

The Peoples-uni: public health education for all

Richard F Heller

Volunteers and the Internet can provide education in public health where it is most needed

The multiple health problems faced by low-income countries require urgent solutions. One solution, as articulated in the United Nations Millennium Development Goals, is to increase the health workforce.¹ An editorial (and accompanying articles) in the *Lancet* highlighted the need for global health capacity building,² and the first Global Forum on Human Resources for Health (in March 2008) produced the Kampala Declaration, which urged "... immediate action to resolve the accelerating crisis in the global health workforce ...".³ Part of this solution will involve boosting in-country public health capacity,⁴ and an educational initiative to do this was launched recently — the People's Open Access Education Initiative, better known as the Peoples-uni (<http://peoples-uni.org>).⁵

The "open-source" movement describes collaborative software development, where products are shared and improved upon among developers and made freely available to others. It has transformed computer software. The movement to make open-source educational materials freely available on the Internet⁶ promises a mechanism to provide public health education at low cost. An ever-expanding range of high-quality open educational resources is

freely available on the Internet, and a number of universities are providing open access to online educational material, but do not offer tuition or accreditation. The Peoples-uni aims to provide an educational context around these materials, using a competence-based approach and volunteers to develop and deliver an educational program. Through the Internet, health professionals can learn while they work, and local workforce is not depleted. Previous experience shows that distance and online learning in public health is feasible.⁷ The open-source approach is a new way for individuals and organisations to collaboratively develop and share the products of their work. The Peoples-uni offers involvement in the exciting and evolving field of the application of the open-source philosophy to education.

A number of national and international partners have agreed to be part of the Peoples-uni, and momentum is building. A pilot of a course module on maternal mortality, run between October and December 2007, attracted a large interest and was well received. The draft of this module is available at <http://moodle.cawd.net/course/view.php?id=2>, and student evaluation is available on the Peoples-uni website. This draft is now being modified as part of the process

of developing a set of new course modules covering some of the foundation sciences of public health and some major health problems facing low- to middle-income populations. The United Kingdom Royal Society for Public Health has agreed to oversee the assessment process and offer awards at certificate and diploma levels, and teams are currently being established for course development and online facilitation. Access to educational resources and teachers of high international quality will provide highly credible education at low cost.

While Australia is committed to its responsibilities towards overseas development through its official development assistance, only 12% of this budget goes to health, and even this is not focused on the areas of greatest global health need.⁸ Australian universities, including their medical schools,⁹ contribute to global educational activities, but are constrained by the need to charge fees, which cannot be met by most people who would benefit from university education. In 2005, full-fee-paying students provided 15% of income within the higher-education sector, and education services were the third highest export-earnings generator for Australia.¹⁰ For these reasons, which are not confined to Australia, the Peoples-uni has been established outside the more traditional educational sector and will rely on volunteers to meet its goals.

Is the volunteer approach sustainable? Will busy health professionals be willing to add to their activities, and in a way that may not help meet the goals of their employing institutions? To date, more than 80 people have agreed to take part in the development of course modules, and are working in 12 teams. Volunteers come from 24 different countries and range from established academics in senior positions to trainees and students. Some students from the pilot have joined the teams. The difficulties of maintaining a large volunteer workforce should not be underestimated, and it is a priority to develop a system that provides rewards, such as the opportunity to work with a diverse and interesting group of colleagues, and to keep up to date with advances in international public health issues and developments in information and educational technology, in addition to appealing to the altruism of those involved. Although the workload will vary according to the level of commitment of the volunteers, we have divided it into feasible amounts for busy people, such that even a small and short-term commitment of 2–3 hours a week for a 3-week period can be a valuable contribution. A similar approach to level of commitment has also been taken by the Clinical Toxicology Teaching Resource Project (<http://wikitox.org>), with which the Peoples-uni shares a number of philosophical ideals.

The Peoples-uni provides a novel opportunity to contribute towards meeting global health workforce and public health needs. Australian health care professionals and academics have made, and continue to make, major contributions to international health. I hope that the Australian health professional community will be involved in contributing to and helping shape this initiative.

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