



**World Confederation
for Physical Therapy**

**WCPT response to COVID-19
Briefing paper 3**

**IMMEDIATE IMPACT ON STUDENTS AND THE
RESPONSE TO DELIVERING PHYSIOTHERAPIST
ENTRY LEVEL EDUCATION**



June 2020

WCPT briefing papers

WCPT briefing papers inform WCPT member organisations and other stakeholders about key issues that affect the physiotherapy profession.

In response to COVID-19, WCPT is producing a series of briefing papers exploring the education, practice and advocacy issues arising for the profession.

Acknowledgement

In response to COVID-19, WCPT is producing a series of briefing papers exploring the education, practice and advocacy issues arising for the profession. The purpose of the task force is to gather key stakeholders and actors in physiotherapy entry to practice education from the global community. It brings together individuals from across WCPT's regions, from education, regulation and accrediting organisations collaborating to:

- establish the short-term impact and consequences of COVID-19 on physiotherapist entry to practice education
- map and share best educational practice and resources in responding to the current crisis
- consider collective responses to the consequences for physiotherapist entry-to-practice education in the short and medium term
- consider the longer term forecast horizon and issues that may need to be addressed
- consider questions and opportunities for collaborative scholarship and thought leadership

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Key Messages

Three thousand eight hundred and forty (3,840) students enrolled in over 400 higher education institutions (HEIs) across 52 countries participated in a survey on the early experiences and consequences of COVID-19 on entry level physiotherapist education. The responses provided an insight into how students experienced this period of uncertainty and change as the programmes they followed resolved the immediate challenges and addressed short-term issues. The survey also captured students' concerns and recommendations for the future post-pandemic return.



- 70% of HEI used e-mail to communicate updates and information about the COVID-19 pandemic, 50% used institutional website and 46% used online learning platforms.
 - students were satisfied with the quality and reliability of information, transparency, regularity, frequency, quick response time and timeliness of communication
 - students appreciated the willingness of educators to provide feedback and guidance
- 67% HEIs used online videoconferencing and 53% used online platforms to deliver courses, while only 4% percent of students reported that their institution did not offer courses via digital means.
- To deliver the programme most HEI combined various approaches: 79% provided real time lectures, 55% provided assignments with feedback, 40% used group work, 40% pre-recorded lectures and 16% used peer learning.
- Students recognised the key role that educators played in making the transition to online learning manageable for them, particularly students who were working on their final projects or theses. Students highlighted strengths, such as:
 - flexibility, availability, and accessibility of educators
 - their commitment to students
- a majority of students were worried about their clinical placements (58%) and the effects on their future (38%)
- Echoing the results of the HEI survey, students' recommendation for the future included:
 - ensuring **flexibility** in the programme to accommodate the diverse needs of students and the diversity of situations in which students must learn during the pandemic, including recognition of the implications of a digital divide
 - **creativity** in finding solutions for delivering education during the pandemic, while ensuring the **practical and clinical skills development**
 - maintaining good and effective **communication** about the current issues related to the programme as well as the future prospects

➤ Introduction

The results of the student survey are presented using the adapted version of the McKinsey and Company (2020)¹ global health crises response framework. We adapted the framework for our first briefing paper in this series that focused on the immediate consequences of COVID-19 on physiotherapy entry level education programmes across the world. The adapted version of a McKinsey and Company model describes five horizons of the COVID-19 response that inform our guiding questions and timelines for the purposes of the work of the Education Task Force (Box 1).

Box 1: Five horizons

Resolve	Resilience	Return	Reimaging	Reshape
How were the immediate challenges addressed? How did students experience these solutions?	How were the short-term challenges addressed? What worked the best for students? What improvements did they suggest?	What does return look like for students? What lessons have been learned? How do students see their return? What are their concerns?	What do students see as actions that educators can take to improve learning experience in the future?	What changes will occur, or be driven, in health, education and practice?

Purpose

The purpose of this paper is to highlight students' perceptions of the immediate consequences of COVID-19 on physiotherapy entry level education programmes across the world. It also aims to capture and share students' perspectives that may serve as a point of reference for higher education institutions as they are planning for the future.

➤ Context

WCPT is made up of 121 member organisations across five regions and from low, middle, as well as high resource countries. There is great diversity in the education experiences in the countries/territories of its member organisations.

Globally there are a variety of contexts in which education takes place, as well as a diversity of health care delivery systems in which physiotherapy is practised. Political, economic, social, technological, legal, and environmental contexts may influence entry level education as well as students' learning experiences. These were explored in the first [briefing paper on HEIs](#). Contextual factors may also influence how the decisions are made in the immediate response to COVID-19 and how the future actions are shaped. In addition, countries and regions are at different stages of the outbreaks affecting individuals, communities and societies differently giving us time to learn from each other.

Decisions made in entry level programmes, in response to Covid-19, have had various impacts on students depending on the stage in the programme they were at. To date it has affected their learning experiences, their ability to complete studies and opportunities to enter the workforce. Taking into

¹ McKinsey & Company (2020) COVID-19: Briefing materials. Global health and crisis response. Updated: March 25 2020.

<https://www.mckinsey.com/~media/mckinsey/business%20functions/risk/our%20insights/covid%2019%20implications%20for%20business/covid%2019%20march%2025/covid-19-facts-and-insights-march-25-v3.ashx>

consideration students' perspectives is essential in the process of re-thinking physiotherapy entry level education, as well as the profession of physiotherapy. Bringing forward experiences from different parts of the world will help us work together on solutions to current challenges that we are all facing, regardless of country or home organisation.

➤ **The task force: Bringing diverse perspectives**

Globally, it is accepted that most physiotherapist entry level education programmes were forced to make changes due to the demands of the COVID-19 pandemic realities. These have significantly impacted students' learning experiences and their ability to complete their studies. A majority of programmes pivoted to online delivery, and modified, suspended or cancelled practical training activities. This had a varied impact on students as they found at different stages of their studies; but particularly those students who were at the end of their studies and close to completion of their degrees were impacted the most.

Recognising the impact that these changes were having on students, the American Council of Academic Physical Therapy (ACAPT), Centro Latinoamericano para el Desarrollo de la Fisioterapia/Kinesiología (CLADEFK), European Network of Physiotherapy in Higher Education (ENPHE) and WCPT collaborated on a survey to gather information on the students' experiences and perspectives to gain insights for future planning.

➤ **Global survey 2: Students' perspectives**

ACAPT, CLADEFK, ENPHE and WCPT conducted a global survey to collect students' perspectives on the immediate impact of COVID-19 on education delivery, including students' concerns and suggestions for the future. Data was collected in both English and Spanish in the period between 3rd April and 30th May 2020. Students were recruited through formal and informal networks.

Three thousand eight hundred and forty (3,840) students enrolled in over 400 higher education institutions across 52 countries responded to the survey. Eighty percent (80%) of students were enrolled in a university professional or bachelor's degree programme, 15% were in a doctoral programme, and 2% were enrolled in a Master's programme. Forty four percent of respondents were in the first or second year of their programmes, 27% were in the third year and 30% were in the fourth or fifth year.



➤ **Resolve**

Communication

Communication between students and their higher education institutions (HEI) was important in the initial response to the COVID-19 pandemic. HEIs used multiple means of communication to provide their students with updates and information about the COVID-19 pandemic. The students reported that 70% of HEIs communicated updates and information about the COVID-19 pandemic via e-mail, 50% via institutional website and 46% via online learning platforms, such as Blackboard or Moodle. Just 2% of HEIs communicated with students using social media such as Facebook or WhatsApp. Students were satisfied when they were regularly informed about the current situation. They appreciated quick responses to their questions. Students did not have a preferred mean of communication.

Students were asked to identify what worked well for them in the way their institution communicated about the current situation and to provide suggestions for improvement in communication. Their responses were summarized in Table 1. Students appreciated the quality and reliability of information, its transparency, regularity, frequency and timeliness. Quick response times, and the availability and willingness of educators to provide feedback and guidance, were highlighted by students as positive aspects of communication.

Table 1. Students' perceptions of how HEI communicated during the COVID-19

Working well 	Areas of improvement 
The quality of information provided through website of the institutions	Continue improving the communication process with more information on both COVID-19 and its impact on educational process
Reliability of information	Improving platforms, being more systematic with channels of communication, and adjusting communication for use online and in social media
Transparency	Providing information on measures for the next academic period and future perspectives
Frequency of communication	Providing clear and concise information
Timelines of information	Differentiating between information about COVID-19 and educational activities
Regularity of communication	Providing timely information about assignments and deadlines
Quick response	Using multiple modes of communication (videos, visual information, shorter and interactive pieces)
Availability	Providing more consistency with planning and schedules
Concerns to guide and give feedback to students	Q & A sessions for students to hear students perspectives and help with crisis management

Areas of improvement that students identified were mainly related to separation of COVID-19 specific information from information related to educational process. They suggested providing clear and concise information about future perspectives, assignments, timelines, schedules and deadlines by using multiple modes of communication including multimedia, and opportunities for students to ask questions in real time.

➤ Resilience

Delivery

Physiotherapy programmes have responded in various ways to manage the delivery of education during the pandemic. A majority of HEIs (67%) turned to online videoconferencing such as Skype, Teams, and Zoom to deliver lectures, while 53% used online platforms such as Blackboard or Moodle

to deliver courses. Four percent (4%) of students reported that their institution did not offer courses and 10% reported that they did not take any course at the time of survey.

Digital divide



The following quotes from two students illustrate the digital divide that students reported:

“ Other students cannot really cope and fully participate in each of the classes because they do not have the means to do it. Alternative solutions are needed for students whose resources or personal conditions do not allow them to connect to any class in the established modality and schedule.

Although assumptions are often made about the ubiquitous presence of technology in lives of young people, moving to online delivery of all courses exposed the digital divide among students. Some students pointed out that they did not have a stable, reliable and affordable internet connection they needed to participate in online learning.

Students identified positive sides of the online education and made recommendations on how to improve the online delivery of the program (Table 2).

Table 2. Students' perceptions of online education

Working well 	Areas of improvement 
Good interaction between educators and students	Improving learning platforms
More discipline and commitment	Improving connectivity
Availability of recordings, lectures and learning materials	Strengthening capacity of educators to teach online
More feedback	Improving use of interactive tools
Pre-recorded lectures are more efficient than real time sessions	Increasing active learning
Efforts made by lecturers and their ability to transfer information	Improving workload management
Well organized courses and sessions	Improving consistency and structure of the courses (technology, content, assessments)
Scheduled time and duration of conferences	Providing materials in advance such as presentations, lecture notes
Quality of online sessions	Providing more flexibility

Students recognised the role of educators and their efforts to organise and deliver courses, provide structure, timelines as well as flexibility during the pandemic.

One student said:



The teachers are really receptive about everything and keeping in mind the difficult time all of us are having.

However, students also pointed out the need for more understanding, as students were dealing with multiple pressures at home due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Below are the comments of two students:





Be considerate of the ones who have a hard time completing the tasks given because of valid reasons, especially when there is pressure given, we also have responsibilities at home.

We are experiencing pandemic situation. Everyone is not stable mentally to cope up with academics. Please understand that. The students are worrying if they can survive this pandemic.

Teaching approaches

The most commonly used approaches to deliver the programme included real time lectures 79%, assignments with feedback 55%, group work 40%, pre-recorded lectures 40%, and peer learning (16%). Students identified what was working well and areas for improvement (Table 3).

Table 3. Students' perceptions of online education

Working well 	Areas of improvement 
Real time lectures in which they could interact, ask questions, and get feedback	Being more responsive to student needs and more opportunities for individual contacts
Real time lectures in which they could interact, ask questions, and get feedback	Being more responsive to student needs and more opportunities for individual contacts
Availability of materials (presentations, handouts) prior to the sessions	Improving feedback process on activities
Availability of pre-recorded lectures	Improving alignment and being more flexible with deadlines including extensions for additional tasks
Availability and affordance of online learning platforms	Improving learning strategies and online learning approaches to deliver courses
Mix of teaching approaches used	Organizing better group work
Methods used for theoretical classes	Using quizzes to help students keep on track
More discipline and commitment	Providing more online resources for learning practical skills

Assessment

Fifty percent (50%) of students reported that the theoretical exams were conducted as online or take home exams, while 14% stated that their theoretical exams were replaced by other types of assignments or tasks. While communication was one of the priorities for HEIs and students, 19% of students reported that they had not received information about exams. Sixteen percent (16%) of students did not have exams at the time of the survey.

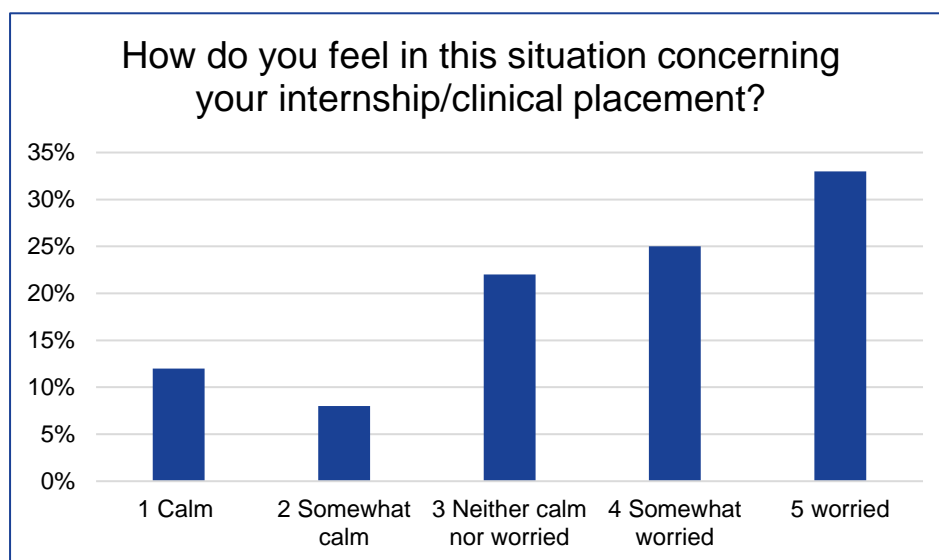
While only 11% reported that their theoretical exams had been postponed to a later date, practical exams had been postponed for 23% of students. Twenty seven percent (27%) of students reported that they did not have information about the practical exams and 21% did not have exams at this time. However, 33% of students reported having practical exams either online (22%) or by having other assignments or tasks instead of practical exams (11%).

Clinical placements and internships

While 26% of students reported that they did not have a clinical placement at the time of survey, clinical placements had been postponed for 25% of students and 19% of students had not received information about it. Only 7% of students continued their internship or clinical placement without interruption and 17% were given other tasks instead.

When asked about how they felt about the situation concerning their clinical placements or internships, 58% responded that they were somewhat worried or worried, 20% felt calm or somewhat calm, while 22% stated that they were neither calm nor worried (figure 1).

Figure 1 Students feelings about internships/clinical placements



Final Year Project/Thesis

Out of all students who responded to the survey, 33% were undertaking the final year project or thesis. Nineteen percent (19%) of survey respondents stated that they continued with their final year project or thesis work uninterrupted, while 7% reported that the process was on hold or postponed and 6% did not have information about it.

Not many students commented on what worked well and the areas of improvement. However, those who did, mostly spoke about their supervisors when asked about what worked well. Students identified availability, support, understanding, flexibility and regular communication with supervisors.

One student stated:



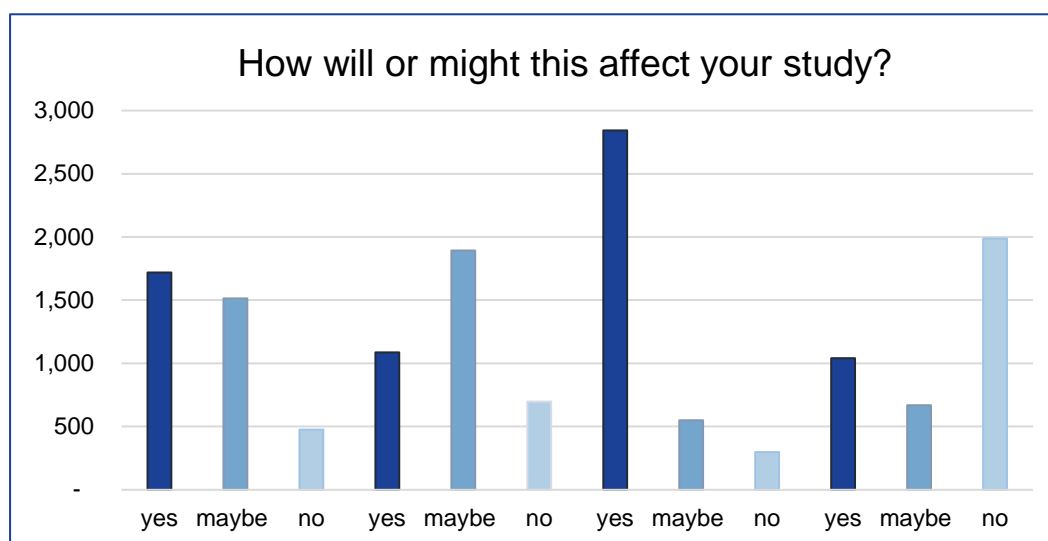
It seems like they are flexible and understanding about our frustrations. They are solution orientated.

In addition to giving high marks to their supervisors' students reported that having their final presentations online using videoconferencing worked well for them.

➤ Return

Looking into the future, students were asked about their main concerns and how the HEIs responses to the COVID-19 pandemic would affect them. Almost a quarter of students who responded to the survey stated that their studies will be delayed and for 15% of them some form of compensatory measures were taken to prevent the delay. Thirty eight percent (38%) of respondents stated that they were worried about these effects on their future.

Figure 2 Effects on studies



Students expressed their concerns about both the short- and long-term impact of this interruption in their education, including their confidence in what they have learned theoretically and practically.

One student stated:



My studies are both theoretical and practical and right now I'm losing all the practical lectures so I don't feel as confident in the theoretical part. I'm wondering and worried about the impact it will have on the rest of my education.

Students' main concerns about the future that should be taken into consideration by their HEI are:

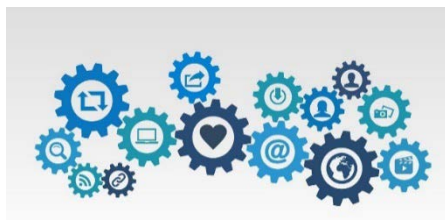
- Delay in their studies
- Delayed graduation
- Possibility of cancellation of the next semester
- Suspension of clinical practice and missing out practical and hands on learning
- Not feeling ready for employment
- Feeling overwhelmed and struggling with motivation
- Tuition fees, eligibility for financial aid

➤ Reimagine and reshape

Information gathered in the survey of students about responses of their HEIs to COVID-19 captured both positive and challenging aspects of the changes as perceived by students enrolled in physiotherapy programmes around the world. Similarly to the HEI survey, results of which we have reported in our first briefing paper [Immediate impact of COVID-19 on the higher education sector and response to delivering physiotherapist entry level education](#), this survey focuses primarily on the resolve, resilience and return stages of the crisis response. In addition, it provides students' recommendations on how to move forward to reimagine and reshape the future of physiotherapist education. Students recommended listening to their voices and working with them to overcome the challenges, improve learning experiences, and prepare employable and confident graduates in extraordinary times, ensuring their readiness for professional practice.

The main lessons learned from students' responses echo those reported from the HEI survey:

- Flexibility
- Creativity
- Communication



Flexibility

What worked well for students was the flexibility of their educators when delivering the programme, using various technologies, setting the learning activities, timelines, assignments, assessments and deadlines. Therefore, when preparing for the next academic year, students recommended paying attention to flexibility of programmes, as well as the emergency solutions that have been put in place, in order to accommodate for diverse needs and situations in which students have found themselves during the pandemic (e.g. low connectivity and interrupted internet access, mental health issues, etc.).

Creativity

COVID-19 has forced HEIs, educators and students to rapidly adjust to a new normal of living and learning during the pandemic. Students recommended improving online teaching skills for educators and online learning skills for students, as it could facilitate finding creative and flexible solutions. Creative solutions to maintain the programmes were appreciated by students, allowing them to learn

and continue their education. However, the concern that students share with educators about [developing practical skills through the clinical and practical part of physiotherapy education](#), has to be addressed creatively and innovatively when reimagining and reshaping it in the future.

Communication

Students recommended maintaining regular, timely, clear, comprehensive and forward-looking communication about a range of issues including schedules, deadlines, and assignments to decisions about the programme and alternative solutions for theoretical classes. They particularly emphasized the need for better communication about the practical and clinical part of their education. Having information about their future prospects will, to some degree, assist students with the burden of dealing with uncertainty that was reported as an issue by some students. The following quote from a student illustrates the impact of COVID-19 and their concerns about the future:



How will this situation effect on our future? How will it effect on business for my parents? How will we write exams? When will this situation finish? I am scared of some exams because I think that professors will demand too much from us, and we know that this situation effects every one of us and sometimes I cannot concentrate and I cannot learn every day.

Recommendations

Students also made the following recommendations:

- Make more efforts to teach practical skills, and give practical assignments to apply theoretical knowledge.
- Ensure a more systematic digital transformation in the post-COVID period that goes beyond the emergency response.
- Avoid overreliance on one way of teaching online by using various online tools and activities, by giving students choices to interact, engage and participate synchronously and asynchronously.
- Improve online learning skills of students on how to learn and educators on how to facilitate learning online.
- Improve and ensure accessibility for all student to online platforms and tools used in teaching-learning processes.
- Develop student support services (e.g. tutoring, online skill development, mental health support).

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