



CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

A. Study Focus

Public health schools, responsible for the education of postgraduate public health professionals, face a major challenge in providing relevant educational programs in the dynamic societal context they find themselves. The challenge to human resource development in public health is to produce professionals who are equipped with appropriate attributes, competencies and skills to address the continuous process of change inherent in development. This continuous changing and dynamic environment for the public health system requires co-ordination between planning, education and management of human resources. The lack of such co-ordination within human resource development generally leads to irrelevant education of public health professionals, in terms of attributes and competencies and, therefore, does not meet the need for public health development. The problem is compounded when one considers the continuing and expanding roles and the interests of public health.

In recognition of these problems, Professor Chitr Sitthi-amorn, then Dean of the College of Public Health (CPH), Chulalongkorn University (CU), Thailand, identified the tasks of the College as:

“(1) To develop and attain a sufficient knowledge base, through a multidisciplinary approach, for appropriate decisions leading to good health; (2) to produce a new breed of knowledgeable, well-educated health manpower, with broad conceptual thinking as well as sufficient disciplinary depth to meet new public health challenges; (3) to contribute to capacity building strengthening need of health personnel of other countries in the region; (4) to be capable of giving services based on scientific knowledge to policy makers, decision makers, health professionals and the public at large.” (CPH, 1993, p19)

The CPH, CU, does not provide discipline specialisation in its postgraduate educational programs. The focus in its Master Degree programs in public health is on broad conceptual and critical thinking skills to build problem-solving capacity for a variety of health professionals such as managers, administrators, physicians, nurses and paramedical staff. These educational programs are developed in the recognition and evaluation of problems within the health system and in the design, testing and implementation of evidence-based solutions to identified problems.

This study focuses on the issue of the relevance¹ of one postgraduate educational program in public health, provided by the CPH, CU. The program referred to as 'Learning @ the Workplace' (LWP) has been implemented as an educational response to address the need for human resource development in the provincial health system of Thailand. LWP is directed at public health professionals functioning in a variety of roles and levels within the provincial health system.

B. The Study Context

The College's management feels the need to improve the LWP in terms of its relevance and efficiency. Funds have been made available, through the China Medical Board (CMB), to do this through evaluation, curriculum revision and the development of additional learning resources, as demonstrated in the approved project proposal "Strengthening Public Health Education in Rural Thailand" (CMB, 1999). This study will address the need to improve the relevance of the LWP, through a need assessment, the development of a relevance assessment instrument and evaluation.

¹ From a conceptual point of view, relevance of public health education to practice, can be defined as the extend to which priorities have been set related to practices, services, competencies and education programs (curricula) within human resources development. Criteria for relevance of public health education vary with the context, the selected target groups among human resources and the appreciation of priorities by different partners and stakeholders.

1. Thailand

Thailand's health system reflects the entrepreneurial market-driven nature of its economy, with a mixture of public and private systems for both health financing and the delivery of health services. Although the Ministry of Public Health (MOPH) is the major provider of public health services, there are other health-service providers in the government such as the Ministries of Universities, of Interior and of Defence. On the private side there are clinics, hospitals, pharmacies and drugstores. For the purpose of this study, I have defined the 'public' health system of Thailand in terms of its major actor the MOPH. The rationale for doing so is straightforward; the MOPH is not only the major actor but also a major partner of schools of public health. According to the Ministry and Department Reorganisation Act of B.E. 2534 (1991): the MOPH has the authority and functions related to medical care, public health, health promotion and development, food and drug control, control over toxic or hazardous substances to public's health and supervision and support of the Red Cross. Its major functions include promotion, support, control and co-ordination of all activities related to physical and mental health including wellbeing of the people, and supervision of health services. (MOPH, 1998). Under the supervision of the MOPH, the provincial health administration is responsible for implementation, this to ensure that provincial health activities are implemented in accordance with the Ministry's policies and programs.

This study will focus on the provincial level of Thailand's 'public' health system. The reasons for this choice are multiple: (1) the provincial level brings us closer to community needs; (2) the need for health system development becomes more focused; and (3) the relevance assessment instrument for public health education will be applied to a program that aims to address human development need in public health at the provincial level.

2. The College of Public Health

CU recognised the establishment of the CPH in 1991, to address the rapidly changing public health problems that require more and more multidisciplinary approaches for their solution. The CPH has a mission to develop its human resource development capacity in

response to the current situation and especially to develop education and training contents and methods accordingly. This is done through the development of information, education and training, as well as other services aimed at meeting the public's health need and the improvement of quality of life. The major functions of the College are expressed in its objectives such as (1) academic resource development, (2) education and training and (3) social advocacy (CU-CPH, 1993). The unique situation of the College is reflected in its balanced autonomy, flexibility and accountability within CU that results in benefiting from the academic support of CU but, at the same time being relatively free from the bureaucratic immobility inherent to large institutions. This enables the College to be responsive to the changing need in public health.

3. Learning @ the Workplace

During 1995 a proposal for a Human Resource Development Project, aiming at the education of Masters of Public Health (Health System Development) was formulated by the College and approved by the MOPH. The project is addressing the education of human resources in public health, through a part-time postgraduate LWP, which specifically targets the upgrading of human resources in the public sector, in the resource constrained rural areas of Thailand, to meet the need for implementing health systems reform. This new approach to post graduate education, based on developments in adult and continuous education (Marsick and Watkins, 1992), was started in 1996. Partners in the implementation of the program are the CPH, the Praboromrajchanok Institute for Health Manpower Development (MOPH) and the Health Systems Research Institute. This innovative program, which was originally started-up at Chonburi province, was then extended to Yasothorn, Roy-Et, Khon Kean, Phayao and Ayutthia provinces as well as in the capital Bangkok and has now been started up in Krabi, Nakhon Sri Thamaraj, Pathalung and Trang provinces.

An evaluation of the pilot program, in Chonburi province, conducted for the Praboromrajchanok Institute (PBRI), a pilot program partner, referring to problems related to the implementation, pointed out that the project faced multiple challenges resulting in delays in

curriculum design, in the development of learning material and in course implementation. On the other hand, the strategy applied in the project is rather unique and indicates an intrinsic value for continuous education opportunities of human resources (Chuchart and Watcharapai, 1999).

In an attempt to address the need of key stakeholders, the program was extended from one to seven provinces in 1997. Unfortunately, this preceded the evaluation of the pilot project, so that the findings were presented after the fact. Realising the intrinsic value of the program, but also the need to reflect and modify the program, the CPH of CU, assisted by the CMB, intends to further develop the program design, strategy and methodologies. Prior to further extension, nationally or regionally and in order to optimise the potentials of the strategy LWP, there is a need to define and employ the concept of relevance so as to assess professional development in more depth. This study will facilitate decision-making on further curriculum development for the program. Further, there is a need to establish an evidence base on the value perspectives and potentials of this approach to post graduate training and continuous learning in public health, which is distinct from faculty-based education and or distance learning. This evidence would contribute to the eventual development of regional programs in the future.

C. The Problem

A problem can be defined as any situation in which a gap is perceived to exist between 'what is' and 'what should be'. As suggested by VanGundy:

“...Certain pre-conditions need to be met before attempting to address a problem such as: (1) there need to be an awareness of the gap, (2) there should be a perceived need to solve the problem, (3) the gap needs to be measurable and finally (4) one must have access to the required skills and resources to solve the problem...” (1981, p.3).

It is important to understand that problems are not static but dynamic. Actual and desirable situations may remain static or change over time and the same is true for their

determinants. This makes problem solving challenging and as Senge stated "...if problem solving would be easy and evident, there would be little problems left for us to solve..." (1990, p.61).

In order to address 'health' need of the community appropriately, there is a need to develop the health system especially in terms of desirable practices² and services³. The functions of a health system and the need for practices and services call for professionals with appropriate competencies⁴. This, in turn, can be expressed as the need to produce professionals with required competencies and associated knowledge; attributes and skills so that community 'health' need are addressed more appropriately. To address these needs, institutes for postgraduate education in public health need to develop 'relevant' programs. With reference to the College's mandate this means developing competencies and skills among health professionals in recognition and evaluation of problems within the provincial health system in Thailand. The interrelationships between community need, health systems development, human resource development and program development can be expressed as a desirable status.

Referring to VanGundy's definition, the problem of improving relevance in public health education can be presented as a complex cluster of three types of gaps namely: (1) a problem gap, expressed as the need for health systems development; (2) a solution gap stated as the need for human resource development and; (3) an implementation gap identified as the need for programmatic development. The cluster of gaps will be discussed in detail in the literature review, but a brief synopsis of each gap follows.

² Public Health Practices are the priorities that have been set based on an examination of the relationships between health system inputs (context information) core functions-related processes, outputs (responsive health promotion actions and services) and outcomes (public's health status).

³Public Health Services are the essential activities maintained by the health system to fulfil its core-functions and achieve its purpose.

⁴ Core competencies in public health can be defined as sets of skills desirable for the delivery of essential public health services. Intended levels of mastery and, therefore, learning objectives for professionals within each competency, will differ depending upon their functional roles (CLAPHP, 2000).

The 'problem gap' can be described as the gap between desirable and the actual health system. The situation can be explained as a need for health systems development. This requires that those developing health systems are also contributors to the health systems development process. Depending upon the appropriateness of practices and services ultimately the shift from actual to desired health system might be initiated. This situation creates challenges for human resources in the health system to acquire knowledge, attitudes and skills in order to organise the desired practices and services.

The 'solution gap' can be described as the gap between desirable and the actual human resources in public health. The desirable health system calls for specific practices, services and competencies. The gap between actual and desired human resources is expressed as the need for human resource development. Through continuous learning, the human resource development process addresses the need for development. The appropriateness of acquired capacities would fuel the shift from actual to desired human resources for public health. This creates challenges for educational institutes in terms of selection of learning objectives, curriculum design and methodologies applied.

The 'implementation gap' can be described as the gap between desirable and the actual educational programs producing postgraduate public health professionals. The implementation gap can be expressed as the need for programmatic development. The challenges faced by educational institutions to increase the relevance of public health education in terms of the community, the health system and student need, require appropriate policies and operational resources including educational developers. This change is expressed as the program development process. The relevance of a program is the driving force that can initiate the shift from an actual to a desirable school of public health. In summary the relationships between the problem, solution and implementation gaps are important and need to be taken into consideration when addressing relevance in public health education. Although complex and extensive, the study of the concept of relevance requires placing education into its context and restoring the links between learning and practice.

D. Purpose of the Study

The primary purpose of this study was to develop indicators of relevance for a postgraduate educational program in public health in Thailand. Although indicators mainly address local usefulness, the process used to arrive at indicators can be generalised. This will facilitate decision making for management among faculties of schools of public health and other program stakeholders on required program modifications and improvements aiming at increased relevance of education in public health.

More specifically, the intent was to apply relevance indicators in assessing and describing the extent to which the LWP is relevant to professional need for provincial health system development in Thailand. The study also provides the required information to establish a base for collaboration to facilitate LWP at the national level. In addition a long-term aim of the study is to contribute in positioning LWP as a strategy responding to the need for relevance in public health education at regional and international levels.

E. Objectives

1. General Objective

Identify need for educational program development within the CPH, CU, in order to produce public health professionals with appropriate competencies aiming at development of the provincial health system in Thailand. This was being done with the expectation that the processes involved can be generalised and useful to other schools of public health.

2. Specific Objectives

Identify practice needed for development of the provincial health system in Thailand, given present and emerging environments, in terms of the health system's mandate, its functions and processes, its responses and population factors, through literature research, tertiary data and an analysis of stakeholder perspectives.

Identify the requirements for the development of competencies in public health and the related knowledge, attributes and skills, through literature research and primary data analysis.

Develop indicators for relevance of postgraduate educational programs in public health in terms of need for health system development and program performance aspects to assess and improve the strategy 'LWP' through literature research and analysis of stakeholder perspectives.

Based on the findings provide recommendations, for the use of the CPH in decision-making, on the relevance of 'LWP Program', in terms of identified need and the scope for curriculum development, through primary and secondary data analysis.

F. The Study Approach

A case study strategy was selected for this study, based on two principles, (1) a case study design offers the required flexibility; and (2) the nature of this research study requires a specific local usefulness, as well as more generalised indications for LWP as a strategy responding to the need for relevance.

The study design applied broad principles of development and evaluation models, using a descriptive methodology with quantitative and qualitative approaches that fit the case study. For the purpose of developing indicators for relevance, I have applied development models such as (1) a public health systems development model, (2) a human resource development model (3) and a curriculum development model. For the application of relevance indicators I have used evaluation models such as (1) a program evaluation model and, (2), a quality improvements process model, (3) and an analysis of stakeholder perspectives.

G. Outcomes

The primary outcome of this study is a framework to define and to employ the concept of relevance in planning, implementation and evaluation of professional development in public health through the LWP Program.

The main products are an assessment of need, the development of an assessment instrument and an evaluation on aspects of the curriculum of the LWP Program. This form of assessment has been utilised as the titles for multiple academic papers, for example:

- A paper on *“Addressing the Relevance of Postgraduate Public Health Education”* (Van der Putten, King and Love, 2001). The paper describes the concept of the relevance of learning to practice and the efforts required in the development of health professionals to improve public health practice. The paper reports on the ongoing research project at CU, CPH, Thailand, which is developing a mechanism for increasing relevance in public health education that should be applicable with adaptation to similar institutions. The primary sources of data required for this paper were a review of the related literature.
- A paper on *“Assessing the Current Performance of Public Health Services in Thailand”* (Van der Putten, Love, Chuchart, Janjaroen, 2002) The paper describes the perceptions of stakeholders on the current level of performance of public health services in the provincial health system in Thailand. The primary sources of data required for this paper were a review of related literature, documents of the MOPH (Bureau of Health Policy and Planning), in addition to the perspectives of key-stakeholders and decision-makers.
- A paper on *“What are the requirements for developing relevant public health competencies to support provincial health systems development in Thailand?”* to be developed after completion of this dissertation. This paper will describe desirable public health competencies, attributes and skills. Identify target groups

among provincial health professionals in the public sector, for postgraduate education in public health and specific need in terms of partnerships. This paper requires primary qualitative as well as quantitative data.

- A paper on *“Relevance based education: development of an instrument to critically appraise the relevance of public health education”* to be developed after completion of this dissertation. This paper deals with the importance of a critical assessment of a postgraduate educational program in public health by those involved in designing and developing educational interventions. A relevance assessment instrument for appraisal of the educational intervention LWP will be described. This paper requires primary as well as secondary data whether they were obtained through quantitative or qualitative approaches.
- A paper on the case study *“The Learning @ the Workplace Program: a postgraduate education program in public health, College of Public Health, Chulalongkorn University, Thailand”* (Van der Putten, Love, Rajataramya, Vichit-Vadakan, 2002). This paper is based on a case study and describes the LWP as an educational strategy to address the need for postgraduate education in public health in rural Thailand, by balancing the concepts and the specifics of conducting the program. This paper required primary as well as secondary data obtained through quantitative and qualitative approaches.
- A series of papers on “Programmatic issues for Learning @ Workplace” some of these to be developed after completion of this dissertation. For example (1) *“A learner – centred assessment of the Learning @ the Workplace Program: An innovative postgraduate public health program in Thailand”* (Thitikorn, Inkochasan, Van der Putten, 2002); (2) an assessment of program performance for LWP in terms of relevance and (3) *“Professional perspectives on the Learning @ the Workplace Program: A public health education program in rural Thailand”* (Inkochasan, Thitikorn, Van der Putten, 2002). These papers require primary as

well as secondary data whether they were obtained through quantitative or qualitative approaches.

H. Summary

There is a need to address public health need more appropriately. Public health practices and services need to be appropriate to community needs. The concept of relevance in public health education is ill defined in the literature and there is a lack of an operational basis to assess relevance in public health education.

To contribute to the plan, of the CPH, CU, to improve the relevance of the LWP Program in Thailand, it was needed to define the concept and develop an assessment instrument for the relevance of this educational program in public health. This study attempts to arrive at relevance indicators by describing public health practices, services and competencies required for health system development and the development of indicators and their measures.

In order to achieve relevant educational responses, appropriate core functions, practices and services of the health system need to be defined. Public health functions, practices and services will facilitate the identification of required competencies and skills for public health professionals. An initial literature review revealed that there is little consistency in the use of terminology as well as in describing public health practice, competencies, skills and attributes for public health professionals.

The need for public health services and competencies are important inputs for the development of relevance factors and their measures in an educational program. Once indicators have been developed to operate the concept of relevance, evaluation on the relevance of LWP Program becomes possible. Finally, program performance is affected by organisational performance; although this study is limited to the measurement of relevance only, a discussion on organisational performance aspects could initiate a future study that will go beyond assessment in order to improve program performance.

The next Chapter deals with a more in-depth review of the literature. A literature review, including reviews from other disciplines, will contribute to defining the concept and to employ relevance in public health education. An exploration of the literature especially in terms of public health systems as well as human resources development was needed to link public health system functions, practices and services with professional competencies and skills. Finally programmatic aspects were explored to answer the questions on what changes are needed within educational interventions to address the need for relevant programs in public health.