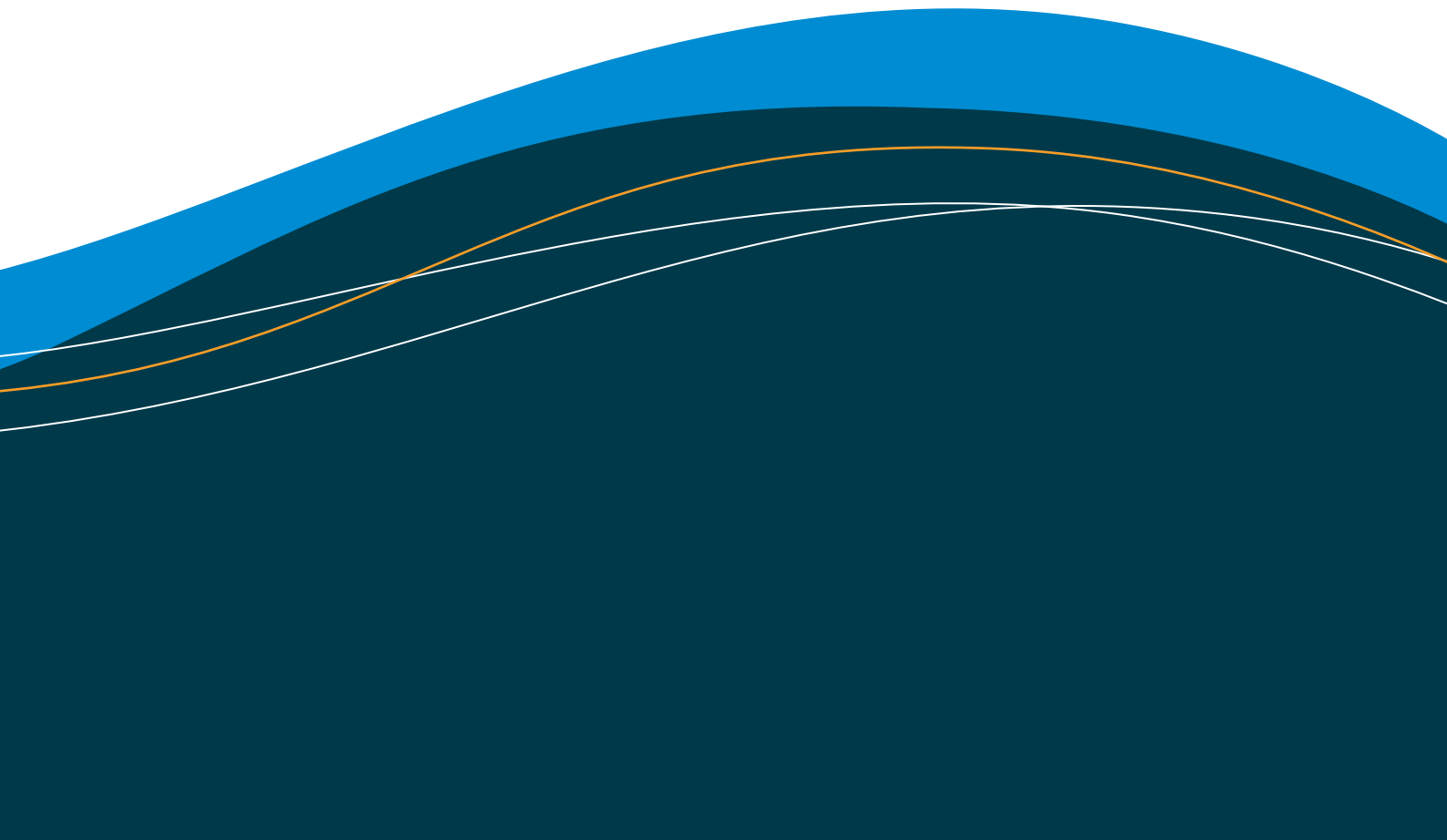




AUSTRALIAN
PHYSIOTHERAPY
ASSOCIATION

Physiotherapy. Shaping our future together

NEXT GENERATION WHITE PAPER



About the Australian Physiotherapy Association

Physiotherapy is an essential pillar of our health system. The Australian Physiotherapy Association's (APA) vision is for all Australians to have access to quality physiotherapy, when and where required, to optimise health and wellbeing and for the community to recognise the benefit of choosing physiotherapy.

The APA represents more than 35,000 members. We are the peak body representing the interests of Australian physiotherapists and their patients and a national organisation with state and territory branches and special interest subgroups.

The APA corporate structure is one of a company limited by guarantee. The APA is governed by a Board of Directors elected by representatives of all stakeholder groups within the Association.

We are committed to professional excellence and career success for our members, which translates into better patient outcomes and improved health conditions for all Australians. Through our national groups we offer advanced training and collegial support from physiotherapists working in similar areas.

Physiotherapy. Shaping our future together: Next Generation White Paper

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Introduction

As healthcare continues to evolve, so does physiotherapy. The next generation of physiotherapists is entering the profession with fresh perspectives, ambition and a strong commitment to making a meaningful contribution. Their transition from academic training to professional practice presents a critical opportunity to strengthen the workforce, enhance patient care and help build a more adaptable, sustainable system.

This white paper is aimed at policymakers, educators, healthcare employers and physiotherapy professionals, offering insights and strategies for supporting early-career physiotherapists in their transition to practice. Student and early-career voices have been incorporated throughout and it is our hope that this paper may also serve emerging practitioners navigating the challenges of starting their careers.

While physiotherapy education provides a solid theoretical foundation and structured clinical experience, the shift to independent practice presents new challenges. This white paper explores how we can better support early-career physiotherapists to transition confidently and thrive. By understanding their expectations, values and aspirations—and identifying gaps between education and workplace realities—we offer practical strategies to enable success.

These strategies include fostering inclusive workplace cultures; expanding mentoring and supervision; embedding flexible, targeted professional development; and reimagining traditional career pathways.

To ensure effective transition and adaptation, skills development must be prioritised through meaningful investment in emerging practitioners. Development can be accelerated in workplaces that prioritise growth, inclusion and purpose. A new approach is needed—one that seamlessly transitions new graduates into professional practice through modern learning methods and accelerated skills training.

As we look to the future, we must ask: are we truly listening to early-career physiotherapists? Are we understanding their needs, supporting their development and laying the foundation for a stronger, more sustainable profession?

Dr Rik Dawson

APA National President



Part 1: Empowering growth, thriving workplaces



It's time to begin the conversation

Experience and expectations

Population growth and demographic shifts are projected to increase health workforce demand,¹ which can only exacerbate the existing supply shortages identified in 80 per cent of professional health occupations.² Addressing this challenge requires strategic reforms to bolster recruitment, ameliorate maldistribution and retain existing talent.

By 2030, generation Z—those born between 1996 and 2010—will represent nearly half of the physiotherapy workforce, ushering in a new era of possibilities and challenges. Shaped by the lasting effects of the COVID-19 pandemic, this cohort brings fresh perspectives and adaptability to evolving professional landscapes. As they navigate the demands of their careers, they embrace new ways to study, practise and grow, contributing to the profession's continued advancement.

The new generation views work differently. They seek meaningful roles that have a significant impact and understanding this is key to unlocking their true potential.

It is essential to capture and respond to the aspirations of those just beginning their careers if we are to ensure their engagement, foster their growth and align their potential with meaningful contributions to the changing workforce. As expectations rise and the face of physiotherapy evolves, employers must adapt to attract and retain top talent. We must identify barriers and harness opportunities. Now is the time to start this important conversation.

The expectation gap

Expectations set the foundation for how early-career physiotherapists perceive their roles and responsibilities, influencing their career intentions and professional practice. Managing expectations is essential—without realistic perspectives, mismatched ideals could lead to unnecessary frustration. A balanced approach helps practitioners find fulfilment while adapting to the practical demands of the profession.

The biggest challenge for new physiotherapy graduates isn't unique to this generation—it's the shift from student to autonomous healthcare professional. They enter unfamiliar environments, face heavier workloads and must quickly adjust to independent decision-making. While clinical placements provide structure, professional practice introduces unpredictability, requiring resilience and the ability to adapt.

This generation's education has been shaped by precision, with clear expectations throughout high school, university and clinical placements. The transition to a workplace where flexibility and risk-taking matter as much as technical skill can feel like a sharp adjustment. Support systems, particularly supervision, remain critical in helping graduates navigate this shift.

Another key factor is the gap between industry expectations and graduate readiness. Employers often expect new graduates to be fully independent from day 1, yet structured support—beyond clinical skill-building—remains essential in developing resilience, managing stress and balancing competing demands.

In defining a meaningful path forward, new graduates benefit from establishing a sense of direction in their careers while staying adaptable. Realistic expectations from the start can help bridge gaps and improve job satisfaction.

Our *2025 Workforce Census* showed that most graduates were satisfied with their decision to become a physiotherapist. However, concerns about remuneration, workload and the gap between job expectations and reality were also evident. Understanding how professional expectations are shaped—whether through education or other influences—could help improve alignment and support graduates effectively.

Figure 1: Factors contributing to the expectation gap.

The expectation gap—students and graduates

Most (**71%**) students and graduates are happy with their choice to pursue a career in physiotherapy, with 13% having no strong feelings.

Of those who were dissatisfied (16%):



82%
dissatisfied with their career choice because **remuneration** does not measure with their expertise and skills



77%
felt that the **reality of physiotherapy** work was not what they expected



52%
felt unprepared for the **heavy workload**



50%
felt that there were **insufficient mentoring** opportunities

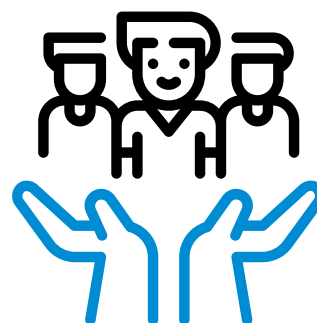
Source: APA Workforce Census 2025

Mentorship matters

A key opportunity for improvement lies in the transitional phase between graduation and professional practice. Strengthening mentoring and guidance during this period is essential. New graduates also benefit from proactive engagement in their own development. As the peak professional body, the APA shares in this responsibility, ensuring that the profession as a whole fosters a supportive environment for its newest members.

Mentoring invests in the next generation of physiotherapists, ensuring the profession's longevity.

For the APA, supporting the physiotherapists of the future is a top priority. We've found that developing support networks, both with mentors and peers, can be incredibly effective in easing the transition of graduates into the workforce. Instilling a sense of belonging through professional socialisation is also very beneficial, immersing learners in the profession and fostering a connection to the professional community.³ This connection is a powerful motivator, especially when new graduates feel included and respected.



A new generation has arrived

Meet the next generation of physiotherapists—driven, ambitious and ready to shape the future of healthcare.

Inspired by a passion for helping others, they chose physiotherapy for its hands-on impact, its ability to improve lives and the deep connection it fosters with patients. They bring fresh perspectives, value work-life balance and seek workplaces that foster connection, flexibility and inclusion. Their expectations and experiences provide valuable insights into the changing landscape of physiotherapy.



Jiwon Baek
Student

I was drawn to physiotherapy because it balances practicality with critical thinking. It allows me to work closely with people while contributing to outcomes that help individuals become stronger and more independent. The ongoing impact on people's lives continues to inspire me.



Anusha Budehal
Student

My undergraduate honours project inspired me to pursue physiotherapy, driven by the opportunity to translate research from bench to bedside and make a real-world impact. I'm passionate about developing broad clinical skills and applying evidence-based practice to improve patient outcomes.



Jessie Edwards
New graduate

After sustaining a serious foot injury, I realised I needed a career path and that led me into physiotherapy. I loved the environment during my treatment. Since then, I've thoroughly enjoyed helping people improve their movement and live their best lives by regaining strength and confidence.



Javad Ghamaryasl
Student

My background in orthotics and prosthetics sparked my passion for rehabilitation and helping people regain independence. After years of designing orthotic devices and seeing their transformative impact, I wanted to take a more hands-on approach to patient care.



Katherine Hickey
New graduate

I danced for over 20 years and trained at a pre-professional level and my physio was the reason I could keep doing what I loved. I wanted to become a physio to pay it forward. Physio combines my love of problem-solving and a fascination with the human body.



Nia Luu
Student

Studying physiotherapy has given me the platform and courage to do what I've always wanted: help people feel healthier, stronger and happier. I'm passionate about using my knowledge to make a meaningful difference in others' lives.



Abeshek Nadarjah
New graduate

I chose this career to make a meaningful difference in people's lives through hands-on, holistic care. My goal is to grow as a compassionate physiotherapist, specialise in orthopaedics or musculoskeletal rehabilitation and contribute to research and education.



Calum Neish
New graduate

After high school, I wasn't quite sure what I wanted to do and started with law. Despite my interest in human rights, I quickly realised I wanted a career that involved more direct interactions with community members in a job that is active and on the go.



Hannah Pfaff
New graduate

With a background in sport and dance, I decided to pursue physiotherapy after a work experience opportunity showed me the impact it can have. I saw how it helps individuals regain confidence in their bodies and return to the things they love.



Tara Sims
Student

I fell into physiotherapy after spending a few years out of school, not knowing what I wanted to do with my life. Since then, I haven't looked back. I genuinely love all aspects of physiotherapy. I am grateful I've chosen a career that is so rewarding and is all about making a meaningful difference in people's lives.



Alexander Young
New graduate

This profession can have such strong positive impacts on people's lives, whether it is getting them back onto the sporting field, helping them return to work or enhancing their health and wellbeing. I am passionate about collaborating and growing the profession and being innovative for the future.

Viewpoint

How the next generation is positioned and what they expect

This white paper is grounded in the best interests of new graduates, recognising that the transition to professional practice is not just about adapting. It is about activating their potential and drawing on the collective strength of a multigenerational profession. Resilience is not a fixed personal trait—it is built through supported experiences. Graduates thrive in systems that recognise emotional labour, provide feedback loops and allow for professional growth. When supported by experienced practitioners, early-career physiotherapists are more likely to develop clinical confidence and resilience and to contribute innovative ideas to patient care.

This section outlines the lived experiences of early-career physiotherapists as they move from university into practice. Their stories reflect a shared reality: the transition is often more difficult than expected. Challenges such as limited placement exposure, imposter syndrome, burnout risk and the pressure to choose a specialisation early are recurring themes.

Despite these concerns, this generation is not cynical. They are determined. They want sustainable careers with strong mentorship, clear progression, inclusive cultures and workplaces that acknowledge both the demands and the rewards of physiotherapy. Flexibility, community and purpose are valued as much as technical skill development.

Their reflections provide critical guidance. Supporting this cohort means not only addressing structural barriers, but also reshaping the support systems that carry them into the workforce. In the sections ahead, we explore practical solutions that align the aspirations of the next generation with the capabilities and responsibilities of the profession.

A collection of insights

The shift from academia to private practice is rarely seamless. For new physiotherapists, limited exposure to clinical experiences and expected workloads adds to the challenge, making the early months feel uncertain.⁴ However, confidence grows through hands-on experience, repeated exposure to common cases and the realisation that expertise develops over time.

We asked a selection of our students and recent graduates about their university experience, career expectations and transitions into practice.



The shift from being a student to becoming a practising physiotherapist was overwhelming at first, especially because I didn't have much exposure to private practice placements. I faced imposter syndrome and felt lost in the first months but repeated exposure to common cases helped to slowly build my confidence.

New graduate perspective



While universities provide a strong foundation, there is an opportunity to integrate more hands-on training with emerging technologies. Lecturers introduce these advancements but deeper practical learning would help students develop the skills needed to effectively apply them in clinical practice.

Student perspective



Digital proficiency

Building confidence early requires real-world experience, while digital proficiency ensures adaptability in modern healthcare. A collaborative effort across education and industry will shape a resilient, future-ready workforce.

Key point | Physiotherapy graduates are skilled but limited placement opportunities shape career decisions in unintended ways.



Clinical exposure

Not all students feel fully prepared for the diverse career opportunities available upon graduation. While the APA advocates for targeted funding to expand placements and diversify training settings, limited options can lead graduates to follow familiar paths—not necessarily by choice, but due to availability.



COVID-19 disrupted my degree, wiping out early observational placements and leaving only final-year rotations. While placements helped me rule out areas I didn't enjoy—like the emotional toll of neuro rehab—they didn't guide me toward a preferred specialty. Some felt like 'sink or swim' experiences, preparing me for private practice, but the lack of variety meant I chose musculoskeletal work more out of familiarity than exposure.

New graduate perspective



With hospital experience, I'm confident in manual handling and patient safety but have yet to explore private practice. After seven years at university, I seek a sustainable career in physiotherapy while remaining aware of burnout risks and limited professional development. This final year has sparked interest in management and public health policy, leading me to consider a non-clinical path within the profession.

Student perspective

Key point | Students see greater emphasis on observational placements as a pathway to enhancing their learning.



Frequency

Feedback from students and new graduates suggests that more frequent, short observational placements throughout physiotherapy education could enhance career decision-making.



Physiotherapy education could benefit from more frequent, short observational placements throughout the degree, offering broader exposure to different fields and helping students make informed decisions. Even brief experiences in varied settings would provide a clearer picture of potential paths.

New graduate perspective



As a third-year student, I've mostly done simulated practice and felt there wasn't enough time dedicated to observational placements. We only had one opportunity, which limited my ability to explore different areas of physiotherapy.

Student perspective



I appreciate the hybrid learning approach—it allows students to work part-time, which is essential for those supporting themselves or their families. Graduates from pre-online learning struggled with this due to time constraints. More early observational placements would help; five clinical placements aren't enough. Choosing a research project reduced mine to four, limiting opportunities to explore the many areas of physiotherapy I'm interested in.

Student perspective

Key point | As new graduates transition from academic rigour to clinical practice, their expectations shift, shaped by early workplace experiences and the support structures available to them.



The reality of practice

Navigating patient complexity remains a defining challenge, requiring adaptable skill sets and continuing professional development. Alongside these challenges, concerns about burnout were prevalent in discussion with emerging practitioners. A 2024 global systematic review published in *Physiotherapy* reveals an eight per cent prevalence rate of burnout among physiotherapists, with 49 out of 53 identified contributing factors considered avoidable.⁵ Distinguishing between occupational stress and clinical burnout is crucial; understanding this distinction is key to implementing effective support strategies that can help graduates thrive.



In my second year, I went on my first clinical placement and a supervisor mentioned that many physiotherapists leave the profession within seven years due to burnout. This was quite demoralising, especially after all the hard work I had put into my studies. It made me question whether this could be a long-term career for me.

Student perspective



My hospital and private practice placements have given me valuable insight into the daily realities of physiotherapy. While I've enjoyed the clinical experience, I'm still uncertain if it's the right long-term fit, especially with concerns about burnout and career sustainability. Earlier exposure to a broader range of placements might have helped me feel more confident in my path.

Student perspective

Key point | Flexibility and work-life balance are increasingly valued by new graduates and support structures are key to retention in the context of unclear career pathways and financial considerations.



Flexibility in work

This generation places a high premium on work-life balance and positive workplace relationships, viewing flexibility in work arrangements as essential to meeting their personal and professional needs. The transition from student to practising physiotherapist will largely be shaped by the workplace culture they enter. Graduate positions that offer flexibility, foster community and promote inclusion are likely to attract the best talent because these elements directly influence job satisfaction and career longevity.



As I entered the workforce, I knew I didn't want to be confined to four walls. Flexibility and variety matter to me—mobile rehab offers that and I continue personal training on the side. I've seen how working across different settings helps prevent burnout. Having a supportive boss and team also makes a big difference, both professionally and personally.

New graduate perspective



Your first job shapes your career, so structured support—like a two-year internship model used in medicine—could offer new grads a safety net, reduce attrition and improve job readiness. Now in the workforce, I also see how pay doesn't always reflect the effort or responsibility. Even senior physios often earn less than peers in comparable fields, raising questions about long-term sustainability.

New graduate perspective

Summary insights

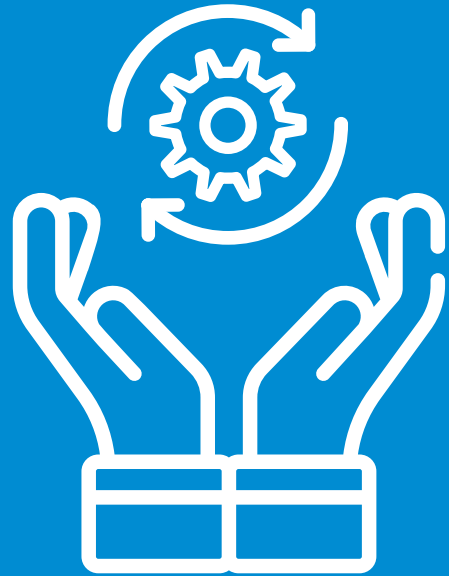


Insight to action

Students and early-career physiotherapists highlight the importance of strong support systems and clear career pathways to tackle challenges like burnout, remuneration and retention. Exploring how these perspectives align with those of employers and universities will uncover critical gaps and opportunities to better prepare professionals for sustained success. The following chapters look into these themes in more detail, offering actionable insights to bridge the gaps and strengthen the workforce.

Part 2:

Skills building and career framework



Bringing their voice and vision to life

Skills to adapt and thrive

Our early-career physiotherapists are not just adapting to their new roles; they are actively shaping the future of the profession. From university to practice and beyond, continuous learning and adaptability are essential for professional growth. As industries evolve, so too must the skills and approaches of those within them. From the insights shared by our students and recent graduates, we see a resilient and highly skilled cohort ready to excel, with opportunities to further refine their readiness for the profession.

Providing the right support means balancing the freedom to explore with enough structure to guide informed decision-making.

Looking ahead, there are significant opportunities for the profession. To seize these, it is important to provide the next generation with structured support that builds confidence, consolidates essential skills and equips them to navigate uncertainty and the emotional aspects of care. While self-motivation and career planning lay the foundation, true growth is strengthened by mentorship, self-reflection programs and tailored guidance—key elements that empower future leaders to step into formal roles and drive success.

Beyond clinical skills, graduates need strong soft skills to adapt and thrive. Critical thinking, leadership and teamwork are essential, yet workplaces often struggle to develop both technical and professional capabilities. Investing in emerging practitioners through mentorship, structured reflection and targeted skill building supports their transition and long-term growth. Workplaces must take an active role in bridging this gap—embedding support systems within existing structures to ensure that practitioners feel equipped for the realities of professional practice. The next step will be a more formalised solution to ensure that workplaces actively support both technical and professional growth, making investment in early-career professionals a strategic priority.

Viewpoint

Effective education-to-job transitions

In the future, just as we place the patient at the centre of their care, the individual acquiring new skills will be at the heart of the learning process. This approach will emphasise just-in-time, lifelong learning for physiotherapists, ensuring they receive contemporary, evidence-informed education precisely when needed.

Skills development will require investment in emerging practitioners, which can be accelerated in the workplace through environments that nurture growth in responsive ways. A new approach is needed to support education-to-job transitions and to adapt to contemporary modes of learning, moving beyond traditional timelines to more rapid skills training.

As the next generation of physiotherapists enters the workforce, it will be crucial to register and respond to their expectations. This requires a commitment that goes beyond standard onboarding—a commitment that supports them throughout their entire career journey. We all have a stake in this effort: students and new graduates as active participants in their own learning and growth; the current physiotherapy workforce including, importantly, employers in both private practice and the public sector; educators; national and state governments; and the APA.

A collection of insights

New-graduate physiotherapists may not have a clear career path laid out before them from day 1. Building the required resilience and skills confidence and mapping out a career pathway can be a lifelong journey. Clarity up-front and agile skill building in the early years are important.

We asked a selection of our students and recent graduates about what matters most to them as they enter and navigate the early career stages.



I'm thinking a lot about how to navigate career pathways and the different opportunities available. It's not always straightforward and having clear guidance on how to move forward in the profession would be really valuable.

New graduate perspective



I'm also thinking about career pathways and future options. I want to have the ability to progress and diversify within the profession. It's not just about staying in one lane; it's about being able to explore different specialisations or even leadership roles.

New graduate perspective



For me, establishing my own clinic is the biggest goal and challenge ahead. It's about taking the skills I've learned and building something sustainable but also thinking about how to differentiate myself in a competitive field.

Student perspective

Key point | How they move along their career journey matters and they seek greater certainty, particularly regarding their progression along the career pathway.



Facilitating career movement

Supporting career mobility within the profession is vital for growth, enabling practitioners to explore diverse opportunities and pathways. Fair and equitable remuneration that reflects expertise is essential for sustaining long-term motivation and commitment. However, concerns about burnout remain a significant factor in this equation.



For me, the biggest question is one of career progression and ensuring that remuneration matches the level of skill and responsibility we take on. As we advance in our roles, it's important that our compensation reflects that growth. This is a concern I've heard echoed among many of my peers.

New graduate perspective



For me, it's all about career progression, consistent professional development and making sure remuneration keeps pace with the level of our expertise. These are all interconnected and without consistent growth and fair compensation, it can be challenging to stay motivated long-term.

New graduate perspective



I totally agree with others in the group. Career progression is a big one and so is figuring out where exactly I want to go within the profession. The pathways can sometimes feel a bit unclear so understanding what the options are and having support to navigate them would be really helpful.

New graduate perspective



I'm focused on finding that first job as a new graduate but I'm also concerned about burnout and how to balance career development with wellbeing.

Student perspective



I'm with everyone else on this—burnout is a big worry for me. I'm already thinking about working as hard as I can at the start and just hoping I can sustain that. The idea of burning out early in my career is something I'm mindful of.

New graduate perspective



Right now, my main focus is on finding a new graduate position that fits me well and where I'll enjoy my work. I want a role that matches my skills and aspirations and provides the right environment for growth.

Student perspective

Summary insights



Insight to action

Students and new graduates must balance personal motivations with workforce realities. Self-efficacy and career adaptability are key to navigating the complexities of practice. Finding new ways for the APA to support them in overcoming challenges, such as adapting to new environments, managing workload expectations and finding strong and consistent support, will be essential.

When expectations clash with the realities of practice, it's time to shift the narrative. Employers, recent graduates, tertiary institutions and industry associations all have a role to play in ensuring a seamless and effective transition. Mentoring could be initiated by experienced APA members or partnered professionals during the final year of study, offering guidance tailored to students' intended career paths—whether in private practice, public health or community health. This support might include structured sessions, shadowing opportunities or targeted workshops to ease their transition into the workforce.

Career pathway

From foundation skills to expert-level practice

The next generation of physiotherapists need real opportunities to learn and evolve in their careers, which begins with access to and the ability to capitalise on peer, mentor and industry connections. The APA is committed to supporting its members throughout their career journeys, from foundational skills to more advanced-level practice. We are exploring innovative solutions to make professional development more accessible and aligned with the evolving needs of our profession.

Creating a better model for career support means embracing the lifelong learning continuum. This model must be flexible, recognising the changing needs of populations and their health priorities and the evolving role of physiotherapists. Success is a dynamic journey that develops throughout a physiotherapist's career—key markers include positive patient outcomes, career advancement and contributions to the profession.⁶ This active pursuit of success involves making informed choices, heavily influenced by self-reflection and mentoring.⁷

Building capacity for lifelong learning is key to thriving in a rapidly changing world. Opportunities must be relevant, flexible and available across different contexts to meet the evolving needs of learners. We need to provide ongoing education to ensure people are continuously learning and growing—career-long support from graduation to retirement. However, there remains a gap in providing specific support during the early career stages. Formalising a distinct career pathway at the association level for students and new graduates is important. This process begins at university but must continue as our new graduates transition to practice, serving as an entry point to foundational professional development.

The APA Career Pathway offers a clear structure for career navigation, from student years to advanced professional practice. This is supported by an educational framework that ensures quality offerings and the achievement of explicit learning outcomes.

The pathway provides a platform to help physiotherapists work towards recognition of a progressive increase in their expertise through four career milestones. It does not assume that all physiotherapists will follow a linear career trajectory and recognises that some practitioners will develop breadth across a range of areas, particularly in the earlier milestones (Milestone 1—Foundation and Milestone 2—Intermediate).

Figure 2: The APA Career Pathway.



To stay aligned with the evolving landscape of public health, professional titling should continue to adapt. While traditional distinctions remain valuable in specialist areas, modern practice increasingly calls for a more integrated approach. Physiotherapists today must navigate the complexities of ageing, frailty and multi-morbidities in the hospital setting. The true specialty lies in understanding how these factors interact and in shaping recovery trajectories beyond isolated cardiorespiratory, neurological or orthopaedic skills—proficiency in all these areas is essential.

Part 3:

Professional identity



Physiotherapy as a career of choice

Defining who we are as a profession

At the core of high-quality healthcare practices are concepts such as patient-centred care, evidence-informed practice and value-driven approaches. Patient values are placed at the forefront, reinforcing the essence of physiotherapy as a profession dedicated to delivering value-based healthcare. This focus on value aligns physiotherapy with broader healthcare goals and reinforces its role in a collaborative, evolving system.

A strong professional identity is central to ensuring that physiotherapy remains a career of choice.

Our identity is shaped by a deep sense of professional responsibility alongside a commitment to partnering with patients in their care. The social contract that exists between a physiotherapist and the community calls for a unified identity—one anchored by values that align with the discipline, enabling individuals to ‘think, feel and act’ as members of the profession.⁸

So, how strong is our professional identity? This question not only prompts us to reflect on our current standing but also underpins a sense of belonging for the next generation of physiotherapists.

The formation of professional identity

Physiotherapy is a discipline rooted in ancient times. Today, it stands on a robust evidence base, ensuring the highest levels of effectiveness and efficiency in healthcare.

Defining and maintaining our professional identity in the face of change is not just a matter of preserving our past but of paving the way for a bright future. It is about ensuring that physiotherapy continues to evolve, adapt and thrive, meeting the needs of patients and the healthcare system today and tomorrow.

The formation of professional identity is closely tied to a sense of belonging, making it an essential component of the learning and training pathway. This process shapes who we are as a profession and our impact on the world. It not only deepens the psychological connection to the core discipline but also serves as a compass for career decisions, leading to greater satisfaction.

The depth and breadth of skills within physiotherapy continue to be a fundamental strength. To ensure integrity and effectiveness, each clinician's scope of practice must reflect their training, expertise and competencies, ensuring that they work within their qualifications while contributing to high-value care. Together, we have a key role in advancing and protecting our core discipline scope. This clarity of purpose establishes a clear value narrative for physiotherapy within the healthcare system. It is through recognition of these skills by funding bodies that patients gain access to the care they need.

Cultivating a strong professional identity early in a physiotherapist's career—starting at university and continuing through the early years as a new graduate at the foundation level—can lead to better career choices and greater longevity in the profession.

Forming a strong professional identity during the early career stage is vital—it shapes a physiotherapist's sense of belonging, career satisfaction and long-term commitment to the profession.

The APA plays a crucial role in establishing a distinctive physiotherapy identity. This supports physiotherapists and learners in articulating and presenting the scope of practice and aids in advancing funding opportunities.

A strong culture of lifelong learning continues to shape physiotherapy, with many practitioners pursuing opportunities for professional growth, upskilling and career development. For some, formal pathways such as progression to titling represent significant milestones and a meaningful way to deepen expertise. While specialist recognition may be a goal for a subset of the profession, the broader emphasis remains on continuous learning and evolving practice across diverse career trajectories. Equally important is the profession's ability to support a wide range of career trajectories. These pathways promote long-term engagement by allowing physiotherapists to grow across clinical, academic, policy and leadership roles.

Within the broader context of allied health, it is essential to distinguish the unique identity of physiotherapists from the diverse range of professions encompassed. The APA advocates for recognition of physiotherapy's distinct expertise, ensuring that its role is understood and valued rather than being generalised under the allied health umbrella. By doing so, the APA ensures that the value and contributions of physiotherapists are clearly recognised and understood, fostering greater professional cohesion and public awareness.

Viewpoint

Factors shaping their identity

Emerging physiotherapists have a variety of views on the qualities that make a great practitioner. For some, the most aspirational qualities are research expertise or leadership skills. For others, it's the ability to build strong rapport with patients and demonstrate empathy. As early-career physiotherapists interact with and are guided by more experienced colleagues, what they witness and admire will be what they endeavour to emulate as they develop their skills and professional identity.

A collection of insights

Early-career professionals don't just seek success—they seek role models who embody it.

We asked a selection of students and recent graduates about the key influences shaping their professional identity as they take their first steps in the profession.



During my placements, I've only worked with a couple of physiotherapists but what really stood out to me was the strong rapport they built with their patients. The patients spoke very highly of my supervisors and the special relationships they developed over time. I want to be able to relate empathetically to my future patients and communicate effectively, just like them. Those are the traits I want to emulate as a future physiotherapist.

Student perspective



My role models are from the physiotherapy department, where I've seen professionals who are incredibly dedicated to advocating for students. They are open to adapting to what students need and are willing to address changes. Advocacy and leadership are qualities I deeply respect and I would like to embody those in my career.

Student perspective

Key point | Early-career professionals shape their identity through role models who embody expertise, advocacy, creativity and meaningful patient connections.



I really admire physiotherapists who are creative while maintaining a strong, evidence-based practice. Those who can think outside the box and try new things that fit within a patient's social environment or recent research, yet still deliver effective treatment, are the ones I look up to. It's something I aspire to be able to do in the future—combine creativity with solid, research-backed practice.

New graduate perspective



I have two role models, who are both lecturers with immense expertise. One was recently invited to collaborate with NASA and the other has established concussion and neurology practices in the UK and Australia. I aspire to be as knowledgeable and experienced as they are. If I could achieve even half of what they have, I would consider it a great accomplishment.

Student perspective



What sets physiotherapists apart?

Joining a profession means becoming part of a community. Our feelings about that community significantly influence our job satisfaction, making belonging a powerful motivator.

A newly qualified physiotherapist's professional identity is shaped by their formative years, health-related experiences, education, ethics training and placements. While their training lays a strong foundation, real-world practice will truly define it. They will face specific challenges in patient care, including working with individuals who have complex conditions, responding to diverse needs and navigating emotional and psychological aspects of care. These experiences will shape and refine their professional identity.

A strong sense of belonging can enhance job satisfaction and commitment to the profession.

The strength of our profession lies in an unwavering commitment to building a supportive and inclusive community. We must ensure that every physiotherapist has the chance to grow, whether through specialisation or through exploring diverse career paths, establishing a strong foundation for the future. By encouraging continuous learning and collaboration across the profession, we empower practitioners to innovate and excel, enhancing patient care, driving core discipline growth and reinforcing our leadership in healthcare.

Part 4:

Culture and workplace



The talent stakes

Why culture is the key to retention

Workplace culture is no longer just an internal matter—it's a competitive advantage. In a job market where employees move fluidly between employers, organisations that fail to foster a cohesive and inclusive culture risk losing top talent. The stakes are high and retention depends on more than just salaries or benefits; it's about creating an environment where people feel valued and connected.

The focus has shifted from **how** work gets done to **why** it matters. Employees seek meaning, impact and a sense of belonging—especially in a diverse and geographically dispersed workforce.⁹ Addressing the 'why' isn't just a feel-good exercise; it's essential for long-term success. Research shows that workplace stress and toxic behaviours significantly contribute to burnout, making culture a business-critical issue.^{10, 11} To tackle this, diversity, equity and inclusion must move beyond a check-box exercise and become core workplace values.

When diversity, equity and inclusion are prioritised, toxic behaviours struggle to take root and employees can thrive.

A strong culture doesn't just happen. It requires leaders to actively shape how work is done. Building a thriving culture depends on open communication, collaboration and accountability. Sustainable work practices require integrating wellbeing and burnout prevention into organisational strategies.¹² By creating a culture that values and supports all employees, organisations can enhance job satisfaction, reduce turnover and ensure that the physiotherapy workforce is well equipped to meet the diverse needs of the Australian population now and in the future.

An alignment on values

Aligning organisational values with employee expectations is essential for fostering a thriving workforce.

New research has provided valuable insights into the workplace and workforce intentions of early-career physiotherapists. The study found that physiotherapists highly valued workplaces with a culture of support, mentoring and team inclusion that provided a sense of community.¹³ They preferred workplaces that aligned with their personal and professional values, especially early in their careers, with a strong emphasis on learning and support.^{14, 15} For some, the positive and collegial culture was the main reason they intended to stay in their current workplace, despite other challenges.¹⁶



Featured insight:

Dr Roma Forbes

Associate Professor Roma Forbes is a musculoskeletal physiotherapist and academic at The University of Queensland. She leads a national program of research examining the experiences of new-graduate physiotherapists, particularly within their first two years of practice, as they transition into the workforce. Her work explores their preparedness for diverse clinical settings, skill development and workplace and career intentions.

Roma draws on research to outline key evidence-based strategies that may enhance workforce retention, improve professional support systems and align career development opportunities with the evolving expectations of new graduates.

What matters to new-graduate physiotherapists

The transition from student to physiotherapist is an exciting yet challenging phase, shaped by the expectations new graduates bring and the realities they encounter in practice. By understanding what truly matters to new graduates, we can better support their growth, retention and long-term impact on our profession.

The workplace

New-graduate physiotherapists are driven by a strong commitment to patient care, continuous learning and finding a workplace culture that aligns with their values. Workplaces that strike a balance between autonomy and support, value ethical and high-quality patient care, and actively invest in professional development are the most appealing, especially in the context of long-term commitment. While workload intensity is a reality in physiotherapy practice, new graduates feel more committed to workplaces that manage workload demands, support work-life balance and provide fair remuneration.

New graduates define workplace success as more than just meeting traditional performance indicators like productivity or efficiency. They are motivated by their impact on patient outcomes, so success should be measured by factors reflecting high-quality, patient-centred care rather than just financial or output metrics. Open conversations between employers and new graduates about shared goals help balance organisational objectives with the growth, learning and impact that matter to new graduates. Aligning workplace achievements with both employer priorities and new graduates' values fosters purpose and long-term commitment.

Workplace support

Workplace support is essential for success in the early stages of a physiotherapist's career. Research emphasises that both structured and informal support play a critical role. New graduates value flexible, personalised support that adapts to their individual needs, especially when navigating clinical situations requiring immediate guidance. Structured transition programs are also highly valued. To support workforce retention and professional growth, workplaces and the profession must strike a balance between structured support and the flexibility needed to meet individual learning needs.

Professional development as an investment

New-graduate physiotherapists place high value on continuing professional development (CPD) that is practically relevant and accessible. CPD is often viewed as an 'investment', with decision-making tied to immediate workplace skills and long-term career aspirations. Research shows that new graduates use critical thinking skills developed during university to evaluate, select and engage with CPD opportunities. They actively use digital platforms such as social media as informal learning tools, assessing the credibility of information and integrating insights from their professional networks. CPD must evolve to offer greater flexibility, accessibility and relevance, providing not just immediate practical use but a foundation for long-term career advancement.

The gen Z factor

When choosing and staying in a workplace, today's new-graduate physiotherapists, predominantly gen Z, prioritise work-life balance, career flexibility and alignment with personal values. They are drawn to workplaces that foster their growth, acknowledge their contributions and support their evolving professional aspirations. Unlike previous generations, new graduates are open to exploring diverse workplaces and career pathways early in their careers, while maintaining a strong commitment to the physiotherapy profession.

Moving forward

To enhance workplace retention and ensure the long-term sustainability of the profession, we must adapt to the evolving expectations and values of new graduates. Educators, employers and professional bodies have a unique opportunity to:

- support sustainable workloads to ease the transition into the workforce
- prioritise a workplace culture that aligns with personal and professional values
- embed structured and informal mentorship and support into workplace culture
- redefine workplace success beyond KPIs
- expand access to flexible, high-quality CPD to enhance clinical expertise and career progression
- advocate for funding and care models that facilitate physiotherapists' involvement in preventive and primary care.

By prioritising workplace culture, support and professional development that align with new graduates' values, we can retain emerging talent and empower the next generation of clinicians to thrive, lead and shape the future of our profession.

The burnout factor

New-graduate physiotherapists often feel engaged and satisfied in their first year of practice but many also face burnout.

Is the real emergency burnout? Burnout often signals deeper systemic issues like poor workplace culture, excessive workloads and lack of support. Organisations must foster environments where employees can thrive, not just by providing resources, mentorship and guidance but by addressing these systemic issues.

To help future healthcare professionals navigate the emotional and psychological challenges of the job, we need to focus on strategies that can help mitigate risk factors for burnout and cultivate resilience before they start working. Once new graduates are in practice, building support around them at the earliest stage of the career journey is key. Effectively tackling burnout involves both systemic changes and individual support. Fostering healthy, supportive work environments empowers new graduates to make a significant impact on their patients' lives.

Research by Associate Professor Kerrie Evans and Professor Lucy Chipchase and colleagues highlights the importance of understanding these experiences and developing strategies to support young professionals and improve workforce retention.



Featured insight:

Associate Professor Kerrie Evans

Associate Professor Kerrie Evans is the Group Chief Group Education and Research Officer for Healthia Limited Australia and works both as an academic and as a clinical physiotherapist. She is a part-time senior research fellow at The University of Sydney and, prior to commencing this role, was a senior lecturer at Griffith University for more than 15 years.

Striving for a cohesive, positive culture

The transition from student to autonomous healthcare professional can be one of the most difficult phases in a physiotherapist's career. During this period, new graduates must rapidly develop clinical confidence, manage patient expectations, adapt to workplace culture and navigate administrative tasks—all of which can be emotionally and cognitively demanding. In this context, traits like grit (passion and perseverance for long-term goals) and resilience (the ability to adapt and recover from stress) may play a significant role in the ability to manage the realities of working in private practice. New graduates who embrace reflective practice and actively seek feedback and support from those around them typically demonstrate greater adaptive capacity. Characteristics aligned with grit, such as persistence, self-direction and initiative, can be enablers of early professional capability.

However, relying solely on personal traits like grit and resilience to explain or ensure graduate success is problematic. A growing body of evidence highlights burnout—characterised by emotional exhaustion, depersonalisation and reduced professional efficacy (or low personal accomplishment)¹⁷—as a pressing concern among new-graduate physiotherapists. Contributing factors include high case loads, diagnostic uncertainty, the need to meet (perceived or real) expected standards, unexpected administrative load and pressure to meet performance targets. While psychological resilience and grit may assist in coping with short-term stress, focusing on these characteristics alone does not address the structural or systemic contributors to burnout. Overemphasising resilience and grit can also inadvertently shift responsibility away from employers and workplace culture, suggesting that coping is a personal rather than collective or organisational issue.

There is also concern that idealising grit and resilience can contribute to unhealthy professional norms. New graduates may interpret struggling as a personal failure rather than a predictable aspect of learning, discouraging help-seeking behaviours and promoting stoicism. Over time, this may lead to emotional suppression, disengagement and burnout, undermining long-term career sustainability. Therefore, while grit and resilience are valuable qualities, they must be nurtured within environments that also provide psychological safety, manageable workloads, meaningful mentorship and support.

Ultimately, promoting the wellbeing and retention of new-graduate physiotherapists requires a dual approach: developing individual capacity while creating supportive systems that recognise the complexity of early-career practice and actively mitigate burnout risks.

Figure 3: Strategies to build resilience and prevent burnout—a shared responsibility.



Diversity matters

Building a diverse and inclusive workforce

Australia is the land of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, the First Peoples and Traditional Custodians who have cared for Country for tens of thousands of years and maintain the world's oldest living cultures, grounded in deep connections to Country, community, identity and spirituality. Today, Australia is also a culturally and linguistically diverse nation, with many communities contributing to its rich social and cultural fabric.

This diversity exists among patients that physiotherapists provide care for and should be reflected in the physiotherapy workforce. Yet the physiotherapy profession is largely homogeneous and lacks significant representation of people from varied backgrounds, including Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, culturally and linguistically diverse groups, and those of diverse sexual orientation, gender and ability.¹⁸

While a diverse workforce can be built by attracting and recruiting people from all walks of life to the physiotherapy profession, the existing physiotherapy workforce must reflect on the variety of patients they care for and actively engage with their diverse experiences and identities, including culture, gender, sexual orientation, socio-economic realities and abilities.¹⁹ This is essential for maintaining a physiotherapy workforce that can work to its full potential and respond to the different needs, preferences and expectations of the patients and communities they serve.

Physiotherapists should undertake continual reflection on the assumptions and norms within the physiotherapy profession, including considering ways in which we may—intentionally or unintentionally—discriminate against, marginalise or exclude people or groups.²⁰ This includes women, who are under-represented in leadership roles in a profession that is female-dominated. According to the 2025 APA Workforce Census, men (22 per cent) are more likely to hold a management role than their female counterparts (15 per cent) and men earn, on average, eight per cent more than women do—underscoring the need for systemic change to bring about greater equity within the profession.²¹

Exceeding tolerance within the realm of diversity and inclusion in physiotherapy entails progressing from simply accepting differences to actively appreciating and honouring a variety of perspectives and identities and incorporating them into clinical practice, education and workplace culture.

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander workforce

Maximising Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander participation in the health workforce is a critical component of any approach to improving health outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, who experience a health burden twice that of non-Indigenous people.²²

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people constitute 3.8 per cent of Australia's total population,²³ yet they are significantly under-represented in the physiotherapy profession, comprising just 0.7 per cent.²⁴ Increasing the number of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander physiotherapists benefits both individuals and the system as a whole, enhancing cultural safety for both providers and patients. Health outcomes improve when care is culturally safe.

To achieve a critical mass of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander physiotherapists, physiotherapy needs to be seen as a viable career option. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people wishing to pursue physiotherapy need to be provided with the necessary tools and framework, creating equitable opportunities and environments that incorporate Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander perspectives at all levels. This includes targeting initiatives at Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander secondary students to ensure that they undertake prerequisite mathematics and science subjects, providing these students with access to role models and mentors, and linking support services for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students throughout the education spectrum.²⁵



Featured insight: **Curtley Nelson**

A proud Dunghutti descendent, Curtley Nelson is a physiotherapist and academic at the University of Queensland. Curtley also served in the Australian Defence Force and currently works with Australian Defence Force members and veterans as a musculoskeletal physiotherapist. Curtley is a member of the APA's Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Health Committee and a council member of the Australian Physiotherapy Council.

Shifting the dial

Increased advocacy for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander affairs within physiotherapy education, media and politics has significantly raised awareness among new graduates.

The evolving landscape of health education continues to emphasise the importance of understanding the unique strengths and diverse cultures of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. This growing awareness is motivating new physiotherapy graduates to commit to a lifelong learning journey focused on cultural safety.

Research shows that new graduates are eager to continue their education in cultural safety when working with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities.²⁶ This desire mirrors the expectation from Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples of healthcare practitioners' continuous education on cultural safety, extending beyond pre-professional training and into the early stages of a graduate's career and beyond.²⁷

Cultural safety is an ongoing journey that requires continuous learning and is inherently personal. It involves a process of *listening, connecting and reflecting* on one's own practices and how they may impact Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. Engaging in *listening* highlights the openness and humility needed from students, new graduates and experienced physiotherapists as they start to connect with the essential knowledge and concepts vital for practising in a culturally safe manner.

Connecting requires mutual respect, which can be fostered by gaining a deeper understanding of cultural safety. This includes exploring personal relationships with Country and the specific cultural contexts of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. *Reflecting* on personal assumptions, biases, power imbalances and cultural beliefs is vital for recognising how these factors influence our physiotherapy practice. This continuous self-reflection builds richer, more meaningful perspectives on cultural safety.

Research indicates that offering a range of opportunities—such as modelling, mentoring, creating safe spaces for discussing cultural safety topics, improving access to resources like local knowledge and supporting reflective learning—can enhance the cultural safety skills of physiotherapists at all stages of their professional journey.

New graduates can make valuable contributions, helping staff, organisations and the wider physiotherapy field engage with cultural safety in a more informed way. Remaining open to learning from Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples about their culture and history is crucial. Ongoing professional development should be framed within the lifelong learning journey of cultural safety, offering opportunities to enhance capacity in *listening, connecting and reflecting*.

By embracing these approaches, physiotherapists can further their understanding of cultural safety, helping to implement best practices in culturally safe physiotherapy for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. These insights can also be extended to embrace the diverse cultures that enrich Australian society.

Looking ahead

Emerging technologies and digital capability

While this white paper focuses on supporting early-career physiotherapists, we recognise that the future of practice will be shaped, in part, by engagement with rapidly evolving technologies.

AI is transforming physiotherapy across patient care, research and education but the real breakthroughs will come from clinicians who lead its integration. Watch for experts exploring collaborative models, ethical standards and tech-rich curricula that preserve empathy and clinical judgement. It's not about replacement—it's about shaping AI to serve physiotherapy's human core.



Experts to watch:

Associate Professor Leo Ng

Leading the way is Associate Professor Leo Ng, a clinician, educator and innovator known for pioneering AI tools, automated feedback and immersive learning at Swinburne University of Technology. He advocates for clinician-led tech integration and digital literacy in physiotherapy education, ensuring that future practitioners are equipped to navigate emerging tools while preserving empathy and clinical judgement.

The 2025 World Physiotherapy Congress in Tokyo explored this topic. Physiotherapists from around the world shared in a dynamic informal discussion about adopting and harnessing the benefits of emerging tech as well as their concerns.

How AI is reshaping physiotherapy and how physiotherapy can shape AI

The session was more than a conversation about tools. It was a global reality check.

Clinicians, researchers and educators from across the different regions explored not only how AI is being used but where it's falling short—and why physiotherapy must lead its ethical evolution.

Efficiencies were described as transformative. **Christopher Lo** from Singapore outlined the way AI tools like ChatGPT and DeepSeek reduced labour-intensive tasks in systematic reviews and policy drafting from week-long to half-day efforts, freeing clinicians for higher-impact work. Others echoed its growing role in research appraisals, patient education and clinical reasoning.

However, enthusiasm was matched by caution. AI 'hallucinations'—fabricated references and flawed outputs—remain a concern. A participant from Pakistan noted that persona-based prompts improved responses but still required manual verification. The consensus was that AI can boost efficiency but not replace clinical judgement or rigour, which are foundational to physiotherapy.

Rodrigo Rizzo of Neuroscience Research Australia talked about how AI-powered conversational agents could address communication gaps in primary care—before, during and after consultations. Their success, he stressed, depends on clinician-led design, clear safety frameworks and stronger digital literacy across the profession.


There was a sense of urgency in relation to equity, ethics and sustainability. Concerns were raised about the environmental impact of large AI models and the risks of sharing sensitive health data. Raona Williams, a physiotherapy educator working across the UK and UAE, warned that ethical risks persist—from absent data protocols to biased datasets—and that clinician involvement is vital in shaping how these tools are designed, governed and used.

The session closed with a shared understanding—AI and assistive technologies are now embedded in practice. Physiotherapists have a critical role in steering their future and in ensuring that integration is driven by care, ethics and equity, not just by efficiency.



Experts to watch: **Jason Giesbrecht**

Physiopedia Plus instructor, senior healthcare leader and physiotherapist **Jason Giesbrecht** offers future-focused reflections on physiotherapy and innovation in this concise blog series.

Artificial intelligence and machine learning: As algorithms grow smarter, how will physiotherapy adapt?	Virtual reality: The implications of virtually simulated environments in rehabilitation and therapy.	Augmented reality: Merging the physical and digital worlds to enhance therapy outcomes.	Robotics and exoskeletons: Aiding mobility and more—robots could be our new assistants.
3D printing: Custom orthotics and equipment, tailor-made for individual patients.	 Dive into the series to discover a fresh perspective and spark new ideas for the future of physiotherapy		Genomics and personalised rehabilitation: Unlocking a new level of individualised therapy.
Big data and predictive analytics: Informed decision-making and forecasting patient recovery paths.	Telemonitoring/ wearables and IoT devices: Remote care and continuous monitoring becoming the norm.	Virtual care: Consultations, therapy and follow-ups—all from the comfort of your patient's home.	Regenerative therapies: Beyond symptom management—healing and restoring function at the cellular level.

Part 5: Shining a light on physiotherapy education



Shifting pathways

Thriving through transformation

Education remains the driving force behind physiotherapy's future. As healthcare embraces precision medicine, predictive diagnostics and prevention-first strategies, physiotherapy must evolve—and it starts with the way future practitioners are trained. Emerging technologies will redefine treatment approaches but they remain tools to enhance, not replace, the human connection at the profession's core. Physiotherapy must not sit on the sidelines. It must take charge, ensuring that advancements serve patient care and practitioner growth and enhance the future of healthcare.

Like every industry facing disruption, physiotherapy will not be immune to transformation but it will endure, adapt and thrive.

A strong training pipeline is essential to physiotherapy's future. Greater investment is needed to ensure that students and graduates transition confidently into independent practice, equipped with the skills to meet evolving healthcare demands. Yet without funded clinical placements, this evolution stalls. The missing piece isn't just innovation—it's experience. Prioritising these placements, particularly in primary care and rural communities, is critical to bridging the gap between education and practice, turning knowledge into competence and potential into leadership.

In the next section, we take a closer look at how physiotherapy training has evolved, the significant advancements that have shaped its progression and what's needed to build a future-ready workforce.

How training has changed and where it is headed

Summary of *'Shifting pathways: the future of physiotherapy education'**

Physiotherapy education in Australia has evolved rapidly, from state-run diploma courses to a diverse and modern university-based system offering bachelor, master and doctor of physiotherapy qualifications.

While all pathways lead to entry-level clinical competency requirements set out by the Australian Physiotherapy Council, the way physiotherapists are trained has shifted dramatically in response to global events, workforce needs and educational reform.

The disruption caused by the COVID-19 pandemic forced universities to re-evaluate teaching methods and placement models. Simulation-based learning and hybrid delivery modes became essential and have now become permanent features of many curricula. This shift paved the way for more flexible, student-driven and independent learning approaches.

Traditional lectures and written assessments have increasingly given way to case-based, experiential and problem-solving learning, often supported by digital tools. With the rise of AI, assessments have adapted to ensure students demonstrate applied understanding rather than simply recall. At the same time, there is growing recognition of individual learning styles, prompting a move toward more personalised and supportive educational experiences.

Unlike a research doctorate, a doctor of physiotherapy program is an extended master's, going for three years instead of the usual two.

Many countries, including the UK, only require physiotherapists to complete a three-year undergraduate degree. Some, like Canada, only offer a postgraduate master's degree.

In the USA, physiotherapy education has moved entirely to the doctor of physiotherapy program.

Compared to the programs of the 1970s and 1980s, physiotherapy education is now more evidence-based and patient-focused. On the flip side, educators have a lot more to fit into the curriculum.

Curriculum content has expanded. In addition to core clinical competencies, students are now expected to develop skills in interprofessional care, cultural safety, trauma-informed practice and digital capability. There is increasing emphasis on preparing graduates to work with diverse populations and to understand healthcare systems, advocacy and ethical practice. These additions reflect both health system priorities and broader societal expectations.

Universities are also rethinking how physiotherapy is structured within degrees. Some institutions, such as Charles Darwin University, are taking a more integrated approach to curriculum, focused on health settings rather than specialties. Others have adapted to meet international mobility needs by ensuring that graduates are eligible for registration in countries such as the USA and Canada.

Despite these innovations, several longstanding challenges remain. Placement availability and quality continue to vary across institutions and settings, particularly in private practice. Differences in clinical exposure, supervision models and case complexity can significantly affect graduates' confidence and work readiness. The high cost of postgraduate degrees remains a barrier for many, without corresponding increases in graduate remuneration.

Work readiness, while a shared priority across universities, employers and regulators, is still not consistently achieved. Graduates report that while they meet registration requirements, they often feel underprepared for the realities of clinical workloads, private practice environments and the resilience needed for early-career success. There is a clear need for greater alignment between university curricula, placement experiences and workplace expectations.

The Australian Physiotherapy Council, which oversees accreditation of entry-level programs, has also adapted its approach in response to these shifts. Today, accreditation is a complex but collaborative process involving a range of perspectives from academic staff, the university, employers, clinical educators and students, ensuring that curriculum design reflects the needs of the profession and the community. There is now greater focus on community involvement, digital learning, cultural safety and interprofessional education as core features of program quality.

This transformation in training not only redefines how students learn but also raises new questions about how well prepared they are for the realities of practice, setting the stage for a closer look at work readiness and the next stage of the education-to-practice journey.

** From 'Shifting pathways: the future of physiotherapy education', InMotion, Australian Physiotherapy Association, 2024. Authors: Melissa Trudinger, Brendan Bugeja and Melissa Mitchell. Contributions by: Dr Julie Walters, Associate Professor Verity Pacey, Dr Robyn Fary, Professor Louisa Remedios, Emily Riglar.*



'If burnout and low resilience are some of the reasons why we're losing parts of our profession very early, then all stakeholders including universities need to think about the development of these personal attributes.

We tend to assume that students will build those skills along the way—but we've got to give them the building blocks.'

Educator and researcher **Vidya Lawton**, a senior lecturer and the clinical education manager at Macquarie University.

Viewpoint

The transition to practice

Ensuring that the next generation of physiotherapists is work-ready starts with a more agile, responsive education and training system that builds on the efforts of education leaders and professional bodies.

As the healthcare landscape continues to evolve, so too must our approaches to education and training—both in university education and in post-qualification training. Through continuous adaptation and collaboration with key stakeholders, including the APA, we can ensure that new-graduate physiotherapists are equipped to meet the demands of their profession.

Universities face a tough challenge in preparing students for diverse workplaces with varying needs and expectations. A significant focus has been on enhancing clinical placement opportunities, especially in private practice, and defining the ideal student placement. However, crowded curricula and limited education on both theoretical business models and practical management skills remain hurdles for graduates entering private sector practice.

As discussed in the previous section, curriculum renewal of undergraduate programs is essential to reflect the evolving demands of the healthcare system. Strengthening partnerships between education and the broader healthcare sector is also key. Despite significant progress in establishing the necessary connections and incorporating sector insights, fully preparing individuals for the diverse range of workplaces they may encounter remains a challenge.

Clinical placements

Universities are working hard to tackle the challenges of work readiness and placements. These placements are vital for preparing students for clinical practice but limited exposure to the breadth of real-world practice, including expected workloads, can make the transition to independent clinician more challenging.²⁸ While placements may provide exposure to private practice, the limited scope of activities students are allowed to perform during these experiences can further hinder their readiness.

Graduate outcomes in physiotherapy education show variation across institutions, often linked to differences in clinical exposure and learning opportunities. While all programs meet accreditation standards, uneven access to practical experiences—such as working with complex patient cases or applying manual therapy—can influence student confidence and readiness.

Limited support during placements may further narrow learning depth, particularly in preparing students to manage complex patient presentations.²⁹ Limiting exposure to diverse patient loads and complex cases may diminish valuable learning opportunities, thereby affecting the preparation for professional practice.³⁰ These trends suggest an opportunity to reflect on whether current minimum standards are adequately preparing graduates for the realities of professional practice.

Ultimately, work readiness extends beyond professional education. It requires the right strategy, framework and foundations for success. This begins with setting realistic expectations and understanding that graduates will need more than just discipline-specific knowledge and skills. Universities, the APA, employers and policymakers all play a role in preparing them for the diverse and dynamic environments they will encounter in their careers.

The training pathway

In a policy environment lacking funded supports, including the necessary training pipeline, a new approach is needed.

A key missing piece is ensuring valuable training experiences by funding clinical placements in primary and community care. Prioritising funding for hospital-based clinical placements is also essential to ensure that students gain hands-on experience in acute care settings, aligning educational strategies with workforce demands.

Smooth education-to-job transitions are reliant on a positive training pathway experience. Significantly more investment is required to support the next generation of physiotherapists. We need to help our student and new-graduate physiotherapists transition into confident, independent practitioners. This relies on building a sustainable training pathway, from early-career to advanced-practice roles.

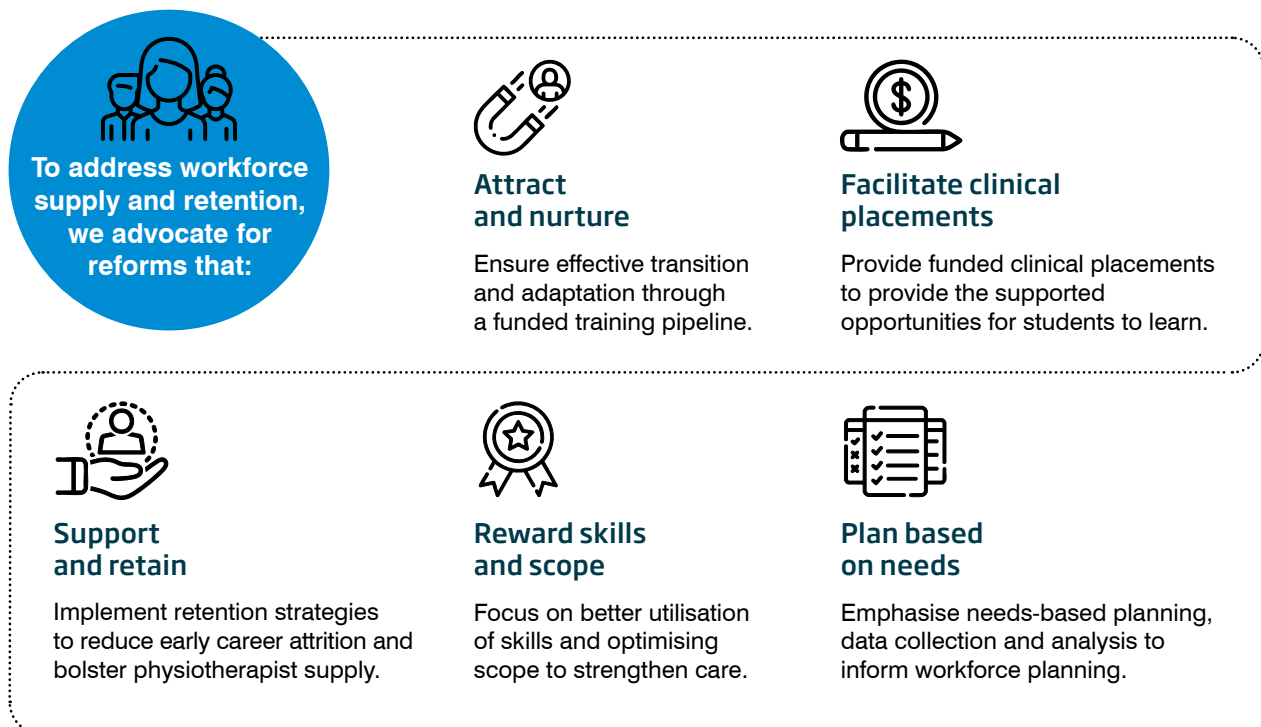
Primary healthcare training should be embedded in the undergraduate curriculum to ensure that future health professionals are well prepared to work to their full scope of practice in primary care settings, as outlined in the Scope of Practice Review Final Report.³¹

Clinical practice placements play an important role in preparing students for practice.

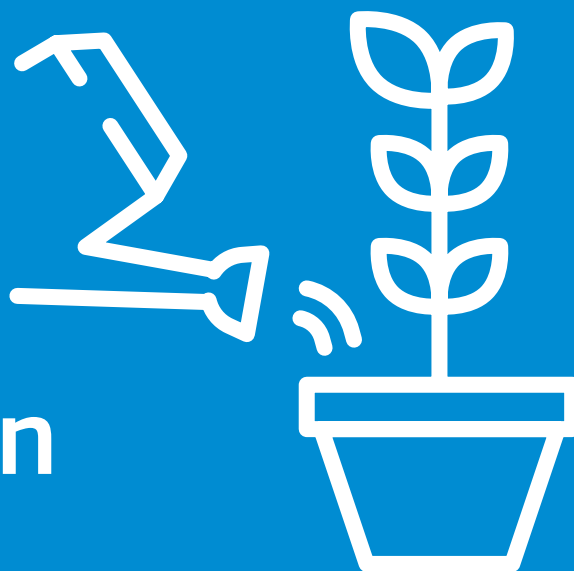
Supporting the next generation of physiotherapists starts with training. Students need the opportunity to develop their skills in a safe environment to enable them to confidently enter the workforce. This requires a supportive and funded pathway experience where students and graduates have the opportunity to experience diverse environments, including rural communities, in short- and longer-term placements in a variety of healthcare settings.

Physiotherapy training programs must include funded clinical placements to provide the opportunity for students to learn in a supervised environment. To ensure that physiotherapy students receive quality primary care education and training experiences, the billing rules for all funding schemes need to be amended, removing barriers that prevent essential learning experiences.

The APA advocates for strategies to manage current and future challenges, from attracting and nurturing talent and facilitating placements to retention and skill recognition.



Part 6: Effective transition and adaptation



Work readiness

Essentials for adaptation

Work-ready physiotherapy graduates are described as those equipped with skills to navigate the complexities of a rapidly evolving healthcare landscape.³² But how realistic is this? The reality of professional practice often presents challenges that may not align with initial hopes.³³ These early experiences are vital, shaping perceptions and aspirations, and significantly influence how early-career physiotherapists view their career trajectories.

How can we ensure that our student and new-graduate physiotherapists transition into confident, independent practitioners?

Navigating the essentials for adaptation requires contextualising these transitions and defining practice readiness to build and inform a more supportive pathway. Modern skill-building is essential to bridge this gap, equipping new graduates with the resilience and adaptability needed to thrive. Developing key competencies in physiotherapy requires a balanced integration of skills, knowledge and professional attributes. This approach ensures that graduates are not only technically proficient but also equipped with critical thinking skills, problem-solving abilities and an ethical grounding.

Prioritising learning preferences, including ‘just-in-time learning’—which provides training as the need arises—is complex. However, skill competencies are only part of the story. The solution also lies in instilling a strong sense of belonging through structured programs that help bridge the gap between academic learning and professional practice. These programs provide students and new graduates with the guidance and support they need. But first, let’s unpack the problem across both private practice and public roles.

Research-based insights

What is graduate readiness?

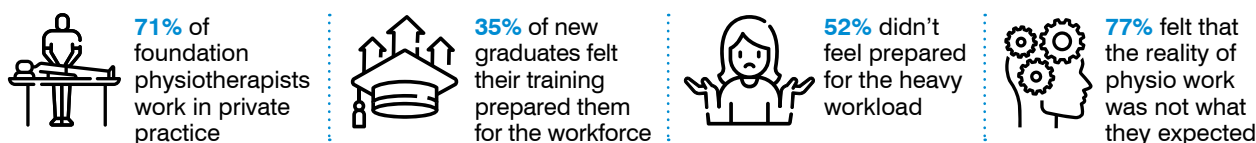
Work readiness refers to how well graduates are perceived to have the necessary skills and attributes for workplace success.³⁴ Achieving this readiness involves balancing the needs of graduates, employer expectations and sector demands.³⁵

A growing body of evidence indicates that new-graduate physiotherapists often feel unprepared and overwhelmed when they begin independent clinical practice.^{36, 37, 38, 39} Many report feeling ill-equipped to handle the increased complexity and volume of patients compared to their student experiences.^{40, 41, 42} While top students excel, there are a significant number who are less prepared for the realities of professional practice. This challenge highlights the importance of authentic clinical placements, which can help bridge the gap between academic preparation and the demands of professional practice, fostering essential skills and confidence.^{43, 44}

This is not new. The transition from university to professional practice has long been a challenging journey for new-graduate physiotherapists. Despite rigorous training, many new graduates and their employers report a significant gap between expected competencies and actual readiness. This issue also isn't unique to physiotherapy—similar challenges exist across allied health and other fields, highlighting the need for stronger support systems to bridge the gap between study and practice.^{45, 46} Our own workforce census shows that our new graduates are underprepared and overwhelmed. This disconnect raises a critical question: what can be done to better support these new professionals as they enter the workforce?

Figure 4: Bridging the gap.

Our new graduates are underprepared and overwhelmed



Source: 2025 APA Workforce Census

Quick poll insights

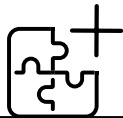
A recent APA graduate readiness quick poll explored key aspects of physiotherapy education, assessed students' and new graduates' preparedness and gathered employers' and supervisors' perceptions of graduate readiness.

The poll received 697 responses, with 69 per cent of supervisors or employers working in private practice, 24 per cent in hospitals and seven per cent in other settings. This distribution aligns with APA membership, where the majority work in private practice.

The top five components of physiotherapy considered most important for workforce entry were clinical reasoning, clinical assessments, manual skills, profession-specific communication and development of treatment plans. While there is general agreement on these core elements, the level of importance varies across groups.

Key results

Clinical reasoning as the core skill



Across all groups except students—new graduates, educators and employers/supervisors—**clinical reasoning** was identified as the most important competency in physiotherapy practice.

Diverging priorities in manual skills



While students considered **manual skills** the most crucial aspect of their training, educators placed relatively lower importance on them compared to other groups. Despite this, manual skills remained among educators' top five ranked competencies.

Emphasis on profession-specific communication



Educators valued **profession-specific communication** significantly more than other groups, underscoring its role in developing effective practitioners.

Varied perspectives on treatment planning



Although **treatment planning** was widely acknowledged as a key component of physiotherapy training, university educators placed less importance on specific treatment elements such as manual skills, exercise prescription, discharge planning and review.

Gaps in multidisciplinary team knowledge and documentation



Employers and supervisors rated knowledge of the **multidisciplinary team** and **clinical documentation** lower than other groups, highlighting potential disconnects in workplace expectations.

Low priority given to time management and business acumen



Students placed significantly less emphasis on **time management**, while **business acumen** and professional knowledge were consistently ranked as the least important skill across all target groups.



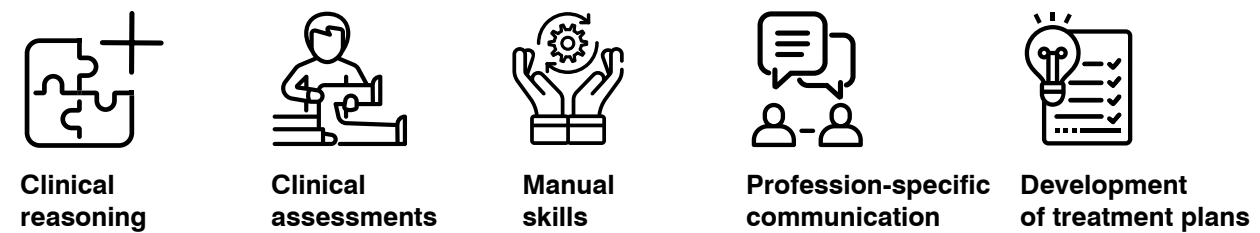
Insight

Work readiness divide



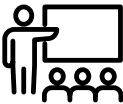

These differences highlight a critical divide that must be bridged to ensure work readiness. Addressing these gaps is essential to aligning training with the realities of professional practice.

Figure 5: Top components of physiotherapy practice across and within key groups.

Top five components of physiotherapy practice (average across all groups)

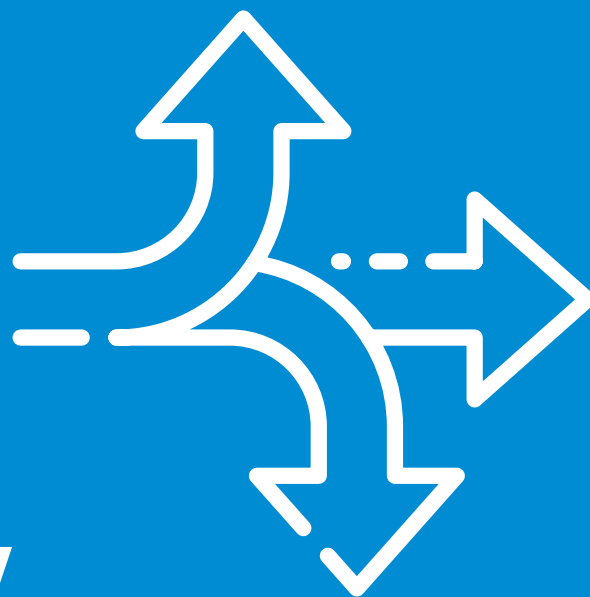


Top components of physiotherapy of each group

<p>Students</p>  <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Manual skills • Clinical reasoning • Subjective and objective assessments • Clinical documentation • Profession-specific communication 	<p>New graduates</p>  <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Clinical reasoning • Subjective and objective assessments • Manual skills • Development of treatment plans • Clinical documentation
<p>Educators</p>  <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Clinical reasoning • Profession-specific communication • Subjective and objective assessments • Manual skills • Development of treatment plans 	<p>Employers and supervisors</p>  <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Clinical reasoning • Subjective and objective assessments • Manual skills • Profession-specific communication • Development of treatment plans

Source: APA Quick Poll Graduate Readiness April 2024

Part 7: Diverging paths: public and private physiotherapy



Across health settings

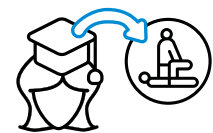
Understanding practice-ready physiotherapists

To truly grasp what makes physiotherapists practice ready, we need to delve into the broader landscape of workforce planning and the diverse demands across various health settings. This discussion takes us from the classroom to the clinic, examining the unique requirements of private practice before focusing on entering the ward and the complexities of hospital physiotherapy.

The transition from classroom to clinic is as much about adapting to diverse systems as it is about mastering clinical skills.

Key differences emerge between the less structured supports in private practice and the more formalised systems in hospital settings. Our goal is to clarify the issues affecting the preparation and transition of new-graduate physiotherapists in both settings, identifying the factors influencing these transitions, to ensure that we can build the right supports around them.

7.1 Private



Navigating the transition to private practice

From the classroom to the clinic

Private practices offer greater autonomy and a variety of experiences but they often lack the structured support systems found in larger organisations. To address this, universities are placing greater emphasis on practical training and real-world experiences. Initiatives such as internships, mentorship programs and collaborations with industry professionals are becoming increasingly important in bridging the gap between education and practice.⁴⁷

In the opinion of many private practice owners, physiotherapy education often focuses more on preparing students for hospital-based roles, potentially limiting their career options.

The evidence base for private practice readiness remains limited. To date, few qualitative studies have examined the preparation and transition of new-graduate physiotherapists into private practice in the Australian context.^{48, 49, 50, 51, 52} However, a few stand-out studies provide valuable insights, helping to fill the gaps in guidance and support for new graduates entering the private practice setting.

Study 1: Transition factors

The first study sought to clarify new-graduate performance in private practice and related transition factors. It has shown that new-graduate physiotherapists possess both strengths and limitations in relation to clinical, business and employability knowledge and skills. Enhancing new-graduate work readiness and transition may be achieved through additional private practice experience, effective management of employer and client expectations, and tailored university and continuing education programs.⁵³

Figure 6: Factors influencing the transition of new-graduate physiotherapists into private practice.

Readiness for private practice



First year
Perceived as
'somewhat ready'



Third year
Perceived as
'ready'



Enthusiasm
High readiness
to learn

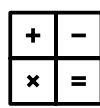


Knowledge
Contemporary,
research-informed

Challenges



Clinical skills
Difficulty with autonomous
clinical reasoning and timely
case load management



Business skills
Limited knowledge in
business, marketing
and administration



Soft Skills
Underdeveloped confidence,
communication and
interpersonal skills

Influencing Factors



Experience
Clinical placements and
employment in private practice



Expectations
Employer and client
expectations of
graduate capabilities



Support
Workplace support
systems



Education
University academic preparation
and continuing education



Attributes
Individual graduate
attributes and skills

Source: Wells, C. et al. (2021). Work readiness of new graduate physical therapists for private practice in Australia.

Study 2: Professional development needs

The second study delved into the professional development needs and decision-making processes of new-graduate physiotherapists in private practice settings. The findings highlight the necessity for tailored professional development, addressing both clinical and non-clinical capabilities, shaped by social influences and access barriers. Employers and professional development providers must cater to these needs to effectively support new graduates' transition into private practice.⁵⁴

These studies highlight a key opportunity to enhance the readiness of new-graduate physiotherapists for private practice. By focusing on both clinical and non-clinical skills and providing comprehensive workplace support, we can transform the transition from student to clinician.

It is important to recognise that perspectives can differ, as evident in a shared responsibility framework study that identified six domains of work readiness. While graduates and employers align across domains, their perspectives differ: graduates focus on short-term, individual readiness, whereas employers emphasise long-term, team-based readiness.⁵⁵

Figure 7: Providing the right support—key themes.

Practical and commercial relevance



New graduates need professional development that directly enhances their clinical skills and understanding of the business aspects of private practice.

Influence of self and others in decision-making



Graduates' decisions about professional development are shaped by their own career goals and the advice of supervisors, colleagues and mentors.

Professional development as a social construct



Professional development is seen as a collaborative activity, with interactions and networking playing a crucial role.

Access is critical



Ensuring accessible and affordable professional development opportunities is essential to support new graduates, who often face barriers like cost and time constraints.

Source: Zou, Y. et al. (2021). Professional development needs and decision-making of new graduate physiotherapists within Australian private practice settings.

Making it happen

Leaders must champion the development and implementation of transition programs, ensuring that new graduates receive the support they need. By advancing a culture of continuous learning and professional growth, leaders can help build practices that are both purpose-driven and future-ready. The following insights explore how to make that happen.



Featured insight: **Shane Gunaratnam**

Shane Gunaratnam, director of Culture of One, provides insights into how purpose-driven business models based on the Universal Diversity™ framework can foster a more inclusive and dynamic workforce for more effective integration of generation Z into our teams.

How to integrate generation Z into your private practice

Physiotherapy clinic owners are facing an uphill battle integrating generation Z into the workforce, particularly following the significant disruptions caused by COVID-19 from 2020 to 2022.

These disruptions deeply impacted both tertiary education and workforce entry, creating a cohort of young professionals navigating economic turbulence, inflation and, more recently, the rapid rise of artificial intelligence. The remainder of this decade promises further uncertainty, demanding adaptability and innovation from clinic owners.

By 2030, generation Z—those born between 1996 and 2010—will comprise nearly half of the physiotherapy workforce. This generation thrives in environments that prioritise independence, autonomy and social justice, while embracing diversity and inclusion. As a profession, we have the potential to harness their strengths but doing so will require more agile business models that align with their expectations.

The physiotherapy profession's greatest asset is its purpose

Few modern careers offer the same sense of purpose as ours. In my experience, integrating generation Z into teams is most effective when guided by purpose-driven business models. An example of one approach is the Universal Diversity™ framework, developed through my work with Culture of One, which seeks to integrate generation Z into teams through purpose-driven and inclusive strategies.

From my perspective, integrating this new generation into the workforce requires more than surface-level adjustments. It calls for a fundamental shift in how we lead and manage, with practices that are rooted in purpose and designed to meet the demands of a rapidly evolving future.



**Towards
purpose-driven
business models**

1



Equitable access

Providing resources, training and incentives tailored to individual needs.

2



Flexibility within work

Embedding mentoring and professional development into paid hours.

3



Simple, intuitive communication

Moving beyond email to instant messaging and AI-enabled tools.

4



Inclusive, diverse leadership

Championing diverse pathways and peer-to-peer mentoring.

5



Effortless integration

Streamlining processes like onboarding through purpose-built systems.

6



Transparent information sharing

Sharing practice goals and outcomes to build trust and engagement.

7



Evolution through errors

Creating psychologically safe spaces where mistakes foster learning.

Embedding excellence early

Building confident clinicians and resilient practices

By prioritising patient care, structured mentorship and clinician wellbeing, leaders can create environments where early-career professionals thrive. These foundations support not only clinical capability, but also long-term workforce sustainability. When early investment is made in people, practices become more resilient, more aligned and better equipped to meet the evolving demands of healthcare.



Featured insight:

Sean Campbell

Sean Campbell, principal managing partner at Sports and Spinal and managing director at Team Rehab Solutions, shares a practical framework for supporting new graduates as they enter private practice. His approach emphasises the value of investing in people first, creating practices that are clinically strong, culturally aligned and designed for long-term success.

How to succeed in private practice: reframing the new graduate experience

Starting in private practice as a new graduate can feel overwhelming. It doesn't need to be. With the right structure, support and mindset, it becomes the foundation for a confident and rewarding career.

The most effective approach for new graduates is simple: focus entirely on delivering high-quality care and take the money out of the equation. Those who do this consistently report the highest levels of satisfaction and achieve strong financial outcomes over time.

Private practice owners should adopt the same philosophy. Prioritise patient outcomes and clinical development over short-term returns. When we invest in our people and support them with the right structure and processes, the business looks after itself.

Starting in private practice as a new graduate requires more than clinical knowledge. It demands a clear pathway, strong support and a mindset focused on growth.

1 Interview process

- Clear expectations
- Assessment of cultural alignment
- Resilience and readiness evaluation

2 Onboarding

- Introduction to team and culture
- Clinical training begun early
- Support for Ahpra registration

The first week is about building connection, confidence and clinical foundations—setting graduates up for success from day 1.

3 First week

- Full induction
- Graduate training: clinical and soft skills
- Building of peer networks

The first year is where structured support meets clinical independence, setting the pace for confident, sustainable growth.

4 First year

- Shadowing of experienced clinicians and other disciplines
- Longer appointment times (double the time of a senior)
- Gradual increase in case load (self-directed)
- Weekly one-on-one mentoring
- Quarterly individual career pathway planning

5 Ongoing CPD

- Numerous in-services each month
- Ongoing mentoring with senior clinicians
- CPD allowance for external courses
- Annual conference
- Open-door policy

The next phase focuses on long-term growth in supporting career longevity and enhancing clinical confidence through smart technology.

6 Ensuring longevity in the profession

- Balanced rosters and flexible scheduling
- A commitment to lifelong learning
- Clinical advisory group promoting expertise and quality
- Future Leaders program
- Lifelong career pathways

7 Using technology to support the transition

- Voice-to-text AI: reduces administrative burden and enhances patient focus
- Data-driven tools: track progress, build confidence, show value

Success begins before day 1.

It's critical to note that every new graduate is different. They come with different levels of clinical and life experience, maturity, resilience and readiness for private practice and they all have different goals. So it's important for graduates to be able to progress in a very self-directed manner. They all start with double the time to complete their consults and can put in ad hoc paperwork blocks as required. Most exceed expectations early. We often slow them down to protect consistency and wellbeing.

Another critical point is that, as clinicians, we tend to do a solid job of teaching, supporting and integrating them as clinicians. But that's only part of the transition. We also need to equip them with the skills required to step into professional life—navigating a workplace, using systems, working with a team, managing a full day of patient care and carrying the emotional weight that comes with wanting to help patients and hearing their stories all day.

Physiotherapy is a broad profession and realistically, universities cannot produce graduates who are fully prepared for private practice. That responsibility falls to us. As private practice owners, we must build the right support structures to guide the next generation from student to professional, starting from day 1.

7.2 Public



Navigating the transition to hospital physiotherapist

From the classroom to the ward

In hospital settings, the dynamic and complex environments pose significant challenges for both new graduates and students.

In the high-stakes world of hospital settings, new graduates are immersed in a sociocultural environment that is fast-paced and complex, testing their clinical skills and resilience. The clinical landscape, while often overwhelming, also provides students and new graduates with direct access to multidisciplinary teams, helping them develop a clearer understanding of diverse roles and collaborative practice within scope. The intricate team dynamics and the complexity of patient cases can trigger significant anxiety and stress.⁵⁶ It is in this work-integrated learning context that students' and new graduates' professional identity is formed. Assisting the next generation of physiotherapists through this challenging and often emotionally uncomfortable transition is critical to securing the future workforce.

Recent literature suggests that some students may have a practice gap as new graduates entering the workforce. A new-graduate physiotherapist's case load can be double that of a student, with more complex clinical presentations and the addition of non-clinical responsibilities.^{57, 58, 59} For new graduates transitioning into real-world practice in a hospital context, targeted training and support is essential if they are to build their skills and capabilities and progress from entry-level physiotherapist to effective and valuable team member. This progressive development is particularly important for new graduates entering hospital workplaces, given the many and varied clinical areas they are often required to work across during their new graduate year(s).

Evolving CPD programs in Australian hospitals

Structured CPD programs in Australian hospitals have evolved alongside broader medical education reforms and have been formalised with the introduction of the National Registration and Accreditation Scheme in 2010.

The first two years of practice in a hospital setting are crucial for skill development and confidence and professional development is one of the keys to a smooth transition,^{60, 61} as is the case in private practice transitions. Hospital-based new graduates value practical and clinically relevant CPD, delivered through both formal and informal pathways, for skill acquisition and career development.⁶² They often seek informal support from senior colleagues to enhance their clinical skills and professional behaviours, finding this guidance important in their immediate practice.⁶³

Despite the apparent lack of research on the specific needs of new-graduate physiotherapists in the hospital setting in the public sphere, this work is in progress within public healthcare institutions. There is important work being done by clinical leadership in the hospital setting, starting with student placements. For example, in the Queensland Public Health Service, a Physiotherapy New Graduate Support Framework provides a structured approach to holistically support the transition from student to new graduate.⁶⁴ The framework consists of five key pillars informed by evidence: onboarding and orientation, professional support and supervision, clinical skills development, health and wellbeing, and development of staff that support the new graduate.

Alongside implementing the framework, numerous Queensland Health hospitals have appointed senior physiotherapists to part-time or full-time roles in which they are responsible for overseeing, training and supporting new graduates in such services. These new graduate training programs can include professional supervision and standardised simulated learning for acute and critical care contexts. However, inconsistencies of public service awards, inconsistent workforce structures and leadership positions, and workforce recruitment and retention challenges can limit the ability to fund and provide the PD and support that is ideally required for new graduates. These challenges place at risk the provision of effective and high quality clinical care to patients.

Figure 8: Key themes for hospital-based new-graduate physiotherapists' CPD needs and decision-making.

Emphasis on practical and clinical relevance



Pursuit of CPD driven by a desire to provide effective patient care and handle complex conditions.

Influences from external supports



Rely on senior colleagues for CPD guidance, valuing their input.

Translation to practice



Value formal CPD for insights into patient conditions and informal PD for practical patient care.

Accessing CPD



Accessibility significantly influences their CPD decisions, with hospital support for costs and time off being key.

CPD for future career



Essential for career growth, evidence-based decision-making and optimal patient care, emphasising continuous learning and up-to-date knowledge.

Source: Tan, S. et al. (2022). Professional development from the perspective of new-graduate physiotherapists within Australian hospital settings: A qualitative study.

Similar challenges in providing adequate training and support can be found in the work-integrated learning component (or clinical placements) of physiotherapy students prior to entry into the profession. Work-integrated learning has been well established as critical for entry-level physiotherapy students to integrate the skills learned at university into real-world practice. Because a significant proportion of clinical placements for entry-level physiotherapy students are provided by the public health system, hospitals play an important role in developing the next generation of our workforce.

The readiness of new graduates to transition into clinical practice is therefore critically influenced by clinical education and training within the hospital system. As the number of physiotherapy programs and cohorts has grown across Australia, a major focus in this area has been on clinical placement capacity (eg, placement models) and quality of clinical placements.⁶⁵ Processes and resources that support and develop physiotherapists as clinical educators who facilitate student placements have to date not received as much attention. Given the evidence that the relationship between a student and their clinical educator is the most significant factor impacting the success of clinical placements, there is a strong need to further explore the clinical educator role as we consider the next generation of physiotherapists. This is particularly the case in teaching hospitals and health services, which support a large proportion of the training of the future Australian physiotherapy workforce.

Building teaching capability

Work readiness is a shared responsibility

Numerous challenges in student placements have been described. These include the increasing complexity/acuity and case load demands of clinical care and the challenges presented by students themselves. In addressing these issues, indicators of quality in clinical placements and increasing placement capacity are critical factors that have, in part, been explored. However, in order to futureproof the profession we must start with teaching capability of clinical staff and clinical educators.

Those who provide clinical education are key to shaping the future physiotherapy workforce. Building on the teaching provided on the university campus, clinical educators provide a crucial next step in the continuum of the student becoming a physiotherapist.

The factors influencing engagement of physiotherapists in clinical education are not yet well understood. A pioneering study⁶⁶ using an implementation framework in a metropolitan teaching hospital identified major barriers to providing high quality clinical education, such as inadequate clinical educator training and the de-prioritisation of the clinical education role at various levels. These findings align with national data indicating that physiotherapists have minimal training to be ‘educators’⁶⁷ and the identified lack of a career pathway for clinical education in physiotherapy.⁶⁸ These gaps exist despite the fact that ‘educator’ is embedded within one of the seven roles of the Australian physiotherapist—specifically, the ‘scholar’ role—as outlined in our threshold standards. Within the APA Physiotherapy Competence Framework, this role is integrated into the scholar section.

Before beginning to address the current needs in the support, development and recognition of the role of clinical education in physiotherapy, understanding the factors that underpin active participation and perseverance in clinical educator roles is required. The broader health professional educator literature suggests that understanding person-related constructs that impact active participation of clinicians in education should also be considered when developing implementation strategies for the support and development of the clinical education in the physiotherapy workforce.^{69, 70} That is, fostering a physiotherapist’s identity as an educator, meeting the needs of clinicians to motivate them to engage in clinical education and tailoring professional development programs to increase self-efficacy as clinical educators will be critical in futureproofing the clinical educator workforce.

Addressing these factors through targeted local interventions could enable clinicians to effectively facilitate the learning of the next generation of physiotherapists in Australia. Collaboration with university providers will be essential in equipping these clinicians with the teaching skills that are required to facilitate learning in the current and next generation of physiotherapy students.

Queensland Health clinical educator and Fellow of the Higher Education Academy Joanna Hargreaves helps us to understand these gaps and what needs to be done to address and build clinical educator workforce capability in the hospital setting.



Featured insight:
Joanna Hargreaves

Jo has been a physiotherapist at the Royal Brisbane and Women's Hospital for over 20 years and leads the Clinical Education team. With a special interest in sustainability of the clinical educator workforce, Jo is currently undertaking PhD research exploring the engagement of physiotherapists as educators across the public sector.

Enhancing clinical competence and educator support

At the Royal Brisbane and Women's Hospital, we are typically training 16 new graduates at any one time (first and second years). As a large metropolitan teaching hospital, we recognise that these physiotherapists are commencing at entry level and are unlikely to have the level of skills required to manage the complex and diverse clinical presentations common to our workplace.

As part of the transition to becoming effective and safe clinicians in the tertiary hospital context, these new graduates therefore need to achieve competence in several acute skills that we don't expect them to have achieved during entry-level training. Audits of these competencies, however, have indicated that, despite having a senior physiotherapist supporting new graduates full-time for their first five months (January–May), our new graduates were not consistently achieving the skills required to safely and effectively provide the clinical care required in this context.

To mitigate this risk, we recognised the need to expand the role to a full-time, year-round New Graduate and New Staff Support position. This support position has proven highly effective and has been established in various forms in many hospitals across the state.

In addition, an ongoing need exists in the support and development of clinical educators. Many of our clinicians are willing to contribute to clinical education but carry a sense of stress as they feel under-equipped to meet all of the learning needs of the students who attend placement in our hospital. This stress is particularly apparent when students present with learning challenges that require additional support. This is an increasingly common scenario.

A significant proportion of our educators are junior clinicians themselves who are still building their own clinical skills and knowledge. If we are to futureproof both the clinical educator and the clinician workforce in physiotherapy, we need to attend to how we support and develop the role of clinical educators.

As a profession we have not yet 'matured' to the point of establishing career pathways for physiotherapists as clinical educators, providing the professional development that is sought after in this space and building collaborative structures that bridge the university and clinical workplaces.

Our workforce is keen and has lots of space to grow in this arena of teaching and learning.

Part 8: Routes to an improved pathway



What needs to change?

Turning challenges into opportunities

The transition from physiotherapy student to graduate marks a significant stage where theory meets the demands of practice. Earlier chapters of this white paper examined academic readiness and professional expectations; this section explores streamlined pathways to better support graduates.

Currently, the journey from entry-level university education to becoming a fully qualified physiotherapist spans up to four years. However, to truly maximise professional potential and impact, it is important to explore new approaches within the education and training continuum. A key opportunity lies in the transition to professional practice—those early-career stages where physiotherapists are developing confidence, consolidating skills and shaping their professional identity.

A graduate transition program empowers early-career physiotherapists, bridging critical support and training gaps to ensure that they thrive from day 1.

One promising solution is the introduction of a structured professional development program that incorporates modular, flexible learning opportunities tailored to the needs of new graduates during their transition year. This initiative would seek to bridge the gaps in support and training to help new physiotherapists navigate early-career challenges, ensuring a smoother transition into the professional world.

Fixing the graduate pipeline

Bridging skills and knowledge gaps with support

Universities can provide foundational skills but graduates need to acquire additional, context-specific skills through on-the-job training and employer support. This is where the profession can make the most impact by ensuring that we provide the necessary graduate readiness resources. Transition programs focusing on the shift from student to clinician are essential. Implementing these programs will provide the necessary guidance and build teaching capacity within the profession but it will take all of us—the full profession—to make it happen.

Graduates need structured support as they navigate their first years in the workforce—a pivotal moment in any career and particularly for those entering healthcare, where the stakes are high. In the APA Workforce Census (2025), 54 per cent of students expressed a preference for an ‘internship year’ or a structured ‘new graduate program’. This indicates that there is a clear need to provide graduates with structured support during their initial workforce years.

The graduate pathway in physiotherapy is an area ripe for reform, with various models under discussion to better support new professionals. This analysis explores three potential solutions: an internship model offering structured immersion, a private practice pathway designed to address sector-specific needs and an APA-led transition program that provides a flexible, profession-wide approach. Each model presents distinct opportunities and challenges, shaping the future of graduate development in physiotherapy.

01 Internship model



One idea is an internship-style first year offering a structural, gradual immersion into the profession to ease the transition from student to professional, supporting foundational skill building. This model aligns with established approaches in medicine and pharmacy, offering a framework that strengthens alignment within health workforce training.

While the model promises significant benefits, it does come with notable challenges. The resource-intensive nature of such a program would demand substantial public funding. It also invites reflection on how the public might view graduates’ readiness for independent practice.

The traditional internship model, designed around public sector allocations and inspired by medical rotations, may no longer fit the evolving landscape of physiotherapy. With nearly half of graduates aiming directly for private practice, the shift reflects growing opportunities beyond hospital settings rather than waning interest in the public sector. Establishing a private practice internship model would require careful design, industry collaboration and financial backing to adapt an already proven structure to a different environment.

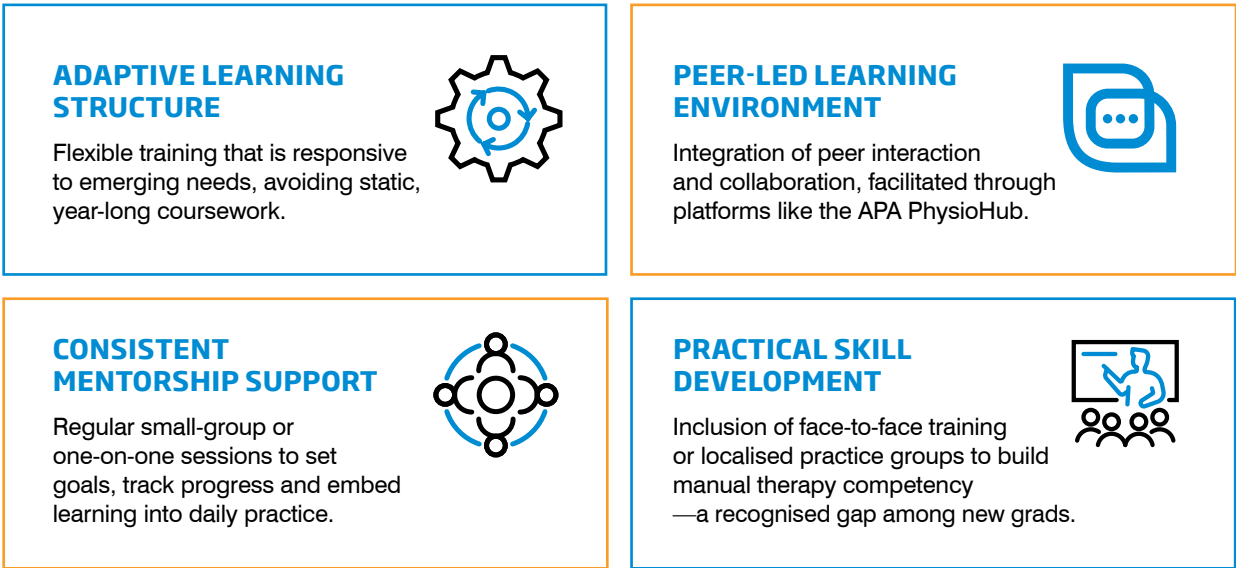
A structured first-year internship that provides a gradual immersion into the profession—bridging the gap between student and practitioner while reinforcing foundational skills—remains a promising option. This approach mirrors successful frameworks in medicine and pharmacy, fostering greater cohesion within health workforce training.

The design could incorporate an initial period of reduced case loads, allowing graduates to progressively build confidence and competence before transitioning to full patient loads. Rotations across departments or practice areas may further enhance adaptability, supporting exposure to varied clinical settings and multidisciplinary teams. Supervision and skill acquisition are critical elements of this model, ensuring targeted learning, timely feedback and structured mentoring to help address skill gaps while maintaining high standards of care.

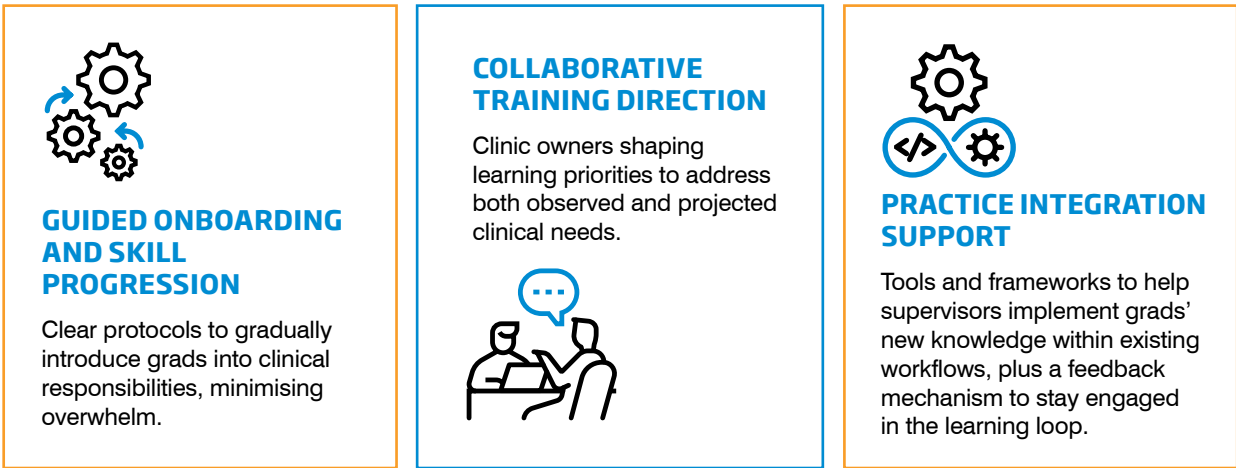
Figure 9: Intern pathway—key requirements for effective integration.

KEY REQUIREMENTS FOR EFFECTIVE INTERN PATHWAY INTEGRATION

For graduates:



For clinics and supervisors:



While the benefits are compelling, implementation presents notable challenges. A resource-heavy program would require substantial public investment and spark debate over graduate preparedness for independent practice. The cost implications—particularly in private practice, where additional supervision and structured mentoring may necessitate financial investment—would require careful planning and stakeholder collaboration. Implementation would need to consider funding mechanisms, workforce demand and sector-specific needs to achieve meaningful integration into current physiotherapy pathways.

Adopting an intern pathway may require shifting from immediate full registration to a provisional phase, similar to pharmacy. This introduces complexity around scope, supervision and governance, requiring clear regulatory guidance to ensure workforce stability and maintain clinical standards.

A similar model existed in physiotherapy departments in New South Wales historically and informal transition programs are integrated within large hospitals today. The challenge isn't proving the value of structured support—it's refining an established framework to suit private practice, where operational and financial constraints differ significantly. The opportunity to create a standardised, high-impact pathway for emerging physiotherapists remains compelling and worth further exploration.

Hospitals across Australia have already cemented their leadership in graduate training programs, creating systems that empower new physiotherapists to thrive in diverse clinical environments. Their success, particularly in the larger hospital settings, serves as a model for excellence. However, the absence of a unified nationwide framework presents an opportunity for expansion. A national framework would offer consistency and stronger support for new physiotherapists.

SIDEBAR

Pharmacy internships

Pharmacy internships in Australia are structured programs designed to transition graduates into professional practice. Interns must complete a period of supervised practice under provisional registration, meeting requirements set by the Pharmacy Board of Australia.

Interns participate in accredited Intern Training Programs, which combine workplace-based training, structured workshops and assessments. These programs are accredited by the Australian Pharmacy Council and offered by institutions such as Monash University, the University of Queensland and the Pharmaceutical Society of Australia.

To gain full registration, interns must complete a minimum number of supervised practice hours while gaining hands-on experience in pharmacy settings. This period allows them to apply their academic knowledge in real-world scenarios, refine their clinical judgement and build professional competencies.

To obtain general registration, candidates must successfully complete an accredited training program and pass final written and oral examinations conducted by the Pharmacy Board of Australia. These assessments ensure that interns meet the required standards for safe and effective pharmacy practice. The Pharmacy Board provides resources to help graduates navigate the transition from study to work, outlining the requirements and responsibilities associated with provisional registration and internship completion.



Featured insight:

Associate Professor Sue Berney

Professor Sue Berney is the Physiotherapy Manager at Austin Health and a Professor of Physiotherapy at The University of Melbourne and Swinburne University. She has over 20 years' experience working in the cardiorespiratory field, with a particular interest in critical care and early rehabilitation. Her expertise provides a critical lens on the realities of implementing a formal internship model in physiotherapy.

Strengthening physiotherapy through structured internship pathways

As a profession we have an obligation to our patients to provide safe and high-quality care. This is the primary motivation for the introduction of an internship model. The increasing complexity of patients and administration surrounding the delivery of healthcare places additional demands on graduate physiotherapists, who are increasingly finding themselves working in circumstances for which they are ill prepared.

The increase in the theoretical content of university courses is essential to cover the breadth of the expanding physiotherapy scope of practice. While this provides a sound knowledge base for the long term, it is delivered at the expense of exposure to clinical experiences, meaning that graduates of today are less work ready.

A structured internship model or professional year would address some of the challenges new graduates face in making the transition into the workforce. Many large public health services already run similar supervised training programs for new graduates without explicitly calling it an intern model. Medicine has provided a template for how an internship program could work across hospital and community settings. This model could be adapted to meet the needs of the physiotherapy profession.

One possibility for an intern program is for health services and local private practices to work in partnership. This would reduce the burden on smaller and/or regional health services as well as private practices but still ensure that an internship included the work expected of a graduate in all clinical settings. Fostering closer relationships between local private practices and health services may help bridge the divide between sectors, creating new opportunities for education, quality improvement and research.

An intern model requires a structured program of workplace-based training and must support development to an agreed on standard of practice. In medicine, for postgraduate years 1 and 2, this is achieved using Entrustable Professional Activities (EPAs). The use of EPAs is also emerging in the physiotherapy profession. An EPA is a description of essential work (eg, clinical assessment) that can be assessed but is not itself an assessment tool. Supervisors use multiple assessments to make judgements about the ability of the person to independently complete the work described in the EPA. Work needs to be done nationally to define what EPAs make up the supporting structure of the internship. To accommodate graduates who only want to work in private practice, flexibility within an intern program could potentially be offered, with options to focus on general or more specific scope of clinical practice, eg, business/admin skills, as part of a modular EPA program. This means that a graduate may work in private practice or public health but undertake a range of professional activities according to their current or future career interests. The duration of the internship could be up to two years. Successful completion would mean being entrusted with independent practice in selected EPAs.

The internship model proposed would not be an extension of a student supervision model. Rather, new graduates would be contributing to clinical care, analogous to medical interns, but under a structured supervised program. Additional modest financial investment would be required to support the roles of clinical educators to provide graduate supervision, although additional costs would need to be scoped. Industry, the APA and the tertiary sector would need to work collaboratively with governments, both state and federal, as well as unions to support the establishment of point-of-care clinician educators.

Notably, the most recent Enterprise Agreement in Victoria included an allocation of clinical educators across the public health sector. Health services and private practice partnerships could be allocated additional clinical educators based on the number of interns they agree to support annually.

Of course, any major change faces challenges. The number of new graduates continues to grow as new university physiotherapy programs are introduced. Initially, it may not be feasible for every graduate to access an internship program or that such a program could be mandated. In the meantime, negotiations with Ahpra would need to be undertaken for the introduction of a year of provisional registration, which may require progressive implementation. To incentivise new graduates to take up an internship, one solution could be that it is a prerequisite to pursuing an advanced scope of practice role in the future. The financial burden on private practices of participating in an intern program must be recognised, while the additional opportunities a clinician educator provides as well as recognition for practices who participate, including the potential for greater Medicare rebates, should also be considered.

The introduction of an internship program is a natural 'next step' in the professionalisation of physiotherapy. Similar pathways exist for health professions such as medicine and psychology and a range of other professions, eg, law, accounting and teaching. I would argue that the introduction of an intern program is overdue.

02 Structured graduate program

In Australia, a **structured graduate program** could be the key to bridging the gap between academic theory and clinical practice. Business owners have a unique opportunity to shape the next generation into a competitive advantage.

Some practices have stepped up, implementing tailored programs, yet many new graduates still struggle with adequate support. Hospitals have long led the way, offering structured programs with dedicated educational resources. Expanding this approach across all settings could offer consistency and a strong foundation for new physiotherapists.

Despite challenges, there are bright spots that practice owners can leverage to capture value. Graduates bring more than technical proficiency. Their training equips them with contemporary evidence, clinical practice guidelines and critical research analysis. They also contribute empathy, adaptability and resilience—valuable qualities in any workplace.

Encouraging discussions about their strengths can unlock untapped potential, ensuring that their capabilities are maximised. Clear communication and aligned expectations between employers and graduates are key to helping them flourish. With dedicated support, most physiotherapy graduates can confidently transition into their roles within two years.



Featured insight: **John Fitzgerald**

Adjunct Associate Professor John Fitzgerald, CEO of Active Rehabilitation Physiotherapy, has led the practice's growth since founding it in 1993. An APA Titled Sports and Exercise Physiotherapist, he has built a leading practice known for evidence-based care, patient focus and innovation. Active Rehabilitation Physiotherapy provides inpatient services to three private hospitals and has four outpatient clinics in Brisbane. The clinic also supports future physiotherapists through a strong graduate transition program, prioritising mentorship, skill development and readiness for modern practice.

Graduate transition program

The transition from university to professional practice offers an important opportunity to bridge the gap between academic preparation and professional readiness.

While universities provide essential foundational knowledge, they cannot be expected to prepare graduates for every specific workplace environment. Employers must play a pivotal role by investing time and resources into training, mentoring and supporting these new professionals.

Supporting new graduates as they step into private practice—the pathway for the majority—ensures that they are equipped to meet the demands of their roles and contribute meaningfully to the physiotherapy workforce's growth and success.

In our business, we have embraced this responsibility and have implemented a two-year graduate transition training program. We view the employment of new graduates not as a burden but as an exciting opportunity to learn from them and to shape and mentor the next generation of physiotherapists. Having a private practice within the hospital system results in numerous benefits to the physiotherapy team and assists in the retention and provision of career pathways.

Opportunities exist in our business for exposure to many clinical areas in the inpatient and outpatient setting. New graduates rotate through various specialties such as medical, surgical, orthopaedics, gynaecology, urology, neurosurgery, neurology, ICU/CCU and oncology, allowing them to gain a well-rounded clinical experience. These rotations give them time to develop their skills in a supported environment before moving on to more complex patient interactions.

We do not place new graduates into high-pressure outpatient settings until the second year. Instead, we ensure that they have the basics of patient management and clinical decision-making down first. I believe this is a great model for our profession and it allows our team members to become well-rounded physiotherapists, with excellent hands-on and customer service skills for both their inpatient and outpatient roles.

Importantly, it has allowed us to mitigate risk. We have found over the years that having this framework has helped to support our younger team, lowers stress levels and ensures that they become valuable, long-term assets to our profession.

To assist our team and ensure quality of service provision, we have developed a comprehensive list of clinical guidelines, which are regularly reviewed, and evidence-based resources that outline assessment and treatment considerations, minimum recovery timeframes and clinically appropriate and optimal patient review schedules. The two-year program is backed by a comprehensive mentoring program.

We need to move beyond the notion that graduates should be ready to hit the ground running on day 1. Instead, we should view their first year or two in practice as an extension of their education—one where we can provide the hands-on experience and personalised support that universities may not be able to fully deliver.

Shaping the future through teaching

New graduates bring fresh perspectives, critical thinking and adaptability but without structured guidance, their potential remains untapped.

Teaching isn't just a skill; it's a responsibility. Moving beyond informal mentorship to evidence-based education will shape resilient, confident professionals. Businesses that invest in structured learning don't just train clinicians—they build a workforce ready to lead. Recognising teaching as a core pillar of physiotherapy will ensure that knowledge is shared effectively, setting the next generation up for long-term success.



Featured insight:

Emily Riglar

Emily Riglar, an APA Titled Musculoskeletal Physiotherapist with a Master of Clinical Education and chair of the APA Educators national group, brings deep expertise to the discussion. She champions evidence-based teaching and learning in physiotherapy as a core responsibility for every physiotherapist.

Teaching is everyone's business

Newly graduated physiotherapists are presented with an immeasurable challenge. This has been well established in the literature and there is a growing body of evidence that outlines this group's need to optimise their experience in the workplace. Although there are numerous sources of information for new graduates to access and a growing number of businesses providing external mentoring, there has been little change in the challenges experienced during this transition from student to physiotherapist.

While physiotherapists spend vast portions of their day educating others, as a profession we are sorely lacking in the knowledge and skills surrounding best practice teaching and learning. This leaves us poorly placed to support graduates in an evidence-based, structured manner in the workplace. We are stuck strongly in the era of trusting that expert clinicians are best placed to teach our younger physios and that our junior physios have the skills to integrate new knowledge into practice.

As it stands, there is very limited access to formal professional development of these skills for physiotherapists. This leaves us unable to evaluate the skills of those being employed as third parties to educate our junior staff. It also leaves us underprepared to support staff effectively in-house. With the costs and expectations of professional development support growing substantially, this leaves employers unable to realise their investment in PD and unable to support the individual learning needs of a workforce increasingly under pressure.

There is a huge opportunity to upskill our profession to better recognise and employ pedagogical skills, supporting newly graduated physiotherapists to access and integrate appropriate new information in a personalised approach that supports each individual to thrive in their career long-term.

03

APA-led transition program

Setting realistic expectations for practice readiness is essential and this responsibility falls on educational institutions, professional bodies and employers alike. The APA stands poised to lead this transformation, driving efforts to create a cohesive, nationwide strategy for graduate transition and ongoing professional development—a pivotal step toward strengthening the profession's future.

Clinical placements offer essential exposure but true readiness requires more than technical skills. It's about mastering the arts of communication, problem-solving, teamwork and adaptability. A strong graduate transition program doesn't assume deficiencies; it empowers new physiotherapists to apply training with confidence. These programs build capable, resilient professionals while guiding employers in setting realistic expectations for early-career performance.

APA private practice transition program

A key feature of the proposed APA Graduate Transition Program is its modular learning framework, designed to provide flexibility and personalisation.

The proposed program envisions a transformative approach to graduate development. Graduates begin by assessing their own strengths and identifying areas for improvement, creating customised learning pathways that align with their professional goals. Recognising that new graduates may not always know what they need, the program incorporates guided input from mentors and supervisors to ensure that all critical areas are addressed.

The program covers essential non-clinical skills—such as communication, problem-solving, adaptability and time management—alongside physiotherapy-specific competencies. These transferable skills are key to thriving in the workplace. Directed learning tracks offer mentor-led modules tailored to addressing gaps in clinical knowledge and fostering core professional skills. This ensures that new graduates build a strong foundation for success in physiotherapy practice. Finally, practical integration opportunities immerse participants in hands-on scenarios through simulated exercises and collaborative projects. These experiences bridge the gap between theoretical training and professional application, building confidence and ensuring that graduates are truly workplace ready.

Figure 10: Key components of the APA Graduate Transition Program for private practice.

OUTLINING THE BUILDING BLOCKS FOR WORKFORCE READINESS IN PRIVATE PRACTICE



APA hospital transition program

Hospital settings present unique challenges and opportunities for new graduates and the program can be adapted to address these specific needs.

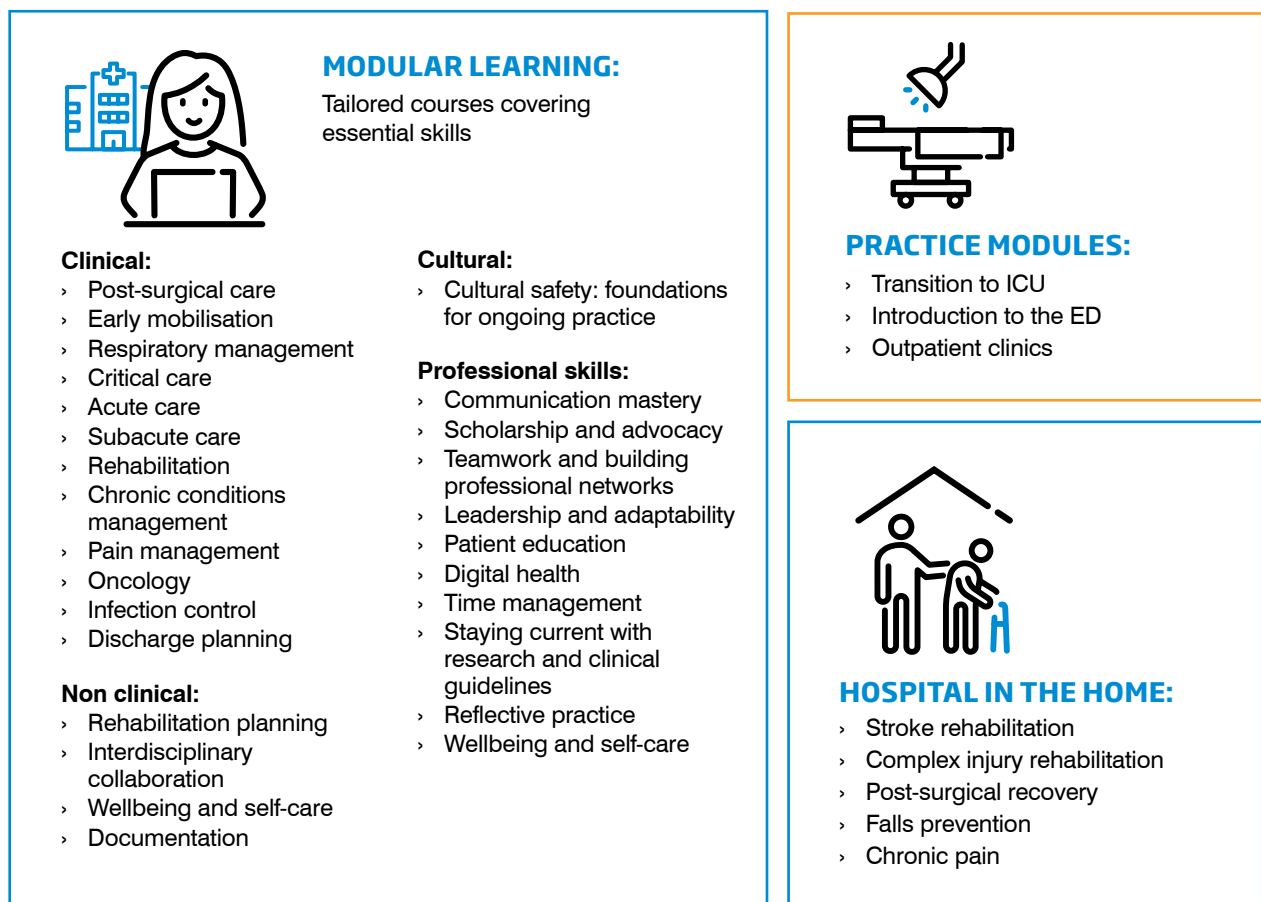
Hospital physiotherapy demands more than technical expertise. It requires adaptability, multidisciplinary collaboration and the ability to navigate diverse clinical settings. With rotations spanning ICU, musculoskeletal outpatients and neuro rehab, physiotherapists must quickly develop a broad, adaptable skill set.

New graduates face distinct challenges, particularly in smaller to mid-sized departments where structured support is limited. A tailored transition program provides a solution. Designed to bridge the gaps, this initiative prioritises mentorship, skill-building frameworks and real-world experiences that complement hospital-based education. Scalability is key, prioritising solutions in rural settings and for departments lacking dedicated resources. These environments demand a broader skill set to manage diverse patient needs.

The program should focus on master classes—immersive sessions built around real cases and, when possible, real scenarios. New professionals benefit more from high-impact, experience-driven learning that sharpens decision-making and adaptability in real-world settings than from additional classroom hours. A community-of-practice approach supports this by fostering knowledge exchange, collaborative problem-solving and practical skill development. It also plays a crucial role in valuing generalists, equipping them with broad, adaptable competencies to address service deficits, particularly in under-resourced environments.

Figure 11: Transferability for hospital physiotherapists.

OUTLINING THE BUILDING BLOCKS FOR WORKFORCE READINESS IN HOSPITAL PHYSIOTHERAPY



Part 9: Retention matters: beyond recruitment



Workforce attrition

Career longevity through flexibility

Attrition in the health workforce is a well-documented challenge, driven by stress, burnout, heavy workloads, limited support and low job satisfaction.⁷¹ Combined with fluctuating replacement rates,⁷² this raises concerns about workforce stability across multiple allied health and medical fields—not just physiotherapy. Instability undermines patient care and incurs significant costs through reduced operational efficiency and care delivery. While physiotherapy has been affected by attrition—certainly, business owners will attest to the attrition factor—the evidence remains largely anecdotal despite efforts to provide more clarity.

Recent research has challenged the assumption that attrition is a significant issue in the physiotherapy profession, particularly mid-career. Studies by the Physiotherapy Board of Australia and the APA reveal that most physiotherapists intend to remain in the profession long-term.⁷³ This finding is further supported by data from the APA Workforce Census (2025), indicating high retention rates among members.⁷⁴

Attrition may not be a concern at present but maintaining workforce stability through retention initiatives like fair pay, career growth and re-entry support remains essential.

The preceding chapters emphasise the pivotal first two years of practice, placing a focus on the importance of targeted graduate readiness programs. Beyond this, the spotlight must turn to long-term adaptation strategies—addressing the complexities of retention in intermediate practice. These efforts should tackle root causes such as pay dissatisfaction and limited career progression while rethinking support for career breaks. Embracing new approaches like returnships could transform re-entry into the profession, offering smoother transitions and stronger workforce stability.

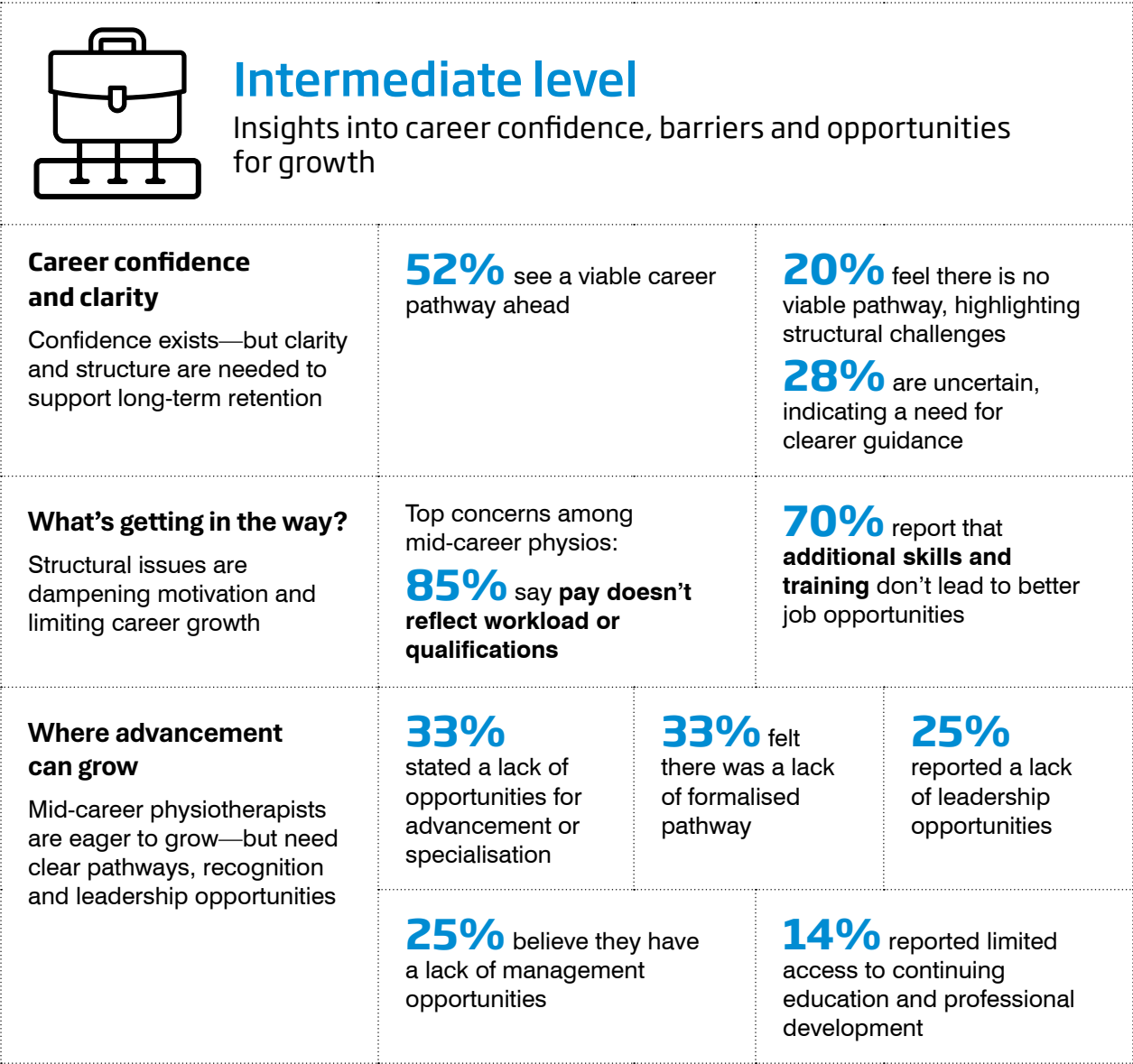
Adaptation strategies

Moving beyond the first two years

As our graduates move beyond the initial two years, they encounter new challenges in their transition to intermediate practice. The Intermediate Milestone 2 in the physiotherapy career pathway marks a significant phase where practitioners advance from foundational skills to developing deeper competencies across various areas.

At this stage, physiotherapists are expected to exhibit increased clinical proficiency, enhanced decision-making capabilities and a more profound understanding of patient care. They often begin handling more complex cases with increased autonomy, while contributing meaningfully to team-based care. This phase is crucial for the ongoing development and retention of physiotherapists as it shapes their professional growth and expertise.

Figure 12: Professional growth—beyond the first two years.



Source: 2025 APA Workforce Census

Returnships

Millennials are taking career breaks at higher rates than previous generations, driven by priorities such as childcare, elder care, relocation, health and other personal development.⁷⁵

In recent years, leading firms such as McKinsey and EY have championed returnships—structured programs designed to help professionals seamlessly reintegrate into the workforce.

McKinsey's reboarding approach is designed to ease career transitions, ensuring that returning employees regain their footing in corporate environments. Recognised by the World Economic Forum, their model shows how returnships strengthen workplace culture, boost employee retention and advance inclusivity.

EY, meanwhile, frames returnships as workforce revitalisers, extending beyond corporate settings into healthcare and other essential industries. Given the increasing competition for talent, their insights suggest that structured returnship programs can fortify critical roles, ensuring that organisations benefit from the expertise of professionals re-entering the field.

In physiotherapy, this approach could be particularly transformative as a skill retention strategy. The profession has a predominantly female workforce and many practitioners take career breaks for family or personal commitments, often struggling to re-enter the profession. Structured returnships could provide a clear, supportive pathway back into clinical practice.

Similarly, as physiotherapists advance in their careers, the five-to seven-year mark emerges as a pivotal period of professional growth and specialisation. This stage is characterised by significant enhancements in both clinical expertise and leadership roles within the healthcare community. A structured skill acquisition pathway becomes an essential strategy for maximising development at this point of the pathway.

While honing clinical expertise remains essential, embracing opportunities that extend beyond technical skills—such as innovative initiatives, interdisciplinary collaboration and technology integration—enables well-rounded development. These broader experiences are professionally enriching and contribute to leadership development.

To further accelerate skill development, the APA Physiotherapy Career and Competence Frameworks highlight Highly Developed Milestone 3 and Expert Milestone 4 as transformative career stages. Milestone 3 focuses on advanced titling as the gateway to specialisation, while Milestone 4 marks the attainment of deep mastery and leadership within specialised practice areas. Together, these milestones ensure a cohesive progression, aligning career growth with the development of competencies that meet the demands of patient care.

Building in even more flexibility

Integrating greater flexibility into the physiotherapy career pathway is vital. One approach is to incorporate options for blended roles that bridge clinical and non-clinical domains, accommodating the diverse needs of the workforce while fostering a consistent pipeline of emerging leaders.

Allowing physiotherapists to continue clinical practice while taking on expanded responsibilities in areas such as leadership, management and health system innovation encourages balanced professional growth. This takes cues from established practices in public healthcare systems, where clinical hours are reduced during role transitions to emphasise leadership development. Supporting shifts to alternative career paths can also minimise the loss of critical skills while maintaining a strong connection to the profession's core values and expertise.

Potential career paths for physiotherapists include academic roles, which allow them to engage in clinical research and education, contributing to the advancement of evidence-based practice and nurturing future generations of professionals. Policy and leadership positions provide opportunities to influence government and decision-making, driving improvements within healthcare systems. Equally important is addressing career breaks within physiotherapy career pathways to accommodate diverse professional needs. Structured initiatives like returnships provide essential support for those re-entering the workforce after a hiatus. By offering skill-building opportunities, mentorship and flexible arrangements, these programs ensure a seamless transition back into practice.

The challenges that lie ahead

Key factors in switching off the career-switching intentions

Retention is just as critical as recruitment when graduates transition into the workforce. Competitive entry-level pay and clear career progression are essential for retaining early-career talent. With the Fair Work Commission reviewing gender-based undervaluation in healthcare and related sectors, upcoming changes may further shape equitable pay structures, reinforcing the importance of fair remuneration from the outset. While broader policies like transparency, maternity leave and flexible work are vital throughout a career, their early implementation fosters an environment where graduates feel supported from day 1.

Young workers, particularly those with higher education, are significantly influenced by adequate pay when considering switching sectors.⁷⁶ They also highly value transparency in decisions related to their careers, including aspects of compensation and rewards.⁷⁷ Similarly, for early-career physiotherapists, factors influencing shorter career intentions include poor remuneration, limited career pathways and lack of recognition of skills.^{78, 79} Further research links intentions to leave the workforce to low job satisfaction and limited career progression.⁸⁰

The 2025 APA Workforce Census Report highlights the fact that although physiotherapy is a predominantly female workforce (68 per cent), there are notable discrepancies in pay and career advancement opportunities between male and female physiotherapists.⁸¹ Men are more likely to hold management positions than their female counterparts, which can contribute to the gender pay gap. These findings align with broader trends in the Australian workforce, where the gender pay gap persists due to various factors, including biases in hiring and promotion and differences in industry and job roles.⁸²

Figure 13: Overall pay discrepancies

The gender pay gap in the broader Australian workforce is reflected in the physiotherapy profession, with women generally earning less than men.



Gender pay discrepancies

On average, Men earn about **8%** more than their female counterparts. This is most pronounced at the highest career stages where the gap is **12%**.



Hourly rates

Casually employed female physiotherapists earn slightly more per hour (**\$66**) than their male counterparts (**\$62**). This does not offset the overall pay gap observed in salaried positions.



Gender pay gap in healthcare settings

A comparison of male and female earnings in public hospitals vs private practice.

Public hospital

Male—\$119,708
Female—\$104,963
Gap—12%

Private practice

Male—\$101,668
Female—\$90,808
Gap—11%

Source: 2025 APA Workforce Census Report;
Australia's Gender Pay Gap Statistics—WGEA

Retention factors

Keeping them there

The retention story is as important as recruitment.

Workforce patterns in physiotherapy suggest a potential drop-off in retention beyond mid-career, though the evidence remains largely anecdotal. This outflow of skilled practitioners is especially evident in areas like aged care, where the need for experienced physiotherapists is growing rapidly. Contributing factors such as mental burnout and insufficient remuneration for the demands of the role highlight the urgency for targeted solutions.⁸³ Retention strategies must focus on improving career satisfaction, enhancing remuneration and creating flexible pathways to sustain the workforce.

One area ripe for development is rural and remote healthcare. New data shows that early-career physiotherapists are open to practising in regional, rural and remote areas if sufficient financial incentives and supports are offered.⁸⁴ This creates an opportunity to address disparities in access to healthcare for underserved communities. A clear, incentivised rural pathway—built on models used successfully in other professions—could attract physiotherapists to these roles and help ensure their long-term commitment.

With the right investments and policies, rural physiotherapy could play a crucial role in building a more equitable healthcare system while addressing workforce challenges. A promising strategy to strengthen rural healthcare is the ‘grow your own’ approach—fostering local talent from within rural communities. Investments in scholarships, mentoring and school outreach can cultivate a physiotherapy workforce closely aligned with regional needs, ensuring long-term commitment and impact.

Equally vital is prioritising the growth of an Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander physiotherapy workforce, with tailored programs that support and empower students to enter and thrive in the profession. Collaborating with the National Aboriginal Community Controlled Health Organisation and with Aboriginal Community Controlled Health Organisations locally to develop culturally safe, community-driven initiatives can address critical shortages while ensuring that care reflects the unique needs of First Nations communities. Building this capacity will strengthen healthcare equity and deliver lasting change across Australia.

Retention challenges extend across all geographic regions and practice settings, demanding bold strategies and targeted investments to build and sustain a resilient physiotherapy workforce everywhere.

Figure 14: Challenges to retention.



Workplace stress

Early-career physiotherapists often experience significant stress due to high workloads and the pressure to meet clinical demands.⁸⁵



Limited career pathways

Many physiotherapists find that there are limited opportunities for career advancement, which can lead to dissatisfaction and thoughts of leaving the profession.⁸⁶



Poor remuneration

Compared to other healthcare professionals, physiotherapists often receive lower pay, which can be a significant factor in their decision to leave the profession.⁸⁷



Gender pay gap

In an industry where 68 per cent of the workforce identify as women, a gender pay gap becomes more pronounced with experience, particularly at the expert level, where men earn on average 15 per cent more than women. This disparity is further amplified in leadership roles, with men more likely to hold management positions.⁸⁸



Pay parity issues

There are often discrepancies in pay within the profession, with some physiotherapists feeling that their skills and contributions are not adequately recognised or compensated.⁸⁹

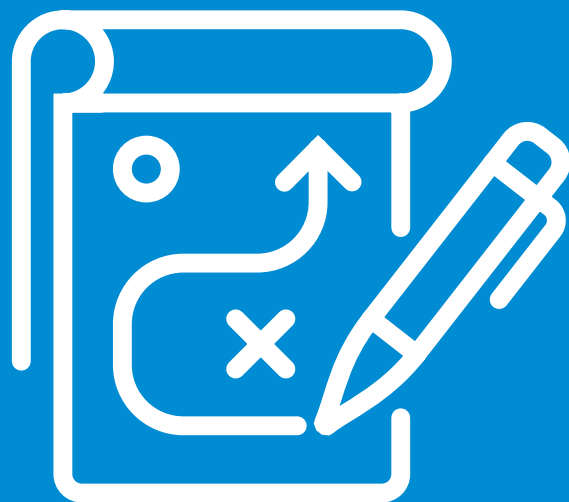


Short career intentions

Despite high levels of career satisfaction among early-career physiotherapists, many have short career intentions, with some planning to leave the profession within a few years due to dissatisfaction with pay and career progression opportunities.^{90, 91}

Source: 2025 APA Workforce Census

Part 10: Strategies for success



Paving your path to success

Ambition to action

Despite the importance of career development in physiotherapy, research on defining success in the field is limited. Key indicators include positive patient outcomes, high satisfaction levels and ongoing professional growth. Fundamentally, success in physiotherapy is driven by clinical expertise, advanced education and continuous professional development. But it's more than that—it's about creating impact and making a difference.

A 2008 Canadian study found that physiotherapists view success differently from other healthcare or corporate professionals. Rather than a straight path, they see success as a circular journey, highlighting the interconnected roles of physiotherapists, professional organisations and employers in fostering growth.⁹²

For the new generation, career fulfilment goes beyond expertise. It's about impact, purpose and driving change. Success is no longer measured just by professional milestones; it's a matter of innovation, inclusivity and driving meaningful change through collaboration and community impact.

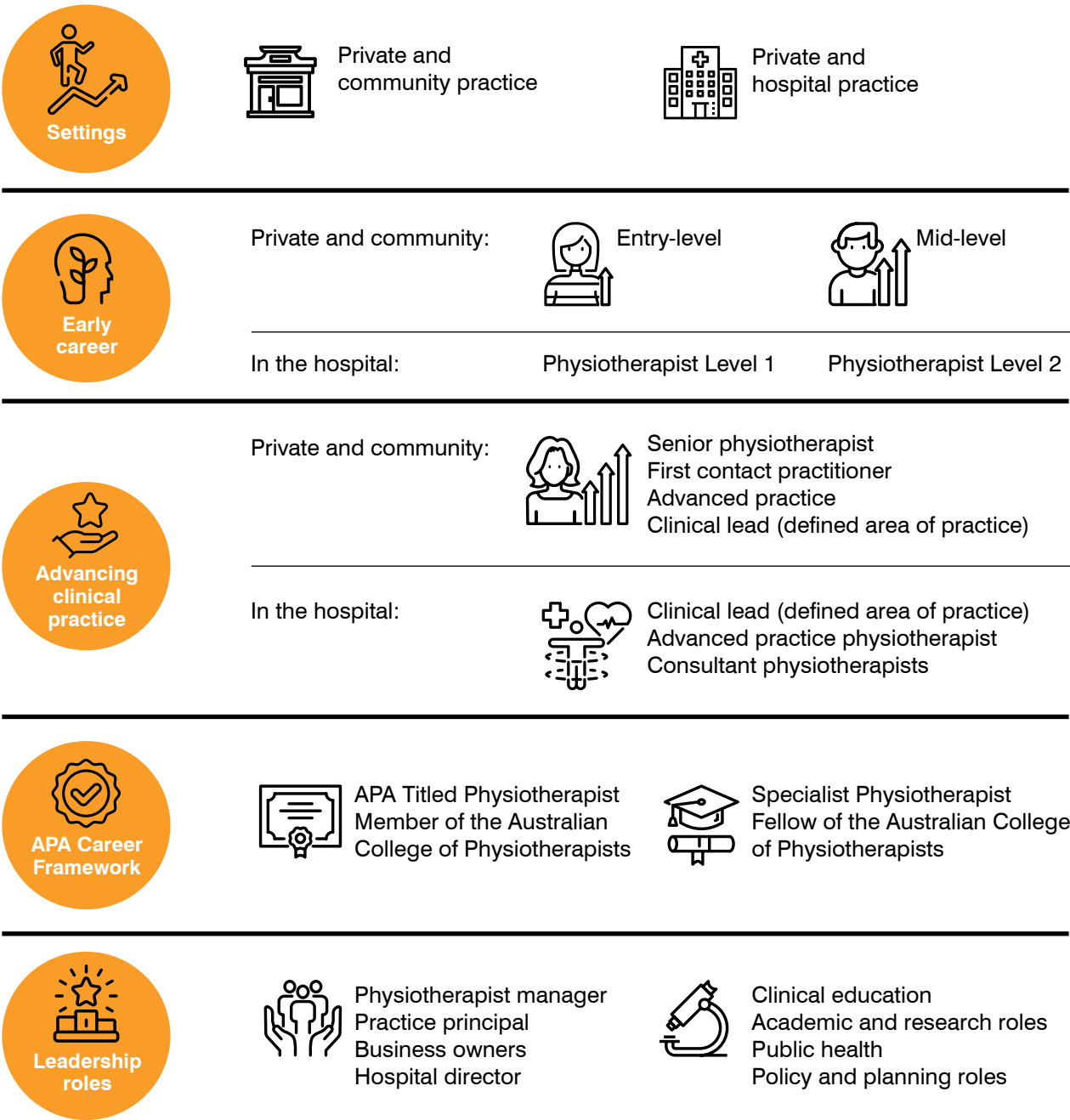
**Success isn't a fixed point—it's an evolving, shared journey.
The real question is: are we ready to step into it?**

A world of experience

Physiotherapy opens doors to a rewarding journey full of potential.

Physiotherapy is evolving, shaped by advancing clinical practice, interdisciplinary collaboration and a new generation of professionals redefining success. No longer confined to traditional pathways, today’s physiotherapists navigate a dynamic landscape of specialisations, leadership roles and community-driven impact. From entry-level clinicians to advanced practitioners, the profession offers an expanding horizon of possibilities, where expertise meets adaptability and career fulfilment goes beyond technical skill.

Figure 15: Physiotherapy infinite pathways



Leadership isn’t just a role—it’s a practice that can be expressed from any position, especially when driving systemic change.

Growth and transition

From new grad to skill mastery

The career path for physiotherapists is diverse, embracing fluid and multifaceted growth. Some delve deeply into specific clinical areas, while others broaden their expertise.

Physiotherapy education responds to modern healthcare demands, emphasising adaptability and integrated expertise. A strong generalist foundation is critical, as many skills evolve in response to patient needs. Physiotherapists must adapt to the growing complexity of ageing populations, increasing comorbidities and the rising musculoskeletal burden. Beyond traditional specialties, practitioners must understand how ageing, frailty and multi-morbidities shape recovery. Future professionals will close care gaps to drive meaningful change in patient care.

APA education leadership is driving innovation in physiotherapy learning, ensuring that it remains adaptive, accessible and career-aligned. An integrated strategy build is underway, refining pathways, enhancing member engagement and keeping education relevant across diverse practice settings. Lifelong learning must be flexible, equipping practitioners to grow from graduation to retirement.



Featured insight:

Ellen Webber

Ellen Webber, General Manager of Education at the APA, is a strategic leader in health professions education with over two decades of experience in driving reform across complex education systems. Passionate about delivering high-quality, evidence-informed programs, Ellen is committed to meeting learner needs while prioritising positive health outcomes for communities. In this featured insight, Ellen describes how she is shaping the future of the profession through initiatives that prioritise next-generation learning.

Leading education reform in physiotherapy

A meaningful career path begins with a balance between exploration and structured guidance, creating room for graduates to develop essential skills while making informed career decisions.

Shifting towards evidence-informed, learner-centred models, education frameworks are becoming more flexible, interactive and tailored to individual professional goals. Next-generation learning approaches—including modular, just-in-time education and integrated workplace learning—are reshaping physiotherapy training by prioritising accessibility, adaptability and practical application.

To better support new graduates, education pathways need to move beyond rigid, time-based structures. The focus should be on developing confidence, capability and professional identity through clearer career pathways, stronger workplace support and flexible training options that allow physiotherapists to adapt, grow and succeed in diverse and evolving healthcare settings.

Physiotherapists are increasingly able to shape their own learning journeys, balancing structure with choice. Targeted and flexible assessments support progression, while adaptable education frameworks enable individuals to align their development with their aspirations or respond to unmet needs in underserved areas. This approach supports both career satisfaction and system impact.

The profession is now building an education system that truly supports lifelong learning—one that evolves with physiotherapists across their careers.

It's an exciting time to be in education leadership. We have a real opportunity to drive meaningful change, foster innovation and shape the future of physiotherapy learning to genuinely meet the needs of learners, the profession and the communities we serve.

Insights from those who made it

What experienced physiotherapists want the next generation to know

To shape this white paper, we invited experienced physiotherapists to reflect on their journeys—what has helped them thrive, how they've stayed the course and what they want the next generation to know.

Their experience spans public and private healthcare, higher education and research, elite sport, defence contracting, international aid, authorship and entrepreneurship. They have contributed as clinicians, educators, volunteers, mentors, business leaders and advocates for the profession—working everywhere from mine shafts to Broadway stages.

What follows is not a blueprint but a convergence of advice and professional values—self-awareness, resilience, curiosity and connection—that emerged from their reflections. These themes, vital for navigating the challenges of early-career physiotherapists, offer both perspective and permission to grow in your own way.

Curiosity and reflection build confidence

Uncertainty is not a weakness. The physiotherapists we spoke with all described a period of professional self-doubt, often early in their careers. What made the difference wasn't knowing all the answers—it was staying open to learning, reflecting and asking for help.



You don't need to know everything in the first five years. Confidence comes from being open to growth and honest about what you don't know yet.

Marcus Mancer



Confidence doesn't come from having all the answers—it comes from asking your clients the right questions, listening deeply and holding the intention to keep growing.

Tara Long



The most valuable thing early in my career was being around people who didn't pretend to know everything—who let me grow and make mistakes.

Annie Strauch



It's okay to feel overwhelmed—especially early on. Just don't let that stop you from showing up and growing.

Dr Peter Selvaratnam AM



I was lucky to have people who gave me early opportunities to lead—probably before I felt ready. It helped me learn fast, but with a safety net.

Jonathan Moody

Seek out environments that support the physiotherapist you want to be

Where you work—and who you work with—shapes your professional growth. Supportive environments do more than foster skill development. They allow for vulnerability and challenge you constructively. Each contributor reflected on the critical role that early teams, mentors or environments played in shaping who they became, whether by learning what to emulate or by learning what to avoid.

'Early mentors shaped my thinking. From hospitals to universities, I sought out people who were generous with their time and knowledge.'—**Dr Peter Selvaratnam AM**

'I've worked in environments where I could be vulnerable, honest and supported. That's when I've grown the most.'—**Annie Strauch**

Be open to change, steered by your values

None of the contributors imagined their careers unfolding exactly as they did. Detours and road bumps, values-driven decisions and redefinitions of purpose and success shaped their journeys.

'I've worked in elite sport, in remote locations, in high-performance settings and in my own clinic. None of that was the plan. But every step added something I needed. Rather than chasing titles or roles, I followed the values that felt true. That's what gave me staying power.'—**Marcus Mancer**

'I moved countries multiple times for family and with each move came reinvention. I never had a blueprint—just a compass. My values pointed the way.'—**Dr Peter Selvaratnam AM**

'I left a job where I felt completely misaligned with the values. It was one of the hardest decisions I've made but one of the most important.'—**Tara Long**

Self-awareness and boundaries are needed for the long haul

Long careers need structure, boundaries and self-awareness. Your passion and motivation are your greatest assets. Protect them. Everyone we spoke to had strategies, developed over time and as a result of challenging periods, that allow them to wake up consistently with energy and love what they do.

'You can care deeply and still set limits. That's how you stay in the profession long enough to make a difference.'—**Marcus Mancer**

'I don't think we talk enough about how much this work can take from you. You can love it and still need rest, boundaries and support.'—**Tara Long**

'Trust your gut. If something doesn't feel right—whether it's a workplace, a treatment philosophy, whatever—pay attention to that. And take ownership of your development. No-one else is going to drive it for you.'—**Jonathan Moody**

Keep learning and give back when you can

The most enduring message from all contributors was to keep learning and give back when you can. Whether through mentoring, collaboration or conversation, there's always something to offer and something to learn.

'Continuing education kept me sharp and mentoring kept me grounded. You learn just as much from your students as they do from you.'—**Dr Peter Selvaratnam AM**

'We're constantly learning from our team, our clients and each other—if we stay open to it. Face-to-face learning with peers—especially clinical practical skills—was vital to my development.'—**Annie Strauch**

No blueprint, just a compass

Dr Peter Selvaratnam AM

Across four countries and five decades, Dr Peter Selvaratnam AM has never stopped developing. He has worked in hospitals, universities, research, elite sport, international development and private practice and each chapter of his career has brought new beginnings.

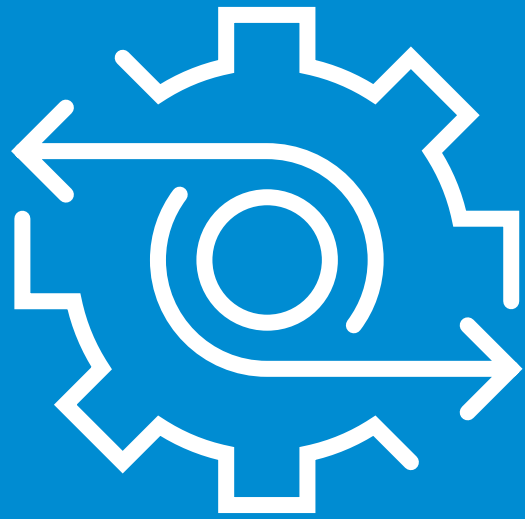
Migration, family commitments and shifting systems meant adapting again and again. But each reinvention, he says, deepened his empathy and strengthened his teaching.

'The diversity of my experiences gave me a broader lens. It helped me understand people, not just conditions.'

Now an educator and mentor, Peter tells early-career physiotherapists that it's not about knowing everything—it's about staying open, curious and kind.

'Burnout creeps in when you forget your purpose. Come back to it often.'

Conclusion: Shaping tomorrow. Building the future now



A framework for action

Healthier working lives

How we support the next generation of physiotherapists will shape the future of the profession. Just as we focus on patient outcomes, we need to build workplaces that allow practitioners to grow, adapt and thrive. A strong workforce isn't just about keeping physiotherapists in the profession—it's about creating careers that are rewarding, balanced and built to last. That means practical support: mentorship, skills development and clear career pathways, not just good intentions.

Strong clinicians come from strong systems and the way we invest in early-career physiotherapists will define where we go from here.

To create lasting change, we need to move beyond discussion and into action. A framework for structured support, workplace adaptability and professional growth must underpin this shift. The physiotherapy workforce deserves environments that nurture long-term success, not just short-term survival.

The future of physiotherapy is not waiting—it's already unfolding. What we do now matters more than ever. This white paper has explored a profession at a pivotal moment: committed to excellence, facing significant pressures and stepping into an evolving landscape of healthcare, learning and workplace expectations.

We're in this together

The next generation, today

The solutions outlined in this paper aim to start a conversation about reform. Strengthening early career support, fostering workplace growth and investing in sustainable career pathways are essential steps toward a stronger, more adaptable profession. The work we do today shapes the future of patient care.

We have listened closely to students, graduates, educators, employers and thought leaders across Australia. Their insights are clear. We must do more than keep pace—we must lead with purpose, equity and collaboration.

While the challenges ahead are complex—burnout, career sustainability, placement shortfalls, funding gaps and diversity deficits—the opportunities are powerful. By investing in the early career phase, building career pathways, strengthening education-to-practice transitions and reimagining culture, we can secure a stronger, more future-ready profession.

What we've learned

A number of foundational themes have emerged:

Identity matters.	Physiotherapy is more than a job—it is a profession grounded in patient-centred care, evidence-informed practice, social accountability and lifelong learning. Professional identity begins at university but evolves continuously across one's career.
Support is pivotal.	Early-career physiotherapists thrive when they are supported. Structured programs, clear pathways, fair remuneration, strong role models and workplace belonging shape confidence, resilience and retention.
Culture shapes experience.	Positive workplace cultures—grounded in respect, inclusion and collaboration—are more than desirable. They are essential to workforce wellbeing, equity and career sustainability.
Education must evolve.	Universities and clinical educators are innovating but placement access, teaching capacity and digital fluency remain key constraints. Curricula must be evidence-informed, clinically relevant, inclusive and future-facing.
Career progression needs clarity.	New graduates are asking not just 'Where can I work?' but 'Who will I become?' They need visible, flexible pathways that reflect diverse goals and modern workforce realities.
Work readiness is a shared responsibility.	Students, universities, employers and professional bodies each play a part in preparing graduates. Alignment across these sectors is essential to build the workforce our future demands.
Leadership must be distributed.	Leadership is no longer top-down. It is shared, local and cultural. Every practitioner, educator and employer has the power—and responsibility—to lead within their sphere of influence.

A call to action: from insight to impact

This white paper does not offer all the answers but it provides a clear direction. It is a call to collective effort, informed by evidence and grounded in lived experience.

Here's what we can commit to, starting now:

Recognise transition as a priority.

Establish structured, funded, national pathways that support early-career physiotherapists as they move from university to the workforce.

Embed lifelong learning.

Promote flexible, inclusive, practice-relevant professional development from graduation to retirement.

Reinvest in teaching.

Equip clinical educators with the time, skills and recognition they need to teach well and to develop the next generation with confidence.

Reform placements.

Expand placement availability, particularly in primary care and rural contexts, to ensure that experience is not left to chance.

Build cultures that retain.

Invest in workplaces that align with values, support wellbeing and enable career development from the outset.

Support diverse entry and progression.

Ensure that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, culturally and linguistically diverse students and professionals from under-represented groups are supported to thrive and to lead.

Formalise pathways.

Build and promote transparent career frameworks that align with the APA Career Pathway and offer multiple modes of growth—clinical, educational, leadership and beyond.

We're in this together

Physiotherapy's future is not something we wait for. It's something we shape. And it will not be shaped by one voice or sector alone. It will be built in the classroom, in the clinic, in the mentoring relationship, in the team meeting and in the decisions we make—individually and collectively.

This white paper is a step forward. It invites action across policy, education, practice and culture. The next generation is not just asking for help—they are offering insight, energy and vision. It's time to meet them where they are and walk forward together.

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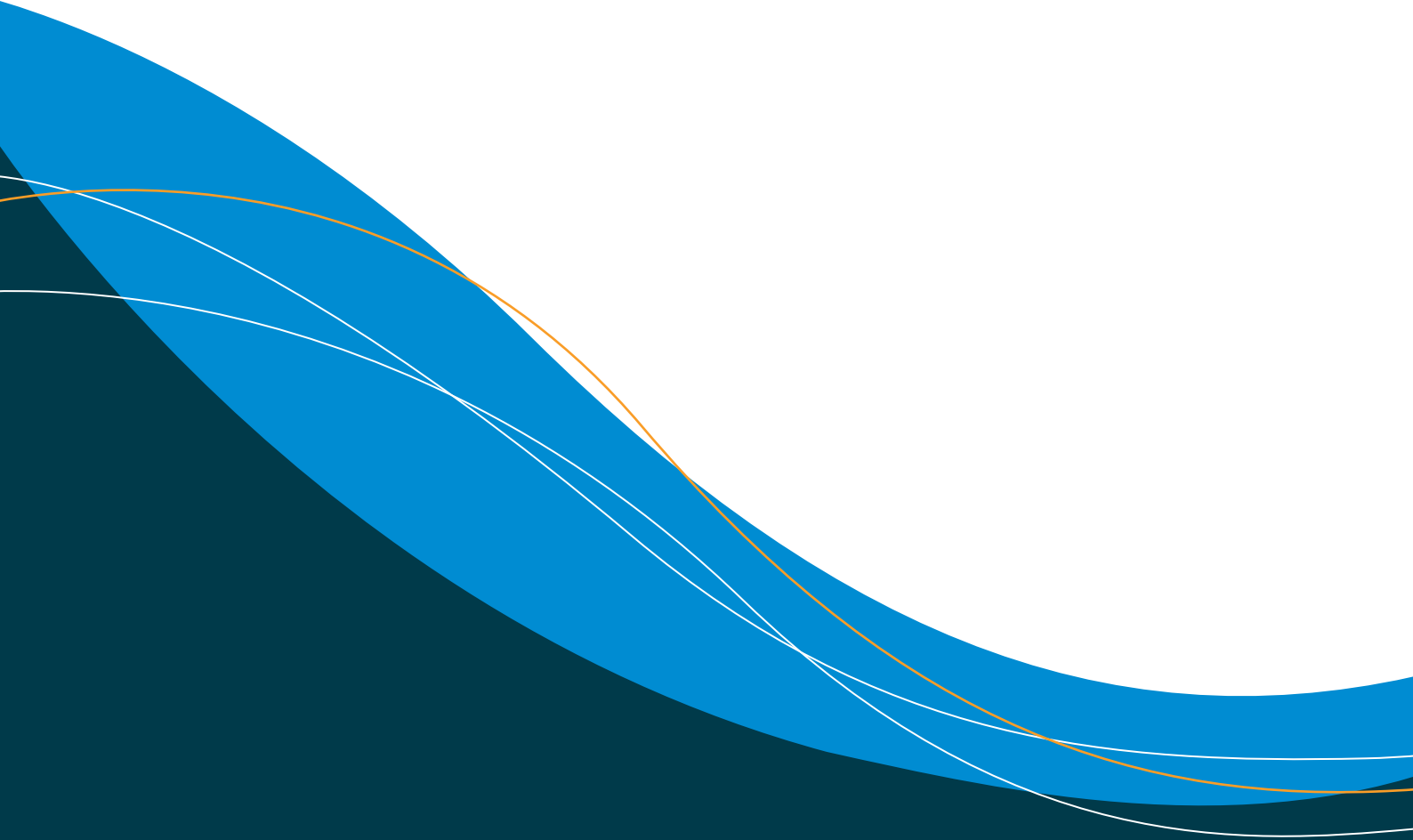
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