

HOW PHYSIOTHERAPY GRADUATES ESTIMATE PHYSIOTHERAPY CURRICULUM AND IF THE STUDIES HAS AFFECTED THEIR PREPAREDNESS TO WORK AS PROFESSIONAL PHYSIOTHERAPIST

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ABSTRACT

Physiotherapy as an independent curriculum has existed only one decade in Estonia. During this period the curriculum has changed and developed remarkably due to the Bologna Process. Specific feedback about the curriculum from the students who have graduated has not been received. Thus, the aim of the study was to estimate how the physiotherapy students who have graduated from University of Tartu assess the physiotherapy curriculum (theoretical knowledge, practical skills and generic competences). Altogether twenty-nine former students (females=25; males=4) participated in this study. All the participants filled in an anonymous questionnaire. Most of them graduated from the University of Tartu in 2010. 82.2% of the participants had gained Bachelor's and 17.8% Master's Degrees. Approximately 80% of the participants work as physical therapists, mostly in hospitals (37.9%). According to the participants the strengths of the curriculum are: highly qualified professionals are included in the study process; lecturers are also professional physical therapists; strong theoretical basis and versatile practical trainings in school and in clinical environment; modern practical training placements all over Estonia. Weaknesses of the curriculum are as follows: basic subjects are sometimes superficial and there is a lack of specialization (due to lack of time in the three-year study program);

lack of external lecturers; connection between theory and practice is not always sufficient. In spite of this fact that the curriculum offers basic knowledge, practical skills and generic competences (communication skills, team work, sense of duty), the study period is still too short to provide in-depth theoretical knowledge and diverse professional skills. Therefore, there is a need to study more independently during the study process and after graduation (in-service training). It was revealed that some suggestions made by graduates have already been implemented in the course of the recent three years. It means the developments of the curriculum have been adequate and have supported the focus groups' expectations. In conclusion, 180 ECTS are not enough to offer in-depth specialized knowledge and practical skills. According to this result, there is a great need to study further on Master level and/or continue training – lifelong learning.

Key words: physiotherapy curriculum, higher education

INTRODUCTION

Physiotherapy is taught in two different schools in Estonia – University of Tartu and Tartu Health Care College. Physiotherapy as an independent curriculum has existed only one decade in Estonia. At first (1990–1999) physiotherapy was taught as movement therapy in the University of Tartu, the Faculty of Exercise and Sport Sciences. In 1999, the exercise therapy curriculum was changed to curriculum of physiotherapy and since 2006 it is possible to study physiotherapy also on Master's level. In Tartu Health Care College physiotherapy has been taught since 2001. During this period the curriculum has changed and developed remarkably due to the Process of Bologna.

According to the Process of Bologna in the University of Tartu four-year physiotherapy study (240 ECP) was changed to three-year study (180 ECP). Now the curriculum is assessed by external supervisors and national and international accreditation commissioners. Curricula in both schools have been fully accredited. After graduation (180 ECP) it is possible to find employment as a physiotherapist or continue the studies on Master's level (120 ECP) at the University. Unfortunately, these studies are not made available for all applicants by the government (only 16 state-funded study places). In Europe generally it is not possible to work as a physiotherapist only after a

three-year study. For example, in Norway it is compulsory to be placed in a practical training base one year after the three-year study period before getting the physiotherapy licence (N. Bugge Rigault, Oslo University College, personal contact, 2011).

Since 2005, 222 students have graduated from the physical therapy curricula in the University of Tartu and 150 from Tartu Health Care College (Table 1). Until now, there has been no specific feedback concerning the curriculum. Obtaining feedback is vital for further curriculum development. Thus, the aim of the study was to estimate how the physiotherapy students who have graduated from the University of Tartu assess the physiotherapy curriculum (theoretical knowledge, practical skills and generic competences) and how the curriculum has affected their professional preparation.

Table 1. The number of physiotherapy curriculum graduates in Estonia

Year of graduation	University of Tartu		Tartu Health Care College
	Bachelor's Degree	Master's Degree	Bachelor's Degree
	Number of graduates		
2004			14
2005	23		13
2006	28		13
2007	30		16
2008	56	12	14
2009	24	15	25
2010	35	18	23
2011	26	10	32
Total	222	55	150

MATERIAL AND METHODS

Twenty-nine former students (females=25; males=4) participated in this study. The questionnaire was compiled based on the need to find out whether development is in accordance with the target group's needs and what should be the directions chosen in further development. The questionnaire consisted of closed questions (multiple choice questions) to collect general information and open questions

which required the respondent to reflect upon their opinion more thoroughly. All the participants filled in the anonymous questionnaire using the E-formular software.

RESULTS

Most of the respondents graduated from the University of Tartu in 2010. 82.2% of the participants had obtained the Bachelor's and 17.8% the Master's Degree. Approximately 80% of the participants work as physical therapists, mostly in hospitals (37.9%). Working places of the physiotherapists are presented in Table 2.

Table 2. Employments for physiotherapists.

Place to work	n	%
Hospital	11	37.9
Rehabilitation center	5	17.2
Private practice	3	10.3
Sports club	2	6.9
Special needs children school	1	3.4
Policlinic	1	3.4
Do not work as physiotherapists	2	6.9
Unemployed	4	13.8

According to the participants the strengths of the curriculum are:

- highly qualified professionals are included in the study process – all the teachers have at least a scientific Master's degree, most of them are well-known in-service training instructors;
- lecturers are also professional physical therapists – practical experience gives besides theoretical knowledge also practical knowledge and guarantees better quality of teaching;
- strong theoretical basis and versatile practical trainings in school and in clinical environment;
- modern practical training placements all over Estonia.

Weaknesses of the curriculum are:

- basic subjects are sometimes superficial and there is a lack of specialization – there is no time to study important subjects within the three-year study program;
- lack of external lecturers – lack of financial resources;
- connection between theory and practice is not always sufficient. Superficial theoretical knowledge may not always enable the students to perform their practical training successfully, and teaching methodology of a number of lecturers does not support outcome-based learning – the student-centred learning and teaching.

The curriculum offers basic knowledge, practical skills and generic competences (communication skills, teamwork, sense of duty) but there is a need to study more independently in study process and after graduation (in-service training). According to the participants' answers the last three-year developments of the curriculum are justified. Generally the curriculum is highly appreciated but there is a need for more international cooperation (external lecturers). In conclusion, 180 ECP are not enough to offer in-depth specialized knowledge and practical skills. According to this, there is a great need for studying further on Master level and/or special courses – lifelong learning.

There is a plan to organize similar questionnaires to develop the physiotherapy curriculum every spring with more students at the University in Tartu and also Tartu Health Care College and to use the standardized questionnaire "Development of professional attitudes among physiotherapy students during Bachelor degree programmes" [1, 2]. The questionnaire focuses on:

1. satisfaction with the physiotherapy degree programme (BA) and opinions on the curriculum of the programme;
2. perception of the physiotherapist's profession;
3. opinions concerning undertaking employment as a physiotherapist as well as career plans;
4. personal data.

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