

# Evolving directions in health promotion workforce development

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## ABSTRACT

**PROJECT CONTEXT:** *Leaders in the fields of public health and health promotion increasingly advocate a socio-ecological approach to meet contemporary and emerging population health challenges. It is essential that health promotion workforce development initiatives mirror the evolving direction of the field to facilitate translation of theory into practice. To date, there has been limited effort to map the socio-ecological approach into tertiary education curricula.*

**PROJECT DESCRIPTION:** *This project was undertaken as part of the development process for an undergraduate health promotion degree in Queensland, Australia. A review of the health promotion workforce development literature was undertaken. Group processes, key informant interviews and a Delphi technique were used to engage health promotion academics and practitioners, including an International Health Promotion Expert Advisory Panel, and an Industry Advisory Group in defining the components of the program.*

**FINDINGS:** *The consultative processes facilitated the development of an undergraduate health promotion degree program underpinned by the socio-ecological approach with strong emphases upon the processes or 'how you do it' of health promotion together with evidence-based decision making and practice.*

**CONCLUSIONS:** *As the basis and practice of health promotion progresses toward a socio-ecological approach, workforce training needs to keep pace with these developments to ensure an appropriately skilled health promotion workforce to meet emerging population health challenges. The reported project and the degree program that has been developed is an example of one step towards achieving this important and necessary shift in health promotion workforce development in Australia.*

## Introduction

To meet global population health challenges, responses are needed that address health determinants to promote sustainable and positive lifestyles<sup>1</sup>. It is increasingly recognised that the multi-causal nature of health and illness means there is a need to move beyond behavioural change interventions to more holistic, integrated, interdisciplinary approaches to secure long-term population health.

Health promotion provides both an orientation to securing of population health with a suite of models, strategies and processes for understanding and actioning population health with its multi-level and multi-strategy operations across the social system<sup>2,3</sup>.

Since the concept of "health promotion" was first coined it has evolved from a focus upon behaviour change through health education, to a comprehensive socio-environmental orientation to health operationalised through an integrative settings approach. This evolutionary process for health promotion is set to continue with a growing emphasis upon the importance of a socio-ecological approach to underpin

the practice of health promotion and advance public health in the 21st century<sup>4,5,6</sup>. Contemporary and anticipated health challenges increasingly necessitate more holistic, "upstream" or determinants-oriented and preventive population-based approaches to health<sup>7</sup>. There will be an ever-increasing need for an emphasis upon health promotion to secure long-term population health. It is imperative that health promotion workforce development mirror the evolving direction and projected health challenges to facilitate timely translation of theory to practice.

To date, there has been limited effort to map the socio-ecological approach into tertiary health promotion curricula.

The present project sought to explore and define the components of a tertiary degree program underpinned by a socio-ecological approach to health promotion. It was undertaken as part of the development of a new undergraduate health promotion degree at Griffith University, Australia.

### Project description

The development of the Griffith University Bachelor of Health Promotion (BHProm) was undertaken from June 2004 to January 2005. In accordance with the participative and collaborative nature of contemporary health promotion practice, consultative processes were implemented that engaged local and international health promotion academics, practitioners and representatives of prominent health promotion organisations in debate about the theory, practice and values of contemporary health promotion<sup>8</sup>.

The project used a cyclic data collection/analysis approach to build consensus among project participants, and methods included group processes, key informant interviews and an email-based Delphi technique. The consultative process engaged members of various organisations in Australia including the Australian Health Promotion Association, International Union of Health Promotion and Education, Public Health Association of Australia, Queensland Health, Health Promotion Queensland and local government, together with an International Health Promotion Expert Advisory Panel. Reviews of the health promotion workforce development literature and existing undergraduate health promotion degrees delivered across Australia informed discussions. Thematic analysis conducted on the data progressed from the identification of topics in recently collected data to clustering these topics into themes and then core elements of a health promotion tertiary curriculum.

### Findings

The literature review and market analysis revealed that universities are considered a key source of suitably skilled and trained public health labour<sup>9</sup>. At the time of this project, however, only one undergraduate Bachelor of Health Promotion was offered within Australia, with a number of undergraduate and post-graduate health programs containing health promotion majors. In contrast, the consultative processes revealed strong support for specific health promotion degree programs as an important step in the discipline's evolution. The

consultations also highlighted that to meet projected health challenges and facilitate timely translation of the evolving direction of the field to practice, the underpinning emphases required in such programs must be:

- A socio-ecological approach to health promotion;
- Evidence-based decision making and practice; and
- The processes or 'how you do it' of health promotion practice.

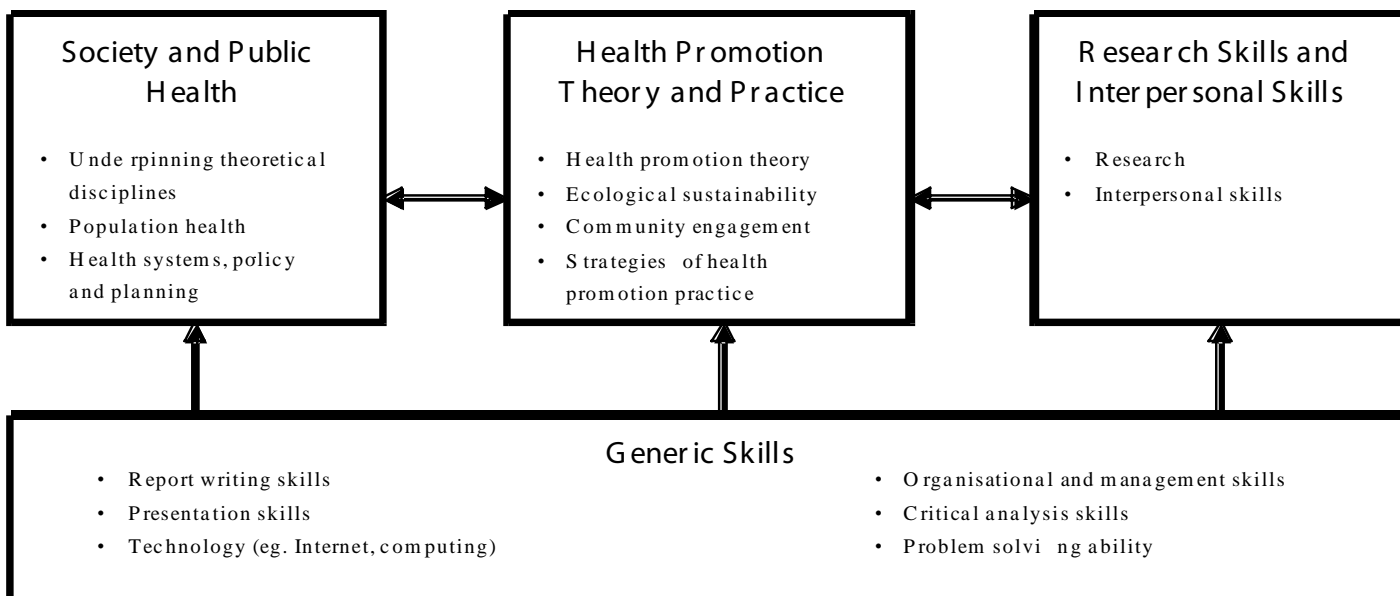
These findings confirm the anticipated need to progress the socio-ecological approach within the field of health promotion. They are consistent with the identified demand for health promotion specialists to have the knowledge and skills to deliver on health challenges and priorities to achieve more equitable population health outcomes<sup>10</sup>.

The thematic analysis of the data gathered through the consultative processes and review of the literature identified nine interrelated core areas of knowledge, skills and values (KSV) required in workforce development to progress a socio-ecological approach to health promotion. In the present project, the identified KSVs have been organised as the three pillars for health promotion training and practice, supported by a foundation of generic skills. Figure 1 displays this configuration of the KSVs and maps their broad interrelatedness with each other and the foundation of generic skills.

### Discussion

The structure and content areas developed through this project reflect the evolving nature of the health promotion field. First, the study identified the need for a significant component of curricula to be focused on the structural determinants of population health and ecological sustainability to position graduates as future global leaders in health promotion. Second, this focus must be balanced with considerable attention being given to the issues and practices of contemporary health promotion. Third, emphasis should be given to the basic skills

Figure 1. The Pillars of Health Promotion Training and Practice



of health promotion practice such as program planning and evaluation, project management, policy development and, perhaps most importantly, interpersonal skills and group work. This emphasis upon the processes of health promotion – ‘how you do it’ – advances the graduates’ capacity to function effectively across the range of approaches to health promotion and issues of interest.

The overarching goal of such a program would be to develop graduates who are socio-ecological in their orientation to health promotion yet able to operate effectively within contemporary health promotion approaches. The graduate would therefore be one who continually challenges contemporary health promotion theory and practice as part of their professional leadership role to progress the field toward a socio-ecological approach that will secure population health in the future.

The outcomes of the project suggest innovative curricula are needed to progress health promotion frameworks within Australia and elsewhere towards the socio-ecological approach. Responsibility for this undertaking lies primarily with the tertiary education sector, where the health promotion workforce of the future is being shaped. The resulting approach behind the KSV for the BHProm at Griffith University responds to this by drawing together a wide range of skills, practices and disciplines to promote a focus upon the social determinants of health together with an emphasis upon collaboration with societal stakeholders and sectors<sup>3</sup>, 10, 11. The approach also recognises that a tertiary degree program is far more than practitioner competencies and must also nurture an orientation, passion and commitment for health promotion in graduates.

## Conclusion

In response to the need to address global population health issues, this study confirmed the demand for health promotion specialists who have the knowledge and skills to deliver on health challenges and priorities to achieve more equitable population health outcomes<sup>10</sup>. Health promotion workforce development is central to achieving the required shift from the current focus upon risk factor reduction and behavioural change interventions to more holistic, integrated, interdisciplinary approaches to secure long-term population health. Griffith University’s BHProm development process confirmed broad support for workforce development to promote a socio-ecological approach to health promotion, ensure skills for evidence-based practice and a focus upon process or skills to actually practice health promotion. To achieve this, stronger leadership and linkages between workforce development and practice are needed. The BHProm is a step in this direction.

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