“What’s in it for me?” Massage practitioners’ perceptions of a degree qualification: a pilot study

Abstract:
Massage therapy is among the many growing complementary and alternative medicine modalities within New Zealand. Educational standards are unregulated and qualifications include certificates, diplomas and more recently a three-year Bachelors Degree in Massage Therapy. The aim of this study was to determine the perceptions of the benefits and barriers to degree-based massage education. Issues examined were: purposes of degree-based education; perceived benefits of degree-based massage education; participant’s past education in massage therapy; current educational needs; and barriers to accessing degree-based massage education. The project used a qualitative approach with semi-structured interviews with three practicing, certificate or diploma qualified massage therapists. Perceived benefits of degree-based massage education were increased capability, research knowledge, job opportunities, and credibility. Participants identified four significant barriers to participating in further or higher education: a nonessential pursuit; time restraints; family considerations; and financial barriers. The view that a massage degree was non-essential, and that being forced by their professional body to undertake a degree qualification would meet with strong resistance, needs to be addressed by education providers and members of the massage therapy community if the profession is to advance as a health care modality.

Key words: massage therapy, qualitative, higher education, complementary and alternative medicine

Author 1: Donna M. Smith
Author 2: Joanna M. Smith
Author 3: Rachel Spronken-Smith

Author 1 place of work: Massage Department, Southern Institute of Technology
Author 2 place of work: Massage Department, Southern Institute of Technology
Author 3 place of work: Higher Education Development Centre, University of Otago

Corresponding author
Donna Smith
Massage Dept., Southern Institute of Technology, Private Bag 90114, Invercargill 9840, New Zealand.
Phone (+643 2112699 ext 8832) Fax (+643 2112621) donna.smith@sit.ac.nz
Introduction

Massage Therapy is among the many growing complementary and alternative medicine (CAM) modalities within New Zealand, reflected by the increased coverage within the media, medical and psychological literature (Lawler, 2004). Paralleling this growth in interest, is growth in the use of massage therapy in healthcare (Ministerial Advisory Committee on Complementary and Alternative Health, 2004), and an increase in the number of education training providers for massage therapy, who offer a range of levels of education for prospective therapists (Massage New Zealand, 2009). During the last fifteen years, the educational package for massage therapy has slowly evolved from weekend workshop training in the early 1990’s through to the now offered certificate, diploma, or bachelors degree in massage therapy. The evolution in training options shows evidence of an increase in the duration of training. It also incorporates research literacy and higher level thinking, aspects commonly found in bachelor degree level education (New Zealand Qualifications Authority, 2009). However, there is no standardised curriculum, or agreement amongst massage education providers of the content and level of training necessary for practice as a massage therapist. In addition, there are no legislated educational requirements for the practice of massage therapy in New Zealand. Massage New Zealand (MNZ), a voluntary professional body for massage therapists, with a small number of members, has a certificate or a diploma in massage therapy as qualification requirements for members.

Higher education practices have been central for many CAM occupations. For example, the education of chiropractors requires them to undertake five years higher education and ongoing postgraduate professional development. To further support and gain legitimacy, chiropractors have adopted a model of education that has been used in medical schools and have infused their curriculum with medical science (Kelner, Wellman, Boon, & Welsh, 2006). One of the aims of higher education is to “increase the students’ capacity to learn, to provide them with analytic skills and to increase their ability to deal with new information and draw independent conclusions” (Gow & Kember, 1990, p.1). Higher education also focuses on fostering professionally mature practitioners. Developing students into practitioners who care for their clients often requires both the acquisition of a great deal of knowledge and the development of the necessary professional attitudes and behaviours (Hammer, Bruce, Beardsley, & Easton, 2003). Furthermore, the content of higher degree-based education increases a student’s research literacy and capacity. With research literacy, research capacity and the attributes established from receiving a higher education, comes a responsibility to help shape the industry in which practitioners work, therefore creating not only a competent practitioner but also an interactive professional (Higgs & Edwards, 1999).

A number of CAM occupations are seeking to procure professional status within the formal health care system (Kelner et al., 2006). Similarly, degree level education is now the minimum educational requirement for allied health professionals, such as osteopaths (The Osteopathic Council of New Zealand, 2009) and physiotherapists (The Physiotherapy Board of New Zealand, 2009) within New Zealand. Within Australia, acupuncture and naturopathy degree conversion courses have been developed in response to changing professional and educational requirements (Smith, Martin & Wache, 2006).

If the massage therapy industry wishes to gain professional status and credibility then higher education may be one step forward. Accordingly, the developers of a previous bachelor degree programme for massage therapy in New Zealand hoped that with a new curriculum there would be an increase not only in skill and knowledge level of practicing therapists, but
also an increase in the credibility of this growing profession. However, a number of stakeholders within the New Zealand massage industry, including practicing therapists, MNZ, and a collective of massage education providers, appear slow to accept and adopt degree-based education as a route to both the training of new massage therapists and professional development for currently practicing massage therapists.

Resistance to higher education is not a new phenomenon and is illustrated within other professions, such as nursing, where Watson (2006, p.624) states “there was support for the development of nursing as a profession and support for the higher education of nurses; and there was opposition - and the opposition came from inside and outside the profession”. In addition to resistance, there are also a number of barriers to participation in higher education. To participate in higher education, some students need to overcome barriers such as financial issues, gender issues, ethnic issues and age (Bowl, 2001). Other barriers commonly noted include low socioeconomic status, parental income, and circumstances such as a non-English speaking background or a disability (Freeman, 1997; Young, 2004). External barriers such as lack of information and encouragement from college counselors and careers advisors (Freeman, 1997), student debt (Marriott, 2007), and the degree of financial hardship (Langworthy, Howard & Sharp, 2006) have also impacted upon the decision to undertake or remain in further education.

As discussed above, there are a number of benefits for the individual and professional groups arising from higher education. However, common barriers to accessing and successfully completing higher education need to be considered as they could be an issue for practicing therapists who, for example, may not be able to relocate their family or business. Moreover, some of the perspectives and beliefs held by practicing massage therapists such as anyone can massage, and the lack of financial incentives resulting from higher education, may limit the adoption of massage degree level education in New Zealand. At this stage of the professionalisation journey of massage therapy in New Zealand, it is timely to ask the research question: what are massage practitioners perceptions of the benefits and barriers to degree-based massage education?

**Method**

This pilot study was the initial phase of an anticipated larger study designed to identify future research directions. This study adopted a qualitative approach within an interpretivist paradigm. Such research focuses on the points of view of relevant actors and draws on individual’s perceptions. In this case the relevant actors were practicing massage therapists and participants were purposively selected using local networks known to the lead researcher. An initial phone call was made to assess participant interest and to confirm whether potential participants met the inclusion criteria which were: (1) whether they held a massage therapy qualification from a recognized New Zealand Qualifications Authority massage therapy training provider; (2) whether they were currently practicing massage therapy; (3) were 16 years or older; and (4) whether they were comfortable with spoken English. Volunteers who indicated interest were sent a consent form and an information sheet explaining the project’s purpose, interview topics, venue and procedures. Given this was a pilot study, only three participants were recruited: two males and one female. Two held a diploma qualification (equivalent to 1200 - 2400 hours of learning) and one held a certificate qualification (equivalent to 600 hours of learning).

The participants’ perceptions of degree-based massage therapy education were gained using
semi-structured interviews. The interview questions were framed around five specific topics: degree based education, participants’ experiences of learning to become a massage therapist, participants’ views on degree-based massage therapy education, their current education needs, and barriers to accessing degree-based massage education. Each interview lasted about an hour and was audio taped by the researcher. No demographic information was sought due to the small size of the local massage community, where age, gender and massage approach may easily identify participants. Pseudonyms are used to maintain the anonymity of participants. Ethical approval was granted by the University of Otago, Higher Education Development Centre Ethics Committee.

The transcripts were transcribed verbatim and sent to the participants for checking. Themes were drawn from the raw data using the general inductive approach (Thomas, 2006) in which data are coded according to the objectives of the research, as well as allowing further themes to emerge. Themes were systematically analysed and patterns of commonality and difference were sought. Appropriate quotations that conveyed the main ideas were selected and are presented and discussed with reference to the literature.

Results

Five main themes emerged from the analysis and are presented in turn below. These are perceptions of higher education, perceptions of degree-based massage education, content of previous massage education and current professional development needs, barriers to higher education in massage, and increased accessibility to massage degree education.

Perceptions of higher education

Higher education was seen as being concerned with further learning and higher level knowledge. Higher education was also perceived as a path for professional training, towards employment. It involved skills in the rational application of knowledge and critical thinking. For example, John said that higher education is:

the obvious path for professional training that’s delivered so that students are able to do the job as it were and allied to that, I think there’s the training in critical thinking... Institutions [are] not releasing robots but they’re giving them training, also they’re giving students the tools to apply it themselves and rationalise about what they’re doing.

Perceptions of degree-based massage education

All participants viewed degree-based massage education in terms of increased capability, research skills, credibility, and increased opportunities, which they linked to an increase in knowledge and skills. One participant (Hannah) further reflected that she was unsure a degree would add to her present circumstances and said “I don’t think it would add anything to my practice as I’m quite fulfilled”. This was due in part to her being well established in her career. Both John and Bill viewed increased knowledge as being important, since it provides tools to critically think and apply massage therapy. Bill commented “nothing beats hands on... but to go further with hands on you have to have higher knowledge”. John viewed degree-based education as providing research skills, where students are equipped “to do research, to be aware of what’s out there and how to research effectively”. An additional view held by John was degree-based education is a journey.
[It’s] not necessarily to do with the subject matter. It’s what the student goes through on that journey. It’s not something that’s in the curriculum explicitly. I think that’s what students do, evolve through challenges they face. A huge amount of degree education actually is personal development.

For John, part of degree-based massage education was a journey of personal growth.

Participants considered that a higher qualification and higher level knowledge in massage therapy would provide them with credibility and recognition. Hannah thought other healthcare practitioners would have recognised her qualification. She said “it [a degree] may have given me an easier route to recognition with other health practitioners . . . having a higher qualification”. Similarly, John remarked “I think it would give me credibility and a point of difference, it sets you apart . . . there still aren’t many graduates of the degree out there”. Bill expanded the perception that higher education in massage may have provided him with opportunities, making him more employable. He thought his chances of getting a position would improve and that he would have better job prospects. John had a similar view, saying “you’re more employable – those would be the opportunities to say this is my scope of practice”.

Content of previous massage education and current professional development needs

Participants were asked what they had learnt in their course of study and were then asked what type of knowledge they currently use in their massage practice. All participants stated ethical, professional and communication skills were part of their massage education as was anatomy and physiology (A&P) and the theory of massage. All participants continued to use these skills or knowledge in their daily massage practice. Hannah indicated that “ethical and professional considerations would be a big one”. She went on to say, “all the A&P aspects that you need to practice [were learnt and still used]”. Bill shared that A&P was “like learning a new language . . . body parts, the words . . . it was great”. John commented that communication is “as important as how well you massage . . . as is clinical skills of assessment and applying massage”.

When asked what content they would have liked to learn, Hannah indicated a desire to learn “more content around structuring and starting a business . . . more in depth business stuff” with John commenting he would have liked to learn more “clinical skills of assessment and applying massage . . . and having more onsite experience”. However, on further reflection Hannah commented that “I don’t know if a degree would teach me anything that I don’t already have, there may be a few things that I would be happy to refresh on”. This was due in part to the type of service she offered her clients and the type of service she may like to include in the future; a view shared by Bill.

The professional development needs of participants were also discussed. John said it would be “great to have refresher courses . . . taster courses as well” while Hannah wanted content on “fascial kinetics work and the best knowledge I can obtain for my clients”. When asked if refresher courses would be of interest to Bill for his professional development he commented, “I would support that wholly”.

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Barriers to higher education in massage

When asked what barriers could prevent them from participating in degree-based massage education, participants highlighted four significant ones: a nonessential pursuit, time restraints, family considerations, and financial barriers.

All participants thought degree-based massage education was nonessential in their present circumstances. This was expressed by Hannah when she said “the experience of doing far out weighs the need for me to go out and get a degree at this point in my career”. Bill reflected, “I am quite happy with the certificate that I’ve got” and John conveyed, “it goes back to ‘what’s in it for me?’”.

Time was a factor that prevented participants from accessing degree-based massage education. Hannah and John both conveyed similar sentiments with Hannah saying “it’s the time thing; I have a busy clinic . . . [and] don’t have time to do book work and find time to study”. John needed to ask himself the question “do I have the time [to study]”. Bill remembered when he was studying and working he was “burning the candle at both ends” and saw this as a factor to consider.

Hannah also found it difficult to continue study with family commitments as a major factor for not participating in higher education. She said, “if I didn’t have a family to support and children at home I would certainly go back, it’s not an easy industry to update your skill base for women with families, it’s a struggle”.

While family was a major factor, Hannah, Bill and John also found the financial barrier significant. For John it was the loss of clients and, therefore, the loss of income; “it takes a long time to build up a client base and clients disappear, people don’t hang around”. Bill said, “the trouble is when you have a mortgage, and kids and need to pay the bills you have to keep that going” and Hannah saw this as impractical for her and shared that “to go back to the classroom wouldn’t be financially viable for me”.

Participants reported barriers in accessing higher education and viewed higher education as nonessential to their situation. However, they also conveyed a desire for further learning. In Hannah’s situation, if circumstances were different, the acquisition of a degree would be considered. She commented “if I were to start my training today I would definitely go for a degree”. Bill’s sentiment was, “I’d love to get more education . . . I used to read comics and cowboy books and now I read journals”.

Increased accessibility to massage degree education

Participants were asked if increased accessibility would facilitate their participation in degree-based massage education. Three main factors, namely mixed mode delivery, modularized learning, and self-paced learning were of key importance to all participants. All three approaches were viewed as increasing accessibility for participants. Hannah and John thought a combination of distance, face to face and self-paced learning would suit them and Hannah made the comment:

a combination … for those working, distance and being able to come in and do hands on class time as well, [also] the ability to come in and do one off units and maybe do
one or two papers over a year … to work away at it quietly this would make it more accessible to choose rather than other modalities.

However, when participants were asked the implications to their massage practice if a degree in massage therapy was a requirement of the massage association, no participant responded positively. Bill responded by saying “I’m not a member of them, I have no intentions of being a member [and] just as well they don’t have that power”. Hannah had a similar view and said,

If they insisted I would have to go out and obtain my degree. I don’t know if I’d be happy about that at this stage in my career . . . I would even consider walking away from massage . . . I don’t want to be forced to consider it.

John believed there is room for every level of qualification and expressed his view by saying “you can practice effectively without a scope of practice. There is room for everybody, you can have a certificate and diploma, there’s space for everyone in that”.

**Discussion**

Participants perceived higher education as a path for professional training, providing them with skills that supported them to undertake employment. This job-focused orientation to higher education was also identified by Spronken-Smith, Buissink-Smith, Grigg, & Bond (2009) in their study of millennium graduates. Participants also viewed higher education as offering them higher level knowledge and further learning in the areas of critical thinking and the rationalisation of the application of knowledge. These views compare favourably with the view that higher education develops professionally mature practitioners who have acquired knowledge and appropriate professional attitudes and behaviours (Hammer et al., 2003), and develop skills in “learning how to think” (Spronken-Smith et al., 2009, p.357). However, participants did not identify the benefits of becoming a life-long learner (Higgs & Edwards, 1999; Spronken-Smith et al., 2009), the growth of the massage profession by means of a lengthy and rigorous education (Etzioni, 1969, cited in Schwirian, 1998), or the transference of skills and knowledge to other areas of their lives.

Degree-based massage education was viewed in terms of increased capability, knowledge and skills (including research skills). Credibility and increased opportunities for employment and personal development were also identified. Participants’ views regarding higher education were consistent with their views of degree-based massage education. No participant considered the benefits of degree-based massage education within their wider communities and nationally, as opposed to an individual benefits. In addition, there was no mention of using degree-based massage education as a strategy for gaining acceptance and credibility as a profession; a collective move toward recognition through higher education as seen in other health professions (e.g. Humphreys, 1996 cited in Francis & Humphreys, 1999), was not discussed.

Excepting research literacy, there seemed to be no significant differentiation of the skills, knowledge and abilities acquired in massage degree-based education as opposed to diploma or certificate level massage education. There was also no agreement that higher education would increase their capacity to learn, or increase their ability to deal with new information within changeable healthcare environments (Gow & Kember, 1990).
Past education was viewed in terms of content learned and content used within their current massage practice. All participants mentioned those areas of learning that were either propositional or procedural in nature. As experiences were shared it became evident that the content learned in their massage education, for example, massage application, communication skills, and the importance of ethical and professional behaviours, were useful and valued. These propositional and procedural knowledge domains identified by participants are evident in vocational based activities where the curriculum is often aligned with the needs of the labour market (Boothby & Drewes, 2004). Of interest was the absence of discussion of higher level knowledge such as conditional and functional knowledge that deals with knowing why, when, and under what circumstances you apply knowledge and skills (Biggs, 2003).

To be able to work full time and study was a genuine concern, along with family commitments and a loss of income, which required serious consideration if future study was an option. These barriers of time restraints, family considerations and financial barriers mirror common obstacles to undertaking higher education for many people (e.g. Bowl, 2001; Young, 2004). Perhaps of greater concern to the massage profession and its stakeholders is the view that degree-based massage education was nonessential for them at this point in time. One participant articulated that he was happy with his qualification; another conveyed that the experience of actually massaging outweighed the need for a degree-based massage education at this point in her career and one participant wanted to know “what’s in it for me?” In contrast, all participants had a desire for further learning. Distance learning, self-paced learning and workshop type courses were seen to be advantageous to their future education needs.

Limitations

As a pilot study with a small sample size the findings are not generalisable to any population. Additionally, the interview process has limitations with findings being personal and subjective. However, the findings do offer some rich insights into the views of qualified practising massage therapists on the perceived benefits of degree based massage education. A subsequent quantitative or mixed methods study with a considerably larger sample size would be needed to investigate how widely held are the views and experiences reported here, and to allow generalisation of the findings. In addition, this study focused on those massage practitioners without a degree. Massage practitioners holding a degree may offer alternative viewpoints and should be included in future research.

Implications and future research directions

There has been positive growth within the massage industry over the past ten years, including a proliferation of training courses at a range of educational levels. Increasingly, massage practitioners are involved in health care service delivery and therefore there is a need to move toward research-informed massage education and practice. MNZ, massage practitioners, and massage training providers contribute to massage education and need to be responsible for the promotion of professional learning, in areas such as skills of life-long learning in massage, knowledge generation and reflective practice (Wieck, 2003). It is clear that participants saw some benefits of higher education. However, they did not strongly identify the broader benefits obtained from gaining a higher education and qualification. A move towards being motivated by the collective benefit, rather than the individual benefit of higher
education, may ultimately shift the massage industry another step in its journey of professionalisation.

The view that higher education is an unnecessary pursuit along with resistance to a bachelor’s degree being required for membership of MNZ or professional practice, is in opposition to the norm for many healthcare professions, and needs to be overcome. In addition, differentiation between the levels of massage education (certificate, diploma, degree) needs to occur to facilitate practicing massage practitioners to identify the benefits acquired through higher education. The onus lies with massage training providers to establish a clear vision that can help guide graduate profiles (Smith, 2003), in order that appropriate information is provided to prospective students new to the massage industry as well as to massage practitioners wishing to undertake a certificate/diploma to degree upgrade. In addition, MNZ would do well to support the notion that higher education assists in building a unique body of knowledge required of a profession (Epstein, 1995).

Minimising, as much as possible, the obstacles of time restraints, financial concerns, and family considerations would be useful. The accessibility barrier experienced by participants also requires consideration and forward planning by massage training providers. Distance learning and self-paced learning may need to be considered by massage educators as a means to overcome these barriers. In this way, massage practitioners who want to upgrade their certificate or diploma qualification to a degree qualification could be accommodated.

Specific areas for further investigation include: the value of higher education as a strategy to move toward professionalisation within CAM; the influence of legislative requirements on educational levels within CAM; graduate perceptions of the benefits of a bachelors degree in massage therapy; healthcare providers perceptions of the credibility, educational and skill level of massage therapists and their scope of practice; and a quantitative or mixed methods study to investigate the views and experiences reported in this study.

In summary, recognition of the need for up-skilling and maintenance of competency of practice would hold promise for the advancement of the massage industry as a whole. As discussed earlier higher education is ultimately about increasing the capacity to learn, and to develop skills to become professionally mature practitioners (Gow & Kember, 1990; Hammer et al., 2003). However, if there is a lack of interest in engaging with higher education, this may have serious implications for the growth, stability, and advancement of massage therapy practice as a health care service in New Zealand.
References


