ASSESSING THE RELEVANCE OF POSTGRADUATE PUBLIC HEALTH EDUCATION TO PUBLIC HEALTH PRACTICE: A CASE STUDY IN THAILAND

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Abstract

During the past decade, conceptual models were developed for public health systems development and for the evaluation of the performance of these systems. Simultaneously, there was an increased demand to improve the relevance of education to practice in public health, because of the need to develop staff for a changing public health system.

This study assesses the need for public health practice in Thailand, which facilitated the development of a relevance assessment instrument that was, then, applied through an evaluation of the Learning @ the Workplace Program. This was done with the expectation that the outcomes will be of local use but that the processes involved can be generalised.

An embedded case study design was used, applying quantitative and qualitative approaches through consensus panels, a mailed questionnaire, focus group discussions, semi-structured interviews, in-depth interviews, self-administered questionnaires and archival research.

Ten Public Health Practices were identified for Thailand, among these 'Health Promotion', 'Health Insurance' and 'Decentralisation' were considered to be the top priorities.

Eleven Public Health Services were identified. Prioritisation showed that none of the 11 Services was considered to be a Strength, 5 were Satisfactory and 6 were considered to be a Weakness. The Weaknesses were 'Monitor (population health)', 'Diagnose and Investigate (problems and hazards)', 'Partnerships', 'Enforce Laws', 'Evaluation' and 'Research'.

Participants believed that the Services 'Monitor', Diagnose and Investigate' and 'Access to Services' were very important. Except 'Policy Development', which was considered to be less important, all of the other Services were considered important.

Perceptions on Involvement of Staff in Services showed that Front-line Staff only participates, Mid-level Management Staff was considered to participate in all Services except for 'Disseminate Information' and 'Evaluation' for which they share responsibility with Top-level Management Staff, who were considered as responsible for all Services.

Considering the relationships between Public Health Practices and Services the participants believed that the Practice 'Health Promotion' would affect all Services. The following Practices were considered to only affect a few Services: 'System Reform', 'Civil Society Capability' and 'Develop Health Industry'.

Considering the Services, 'Assure Human Resources' would be most frequently affected by the Practices. The Services 'Monitor', 'Diagnose and Investigate', 'Evaluation' and 'Research' would be less frequently affected by the Practices.

Seventy Public Health Skills were identified and the required Levels of Skill Mastery were examined for 3 Staff Categories. Almost all of these Skills (67/70) were considered to be Core Skills for Front-line Staff. For these Core Skills, Front-line Staff were required to have Awareness on 13 Skills, to be Knowledgeable in 50 Skills and to be Proficient in 4 Skills. For both Mid-level and Top-level Management Staff all 70 Skills were considered to be Core Skills. Mid-level Management Staff were required to be Knowledgeable in 53 Skills and Proficient in 17 Skills. Top-level Management Staff were considered to have Awareness on 1 Skill, to be Knowledgeable in 35 Skills and to be Proficient in 34 Skills.

Participants considered which of the 70 Public Health Skills should be attributed to which of the 11 Services. The Service 'Planning and Management', had the highest number of Skills (52) attributed to it and the Service 'Enforce Laws', the lowest number of Skills (7). Of all 70 Skills, 57 were attributed across Services that were considered to be a Weakness. Findings also showed that the Services 'Monitor', 'Diagnose and Investigate', 'Evaluation' and 'Research' share similar Skills.

The public health system in Thailand requires a professional MPH Program that is orientated to health system reform and development. The participants in the study believed that the main Target Group for the Learning @ the Workplace Program should be Mid-level Management Staff with a health or non-health Bachelor Degree from any functional level within the provincial health system. Their main Learning Need was considered to be; applied quantitative and qualitative research and analytical skills, used in the development of interventions (problem solving), as well as project formulation, management, communication and evaluation skills.

They also believed that there is a need for communication, collaboration and co-ordination among national and provincial partners and a clear need for mutual gain among all partners.

Based on the need assessment outcomes a relevance assessment instrument was developed and tested. This showed good reliability coefficients in the various units of analysis. Triangulation proved to be important in dealing with the social desirability bias.

The Learning @ the Workplace Program's purpose and objectives were congruent with the need considered by those involved in the practice of public health. At the Instructional Level, the Curriculum Design was not congruent with professional need.

Findings should be useful for local curriculum development. The process applied in this assessment may also be of use for those interested in improving the relevance of public health education.

Key words: public health, education, relevance, needs assessment.

Original Papers

Following original papers are outcomes of this Dissertation:

1. Van der Putten M.G.B., King S., Love E.J. Addressing the relevance in postgraduate public health education. IMJ Vol.8 No.4 Dec. 2001 259:262

2. Van der Putten M.G.B, Love E.J, Rachataramya B., Vichit-Vadakan N. The learning @ the workplace program: A postgraduate education program in public health, College of Public Health, Chulalongkorn University, Thailand. APJPH (Under Editorial Review 2002)

3. Van der Putten M.G.B., Love E.J., Chuchart A., Janjaroen S.W. Assessing the current performance of public health services in Thailand. APJPH (Under Editorial Review 2002)

4. Inkochasan M., Trayaporn T., Van der Putten M.G.B. Professional perspectives in assessing need for public health education in rural Thailand. IJ Adult Education and Development (Accepted 24 Sep. 2002)

5. Trayaporn T., Inkochasan M., Van der Putten M.G.B. A learner-centred assessment of the Learning @ the Workplace Program: An innovative postgraduate public health in Thailand. IJ Chula Educational Review (Accepted 29 Nov. 2002)

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Acronyms

AHB	Area Health Board
ANOVA	Analysis of Variance
CEPH	Council on Education in Public Health
CLAPHW	Council on Linking Academia and the Public Health Workforce
CLAPHP	Council on Linking Academia and Public Health Practice
CMB	China Medical Board
CPH	College of Public Health
CU	Chulalongkorn University
Epi-info	Epidemiological Information Analysis Package
HIS	Health Information System
HMI	Health Management Information
HRD	Human Resource Development
HSD	Health Systems Development
HSRI	Health Systems Research Institute
HSRO	Health Systems Reform Office
IO	International Organisation
JPHET	Joint Public Health Education Team
K	Knowledgeable
KAP	Knowledge, Attitudes, Practices
Lit.	Literature
LO	Learning Objective
LWP	Learning @ the Workplace Program
MAO	Municipality Administrative Organisation
Mgt.	Management
Miss.	Missing
MOPH	Ministry of Public Health

MPH	Master of Public Health
N	Number
NESD	National Economic & Social Development
NGO	Non Government Organisation
p	Significant Difference Level
P	Proficiency
PAO	Provincial Administrative Organisation
PBL	Problem Based Learning
PCMO	Provincial Chief Medical Officer
PD	Project Development
PE	Project Evaluation
PH	Public Health
PHO	Provincial Health Office
PI	Project Implementation
PPIS	Program Performance Indicator System
QA	Quality Assurance
RAI	Relevance Assessment Instrument
Rep.	Representatives
SAI	Situation Analysis Individual
SAO	Situation Analysis Organisation
SAP	Situation Analysis Population
SEA	South East Asia
Sig.	Significance
SN	Serial Number
SPSS	Statistical Package for Social Science
TAO	Tambol Administrative Organisation
USA	United States of America
vs.	Versus
WHO	World Health Organisation