



Dietitians in Europe Definition, Profession and Education

Statement by the European Federation of the Associations of Dietitians (EFAD)

July 2016

Adopted at the General Meeting of the European Federation of Associations of Dietitians (EFAD), September 2016

The following statement provides a definition of a dietitian in Europe with an explanation of the education and profession of dietitians in Europe.

The document recognizes that the profession and practice of dietitians varies between European countries. While healthcare is the main work field, dietitians also improve the food and nutrition environment through their work in communities, food outlets, government, industry, academia and research. In consequence, this statement is intended to be used as a guide to threshold standards.

This statement can be used to inform other healthcare professionals, employers, educators, policy makers, clients and civil society together with other key stakeholders what they can expect when meeting and working with a qualified dietitian.

1.0 Introduction

The use of food to promote health has a very long history¹. EFAD has adopted standards for both the academic knowledge² and the dietetic competences³ required of a dietitian at the point of entry to the profession. There are also standards for dietitians working at more advanced levels⁴, as well as ethical standards⁵.

The requirements for recognition to practice are normally established in the Member State and can be overseen by a Statutory Body⁶ (SB), the professional body or equivalent. The SB/professional body assumes responsibility for the safe practice of dietetics, e.g., through a published 'Statement of Conduct', and can set the criteria for the dietetic curriculum. The SB/professional body and the Higher Education Institution (HEI) where the education is delivered, have a shared responsibility to ensure that all graduates who enter the profession are fit to practice.

2.0 The definition of a dietitian in Europe

Dietitians are found in nearly every country within the European Union. The professional practice of dietitians varies between European countries. Improving the nutritional status of individuals and groups within a healthcare environment remains the main work field for dietitians. But they increasingly work in other food and nutrition environments; in communities, food outlets, government, industry, academia and research. In consequence, this statement is intended to be used a European threshold definition.

The EFAD definition of a dietitian in Europe is;

Dietitians in Europe are recognized⁷ healthcare professionals, educated to at least Bachelor level. Using evidence-based approaches⁸, dietitians work autonomously⁹ to empower or support individuals, families, groups and populations to provide or select food which is nutritionally adequate, safe, tasty and sustainable. Dietitians assess specific nutritional requirements throughout the life span and translate this into advice and/or treatment. This will maintain, reduce risk to, or restore health, as well as alleviate discomfort in palliative care. Beyond healthcare, dietitians improve the nutritional environment for all through governments, industry, academia and research.

¹ "Let food be thy medicine and medicine be thy food." (Hippocrates, c 460-370 BC)

² European Academic Standards for Dietetics (EFAD; 2009; to be revised 2016)

³ European Dietetic Competences (EFAD; to be accepted 2016)

⁴ European Dietetic Advanced Competences (EFAD 2012) <http://www.efad.org/everyone/3804/5/0/32>

⁵ International Code of Ethics and Code of Good Practice (EFAD 2008)

⁶ A body set up by the government to consider evidence and make judgements in some field of activity. (Collins English Dictionary)

⁷ In some countries in Europe, dietitians are registered and in some they have a protected title

⁸ Evidence-based dietetic practice is about systematically search for research evidence, and assessing the validity, applicability and importance of that evidence. This evidence-based information is then combined with the dietitian's expertise and judgment, and the clients or community's unique values and circumstances to guide decision-making in dietetics. (International Federation of Dietetic Associations; ICDA, 2010)

⁹ Professional autonomy: the right and privilege to exercise professional skills independently without input from others

Dietitians practice their unique role in assessing, diagnosing, intervening, monitoring and evaluating according to the Nutrition Care Process/Dietetic Process (NCP)¹⁰, often in an interdisciplinary team.

2.1 Other definitions for dietitians exist

For example by European Skills, Competences, Qualifications and Occupations (ESCO)¹¹

Dietitians are autonomous healthcare professionals who assess specific nutritional requirements of populations or individuals throughout the life span and translate this into advice which will maintain, reduce risk to or restore people's health. Using evidence-based approaches dietitians work to empower individuals, families and groups to provide or select food which is nutritionally adequate, safe, tasty and sustainable. Beyond healthcare, dietitians improve the nutritional environment for all through governments, industry, academia and research.

Submitted 2015 but not yet confirmed

And by the International Confederation of the Associations of Dietitians (2004)¹²

Dietitian

"A dietitian is a person with a qualification in nutrition and dietetics, recognised by national authority(s). The dietitian applies the science of nutrition to the feeding and education of individuals or groups in health and disease"

3.0 Qualifying as a dietitian in Europe

In European healthcare, practice is restricted to dietitians who have undergone a recognised education and training in dietetics. There are two routes for qualification as a dietitian in Europe and both take place in a Higher Education Institution (HEI), or equivalent. Both routes include a mandatory period of practice. EFAD recommends that a minimum of 30 ECTS is spent in practice education (one year of study equals 60 ECTS) guided by EFAD standards¹³.

The main route for students of dietetics is to follow prescribed HEI first cycle (bachelor level) courses that carry a minimum of 180 ECTS, or equivalent.

The second route is available only in some countries of Europe. These students first study a minimum of 180 ECTS, or equivalent, in subjects related to dietetics (e.g., nutrition or biochemistry), and then study dietetics as second cycle (postgraduate/master level).

¹⁰ Nutrition Care Process/Dietetic Process (NCP) (EFAD 2014)

<http://www.efad.org/everyone/5216/7/0/80>

¹¹ <https://ec.europa.eu/esco/portal/home>

¹² <http://www.internationaldietetics.org/International-Standards/International-Definition-of-Dietitian.aspx>

¹³ European Practice Placement Standards for Dietetics, EFAD 2010. See also Pedagogic Standards for dietetic placement teachers. EFAD 2013. Both at www.efad.org.

On qualification from a recognised programme of study students from both routes will meet the criteria shown in the European Dietetic Competence document¹⁴. Six competency domains are seen for a professional dietitian in Europe and therefore to be a competent dietitian and healthcare professional all six domains must have been achieved.

Healthcare professionalism

Knowledge base of dietetics

Dietetic process and reasoning

Evidence based dietetic practice

Autonomy, accountability and quality in dietetic practice

Communication, relationship and partnership skills in dietetics

To remain competent, EFAD strongly advocates Lifelong Learning and continued professional development (CPD) throughout the professional career of all dietitians in Europe.

4.0 Work fields for dietitians in Europe

European dietitians use their competence across a wide range of situations and places within financial and regulatory frameworks. They can adapt their role depending on immediate need and are increasingly required to develop more specialist competences¹⁵. Three main, sometimes overlapping, dietetic work fields exist in Europe: Clinical, Food Service, and Public Health/Community (see below). In addition, dietitians can work within other fields that require expertise in healthcare, food and/or nutrition e.g., academia/education, primary care, food industry, media, research, and sports.

Clinical Dietitian: a dietitian who has responsibility for diagnosing and treating nutritional problems, using the Nutrition Care Process/Dietetic Process (NCP)⁹. Clinical dietitians can work in any health care setting, including primary health care, often in an interdisciplinary team.

Food Service Dietitian: a dietitian who has responsibility within food service management for the provision of nutritionally adequate, safe, tasty, and sustainable quality food to individuals or groups. Food service dietitians can work in institutional, community and educational settings.

Public Health¹⁶ or Community Dietitian: a dietitian directly involved in health promotion, prevention and policy formulation focusing on families, groups and populations; minimizing risk of nutritionally derived illness and health inequalities. Public health/community dietitians can work within government and non-government organizations; within the voluntary and independent sectors, as well as in community care¹⁷.

¹⁴ For more details see European Dietetic Competences (EFAD; 2016)

¹⁵ Currently within EFAD there are specialisms of; older adult, obesity, diabetes, oncology, food service, education, primary care and public health

¹⁶ Public health nutrition focuses on the promotion of good health through nutrition and the primary prevention of diet related illness in the population

¹⁷ Community care = preschools, schools and public places

5.0 The education of dietitians within a European context

The education of dietitians is multidisciplinary, including subjects from both life sciences¹⁸, and social sciences¹⁹. Moreover, the education of dietitians includes critical appraisal, information technology, research methodology and statistics²⁰. Practical placement²¹ is an important part of the training of dietitians.

Reflective, evidence-based, systematic clinical reasoning and a problem-solving approach is developed during the practical placements^{14, 15}. This enables the dietitian to assess nutritional status and formulate appropriate dietary advice or intervention, and manage food service. At the point of qualification, the combination of academic and practical education results in a competent dietitian who contributes to delivery and maintenance of health, increased quality of life, and reduction in costs for the individual, households, society and health systems.

EFAD published the European Academic and Professional Standards for Dietitians in 2005 (www.efad.org). The standards are currently under review and it is anticipated they will be available in 2017

¹⁸ Life sciences include biochemistry, biology, epidemiology, food science, dietetics, genetics, immunology, medicine, microbiology, nutrition, pharmacology, and physiology,

¹⁹ Social sciences include communication, education, economics, ethics, food service management, health promotion, psychology, sociology,

²⁰ For more details see European Academic Standards for Dietetics. (EFAD; 2009; to be revised 2017)

²¹ For more details see European Practice Placement Standards for Dietetics. (EFAD 2010)