

A global workspace is the emerging reality for future public health workforce

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There is an urgent need to train public health professionals at undergraduate level who can face global challenges that are due to longstanding conflicts, increasing number of displaced people, natural disasters, and growing inequalities between and within countries. Future public health professionals will lead activities ranging from national and international community planning, strategic work geared towards integration of migrants and crisis management of refugees, and humanitarian services. Consequently, the need for public health professionals with deep and wide theoretical and practical competencies in global contexts has become most relevant. In response to this need, The Swedish Red Cross University College has created such a programme leading to a Bachelor degree in Public Health Science, specialization Global Health.

Introduction

Fundamental concepts in public health and health promotion such as health equity, social justice, inclusion, diversity, and empowerment are constantly developing into new meanings and applied within ever-renewed contexts and settings. In the recent years, the severity and frequency of major dramatic global events has increased. Consequently, the necessity for public health professionals to diversify, deepen and increase their knowledge and skills in global contexts has become most relevant. Reports show that health challenges are on the rise due to growing inequalities between and within countries¹. Natural disasters and longstanding conflicts result in increasing numbers of displaced people. Estimates from the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) show that up to 65.3 million people globally are currently displaced due to wars and conflicts, internally or outside the borders of their own country², and Europe has experienced a historical surge in the number of refugees within the past few years³. Therefore, the phenomenon of migration and its implications for populations' health has become a priority in many countries. In parallel and intrinsically, sustainable development has become highly significant concerning populations health, as indicated by Agenda 2030⁴.

Due to the major demographic as well as epidemiologic health transitions, important concerns regarding health problems related to globalisation and climate change are raising⁵.

Some of these issues are the emergence and re-emergence of infectious diseases as well as the threat of double burden of diseases⁵. The need for public health specialists with broad and deep theoretical and practical competencies is vital. Globalisation has major impacts on population health. Health systems and economic equilibrium are being challenged via complex global mechanisms, such as demographic, ecological and climate changes, and social structures^{5,6}. These impacts are particularly hard felt in low- and middle income countries (LMICs)⁶. There is, thus, a need to better understand the interactions between globalisation and health, as well as health outcomes at national and international level, monitoring these interactions as well as promoting health and preventing ill health accordingly⁵. Frenk & Gomez-Dantes⁷ argue that although relative geographical distances are eroding due to globalisation, health challenges are no longer simply the risk of transnational epidemics but to countries' differences in health policies⁷. For instance, a country with restrictions on antibiotic purchase may still have to grapple with the threat of multi resistant bacteria as much as their neighbouring country that has no policy regarding the over-use of antibiotics⁷.

Other challenges such as war, conflicts, oppression, terrorism, poverty, social exclusion and inequality also result in growing health disparities. Frenk & Gomez⁷ however, suggest that in spite of these challenges, national and international efforts to improve health for all can become a

unifying force across countries. Never before has these joining forces been stronger in modern history than in recent times. The past few years have witnessed an increase in the public health involvement of communities, civil societies, international organs and humanitarian organisations. Additionally, the sustainability of health within and across populations are central concerns for most countries as well as world governing bodies and organisations, such as the World Health Organization (WHO)⁸.

Public health science and global health

Public health science can broadly be defined as a subject area with focus on population health, its development, changes, and distribution within and between groups in the society^{9,10,11}. Specific emphasis is placed on understanding its determinants as well as how factors such as social structures, health systems, environments and living conditions can be modified to improve population health, prevent diseases and injuries as well as to promote health equality and equity. As such the discipline of public health incorporates and utilises theories and perspectives that are trans-, multi-, and interdisciplinary. The intensification of the effect of globalisation implies that important aspects of population health are affected by factors that extend across geographic and national borders.

A common definition of global health has been vividly discussed as a relative common consensus is im-

portant to achieve within the global health community in order to raise the efficacy of its operations and activities. In 2009, Koplan and colleagues¹² proposed the following definition: global health is an area for study, research, and practice that places a priority on improving health and achieving equity in health for all people worldwide. Furthermore, global health emphasises transnational health issues, determinants, and solutions; involves many disciplines within and beyond the health sciences and promotes interdisciplinary collaboration; and is a synthesis of population-based prevention with individual-level clinical care¹².

Addressing disparities in education within the public health related workforce

A recent report from the WHO and the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) shows that between 65–95% of workers currently engaged in public health related activities (i.e. the public health work force), lack a formal education in public health sciences⁸. Based on the report, three categories of the following public health workforces were identified: The first category includes specialists with a graduate education, masters or doctoral degree, within public health sciences. The second category represent workers who are indirectly connected to public health sciences such as health care workers. The third category is represented by professions that are aware of the importance of public health

sciences without working within the field such as teachers and police officers. As presented in the report, only the people with a graduate education, largely based on theoretical knowledge, are considered as public health specialists. There is therefore a major gap in academic knowledge within the global workforce involved in public health related activities.

Acknowledging this gap and its likely consequences, the WHO is advocating for more schools of public health and has taken strategic steps to address the situation. For example, a WHO policy document (Health 2020), contains an action plan aimed at strengthening public health services and capacity in Europe¹³. One of the key strategies outlined in the action plan is the intensive development of professions within public health sciences. In addition to professional expertise, the document emphasises the need for civil societies' involvement in health promotion. The Association of Schools of Public Health in the European Region (ASPHER), which is an independent body, was thus charged with the task of leading the working group on the public health workforce, named as the essential public health operation EPHO¹⁴. The task of the working group is to help member states implement the WHO strategy through increased research and the development of models for education within public health at all academic and professional levels.

Public health education in Europe: Promoting undergraduate public health education with a global health profile

Although education in public health is offered in many countries, most institutions choose to focus on masters and doctoral degrees. In some countries, public health has been considered as a specialisation area/second degree for health care professionals like physicians and nurses¹⁵. A health background is no longer obligatory for public health professionals, as models for inter- and trans-professional education are becoming increasingly important¹⁶. A recent mapping of available undergraduate programmes in public health sciences in Europe, offering associates' or bachelors' degrees, shows important variations across countries. Indeed, the profiling and therefore the content varies greatly as some institutions choose to focus on health care management, others on health communication, community planning or health economics to name a few¹⁷.

Although the English language is the most widely spoken of all formal working languages within the European region, as many as 72% of existing public health programmes are given in the national language¹⁸. Considering the types of programme content commonly found across Europe and the overrepresentation of national languages as a medium of instruction, one can conclude that there is a need for undergraduate programmes in English that address present and future global health challenges. Also,

the issue of language was lifted in the ASPHER report in term of the low level of faculty and student mobility within the European schools of public health. This situation strengthen the need for a common working language on the continent, which might foster confidence by breaking down language barriers and increasing mobility.

In order to build and strengthen public health sciences and the public health work force in Europe, key stakeholders have emphasised the need for prioritising development of undergraduate education in the coming years and increased mobility between public health institutions⁹. They have also strongly expressed the urgent need for more programmes with a global health profile^{9,17,18}.

The Swedish Red Cross University College: the university with the optimal humanitarian network for future global public health specialists

In response to the need presented above for more undergraduate programmes in English within public health sciences, The Swedish Red Cross University College (SRCUC) has created such programme with a global profile. The SRCUC is affiliated to the world's largest humanitarian civic organisation, and has a long experience in nursing education and has been training nurses for the past 150 years. In addition to its undergraduate programme in nursing, the SRCUC offers independent courses as well as three one-year master programmes within three different nursing

specialities; intensive care, infectious diseases, and psychiatric care. In January 2017 the Swedish Government, on recommendations from the Swedish Higher Education Authority (UKÄ), authorized the SRCUC graduation rights to issue a bachelor's degree in Public Health Science, specialization global health. This new educational programme is supported by the board of the Swedish Red Cross and the university board at SRCUC and is scheduled to start in the autumn of 2018.

The International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement is the world's largest humanitarian non-governmental organization. The movement is composed of the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) and the International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies (IFRC). Its operations and activities are based on seven fundamental principles, which are humanity, impartiality, neutrality, independence, voluntary service, unity and universality. The Red Cross national society in Sweden is the Swedish Red Cross (SRC). The SRC has a long history in humanitarian activities, health care and education, both domestic and international.

As a member of the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement, SRCUC collaborates actively with municipalities, counties, regions, private businesses, universities and different civil societies. Due to its long experience and extensive network, SRCUC is a major strategic key player in the education of the future public health work force. The teaching of public health and its global focus is not new at SRCUC. Public health sci-



Figure 1. Programme Content of Bachelors in Public Health Sciences, specialization global health. Courtesy: Birt C & Foldspang A¹⁹.

ences has long been systematically integrated into its nursing programme. SRCUC is also an active member in ASPHER. The convergence between the Red Cross humanitarian principles and the global population health context has stimulated the creation of the undergraduate programme in public health sciences with global perspective at the SRCUC.

Brief description of the programme

The planned bachelor's programme in public health sciences with a global health profile is a three-year (180 ECTS) campus-based programme with several distance-based modules. ECTS stand for European Credit Transfer and Accumulation System. As described earlier, the programme is in English and the distribution of ECTS points are as follows: 120 ECTS in Public Health Sciences, 45 ECTS in

social and behavioural sciences and 15 ECTS in medicine. The programme highlight systematically ethical areas and scientific work grounded in international health promotion. Fundamental public health concepts such as health equity and equality, social inclusion and diversity, empowerment and human rights as well as humanitarian crisis, trauma, vulnerability, migration, disaster prevention, emergency preparedness and humanitarian principles will be studied under the programme (See figure 1).

As the SRCUC has an extended professional network and is affiliated to numerous national and international organisations, students will be performing field studies, study visits and internships both nationally and internationally. This experience will start very early on in their studies and will continue throughout the programme.

The world as a global workplace: needed professional competencies and employment opportunities

In the midst of a major global health transitions, trained public health worker specialized in global health are equipped with knowledge and skills for active participation in health promotion and prevention of disease and injuries with the world as their workplace. In the proposed bachelor's programme in public health sciences at the SRCUC, the students will be exposed to a solid knowledge in public health research, intervention and planning. Consequently, after completing the programme, it is expected that the students have gained the competencies enabling them to work as public health professionals and delegates within humanitarian organisations, as well as employment related to health prevention and promotion worldwide, in a variety of populations and demographic groups. Graduates will also be capable of working with disease prevention and health promotion at different organizational levels such as municipal, regional, national (government and agencies) and international (European and global). They will also be able to work with different stakeholders in different arenas both at theoretical and practical levels. More specifically, they will be able to lead activities ranging from national and international community planning, strategic work geared towards integration of migrants and crisis management of refugees, aid work and humanitarian services.

From lack of recognition to high demand of public health graduates on the labour market: a fast evolving field

Despite the need of public health science as a main discipline, public health graduates still sometimes face a lack of recognition on the labour market as compared to other professions. In contrast to medical careers, the public health profession is still perceived as vague and difficult to define. Due to the multidisciplinary and diverse nature of public health sciences, public health professionals can work within, and in parallel to, the medical sector. They can also function independently of organisational affiliations. However, many prospective employers are not quite aware of the vast knowledge and skills possessed by public health professionals. It is thus important to train students at marketing their competencies and level of competition with other professions on the labour market. At the organisational level, key stakeholders such as public health institutions, associations of schools of public health, public health consortia are central actors in the development of strategies aiming at boosting the employment of public health specialists.

Relevance of public health in the Swedish context

As a welfare state, Sweden has over the years worked to ensure the health of its population¹¹. In 2009, the Swedish government drafted a proposition meant to strengthen the civil society, also

referred to as the third sector²⁰. Integrating academic knowledge towards third sector activities and involvement in public health already at the undergraduate level can be considered potentially as a specialization within public health education. Sweden along with its Nordic neighbours ranks high in regards to health indicators compared to most world regions. However, health disparities exist also in Sweden. For instance, people with low education, single parent households, low-skilled workers, migrants, have a lower health outcome²¹. In the recent years, Sweden, as an active actor of the global community, has faced diverse challenges. The country has long had a reputation for a generous migration policy, and therefore, more than 160 000 refugees sought asylum in 2015, beating all previous records²².

The need for a stronger Swedish public health work force with global competence can thus not be overemphasised. In conclusion, we argue with this article that there is an urgent need to train public health specialists at the undergraduate level to face global health challenges. In response to this need, The Swedish Red Cross University College has created such a programme leading to a Bachelor degree in Public Health Science, specialization Global Health.

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