

Improvement of Health Management Education in Albania

Based on the main findings from the review of the professional Master's program in Health Management

MANAGEMENT MATTERS IN HEALTH SYSTEMS

According to recent studies, management can enhance the value produced by health systems organizations and professionals¹²³. Performance of health care systems and organizations seems to be correlated with management practices, leadership, manager characteristics and cultural attributes⁴.

Management practices involve planning, budgeting, organizing, staffing, and controlling and distinguished them from problem-solving and leadership processes that establish direction and motivate and align people⁵.

For the last two decades most health systems have continuously reorganized their structures and governance, but such efforts will be insufficient unless they are accompanied by the clear long-term development of management capabilities⁶.

Management does have consequences for organizational performance but in most cases these consequences are mediated by context.

HEALTH MANAGEMENT CONTEXT IN ALBANIA

The health system in Albania, during the last 30 years has passed through important and radical organization/reforming processes which so far have failed to cope efficiently and sustainably with population's health needs. The reasons could be many and vary, but the most

relevant are underfinancing, frequent political changes of priorities (given that health care organizations are subject to funding decisions from political authorities), scarce policy-making and poor management capacities, and a limited number of professionals trained on a need & performance basis.

Health management programs have been overall neglected in the education system of Albania. Consequently, managerial capacities of health care organizations have been limited only on the experience of their leaders or on learning by doing. Being health manager is still considered a job for which neither a particular background nor a professional development is required. Health managers make instead a separate professional category. As such, health management education includes:

- University under-graduate level training. In Albania, health management subject(s) are part of the medical university study programs in the University of Medicine and



eventually other universities where health sciences are taught (medicine, dentistry, pharmacy, public health, nursery etc.).

- Post-university level programs are made of professional Master's or Master programs with a research orientation. In Albania, a professional master in health management under the responsibility of the Faculty of Medicine started for the first time in the academic year 2017-2018. Prior to that, there were several donor-driven post-grad training courses (certificates) in health management, but they were not incorporated in the university regular study programs. Their provision discontinued once the international support was interrupted. There are no doctoral programs in health management in Albania.
- Continuing Professional Development. A proper mandatory system of continuing education for health managers is not in place in Albania. Swiss-funded HAP project has supported accredited short-term training activities that have been provided to a limited number of primary health centers managers, hospital directors and their respective teams.

The current hiring procedures/criteria for managers of health organizations do not include neither the proof of specific diploma/certificate in health management nor any on-the-job training certifications. The last

amendment of the Law of Health Care in Albania (Nr. 27/2019) didn't succeed making legally mandatory the introduction of this hiring criteria, leaving nevertheless the vague suggestion that after their appointment, directors of health institutions are requested to attend some education/training courses in health management. However, this will be insufficient. As health organizations and hospitals in particular reorganize around concepts such as focused care, clinical directorates and product or service lines, several studies suggest that management skills are required to effectively run the new organizational models, which ultimately contributes to better clinical and financial performance⁷.

KEY MESSAGES RELATED TO THE HEALTH MANAGEMENT CONTEXT IN ALBANIA

- The Ministry of Health and Social Protection (MoHSP) should revise the employment and recruitment policies through elaboration and inclusion of strict criteria related to educational background during the process for recruitment of health managers. Such a criteria could include the successful graduation from the professional Master's in health management and/or other recognized and accredited in service training courses in this field. Of note, a better coordination between the responsible institutions is required.



- Managers should not only be trained in basic technical skills on management of health services, but also continuously educated/trained to strengthen their managerial skills and become familiar with current reforms affecting the health sector in the country. Therefore, MoHSP should consider as an important priority the establishment of a mandatory system for Continuing Education of health managers. This may create the conditions for an increase of both, the offer and the demand for training in health management, leading towards the establishment of a critical mass of professional managers and hopefully an increased organizational performance and improved quality of health care services.

PROFESSIONAL MASTER IN HEALTH MANAGEMENT IN ALBANIA

Organization and development of the Master Program

- For the first time in Albania, since 2017, a professional master program in health management (MHM) is being provided jointly by two universities: University of Medicine of Tirana (Department of Public Health at Faculty of Medicine), and University of Tirana (Department of Management at Faculty of Economics). The diploma of the master is issued by the Faculty of Medicine, University of Medicine. The MHM development and provision has been supported by the SDC funded project Health for All (HAP) and it is included in the technical assistance provided by Swiss Tropical and Public Health Institute of Basel, Switzerland. The program is currently being offered to the third cohort and it is considered a well-organized and useful program that needs to preserve and further enhance the quality and benefits to the future health managers.
- The Master Program in Health Management is full-time and lasts one academic year (two semesters). The total number of ECTS is 60 that is equivalent to 1500 working hours (engagement of students). The curriculum of the MHM program consists of 10 courses (which include 14 modules) and the final thesis.
- Candidates interested to attend the master should have completed a whole cycle of studies (bachelor and master studies) in any of the following programs: medicine, public health, nursery, law or economics. The purpose of these criteria was to recruit valid experienced candidates, whose employment will likely persist in the health sector.
- Curricula development process had a full ownership from both faculties. In this path an important support was provided by HAP through mobilization of Swiss TPH experts and support for participation of teaching staff in training modules in Basel (Switzerland) in the framework of MBA in International Health Management.
- All program modules have been evaluated positively from students as having an important role in building capacities for a health manager. However, they confirmed the current balance of theory versus practice is very much in favor of theory.
- Internship is lacking as a separate module in the master program, the need for which has been highlighted from students and alumni.
- Currently a major part of individual master thesis looks more a like traditional research-type activity rather than a practice-oriented project, which would make this program fit better to a professional master program.
- The current program does not include hospital management module(s), which might present a limit to the abilities and skills of its students in this regard.

Coordination amongst the two departments/faculties and promotion of the Master

- There are clearly shared responsibilities amongst both Departments in developing and teaching: 5 modules under the

responsibility of the department of public health, 2 under both departments - public health and management - and 7 under the department of management. There are also inter-faculty arrangements regarding administrative, legal and technical aspects of the program. The administrative, logistic and communication processes are under the responsibility of the Department of Public Health (FoM) while the teaching process has been provided in dedicated premises for this master at both faculties.

- The infrastructures of both faculties were damaged by the earthquake of November 2019, with the FoM being heavily affected.
- A Moodle-based online platform was set up with HAP support during the academic year 2019-2020 to facilitate the communication and the exchange of learning materials, task assignments amongst students and professors. Following the national lockdown due to COVID-19 pandemic situation in March 2020, the whole teaching process was shifted online which created serious barriers for a normal progress of learning processes.
- Publicity of this program is mainly supported through web pages of Faculty of Medicine and communication channels of HAP (website, social media, direct mailing). HAP has particularly boosted the visibility of the program by communicating program's details for interested candidate

(e.g. by publishing master's brochure, promoting teaching activities etc). However, the marketing of the program is still slow and fragmented.

KEY MESSAGES FOR IMPROVEMENT OF THE MASTER IN HEALTH MANAGEMENT

Content and relevance of the program

- The Department of Public Health in collaboration with Department of Management should review the overall outline of the program with several objectives:
 - a) potentially add the hospital management module (or set of modules) as a singular subject or as a second master direction;
 - b) introduce the internship as a mandatory program course. To make this internship happen this change should be accompanied by an agreement of the University with health organizations, including the respective remuneration of the internship mentors.
 - c) Rethinking of merging/splitting/modifying of current modules duration based on an updated set of knowledge and skills to be obtained by each student;
 - d) move toward a continuum module revision by adding and better structuring seminars and practice-based exercises.



- Shift conventional research-type Master theses into an internship based project in order to fit master thesis preparation to the set of skills and responsibilities of the future health managers. In this regard the DPH in collaboration with DoM should revise the guideline proposed by HAP on how to organize an internship report-based thesis, starting from its planning, topic identification, means of support, until its final presentation.
- HAP in collaboration with DoPH and DoM should identify and support any initiative that creates sustainable improvement to the learning environment (as an example the rehabilitation of a MHM dedicated classroom at the Department of Management).
- The current worldwide COVID-19 pandemic has imposed some immediate requirements for an online learning management system with the following features: a) combine simultaneous teaching techniques as well as have a video tutorial; b) have the function of recording lectures and group discussions for further consultation, beyond school hours; c) be easily adapted amongst various electronic devices (laptops, cell phones, etc.); d) be able to replace on-site lessons (in case of necessity), etc. This system should be established and further improved in both faculties to support the Master program.
- The Department of Public Health in collaboration with Department of Management should push the process of shifting the MHM Diploma to a joint diploma issued by both faculties/universities. This will create a favorable regulatory context for the implementation of the above-mentioned recommendations.
- The Department of Public Health (DoPH) in collaboration with Department of Management (FoE) should revise the application criteria in order to improve the quality of interested candidates in terms of their motivation and necessary commitment to meet the requests of teaching process and to preserve and enhance their interest in health management career. A new criterion might be for instance, the candidate's interview in the selection phase.
- FoM/DoPH should enhance the communication with MoHSP to lobby about the inclusion of the master degree in health management into the criteria for health management recruitment.



Promotion of the Master in Health Management

- The promotion of the program by the Faculty of Medicine should take place throughout the provision of the course. It is important that the announcement for the new course prior to the beginning of each academic year is promoted few months before the call for new applications is published alongside the application criteria. The Faculty of Medicine/DPH should use more actively the social media and also traditional media to publish information on the master.
- In order to promote and strengthen the MHM program, the Department of Public Health (DoPH) in collaboration with Department of Management (DoM) should: support the creation and strengthening of the network of alumni of this program, consider the organization of the conferences/meetings dedicated to health management related topics, involve policy makers and successful health managers in different MHM program activities etc.

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Disclaimer

This document is based on the “Review of the professional Master’s program in Health Management”, carried out by Prof. Asoc. Fabian Cenko and Prof.As.Dr. Eliona Kulluri Bimbashi. The review and drafting of this document have been supported by Health for All, a project of the Swiss Agency for Development and Collaboration SDC, implemented by the Swiss Tropical and Public Health Institute (STPH). The views and recommendations expressed in this publication are those of the author and do not necessarily represent the official opinion of SDC, STPH nor of HAP.

A project of the Swiss Agency
for Development and Cooperation SDC



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