

Collaboration with the Peoples-uni for on-line education in Public Health

Richard F Heller, Coordinator, Peoples-uni

One of the major barriers to health in Africa is the capacity of the public health workforce. The need for capacity-building to increase local human resources in health has recently been highlighted by the Global Health Workforce Alliance and the Kampala Declaration. Traditional public-health education programmes are often oversubscribed and the costs of attending programmes from universities in the 'north' (even distance education programmes) can be prohibitive. However, an expanding body of high quality, online Open Education Resources (OERs) is becoming available through the Internet, although they do not usually include either instruction or accreditation. The Peoples-uni (<http://peoples-uni.org>) has been established recently to develop educational context around these resources to build public-health capacity in low- to middle-income countries.

In order to create an educational context to the OER, we have developed a common format as detailed below.

1. Identify a health problem.
2. Identify the educational need (though our aim had always been to provide Masters level education initially – in a 'train the trainers' approach).
3. Identify the competences required and map against existing lists of public health competences.
4. Identify the on-line resources relevant to the competences, and provide links to them.
5. Develop a set of focused discussion topics for tutors/facilitators to lead on-line groups, using a learning management system (currently Moodle).
6. Assess and accredit learned competences.
7. Repeat this process for a range of relevant problems in order to cover a complete set of competences to guide the public health course development.

In order to create this, we have utilised the open source educational software platform Moodle. In late 2007, a fully on-line pilot course module in Maternal Mortality was offered, and 38 students enrolled on the module, after limited publicity. Their backgrounds ranged from clinicians, whose aim was to further improve their public health knowledge and skills, to policy makers and programme leads. They were all experienced practitioners, and came from 8 different countries. The module was delivered over ten weeks and divided into five two-week blocks focusing on a different topic, driven by appropriate competences. Delivery was through problem-based learning, and participants were required to read the provided materials and discuss questions raised to meet competences. There were three assessments (one formative) and discussions were facilitated by two content-expert facilitators who 'visited' at periods of their focus; and two general facilitators whose role was to keep conversations moving when participants grew quiet. This was all hosted by Moodle, and the draft course module can be seen on <http://moodle.cawd.net/course/view.php?id=2>.

One person left before starting due to work commitments, and 7 did not enter the course to enrol at all (although they received automatic e-mails of the discussion postings). 22 posted at least once to a Discussion forum, and an additional 5 posted to the Introduction (but not to the Discussions). 13 submitted at least one Assignment. 19 students had completed the pilot's brief evaluation questionnaires by the end of January 2008, and the overall response was very positive. This evaluation was not in-depth. Its intention was to encourage participants to share their views on gaps in the course, make suggestions as to how Peoples-uni.org should make improvements and advise on developmental direction.

A summary of key results are shown in the table in the Appendix.

Encouraged by the response to the pilot, and learning the lessons from it, the Peoples-uni has embarked on the development of 11 course modules covering public health problems as well as the foundation sciences of public health. We have assembled an international volunteer faculty of more than 70 people, who come from 24 countries. They have been identified by responses to a paper published in the Bulletin of the WHO <http://www.who.int/bulletin/volumes/85/12/07-044388.pdf>, and various other 'advertisement' through international discussion forums and personal contact. We are authoring the course modules collaboratively on-line, again using Moodle, and adding Google Documents (to allow changes and previous versions of material to be readily viewed by the development team members). The UK Royal Society of Health will offer awards to the certificate and diploma level.

In order to make the education relevant to the local setting, to be able to obtain help with delivery, to add value rather than compete with local organisations, and to explore the possibility of joint degrees, we feel it essential to develop partnerships with universities and other organisations in the 'south'. We welcome all suggestions, advice and assistance in identifying the factors that will encourage the development of such

collaboration and partnership arrangements with the Peoples-uni.

Appendix:

Selected questions and responses from evaluation of pilot delivery of Maternal Mortality course module (19 responses in total)

Question 1. How important were these potential reasons for you to enrol in this course module?	Very important	A little	Not at all
To get academic credit	10	6	2
To gain Public Health knowledge	16	2	0
To gain Public Health skills	15	1	1
To look at the resources	12	4	2
To join in a discussion with others	13	5	0
To get experience in e-learning	12	5	1

Question 3. Technical aspects: how did you find the following?	Good	Mostly OK	Bad
Internet access	8	9	1
Access to course module and Moodle (apart from problem at end of November)	11	5	0
Information on how to use the course materials and take part in discussions	10	8	0
Access to materials on module	9	9	0
Response to problems from course support team	16	2	0

Question 5. Course benefits: Was the	Excellent	Good	Useful	Not of use
The general interest of the course	8	9	1	0
The academic value from the course	11	4	2	1
The practical value from the course	6	3	5	3
The input to the discussions from other 'students'	5	12	1	0
Input to the discussions from facilitators	11	2	3	1

Question 6. The future:

	Yes definitely	Yes probably	No
Would you enrol in more course modules?	12	4	0
Would you be interested in continuing to a Diploma or Masters degree?	13	0	3
Was this relevant to your job or career?	13	1	2
Would you recommend this to others?	12	3	0

Question 9. Changes for the future

	Yes definitely	Possibly	No
Does the content need to be changed for local situations?	4	10	3
Would you be prepared to help make changes?	9	6	1
Would you be prepared to join in as a tutor or other role in the future?	10	6	1