



PUBLIC HEALTH EDUCATION IN NEPAL: INSIGHTS OF UNDERGRADUATE PUBLIC HEALTH STUDENTS

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There is a long history of Public Health Education in Nepal. As a leading provider of medical education, Tribhuvan University, Institute of Medicine started undergraduate education in Public Health in 1986 and postgraduate education in 1991 for the first time in Nepal. Since then, other universities like Pokhara University, Puvanchal University, Kathmandu University, BPKIHS, PAHS, KAHS have also started the undergraduate and post graduate public health programs in the country. Recently Madan Bhandari Academy of Health sciences and Madhesh Institute of Health sciences have started undergraduate public Health programs (Bachelor in Public Health).

Every year, about thousand public health professionals graduate from the various universities in the country and from abroad. If we explore the major capacities that the students have developed after completion of their undergraduate public health degree, they confidently expressed that they were now capable of managing large amount of data, conducting valuable research works, demonstrate excellent communication and critical thinking skills and carefully handling difficult situations by showing professionalism and now are socially responsible health work force. The prescribed curriculum of the universities imparts the confident in carrying out health projects and managing health awareness campaigns. They have also developed public speaking skills, networking abilities, and motivation to improve the existing health system.

The undergraduate public health professionals can apply their knowledge and skills to develop policies, strategies, and programs to improve the public health. They are confident in their ability to create significant change in people's lives through training and awareness activities, as well as using technology. They know the national and international health scenarios of health delivery system and they can analyze the gaps critically with better solutions. They can counsel the people in humane ways, and are aware the group dynamic as well as organizational behavior and manage situations accordingly. They have skills in program planning, implementation, monitoring, evaluation, and documentation. They uphold ethical standards in research and other areas. The role of public health professionals is not well understood in spite of the available pool of professionals¹. Moreover, federal restructure of health care system ignore the role of public health professionals.

For the implementation of public health education in Nepal, there are numerous issues and challenges. These include not following the national curriculum frameworks developed by the Medical Education Commission (Nepal), development and implementation of need based/demand-based curriculum, entrepreneurship-based skills provisions, inclusion of model of health promotion prescribed by World Health Organization^{1,2}(WHO), inadequate capacity building exercises after enrollment in the jobs, unclear expertise-based job description, improper planning in human resource development leads to less job opportunities in

the government sectors and feeling of job insecurity. In addition, the general public lacks knowledge on hygiene and sanitation, proper nutrition, healthy life styles adoption, and prevalence of gender-based violence in the household levels. The human resource capital development and other health care data ask the active involvement of public health professional in the health care system of the country³.

There are added challenges in implementing courses and syllabus as a result of outdated topics. Many teachers are not trained in new technologies or teaching methods, leaving students dissatisfied with the learning experience. During field practical, there is a shortage of mentors, making it hard for students to learn effectively. In Nepal's federal system, roles and responsibilities are assigned at various levels, but many faculty members are unaware of these roles and do not update students, which is very concerning.

It is clear that many people still lack knowledge about Public Health Education and its vital role in promoting health. Low awareness of public health issues also affects policymakers, who show limited interest in addressing these educational concerns. Some academic institutions are hesitant to continue their undergraduate and postgraduate programs. Proper and timely placement of public health professionals at the local level is critical, yet many graduates feel forced to leave the country to study other subjects instead of public health.

One of the significant issues for public health graduates is the long waiting duration for admission. Guardians and students need to wait almost a year for the admission. Many enroll in other subjects during this waiting period, not wanting to waste time, which contributes to a decline in undergraduate public health enrollment.

As a matter of fact, the undergraduate public health professionals stated their insights ways to improve public health education in Nepal. They also suggested that admission processes to be more flexible, advocacy for importance public health professionals in health system improvements, creating more job opportunities in the country, identification of role model of public health and mobilize them as the motivational speakers, media mobilization for awareness on public health educational and also emphasized on visiting the academic institutions where potential candidates are preparing for health science education. Since public health is everyone's common agenda so that it is prime time to incorporate it in all sectors. The overall situation is still not much improved in last thirteen years⁴.

Additionally, academic institutions could manage guest lectures during studies and recruit experienced faculties to add value. It is essential to timely revise curriculums/

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syllabus, collaborate with various organizations for academic exchange programs, share resources and build capacity, at the same time, academic institutions should develop the technology friendly classroom and other physical infrastructures, provision of adequate numbers of reading books, engage and support public health students on various health related activities and encourage them by providing small research grants.

There are many opportunities in the public health sector, which can be strengthened in the future to retain the younger generation in the country. Improving the health system will contribute to the improvement of the public health as a whole.

FURTHER READING

1. Health education: theoretical concepts, effective strategies and core competencies: a foundation document to guide capacity development of health educators/ WHO. Regional Office for the Eastern Mediterranean. ISBN: 978-92-9021-829-6 (online).
2. Mahat, A., Bezruchka, S.A., Gonzales, V. et al. Assessment of graduate public health education in Nepal and perceived needs of faculty and students. Hum Resource Health 11, 16 (2013). <https://doi.org/10.1186/1478-4491-11-16>
3. <https://data.worldbank.org/country/nepal>
4. Bhusal S, Paudel R, Gaihre M, Paudel K, Adhikari TB, Pradhan PMS. Health literacy and associated factors among undergraduates: A university-based cross-sectional study in Nepal. PLOS Glob Public Health. 2021 Nov 8;1(11): e0000016. doi: 10.1371/journal.pgph.0000016. PMID: 36962072; PMCID: PMC10022320.