



APHEA

Agency for Public Health
Education Accreditation

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY FOR THE ACCREDITATION REVIEW OF

Master in Public Health (online)



UNIVERSITY OF
LIVERPOOL

The Department of Public Health & Policy

University of Liverpool

Liverpool,

United Kingdom

Accreditation granted August 2015 to August 2021

AGENCY FOR PUBLIC HEALTH EDUCATION ACCREDITATION
SITE VISIT DATES: June 2-3, 2015

SITE VISIT TEAM:
Professor Susan Babich, Chair
Professor Petko Slachev
Dr. Nick de Viggiani
Julien Goodman, Director APHEA

Executive Summary

The site visit team (hereafter referred to as "the Team") would like to thank all those involved with the Master of Public Health at Liverpool (hereafter referred to as "the Programme") for the preparation of the self-evaluation documentation (SED), the curriculum validation process, the constant requests for additional information during the process as well as the hospitality during the visit. From the SED and validation documents the Team were able to discern the intricacies of the Programme and were provided with a base framework on which to verify the information with all the respective internal and external partners during the site visit. The Team would especially like to thank the work of the Programme Director, Francine Watkins and Programme Administrator, Natalie Gotch who had prepared all the documentation as well as ensuring the logistics and smooth running of the site visit.

The Programme is a collaboration between the University of Liverpool and Laureate online education which has developed over several years and has seen a process of growth and evolution. This means that there are two organisations with separate goals in which some are consistent and some are different. The Team noted that there is a very large and diverse international student population with a substantial percentage coming from Africa and, as such, the Programme responds to populations requiring public health training. With regard to the two organisations, the Team felt that they could further collaborate on collecting evidence for developing and improving the Programme, for example, collecting evidence on student experience and on tracking the student progression through the modules and the Programme. This evidence will help inform efforts to improve student retention and drop-out rates as well as providing insights into which countries yield stronger recruitment or how students from different regions perform on the Programme. Secondly, the Team felt that the Programme must provide greater opportunities for broader cross cohort student input and representation relating to several areas, such as curricular content and student experience. It was seen that student representation within the Programme was undertaken by only two student representatives for a large cohort and, as such, the Programme was recommended to review the level of and approach towards student representation on the programme.

The programme's flexible design enables it to reach an under-served global population, including low and middle income regions, which evidently helps to build and support public health workforce capacity within those regions. The ability to draw students who often have to balance work and family commitments was seen as a crucial quality of the programme, allowing such students to access an otherwise unattainable education. It was also noted that students were able to implement their newly gained knowledge and skills immediately – or concurrently – within their workplaces rather than having to wait to the end of the academic year, which many international students within on-site programmes experience.

The diversity of the student body within each cohort ensures a broad range of perspectives are brought to bear in the virtual classroom, as the teaching and learning are based on integrating the student experience within the classroom. The model employed by Liverpool is one of facilitation rather than having specialists teaching the programme, which places a focus on the student rather than the expert. The systems utilised in the Programme are robust and follow the procedures employed through the University of Liverpool. The whole infrastructure of the University of Liverpool is in place with, for example, the board of studies, board of examiners and referral processes, which provide a solid basis for the quality of the programme. The Team had also been made aware of feedback made from the last curriculum refresh process, which evidenced the increased support for online students. One important innovation was to re-schedule the dissertation module to enable students to engage with it in a staged format consistent with their other learning/modules; this “scaffolding approach” was perceived by the team to be an important development in terms of creating a more integrative and developmental learning process for students. . This was also seen as important in terms of introducing a diverse international student group, some without research experience, to the complexities of research , which could have a positive effect on retention figures.

The Team felt that the programme could benefit from a greater input from international stakeholders including alumni. These are seen as people who would be sending and recommending people to the Programme as well as the current students. There is such a large volume of students and alumni available to broadcast and promote the Programme and, as such, it may be worth the Programme investigating the generation of an international advisory panel to deal specifically with this point.

During the discussions, it was found that the programme is heavily reliant on an asynchronous teaching approach and the Team felt that the programme may be able to benefit from a greater use of synchronous approaches to teaching and learning to raise the quality and opportunity for interactive discussion, analysis and debate. Asynchronous training is beneficial to undergraduate programmes where there is greater emphasis on students acquiring knowledge and understanding, but at the graduate level there is a greater emphasis on synthesis and critical analysis. There are evident issues for equal opportunities, such as bandwidth and differing time zones, which may exclude some students from participating in some aspects on online learning. The Programme is aware of this and has introduced synchronous discussions within some of the groups and with the dissertation module. However, it was also noted that the issue of connectivity is improving globally and in the future bandwidth may not be the problem it once was.

The Team found that there was little evaluation indicating the reasons for student retention and the figures presented suggested low completion rates. The Team understood the complexities of the figures given that there are around 40% of students still in process. Therefore, although the numbers suggest there may be low completion rates, there are no evaluation data to substantiate the reasons. The low retention rate may suggest additional student support is required. Accordingly, the Team recommended that the programme should have systems in place to monitor and evaluate student progress and use this information to continuously improve retention rates. The Team also felt that applicants should be evaluated before entry onto the programme rather than within the first module as is the present case to help support retention rates. One area suggested was to explore the possibility of students entering at Postgraduate Certificate level and working upwards through Postgraduate Diploma on to Masters, rather than registering for the Masters and having the fall-back options of PG Diploma or PG Certificate. The Team was informed by the Associate Executive Pro-Vice Chancellor (Student Experience) of the Faculty of Health and Life Sciences that in future Postgraduate Certificate will be offered as an entry award and that is it is the preference of the Faculty, for students facing difficult circumstances, to follow PG Certificate through to PG Diploma, then on to the Masters award.

The Team noted that the teaching faculty is employed by Laureate and vetted by the University of Liverpool. As such, the Team would recommend that the Programme explores the possibility of greater involvement and linkage with the Liverpool campus-

based Public Health faculty, which could be of mutual benefit. The University of Liverpool vetting procedure was noted as being a part of the overall University wide quality procedures and academic oversight, which were seen as high value and ensured that the quality of the online teaching faculty would be appropriate for the programme.

The Team noted that although there was systematic module level evaluation there was no overall programme level evaluation, and that the Programme should therefore investigate the incorporation of a systematic and ongoing evaluation at a programme level. The Team was shown the results of an alumni feedback survey, which detailed a range of data including, employment status, professional sector and career improvement, the applicability and pertinence of University resources, as well as overall student experience and future academic progression. This was seen as a valuable exercise, which should be ongoing. One area the programme might wish to consider would be to scope and further understand the extent to which their graduates are equipped with the necessary skills to succeed in their workplace, and to draw upon alumni to inform future curricular development.