

## Occupational Therapist Assistant & Physiotherapist Assistant Education Accreditation Program

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### Frequently Asked Questions on... COVID-19 – Changes to OTA & PTA EAP Standards and Policies Guidance for Education Programs

The following document answers questions arising from the announcement sent on March 26, 2020, many of which were discussed with educators at our Q&A Webinar held on March 27, 2020. The Joint Accreditation Committee (JAC) considered the additional requests from the webinar; see p. 5 for their responses.

[PDF of March 26, 2020 Announcement](#)

A video replay of the Q&A webinar can now be found [on our website](#).

#### Key Messages from the JAC, CAOT Board and PEAC Board

Thank you for all the work you are doing to continue your students' studies and graduate competent assistants in these unprecedented times. Both the education programs and the OTA & PTA EAP have a common goal of finding solutions that will help students to graduate with few or no delays and still maintain the standards that everyone has worked hard to develop and meet over the past 10 years.

We trust the education programs and their institutions to:

- Act in the best interests of their students;
- Graduate only those students who are competent to practice; and
- Adjust or develop course work and clinical/fieldwork opportunities that will address identified gaps in competencies.

We recognize that programs are accountable to their institutional policies and processes, including those related to academic integrity, student achievement of learning outcomes, student progression, and graduation.

The scale of the COVID-19 pandemic and its impacts on OTA & PTA education change daily and may require us to consider further adjustments.

We appreciate the opportunity to work together at this challenging time. Please keep well.

*Questions & Answers start on the next page...*

## Questions Related to Required Fieldwork Hours

Education programs may temporarily reduce the required clinical/fieldwork hours by 10%, i.e., 450 total hours with 135 hours in OTA and 135 hours in PTA, for students currently enrolled in the program.

*Note:* If a program currently requires more than 450 hours as part of their current clinical/fieldwork education, e.g., some require up to 600 hours, only the 450 hours are required to meet these temporary changes. We trust that programs will monitor their students' progress to ensure that the necessary competencies are met within the 450 hours.

*There seems to be a lot of variability between programs as to how many hours students have completed to date. How was the 10% arrived at?*

The Joint Accreditation Committee (JAC) took into account that the original 500 hours, with 150 hours in each discipline, were considered the bare minimum when the standard was set. We have also been monitoring what other members of the Association of Accrediting Agencies of Canada (AAAC) are doing. Most members of AAAC accredit education programs where graduates are also required to pass an entry exam prior to being eligible for registration (licensure) which allows them to hold title and to practice. In contrast, graduates from the OTA and PTA education programs are required to work under the supervision of registered health care providers (an OT or PT or both) who assume the responsibility for assigning tasks that are not outside the individual assistant's competencies.

Because of this, the risk of harm to patients due to reduced clinical/fieldwork hours is mitigated, in part, due to the required supervision of OTAs and PTAs. If the supervising health professional is aware of the changes to the new graduate's curriculum, they can take special care in checking competencies before assigning tasks. However, because the OTAs and PTAs themselves are not registered health professionals the accountability rests with the registered health professionals. We need to respect their need for assistants who graduate with the expected competencies and meet the standards we carefully built over the last 10 years. The 10% reduction was seen as a reasonable, temporary concession that balances the needs of the programs and their students with the needs of their future employers.

The AAAC is meeting regularly, and our decisions will remain open for revision as more information is gathered and as the evolution of the pandemic becomes clearer. Provincial governments may legislate programs to graduate students who have completed most of their education. We know this has occurred for respiratory therapy students in Ontario, and healthcare support workers in BC. We don't know if, in the future, this will apply to OTA&PTA programs, but we are monitoring it.

*Does this reduction only apply to students graduating this year? Does it apply to students who will start placements this coming Fall?*

The reduction in hours applies to all current students, regardless of whether they have just started a program or are about to graduate.

*Can courses such as ethics or the [Coronavirus Disease Program by Physioplus](#) count?*

We encourage you to choose activities that achieve specific competencies and that reflect, as much as possible, the realistic/practical work that occurs in a practice/work setting. Given students may be

confronted with COVID-19 or its aftereffects and ethical dilemmas are a part of everyday practice, these could be suitable. However, we trust you to identify the gaps in competencies for your students or an individual student, and to develop learning activities to meet the desired learning outcomes. We will not be reviewing alternative clinical/fieldwork experiences, approving them, or evaluating them retroactively.

*Does the OTA & PTA EAP program have any ideas for alternative clinical/fieldwork opportunities? How many hours should be counted for different kinds of projects? Do you have any acceptable projects with corresponding hours to share as examples?*

It's up to the individual programs to estimate how many hours the student or cohort should receive for completing projects. We believe you are in the best position to make those decisions based on your current curriculum planning processes and the learning needs of your students, or an individual student. We trust educators to decide what would be fair and consistent across the cohort, and we will not assess, retroactively, these alternative activities or the hours assigned.

We have heard that members of the Canadian OTA and PTA Educators Council (COPEC) are assembling ideas to share, and we encourage this. Now that the parameters from us are clearer, i.e., the OTA & PTA EAP is trusting the programs to make the right decision, for the right student, at the right time, COPEC hopes to move forward with this.

*When tracking hours, if a student takes longer to complete an assigned project, can these additional hours count?*

Although we encourage programs to try to be consistent, i.e., give the same credited hours for the same project, we trust that if an individual student needs additional time to demonstrate competence, that time can be counted.

*We are nowhere near 135 hours left to go as our students complete most of their fieldwork at the end of their studies. What can we do?*

You may need to consider more than one strategy. Some hours could be completed with alternative clinical/fieldwork hours and some with conditional graduation status where students are to complete their hours in the workplace post-graduation. See more questions re: conditional graduation below.

We understand that placements will be “jammed” if you hold back placements and try to double-up later. We don't know how long the impact of COVID-19 will be felt, and there may not be a way to avoid delaying some students' clinical/fieldwork education.

Continued ...

## Questions Related to Conditional Graduation

Where institutional policies allow, programs may consider conditional graduation for current students who have completed a minimum of 2/3 of the total required hours and 2/3 of the required hours in each discipline.

Issuing of the diploma or certificate may be delayed until the required hours are successfully completed at the workplace under the supervision of a registered occupational therapist or physiotherapist.

This allows OTA & PTA students to enter the workforce earlier, which may be required as Canada's health system grapples with caring for those affected by COVID-19.

*For conditional graduation, are you requiring students complete 2/3 of the initial 500 hours with 150 in each discipline or 2/3 of the reduced hours?*

It is 2/3 of the 450 required hours (300 hours), which includes 2/3 of the 135 required hours for each discipline (90.5 hours in each).

*If a program goes forward with conditional graduation status, would there be a specific timeframe for a student to achieve those supervised hours? Would the OTA & PTA EAP be putting more specific requirements in place or is it up to the institution or the program itself?*

The 2/3 amount was based on policy used in the teaching profession in Ontario. The amount of time it takes to obtain their hours would be set by the education program, if desired.

Conditional graduation is a temporary measure that will allow students to enter the workforce now, when needed, and begin earning a living. It does require an additional layer of supervision and follow-up by the programs, but it may be a possible option for some programs.

## Questions Related to Waiving of Substantive Change Reports

During the COVID-19 pandemic, temporary changes made by programs with respect to online delivery, adjusting curriculum sequencing, and fieldwork experiences **will not require** a substantive change report.

*Is there a risk of probationary accreditation as a result of changes made during to the COVID-19 pandemic?*

The JAC has placed significant trust in educators that they would exercise judgement and choose not to put a new graduate into the workforce who is not competent, i.e., not ready and safe to be working as an OTA/PTA. Probationary accreditation would occur only with an egregious error that is far outside a reasonable response to the COVID-19 pandemic.

## Questions Requiring Further Consideration by the Joint Accreditation Committee

1. *OTA/PTA students learn and practice skills in many labs and simulations, which are assessed through practical exams. Can we count hours (or extra hours) that were accumulated previously during labs and simulations?*

Hours accumulated by students using simulations that were not previously counted for credit in their program can be applied toward the required clinical/fieldwork hours. Lab hours were not considered to be equivalent as they do not replicate a “real world” environment.

2. *Is there a possibility to look at an equivalence in competencies instead of hours? For example, where students are in their last placement that was interrupted due to COVID-19, and their fieldwork supervisors have assessed them to be competent. Can competency be the measure rather than hours?*

Not at this time. Measurement of competence continues to be challenging for all health professionals and to date there are no reliable ways to rely solely on observational assessment in the field as a measure of competence. Moving to assessing competence without time parameters is a significant shift that cannot be made without much further study. Please consider conditional graduation if you have students whose fieldwork supervisors have assessed as competent to practice.

3. *Can shadow placement hours count towards the required hours?*

No. Shadow placements allow only observation and do not require the students to demonstrate competencies. They are also not assessed and so cannot be counted.