



AUSTRALIAN  
PHYSIOTHERAPY  
ASSOCIATION

# Introduction to APA's Education Principles

## - Access, Equity and Recognition of Prior Learning

### UNESCO Sustainable Development Goal 4

'Ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all.'

Education 2030, UNESCO

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## Introduction to APA's Education Principles

"[The Human Right to education]...is universal: Everyone has the right to education without discrimination. This includes children, adolescents, youths, adults, and older people"

UNESCO

The Australian Physiotherapy Association's (APA) alignment to, and relationships across, the national health governance is well-understood throughout our membership, entities and staff. Nationally these regulatory and governance bodies include the Australian Health Practitioner Agency (AHPRA), the Physiotherapy Board of Australia (PhysioBA) and the Australian Physiotherapy Council (APC). Our international relationships and leadership in the discipline of physiotherapy is also well-understood through our role with the World Confederation for Physical Therapy and its subgroups.

Our relationships with the Australian universities providing accredited physiotherapy programs is understood through our membership, entities and staff. National groups and branches work closely with many universities supporting undergraduate and post-graduate physiotherapy programs, and the APA has a strong, collaborative relationship with the Council of Physiotherapy Deans Australia and New Zealand (CPDANZ).

The APA offers a range of post-graduate professional development and education programs for physiotherapists in their journey from early career through to advanced career, including recognising a range of university post-graduate programs. As a professional member association, the APA is not formally bound by national and international education frameworks and governance. Less well-known is the APA's professional development and education programs' alignment to best-practice national and international education governance and standards.

The tertiary education sector works within a national regulatory and governance framework which provides the quality assurance and regulation of national qualifications. These include:

- Australian Government Department of Education in consultation with states and territories
- Australian Qualifications Framework (AQF)
- Tertiary Education Quality and Standards Agency (TEQSA)
- Higher Education Standards (HES)

At an international level, there is harmonisation of the principles and standards governing tertiary and adult education through the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO). Australia is a member organisation with a long history of contribution to, and leadership in, UNESCO's education program.

As an organisation, the APA formally elaborates our Vision, Belief, Purpose, Strategy and Code of Conduct, and we do the same with our Education Principles.

This document outlines the background to and context of APA's Principles of Education - Access, Equity and Recognition of Prior Learning. Our commitment is that we will continue to improve and expand the depth and breadth of content and governance of our professional development and education programs. The principles will be reflected throughout our learning and education programs, and the related policies and procedures.

## Why have principles of access and equity?

“...recognition and validation of knowledge and competences acquired through multiple learning pathways are part of a lifelong learning framework...which demands multiple learning pathways and recognition that learning is a ‘continuum’ in which formal education overlaps and interacts with informal and non-formal forms of learning .”

UNESCO

APA’s education and professional development programs aim to meet international best practice standards and principles for access and equity using a continuous improvement approach. Recognition and validation is an integral component of access and equity. During the transition to the Career Pathway there is a rare opportunity for the APA and the physiotherapy profession to make a significant improvement and expansion in the ways that we recognise and validate our members’ competencies.

The United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO) is the leading international body in strategic education, educational systems and underlying principles. The OECD also has an international leadership role in education, including monitoring and evaluation, measuring outcomes and completing reviews.

Australia’s educational governance is aligned to the international standards, including the Australian Qualifications Framework (AQF), Tertiary Education Quality and Standards Agency (TESQA) and related Acts and Standards. This document draws from UNESCO’s principles and definitions as the international standard.

APA’s principles of access and equity have been informed by UNESCO’s Sustainable Development Goal 4: Ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all<sup>1</sup>

## Australian physiotherapy qualifications journey

The APA and its entities have been responsive to the post-entry level needs of the profession from early to advanced career, in order to ensure quality professional development and education. In this, we work closely with universities providing post-graduate programs and other education providers, with APA’s role including provision of professional learning and education, and recognition of quality in practice-area standards of qualifications.

The physiotherapy qualification landscape in Australia has seen significant change in formal education over these decades – at undergraduate level moving from Diploma to Degree, at post-graduate level moving from Graduate Certificate to discipline-based Masters in many clinical streams.

We’re in another period of significant change. There has been widespread recognition of, and response to, the needs of adult learners. These include designing learning opportunities, programs and recognition processes which take into consideration a range of adult learning models, methodologies, frameworks and the like. Just few of these include adult learning principles, self-directed learning (heutagogy), learning lead by and designed by learners, the learning that occurs after the formal process, and work-integrated learning – there are many more.

Tertiary education institutions in the formal education sector have recognised this and are responding to the demand by offering microcredentials, and practice-area specific coursework masters qualifications are being supplemented by general physiotherapy masters qualifications which allow the learner to select their practice-area. There has also been significant expansion in the non-formal and informal sectors with a wide range of course providers and substantial, rigorous and quality-assured workplace programs, such as the Advanced Musculoskeletal Practice Framework.

Over this time, internationally there has been substantial refinement of the principles and expansion of the body of research around formal, non-formal and informal learning, educational design, access and equity, recognition, validation, assessment and credentialing, to which Australia has been a significant contributor.

## Best practice lifelong learning, access and equity

In its strategic leadership role in lifelong learning, UNESCO outlines key elements through:

- Sustainable Development Goals – specifically Goal 4 – education
- Universal human rights including access to lifelong education
- Education 2030 Framework “Towards 2030”
- Institute for lifelong Learning (ILL).

The OECD also has an international leadership role, including monitoring and evaluation, conducting surveys, measuring outcomes and completing educational reviews of member countries.

## Recognising and validating learning

The importance of access, equity and the integral nature of recognition of prior learning is neatly outlined in *UNESCO Guidelines for the Recognition, Validation and Accreditation of the Outcomes of Non-Formal and Informal Learning*:

“...demand for the recognition, validation and accreditation (RVA) of all forms of learning with a focus on non-formal and informal learning. It renders visible and gives value to the hidden and unrecognised competences that individuals have obtained through various means and in different phases of their lives.

RVA processes should allow broad groups of populations to have their learning outcomes assessed, validated and recognised, whether acquired non-formally or informally. For disadvantaged groups particularly, it can create a more level playing-field in education and training.

In most cases, traditional qualifications of formal education and learning have been defined with reference to fixed durations, subject, levels and location of study. The integration of RVA into formal systems stresses the importance of what learners actually know, are able to do and understand.

This integration is crucial to creating alternative pathways in open and flexible education and training systems, meeting individuals’ diverse needs.

The quality of RVA hinges significantly on the capability of RVA administrators, assessors, facilitators, counsellors and other practitioners to set up and maintain inclusive RVA practices. The ongoing and continuous training of RVA personnel ensures reliability and trust in RVA practices.”<sup>2</sup>

In the context of access to ongoing continuing professional development, post-graduate qualifications and credentials in the Australian post-entry level physiotherapy, disadvantage may include, but is not limited to:

- gender
- geographical location
- time constraints
- financial constraints.

As a member-based organisation, the APA needs to find a balance to serve all of our member's needs within resource capabilities and capacity. These include, but are not limited to:

- budget and financial
- human resources including:
  - the invaluable contributions of volunteer member time on committees and other entities
  - staff
  - members remunerated for their contribution such as course presenters, course developers, examiners.

We are committed to continuing to expand access to our education and continuing professional development programs through a range of innovative means, as these opportunities and technologies become available. We will also continue our close working partnerships and relationships with stakeholders across this area.

## **APA's Career Pathway supports access and equity**

The APA has responded to the changing environment and context by developing the Career Pathway and education frameworks, including the Competence Framework and governance structures.

The APA has recognised that our volunteer members require additional support to make a significant step change in the transition to the Career Pathway by providing a range of additional support:

- Additional staff support provided in the College Operations Team
- Professional consultancy in the development of the Career Pathway and education frameworks
- Recruitment of staff with qualifications and experience in educational design, recognition, validation, moderation, assessment and program accreditation.

These systems need to have inbuilt checks and balances to ensure they are rigorous and maintain the expected standards, recognised internationally in *Education 2030: Incheon Declaration* that "due attention [must be paid] to relevant quality assurance."<sup>1</sup>

## APA's Education Principles - Access and Equity

As part of their Career Pathway Education Framework the APA has adapted their access and equity principles from *UNESCO Guidelines for the Recognition, Validation and Accreditation of the Outcomes of Non-Formal and Informal Learning*<sup>2</sup>. Our education and continuing professional development programs, including recognition of prior learning, will go through a quality assurance process to ensure they meet the following principles, as practicable within APA's technical, human and financial capability.

APA's Education Principles – Access and Equity are:

- **Ensure equity and inclusiveness in access to learning opportunities**  
Every member should have the right to access and engage in any form of learning suited to their needs, and have their learning outcomes made visible and valued
- **Promote the equal value of learning outcomes of formal, non-formal and informal**  
Competences that every member has accumulated through non-formal and informal learning should be treated on a par with those that are obtained through formal learning
- **Ensure the centrality of individuals in the recognition and validation process**  
The process should respect and reflect members' needs, and their participation should be on a voluntary basis
- **Improve flexibility and openness**  
Education and training systems should consider diverse forms of learning, taking into account learners' needs and experiences
- **Promote quality assurance in the entire recognition and validation process**  
It is imperative that criteria and procedures for assessing and validating non-formal and informal learning are relevant, reliable, fair and transparent

These can be distilled into a simple one page document which can be used for wider dissemination and communication, provided in Appendix 1.

## Why have principles of recognition of prior learning (RPL)?

“consumers have the right to expect that physiotherapists providing regulated health services do so in a competent and contemporary manner. CPD can improve competence and result in better outcomes for patients or clients. CPD is important in the continued provision of safe and effective services by health professionals.”

Physiotherapy Board of Australia

As a member-based organisation, the APA has a small staff team and relies on the contributions of highly qualified and experienced members to support many of the organisation’s activities. In terms of our education and professional development programs, provision of widespread recognition of prior learning is one area that has traditionally had an extremely limited scope due to a number of interlinked constraints:

- human resources – both staff and volunteer members
- financial – to pay for the initial design and development of systems, proformas, marking systems; or to pay for the assessment of applications
- expertise – this is a niche area within education, outside the usual role of most university academics. Expertise is needed for the initial design and development, and then upskilling of staff, volunteer members and the paid member-assessors.

With the transition to the Career Pathway, Competence Framework and Education Framework, we have a window of opportunity to design and implement systematic best-practice recognition of prior learning which is flexible, responsive to changes and future-proofed. The principles and recommendations in this document are informed by, and align with:

- Australian regulated health service requirements, guidelines, acts and standards
- International educational best-practice, and national educational requirements, guidelines, acts and standards.

We will be able to offer our members recognition of their learning and professional competence – wherever it was attained or demonstrated.

## Benefits of continuing professional development (CPD)

The Australian Physiotherapy Association’s (APA) Career Pathway Competence Framework is aligned with the PhysioBA in that “all learning activities which help you maintain competence will be accepted as CPD”<sup>3</sup>.

The PHysioBA notes that this includes “participation in formal learning activities, such as attendance at courses or conferences, as well as non-formal learning gained through experience and interaction with colleagues.”<sup>3</sup> This aligns with the Australian Qualification Framework’s concept of volume of learning as including activities such as guided learning (classes, lectures, tutorials, on-line study or self-paced study guides), individual study, research, learning activities in the workplace and assessment activities.<sup>4</sup>



## RPL in the context of health regulatory requirements

The PhysioBA acknowledges the importance of self-determined and work-relevant learning, stating that:

“You will learn best when you are motivated and your CPD:

- is highly self-directed – you are responsible for deciding what CPD activities you want to do
- is based on a personal learning plan and your individual learning needs
- builds on existing knowledge and experience
- links learning and practice
- includes evaluation of the effect of learning on practice
- involves review of the learning plan in response to personal experience, and
- includes mentor or peer review”<sup>3</sup>

Well-designed recognition of prior learning will future-proof the APA’s Career Pathways, as it enables our members’ choice in where and when they undertake learning. The flexibility of an expanded recognition of prior learning further improves on existing APA options, to provide more access and equity to our members whilst maintaining the integrity of standards.<sup>2,4-6</sup>

The principles of RPL are informed by, and align with:

- Australian health sector requirements, guidelines, acts and standards
- international educational best-practice, and national educational requirements, guidelines, acts and standards.

In the Australian context this includes:

- Australian Health Practitioner Regulation Agency (AHPRA)
- Physiotherapy Board of Australia (PBA)
- Australia Qualifications Framework (AQF)
- Tertiary Education Quality and Standards Agency (TESQA)
- Higher Education Standards Framework.

## Ways that our members learn

There are many ways that our members’ may continue their lifelong and life-wide learning and attain competence, these include:

- **Formal learning** –this generally refers to nationally recognised qualifications, including but not limited to post-graduate certificate, master’s degree, doctorate
- **Non-formal learning** – this generally refers to structured courses of learning, which may be in classrooms or online (but don’t lead to a qualification)
- **Informal learning** – this may also be called experiential learning and refers to other learning activities, including but not limited to: on-the-job learning, self-study<sup>2-5</sup>

There are a wide range of activities, tasks, situations and scenarios in which our members continue their lifelong and life-wide learning. The PBA outlines a range of examples<sup>3</sup> as including, but not limited to:

- tertiary courses
- accredited courses
- work-based learning contracts
- conferences, forums and seminars
- undertaking research and presentation of work
- courses leading to degree, higher degree and research degree
- online learning (interactive discussion and chat rooms)
- in-service education programs
- making presentations
- videoconferencing.
- reflecting on experience in day-to-day activities
- reading books, journals, etc.
- secondment and/or contact with other professionals
- quality assurance activities, such as accreditation
- participation in committees
- information sharing at meetings
- discussion with colleagues
- internet research.

## Credit pathways to recognise learning

There are a range of credit pathways<sup>2,5,6,8-11</sup> that are used to recognise the equivalence between content and learning outcomes between different types of learning (adapted for the context of APA as a professional association):

- **Recognition of prior learning (RPL)** – includes all forms of formal, non-formal and informal learning
- **Advanced standing** – credit for any previous learning (similar to RPL)
- **Credit transfer** – recognised equivalence between qualifications
- **Articulation** - progress from a completed course/credential to another in a defined qualification/career pathway.

In order to ensure RPL is fair, flexible and valid, the APA will follow the well-established national and international protocols and standards which govern acceptable evidence and methods of assessment of RPL.

Credit pathways are underpinned by equity and access principles as they:

- are clear and transparent to members
- are systemic and systematic
- enable flexible pathways
- may be horizontal at the same level as well as vertical between levels
- can facilitate credit for entry into, as well as credit towards, learning
- eliminate unfair or unnecessary barriers for members.<sup>1,4,6,8</sup>

These can be distilled into a simple one page document which can be used for wider dissemination and communication, provided in Appendix 2.

## Key Education Terminology

Like other professions, the education sector has a range of terminology with very specific meanings and parameters. Individual tertiary institutions across Australia may slightly differ in the way that they apply and implement processes, and many stakeholders will be familiar with the way that their institution operates.

We gain great value from the contributions of our member volunteers from across the spectrum of academia, public, community and private health sectors. It's important during business-as-usual, and it's critical during the transition to the APA's Career Pathway, that all stakeholders have a common understanding of the terminology being used. To ensure consistency APA has adopted UNESCO's definitions<sup>2</sup> below, some of which have been adapted for APA's role as a professional association rather.

### Recognition, validation and accreditation

- **Recognition** is a process of granting official status to learning outcomes and/or competences, which can lead to the acknowledgement of their value in society.
- **Validation** is the confirmation by an officially approved body that learning outcomes or competences acquired by an individual have been assessed against reference points or standards through pre-defined assessment methodologies.
- **Accreditation** is a process by which an officially approved body, on the basis of assessment of learning outcomes and/or competences according to different purposes and methods, awards qualifications (certificates, diplomas or titles), or grants equivalences, credit units or exemptions, or issues documents such as portfolios of competences. In some cases, the term accreditation applies to the evaluation of the quality of an institution or a programme as a whole.
- **Credential** – in terms of the role and context of APA, it's proposed that the term credential may be used interchangeably with accreditation

### Competences and learning outcomes

- **Competences** indicate a satisfactory state of knowledge, skills and attitudes and the ability to apply them in a variety of situations.
- **Learning outcomes** are achievements of what a learner knows, understands and is able to do as a result of a learning process.

### Formal, non-formal and informal learning

- **Formal learning** takes place in education and training institutions, is recognised by relevant national authorities and leads to diplomas and qualifications. Formal learning is structured according to educational arrangements such as curricula, qualifications and teaching-learning requirements.
- **Non-formal learning** is learning that has been acquired in addition or alternatively to formal learning. In some cases, it is also structured according to educational and training arrangements, but more flexible. It usually takes place in community-based settings, the workplace and through the activities of civil society organisations. Through the recognition, validation and accreditation process, non-formal learning can also lead to qualifications and other recognitions.

- **Informal learning** is learning that occurs in daily life, in the family, in the workplace, in communities and through interests and activities of individuals. Through the recognition, validation and accreditation process, competences gained in informal learning can be made visible, and can contribute to qualifications and other recognitions. In some cases, the term experiential learning is used to refer to informal learning that focuses on learning from experience

## Equivalence

- **Equivalence** refers to a state of being of equal value. The term is usually used to give equal value to a level of the competences a learner obtained from outside the formal education and training system with those gained in the formal education and training system.

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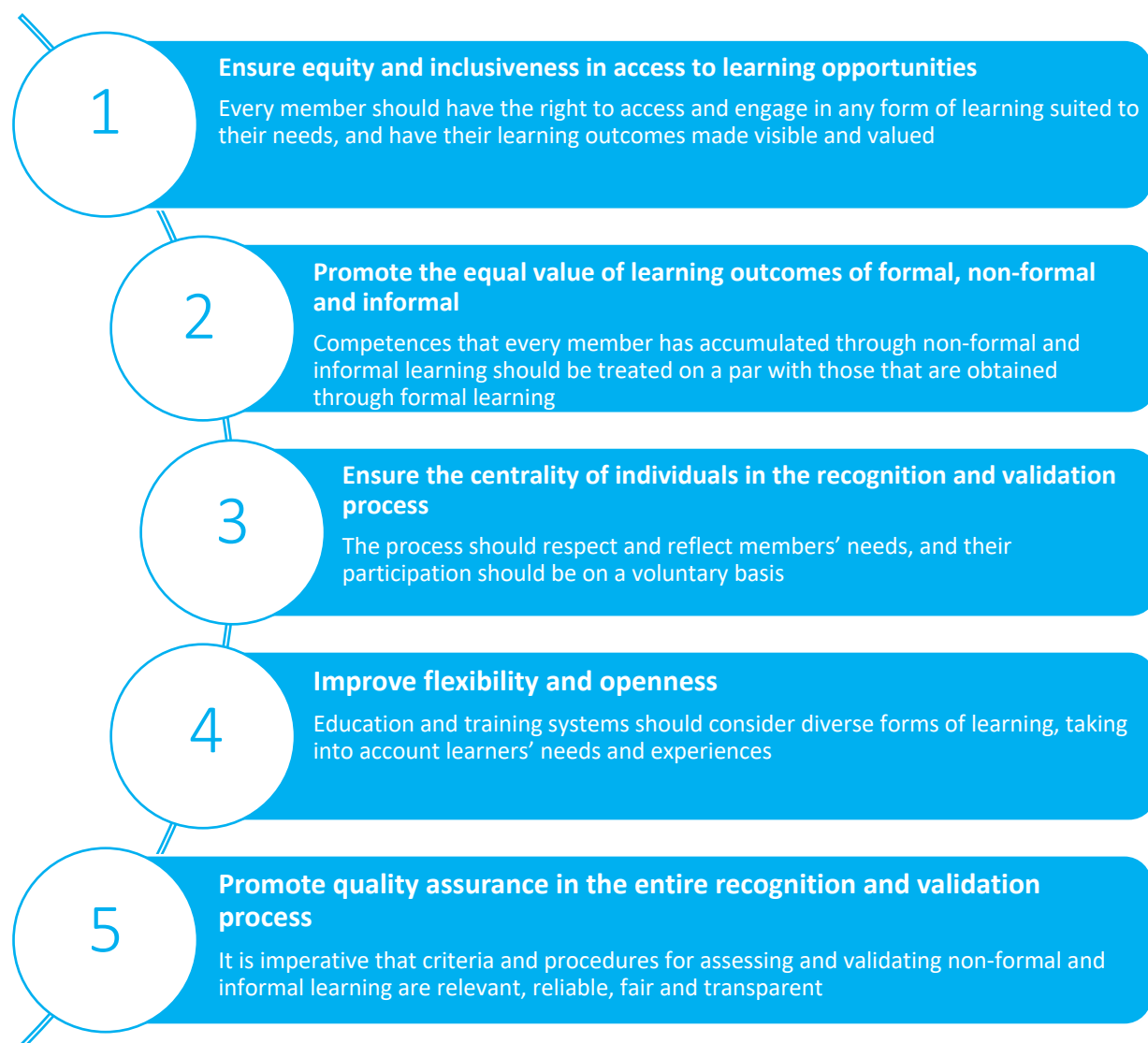
## Appendix 1 - APA's Education Principles - Access and Equity

*Life-wide and lifelong learning and recognition should be*

*"... 'equality-assured' to ensure access and progression is fair, transparent and equitable."*

UNESCO

The APA and its entities are committed to providing equity and access to lifelong learning and recognition for physiotherapists from early post-graduate through to advanced career stages - for the benefit of the physiotherapy profession, consumers and the wider healthcare sector. To this end, we have adapted our principles of access and equity from the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO) as best practice.



## Appendix 2 - APA's Education Principles - Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL)

*“Recognition, Validation and Accreditation (RVA) of all forms of learning outcomes is a practice that makes visible and values the full range of competences (knowledge, skills and attitudes) that individuals have obtained in various contexts, and through various means in different phases of their lives.”*

UNESCO

The APA and its entities are committed to providing national and international best practice equity and access to lifelong learning and recognition<sup>1</sup> for physiotherapists from early post-graduate through to advanced career stages - for the benefit of the physiotherapy profession, consumers and the wider healthcare sector.

### Ways our members learn

The APA recognises that there are many ways that our members continue their lifelong learning and attainment of competence, which include:

<b>Formal learning</b>	This generally refers to nationally recognised qualifications, including but not limited to: post-graduate certificate, master’s degree, doctorate
<b>Non-formal learning</b>	This generally refers to structured courses of learning, which may be in classrooms or online (but don’t lead to a qualification)
<b>Informal learning</b>	This may also be called experiential learning and refers to other learning activities, including but not limited to: on-the-job learning, self-study

### Recognising our members’ learning

It’s vital that the APA recognises and validates the continuum of learning for our members. There are a range of credit pathways used to recognise the equivalence between different types of learning:

<b>Recognition of prior learning (RPL)</b>	includes all forms of formal, non-formal and informal learning
<b>Advanced standing</b>	credit for any previous learning (similar to RPL)
<b>Credit transfer</b>	recognised equivalence between qualifications
<b>Articulation</b>	progress from a completed course/credential to another in a defined qualification/career pathway

The APA will follow established national and international protocols to ensure the evidence we accept and the assessment processes we use for RPL are fair, flexible and valid.

<sup>1</sup> RPL principles adapted from United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO) [www.en.unesco.org](http://www.en.unesco.org), Tertiary Education Quality and Standards Agency (TEQSA) [www.teqsa.gov.au](http://www.teqsa.gov.au), Australian Qualifications Framework (AQF) [www.aqf.edu.au/](http://www.aqf.edu.au/)