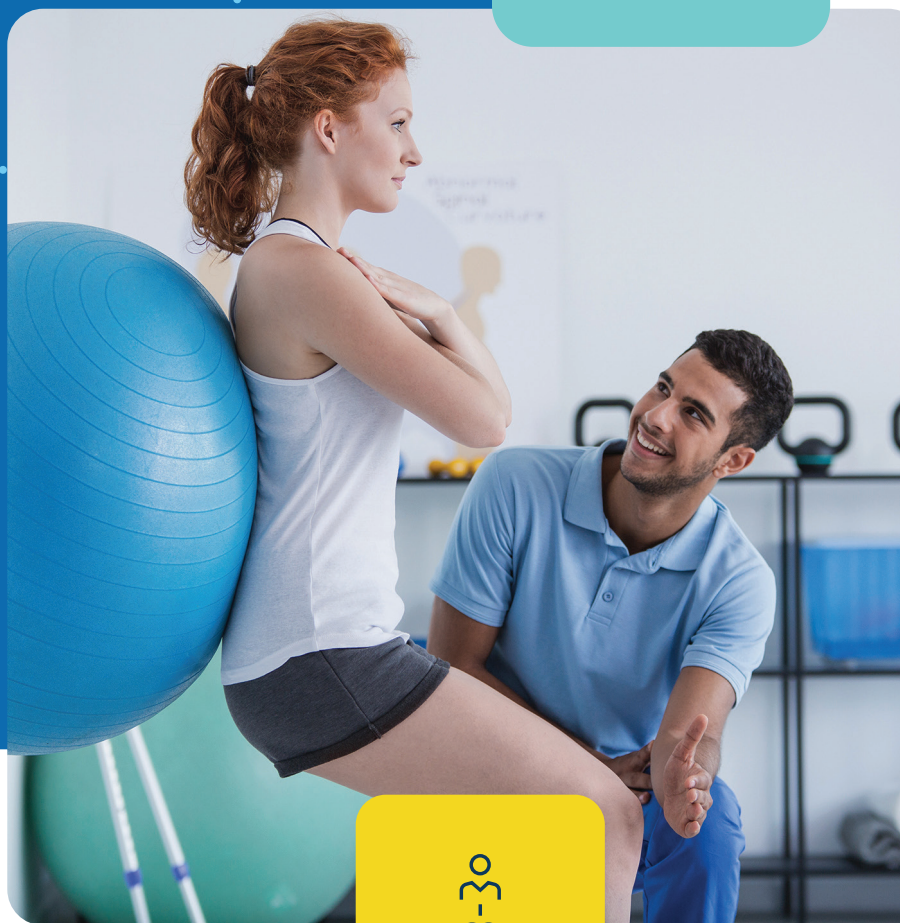
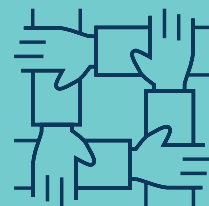


Licensure and Competency  
Assessment in the Canadian  
Physiotherapy Profession:

# The CPA's Recommendations for the Future

December 2022



Canadian  
Physiotherapy  
Association

Association  
canadienne de  
physiothérapie

## Executive Summary

In response to the disruption in the administration of the Clinical Component of the Physiotherapy Competency Examination (PCE) in March 2020 and the ongoing barriers to physiotherapy licensure, the Canadian Physiotherapy Association (CPA) launched the Future of Licensure project in April 2022.

The project – which consisted of a comprehensive environmental scan of global licensure models, multiple focus groups with key stakeholders (including physiotherapists, physiotherapy students, and provincial branches), and a CPA member-wide Town Hall – was designed to ensure that the voice of the profession is included in the national dialogue on entry-to-practice requirements for physiotherapy.

The input gathered from CPA members was organized by theme and used to develop six key recommendations, which are intended to inform and guide the work of the Expert Advisory Panel of the Canadian Alliance of Physiotherapy Regulators (CAPR), and ultimately the CAPR Board of Directors, as they seek to define entry-to-practice requirements.



## Problem Statement

The COVID-19 pandemic disrupted every segment of society. For the physiotherapy profession, one of the most critical disruptions was the **cancellation of the administration of the clinical component of the Physiotherapy Competency Examination**, which prevented thousands of physiotherapy students from being able to obtain their licences and enter practice.

While regulators in some provinces have now implemented interim solutions to allow certain candidates to become fully registered, and others have created provisional licensure options, **a long-term national solution has yet to be defined.**

The Future of Licensure project was designed to help ensure that the voices of the CPA's 17,000 members are heard as part of the work being undertaken by various groups to reimagine the future of physiotherapy competency assessment and licensure. The themes and recommendations that follow throughout this report reflect the broad range of opinions and ideas shared with us as part of the extensive consultations undertaken throughout this project.



# Project Methodology

The Future of Licensure project was led by the CPA National PCE Task Force on the Future of Physiotherapy Licensure ('the Task Force'). The Task Force consisted of CPA members (Appendix A), representing perspectives and knowledge from across the physiotherapy community and the full continuum of education and practice.

The Task Force worked closely with credentialing experts and consultants from Accessing Centre for Expertise, Learning Innovations LLC, and the SeaCrest Company to guide the design of an environmental scan and focus groups, facilitate a member-wide town hall, provide context to findings, and frame the final report and recommendations.

## THE PROJECT CONSISTED OF THE FOLLOWING KEY ELEMENTS:



### Environmental Scan

An environmental scan comprised of (1) a rapid review of research evidence on the performance of entry-to-practice competency assessments, and (2) a targeted scan of relevant regulatory/licensure-granting organizations to document entry-to-practice competency assessment practices in a range of comparator jurisdictions. The findings report (Appendix B: Entry-to-Practice Competency Assessment Practices for Physiotherapy and Other Regulated Health Professions: Rapid Review and Targeted Scan Findings) details challenges, opportunities, and trends derived from the literature and through the scan of documents from relevant licensure organizations.



### Focus Groups

Focus groups that discussed opportunities to modernize and innovate competency assessment, the perceived barriers to innovation, and the vision for the future of licensure. The insights derived from these focus groups, which were organized by theme, and which are described below, were then shared with representatives from the CPA's provincial branches to ensure that unique regional factors were considered in translating the themes into recommendations.



### Town Hall

A town hall in September 2022 that provided a forum for interested CPA members to provide further nuance to the themes identified from the focus groups. One key theme that arose repeatedly throughout the town hall was the desire for the various organizations within the physiotherapy profession to work together to collectively address the needs of the community.

# Themes

The insights shared in the focus groups and town hall were organized into the themes below, which were then reviewed and further refined by the Task Force. Although these themes are provided as a discrete list, there is a great deal of synergy between them, and they should be viewed as a singular set of philosophies that support the recommendations that follow.

## 1

### Rely on Evidence

**Process:** Establishing an evidence-based process for entry into practice will honour the trust the public places in the healthcare system. If the purpose of licensure is to protect the public, it is incumbent upon those who make that claim to prove that there is evidence to support it. The literature (e.g., Bobos P, Pouliopoulou DV, Harriss A, Sadi J, Rushton A, MacDermid JC, 2021) and industry reports (e.g. "A Review of the Clinical Component of the Physiotherapy Competency Exam," College of Physical Therapists, May 2021) published on this subject acknowledge that there is limited evidence to support that performance on an Objective Structured Clinical examination (OSCE) predicts clinical performance or competency.

Physiotherapists who have completed training in Quebec and wish to practise in Quebec are not required to write the same exams as physiotherapists in the rest of the country. As such, it may be possible to view those physiotherapists as a control group for the purposes of conducting quasi-experimental research that explores the relationship between patient experiences and the different entry-to-practice requirements that exist between Quebec and the other provinces and territories in Canada. Further, hundreds of people over the last two years have been able to become fully licensed through interim processes established in response to the COVID-19 pandemic that did not include the requirement to write the clinical component of the Physiotherapist Competency Exam. There is an opportunity to learn whether the elimination of these requirements has had any impact on public safety.

**Content:** Physiotherapists should be tested on the current knowledge, skills, and abilities needed to provide safe, effective, high-quality care. Exam content that is perceived as outdated practice by professionals entering the field diminishes the value of the role of the examination in the licensing process. Evidence-based mechanisms exist for establishing valid and reliable test content, which should also be the basis for a curriculum that underpins professional education. Regularly reviewing and updating the framework for both education and licensure will ensure that educational and testing content is based on the latest science.

The profession has a societal obligation to utilize a learning and assessment approach that has the strongest relationship to patient safety and to rethink requirements or content that may be perceived as resulting from historically entrenched, economically motivated, or other subjective factors. Doing so will foster trust and commitment among residents, educators, and society.

<sup>1</sup> Bobos P, Pouliopoulou DV, Harriss A, Sadi J, Rushton A, MacDermid JC. A systematic review and meta-analysis of measurement properties of objective structured clinical examinations used in physical therapy licensure and a structured review of licensure practices in countries with well-developed regulation systems. *PLoS ONE* [Electronic Resource] 2021;16(8):e0255696. doi: <https://dx.doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0255696>

<sup>2</sup> **Physiotherapy Competency Exam Saskatchewan College of Physical Therapists Ad Hoc Working Group.** A review of the clinical component of the physiotherapy competency exam: Report and recommendations on the use of the PCE clinical component for physiotherapy licensure in Saskatchewan: Saskatchewan College of Physical Therapists, 2021. Retrieved online: <https://scpt.in1touch.org/uploaded/web/website/PCE%20Report/PCE%20Report%20-%20Final%20web.pdf>.

## 2

### Design for Risk Mitigation, Not Risk Elimination

The desire to eliminate all risk from patient care is understandable, and even admirable. Ensuring patient/client safety should be the foundation of licensure. However, designing a system that attempts to eliminate all risk can be paralyzing. Further, it ignores that the healthcare system is comprised of humans, who are fallible. A system for licensure, especially one that is dedicated to patient wellbeing, should consider the minimum competency required to begin independent practice safely and effectively, and then direct equal attention to maintaining a competency program that encourages practitioners to evolve their practice to the latest standards and best practices. This provides a further opportunity to conduct new studies and incorporate research on the relationship between competency assessment programs and desired outcomes for client safety.

The current system in Canada, like in many countries, sets the highest bar for entry requirements, and puts less emphasis on requirements for lifelong learning and maintenance of competence. Creating a system that levels out the initial competency assessment and maintenance requirements results in a community of care providers who are consistently developing their knowledge and skills to meet the ever-changing needs of patients and the increasing complexity of the healthcare system.

## 3

### Eliminate Redundancy in the Learning and Assessment Continuum

Organizational and individual stakeholders in the physiotherapy profession widely agree that physiotherapy educational institutions are required to meet rigorous standards through accreditation. These standards require a strong theoretical framework, hours of supervised clinical practice, and rigorous exams. Despite these requirements, Canadian physiotherapy regulators (except for Quebec) mandate that physiotherapist graduates from accredited Canadian programs write a separate clinical competency examination in order to be granted a licence to practice.

International standards and best practices for the assessment and credentialing of professionals clearly indicate that education and testing activities can coexist within a single organization (National Commission for Certifying Agencies Standards for the Accreditation of Certification Programs, 2021). Although autonomy for essential licensure decisions should be observed and clearly communicated, the path to entry to practice can be significantly streamlined by viewing the trajectory from education to practice as a singular continuum, using for instance the existing Assessment of Clinical Performance as one proxy for assessing competency. Regardless of the specific testing components that are established, it is critical that organizations work together to define an approach that views education and testing on a singular, holistic path to physiotherapy licensure.

## 4

### Modernize the Registration and Test Administration Processes

Any system that wholly relied on in-person or on-paper delivery of materials or exams was immediately rendered obsolete with the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic. Organizations worldwide were forced to adapt their processes to accommodate social distancing requirements and other disease-mitigation protocols. In many cases, plans to offer more modern registration and test administration processes had already been underway, but the pandemic forced the expedited execution of those plans. These efforts should not be wasted. In very few cases is there a need to revert to requirements that involve submission of original paper documentation or in-person test-taking. Further, technology has advanced to the point where digital options and remote live proctoring offer viable solutions to what are now antiquated approaches. Modernizing the test registration, communication, and delivery processes would help meet the reasonable expectation of today's students, residents, and physiotherapists.

## 5

### Collaborate and Support

The organizations that operate within the physiotherapy community – including the Canadian Association of Physiotherapy Regulators, the Canadian Physiotherapy Association, the Physiotherapy Education Accreditation Canada, the Canadian Council of Physiotherapy University Programs, and the ten provincial colleges and one territorial government that comprise the regulatory bodies for physiotherapy – must work together to address the needs of the physiotherapy community and the members of the public they serve. While each group plays a different role in the professional landscape, they must all come together to define a singular narrative for the future of learning, assessment, and continued professional competency that is based on the best evidence for what is required to support the profession while providing safe patient care.

Further, these groups must begin to view themselves as partners of the future physiotherapists of Canada, as opposed to gatekeepers for the profession. The human toll this licensure crisis has taken on individual physiotherapists and the wider general public cannot be understated. Lives have been put on hold, and patients have been faced with a scarcity of care providers. While there may have been good reasons for the decisions that have been made to date, the absence of a singular voice, clear and collective communication, and a spirit of partnership has exacerbated the damage. Going forward, the leaders of the profession must commit to working together and recalibrating the balance of authority in order to support the next generation of Canadian physiotherapists.

## 6

### Incorporate Fairness, Equity, and Inclusion

Creating a system of equity across the provinces and territories of Canada will increase professional mobility and minimize unnecessary bureaucracy. The value and purpose of different regional requirements is being questioned across the world, with many asking why a licence to practise should be restricted to one geographic area. These questions arose in large part as a result of the pandemic, during which healthcare professionals were able to provide telehealth services across geographically defined boundaries. The wisdom of rescinding those rights is being questioned, especially as rural and underserved populations have come to rely on a more mobile and accessible healthcare workforce.

Physiotherapists who graduated from a Canadian-accredited program should have equitable access to work across the country. Further, physiotherapists who graduated from programs outside Canada should have a transparent, cohesive, and consistently applied mechanism to have their knowledge, skills, and abilities evaluated in a way that recognizes and honours their educational achievements, while still maintaining a minimal standard of competence for entry into practice in Canada.



# Recommendations

As a result of this process, and the themes that emerged from it, the following recommendations are suggested as a means to inform the future of physiotherapist licensure and continued competence.

Some recommendations align more closely with the mission of the CPA, while others are better suited to the roles of other entities that serve the profession. However, all are included here in order to demonstrate the CPA's commitment to the transparency and collaboration that will be necessary to achieve the shared goals of all invested groups.

1

## Establish and Enact an Advocacy Agenda

Central to the CPA's mission is a commitment to helping physiotherapists make real and lasting contributions to the health of Canadians. As the CPA discovered during its consultations with members throughout this process, there is a strong desire for a national solution for licensure and improved licensure mobility. In a world characterized by increasing personal mobility and a healthcare system actively exploring the feasibility of telehealth (telerehabilitation), removing geographic boundaries increases the possibility for care to continue in the midst of future disruptions. Although the CPA does not have a decision-making role in licensure rulings, the collective voice of its members can serve to inform and guide those who do have the authority to take such action. Advocating for greater licensure mobility fits with both the CPA's core competencies and its commitment to serve the current and future members of the profession.

2

## Review and Clarify Existing Assessment Tools and Frameworks

There are numerous frameworks, blueprints, and assessment tools that are used to measure quality, progress, and knowledge across the physiotherapy education and licensure system. Included among these are the Assessment of Clinical Performance used to assess physiotherapy student performance on clinical placements, the Accreditation Standards for Canadian Entry-to-Practice Physiotherapy Education Programs used to measure quality of accredited education programs, the Physiotherapy Competency Examination Blueprint that serves as the basis for the written component of the PCE, and the various Objective Structured Clinical Examinations candidates take throughout their educational experience.

While there are important distinctions among this set of tools and frameworks, there is confusion among the profession about the unique purpose of each. This leads to the perception that there is redundancy in the process that leads to unnecessary time and money required to enter the profession. Mapping the knowledge, skills, and competencies reflected across these various frameworks may reveal opportunities to expedite the path to practice without impacting quality of care. Additionally, publishing the outcome of this analysis, and explaining the rationale for the distinct steps required to become licensed, will build trust and understanding among the members of the profession.

3

## Create a Meaningful Continued Competence Program

The rigor of initial licensure requirements is intended to mitigate risk and enhance safety. The emphasis on measuring initial knowledge and skills tends to distract from the importance of programs designed to require demonstration of ongoing competence. As treatments and protocols change and technology develops, patients need to be assured that their providers have maintained the knowledge required to provide the best care. The emerging evidence on the relationship between competency assessment and desired outcomes should inform a holistic program that balances a meaningful set of requirements for entry into practice with ongoing maintenance expectations that demonstrate continued alignment with evolving standards and practices.

## 4

### Establish Equity for Internationally Trained Physiotherapists

Internationally trained physiotherapist colleagues are an essential part of Canada’s physiotherapy workforce. But the process those candidates are required to navigate in order to practise in Canada fails to adequately consider the quality of their education or the value they bring to meeting the needs of physiotherapy patients. The CPA understands the need for a set of requirements that are unique for internationally trained residents, and supports these requirements being grounded in upholding patient safety. However, it is critical that the licensing authorities develop an expedient path for internationally trained physiotherapists to become licensed. This will not only support qualified physiotherapists in entering the workforce, but it will also create a profession that better reflects the diversity of the population it serves.

## 5

### Assess Governance Models to Ensure Impartial Decision Making

Best practices and standards in organizational governance exist so that governing bodies fulfill their duties free from undue influence and real or perceived conflicts. The ISO/IEC 17024 Standard (Conformity assessment – General requirements for bodies operating certification of persons) requires that the certification body “document its structure, policies, and procedures to manage impartiality and to ensure that the certification activities are undertaken impartially.”

It is apparent from the focus group discussions that there is a lack of understanding of the unique roles and responsibilities of CAPR and the regulators who direct their efforts. This confusion is exacerbated by the overlap in membership on the governing boards of the two organizations. The profession would be well-served if the accountability and responsibility of the different governing bodies were clarified. To achieve this goal, it is recommended that the parties engage an independent evaluation of the existing governance structures within the framework of international standards for governance and publish information on gaps found and recommendations to align the structures with those standards. In January 2022, CAPR announced that they were undertaking such a review, and indicated that the final report for consideration by the CAPR Board would be expected by June 2022. The CPA recommends that the findings and any resulting actions be shared with the physiotherapy community.

## 6

### Build a Collaborative Coalition

Perhaps the strongest sentiment that emerged from the consultations was the frustration at the perceived lack of collaboration among the groups charged with leading, licensing, and supporting physiotherapy candidates. As a result, communications are fragmented across the various groups, and candidates reported feeling a lack of empathy and support. By establishing a strong and collaborative coalition, the leading physiotherapy organizations can demonstrate their commitment to transforming their relationship to one that is characterized by cooperation and shared values. The National Physiotherapy Advisory Group (NPAG) is well positioned to lead this effort. The CPA, as a member of NPAG, encourages our NPAG partners to embrace this moment as an opportunity to work together to define a shared vision to support the needs of the physiotherapy profession.

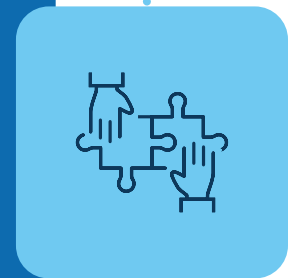




# Acknowledgements

On behalf of the CPA and the numerous members who have contributed their voices to this work, including the Task Force contributors; Branch representatives; PT students, residents, and graduates; internationally educated PTs; and recently licensed PTs, as well as those PTs currently in practice, we extend our gratitude and appreciation for all those who came forward to share their experiences, ideas, concerns, and vision for the future.

The CPA acknowledges that the last several years have been challenging ones for the profession, and as the national membership association for the profession in Canada, we are grateful for the dedication, perseverance, and passion of all members of the physiotherapy profession, without whom this work could not have been completed.



## Appendix A

### PROJECT TASK FORCE CONTRIBUTORS

The following individuals contributed to and guided the work that was undertaken to develop this report in their role as members of the project Task Force. In addition, there are several contributors from the profession who were also instrumental to this project work that have requested to remain anonymous. We have respected their request and extend our thanks to all contributors who helped to shape the themes and recommendations.

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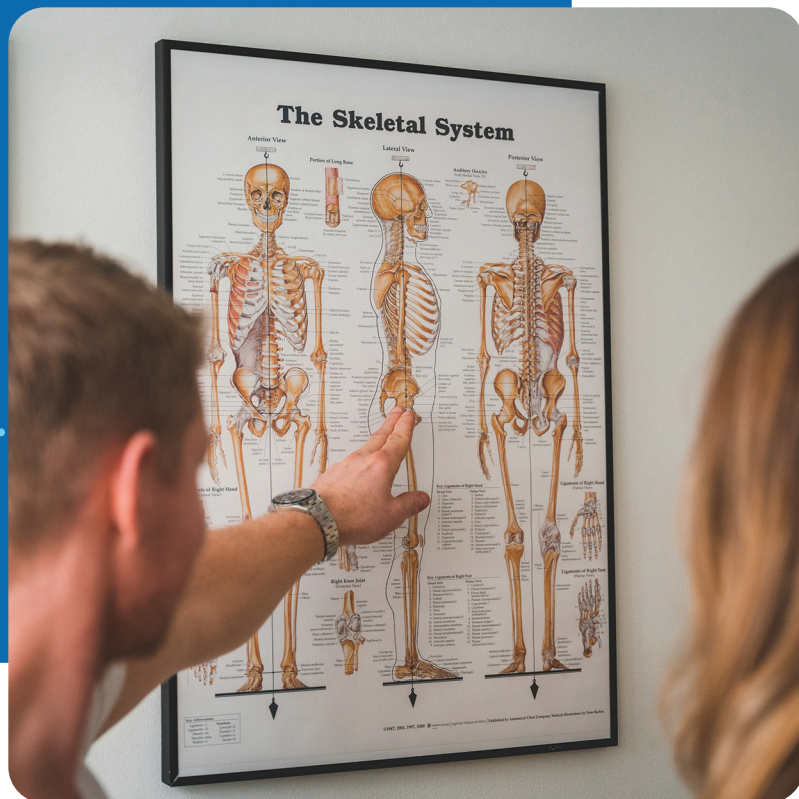
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## Appendix B

Entry-to-Practice Competency Assessment  
Practices for Physiotherapy and Other Regulated  
Health Professions: Rapid Review and Targeted  
Scan Findings.



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