

Occupational therapist assistants in occupational therapy: An update on the Occupational Therapist Assistant and Physiotherapist Assistant Education Accreditation Program

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The Occupational Therapist Assistant and Physiotherapist Assistant Education Accreditation Program (OTA & PTA EAP) is responsible for the accreditation of Canadian occupational therapist assistant (OTA) and physiotherapist assistant (PTA) education programs. Its early development was described in the March/April 2012 issue of *Occupational Therapy Now* (Burnett, 2012). Now, over five years from its inception, the program continues to grow and evolve. It has been exciting to see the impact accreditation is having on stakeholders and on the disciplines of occupational therapy and physiotherapy themselves.

Program overview

Education accreditation involves several steps, and includes submission of a Self Study Report by the education program and completion of both an off-site review of the report and an on-site review of the program by a team of four peers. The program is expected to provide evidence to demonstrate compliance with the established accreditation standards and criteria (OTA & PTA EAP, 2012). This evidence is triangulated and confirmed by the peer reviewers through on-site interviews with a variety of stakeholder groups (e.g., students, graduates, employers, preceptors), as well as with faculty, staff and administrators. The interviews are conducted in a non-threatening manner that fosters collaboration, and the peer reviewers seek consistency in the responses received from the various interviewees. The ultimate goals of accreditation are the assurance of quality education for current and potential students and the assurance of competent graduates for employers and the public. In the absence of regulation for these professionals, an accreditation award for their education programs acts as a measure of quality and competence.

Program evolution

The accreditation program was launched in 2009 with the appointment of a program manager and subsequent development of accreditation standards and accreditation policies. Two education programs agreed to pilot the standards and the review process, and these pilot reviews were completed in early 2012. The standards and policies were modified based on evaluative feedback from the pilot process and the current accreditation standards were published in November 2012 (OTA & PTA EAP, 2012). At that time, there were 19 education programs committed to the accreditation process – two with accreditation status and 17 with candidacy status awaiting a full accreditation review.

As of December 2014, there were 10 accredited programs and 22 with candidacy status (see the list of programs at: www.otapta.ca). Geographically, these programs span the country from British Columbia (4) through Alberta (4), Ontario (20), Nova Scotia (3) and Newfoundland and Labrador (1). Three programs are francophone; all programs except one are designed to graduate dual-trained OTA/PTAs. Eleven programs are situated in private institutions and 20 are publicly funded. As of December 2013, the total number of students enrolled in programs with either accreditation status or candidacy status was 1419.

The OTA & PTA EAP receives inquiries each week from potential students who seek clarification about the accreditation program and the value of attending a program with accreditation status or candidacy status. As of December 2014, the OTA & PTA EAP had heard from at least five additional education programs preparing submissions for candidacy status in the next six months. Should these programs be successful in receiving candidacy status, the total number of programs committed to the accreditation process will rise to 37. This is an increase of over 90% since early 2012 when the pilot reviews were conducted.

Governance

The OTA & PTA EAP is administered by Physiotherapy Education Accreditation Canada (PEAC), the organization that accredits physiotherapy programs; however, the OTA & PTA EAP is jointly governed by PEAC and the Canadian Association of Occupational Therapists (CAOT). The Joint Accreditation Committee (JAC) is a standing committee of both the PEAC and CAOT Boards of Directors. The JAC has representation from PEAC, CAOT, the Canadian Occupational Therapist Assistant & Physiotherapist Assistant Educators Council (COPEC) and from the public. The committee's roles are to:



Members of the OTA & PTA EAP Joint Accreditation Committee at a 2014 meeting in Victoria, British Columbia.

- Review applications and award candidacy status to education programs demonstrating compliance.
- Review accreditation reports and make accreditation award recommendations.
- Review accreditation standards and make recommendations for revisions.
- Review policies and procedures related to the OTA & PTA EAP and make recommendations for revisions.
- Present accreditation award recommendations, standards revisions, and policy and procedure revisions to the Boards of Directors of PEAC and CAOT for review and approval.

When presented with recommendations from the JAC at their regular board meetings, PEAC and CAOT are responsible for awarding accreditation status and approving new and revised documents.

A Governance Advisory Committee consisting of representatives from CAOT (president, executive director and staff liaison), PEAC (president and executive director) and the OTA & PTA EAP (chair of the JAC and program manager) meet once annually to broadly oversee any governance issues that may arise throughout the year.

As the program continues to evolve, input and feedback are sought from the education programs involved in the accreditation process and from COPEC. An annual education session is offered face-to-face and free of charge to education programs interested in information about the OTA & PTA EAP. Programs at any stage of the accreditation process are invited to attend.

Impact of accreditation

Since the inception of the OTA & PTA EAP, there have been two significant shifts in the OTA/PTA practice environment, which demonstrate an awareness of the value of accreditation by key stakeholders in the profession:

- Since April 2013, the Vancouver Coastal Health Authority (VCH) only accepts OTA/PTA students from education programs with accreditation or candidacy status for fieldwork placements.
- As of 2011, the Board of Directors of the Canadian Physiotherapy Association includes one member who is a PTA.

Current challenges

Fieldwork placements

Education programs are required to provide their students with 500 fieldwork placement hours (OTA & PTA EAP, 2012, criterion 3.4) in order to receive candidacy status and later to be awarded accreditation status. Specifically, 150 of those hours must be OTA-specific fieldwork hours, 150 must be PTA-specific fieldwork hours and the remaining 200 hours can be in either discipline or in combined OTA/PTA contexts. Fieldwork placements are challenging for education programs to acquire, not only in OTA/PTA education, but in many other health-care education programs, such as occupational therapy and physiotherapy. Education programs report that OTA fieldwork placements are especially difficult to secure in comparison to PTA placements, in part because of the frequently consultative nature of occupational therapy practice and in part because, nationally, there are fewer practising occupational therapists than physiotherapists. This discrepancy limits

the OTA placement opportunities and can put the accreditation status of an education program at risk despite its ability to demonstrate a high-quality educational experience and curriculum. Fieldwork placement coordinators would be happy to hear from any occupational therapists willing to supervise OTA students (contact information for education programs is available at www.otapta.ca).

Resources

Volunteers: Each accreditation review requires a team of four volunteer peer reviewers. With the accreditation schedule set at between six and nine reviews per year by 2017, the program will need to recruit, train and appoint up to 36 volunteers a year to accreditation Peer Review Teams. The eight volunteer Joint Accreditation Committee (JAC) members participate in two two-day meetings face-to-face each year. As the number of reviews per year increases, it is likely that these volunteers will either have to lengthen each meeting or add one more face-to-face meeting to the annual schedule.

Staff: With the quick evolution of the accreditation program, it has been challenging to keep up with human resource needs. Currently, the program is run by the program manager (15 hours per week) and an administrative assistant (10 hours per week). The hours allocated to these positions will increase significantly in the coming two years in order to ensure that the needs of the program are met.

Accreditation resources: The accreditation program has developed information, templates and examples of the various reports required from programs through the accreditation process. Because most of the faculty members of these programs have never experienced accreditation either as recipients or as peer reviewers, there is an ongoing need to provide guidance and training for everyone involved. With limited human resources this has been a challenge, but the repository of information is growing slowly. Staff are also always available to answer questions by email or phone in a timely way. It is a priority of the program to be sure that necessary information is easily available to those who need it.

Summary

The OTA & PTA EAP has filled a need in the context of OTA/PTA education in response to education programs seeking a measure of quality. It is a constantly growing and evolving program, which poses challenges given the rate of change, but it also demonstrates clear successes as increasingly more programs are awarded accreditation status.

To learn more about the OTA & PTA EAP, go to: www.otapta.ca. For additional information, to apply to the program accreditation process or to submit an application to be a Peer Review Team member, please contact Kathy Davidson, program manager, at: kathy.davidson@otapta.ca

References

- Burnett, D. (2012). Occupational Therapist Assistant and Physiotherapist Assistant Education Accreditation program: Development and update. *Occupational Therapy Now*, 14(2), 29-30.
- Occupational Therapist Assistant & Physiotherapist Assistant Education Accreditation Program. (2012). *Accreditation Standards for Occupational Therapist Assistant & Physiotherapist Assistant Programs in Canada*. Retrieved from <http://www.otapta.ca/english/accreditation/accreditation-standards.php>