

Editorial**A milestone in physiotherapy education: Journey of the BSc Honours in Physiotherapy degree programme in University of Colombo****Vajira H W Dissanayake**

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<https://orcid.org/0000-0002-3264-6856>**Introduction**

Physiotherapy is a healthcare profession dedicated to enhancing movement and function, preventing disability, and promoting overall well-being. Recognizing its significance, the Faculty of Medicine at the University of Colombo pioneered the establishment of a physiotherapy undergraduate degree program in Sri Lanka. This initiative was a groundbreaking step toward improving rehabilitation services and fostering the professional growth of physiotherapists in the country. The journey of this program – from its inception to its current status as a premier physiotherapy education provider – reflects the faculty's commitment to excellence, innovation, and the advancement of healthcare education.

The inception, development and growth of the programme

The Bachelor of Science Honours in Physiotherapy Degree program at the Faculty of Medicine, University of Colombo, was officially inaugurated on 26th November 2006, enrolling students from the 2005 General Certificate of Education (Advanced Level) batch. This was Sri Lanka's first structured university-level physiotherapy program, addressing the longstanding need for higher education in the field. Previously, physiotherapy education was limited to diploma-level training, which constrained

professional opportunities and advancement in clinical practice and research. At that time, the program was coordinated by the author of this editorial, who had to play a crucial role in shaping its structure and curriculum, as well as giving leadership to the establishment of the Allied Health Sciences Unit that was established to conduct the programme. The first batch of students, 28 in total, was enrolled in the Allied Health Sciences Unit, located at Ananda Rajakaruna Mawatha, Colombo 10. The teaching faculty initially comprised three probationary lecturers, one technical officer, and one computer application assistant.

Mission

The mission of the BSc Honours in Physiotherapy program is to develop competent graduate physiotherapists with the knowledge, skills, and attitudes required to meet the needs of individuals, families, and communities.

Programme development and expansion

In 2016, the Allied Health Sciences Unit, that delivered the programme was upgraded to departmental status, marking a significant milestone in its growth. Today the Department of Allied Health Sciences, with modern academic and training facilities, is housed on the 10th and 11th floors of the UCFM Tower.

Over the years, several other academic leaders have contributed to the development of the program, including Professor Joe Perera, Professor Ajith Malalasekera, Professor Jithangi Wanigasinghe and Professor D J Anthony. The current head of the department is Dr. Subhashini Jayawardene, Senior Lecturer in Physiotherapy, the first Physiotherapist to head the Department who took on the role in the year 2021.

The curriculum is structured around five core streams: Basic Sciences, Applied Physiotherapy, Clinical Training, Behavioral Sciences and Research. This comprehensive approach ensures that students develop a deep understanding of both theoretical knowledge and practical applications. The integration of evidence-based practice into the curriculum has encouraged students to develop analytical thinking and problem-solving skills.

The Faculty of Medicine has facilitated international collaborations, inviting visiting lecturers from globally recognized universities to provide students with enhanced exposure and experience.

Clinical training and practical exposure

Clinical training is a cornerstone of the program, with students undergoing rigorous hands-on experience at affiliated hospitals, including the National Hospital of Sri Lanka, the Ragama Rehabilitation Hospital, the Chest Hospital, Welisara, the Lady Ridgeway Hospital for Children, and several Community Rehabilitation Centres. Students receive training in a wide range of disciplines, including musculoskeletal and neurological rehabilitation, cardiopulmonary physiotherapy, paediatric physiotherapy, elderly care, women's health, and sports injury rehabilitation. The growing reputation of the programme is evidenced by the ever-increasing number of students enrolling in the programme (Table 1).

Table 1. Student enrolment over the years

Intake	Year	No. of students
1	AL 2005	27
2	AL 2006	18
3	AL 2007	29
4	AL 2008	36
5	AL 2009	24
6	AL 2010	27
7	AL 2011	35
8	AL 2012	29
9	AL 2013	28
10	AL 2014	28
11	AL 2015	28
12	AL 2016	40
13	AL 2017	28
14	AL 2018	28
15	AL 2019	34
16	AL 2020	47
17	AL 2021	40
18	AL 2022	45

Pioneering physiotherapy education in Sri Lanka: challenges, achievements, and the road ahead

Overcoming early challenges

The establishment of the program was not without challenges. One of the main hurdles was the initial shortage of qualified faculty members with expertise in physiotherapy education at the university level. To address this, the university invested in faculty development programs, supported postgraduate education and fostered international collaborations to attract experienced educators.

Today, the Department has academics who have obtained PhDs from both the University of Colombo as well as overseas Universities. The first Professor in the Department, Professor in Sport and Exercise Medicine, Prof. Chathuranga Ranasinghe was appointed in 2023.

The publication of this inaugural issue of the Sri Lanka Journal of Physiotherapy and Rehabilitation Sciences coincides with another important milestone in the Department, the first international conference to be organised by the Department, The International Conference on 'Frailty and Geriatric Assessments'. This conference is part of the ERASMUS project titled "Capacity for Active Ageing (CAPAGE) – Promoting academic and professional excellence in health care to meet the challenges of aging in Sri Lanka", which involves collaboration between European and Sri Lankan universities co-funded by the European Union, on the theme "Promoting Healthy Aging through Holistic Approaches and Innovations". This conference aims to bring together a diverse array of healthcare professionals, including physiotherapists, nurses, medical doctors, psychologists, rehabilitation experts and allied health experts. Organising this conference speaks volumes for the great academic heights this department has achieved in its 20-year history from its humble beginnings in the year 2005. The academic team in the Department, comprising of Dr Asha Wettasinghe, Conference Co-Chair; Dr KRM Chandrathilaka, Conference Secretary; Dr Subhashini Jayawardena, Conference Treasurer; and Mr Kaveera Senanayake, Coordinator, Conference Programme Committee, have done marvellously well to organise a conference of the highest international standard.

The second challenge was the non-availability of permanent premises for the Department. This, however, was overcome with the construction of the UCFM Tower with two floors allocated to house the Department with state-of-the-art facilities. As the first few batches of students were graduating, we faced another challenge - the limited awareness and

recognition of the need for BSc qualified physiotherapists as an essential practitioner group for providing healthcare services. Advocacy efforts by the Faculty of Medicine, combined with engagement with healthcare policymakers, helped to give due recognition to graduate physiotherapists and facilitated the integration of graduate physiotherapists into mainstream healthcare services.

The road ahead: future directions

As the field of physiotherapy continues to evolve, the University of Colombo remains committed to advancing education and research in this discipline. Future directions for the program include:

- 1. Expanding postgraduate education:**

Introducing specialized master's and doctoral programs to promote advanced clinical practice, teaching, and research.

- 2. Enhancing technological integration:**

Incorporating digital health tools, tele-rehabilitation, and artificial intelligence into physiotherapy training and practice.

- 3. Strengthening global collaborations:**

Building international partnerships to facilitate faculty exchanges, research collaborations, and global exposure for students.

- 4. Community-based initiatives:**

Expanding outreach programs to provide rehabilitation services to rural and marginalized populations.

- 5. Policy advocacy:**

Engaging with health authorities to shape policies that promote physiotherapy's role in public health and primary care.

Conclusion

The physiotherapy degree program at the Faculty of Medicine, University of Colombo, represents a significant achievement in Sri Lanka's healthcare professions education sector. By emphasizing academic excellence, clinical proficiency, and interdisciplinary collaboration, the program has enhanced the quality of physiotherapy education and contributed to the broader healthcare landscape. As the field continues to evolve, the University of Colombo remains at the forefront, pioneering advancements in physiotherapy education and practice for a healthier future in Sri Lanka.

Electronic resources:

1. Website of the Department of Allied Health Sciences – <https://med.cmb.ac.lk/allied-health/>
2. Faculty of Medicine, University of Colombo, Student Handbook 2024 – https://drive.google.com/file/d/1M2EPXbcvE8eEakrbys4SlKpL8l_DC9Of/view.
3. The International Conference on 'Frailty and Geriatric Assessments' – <https://med.cmb.ac.lk/capage2025/>