eCMTA | Evidence-Based Chinese Medicine and Technology Assessment

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Editorial

Acupuncture education and training: the Italian and UK experience

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Received: May 12, 2026; **Revised:** May 20, 2026; **Accepted:** May 28, 2026

KEYWORDS

acupuncture, education, training, regulation, practice, integration, Europe

CITE THIS ARTICLE

Robinson N. Acupuncture education and training: the Italian and UK experience. Evidence-Based Chinese Medicine and Technology Assessment, 2026, 2: 9570035. https://doi.org/10.26599/eCMTA.2026.9570035

In Europe, as early as the 17th century acupuncture was used within the medical community,[1] but failed to gain recognition. By the mid-20th century, the West became increasingly interested in traditional systems of healing and personalized medicine, while the Chinese pursued demonstrating the science behind their long and rich history of their traditional Chinese medicine (TCM), Western scholars demanded proof and validation.[2]

In almost all European countries, acupuncturists have to also be trained in conventional Western medicine to practice. Acupuncture is strictly regulated, may require formal certification, licensing and training to specific set standards to ensure safe and ethical practice. For example, in Italy, in 1982, the Italian Supreme Court of Cassation ruled that only those with a degree in medicine or surgery, who passed the state exam and were certified as a medical doctor could practice acupuncture.[3] Once the Italian Federation of Acupuncture Societies (FISA) was formed in 1987, as the leading self-regulatory body for acupuncture associations, the growth of acupuncture training and practice started to really blossom in Italy.

However, it was not until February 2013 that in the State-Regions Agreement, the Italian parliament defined the profile of the medical acupuncturist and the education, and training required. It is leading body for the practice of acupuncture in Italy and accredited by the Ministry of Health. For medical doctors, this education and training is still regulated, requiring at least 400 h of theoretical training and 1000 h of clinical practice. Accreditation is provided by the Region where the training institution is registered.[4]

The Association of Medical acupuncturists of Bologna (A.M.A.B) was established in 1986 to create a school for training and education. The 40th international congress on clinical research on acupuncture held in Bologna, Italy 21/22 March 2026, was a real celebration of A.M.A.B. Its inspiration has been all due to two dedicated doctors (Carlo Maria Giovanardi and Umberto Mazzanti). With nearly 400 delegates, experienced clinicians with specialist training and researchers, this congress debated an impressive range of topics on traditional Chinese acupuncture with invited participants from United States of America, Germany, United Kingdom (UK), and Republic of Korea, *etc*.

Acupuncture practice started in the UK in the 1960's and 70's and courses were established for non-medically qualified people established in the UK.[5] In the UK, private acupuncture colleges were formed such as, the British College of Acupuncture, originally developed by Sidney Rose-Neil as postgraduate training for health professionals. Another two private colleges developing during these early stages were at the College of Traditional Acupuncture (CTA) established by J.R. Worsley and The International College of Oriental Medicine (ICOM) (Dick van Buren). These colleges had specific foci, CTA focused on five elements and ICOM on stems and branches.[6] The background of their teachings came from Jesuit or French doctors living in China before the forming of the People's Republic of China and was taught as the medicine of ancient China and was based on traditional translations of the *Yellow Emperor's Canon of Medicine* (*Huang Di Nei Jing*), written around 2000 years ago.[6] This emphasised prevention of disease, health, illness, diagnosis and treatment and still continues to guide TCM practice.

The second wave of UK acupuncture schools emerged in the 1980s modelling themselves on translated Chinese texts among these were; the London School of Acupuncture and TCM (LSATCM), in 1983 and the Northern College of Acupuncture (NCA) in 1988. The College of Integrated Chinese Medicine (CICM) was established in 1993, combining TCM and the five-element approach of J.R. Worsley. The Middlesex University started a five-year TCM undergraduate degree in 1997 that combined the teaching of acupuncture and herbal medicine and was affiliated to Beijing University of Chinese Medicine (BUCM).

The move towards university accredited and validated courses continued with acupuncture degree at London South Bank university (supported by the Confucius institute), the University of Salford, the University of East London and the University of Lincoln. At the same time, private colleges started to move into the university sector, obtaining the necessary accreditation and validation.

In the early days there were five professional acupuncture registers, mostly affiliated with their own teaching institutions but political moves wanted to restrict the acupuncturist's ability to practice. There were many differences between the colleges and professional groups which were only resolved by agreeing a "core" body of knowledge but allowed the unique diversity of a college's particular philosophical approach. There were clearly stated standards for colleges in relation to their education and training processes.[7] This enabled the development of the British Acupuncture Accreditation Board (BAAB) in 1990, even before the professional bodies united. Accreditation of educational institutions is vital for the development of a profession.

BAAB was always about raising the standards of acupuncture education through support and development of TCM so that it could harmonize with the language of higher education. By 2002, BAAB accreditation required that courses be three years full-time in length and with a level equivalent to a first degree. Acupuncture training was now aligned with the requirements of higher education and this was seen as a necessary first step toward statutory self-regulation (SSR), which at the time was seen as a way of integrating into the UK National Health Service (NHS). The coming together of the colleges into one registering body was established. The merger of private acupuncture schools led to the development of the British Acupuncture Council which is the UK's largest professional body of traditional acupuncturists (established

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in 1995) and was one of the first to appear on the accredited voluntary register of the Professional Standards Authority for Health and Social Care (PSA).

Other organizations that existed in relation to acupuncture in the UK; the British Medical Acupuncture Society established in 1980 (focusing on Western medical acupuncture for regulated health professionals) and the Acupuncture Association of Chartered Physiotherapists (founded in 1984), both focused on Western medical acupuncture for regulated health professionals). Their members can provide treatment within the UK's NHS, but when deciding diagnosis and treatment, TCM philosophy is not a dominant feature.

UK, Chinese TCM associations were also established, often by Chinese trained TCM practitioners; Register of Chinese Herbal Medicine (1987), the Association of Traditional Chinese Medicine and Acupuncture (ATCM, 1994), the Chinese Medical Institute and Register (CMIR, 1994), The Federation of TCM Practitioners (FTCMP, 2002), and the Chinese Acupuncture and Herbal Medicine Alliance UK (CAHMA, 2015).

Therefore, the history and current landscape for acupuncture training, education and practice in the UK remains somewhat complicated with much of practice still being provided privately by practitioners in what is a self-regulated profession. UK law is different to the rest of Europe as acupuncturists are not a nationally regulated profession and are exempted from licensing if the individual is a member of the approved acupuncture associations with the appropriate insurance. Support for the professionalization of acupuncture by embedding it in higher education became political, costly and the biomedical lobby challenging, so much so statutory regulation was blocked.[8-10] The history of how UK acupuncturists tried to become a regulated profession and how universities initially welcomed acupuncture courses but then were forced to close them, is another long story but the result is limited patient access to acupuncture.[11] The Italian experience was perhaps far easier perhaps because it only involved the education and training of those who were already medically qualified!

Funding

Prof. Nicola Robinson is a visiting professor at Beijing University of Chinese Medicine and is funded by the Research and Development for Evidence-Based Chinese Medicine Program, Ministry of Education and Ministry of Science and Technology of the People's Republic of China (grant no.: B23041).

Author Contribution Statement

Nicola Robinson: Conceptualization, writing – original draft, and writing – review & editing.

Use of AI Statement

None.

Declaration of Competing Interest

Prof. Nicola Robinson is the Editor-in-Chief of *Evidence-Based Chinese Medicine and Technology Assessment*.

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