



Canadian Association of Occupational Therapists Association canadienne des ergothérapeutes

Frequently Asked Questions by Employers and Government *on Entry-Level Education of Occupational Therapists in Canada*

Who made the decision to change the entry-level education standard?

In 2001, the Board of Directors of the Canadian Association of Occupational Therapists (CAOT) decided to accredit only occupational therapy educational programs that lead to a professional master's degree in occupational therapy as the entry credential starting in 2008. ⁽¹⁾ Since 1986, the bachelor's degree in occupational therapy was the minimum educational requirement for entry-level occupational therapy education in Canada. ⁽²⁾

Why is the entry-level education standard changing?

Trends in education of the health professions ⁽³⁾ indicate that the education must be broadened to include mastering techniques for lifelong learning and best practice as well as system, organizational and population health skills beyond specific technical abilities. Education in a professional master's degree program will provide the necessary opportunity and environment for the development of competencies for autonomous practice, and the provision of client-centred, evidence-based and occupation-focused services within an expanding and competitive global environment.

Why did the occupational therapy profession decide to make this change when other professions have not?

Occupational therapy in Canada is evolving very rapidly as a result of the following factors: i) health and social system reform, ii) changing client profile and health status, iii) growing professional knowledge base, iv) the growth of private practice, and v) national and international mobility. ⁽⁴⁾ The higher entry-level education model is more responsive to the intensity and breadth of education required; complexity of current practice; and system need for accountability.

How does a professional master's degree differ from the master's degrees currently offered?

"Entry-level professional master's degree" refers to graduates who have obtained their professional education at the master's level. "Post-entry master's degree" refers to graduates who have obtained their professional education at the bachelor's level or professional master's degree level and have taken further studies at the graduate level in occupational therapy or another discipline. This group has acquired knowledge beyond the entry-level requirement for the profession. ⁽⁵⁾

What is the role of graduates with a master's entry level degree?

New graduates with a master's entry-level degree are qualified to be the primary providers of occupational therapy services.

Will an occupational therapist with a professional master's degree be paid more than one with a bachelor's degree?

There does not appear to be a direct relationship between entry-level educational credential and salary.⁽⁶⁾ Other factors such as type of practice, funding, setting, and union environments would appear to influence salaries of health professionals. Occupational therapists who will graduate from a CAOT or WFOT accredited program with bachelor's degrees and new graduates with a professional master's degree are equally qualified to be the primary providers of occupational therapy services. Both should meet the competencies outlined in the *Profile of Occupational Therapy Practice in Canada*⁽⁷⁾ through continuing professional education in the case of the experienced bachelor's graduate, and the advanced skills acquired by the master's graduate. CAOT therefore does not advocate for occupational therapists with an entry-level master's degree to receive a higher level of compensation based on entry-level qualifications.

Will the accreditation standards for professional master's programs be different than those for bachelor's programs?

The standard process for CAOT academic accreditation will continue to follow the *CAOT Academic Accreditation Standards and Self-Study Guide*.⁽⁸⁾

How will all the content be covered in a professional master's degree if the length of the program is shorter?

CAOT does not prescribe how occupational therapy education programs are taught but uses the academic accreditation process to ensure that the outcomes and standards for the education process are met.

University educators have the expertise to design and implement occupational therapy education programs to meet the CAOT accreditation standards.

Will the move to a professional master's affect the number of available seats in education programs?

A recent survey indicated that moving to an entry-level master's degree should not lead to a reduction in the number of seats. Nine of the ten university programs responding to this question reported that their projections indicated an increase of up to 67% or no change at all. The one remaining program reported an expected reduction of 21 seats due to lack of adequate faculty in the short term. This decrease, however, will be offset by the increases reported in other programs.⁽⁹⁾ This information is important for human resource planners in projecting the future supply of occupational therapists.

What will be the effect on the supply of occupational therapists?

A recent survey of education programs indicated that the transition to entry-level master's education should not have a negative impact on the current supply-demand situation.⁽¹⁰⁾ The total number of seats in Canadian education programs is projected to remain the same or increase. Applicants will be recruited from a broad pool of existing undergraduate programs and the number of applicants currently exceeds the number of seats available. In addition, to ensure a constant stream of new graduates, for the next five years, CAOT will accredit both the bachelor's and the entry-level professional master's degree programs until all of the education programs have made the transition. CAOT is working on a recruitment campaign to attract talented and gifted men and women to the profession.

What will be the effect on occupational therapists currently practicing in Canada who have a bachelor's degree?

The change to the educational requirement was only made for new graduates entering the profession and not for experienced occupational therapists. Experienced occupational therapists with bachelor's degrees and new graduates with a professional master's degree have acquired the competencies for their professional roles and functions, either through continuing professional development, in the case of experienced occupational therapists, or as recent graduates of the professional master's programs. However all occupational therapists regardless of their educational credentials are responsible for ongoing education to remain current with new developments in the profession. ⁽¹¹⁾

What will the impact be on internationally educated occupational therapists that want to work in Canada?

Internationally educated occupational therapists who want to work in Canada will still be required to meet provincial regulatory entry-to-practice requirements that are equivalent to those set out for Canadian graduates.

Will the professional master's degree programs be more costly for students?

There is a perception that professional master's degree programs will be more costly to students. This perception does not appear to be the reality based on responses to a recent survey of occupational therapy education programs. ⁽¹²⁾ The findings indicated that when one compares the professional occupational therapy education programs, the costs to students vary with five of the seven responding programs expecting a decrease in the range of 0% -32%. Two of the seven programs indicated an increase of less than 15% under current funding parameters. The reduced program cost to students is the result of comparing the decreased number of years for the professional program from a three to four year bachelor's to a one to two year master's entry-level program

Will it be more difficult to become an occupational therapist in the future?

While the standard of education for occupational therapy cannot be lowered, CAOT has current initiatives directed towards attracting applicants to occupational therapy as a career.

What impact will the change have on service delivery mechanisms?

It is expected that occupational therapists will continue to work in collaboration with occupational therapy support personnel to deliver client-centred services in a cost-effective and efficient manner. While components of services may be assigned to support personnel, the occupational therapist will remain accountable for service provision. ⁽¹³⁾

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January 2004 (last revised April 2008)

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