Proposals for collaboration in European public health training

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The drastic changes in European politics, economy, environment and technology during the last decade have profoundly influenced the role and scope of public health practice and training. A response to training in public health was given by the Association of Schools of Public Health in the European Region (ASPHER) and WHO by creating a joint task force in order to propose a European Master’s Degree in Public Health, based on the 'health for all’ principles. Attempts to develop curricula and learning materials were not very successful and, instead, a peer review system as a means of establishing a European standard in public health training, together with mutual recognition and a common standard in professional qualifications has been suggested. Principles, criteria and practical steps for this Public Health Education European Review (PEER) are outlined.

Key words: public health training, Europe, peer review, recognition

By the early 1980s the face of public health in Europe was seen to have been changing radically. Social and political inequalities, the demographic revolution, the health effects of a vandalized environment and the burgeoning technological advances in medicine are generating unprecedented problems for public health practitioners. 1 The current economic developments in western Europe and the continuing drastic changes in countries of central and eastern Europe (CCEE) are generating yet more problems for the 1990s. 2

In the European region of WHO a response to these challenges has been articulated in a regional 'health for all’ (HFA) policy and strategy to advance the public's health. The HFA strategy principles, accepted by all member states, have been systematically elaborated into 38 operational targets, in 1992 revised to be specifically applicable to the European situation. 3 However, existing programmes for public health education also need to provide training for practitioners which enables them to tackle new problems and exercise leadership in facilitating changes.

ASPHER’S RESPONSE

ASPHER (Association of Schools of Public Health in the European Region), links over 80 institutions and individual members in the promotion of education and research in public health. There has been close cooperation with the WHO European Regional Office (EURO).

In 1986 a joint WHO/ASPHER task force was created to test if the teaching of public health could be reoriented and reorganized around the European HFA targets. Some of the work resulted in self-learning modules while other efforts were designed for learning which teachers could adapt and develop to meet local needs. The next step of the task force was to prepare proposals for the development of a European Master’s Degree in Public Health (EMPH) based on HFA principles, which would set a European standard and which would be accredited jointly by ASPHER and WHO. 4

In a report from experience of this work, it was, however, concluded that it would not be useful to continue the existing approach of using workshops of ASPHER members to cover the full spectrum of HFA targets. 5 Instead, the ASPHER Executive Board created an ad hoc group to propose a mechanism for reviewing courses and modules in terms of academic level, curriculum, scope and learning objectives, as well as scale, contents and methodologies and to define principles to be satisfied for such courses or modules.

A EUROPEAN TRAINING PROGRAMME

IN PUBLIC HEALTH

Long-term objectives

The strategic aim is to enable public health professionals in Europe, whatever their initial disciplinary background, to obtain an academic training with a European perspective, which would be widely recognized as valid and equivalent to other such training programmes across Europe. This ambitious aim will only be achieved over a number of years.

In terms of European collaboration, this will only be really effective if the approach adopted reflects a genuinely flexible and pragmatic use of schools’ varying resources, competences, culture and languages.

The proposed approach is to foster the development of study in public health at the master’s level. Whatever
specific differences there might be between any of the schemes of study, they would all be equivalent in essential core content and status. In the long run, a European Master's in Public Health could be obtained at either one or several centres and over 1 year or spread over several years. The practical effect of adopting such an approach in the short- and medium-term is that different member institutions could decide to offer i) a full master's programme by modifying an existing scheme of study or planning a new scheme, or only ii) modules or components which can be stand-alone courses or ones which can be incorporated within an EMPH-scheme.

Ways and means
The underlying intention behind the proposed approach is to encourage schools to enter into voluntary association with others, collaborating and helping each other to provide multiprofessional Master's training according to specified European public health principles. There is the need for a means whereby ASPHER would follow a systematic rigorous process of reviewing and recognizing courses or modules, that fulfil certain criteria (of quality, content, educational framework and philosophy), which stand independently of any particular structural arrangements but which are compatible with all. This would allow schools to run their courses/programmes according to the national context and requirements; at the same time the intercountry component of the content will enable students to see the European dimension in national courses. This process of European recognition of courses/modules or programmes should be supportive to schools in all parts of Europe, whether old schools that want to take a lead in new developments or new schools that want to develop their programmes to a high European standard as rapidly as possible. As part of the strategy schools are encouraged to create consortia, as ad hoc partnerships for one or more courses/modules. There are already some good examples of such consortia flourishing in Europe.

Points of reference
The following constitute the fundamental points for the European Training Programme in Public Health and the essential characteristics for any EMPH scheme developed by schools.

- The essence of the programme is its focus on the HFA philosophy and on leadership for health.
- An awareness of the health situation and systems throughout Europe and some in-depth foreign studies are important components of the programme.
- The participants are drawn from all disciplines and professions relevant to public health.
- The participants have been exposed to substantial field experience prior to being accepted for the programme.
- The educational approach is that of 'learning by doing' and reflects the working environment. Students are expected to involve themselves fully in the learning process by using their work experience and otherwise contributing to enrich any 'classroom' activities.

- The overall curriculum reflects a sustained effort at integrating classroom activities with in-service training and essentially comprises 2 components: learning modules and service based project work/assignments.

RECOGNITION OF PROCEDURES
Forms of recognition
There exists a wide range of possible forms of evaluation and assessment, from confidential peer review to public accreditation procedures. Both ends of this spectrum allow their advantages and disadvantages. Confidential peer review is suitable for those institutions which have a high internal motivation to improve the quality of their teaching. The advantage is that evaluators as well as those being evaluated can be frank in their opinions and thus contribute to the quality and rigour of the assessment. Also, the confidential nature allows for a high degree of flexibility. On the other hand, as the procedure is confidential, it cannot be easily monitored by external agencies, unless the institution's management allows for it. This could obscure any negative findings and conclusions. To this extent the external credibility of the exercise is diminished.

Public accreditation has as the main advantage that, through rigorous application of explicit criteria, external peers can make a more objective judgement. Being public it is more suitable for making comparisons between institutions and programmes and the credibility of the process is protected.

It is of course possible that experienced professional peers can evaluate programmes fairly and constructively without using rigorous criteria and so assist the receiving institution to improve standards. The proposed ASPHER approach will not interfere with any other recognition mechanism. From a school's perspective, the status value attached to a recognition 'stamp' and the enhanced capacity to attract high-quality applicants to courses is probably a more important motive. It is, therefore, necessary that a legitimating body of unquestioned authority awards such recognition.

The ASPHER approach
In order to suit the needs of the client, a review contract will be established in each case. The contract will lay out financial aspects of the review, agreements on the composition of the review team, form and right of appeal to decisions taken, agreements on the confidential nature of the evaluation, statements on publication rights of the final report and recognition options.

Logistics and infrastructure required
A separate governing body – the Public Health Education European Review (PEER) Committee – is established to develop and monitor the recognition procedure and also act as the Court of Appeal. It is composed of members of ASPHER, the European Association of Public Health (EUPHA) and includes observers from the European
Public Health Alliance (EPHA) and from students’ organizations. Other European associations could be invited.

RULES OF REVIEW

Central principles

- The course/module/programme/institution should be directly concerned with training in public health at the Master’s level.
- The course/module/programme/institution should reflect the philosophy of the European HFA policy and be prepared to give appropriate recognition of the Commission of the European Community Public Health mandate when applicable.
- The participants and students should be exposed to a European perspective through specified and clearly identifiable means, e.g. comparative issues, intercountry cases, study tours and student or teacher exchanges with other countries contributing to the teaching.

Framework for criteria

- For the courses or modules, there should be a significant course load (minimum 3 weeks or 100 hours student work-load).
- There must be an overall educational coherence, i.e. a proper fit between objectives, content and student competence assessment.
- The course/module/programme should be population based, community oriented, student centred and should incorporate problem-based approaches.
- Organizers and all academic resource persons should be of sufficient standing and recognized competence.
- The course/module/programme should be multidisciplinary in its approach, using staff from relevant disciplines and attracting students from various professions.
- There should be a proper quality of learning environment and an appropriate availability of learning materials.

- There should be in-house mechanisms for appropriate assessment of the course/module/programme by staff, students and academic peers.

Funding

For a full programme review, the review team will consist of 3 persons, spending 3–4 days in the school. For single modules or courses, less time will be needed, subject to negotiations.

Costs and fees will be based on current standards for per diems and other cost reimbursements as used within the United Nations’ system.

Actual situation

The principles as well as the details of the review proves are now accepted by the ASPHER General Assembly, the review committee is constituted and the first reviews have taken place.

REFERENCES


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