning knowledge skills and rationale for clinical reasoning that lead to competencies for delivering high quality innovative physiotherapy services.

2. Be evidence based and include physiotherapy led research as well as inter-professional research activities.
3. Be of high quality and enable flexible ways to enter qualifying and post qualifying physiotherapy education in addition to multiple career pathways and continuous professional development (CPD).
4. Use established national and European quality assurance procedures and standards.
5. Have an international profile.

3. PHYSIOTHERAPY ENTRY LEVEL AND POSTQUALIFYING EDUCATION

The first professional qualification should be completion of a physiotherapy curriculum that qualifies the physiotherapist for practice as an independent autonomous professional. Education for entry level physiotherapists should be based on university level and should be congruent with entry level standards and recommendations by the WCPT at a minimum of bachelor level (WCPT 2011, c). Physiotherapy education comprises entry level education (minimum bachelor, EQF6), advanced level education (master, EQF7) and doctorate level (EQF8).

Qualifying physiotherapy programmes should aim to develop the knowledge, skills, behaviours and values required to practise physiotherapy on graduation, while nurturing the skills, behaviours and values that will enhance career-long development and practice (WCPT 2011, b). Continuing professional development is the career-long learning that physiotherapists engage in, in the context of their working lives to also function as educators (with patients, peers, students and colleagues and so on). Keeping up to date with changes in practice require individuals to learn and develop constantly in order to deliver high quality evidence based services to their patients/clients. CPD describes the systematic, planned and on-going process of learning that underpins professional practice. CPD enables physiotherapists that have completed an entry level programme to maintain, develop and enhance their personal and professional skills, knowledge and behaviours, and on-going competence to practise. The role of both qualifying and post-qualifying education is to help learners to synthesise evidenced-based practice along with a patient-centred approach within clinical reasoning. This, in turn, advances physiotherapy practice, service delivery and ultimately outcomes for patients/clients. All physiotherapists should participate in learning activities that maintain or increase their professional competence.

CPD activities for physiotherapists should meet the minimal standards of quality as set out in the WCPT guideline for delivering quality continuing professional development for physiotherapists (WCPT 2011, d). An important part of CPD is specialisation, as well as broadening of practice to meet changing patient and service needs, including complex situations. Masters programmes with different specialised clinical content

provide new opportunities for expanded knowledge and career possibilities for specialists in physiotherapy (ER-WCPT 2006, ER-WCPT 2010). The demands for specialisation vary in the different European countries, some being more directly under legalisation

4. QUALITY ASSURANCE IN HIGHER EDUCATION

The WCPT (2011, e) supports national member organisations to develop accreditation/recognition processes that independently validate and assess the standards of entry level education provision to ensure a standard that affords graduates full statutory and professional recognition to practise. In Europe, there is often an authority with legislative responsibility for these processes. The Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance (ESG), in the European Higher Education Area adopted in 2005, aim to develop comparable criteria and methodologies as well as to promote mutual trust while respecting diverse national and institutional contexts and subject areas. In 2008, the European Quality Assurance Register for Higher Education (EQAR) was established. Quality Assurance (QA) covers both internal and external systems and was developed to move towards greater internationalisation. The physiotherapy education QA procedures should aim to achieve a balance between accountability and improvement. The Member Organisations of the European Region of WCPT have an important role to contribute and support the development of the physiotherapy education in the HEI's through their quality enhancement activities.

Quality is an important dimension in EU policy formation. An important aspect for establishing a knowledge society is the need to coordinate policies across different areas, linking higher education with research and innovation (Elken & Stensaker 2011).

<http://www.enic-naric.net/>

5. EDUCATION POLICY STATEMENT RECOMMENDATIONS

It is important to recognise that physiotherapy practice and education within the EU is at different stages of development. The European education policy statement recognises and values bespoke professional bodies' approaches and their responsiveness to national needs. The education policy statement still recommends physiotherapy education programmes in the EU to include the following overall claims presented in Table 1.:

Table 1.

1. Provide underpinning knowledge skills and rationale for clinical reasoning that lead to competencies for delivering high quality innovative PT services	2. Be evidence based and include PT led research as well as multi-professional research activities.	3. Be of high quality and enable flexible ways to enter qualifying and post qualifying education in addition to multiple career pathways and continuous professional development (CPD).	4. PT education uses established national and European quality assurance procedures and standards.	5. PT education has an International profile.
The curriculum for physiotherapy education reflects national as well as global health and social priorities.	PT education is built on evidence based physiotherapy practice and research to demonstrate innovation and provide continuous improvement. EBP ² is integrated in all educational processes at all levels of PT education.	PT education access is based on university level requirements and bachelor degree is a minimum entry qualification to the profession.	HEIs have regular involvement with professional bodies, employers, health authorities and other national and international stakeholders with regard to education.	HEIs facilitate teacher, researcher and student mobility. To enable this ECTS learning agreements are adopted and the curriculum for physiotherapy education defines transparent and comparable competencies.
Qualified physiotherapists have the generic as well as PT specific competencies including social skills to meet local as well as global population needs.	The education demonstrates clinical value, benefit and cost effectiveness.	Physiotherapy education is structured according to the EQF standard placed within national qualifications framework and aligned with international qualification frameworks	Quality assurance procedures include input from all relevant stakeholders; colleagues, student representatives, health and patient organisations.	International mobility aims to promote European joint curricula and joint degrees, to facilitate knowledge and professional development and competitiveness of both the profession and the EU.
The curriculum for physiotherapy education responds to various health care needs within health promotion, prevention, rehabilitation and treatment of disorders. The education includes the competencies needed in an autonomous physiotherapy practice to examine, diagnose, treat and evaluate effects of physiotherapy.	The study culture and learning environments facilitate entrepreneurship and innovations.	All levels of education apply the ECTS in terms of level, quality, workload, learning outcomes, profile of the studies and diploma supplement. The programme demonstrates flexibility in structure and delivery pattern to provide equality of access to individuals from a variety of social and academic backgrounds.	Member Organisations collaborate with public quality assurance authorities, HEIs and quality assurance agencies to develop common quality assurance criteria and methods at national and international level to stimulate an exchange of information.	HEIs promote procedures in transnational education through European and other international networks ² and organisations as well as trade union agreements.
Qualified physiotherapists have competencies for development and management of services in both the public and in the private sector.	The academic staff has a minimum of a master degree or PhD degree, significant clinical experience and teaching qualifications.	HEIs validate and recognise prior formal, non-formal and informal knowledge in a transparent way to enable access to programmes and provide flexible and effective study pathways.	Quality assurance mechanisms in the HEIs ensure that evaluation procedures consider the links between teaching and learning, research, knowledge transfer and other dimensions of institutional management. These processes ensure their relevance to professional practice and social impact.	HEIs are actively taking part in international research networks to make it possible to use research funding to promote a strong knowledge development.

² Such as the ENIC (European Network of Information Centres), the NARIC networks (National Academic Recognition Information Centres in the European Union) and ERASMUS

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