

100 years of education, research, and clinical practice: The University of Otago School of Physiotherapy in 2013

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ABSTRACT

This paper provides an overview of the University of Otago School of Physiotherapy, which celebrates its centenary in 2013. Based in Dunedin, as well as in main centres in Christchurch and Wellington, the School employs some 70 staff, including academics, professional practice fellows, researchers and administrative and technical staff; it currently has over 400 students enrolled in its courses and research programmes. The School's activities range from teaching (at undergraduate and postgraduate level), and research to clinical practice through its dedicated teaching Clinics.

The most salient recent developments at the School include: (i) the development and expansion of research activities (evidenced by significant increases in research publications, research funding support, and numbers of research students, as well as Performance-Based Research Funding scores); and, (ii) staff development through higher degree training to increase research capabilities and to offer opportunities for staff progression. The principal challenge as the School advances into the next century remains the chronic underfunding of physiotherapy education by government.

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THE SCHOOL IN 2013

The University of Otago's School of Physiotherapy celebrates its centenary in 2013; formerly New Zealand's National School of Physiotherapy (and prior to that, the School of Massage), it is one of the oldest such schools in the world (MacDonald 1938). To mark this important milestone, Louise Shaw has recently completed work on a history of the School, which is due to be launched at the School's main centenary celebration event in April 2013 (Shaw 2013). This is a fascinating and highly readable account of the development and growth of the School, as well as the profession in New Zealand, and will doubtless appeal to a readership wider than the physiotherapy profession.

While the School has always been based in Dunedin (moving from the University to the hospital board, to the Otago Polytechnic, and – from 1996 – back to the University), it is also now represented on each of the three main University of Otago campuses (Wellington and Christchurch, as well as Dunedin), and employs clinical educator staff from Hawkes Bay to Invercargill. Complementing the School's teaching and research activities, School of Physiotherapy Clinics provide clinical services to the communities in Dunedin, in Christchurch (Barrington), and in Wellington (Victoria University). We believe that this nexus of teaching, research and practice are mutually reinforcing, providing a unique environment for each to develop.

Notwithstanding its geographical dispersion, as part of its strategic priorities the University of Otago is committed to providing for students an outstanding campus environment and student experience: for most alumni, this represents the most enduring memory of their time at Otago. In addition, the Division of Health Sciences (of which the School is a part) has developed a strong focus on community engagement as part of its strategic plans, and a commitment to widening participation in its healthcare professional courses (Division of Health Sciences, University of Otago 2012). Under-representation of students from the Māori and Pacific communities is a key focus for action for the future.

The School in 2013 comprises 73 staff (c50 full-time equivalents), and has 407 students currently registered at undergraduate (Bachelor of Physiotherapy or Bachelor of Physiotherapy Honours) or postgraduate level (Postgraduate Certificate, Postgraduate Diploma, Masters of Physiotherapy, and Doctor of Philosophy PhD). The School has developed a strong international culture, with academic staff and students from the UK, Ireland, Brazil, South Africa, India, and the Middle East, as well as from New Zealand; we regard such internationalisation of our staff and student body (particularly at postgraduate level) as a key feature of our learning community.

RESEARCH DEVELOPMENT

The Otago School of Physiotherapy is currently one of the few (internationally) to be based in what are known as research-intensive universities. This provides a unique environment for student learning: facilities are cutting edge; students are taught by academics who are recognised experts and researchers within their fields (and not just from Physiotherapy); students benefit from a vibrant learning environment focussed on research-led teaching; and finally, for the most academically gifted, the School now provides opportunities to undertake honours in final year, and - in turn - doctoral level training.

It should be noted, however, that physiotherapy is still in many respects a developing academic area: while the move to degree-level training within the academy is relatively recent, the pace of development has been rapid and transformational. Alongside this development has been a move to a truly research-based profession, which not only uses research to inform treatments, but whose members contribute to the development of new knowledge through their research endeavours. Within the academic sector, government policy framed in terms of supporting and assessing research quality in universities has been a significant driver of (and challenge for) research development within emerging areas like physiotherapy, as well as other related areas such as nursing. Notable examples of such policy are the Research Assessment Exercise (RAE; now Research

Excellence Framework, REF) in the UK, and here in New Zealand, the Performance Based Research Funding (PBRF) exercise.

While such initiatives are not without their critics, one benefit has been to encourage investment by universities in areas like physiotherapy in order to improve their research performance, and – in turn – their research profile and funding allocation from government. The effect in nursing and the so called allied health professions, including physiotherapy, has been profound (Anderson et al 2003). New Zealand has been no different: the School's overall PBRF rating announced in 2007 was 3.0, a 1000% increase over its previous score (0.3), and the largest improvement in the University at that time. Over the 5 year period 2007-2011, research activity at the School (organised through its dedicated *Centre for Physiotherapy Research*) has continued to grow significantly: both research outputs (number of full papers in peer-reviewed journals) and income each more than trebled, while PhD student numbers peaked at 23 (School of Physiotherapy 2012). We therefore anticipate a further improvement in PBRF rating when the results are available later in the current year. Providing a strong research foundation for the profession remains a key focus for the School as we move into our second century.

STAFF DEVELOPMENT

Perhaps the most significant aspect of the School's transformation over recent years has been in its staffing. During the transition phase of the School's return to the University in 1996, the highest degree held across the staff was at Masters level; although highly experienced clinicians and educators, most of the academic staff who transferred from the Otago Polytechnic were diploma - and baccalaureate-trained physiotherapists. Within their new home, this was clearly inappropriate for a professional school within a world-ranked, research-intensive university like Otago. It is to the credit of the University, and particularly of the individuals concerned, that within 8 years, all those staff who had transferred to the University had earned PhDs, many while continuing to work full-time.

This represented but the start of a wider programme of staff development in the School which commenced in 2006, and was designed to increase research capacity and capabilities across the School, and to provide staff with opportunities for career progression. This strategy has focussed on the School's Professional Practice Fellow physiotherapists, who are employed in the School's clinics, and clinical education hubs, and with the aim of training all to at least Master's degree level, and for those interested and able, to doctoral level. Since 2008, some 5 former Professional Practice Fellows have completed PhDs and been employed as lecturers or research fellows within the School; of our remaining Professional Practice Fellows on permanent contracts, all have completed or are currently finishing off clinical masters courses.

CHALLENGES FOR THE FUTURE

A reading of Louise Shaw's history of the School provides the background to, and context for, contemporary challenges for the School and the wider profession; it also provides some striking and sobering resonances. Perhaps most significant of these is the continuing issue of underfunding of physiotherapy

education in New Zealand (Baxter 2006), which puts at risk the ability of the schools in New Zealand to provide world-class professional education, to attract the best staff internationally, and to undertake world-class research (Skinner 2007). The Otago School of Physiotherapy is internationally recognised for the quality of its graduates, and for the outstanding contributions to the development of the profession, nationally and internationally, of distinguished alumni such as Robin McKenzie, Brian Mulligan, Stanley Paris, and Joan Walker. For the future, the challenges for the School will be in maintaining the quality of its research and professional education within a restricted funding environment, and in training the next generation of leaders for the profession. While the challenges may be great, these are certainly no less than our predecessors faced over the last century, and – for the future – the opportunities will be commensurately greater.

ADDRESS FOR CORRESPONDENCE

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Figure: Early class at the School of Physiotherapy, University of Otago (Acknowledgements: School of Physiotherapy, University of Otago)

