Benefits, Advantages and Opportunities Gained from a Bachelor’s Degree Qualification in Massage Therapy

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This year, 2018 marks the fifteenth year of bachelor’s degree qualified massage therapists (DQMT) to graduate from training establishments in New Zealand. Some studies that look into building levels of professionalism and credibility discuss the importance of regulated and quality training providers and syllabi. 1,2,3 These are important issues when it comes to building professional standards in massage therapy and gaining acknowledgement as a profession from allied health professionals and the public. 1 Within New Zealand, there is disagreement as to the validity of pursuing full regulation and registration for massage therapists and the massage industry. 2 Currently in New Zealand there are no specific training requirements to practice massage therapy 3 and many other countries are also unregulated. 4 So, what are the incentives to taking the time and financial commitment involved in a formal course of study for massage therapy and, in particular, a bachelor’s degree? This project aimed to investigate this question and build on previous studies 5,6 with the inclusion of DQMT’s from both of the New Zealand massage degree training establishments.

Methodology

- Mixed methods design.
- Two sequential phases.

Phase one (n=64)

- Quantitative phase.
- Online survey.
- Snowball recruitment method.
- Excel spread sheet with raw data generated, cleaned and descriptively analysed.

Phase two (n=28)

- Qualitative phase.
- Semi-structured interviews (face to face and telephone) up to 45 minutes duration.
- Interviews recorded and transcribed.
- Thematic analysis.

Inclusion criteria

- DQMT’s who studied New Zealand.
- Over the age of 18.
- Able to communicate in English.
- No prior training in massage.
- Pseudonyms have been used to maintain confidentiality.

Ethics

Granted by SIT Human Ethics Committee.

Limitations

- Study findings are limited to views of participants and may not reflect the larger population.
- Interviews were conducted by inexperienced interviewers.
- Limited time frame.

This was part of a larger group project titled “New Zealand Bachelor’s Degree Qualified Massage Therapists: A Changing Landscape”.

RESULTS

Table 1. Have DQMT’s had massage or non-massage opportunities since graduation related to their level of qualification?

Table 2. Have massage opportunities since graduation related to their level of qualification?

**DISCUSSION**

Most (84.1% or 53/59) of the participants are currently practicing massage therapy (MT) to some degree, which is a similar representation as per a previous study 5 and many recognised massage and non-massage opportunities that directly related to their massage degree qualification. A majority found value in their final year (Figure 2). However, not everyone agreed (3.4% or 2/59) which is also acknowledged in comments under “Another perspective”. The opportunities and values were further explored in phase two with the emergence of the four themes: 1. Higher individual capability; 2. Expanded opportunities in MT; 3. Expanded opportunities outside of MT; 4. Higher standards and credibility.

1. Higher individual capability

“I kind of found that the biggest benefit would be the kind of confidence it gives you, in regard to thinking about being able to talk to other health professionals.” Allen.

“…there’s something about having that high level of qualification. . . and years down in the job, you can reflect on what your own personal growth has been over the course of that. That’s because you develop a reflective mind and critical process of thinking that you don’t get when you are not challenged in that way.” Sid.

2. Expanded opportunities in MT

“It’s been beneficial for me really well. I’ve travelled to quite a few different countries and worked over seas, and having a degree in massage has always made it very easy to get a job because most places don’t have quality training. So you get hired pretty quick.” Sophie.

“Opened doors that I think would not have opened otherwise. So I’ve had opportunities with professional sports teams, professional athletes, and job offers left right and center that weren’t as forthcoming when I had just a diploma.” Ruth.

3. Expanded opportunities outside of MT

“I think I have got the degree, I’m already in the same job that I was doing before, which I got from a diploma . . . I think I gained academic knowledge and have a better understanding of academic writing and research as opposed to before [but] in terms of hands on skills of the third year, in a way they’re a little disappointing.” Jock.

4. Higher standards and credibility

“You get acknowledged by other health professionals like physios and GP’s. It gives you more confidence and credibility to work alongside them rather than think I’m below them.” Doris.

“It’s given me sort of an edge within my region, as the only degree graduate . . . they jump at the opportunity to work with someone along these lines rather than someone who has a certificate or diploma.” Noreen.

“… With some physios, they won’t look at someone with a diploma compared to a degree.” Annie.

**THEMES & QUOTES**

**KEY MESSAGES**

- This study provides some encouraging results for past, present and future graduates.
- Advantages and benefits were acknowledged with regards to completing the bachelor’s degree and beyond.
- Opportunities both within massage therapy and in other areas are available for those prepared to pursue them.
- A larger number of DQMT’s can help legitimise MT as a profession which may lead to increased opportunities.

**References**


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