

# A guide to establishing a national register for exercise professionals



## Occupational Standards

Registers should have a direct relationship to the labour market. Members of Registers should have up-to-date skills and knowledge required by employers (or to succeed as a self employed worker) in today's fitness industry. To ensure the link between registration, education and employment roles, Registers should be based on a set of National Occupational Standards.

National Occupational Standards are developed and agreed with industry to describe the competence, skills and knowledge needed in key job roles identified in the industry. These standards then form the basis for the structure of a Register and for the approval of educational programmes approved to give registration.

National Occupational Standards can be developed within each country which develops a register, alternatively international standards such as the European Health and Fitness Association standards or an individual country's standards can be adopted in a country if they are deemed to be appropriate to that country.

Several decisions need to be made when setting up a Register, these will include:

- What are the job roles within the industry that will form the entry points to the Register (e.g. Gym Instructor, Group Exercise instructor, Personal Trainer)?
- What are the knowledge, competence and skills that underpin these roles (they can be described as 'Standards'?)
- Will these standards be written by the industry or borrowed from another country or body?
- Who will be involved in the development of these standards (employers, training providers, instructors, experts)?
- Who will be involved in the consultation?

## **Structure of the Register**

There are a wide range of structures to the Registers around the world. The Register structure is the levels and categories of registration. All Registers have categories for Gym Instructors, Personal Trainers and Group Exercise Teachers. Registers then differ in the additional areas where professionals can be recognised. The UK Register probably has the largest structure where members can be recognised for categories including Pilates, Aqua, Older Adults, Disability, Ante/Post Natal, Yoga, Children and a range of medical conditions including Cardiac Rehabilitation.

## **Continuing Professional Development**

Continuing Professional Development, or CPD is one of the key components of Registers. It is maybe not the first thing to think about when setting up a Register but it will be of vital importance as the Register develops. CPD is key to the fitness industry progressing and also to fitness professionals maintaining currency by keeping their knowledge up to date and learning new skills.

Several decisions will need to be made when developing a Register. These will include:

- Will there be a CPD requirement for members of the Register?
- What will the annual CPD requirement be in hours?
- What activities are deemed to be appropriate CPD?
- Will CPD activities be endorsed by the Register?
- How will members log their CPD?
- How strict is the Register on insisting on CPD being undertaken?
- What sanctions are there for members who do not undertake CPD?

A comparison of how Registers around the world have tackled CPD could be carried out before these decisions are taken.

## **Approval of Qualifications and Link to National Qualifications Authority**

“Entry by qualification” is a key principle of Registers around the world. Fitness professionals who hold a qualification which meets the industry standards can gain entry to the Register. In many countries vocational or higher education is regulated by the State – in some cases through a National Qualifications Framework which is operated by a National Qualifications Authority.

New Registers should fully understand the regulation of qualifications in their country. In the UK for example only government approved qualifications on the national qualifications framework can give entry to REPs.

To uphold the principle of entry by qualification new Registers will need to decide whether to approve educational programmes in fitness themselves, or rely on state approved qualifications.

## **Database of members**

At the end of the day a Register is a database of members. A Register is just a list of names of qualified and insured professionals. There are a range of systems for logging and tracking members of a Register. From an Excel spreadsheet to more sophisticated member database systems. These can be developed or copied/borrowed from an existing Register.

## **Registration issues**

There needs to be a streamlined Registration process which can be paper-based or online. However a Register needs to be evidence based and therefore there must be proof that the applicant has the knowledge, competence and skills to perform the specific role or roles. It is this promise that the Register is making to the industry, its employers and ultimately the public that use the services of Register members. This suggests that there must be proof of competence (in the UK this is the production of an awarding body certificate for which we insist there is a signature to state that the original has been seen. You may wish to see the original but then you need to have systems in place to return it safely to the owner.

You need to be able to clearly identify which category and level (Some Registers do not use a level) the applicant will be on the Register. This visual Registration framework acts as an aspiration for most industry professionals to move up the framework thereby increasing standards in the industry.

In the UK we have two types of member, Provisional and Full. Provisional status is given to those that are practicing but with old qualifications or international qualifications that have not been mapped to current standards. This gives the member one year to prove their current competence. At the start of the UK Register 40% were provisional in an attempt to be inclusive or the working industry. Now provisional membership is down to just 8%. (see also 'How to deal with current professionals' Below).

In the UK we produce a certificate and a card that details which categories and levels the member has recognition for. We do not include CPD, just the entry qualifications. These can be updated at any time if the members achieve more or higher categories of Registration.

There will need to be a complaints procedure for the public to use should they feel they wish to complain against a member.

## **Code of ethical practice**

The word "professional" in Register of Exercise Professionals implies that members work to some professional code of conduct. This is often called a Code of ethical practice. This can be developed at the start of a Register and all members then sign up to the Code as a condition of membership. This increases the standing and respect of the profession. Examples can be viewed from around the world and adapted for the needs of countries developing new Registers.

## **Insurance**

Members of Registers should be insured to practice. For those members who are employed insurance might come through their employer. For self-employed members they will need to purchase their own insurance. A Register can link up with an insurance provider and sell insurance to members who need it as part of the membership package.

## **Employer support**

It is vital when establishing a Register to gain the support of employers. Employer representative bodies and trade bodies are key to accessing this employer voice. If the big chains buy in to the concept of the Register then the rest of the industry will follow. Large chains insisting on membership of all their staff should be the aim of the Register. If they are willing to pay for their staff to register then even better.

## **Education provider support**

Of equal importance to the support of employers is the buy-in from the education providers in the fitness sector. It has been proven that Registers increase the demand for learning. Training providers benefit from this increased demand from fitness professionals to improve their skills and knowledge, particularly if members need to carry out CPD in order to remain on the Register. Providers should seek REPs endorsement as a badge to show their courses are valuable to the industry.

Registers should seek to have a good relationship with approved education providers. It is good for a Register if approved providers teach about the value of membership and ideally they will pay for the first years membership for their graduates.

## **Higher education**

Universities are a key source of education to the fitness industry. However they often operate outside of vocational education systems. New Registers will need to decide whether to approve higher education courses. Sometimes university courses lack the practical teaching and assessment which is found on vocational courses which can prove a challenge when recognising HE graduates.

## **Links to the health sector**

There is growing recognition around the world of the role the fitness industry can play in tackling a range of public health issues from tackling obesity to treating cardiac patients. As the medical community and the health insurers increasingly look to the sector they will want to see that the sector is professional, robust and transparent. The Register provides this professionalism and assurance to the health sector that the fitness industry is a serious and significant partner. Registers should seek links with health ministries and health sector partner organisations.

## **How to deal with current professionals**

Perhaps the biggest issue for any new Register is how to deal with current professionals in the industry. It is all very well having new approved qualification routes based on new occupational standards but it has to be recognised that there will be many thousands of current professionals already working in the industry. The success of a new Register will hinge on how these professionals are dealt with. Existing professionals will have a huge range of education and experience, some will have no qualifications, some will have qualified many years ago.

Existing Registers around the world have mainly dealt with this issue by having a “provisional” membership category. This means that most existing professionals can access the Register and they remain provisional until they have demonstrated they meet the occupational standards. How the Register asks them to demonstrate how they meet the standards will also be a key decision. Choices here include taking a new qualification, taking an exam, taking a practical assessment, filling in a form, undertaking CPD or having their competence signed off by a manager.

It is recommended that leniency is shown to existing professionals and everything is done to ensure their smooth entry on to the Register.