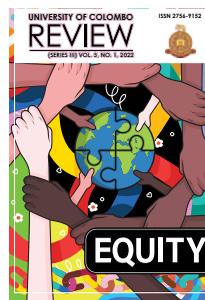


DOI: <http://doi.org/10.4038/ucr.v3i1.57>

University of Colombo Review (Series III),
Vol. 3, No. 1, 2022



Perception of physiotherapy students regarding their chosen career: An exploratory study on leveling the playing field

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ABSTRACT

The physiotherapy profession plays a significant role in multi-disciplinary healthcare teams, especially in planning rehabilitation regimes, re-establishing maximum movement capability, and achieving functional independence of a patient. The professional status of physiotherapy depends on career satisfaction amongst physiotherapists. Understanding the dynamics of professional in/equity would be useful to develop the profession. Therefore, this study explores the perceptions of physiotherapy students about their profession [i.e., the reasons for choosing to study physiotherapy, level of satisfaction with having chosen physiotherapy, and (perceived) problems in the profession] in a Sri Lankan state university, and to explore potential inequities in the profession. A cross-sectional survey of 100 students was conducted using an online, self-administered questionnaire. Results indicated that 79% of the students were satisfied with having chosen physiotherapy as a profession. Their year of study and gender did not influence their career choice. The students most frequently cited the opportunity to serve humankind and job opportunities in Western countries as reasons for choosing to study physiotherapy. The most frequently cited profession-related problems were wage inequity, lack of knowledge amongst the public about physiotherapy, and lack of job opportunities in the country. Although the profession is perceived to have these problems, most students were satisfied with their career choice. The results indicate that Sri Lanka needs to further develop the professional equity and status of physiotherapy.

KEYWORDS:

Equity in physiotherapy; physiotherapy; professional equity; Sri Lanka; tertiary education; undergraduates

Suggested Citation: Gamage, S. W. K. & De Zoysa, P. (2022). Perception of physiotherapy students regarding their chosen career: An exploratory study on leveling the playing field. *University of Colombo Review (New Series III)*, 3(1), 20 - 31.

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Introduction

Professional equity involves providing resources unique to each professional group so that they may access opportunities for optimal personal and career growth (InStride, 2021). Professional equity is important for the healthcare system so that healthcare staff can function with satisfaction. This would lead to better patient care. The present study assesses the perception of physiotherapy students regarding their chosen profession. This is the first of such studies in Sri Lanka. The study seeks to reveal the inequities if any, that physiotherapists face in their profession in Sri Lanka.

A positive perception of students about their profession is crucial for the development of any profession (Ohman et al., 2002). There are diverse elements of student perception regarding their chosen profession (Tomu, 2013). In our study, we explore the following about physiotherapy: (1) reasons for choosing to study physiotherapy, (2) level of satisfaction after having chosen to study physiotherapy, and (3) (perceived) problems in the profession of physiotherapy. Certain correlated factors, such as gender and race, could affect these perceptions (Tomu, 2013).

South Asian students choose a career in physiotherapy generally because it is a profession related to the medical profession, it is an opportunity to serve humankind, because of the publicity given for sports physiotherapy, and due to the availability of job opportunities in Western countries (Sarkar, 2006). Once a student chooses to study physiotherapy, s/he should experience a certain degree of satisfaction if they are to be successful in their professional goals. The more equitable a profession, the greater the satisfaction a person would experience by being a member of that profession (Seniwoliba, 2015). When satisfaction is high, the members perceive their profession positively (Ohman et al., 2002). Further, when a person is satisfied with his/her chosen profession, this strengthens their ability to accept and present themselves as an autonomous accountable professional who can advocate for their role in society. This, in turn, develops their professional identity and their profession (Ohman et al., 2002).

Identifying and addressing (perceived) problems regarding a profession is necessary to improve the professional equity of that profession and its quality of service. If the problems perceived are many, a person's perception of his or her profession becomes increasingly negative. It erodes the profession's equity as well as its status (Marginson, 2010).

The status given to a profession appears to differ from one geographical region to another (Grafton & Gordon, 2019). For instance, physiotherapy is a higher status profession in Western countries than in South Asian countries like India (Grafton & Gordon, 2019) and possibly Sri Lanka. These regional differences may be due to social factors. For instance, those in Western countries appear to be knowledgeable about various types of health services and are open to receiving these services (Uba, 1992). They appear to be more aware of what physiotherapy is about and hence may value it more. But in South Asian countries like Sri Lanka, many people are unaware of physiotherapy and its importance is underappreciated (Dissanayaka & Banehekka, 2014).

These social factors may create a less-than-desirable context for the profession in the country. This impacts professional equity, including wage inequity where physiotherapists' salaries in the West are much higher than in Sri Lanka, even after making adjustments for country-specific economic factors. Improved wages are one way in which a profession could be made more equitable (InStride, 2021).

Therefore, we assess the perception of physiotherapy students about their profession to identify professional inequities in the profession, if any. This assessment can serve as a guide in designing solutions to redress these inequities and thereby, improve the effectiveness of physiotherapy services in Sri Lanka. We have chosen to conduct the survey among physiotherapy students as they are the future of the profession.

Methodology

Research design

The research uses a cross-sectional descriptive study design.

Population, sample size, and sampling technique

The study population was physiotherapy undergraduates of a state university in Sri Lanka. Participants were excluded if they were lateral entry students. In the state universities, a physiotherapy degree program is of four years duration and has an intake of 30-35 students per batch. A convenience sampling method was used for selecting the participants, based on their availability and willingness to take part in the study. Hence, the final sample consisted of 100 students.

Data collection instrument

The data collection instrument was a self-administered questionnaire that was designed by reviewing relevant literature and modifying a questionnaire used in a similar study (Nordholm, 1979). The questionnaire included 19 items on socio-demographics; reasons that led students to choose physiotherapy as their future profession; problems perceived concerning their profession; and the level of satisfaction with their profession.

The questionnaire was administered as a Google form. The questionnaire was in the English language since the selected population was following the degree program in the English medium. The researcher pre-tested the questionnaire with ten students to assess any difficulty or discomfort in understanding the sentences, phrases, or words in the questionnaire. All participants indicated that they were able to answer the questionnaire with ease.

Ethical approval

The Ethics Review Committee of the Faculty of Medicine, University of Colombo provided ethical approval for the study.

Results

Socio-demographic characteristics

The age of participants ranged between 22 years and 27 years and 69% were females. The participants represented all four years of study. Most of the participants self-identified as Buddhist (93%).

Reasons that led students to choose physiotherapy as their future profession
 The participants could select multiple responses (see Figure 1).

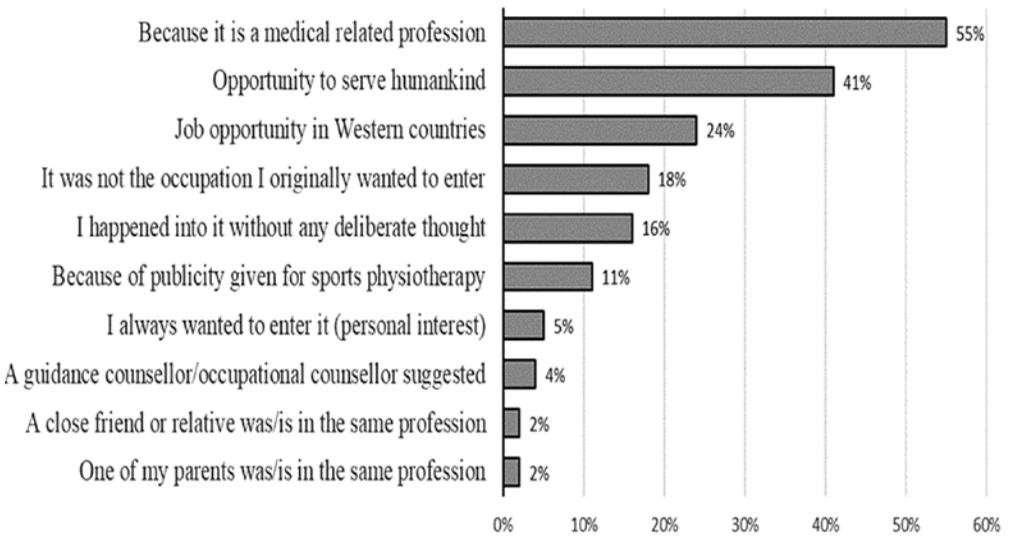


Figure 1.

Reasons that led participants to choose physiotherapy as their future profession

Reasons that led students to choose physiotherapy as their future profession, based on gender

The participants could select multiple responses (see Table 1).

Table 1.

Reasons that led students to choose physiotherapy, based on gender

| Correlates | Gender (%) | |
|---|------------|--------|
| | Male | Female |
| Because it is a medically related profession | 48.4% | 58.0% |
| Opportunity to serve humankind | 48.4% | 37.7% |
| Because of publicity given for sports physiotherapy | 22.6% | 5.8% |
| Job opportunities in Western countries | 29.0% | 21.7% |

| Correlates | Gender (%) | |
|--|------------|--------|
| | Male | Female |
| A close friend or relative was/is in the same profession | 3.2% | 1.4% |
| A guidance counselor or occupational counselor suggested it | 6.5% | 2.9% |
| I always wanted to enter it (personal interest) | 12.9% | 1.4% |
| It was not the occupation I originally wanted to enter – But I could not get into the occupation of choice | 16.1% | 18.8% |
| I happened to enter the profession without any deliberate thought | 6.5% | 20.3% |
| One of my parents was/is in the same profession | 0% | 2.9% |

(Perceived) problems among students of physiotherapy students about their profession

The students selected the problems they perceive about their profession from the 15 response options depicted in Figure 2. The participants could select multiple responses.

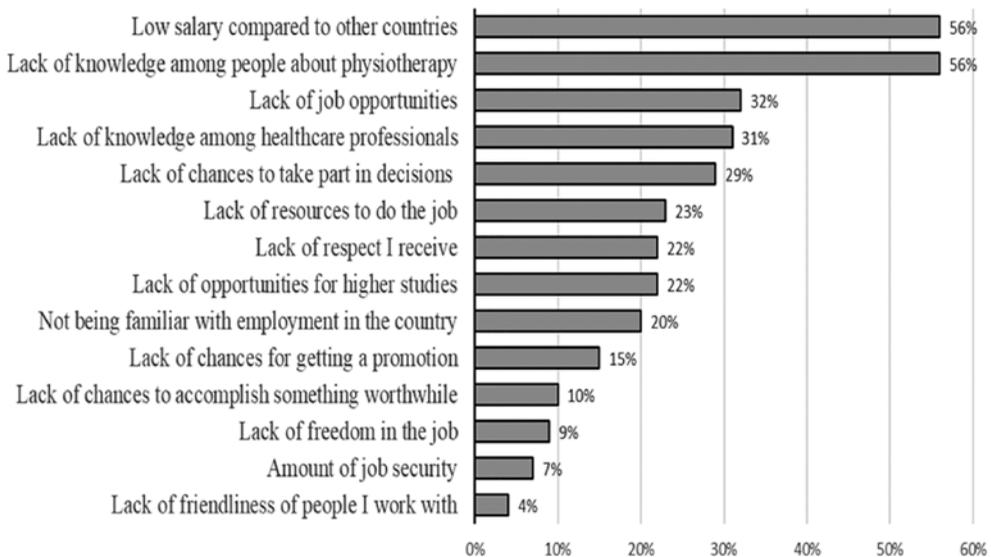


Figure 2.

The student perceptions of problems in the physiotherapy profession

The student perceptions of problems in the physiotherapy profession, based on gender and year of study

The participants could select multiple responses (See Table 02).

Table 2. The student perceptions of problems in the physiotherapy profession, based on gender and year of study

| Problems | Gender (%) | | | Study year (%) | | | |
|--|------------|--------|-------|----------------|-------|-------|--|
| | Male | Female | 1st | 2nd | 3rd | 4th | |
| Lack of opportunities for higher studies | 22.6% | 21.7% | 4.3% | 13.0% | 32.1% | 34.6% | |
| Lack of job opportunities | 32.3% | 31.9% | 17.4% | 26.1% | 39.3% | 42.3% | |
| Lack of knowledge among people about physiotherapy | 51.6% | 50.8% | 56.5% | 69.6% | 50.0% | 50.0% | |
| Lack of knowledge among other healthcare professionals about physiotherapy | 25.8% | 33.3% | 26.1% | 43.5% | 32.1% | 23.1% | |
| Not being familiar with employment opportunities for physiotherapy in the country | 16.1% | 21.7% | 30.4% | 13.0% | 21.4% | 15.4% | |
| Lack of respect received | 9.7% | 27.5% | 8.7% | 17.4% | 28.6% | 30.8% | |
| Lack of friendliness of people I work with | 0% | 5.8% | 4.3% | 4.3% | 3.6% | 3.8% | |
| Lack of chances to accomplish something worthwhile | 3.2% | 13.0% | 4.3% | 17.4% | 7.1% | 11.5% | |
| Low salary compared to other countries | 48.4% | 59.4% | 30.4% | 52.2% | 64.3% | 73.1% | |
| Amount of job security | 3.2% | 8.7% | 4.3% | 8.7% | 7.1% | 7.7% | |
| Lack of chances for getting a promotion | 25.8% | 10.1% | 8.7% | 13.0% | 21.4% | 15.4% | |
| Lack of chances to take part in decisions regarding the treatment plan of patients compared to physiotherapists in other countries | 12.9% | 36.2% | 30.4% | 39.1% | 21.4% | 26.9% | |
| Lack of freedom in the job | 6.5% | 10.1% | 4.3% | 4.3% | 25.0% | 0% | |
| Lack of resources to do the job | 19.4% | 24.6% | 4.3% | 30.4% | 25.0% | 30.8% | |

Physiotherapy students' level of satisfaction regarding their chosen profession

Satisfaction with career choice

The study assessed the satisfaction with career choice using a seven-point scale (see Table 3).

Table 3. Satisfaction with career choice

| | Percent |
|----------------------------|---------|
| Strongly disagree | 0% |
| Disagree | 6% |
| Slightly disagree | 2% |
| Neither disagree nor agree | 13% |
| Slightly agree | 12% |
| Agree | 54% |
| Strongly agree | 13% |

Satisfaction with career choice, based on gender and year of study

The study assessed the satisfaction with career choice using a seven-point scale (see Table 4).

Table 4. Satisfaction with career choice, based on gender and year of study

| | Gender (%) | | Year of study (%) | | | |
|----------------------------|------------|--------|-------------------|-------|-------|-------|
| | Male | Female | 1st | 2nd | 3rd | 4th |
| Strongly disagree | 0% | 0% | 0% | 0% | 0% | 0% |
| Disagree | 3.2% | 7.2% | 0% | 4.3% | 17.9% | 0% |
| Slightly disagree | 0% | 2.9% | 0% | 0% | 0% | 7.7% |
| Neither disagree nor agree | 12.9% | 13.0% | 8.7% | 0% | 17.9% | 23.1% |
| Slightly agree | 3.2% | 15.9% | 0% | 21.7% | 7.1% | 19.2% |
| Agree | 61.3% | 50.7% | 52.2% | 65.2% | 53.6% | 46.2% |
| Strongly agree | 19.4% | 10.1% | 39.1% | 8.7% | 3.6% | 3.8% |

Students' intention to change their profession

The study identified students' intention to change their profession using a 4-point scale (see Table 5).

Table 5. Students' intention to change their profession

| Intention | percent |
|-------------------|---------|
| Not at all likely | 52% |
| Somewhat likely | 25% |
| Quite likely | 15% |
| Extremely likely | 8% |

The questionnaire also requested the participants to indicate the most likely type of changes they would consider if they were to change their profession. Seventeen participants responded to the question. Changing into another medically related profession (n=16) was the most likely change they would make, followed by a change into a job with a good salary scale (n=2). Some of the other intentions were: “choosing a career in the information technology sector”; “doing a business”; “a career in banking”; “doing a job in the private sector”; “doing something very different to this occupation”; “getting into the management sector”; and “getting a degree in psychology”.

Satisfaction with career choice and intention to change the profession

According to Spearman’s correlation test, there was a significant negative moderate strength between the satisfaction of career choice and intention to change the profession ($r = -0.385$, $p < 0.001$).

Association between gender and satisfaction of career choice

The Chi-square test analyzed the association between gender and satisfaction with career choice. The results showed no significant difference ($p > 0.05$; $\chi^2 = 6.195$, $p \text{ value} = 0.288$).

Association between the year of study and satisfaction with career choice

The Chi-square test evaluated the association between year of study and satisfaction with career choice. The results showed a statistically significant difference ($p < 0.05$; $p \text{ value} = .00$) where career satisfaction increases as the students progress in the degree program.

Discussion

The present study explored the perception of physiotherapy students regarding their chosen profession. The results indicate that the most common reason students chose to study physiotherapy was that it is a medically related profession. The second reason was that it was considered an opportunity to serve humankind whilst other reasons were: job opportunities in Western countries, because of publicity given for sports physiotherapy, a personal interest, because of a suggestion by an occupational counselor, and because a close friend, relative, or a parent was/is in the profession. Sarkar’s (2006) study findings from Bangladesh, a South Asian country as is Sri Lanka, showed similar findings.

However, Yitt et al.’s (2019) study conducted among physiotherapy students in a host of Asian countries including Malaysia, Japan, Indonesia, Taiwan, Hong Kong, Thailand, Korea, Philippines, Brunei, Pakistan, Singapore, and India indicated different reasons for studying physiotherapy, such as the desire to help others, opportunity to interact with other people, job availability, the professional status of physiotherapy, an interest in sports and athletic injuries, professional autonomy, the potential for a good salary, encouragement from parents, being a pre-medicine course, and personal interest (Yitt et al. 2019). Yitt et al.’s study imply that the professional equity of physiotherapy in most of the countries in their study is better than in Sri Lanka and Bangladesh.

Out of the countries which were included in Yitt et al.'s (2019) study, Japan, Hong Kong, Taiwan, South Korea, and Singapore are developed countries. A country is considered "developed" if it meets certain criteria such as literacy, socio-economic status (i.e., income, education level, and occupational category), and life expectancy of its citizens (United Nations, 2014). Hence, people in these countries might have a higher health literacy. As a result, they may be more aware of the importance of physiotherapy and have the economic capacity to spend on physiotherapy services. Therefore, novel job opportunities might emerge to fulfill the health requirements of people in these developed countries, which may have influenced the students in Yitt et al.'s (2019) study to choose physiotherapy as their future profession.

In contrast, most people in Sri Lanka might not be adequately aware of physiotherapy (Jayawardena et al., 2011) and even if they are, most may not be able to spend on physiotherapy services. Hence, new job opportunities might not develop as rapidly. 'Personal interest' was the least common reason for choosing to study physiotherapy in our study. However, Gotlib et al.'s (2012) survey of several European countries reported that the students decided to study physiotherapy mainly due to personal interests. This contrast might be due to the professional equity and status of physiotherapy in Europe.

Ohman et al.'s (2002) Canadian study were in contrast with our study findings too. Ohman et al.'s (2002) study identify six factors that influence the students in choosing to study physiotherapy: job accessibility, potential to earn a good salary, positive exposure to the profession, interesting aspects of the profession, a desire to help others, interest in sports physiotherapy, and influence from peers. The first three reasons that led students to select physiotherapy highlight the professional equity and status of the profession. Physiotherapy is a well-developed profession in Canada, and physical therapists are primary care providers (Shah et al., 2019). However, physiotherapy is considered a profession supplementary to medicine in Sri Lanka (Sri Lanka Medical Council, 2022), and university-level training in the profession commenced only in the year 2006. Hence, it might take more time, along with changes to the professional standing of physiotherapists (for instance, for it to be not deemed a profession supplementary to medicine, as it is now considered), for physiotherapy in Sri Lanka to be a more autonomous profession. This could then influence the career choice of future students who would choose to pursue it due to its professional equity and status, rather than because it is a medically related profession or because of job opportunities in Western countries.

Ohman et al.'s (2002) study indicated no statistically significant difference between female and male students' reasons for choosing to study physiotherapy, a finding compatible with our study. However, publicity given for sports physiotherapy and personal interest had influenced the career selection of male students more than females. It might be because the men are more involved in sports and hence more aware of physiotherapy as a profession.

Our study revealed that the most common problems perceived by physiotherapy students were wage inequity compared to other countries, lack of knowledge among people about physiotherapy, and lack of job opportunities. In Sarkar's (2006) study on Bangladesh, more than 65% of students cited lack of knowledge among people about physiotherapy

and inequities in opportunities for jobs and higher studies as major problems faced by physiotherapy students. The results of our study record similar responses from the students. Our study findings are also similar to the findings from Afzal's (2017) study in Pakistan. This study identifies several inequities in the physiotherapy field such as professional dominance of other health care professionals, insufficient undergraduate training opportunities, limited higher education opportunities and scholarships, lack of public awareness, limited opportunities and resources for research studies, and cultural issues in practice. Hence, it seems that Sri Lanka shares common problems with other South Asian countries.

Ohman et al.'s (2002) study on Canada indicates that job accessibility and the potential to earn a good wage are the main reasons for students to choose physiotherapy as their undergraduate study. In fact, Yitt et al.'s (2019) multi-country Asian study also indicated job availability and potential for a good wage as reasons that influenced students to study physiotherapy. In contrast, wage inequity is mentioned as the most common problem perceived by physiotherapy students of our study. The students also mention the lack of job opportunities as a problem.

Hence, it appears that in the West and developed Asian countries, physiotherapy stands as an equitable profession whose prestige draws students. In Sri Lanka, however, physiotherapy was introduced as a degree program only in 2006 and is considered a profession supplementary to medicine. Hence, the professional equity and status of physiotherapy in Sri Lanka are at an early stage.

Our study reveals that profession-related problems perceived by both male and female students are similar. Results also suggest that student perceptions of problems with physiotherapy increase with their year of study although there are slight alterations at times. When students move from year to year, they are more exposed to the profession, and hence are better able to identify the problems of the profession. Despite so, our study also reveals that many physiotherapy students (52%) were not at all likely to change their profession. The results of our study show a significant negative moderate strength between satisfaction with career choice and the likelihood of changing the profession - if students are satisfied with their career choice, there is no need to contemplate changing their profession.

According to the results of our study, 79% of the students are satisfied with their career choice. The results of a similar study in Bangladesh (Sarkar, 2006) indicated that 92% of the students were satisfied with their career choice though earlier on in their studies, some students were not satisfied. Narin's (2018) study in Turkey indicated that more than 98% of students had positive expectations of their profession. Although the percentages are somewhat different, as are the research methodologies of these varied studies, the fact that a high percentage of physiotherapy students were satisfied with their chosen profession, including those in our study, is noteworthy. Our study also indicates that there is no difference in satisfaction of pursuing physiotherapy based on gender. Most of the students in each year of the study indicate satisfaction with their career choice.

Conclusion, limitations, and research implications

The students in our study mainly chose to study physiotherapy because it is a medically related profession, the opportunity to serve humankind, and the availability of job opportunities in Western countries. The number of personally interested students who always wanted to enter the profession was low, possibly because of its professional inequity. Hence, the profession requires further development in Sri Lanka.

Our findings indicated that physiotherapy students in Sri Lanka identify wage inequity, lack of knowledge among people about physiotherapy, and lack of job opportunities as the most pressing problems for the profession. Many of the problems perceived by physiotherapy students increased with the year of study. As students identify more profession-related problems, their perception of the profession becomes negative. Therefore, problems perceived by the students must be addressed for the development of the profession. Although the profession is facing several problems, most of the students were satisfied with their career choice.

Our study was not without limitations. The first- and second-year students of this study did not get an opportunity to be well exposed to the profession due to the COVID-19 pandemic prevailing whilst this study was conducted. Third and final-year students were also not adequately exposed to the profession. The findings were from a small sample of students from one university. Therefore, there is a need for further, more representative studies of this nature, in non-crisis contexts. The questionnaire used for the study was not validated, nor was its reliability tested. Future studies could include explorations with psychometrically established questionnaires. Most of the students in the study sample self-identified as Buddhists. Representation of other religions in the study sample was very small. Therefore, it would be inappropriate to generalize these results.

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