

# History of the AUT Physiotherapy School

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## ABSTRACT

As well as celebrating the centenary of physiotherapy in New Zealand, 2013 also marks the 40th anniversary of physiotherapy education at AUT University. Founded in 1973, the AUT School (formerly ATI and AIT) has always offered progressive physiotherapy practice and has been innovative in undergraduate and postgraduate education. In this article, we provide a brief review of the major landmarks in the history of physiotherapy education at AUT.

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## HISTORY OF THE UNIVERSITY

What is now known as AUT began in 1895 (coincidentally the founding year of physiotherapy in England) as a school for children of poor families. Originally on Rutland Street in Auckland, the school's first roll was just 30. In 1906 it moved to new premises on Wellesley Street that would become its permanent home, and much of the original building still stands.

In 1913 the Auckland Technical School became Seddon Memorial Technical College and by 1947 had become the largest secondary school in New Zealand with 1,800 day and 2,500 evening pupils. In 1957 the school's secondary function was separated from its tertiary education arm, with a new secondary college being formed – now called Western Springs College – with the newly named Auckland Technical Institute (ATI) formally established at Wellesley Street.

In 1973, when a new physiotherapy school was opened at ATI, New Zealand's largest technical institute had nine departments within four newly established schools: engineering, science, arts and commerce. A fifth school — health and biological science — was not to formally come into existence until 1976. In 1980 ATI grew even larger, taking over the North Shore Teachers' College establishing the Akoranga Campus where the physiotherapy programme would become situated.

As the 1988 Hawke Report sparked heated debate on funding for tertiary education, Auckland University recognised the ATI diploma and advanced diploma in physiotherapy as the equivalent of a Bachelor of Science degree. In 1989, as a result of the new Education Act, the university became bulk funded and changed its name to the Auckland Institute of Technology (AIT), and in 1991 AIT became the first polytechnic in New Zealand to offer a degree course – the Bachelor of Health Science (Physiotherapy). And in 2000, AIT made history becoming the first polytechnic in New Zealand to become a University, changing its name to Auckland University of Technology (AUT).

## PHYSIOTHERAPY AT AUT

Although an early training in massage was offered to nurses in Auckland in 1913, the course was to be short lived and it would be another 60 years before Auckland established a

second physiotherapy training school. Having only one training school in New Zealand had some significant disadvantages, not least the fact that students were required to travel and live in Dunedin to train, and training numbers were inadequate to significantly grow the profession. By the 1960s, the shortage of physiotherapists in practice had become chronic but attempts to start a second school proved fruitless.

At the same time, unsuccessful efforts were being made to incorporate physiotherapy into the university system and for it to become a degree course in 1941, 1946, 1950 and 1958, and in 1965 Professor Alan Alldred – a Dunedin-based orthopaedic surgeon – completed an inquiry which recommended that physiotherapy training should be transferred to the universities. This was however rejected by the Otago University Grants Committee.

In 1970, the Department of Health recognised that there were not enough physiotherapists training to supply the needs of the hospital system in the future (note, this was before the emergence of ACC and the explosion of interest in private practice). At the same time, the Department of Health transferred the responsibility for funding physiotherapy education to the Department of Education which offered to house a second school in Wellington. A site at Heretaunga was reviewed (much to the dismay of the Physiotherapy Board and NZSP) but this was considered unsuitable because it was too far from a medical school or teaching hospital. A second course at ATI was recommended at this stage but the Department of Education preferred a site in Wellington.

The Central Institute of Technology in Wellington was offered as an interim course, to overcome the now dire shortages of physiotherapists in training, with the promise of a move to ATI later, and plans were put in place for an intake in 1972. Public rancour, professional agitation and the lack of support from doctors led to an agreement that a second school would be established at ATI in Auckland working in close relationship with the medical school and the (Auckland) hospital complex. Finding a suitable site took a year and it was not until June 1972 that Cabinet approved the establishment of the Auckland School on the Grafton Road site in Auckland. The first intake beginning in March 1973 with Fran Elkin appointed as the Head of Department.

**Figure: AIT - First School (Acknowledgements: AUT University)**



**Figure: AIT - First Intake (Acknowledgements: AUT University)**



Despite many years of lobbying, the approval of three-year diploma in physiotherapy at a second school at AIT left many people scrambling to try to get the school ready for its first cohort in early 1973. Students who had applied for training in Dunedin were confused to learn that they had been approved for a place in Auckland. The accommodation for the students at Grafton was substandard, and equipment had to be hurriedly purchased, borrowed or made. Staff came from local hospitals and practices with only weeks to prepare for the start of the school year.

As early as 1975 dissatisfaction with polytechnic- and technical school-based training began to emerge. People argued that physiotherapy needed to be a degree programme and that more post-qualification training was needed. Post-basic courses began at ATI as early as 1975, and full time options began in 1982 with five students enrolled in the one-year full time Advanced Diploma in Physiotherapy in Manual Therapy – the first formal postgraduate qualification for physiotherapists in New Zealand. Pressure for a better standard of education increased in 1978 with the Commission of Inquiry into Chiropractic which showed physiotherapy training to be inadequate.

In August 1984, after 10 years at Grafton Campus, the Physiotherapy Department moved to the recently acquired

Akoranga Campus on Auckland's North Shore just a year after ATI had established an Advanced Diploma in Physiotherapy which would, in five years time, become recognised as equivalent to a bachelors degree. In 1986 a Department of Education-run *Workshop on Physiotherapy Training* identified the need for physiotherapy to move from a three-year Diploma of Physiotherapy to a bachelor's degree, primarily because of the growing need for students to engage in research and to be trained in critical thinking to fulfil their role as autonomous, first contact practitioners. After many years of negotiation and planning, AIT received approval from NZQA for a Bachelor of Health Science (Physiotherapy) programme which became the first degree programme offered by a New Zealand polytechnic.

In 1994, having seen the school's inception, the move to a new campus, and the creation of a dedicated bachelor's degree in physiotherapy, Fran Elkin retired from the Head of Department position to be replaced by Andrea Vujnovich. In the same year, ATI began offering a Master of Health Science with physiotherapy options, adding its first distance learning-based papers in neurodevelopment, and a postgraduate certificate in acupuncture.

In October 1999 AIT became the first polytechnic to become a university and changed its name to Auckland University of Technology (AUT) and at its 10 year anniversary of being a university in 2010 it celebrated:

- Graduating 25,000 students from undergraduate and postgraduate degrees
- Graduating 110 PhDs and other doctorates (the first just 6 years ago)
- Producing 8,000 refereed journal articles and other peer-reviewed research outputs
- Receiving \$145 million in research-related income
- Growing total enrolments to more than 19,000 students (equivalent full-time), with over 80% in undergraduate or postgraduate degrees.
- Seeing annual postgraduate enrolment climb to 2,000 students (equivalent full-time), with 300 PhD students.

In 2000, the removal of the Ministry of Education's cap on training places saw the physiotherapy school's intake rise from 60 to 120. The school developed new clinical placements, most notably through a memorandum of understanding with Waiperera Trust in West Auckland. The Centre for Physical Rehabilitation Research, set up under Professor Peter Larmer, provided much of the impetus for research within the school and produced most of the school's research outputs.

During 2001/2 the Head of School, Andrea Vujnovic, took extended leave and a new management structure was put in place with Lynne Taylor appointed Head of School. By now, the Faculty of Health had grown considerably. In 1998 the Faculty offered only six major programmes and four Bachelors Degrees (nursing, midwifery, occupational therapy and physiotherapy). By 2002 it offered 14 Bachelors Degrees, five Diplomas, six Certificates and five other programmes across four divisions for more than 6,000 students. To manage some of the increased growth and diversity of the programme the School joined

**Figure: AIT / AUT University - Heads of School  
(Acknowledgements: AUT University)**



the other programmes in adopting a common first semester programme in 2002.

In 2003, there were 362 applications for 139 places in the BHSc Physiotherapy giving an overall student cohort of 475 enrolled full time students studying physiotherapy. By the end of 2002, two lecturers in the School had PhDs, 17 had Masters Degrees. Seven of the remaining staff were studying for higher degrees. The school grew rapidly during the first

10 years of the new millennium and in 2006 Peter Larmer took over from Lynne Taylor as Head of what was now the Department of Physiotherapy instigating an extended review of the physiotherapy curriculum. The first cohort of students were enrolled into the new curriculum in 2010 and will graduate in 2013 when the school celebrates 40 years of physiotherapy education in New Zealand.

David Nicholls took over from Peter Larmer as Head of School in 2012. In the same year, the first year intake of 173 students would be the largest in the school's history and the largest physiotherapy intake in the Australasia. The school now has 36 academic staff, 13 have doctoral degrees and 17 have Masters degrees.

#### **SOURCES**

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