

A course in food and nutrition policy for MPH students at UNSW

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In teaching public health nutrition within a Master of Public Health (MPH) program, teachers are challenged to create learning materials and activities which are suitable for a variety of adult learners with very different professional backgrounds and competencies. MPH students often include qualified dietitians as well as public health generalists with no prior exposure to nutrition, and occasionally little exposure to basic biomedical sciences.

When a new flexible delivery course in public health nutrition was developed at The University of New South Wales, the dilemma was solved by focussing on food and nutrition policy rather than introductory nutrition. The course consists of self-study print, audio and video materials.

The approach used was to devise a ten-step process for policy development, implementation and evaluation. Students completed worksheets for each step of the process, guided by an extended worked example based on a case study of a hypothetical country.

They applied the same ten-steps when devising a food and nutrition policy for a real community of their own choosing. Completed worksheets for each step of the process became inputs for the policy.

Policy development is a political process and this aspect was emphasised throughout the course. To inject an element of reality into the process, the major assessment task consisted of preparation of a policy document and an oral presentation. The students were asked to play the role of an advocate for the policy and to imagine that they were presenting it to an audience of stakeholders who were in a position to decide whether or not it should be adopted.

The course was offered for the first time in Session 1, 1996. Half of the participants were Sydney-based students, half were distance students. Three were qualified dietitians. Formative evaluation was very positive. None of the participants found that lack of basic nutrition knowledge impeded their progress in the course. Half of the students took advantage of this course to develop a policy which will be useful in a real situation. One important observation was that the community selected for study needed to have a sufficiently large number of members and stakeholders to provide a realistic and valuable learning experience. Students with no previous experience using self-study materials experienced some difficulty in completing the course satisfactorily. This was considered to be more a difficulty with self-direction and distance study than a weakness in the course materials.

A pleasing outcome was that a majority of students found that the process was just as relevant to other health policy areas as to food and nutrition policy.