

European Master Programme in Public Health Nutrition

A European Master's Programme in Public Health Nutrition

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Abstract

Effective population-based strategies require people trained and competent in the discipline of Public Health Nutrition. Since 1997, a European Master's Programme in Public Health Nutrition has been undergoing planning and implementation, by establishing initial quality assurance systems with the aid of funding from the European Commission (DG SANCO/F3). Partners from 17 European countries have been involved in the process. A European Network of Public Health Nutrition has been developed and accredited by the European Commission.

Keywords
Nutrition
Physical activity
Training
Health promotion
Disease prevention

For the majority of European adults, who neither smoke nor drink excessively, the most significant controllable risk factors affecting their long-term health are what they eat and how physically active they are. The task of undertaking effective population-based strategies to tackle these problems demands a workforce in Europe that is trained and competent, with comparable skills, for optimal mobility and joint research^{1,2}. As a consequence of this, during the last five to ten years, the new discipline of Public Health Nutrition has developed.

Public Health Nutrition is 'the promotion of good health through nutrition and physical activity and the prevention of related illness in the population' (Definition from the European Master's Programme in Public Health Nutrition, 1998).

In 1997, the European Commission DG SANCO/F/3 funded a project aimed at building a European-wide Master's Programme in Public Health Nutrition, a work that is still ongoing. The work is co-ordinated by the Unit for Preventive Nutrition, at the Department of Biosciences at Novum, Karolinska Institute, Sweden. Currently, 17 renowned universities in 16 countries are taking part in the programme, which includes teacher and student exchange through the Socrates programme³.

In the work so far a number of achievements can be highlighted.

- The development of a general course structure of two years, including 10 core modules and a master's thesis of half a year, building on two years of previous university training.

- The development of an initial quality assurance system.
- The development of a European network, accredited by the European Commission.

The work has been funded for three years, and will be funded for another year from EC DG SANCO.

The course

The draft course document is a description of each of the proposed modules, which are:

- Principles of nutritional science (15 ECTS);
- Principles of public health (10 ECTS);
- Principles of health promotion (10 ECTS);
- Principles of physical activity (5 ECTS);
- Epidemiology and biostatistics (10 ECTS);
- Assessment (10 ECTS);
- Food habits: An integrated perspective (10 ECTS);
- Food safety (5 ECTS);
- Food and nutrition policy (5 ECTS);
- EU basics in Public Health Nutrition (5 ECTS);
- Research project and thesis (30 ECTS); and
- Electives (5 ECTS).

Contained within the draft course document are also descriptors for each of the modules, which are to help in organisation of the course and to ensure that students have the required prerequisite knowledge to enter a particular module. Each module has two unifying

cross-curricular themes; namely, the European Dimension and the Physical Activity Dimension.

Students must fulfil an admissions criterion for entry to the course. This should consist of at least two years of academic training, including basic physiology, nutrition or public health. Within the programme, they will undertake the equivalent of 90 ECTS (1.5 ECTS is approximately one week of full-time study; ECTS = European Credit Transfer System) of core modules and electives (see above), followed by a research project (and thesis) worth 30 ECTS.

As the course is at Master's level, the students must undertake learning that is complex and unpredictable and, normally, involves specialised situations demanding innovative work, which may involve exploring the current limits of knowledge.

For each of the specified core modules, specialist groups were set up to design the curriculum according to the descriptors listed above. This process is ongoing to ensure that each module is as complete as possible and that the literature is kept up-to-date. Additionally, this allows the modules to be developed in such a way that they are at the required high level (i.e. Master's level) but also make them coherent, which will allow students to pass between modules as easily as possible.

In addition it was agreed that the programme should include a research project and thesis. The research must demonstrate the integration of concepts across modules in the way the project is undertaken and discussed. This would include study design etc., but must also show that the student has been able to consider the wider public health context (the European Dimension) of the work undertaken.

Quality assurance

Diversity creates challenges for comparing standards. The EU Master's Programme takes a quality assurance approach, based on consensus, an essential basis for recognising the highest quality and validating the rigour with which such high standards are obtained in different institutions, in different countries, with different systems. This approach builds on current best practice in universities and the administration of higher education.

The European Master in Public Health Nutrition (EUMPHN) process, steered by an Executive Committee (a forerunner of an EUMPHN Programme Board), starts with self-analysis (self-study) reports that are exchanged across the consortium. Transparency with collegiality ensures that self-analysis of practice and capacity benefits all involved, and facilitates formal agreement partnerships within the consortium that will facilitate mobility.

Agreed quality criteria include the quality of learning resources and methods of examination and evaluation, which should demonstrate that high-level cognitive and transferable skills and ethical values are developed. The

calibre of staff is judged by their research and professional activity in Public Health Nutrition. There should be a European dimension in the curricula of all modules. A European faculty should examine dissertations or theses. Annual workshops in the EU Basics course provide regular opportunities for training the trainers and team teaching.

Thus, in the EUMPHN project, quality assurance mechanisms are under development that will support the flexibility essential for a Europe-wide consortium approach to quality-assured teaching and learning in Public Health Nutrition.

The challenges

The next challenges will be to ensure the sustainability of the European training programme, with two main pathways:

- to secure funding for courses; and
- to build IT-based distance learning programmes for use across Europe.

One of the main events in 2001 was the summer school 'EU Basics in Public Health Nutrition', held in Stockholm, on 9–18 June, due to the EU presidency.

Since the early days of the programme, a number of developments regarding the importance of Public Health Nutrition can be noted. The European Commission recently funded a project called 'Dietary Guidelines and Guidelines for a Healthy Lifestyle', or Eurodiet for short. This project provided a good base for national food-based dietary guidelines and valuable public health nutrition strategies to implement these guidelines. The Eurodiet project delivered an expert consensus on population goals on a number of topics, including physical activity level, certain nutrient intakes, fruit and vegetable consumption as well as exclusive breast-feeding duration. All of these issues provide a good basis for national work within the area of public health nutrition. What it also underlines is the need for trained and competent people across Europe, capable – among other things – of tackling the task of assessing the current situation in member states based upon current reliable and comparable data, and designing ways forward on a national level.

The European Master's Programme fills a very important gap in this development, not only by providing trained staff with skills for performing comparable baseline assessment, but also in performing comparable monitoring programmes and designing cost-effective projects and programmes, including policy developments on a national level.

The scope

The European collaboration means quality improvement within the area of Public Health Nutrition training, not

only at graduate and postgraduate level, but also for the potential of building training programmes on a more basic level for healthcare staff and others, by providing excellent potential teachers within the member states. The collaboration has also developed into a European Network for Public Health Nutrition, which will be developing consensus statements and background documents for the Master's Programme, as well as supporting joint research between the universities involved. Through the support that the European Commission is giving to postgraduate training in Public Health Nutrition across Europe, we can hope for increased mobility, networking and understanding between European nutrition and physical activity professionals. We can look forward to a new brand of professionals, who are truly European in their training, but who also have an integrated view of nutrition and physical activity, interrelations, possibilities for intervention, etc. We have never before had so great a possibility for developing the field of Public Health Nutrition. With these possibilities follow increased demands for showing cost efficiency and positive results. This can only be reached through increased specialisation, hard work and collaboration with other professionals.

The partners

- University of Vienna, Austria
- University of Gent, Belgium
- Royal Veterinary & Agricultural University, Denmark
- University of Kuopio, Finland

- Université Victor Segalen Bordeaux 2, France
- University of Giessen, Germany
- German Institute of Human Nutrition, Germany
- University of Athens, Greece
- University of Iceland, Iceland
- Trinity College Medical School, Ireland
- National Institute of Nutrition, Italy
- Wageningen University, Netherlands
- University of Oslo, Norway
- Oporto University, Portugal
- University of Navarra, Spain
- University of Las Palmas, Spain
- Karolinska Institute, Sweden
- University of Zürich, Switzerland
- Queen Margaret University College, UK
- University of Southampton, UK

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