

Educational Standards for Yoga Therapy – A Western Perspective

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It seems almost ironical that in the 21st century we are having a discussion about educational standards for Yoga Cikitsa or Yoga for healing and well-being.

“Healing” comes from the ancient Greek word “holos” meaning whole or complete, while “well-being” can be interpreted as tapping into the deep “well-spring” of our “being”. Surely healing and well-being at the deepest levels of our self have always been a fundamental part of Yoga! However notwithstanding the fact that Yoga has for centuries been a cornerstone of physical, mental and spiritual well-being in its Bhārata homeland, Yoga as therapy has only recently become established in the lexicon of healing and well-being in the West.

Unlike the teaching of Yoga through the ages in India, where the darshana was a transmission from teacher to student in a one to one relationship, most Yoga in the West is taught in group settings (classes), where the teacher is less concerned about each student’s individual unfolding of their Self-understanding, but more focused on helping to facilitate some general physical and mental improvements for those in the class.

While an argument can be made that education for Yoga teachers still falls short of the ideal in many countries in the West, it is now generally accepted that the level of training for most Yoga teachers has improved in recent years and that for the most part, the standard of Yoga teaching is becoming acceptable.

However because of the way Yoga is predominantly taught in the West, it has become clear that further, specialist education is required for a Yoga teacher to practise as a Yoga therapist. The following are some of the reasons why additional training is required:

- A Yoga therapist deals with specific health issues, often on a one to one consultation basis as well as in group settings

- Each client/patient has specific, individual needs, so that unlike a Yoga teacher who can prepare a class based on what she or he wishes to teach, the Yoga therapist must be able to respond effectively to the client/patient’s needs at the time of the consultation.

- A Yoga therapist needs to have a depth and breadth of expertise and understanding of a wide range of Yoga techniques in order to provide for the needs of clients/students with any health condition.

- A Yoga therapist needs a solid underpinning knowledge of psycho-pathologies and patho-physiologies

- A Yoga therapist needs in-depth assessment skills, including prashna, darshana and sparshana and the ability to use these with sensitivity

- A Yoga therapist ought to be familiar with current research in the field

- A Yoga therapist needs to have the skills and knowledge to deal sensitively and effectively with clients/patients in a therapeutic, clinical setting

- A Yoga therapist needs to understand and apply the development and maintenance of therapeutic relationships.

- A Yoga therapist needs to view clients/students holistically and understand the interconnection between lifestyle and well-being

It is beyond the scope of this paper to present an overview of educational standards for every country, however the three cases provided here are indicative of the approach taken in the West.

The Australian Experience

In Australia many complementary and alternative medical or health-care modalities (including Ayurveda) are regulated under what is known as the “National Health Training Package”, which is a government –based educational framework that sets out competency standards for each of the modalities covered by it. One of the features of the Health Training Package is the commonality of several of the competencies across the various modalities. For example all modalities, be they massage, naturopathy, shiatsu, herbalism or Ayurveda etc are required to include common competencies for areas such as hygiene, practice management, referral, researching, workplace safety, therapeutic relationship, to name a few. The balance of the competencies is then specific to the modality. For example for Ayurveda, this includes areas such as: the Ayurvedic framework, dravyguna, Ayurvedic health assessment, Ayurvedic nutrition, Ayurvedic massage, etc.

In the year 2001 when this package was being developed, the government decided that Yoga (therapy) need not be included as it was regarded as a small, safe and well self-regulated field. Accordingly the field/profession of Yoga therapy in Australia developed its own educational standards that were partly informed by some of the competencies in the Health Training Package, especially those for Ayurveda, but that were predominantly specifically designed for Yoga therapy’s unique circumstances.

The development of the standards was under the auspices of the Australian Association of Yoga Therapists (AAYT), which brought together a committee representing senior Yoga therapists and teachers, health-care providers and trainers who worked for 12 months to produce what was then the first set of educational standards for the practise of Yoga therapy in the West, if not the world.

It was decided from the outset to focus on setting standards for practitioners, rather than for training providers and that the AAYT as the national representative organisation, would establish a process for registering Yoga therapists that met the standards.

Underpinning the development of the standards were the questions:

- ☐ What does a Yoga therapist do?
- ☐ What does she/he need to know?
- ☐ What training is necessary to provide that knowledge and skill?

The committee eventually developed a set of competency standards known as a Knowledge and Skills Profile that in 2007 became endorsed as the standards for a practitioner of Yoga therapy. The standards include guideline hours of training required for each of the 21 areas of competency. In summary terms a person requires a minimum of 1000 hours of training (combined total of 500hrs teacher training and 500hrs Yoga therapy training) and a minimum of 2-3 years of prior Yoga teaching experience and a regular personal Sadhana. Fundamental to the Australian standards is the belief that all registered Yoga therapists first need to be a well trained and experienced Yoga teacher. (Details can be seen at www.yogatherapy.org.au)

The United Kingdom Experience

This brief summary of the development of standards in the UK follows from discussions with some of those involved with the process and a review of their documentation, as I did not have a first-hand involvement, unlike my involvement with the Australia and U.S. standards.

The process for developing educational standards was under the auspices of the British Council for Yoga Therapy (BCYT). The BCYT standards, known as a “core curriculum” was developed by consultation between various organisations offering training in the therapeutic application of yoga to determine a minimum curriculum for the competent, safe practice of yoga therapy to members of the public in the UK.

Similar to the regulatory environment in Australia, complementary health care in the U.K. is regulated by the Complementary and Natural Healthcare Council (CNHC), which links to the National Occupational Standards (NOS), a government organisation which specifies standards of performance that people are expected to achieve in their work, and the knowledge and skills they need to perform effectively.

For educational standards for Yoga therapy to be endorsed in the U.K. specific National Occupational Standards needed to be developed.

Over a period of nearly two years, the BCYT worked to develop a ‘core curriculum, which was eventually endorsed under the NOS under the number and title CNH14 - Deliver Yoga Therapy to clients. This specific NOS standards has been packaged with the generic NOS standards CNH 1 - Explore and establish the client’s needs for complementary and natural healthcare and CNH 2 - Develop and agree plans for complementary and natural healthcare with clients, to form the overall educational standard for Yoga therapy in the U.K.

The U.K. standards include area such as Yoga therapy theory and its application, observation skills, yoga teaching skills and experience, yoga therapy teaching skills and experience, clinical practice including case studies and practice management, evidence of daily personal yoga practice and class attendance, supervision and /or mentoring.

Training in teaching the therapeutic aspects of yoga is not an entry level course for people new to yoga, but trainees should have substantial experience of practising yoga before beginning therapy training. Such training can either be taken combined with a yoga teaching qualification; or as an addition to an appropriate yoga teaching qualification. A person can train to be a Yoga teacher and Yoga therapist concurrently with as little as 450 hours training and 2 year’s personal sadhana, or 330 hours of Specific Yoga therapy training for existing Yoga teachers who have a 200 hour teacher training qualification.

The United States Experience

The educational standards initiative in the United States is being led by the International Association of Yoga Therapists (IAYT), more specifically by the IAYT Educational Standards Committee which was selected from a list of applicants associated with IAYT Member schools. The committee is charged with developing entry-level standards for the training of yoga therapists and submitting them as a recommendation to the IAYT Board of Directors. The committee recognises its role in representing the interests of a wide range of stakeholders, including IAYT individual members and member schools, and has at all times endeavoured to work in a “global” manner, seeking to keep the interests of the wider yoga therapy profession at the forefront of its deliberations.

The committee has been meeting regularly for over two years, and in July 2011, a draft of the three areas of the standards was posted on the IAYT website and all IAYT members were invited to provide feedback. On August 31st 2011 the committee reviewed and discussed the draft at the Meeting of Schools just before SYTAR at the Asilomar Conference Centre in California, for further review and feedback. While a small number of themes emerged from the meeting of schools and the preceding email to members, there was generally solid support for most of the recommendations in the draft.

Subsequent to that meeting, the committee has endeavoured to incorporate most of the main suggestions provided by both the member schools and other members and the revised standards have been made available for one more review prior to being submitted to the IAYT Board for approval, hopefully in the first half of 2012.

The IAYT committee initially used the Australian model as a starting framework, asking the questions:

- ☐ What does a Yoga therapist do?
- ☐ What does she/he need to know?
- ☐ What training is necessary to provide that knowledge and skill?

As this work progressed, the committee's own framework emerged, better suited to developing standards for training programs (as distinct from standards for practitioners).

The first stage to be completed was the articulation of a definition of Yoga therapy – a definition which honoured the long tradition of Yoga and Yoga Cikitsa, while being relevant to and meaningful in the contemporary context. In developing the definition of yoga therapy, the initial task has been to draft an in-depth, comprehensive version, suitable for publication and targeted to those in the Yoga and wellness-related fields, as well the broader audience of people interested in yoga therapy. The subsequent task will be to develop a one or two sentence “elevator” version (i.e., as if asked about it in an elevator) summarising yoga therapy. (the definition and other standards were published on www.iayt.org in February 2012)

The second stage was the development of a competency profile (what skills and knowledge are required to be taught), which is comprised of five sections:

1. Yoga Foundations
2. Contemporary Biomedical and Psychological Knowledge
3. Knowledge of Teaching and Therapeutic Skills
4. Application
5. Professional Practice

In each category, general subject areas were identified. For each subject area the question was asked, “What breadth of knowledge and/or skills is required?” That process led to the development of a comprehensive competencies profile.

The third stage was the setting of admission requirements and minimum training hours. This has been the most robustly discussed section of the standards, as the committee has sought to balance the need for quality and depth, with the need to effect ‘buy-in’ from the field/profession, which currently (in the main) provides many less hours of training than what the committee regards as the minimum required for entry level programs.

The committee recognised that there are many factors to be considered in implementing guidelines once the required hours have been established. Some of these are:

- ☐ The necessary depth of the various areas of competency
- ☐ What depth of instruction is currently being offered by existing programs
- ☐ What is achievable for the majority of schools and in what time frame
- ☐ Development and implementation of a process to assist schools with the compliance process, including time lines

The proposed standards recommend a minimum admission requirement of a 200 hour teacher training qualification and 12 months teaching experience, then 800 hours Yoga therapy training over a minimum of 2 years (a total of 1000hr minimum training).

Commonalities and Differences in These Three Experiences

The Australian and U.S. experiences have many similarities, being based on similar areas of competency and designed for self-regulation with the field/profession. While spread differently over pre-requisites or admission requirements and actual Yoga therapy specific training, both have a total of about 1,000 hours of training when considering teacher training and Yoga therapy training. The major difference between these two approaches is that the Australian standards are for registration of practitioners, while the U.S., standards relate to training programs.

The U.K. standards share some commonalities with the other two in terms of aspects of the core curriculum and with the belief that a Yoga therapist should also be a Yoga teacher. However the U.K. standards align with various government regulatory agencies and appear include considerable generic learning and require a lower level of training overall. The U.K. health-care system is largely government funded, which has removed some barriers to the incorporation of Yoga therapy into the system. This is in contrast to the U.S. where health-care is largely privately funded, leading to a more guarded uptake of emerging health professions. Further, the size and diversity of the field in the U.S. has also led to a longer, more laborious process than that experienced in Australia and the U.K.

In summary, educational standards for Yoga therapy in the West are well progressed and will continue to expand in the coming years. The intention of those countries and organisations at the vanguard of Yoga therapy standards is to honour the tradition, to keep the 'Yoga' in Yoga therapy (and not let it become another form of physical therapy) and to ensure that the great gift from the land of Bhārata is relevant for health-care in the West in the 21st century and beyond. It is my prayer that these intentions can continue to be fulfilled.

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