

Happy birthday MPH: it's time for the party – a reality check and a cure

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The party

The collaborative postgraduate programme in public health, offered by the Universities Basel, Bern, and Zurich, celebrates its 10th anniversary with currently 210 enrolled students, more than two dozen students enrolling every year and 70 students who have already obtained their MPH. Congratulations!

It was the vision and tenacity of the mother and the fathers (yes, there were several fathers) that brought the Master of Public Health programme to life. The parents of the programme and the Faculty fully acknowledge that a modern country, comprising 26 different health care systems (basically one in each Kanton) and serving seven million people, needs well-trained public health professionals. None of the primary academic paths such as medicine, pharmacology, biology, economy, or social sciences educate students in the specific needs of public health and the scientific underpinnings with which to base decisions on evidence rather than on beliefs, politics, and budgets. Thus, it is the jubilee of an interdisciplinary process toward professionalism in an area of need.

As acknowledged in the 2001 PEER Review, conducted by the Association of Schools of Public Health in the European Region (ASPHER), the programme is praised by its users, students, and employers alike. The modular course structure offers high flexibility, is perfectly compatible with full-time work and can be adapted to individual tracks. Thanks to the quality and engagement of the faculty and the coordination office, the programme complies with international standards and MPH students make already noticeable contributions. However, the MPH programme needs a reality check – and a cure.

The reality check

This ten-year old adolescent spends his birthday in the intensive care unit! The limited financial support of the early

years was phased out in 2000. The current contribution of the Swiss Universities for developing a Swiss Public Health Network gives some hope; it is however limited to three years and the funds allocated to the MPH programme are not sufficient to resolve the structural weaknesses. The programme has kept the structure of the pioneer phase. There still are, at maximum, only two (!) professionals who piece together the entire puzzle of modular courses, offered in several places, and who administer the programme, make it function, evaluate, and develop. The Coordination Centre is the only structural back bone for students, steering committee, faculty, working groups and external partners. The rest is voluntarism. It is not by coincidence, that the Faculty had a meeting under the provocative label “The faculty doesn't exist”. We are an assembly of volunteers, all convinced about the need of a high quality public health education, but faced with the fact that course fees don't cover our contribution. The Faculty agrees with the criticism also formulated by the ASPHER Review: the curriculum needs revision; coordination between overlapping courses must be optimised and gaps need to be filled; the programme must be adapted, continuously, to the (changing) needs of the public health stakeholders; teaching approaches need development with implementation of new technologies. However, a Faculty of volunteers does not have the resources to tackle the current agenda for improvement.

The cure

The first step toward a cure will be to accept that the programme is in crisis. Unless all involved parties within and outside the MPH programme, including key stakeholders such as, e.g., the Federal and Kantonal Offices of Public Health are willing to face this truth, the Swiss attitude to keeping things “as they are” will most likely prevail – thus all

partners will collaboratively witness the grounding of this successful MPH programme in its second decade. We have to accept that the programme urgently needs sustained funds.

The Coordination Centre needs a critical mass – not an annually revised survival budget. The Faculty needs resources to efficiently contribute to the academic development of the programme. The current voluntarism-based system excludes, to a large extent, the contribution and experience of all those public health professionals that can't afford to subsidise, as volunteers, the MPH programme, e.g., those working for private companies, NGOs, or public offices. Accordingly, the programme has an "University bias" which further increases the trend – criticised by ASPHER and students alike – towards more theoretical approaches rather than to develop a curriculum in accordance with changing needs of the Swiss public health scene.

The critical step will, thus, be to allocate funds to the programme. First of all, we need to answer a key question: should student fees cover the full costs? Doubling the current course fees might resolve the major financial problems. But is this the solution? After several increases in fees, a student has to invest >30'000 CHF for the MPH. The typical MPH student does not live in a high income phase. In fact, 50% of students are in a part-time work or have no income, e.g., women who have child care commitments. More than 50% of current students are women. Furthermore, it is in the interest of our field to attract students below the current average age at entry (39 years) to bring MPH skills earlier into careers. The fees must also be competitive with other MPH programmes, e.g., one year at Harvard School of Public Health costs 26'000 USD (up to 45 credits). The former MPH fellowships of the Swiss National Science Foundation

have been cancelled and, given the under-funding of the public health area in this country it is no surprise that ~50% of students pay the MPH out of their pocket. It is my conclusion, that a further increase in fees, although a fast and – in the short run – effective decision, is not the solution. However, it is of public interest to have vocationally trained professionals, thus public and/or private institutions should support the core structure of an MPH programme.

Universities are not only a key partner of an academic programme but have clear needs for MPH skills in the University staff. The 1992 decision of the Universities Basel, Bern, and Zürich to co-sign this programme reflects a remarkable and unprecedented vision to surmount local University boundaries and interests. Co-funding would be an important next step. Collaboration may even be extended to all Swiss Universities to increase synergies with the francophone MPH offered in Geneva.

At least 50% of current MPH graduates work under the responsibility of Federal, Kantonal and local Public Health Authorities. It is crucial to generate a pool of Swiss public health professionals, thus, to continue the MPH programme if authorities are to optimally perform their mandatory duties. Their current approach, however, is to support – on an individual basis – staff members to take courses. This has led to the paradox that the MPH faculty volunteers for Federal and Kantonal staff training. The programme needs a clear commitment of these key public health stakeholders.

Ten years of pioneering voluntarism led to a very successful interuniversity programme. It's time for sustained solutions. Congratulations to all that did and hopefully will contribute!

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