



Canadian Association of Occupational Therapists

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

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

The Board of Directors of the Canadian Association of Occupational Therapists (CAOT) made the decision and announced on November 28, 2001 that effective 2008, CAOT will only grant academic accreditation to those occupational therapy educational programs that lead to a professional master's degree in occupational therapy as the entry credential. ⁽¹⁾ All university occupational therapy programs in Canada are accredited by CAOT. 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 the education of health professions indicate that it must be broadened to include system, organizational and population health skills beyond specific technical abilities. ⁽³⁾ In 2002, CAOT released the updated *Profile of Occupational Therapy Practice in Canada (Profile)*. ⁽⁴⁾ The *Profile* indicated that advanced skills and knowledge are now expected for occupational therapists upon graduation such as those associated with: greater accountability for professional decisions; autonomous practice in diverse environments and with multicultural populations; evidence-based and occupation-focused services; skills for lifelong learning; and the ability to market services in an expanding competitive global environment. Education in a professional master's program will provide the necessary opportunity and environment for the development of these competencies.

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. ⁽⁵⁾ 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 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. ⁽⁶⁾

What will the role of the new graduates be?

It is expected that both experienced occupational therapists with bachelor's degrees and beginning occupational therapists with a professional master's degree have acquired the competencies for their professional roles and functions as described in the *Profile of Occupational Therapy Practice in Canada (2007)*.⁽⁷⁾ Both are the primary providers of occupational therapy services and may provide direct services not only to individuals but may also perform functions as manager, researcher, program developer, educator, or as part of other professional roles. All occupational therapists are expected to pursue continuing professional education to maintain excellence in their practice and to ensure that their level of achievement is consistent with the *Profile*.⁽⁸⁾

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

The findings of a discussion paper recently on entry-level education commissioned by CAOT, suggest that there does not appear to be a direct relationship between entry-level educational credential and salary.⁽⁹⁾ Other factors such as type of practice, funding and setting would appear to influence salaries of health professionals. It has been suggested that there may be more of an impact on salaries of occupational therapists working in unionized environments. CAOT 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.

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

CAOT 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 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*.⁽¹⁰⁾ Programs undergoing accreditation will use the current version of the *Profile of Occupational Therapy Practice in Canada*.

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

The transition to entry-level master's degree education should not have a negative impact on the current supply-demand situation.⁽¹¹⁾ The number of seats in 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 programs until all of the education programs have made the transition. CAOT has also developed 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 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. ⁽¹²⁾

What effect will the change have on membership in CAOT?

Both the bachelor's and masters' degree entry-level graduates are eligible for membership in CAOT as they are both graduates from a program accredited by CAOT or have met World Federation of Occupational Therapists (WFOT) standards.

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.

How can practicing occupational therapists obtain a master's degree if they would like to do so?

A research master's degree is different from a professional master's degree. A professional master's leads to an entry-level credential and is not necessary for practicing occupational therapists as they have already met entry-level requirements. A research master's is undertaken after attaining an entry-level credential in occupational therapy. Visit www.caot.ca (Click on "Contacts") for a listing of the university programs that offer a research master's degree in occupational therapy or related subject area. There are on-line research master's degree programs that facilitate learning from the home or workplace.

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

In a comparison of professional occupational therapy education programs, ⁽¹³⁾ 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-four year bachelor's to a one-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. ⁽¹⁴⁾

Will I lose my ability to compete for clinical positions as an experienced occupational therapist?

This change should not affect your ability to compete for clinical positions as an experienced occupational therapist. There may, however, be some management positions that will require a

master's degree as a requirement for the job. This situation currently exists and is not expected to change in the future.

For more information, contact Kathy Van Benthem, Director of Standards, Canadian Association of Occupational Therapists, 1 (800) 434-2268, ext. 223, e-mail: kvanbenthem@caot.ca

January 2004 (last revised April 2008)

References

- 1
Canadian Association of Occupational Therapists. (2002). *Position Statement on Entry-Level Education of Occupational Therapists in Canada*. Retrieved September 25, 2003 from <http://www.caot.ca/index.cfm?ChangeID=269&pageID=274>.
- 2
Canadian Association of Occupational Therapists. (2005). *CAOT's Academic Accreditation Standards and Self-Study Guide*. Ottawa, ON: CAOT Publications ACE.
- 3,6, 9, 11,13
Canadian Association of Occupational Therapists. (2003). *Discussion paper: A Dialogue on... Occupational Therapy Entry-Level Education in Canada... the Change to a Professional Master's Degree by 2008*. Retrieved December 29, 2003 from http://www.caot.ca/pdfs/CAOTdiscussionpaper_Masters.pdf.
- 4,
Canadian Association of Occupational Therapists. (2002). *Profile of Occupational Therapy Practice in Canada*, 2nd Edition. Ottawa, ON : CAOT Publications ACE.
- 5
Éduconseil inc. (2002). *La scolarité utile à l'exercice de la profession Ergothérapeute au Québec : résultat d'une analyse documentaire*. Montreal, QC : L'Ordre des ergothérapeutes du Québec.
- 7, 8
Canadian Association of Occupational Therapists. (2007). *Profile of Occupational Therapy Practice in Canada*, 3rd Edition. Ottawa, ON : CAOT Publications ACE. Retrieved April 25, 2008 from <http://www.caot.ca/default.asp?pageid=36>.
- 12
Canadian Association of Occupational Therapists. (1997) *Position Statement on Continuing Professional Education*. Retrieved: September 25, 2003 from <http://www.caot.ca/default.cfm?ChangeID=163&pageID=153>.
- 14
Canadian Association of Occupational Therapists. (2003). *Guidelines for the Supervision of Assigned Occupational Therapy Service Components*. Retrieved December 30, 2003 from <http://www.caot.ca/index.cfm?ChangeID=1&pageID=579>.