

Quality Assurance in Physiotherapy Education

Updated Information and Recommendations

APPROVED VERSION
POST 2016 General Meeting

UPDATED INFORMATION AND RECOMMENDATION ON QUALITY ASSURANCE IN PHYSIOTHERAPY EDUCATION

European Region of the World Confederation for Physiotherapy (ER-WCPT)
Education Matters Working Group

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1. Background.

The WCPT encourages Member Organisations (MOs) to support development of quality assurance procedures and accreditation/recognition processes¹⁻³. Such processes are crucial to assess and validate the standard of entry level education provision to ensure graduates full statutory and professional recognition to practice¹. In Europe, there is often an authority with legislative responsibility involved in these processes and procedures vary from country to country⁴.

Quality Assurance (QA) is also an important dimension in EU policy formation. Crucial for establishing a knowledge-based society is the need to coordinate policies across different areas, linking higher education with research and innovation⁵. The Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance (ESG), in the European Higher Education Area, adopted in **2005**, aimed 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. The ESG 2005 was further developed and the revised version was adopted in May 2015⁶⁻⁷. The revision reflects a consensus among all the organisations and ministries involved on how to progress Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area and, as such, provides a firm basis for successful implementation.

Quality Assurance (QA) covers both internal and external procedures, systems and structures and the Quality Assurance procedures were initiated in order to move towards greater internationalisation. The physiotherapy education QA procedures should aim to achieve a balance between accountability and improvement. The MOs of the European Region have an important role to support, and contribute to, the quality enhancement of physiotherapy education in the HEIs⁸.

2. Overview of Quality Assurance in Physiotherapy Education.

A range of measures are employed within the countries of the European Region to carry out Quality Assurance within Higher Education Institutes as indicated by several surveys performed by the Education Matters Working Group over the years (including

2010, 2012, 2014) (**Report on Quality Assurance 2014**). In total, 37 out of 39 MOs have replied to the survey over the years. Several reminders were sent to the MOs where no information had been provided, and some MOs provided information at the time of the 2016 GM or even later. An overview of the responses is presented in Table 1.

2.1 National Agencies for Quality Assurance in Education

Thirty-two MOs stated that there is a National Agency responsible for QA work, which also covers physiotherapy education. The repeated surveys demonstrate a clear development over the years with an increasing number of countries employing QA procedures. Quality Assurance mechanisms at national level have also been a key element of the Bologna Process employed within the **European Higher Education area**.

Most of the evaluations by the national agencies were repeated every three to six years, depending on the country. One MO (Spain) reported that the frequency of the evaluation varies depending on which level is being targeted (Bachelor, Master or Doctoral). Sanctions imposed due to poor levels of Quality Assurance were similar across countries and commonly included loss of approval, suspension of the programme, re-organisation and re-evaluation.

Nineteen MOs reported that there is a National Regulatory Body within their country, with seven taking a role in Quality Assurance of education. Sanctions were the same as those used by National Agencies.

2.2 The role of the MOs in Quality Assurance procedures

Fourteen MOs reported that they undertook QA procedures in assessing physiotherapy education and five stated that they were working towards developing such processes. The frequency of such activity ranged from continuous to a flexible approach allowing up to seven years between reviews. Nineteen MO's encourage the educational institutions to promote and use a wide range of QA procedures. The most commonly promoted procedures included student evaluation, self-evaluation within universities/schools, external visits and peer review.

Table 1 – Current information on QA obtained from the MO's from the last three editions of the ER-WCPT survey and interviews held with some MOs at the time of the 2016 General Meeting and later. Data is available from a total of 37 MOs. The symbol – indicates that no information was provided.

	National Agency responsible for HEI QA work ⁴	National Regulatory Body Involvement in PT education	National ranking system for HEIs (if PT specific)	MO involved in Quality Assurance Procedure (directly or indirectly)	Replied in year/Have not replied
Austria	YES	YES	-	NO	2010, 2012, 2014
Belgium	YES	NO	NO	NO	2010, 2014
Bosnia-Herzegovina	YES	NO	-	NO	2016
Bulgaria	YES	NO	NO	YES	2010
Croatia	YES	NO	NO	NO	2015
Cyprus	YES	NO	-	NO	2010, 2012, 2015
Czech Republic	YES	YES	NO	YES	2010,2012,2014
Denmark	YES	YES	NO	NO	2010,2012,2014
Estonia	YES	YES	-	YES	2010,2012
Finland	YES	YES	NO	NO	2010,2012,2014
France	YES	YES	-	YES	2010
Germany	YES	YES	-	YES	2010,2014
Greece	YES	NO	NO	NO	2017
Hungary	YES	NO	NO	NO	GM 2016
Iceland	YES	YES	YES	NO	GM 2016
Ireland	YES	NO	NO	YES	2010,2014
Israel	YES	YES		NO	2010
Italy	NO	NO	NO	NO	GM 2016
Latvia	YES	-	-	YES	2010
Lebanon	NO	NO	NO	YES	2010
Liechtenstein	NO	-	-	-	2010
Lithuania					
Luxembourg	NO	NO	-	NO	2012,2014
Malta	YES	YES	YES	YES	2012,2014
Montenegro					
Netherlands	YES	NO	NO	YES	2010,2012,2014
Norway	YES	YES	NO	NO	2010,2012,2014
Poland	YES	NO	NO	NO	2010,2012,2014
Portugal	YES	YES	-	NO	2012,2014
Romania	YES	YES	NO	NO	2012,2014
Serbia	YES	NO	NO	YES	GM 2016
Slovakia	YES	YES	-	YES	2012
Slovenia	YES	YES	-	NO	2012,2014
Spain	YES	YES	-	YES	2010,2012,2014
Sweden	YES	YES	NO	NO	GM 2016
Switzerland	YES	YES	NO	NO	2014
Turkey	NO	NO	NO	NO	2010,2014
United Kingdom	YES	YES	YES	YES	2010,2012,2014
Ukraine	YES	NO	NO	NO	GM 2016

2.3 Conclusions related to the Quality Assurance

The responses show that, independent of the Member Organisations, the majority of countries either already have some form of Quality Assurance processes or are currently developing them. It is evident that many Member Organisations also promote a range of QA procedures within the educational institutions.

The role of the MOs as a professional consultant for the education authorities should be emphasised in relation to QA processes, with the MOs working as a link between the Higher Educational Institutes (HEIs) and the international professional organisation ER-WCPT.

The recommendation is to continue to follow the development and implementation of Quality Assurance in higher education in the member countries of the European Region. It would also be of value to share experiences and procedures amongst MOs as this would contribute to raising standards of education across Europe.

3. Higher Education Rankings

In the context of Quality Assurance, there is also increasing use of ranking of Higher Educational Institutes (HEIs) worldwide. Having International university rankings is a way to create a hierarchy or list of the HEIs, ranked in order based on ratings of various quality indicators such as measures of research excellence and/or influence, student choices, success factors like awards or Nobel prize winners, and/or demographics. In addition, in some institutions, specific programmes, departments, and schools are sometimes ranked. Often however, there is a lack of common transparent criteria for the ranking, which in addition to competitive interests make objective comparisons difficult.

The Quality Assurance process is generally developed by the national agencies in each country. Regardless of it being a national process or within an MO or other, it should be transparent. The process is often conducted at the level of university administration and policy-makers. It aims to comprehensively cover the different dimensions of higher education such as education quality, research quality, mission of the institution, etc. The ranking process focuses on the provision of general information about the universities to the students and to society as a whole. The underlying criteria for the ranking are not always official. The procedure could be conducted by commercial organisations, private enterprises or some universities themselves. Because the focus is to present ranking in a comprehensive format, sometimes in mass media, the rankings are often summarised as a single indicator which is intended to be easily understood by the general public and authorities. These indicators are presented on web sites of the institutions, in national statistics (given by governments and their own administrations and agencies) or

in journal publications and citations. Sometimes qualitative information, based on expert opinions or questionnaires to, stakeholders is added.

The usefulness and accuracy of rankings has raised much debate. There is no consensus at present but each ranking procedure has its own methodology to reach its final judgment of the quality and thus ranking of a specific HEI. Different ranking procedures give priority to different indicators, making comparison between them difficult. As a result, the same institution could achieve a different position in different rankings. The expanding diversity in rating methodologies and accompanying criticisms of each indicates the lack of consensus in the field.

Given the heterogeneity of methodologies of rankings, those producing rankings should hold themselves accountable for the quality in their own data collection, methodology, and dissemination. Concerns about this heterogeneity led to the development of **The Berlin Principles on Ranking of HEIs** in 2006; a set of principles of quality and good practice for the delivery of university rankings.

The internationalisation process and the “institutional diversity” extend the choice of the country and university in which to study, the degree or programme to take, and the institution in which to lecture or research. This is why rankings of HEIs have become part of the framework of national accountability and quality assurance processes, and why more countries are likely to see the development of rankings in the future.

At a European level, the European Commission has sponsored two projects: the **U-Map** and the **U-Multirank** projects with the aim of building a classification of European HEIs and trying to capture the relative performance of institutions on their various clusters of activity. This enhances the necessary transparency between the HEIs.

The European Network for Physiotherapy Education (**ENPHE**) has worked on the ranking criteria for Physiotherapy with the purpose of **enabling European physiotherapy in higher education to affect and handle future ranking procedures in Physiotherapy**, establishing a set of areas of indicators that would be considered when ranking physiotherapy programmes in Europe.

4. Ranking procedures of universities and in relation to physiotherapy education in Europe

Following the recommendation of the 2012 General Meeting “To monitor the ranking process within Higher Education at national and International levels”, the Education Matters Working Group asked the MOs about the existence, or not, of a national ranking system for HEIs in their country, and if there is a specific one for physiotherapy programmes.

36 out of 39 MOs responded, of which eight indicated that there is a ranking system for HEIs in their country (Table 1). Out of those, six presented an internet link for further information. From these eight MO's, only three (Malta, UK and Spain) indicated that there is also a specific ranking for physiotherapy programmes.

5. Conclusion

In summary, it is essential that all relevant key stakeholders are involved in the QA processes of physiotherapy education. MOs also recognise the importance of such procedures to ensure skills and competencies needed for the profession in the future, and therefore aim to contribute to ensure quality and social relevance of the education. A system for QA that takes into consideration European recommendations and standards promote a high-quality physiotherapy education that is internationally competitive and that can also be compared with other professions.

Ranking processes in Higher Education are becoming increasingly popular and cannot be ignored despite the difficulty with objectivity in comparing HEIs that may have entirely different profiles and postulations. There seem to be a very small number of Rankings Processes across the European Region that focus specifically on physiotherapy programmes.

6. Recommendations

MOs should promote and support quality assurance procedures related to physiotherapy education programmes, in accordance with EU and WCPT policies. This can include the following (but is not exclusive to):

- work with the national authorities for quality assurance, and with the educational institutions. For instance, establish a Quality Assurance committee or conduct network meetings
- be aware of trends in international accreditation and critically appraise such procedures.
- consider benefits of involving international reviewers in quality assurance procedures
- follow and consider European guidelines when working with HEIs and authorities in regard to the quality assurance processes
- be aware of any ranking of HEIs and physiotherapy programmes in their country.

7. References

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