PLANNING FOR THE ALBERTA PHYSIOTHERAPY WORKFORCE:
The Need for an Internationally Educated Physiotherapist Training Program
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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Having an adequate number of physiotherapists in the workforce is critical for ensuring Albertans have access to appropriate and timely rehabilitation services. Planning for the future physiotherapy (PT) workforce involves considering various elements that contribute to the demands of a shifting health care landscape. To outline PT workforce needs we provide an overview of the current state of PT in Canada and Alberta, focusing on relevant demographics and other factors influencing the PT workforce. We also highlight the need for Internationally Educated Physiotherapists (IEPTs) in the Alberta workforce and describe efforts that have been made to support IEPTs to gain licensure to practice in Alberta. A description is provided of the Albertan bridging program for IEPTs developed by University of Alberta’s Department of Physical Therapy in collaboration with Physiotherapy Alberta: College + Association. The University of Alberta’s IEPT Program is designed to meet the needs of the Alberta PT workforce and provide a unique educational experience for internationally educated PTs, supporting them in their journey to pass the national licensing exam and gain entry to practice in Canada. Lastly, the Alberta IEPT bridging program is benchmarked against other bridging programs in Canada and internationally.
PLANNING FOR THE ALBERTA PHYSIOTHERAPY WORKFORCE: The Need for an Internationally Educated Physiotherapist Training Program

DEMOGRAPHICS OF THE PT WORKFORCE

Physiotherapy (PT) is the fifth leading health profession in Canada, with 18,469 PTs employed in 2012.(1) This is up from 16,889 employed in 2008 and represents approximately 53 PTs per 100,000 Canadians. Recent statistics from Physiotherapy Alberta: College + Association show that 2,321 PTs were employed in 2013 representing an increase of 19.7% since 2008.(2) This is within the context of an overall Alberta population growth rate of 11.4% over the same period.(3) While this represents a sizeable growth rate of the PT workforce, a major concern is that 25% of PTs in Alberta are above 50 years of age and 23% of these plan to retire within the next 7 years.(4) The average age of the Canadian PT workforce in 2012 was 42.0 years, up from 41.4 years in 2008.(1) Alberta was similar to the national averages at 42.1 years in 2012 and 41.3 years in 2008.

While a sizeable portion of the PT workforce is nearing retirement age, the proportion of new graduates is decreasing.(5) Slightly less than five percent (4.8%) of PTs were classified as new graduates in 2011, which is a reduction from 5.9% in 2007.(5) This may be due to the general aging of the entire workforce, or may be a PT-specific phenomenon. Regardless, the demographic changes in the PT workforce present challenges for attrition planning and maintaining adequate numbers in the PT workforce.

FUTURE SHORTAGE OF PTs PREDICTED

Despite the growth observed in the PT workforce, there continues to be a high demand for PTs across Canada and a future shortage of PTs is predicted across all regions of Canada.(6, 7) An accurate appraisal of this shortage is challenging for several reasons including difficulty tracking the number of reported job postings. For example, some employers in British Columbia have stopped posting PT job openings because of the remote chance of filling the positions. The American PT Association has also experienced difficulty in modeling the future shortage of PTs,(8) however, PT has consistently been identified as a high-demand occupation in Canada.(9) Calgary Economic Development in partnership with the Government of Alberta reports that between 2010 and 2020 demand for PTs is expected to increase by over 61%, however, it was
not clear how this estimate was obtained.\(^{10}\) This growing demand is due to a variety of reasons including the burgeoning Alberta population and workforce caused by a strong economy, shortages in other primary health care professions that can be supplemented by PTs (i.e. community health and primary care networks), and the aging population and obesity epidemic that present growing demands for rehabilitation services.\(^{7}\)

Two challenges influencing the shortage of PTs in Alberta is a high proportion of PTs working part-time (41.3%) and a relatively low percentage of PTs working in rural settings (8.3%).\(^{1}\) The high percentage of part-time PTs in Alberta has been increasing (up from 38.0% in 2008) and reduces the overall number of hours PTs provide care in the province. In fact, in 2012 among all the Canadian provinces Alberta had the lowest percentage of PTs working more than 1,750 hours per year. Females are more likely to work part-time as indicated by a recent Physiotherapy Alberta: College + Association member survey that found female PTs averaged 30.7 hours per week compared to males at 37.1 hours a week.\(^{11}\) Additionally, PTs in the private sector worked more hours (38.0) than their counterparts in the public sector (33.7). From available data, it is unclear whether the high-levels of part-time work in Alberta is a choice by the PTs or by circumstance due to prevailing economic and occupational conditions.

The percentage of PTs working in rural Alberta settings was also below the Canadian average (7.9%) despite a fairly high proportion of the Alberta population living or working in rural locations. According to Physiotherapy Alberta: College + Association, 10% of PTs worked in rural or remote settings in 2013, while 18% of Albertans lived in rural locations.\(^{4}\) This discrepancy combined with the high proportion of part-time PTs in Alberta contributes to increased demand for PTs within Alberta, especially in rural settings.

**HOW WILL THE NEED BE MET?**

The primary source of new PTs in Canada has traditionally been graduating physiotherapists from Canadian academic programs. In 2012, 87.4% of Canadian PTs were trained in Canada (increased from 84.3% in 2008) while the remaining 12.6% were internationally educated. However, in Alberta in 2012, 15.9% of employed PTs were internationally educated, which is higher than every other province except B.C. (16.9%) and Ontario (19.9%). Alberta also has a relatively low percentage of PTs who were trained in Alberta (63.8%), lower than every province except B.C. (36.9%) and New Brunswick (54.4%). Clearly, the Alberta PT training program is not filling the demand for PTs in Alberta and the workforce is being supplemented by PTs educated in other provinces or internationally.
PROFILE OF INTERNATIONALLY EDUCATED PHYSIOTHERAPISTS

Increasing the number of Internationally Educated Physiotherapists (IEPT) is one strategy for meeting the predicted shortage of PTs in Alberta. However, this presents several logistical and procedural challenges such as identifying and recruiting internationally educated PTs and ensuring they meet requirements for licensure. As mentioned above, the percentage of internationally educated PTs in Alberta has persisted for several years at around 15%. Nationally, it has been reported that approximately 500 IEPTs immigrate to Canada under the Federal Skilled Worker program each year,\(^{(12)}\) and more immigrate to Canada under other immigrant categories (e.g., Live-in Caregiver program). Despite these steady trends, increasing number of IEPTs have applied for credentialing in Canada, up from 400 in 2009 to 741 in 2013.\(^{(21)}\) However, this increasing trend may have peaked in 2012 with 773 applicants.\(^{(17)}\)

Previously, most IEPTs coming to Canada received their education in countries where English is commonly spoken and where cultural norms are comparable to those in Canada.\(^{(13)}\) However, more commonly IEPTs seeking registration are from “non-Western” countries where languages and cultural norms are considerably different, and variability may exist in physiotherapy training programs. For instance, between 2009 and 2011 more than two-thirds of IEPTs applying for credentialing received their training in India or the Philippines.\(^{(14)}\) The demographic complexion of IEPTs necessitates a comprehensive assessment process aimed at determining whether IEPTs have developed essential competencies required for safe and effective PT practice in Canada. It also likely requires language and cultural training programs to ensure these individuals are prepared to successfully practice in the Canadian health care system.

More detailed information about IEPTs would enable tailoring of preparatory training programs. Data available from 2012 indicate that IEPTs in Canada are slightly older than Canadian-educated PTs (11.8% vs. 5.8% >60 years of age) and more likely to be male (35.8% vs. 21.2%).\(^{(1)}\) The fact that more IEPTs are male may provide more practise hours as female PTs work fewer hours than their male colleagues.\(^{(11)}\) As expected, 3 of the top 5 source countries were English-speaking (United Kingdom, United States, and Australia), however, numerous other IEPTs were trained in countries where English is not the primary language (i.e. India, Philippines, Iran, or Brazil).

Data from Physiotherapy Alberta: College + Association indicate that IEPTs from non-English speaking source countries working in Canada differ from PTs trained in English speaking countries in terms of where they practice.\(^{(2)}\) IEPTs trained in non-English speaking source countries are significantly more likely to work full-time (69% vs. 56% full time), in public practice facil-
ities (63% vs. 56% public practice), in rural Alberta settings (25% vs. 20% rural) as compared to PTs trained in Canada or other English speaking countries. IEPTs appear to have excellent potential for filling future gaps in the PT workforce, especially in full-time rural positions.

**LICENSURE IN CANADA AND SUPPORT FROM BRIDGING PROGRAMS**

Despite the need for IEPTs to fulfill the shortage of PTs in Alberta, the percentage of IEPTs in Alberta has risen only minimally (0.9%) since 2008. This is potentially due to difficulties IEPTs face when they seek licensure in Canada, which requires successful completion of credentialing followed by the Physiotherapy Competency Examination (PCE) that has two components; a written examination followed by a clinical examination. Once they pass the written examination they may apply for a temporary permit to practice under supervision. Once they pass the clinical examination they are eligible for an independent permit. The Canadian Alliance of Physiotherapy Regulators has attempted to streamline the credentialing process, and require only the following items from the candidates:

- Application forms and fee
- Identity documents
- Notarized copy of the applicant’s diploma/degree/certificate from the entry-level PT program (which included 1025 supervised clinical practice hours)
- Original language proficiency score sheet in English or French
- Proof of successful completion of Canadian context courses

A comparison of the Canadian requirements with those of other countries is shown in Table I. The Canadian application process appears to be one of the least burdensome when compared to Australia, USA, United Kingdom and New Zealand, with the fewest required documents needed to apply. While the application process itself does not appear to be a major barrier, other factors may be limiting IEPTs' ability to gain licensure in Canada. For example, not all international entry-level training programs provide the required courses or adequate number of practical hours. However, the largest barrier appears to be the IEPTs' ability to successfully complete the PCE.
Unfortunately, according to the Canadian Alliance of Physiotherapy Regulators the pass rate for IEPTs who wrote the written component of the national examination in 2013 was 53%. \(^{(21)}\) Pass rate for the practical component (attempted only after candidates have successfully passed the written) was only slightly higher at 58%. In comparison, pass rates for Canadian-educated candidates of 95% for the written exam and 92% for the practical component.

Given the challenges faced by IEPTs seeking licensure in Canada, such as meeting the academic and clinical requirements and passing the PCE, support for interested IEPTs is greatly needed. Formal programs to provide training to fill gaps in knowledge and skills, clinical experiences, as well as knowledge of the Canadian health care context would be beneficial. It would also be valuable to provide IEPTs with practical skills for the Canadian job market such as resume writing, interviewing, and other job seeking skills. For this reason, IEPT bridging programs have been developed in Ontario and Alberta to provide support for IEPTs in meeting all criteria for successful practice in Canada. The term ‘bridging’ refers to a set of centralized resources made available to applicants in a regulated profession such as PT who are seeking to address certain educational and/or practice deficiencies relative to their profession’s entry-to-practice standards.\(^{(18)}\) These programs are typically offered through educational institutions (i.e. colleges and universities), and in the case of PT they have the goal of providing work-force integration and PCE preparation for entry-to-practise in Canada.

**RATIONAL FOR THE UNIVERSITY OF ALBERTA’S IEPT PROGRAM**

The University of Alberta’s Department of Physical Therapy in collaboration with Physiotherapy Alberta: College + Association has developed the Alberta IEPT Bridging Program.\(^{(19)}\) This program is designed to provide a unique educational experience for IEPTs, supporting them in their journey to prepare for successful clinical practice in Canada. The key goal of the program is to facilitate the integration of IEPTs into the Canadian health care workplace through education, mentorship and clinical experience. Two other important objectives of the program are to: 1) Create an opportunity for collaboration and development of a community of practice for ongoing support; and 2) To culturally prepare candidates for work in the Canadian health system through clinical experience and workforce exposure. This program aims to help address a skills shortage of PTs in the province that is expected to reach 1,100 physiotherapists by year 2017.\(^{(20)}\)
The University of Alberta’s bridging program provides a versatile format for students to gain the necessary work experience and required knowledge and skills. Alberta presents several geographic and logistic challenges for academic programs and as mentioned previously, there is a shortage of PTs in rural areas of Alberta. As such, the University of Alberta has developed its program to address this problem and has built strong linkages with therapists in rural locations and incorporated an internship component to facilitate placement of IEPTs in rural Alberta after graduation. The program includes approximately 120 hours of mentorship for the duration of the three academic courses plus a six-week full-time clinical placement at the end of the program. This exposure to clinical practice allows students to gain practical skills and knowledge of local clinical culture necessary to successfully work within the Canadian healthcare setting. The program also focuses on gaps in knowledge of the IEPTs and has 3 required courses highlighting issues in professional PT practice in Canada.

The geographic challenges inherent to Alberta and the prairie provinces has led the University of Alberta to incorporate a distributed/distance learning model. A blended format consisting of online and in-person learning activities (in either Calgary or Edmonton) as well as mentorship programs in the student’s community addresses the fact that IEPTs are located throughout Alberta and attending a traditional in-person program would not be possible for many. The program takes approximately 14 months to complete and includes 3 academic courses and 1 clinical placement. The academic courses each include online self-study modules (distance format), clinical skills labs (in-person format) and weekly half-day clinical mentorship sessions (in-person at a local PT site). The first academic course starts with all students attending a 1-week Bridging Boot Camp in Edmonton. This allows the students to meet all instructors, be introduced to the technology and to complete orientation with their mentor. At the completion of Boot Camp, students essentially ‘go home’ to start the online work, visit their mentor’s clinic and meet every second Saturday for the clinical skills lab. Following completion of the academic courses, students complete a 6-week full-time, caseload carrying clinical placement.

This blended format is unique in Canada and enables students to live and work in settings where they live, for example rural locations. Students can participate in the courses and interact with instructors and university faculty online or in person. If the University of Alberta’s IEPT program is successful, the plan is to expand to other areas of Canada with PT workforce shortages. The program is currently being evaluated, and the graduates are being followed prospectively to determine their success at meeting the requirements for licensure and integrating into the Albertan or Canadian workforce.
BENCHMARKING IEPT PROGRAMS IN CANADA

Currently, two Canadian universities (Universities of Alberta and Toronto) provide full IEPT bridging programs and meet the Canadian Alliance of Physiotherapy Regulators' requirement of Canadian context of PT practice. Another program is available in Montreal to support candidates interested in practicing in Quebec. The University of British Columbia provides an Exam Preparation Program for IEPTs hoping to challenge the National Physiotherapy Competency Examination. Table I summarizes the key characteristics of these programs, highlighting similarities and differences. Alberta's program is the least expensive and the only one offering a blended program that combines online and in-class instruction with mentorship and a clinical placement. The University of Toronto offers online and in-class instruction but does not offer a mentorship program, while the University of British Columbia provides online exam preparation.

CONCLUSION

Physiotherapy remains an in-demand profession in Canada and Alberta, and dramatic workforce shortages are predicted. IEPTs are a valuable resource for meeting the rehabilitation needs of Albertans. Four Canadian Universities have developed variations of bridging programs for IEPTs to support them in the process of obtaining licensure and finding employment in Canada. The innovative Albertan bridging program has attempted to overcome the geographic and logistical challenges inherent to educating therapists and practicing clinically in rural Alberta.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Country</th>
<th>Bridging program Available?</th>
<th>Number of Documents Needed to Apply for Licensure</th>
<th>English Language Requirements</th>
<th>Cost for Credentialing Review</th>
<th>Minimum Academic Hours Required for Credentialing</th>
<th>Practical Experience Required</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Canada</td>
<td>Yes, Universities of Toronto and Alberta</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>IELTS – 7 TOEFL - 92 overall with minimum score of 21 in each section</td>
<td>$960 CDN examination payable to the Canadian Alliance of Physiotherapy Regulators plus cost of written ($875) and practical ($1425) exams</td>
<td>No minimum requirement, but must have entry-to-practice degree</td>
<td>1,025 hours for entry to practice or 820 hours supervised clinical for practicing PT</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>USA</td>
<td>Not as of 2013, but a planning group is investigating</td>
<td>Online Application</td>
<td>TOEFL - 89</td>
<td>$775 USD for Comprehensive Credentials Evaluation by the Foreign Credentialing Commission on Physical Therapy (FCCPT)</td>
<td>150 semester credit hours, 90- PT professional, 60 - General education</td>
<td>800 hours</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>United Kingdom</td>
<td>Unknown</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>IELTS- 7 with minimum of 6.5 in each section</td>
<td>£440 Payable to Health Care Professionals Council</td>
<td>Unknown</td>
<td>Unknown</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Australia</td>
<td>Yes, since 2011 by Health Education Australia Limited</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>IELTS - 7</td>
<td>$2,200 AUS for Assessment of Equivalence of Qualification</td>
<td>Unknown</td>
<td>Unknown</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>New Zealand</td>
<td>Unknown</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>IELTS- 7.5 minimum of 7 in each section</td>
<td>$1,226 NZD for Overseas Qualified Physiotherapist Application</td>
<td>‘Comparable to PT curricula undertaken in New Zealand’</td>
<td>1,000</td>
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<tr>
<td>Location</td>
<td>Maximum Enrolment</td>
<td>Language Requirements</td>
<td>Courses</td>
<td>Mentorship / Internship</td>
<td>Duration</td>
<td>Residency Requirements</td>
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</table>
| University of Alberta     | 20                | IELTS Band 7/9, TOEFL 92/120 | A) Comprehensive program, 3 courses with mentorship and 1 clinical placement  
B) Modular Courses | Mentorship: ½ day weekly throughout 3 courses. Final course 6-week full-time clinical internship | 14 months  
8 weeks | Blended format using face-to-face and online  
– In person Edmonton or Calgary  
Online Learning Module | $3,200  
$400 |
| University of Toronto     | 39                | IELTS Band 7/9, TOEFL 92/120 | A) Comprehensive program, 4 courses and 2 clinical internships  
B) Modular Courses on various topics | Full-time academic residency with 2 mandatory 4-week fulltime internships | 10 months  
6 weeks | On campus in Toronto  
Online learning Module | $6,000  
$425 |
| University of British Columbia | Unlimited   | None                      | No formal program, but offers IEPT Exam Preparation course | No internship, but provides online instruction on clinical practice skills and reasoning | Runs 4 times per year | Theory and practical sessions, practice exams, and workshops. | Written-$1,250, Practical- $1,750 |
| University of Montreal    | 26                | French - TFI Score of 850/990 or TFI exemption | 15 courses over 3 sessions and 3 clinical internships | 3 full-time clinical internships | 16 months | In-person in Montreal for 3 sessions | Foreign students: $22,135 per year |
REFERENCES


