

Attitudes of European physiotherapy students towards their chosen career in the context of different educational systems and legal regulations pertaining to the practice of physiotherapy: implications for university curricula

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Abstract

Objectives Differences in the organisation of educational systems and regulations pertaining to the practice of a profession can influence the attitudes of students towards their chosen career and their perceptions of employment possibilities. The aim of this paper was to discuss the different educational systems and legal regulations pertaining to the practice of physiotherapy in selected countries of the European Union (EU), and to present some conclusions regarding the influence of these differences on the perceptions of first-year physiotherapy students on their chosen career.

Design Quantitative questionnaire-based study.

Setting Twenty-one university-level schools in the Czech Republic, Latvia, Malta, Poland, Spain and the UK.

Participants Six hundred and sixty-seven first-year physiotherapy students.

Results The mean response rate was 74%. Most students (79%) reported that a personal interest was the main reason why they had decided to study physiotherapy (79%). Most students from Spain and the Czech Republic reported that, on completion of their studies, they would like to work as physiotherapists (61/120, 51% Czech Republic; 140/250, 56% Spain), compared with only 4% of Polish students ($P < 0.001$). Most students from Poland and Spain were not familiar with employment opportunities in their respective countries (202/250, 81% Spain; 212/250, 85% Poland), and claimed that it is difficult to find employment as a physiotherapist in their country. Most students from the Czech Republic, Latvia, Malta, Poland, Spain and the UK claimed that it is easy to find a job in other EU countries.

Conclusion Most physiotherapy students chose their course because of an interest in physiotherapy. They were not familiar with employment possibilities for graduates, and believed that it is easier to find work in other EU countries. Both factors may further aggravate the problem of unemployment among physiotherapists.

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Introduction

According to data from the World Health Organization, the worldwide population aged ≥ 65 years will more than triple from 600 million to 2 billion between 2000 and 2050. Most of this increase will occur in countries of the European Union (EU) [1,2]. Between 2005 and 2030, the number is expected to grow by 55% in France, 34% in Italy and 48% in the UK [3].

The demand for physiotherapists in many EU countries is likely to continue to rise due to the ageing population, increased attention to the needs of disabled persons and accident victims, and an increase in the number of individuals with disabilities and limited function [1–3].

There is currently considerable interest in studying physiotherapy in many EU countries, as evidenced by the number of applicants and university-level schools offering programmes for physiotherapists [4–11]. According to the latest data of the European Region of the World Confederation for Physical Therapy, the number of students entering physiotherapy programmes each year is 1800 in the Netherlands, 2500 in Italy, 2804 in the UK, 3200 in Spain and 9680 in Germany [11–14].

Finding work as a physiotherapist does not pose a problem in EU countries such as Austria, the Czech Republic, France, Ireland, Italy, Latvia, the Netherlands and Portugal [11–14]. However, other EU countries have high unemployment rates for physiotherapists (Spain 10%, Greece 15%, Bulgaria 13%), which may have a negative effect on students' professional attitudes towards the profession [11–14]. In the UK, according to the 2008 survey of the Chartered Society of Physiotherapy (CSP), seven out of every 10 physiotherapists had not found a job [15]. In Scotland, of 187 physiotherapy students who graduated in 2006, nine had a permanent post, 10 had a temporary post, two were not looking for work and 80 were unemployed [16]. The CSP job figures for England showed that 93% of 2529 physiotherapy graduates in 2006 had been unable to find employment within the National Health Service [16,17]. In 2008, the National Health Service announced that 80% of new graduate physiotherapists in the UK were unemployed [18,19]. All these factors can influence the perceptions of employment possibilities in physiotherapy among first-year physiotherapy students.

Another difference concerning physiotherapy practice in many EU countries is the social context and autonomy to practice physiotherapy [20–24]. Professional autonomy for physiotherapists is connected mainly with their relations with medical doctors. Different countries have different regulations pertaining to these relations. In many countries (e.g. Austria, Belgium, Denmark, Poland and Turkey), a referral from a medical doctor is needed to treat patients; this specifies the intervention modalities to be undertaken by the physiotherapist [11–14]. In other countries (e.g. Cyprus, the Czech Republic, Denmark, Estonia, Finland, France, Germany, Greece, Iceland, Ireland, Latvia, Norway, Slovenia, Sweden and the UK), the physiotherapist is free to decide

on the intervention herself/himself. In some EU countries, physiotherapists can establish their own private practices, in which case they do not need referrals [11–14].

A review of the world literature (EMBASE, PubMed, ProQuest and SCOPUS, January 1990 to December 2010) was undertaken using the following Emtree search terms: physiotherapy, student, educational model, career choice and international studies. This identified publications on factors influencing the vocational choice of physiotherapy, and the perceptions of physiotherapy students about their future career. These papers, however, derived their samples from students of a single country [8–10,25–30].

Accordingly, the present authors decided to study the attitudes of physiotherapy students from different countries using a standardised questionnaire to ensure comparability of results. The collaborating researchers from all countries used standardised procedures and research tools. In all university-level schools, the surveys were administered during a class. All students received the same questionnaire in their national language. The completed questionnaires were sent to the study co-ordinator, who coded the data and analysed the results [4–7].

The study was conducted as part of an international research project entitled 'Influence of physiotherapy training cycles on development of the students' vocational attitudes'. This started in 2006 at the Medical University of Warsaw in Poland (www.projekt-fizjoterapia.wum.edu.pl) [4–7]. The project is currently being carried out in nine countries.

Since the literature review did not find publications comparing attitudes of students from different European countries towards the physiotherapy profession, the present paper is an innovative addition to the literature.

The differences between the UK, Czech, Latvian, Polish and Spanish educational systems for physiotherapists and the legal regulations pertaining to the practice of physiotherapy are presented in detail in [Tables 1 and 2](#).

Study objective

The aim of this paper was to discuss the different educational systems and legal regulations pertaining to the practice of physiotherapy in selected EU countries, and to make tentative conclusions about the influence of these differences on the perceptions of first-year physiotherapy students on their chosen career.

Methods

Design

A questionnaire was developed that comprised three parts and 21 questions. Questionnaires were handed out during lectures. Participation in the survey, carried out in 2008 at the beginning of the first semester of the Bachelor's programmes, was anonymous and voluntary.

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