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Enhancing The Public Health Work Of Graduates Returning To Developing Countries Via An Online Community Of Practice

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Introduction/background:
Philanthropic and government organizations sponsor public health students from resource poor settings so that they can gain postgraduate qualifications in order to contribute to their countries’ public health outcomes. Anecdotal reports from returning public health graduates suggests, however, that due to factors such as lack of resources and academic isolation, these graduates’ public health training is possibly under-utilized. Furthermore, these graduates often have to work in challenging contexts, for which they are possibly under-prepared. This project aims to enhance the knowledge transfer of public health graduates returning to developing countries. Through the development of an online community of practice using a Moodle course management system, recent graduates from diverse developing countries can seek advice from each other to assist their public health practice. They can consult participating University of Melbourne academics and access the University’s library databases. It is also hoped the participants will identify projects that might be suitable for current students to further strengthen the public health partnership between the staff, students and alumnus.

The study framework is action research through a community of practice. The qualitative data includes a preliminary needs analysis as well as six monthly follow up questionnaires over a two-year period. Discourse analysis of the interactions amongst participants will be conducted to determine if and how participants give and seek advice and to what extent the site is interactive. Participants are Masters of Public Health graduates from developing countries, including Nepal, Indonesia, and Bangladesh, who have returned home after completing their studies at The University of Melbourne. Approximately 25 participants are currently enrolled in the Moodle site, and the site includes social and news forums, resources, profiles of participants, and links to the University library databases.

Purpose/objectives:
The three main objectives are:

i) to investigate the processes of supported knowledge transfer via the online community of practice,

ii) to identify the barriers to knowledge transfer in public health such as access to expertise and resources, and knowledge dissemination, and to identify the strategies participants adopt to overcome these barriers,

iii) to evaluate the effectiveness of an online community of practice as a means of enhancing and sustaining knowledge transfer of public health graduates returning to resource poor settings.

Issues for exploration/ideas for discussion:

• how to establish and sustain meaningful university and community partnerships with international graduates in the health sector
Results:

Preliminary results from the needs analysis and six month follow up questionnaire will be presented as well as preliminary analysis of the nature of the online discussions between participants.

Discussion:

As a framework for enhancing knowledge transfer of public health graduates, the virtual community of practice is a low cost and minimal labour intensive resource. While it does require good internet accessibility, it has the potential to link participants in developing country settings working in areas of high public health need with university expertise, to give participants access to resources such as journal databases as well as to the experiences of their colleagues working in comparable environments with similar public health issues.