

The contribution of a master's degree to the academic development of physical therapy: Historical survey and future perspectives

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Abstract

Background: Physical therapy (PT) is a relatively new field in the academic world. Therefore, while in traditional fields such as the natural sciences and humanities the path of academic development is clear and regulated, in the field of PT the choice to pursue an advanced degree is not self-evident. Hence, it is necessary better to understand the needs and preferences of physical therapists wishing to develop professionally, as well as the barriers they face. This understanding will allow physical therapy departments to make the necessary adjustments to their curriculum, in light of the needs of their target audience and the goals of the profession.

Objectives: The main objectives of this survey were: 1. To examine and compare the satisfaction, preferences, and contribution of a master's degree to the life and career of physical therapists who studied in PT master's programs, compared to those who completed a master's degree in other fields; and 2. To examine the preferences, expectations, and barriers faced by physical therapists with a bachelor's degree, who are considering to continue their professional development.

Methods: This study was approved by the Ethics Committee of the Faculty of Health and Social Sciences at the University of Haifa. For the purpose of the study,

the authors of the article compiled a questionnaire, which was distributed on the Internet via the various social networks of Israeli physical therapists and addressed to therapists with/without a master's degree. Group comparisons were performed using the Chi-Squared test.

Results: Seventy percent of the respondents and completed a master's degree in PT. The master's degree studies were perceived as contributing to a large extent, to critical reading and professional writing abilities, regardless of the sub-discipline of study. On the other hand, a higher percentage of respondents who studied in fields other than PT found that their studies greatly contributed to broadening their professional horizons. Only 15% of those studying in physical therapy programs, compared to 41.4% of those studying in other fields, found the studies to be conducive to promotion at work. Thesis programs yielded a significantly higher number of publications, especially in international journals. At the same time, many theses remain unpublished. Only about 42% of respondents with a bachelor's degree said they are considering to continue their studies in the next five years, and about 49% of them mentioned they were debating whether to choose to study in the field of PT or in another field. The main barrier to continuing studies in PT was the perception that a master's degree in this field would not contribute to either promotion at work or to clinical abilities.

Summary and conclusions: In order to meet the needs of the target audience, PT academic programs should consider developing tracks that allow for the integration of more courses with clinical implications, to expand tracks that promote projects in the community, and to integrate additional fields of knowledge such as management, child development, and gerontology. It is also recommended to encourage graduates to publish their work in conferences and journals in Israel as well as abroad.

Keywords: higher education, physical therapy, master's degree, thesis