

The NOMA track module on nutrition, human rights and governance: Part 2. A transnational curriculum using a human rights-based approach to foster key competencies in nutrition professionals

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Background. In response to the challenge of the global health needs of the 21st century, four academic institutions in Norway, South Africa and Uganda, each offering a Master's degree in nutrition, collaboratively developed the NORwegian MAsTers (NOMA) track module on nutrition, human rights and governance, integrating a human rights-based approach into graduate education in nutrition.

Objective. To capture students' perceptions about the NOMA track module, focusing on the development of key competencies.

Methods. Employing a qualitative approach, 20 (91% response rate) in-depth telephonic interviews were conducted with participating students, voice recorded and transcribed. Through an inductive process, emerging themes were used to compile a code list for content analysis of the transcribed text. Relevant themes were reported according to the professionals' roles described by the CanMEDS competency framework.

Results. Participation in the module enhanced key competencies in the students, e.g. communication skills and the adoption of a holistic approach to interaction with people or communities. Their role as collaborator was enhanced by their learning to embrace diversity and cultural differences and similarities. Students had to adapt to different cultures and educational systems. They were inspired to contribute in diverse contexts and act as agents for change in the organisations in which they may work or act as leaders or co-ordinators during interaction with community groups and policy makers. Higher education institutions offering transnational modules should support lecturers to manage the inherent diversity in the classroom as a way of enhancing student performance.

Conclusion. The development of future transprofessional modules will benefit from the inclusion of desirable key competencies as part of the module outcomes by following a competency by design process.

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The education of health professionals has not kept pace with the major challenges involved in providing health security for all during the 21st century.^[1,2] Despite professional regulatory bodies requiring certain competencies, which are featured in the teaching and learning policies of training institutions, these competencies are not necessarily embedded in the formal curriculum and are often assumed to be acquired through the 'hidden' curriculum.^[3]

Professional competencies are seen to include, but go beyond, disciplinary expertise or technical knowledge – 'they are the qualities that also prepare graduates as agents for social good in an unknown future.'^[4] Various frameworks are used by educational institutions worldwide to demonstrate the professional competence of graduates. For example, one of the participating universities in this study bases its professional competencies^[5] (Table 1, left column) on the CanMEDS competency framework developed by the Royal College of Physicians and Surgeons of Canada.^[6] Similar competency attributes are also embedded in the principles of a human rights-based approach (HRBA), which centres around the primary rights and responsibilities of the rights holders (such as vulnerable population groups) and the corresponding duties of those responsible for improvements (duty bearers). For example, HRBA principles emphasise participation, transparency, non-discrimination and sustainability.^[7] Thus, the professional competency attributes mentioned correspond with several of the human rights principles required by nutrition professionals to fulfil their roles as duty bearers, honouring their obligation towards the fulfilment of the relevant human rights of the rights holders.^[8]

The HRBA also implies that nutrition professionals should not function in isolation. Through transprofessional collaboration between several

professions, such as nutrition, law, economy and agriculture, among others, sustainable solutions may be found to deep-rooted nutrition problems.^[8] Such a transprofessional approach provides nutrition professionals with a combination of enabling competencies valuable to the development and implementation of policies and programmes aimed at addressing the myriad of nutrition-related challenges faced by vulnerable population groups.

Agreeing about many of the educational challenges of the 21st century, educators at universities in Norway, South Africa (SA) and Uganda collaboratively developed the NORwegian MAsTers (NOMA) track module on nutrition, human rights and governance (further referred to as 'the module'). Funding was obtained from the Norwegian government (through the Centre for International Cooperation in Education (SIU)).^[9] Participating students were registered for a Master's degree in nutrition at their respective universities.

The 18-week module was presented for 6 weeks in each of the three countries and students had to adapt to different cultures and educational systems twice. NOMA students ($n=22$) were exposed to the associated culture shock, which caused some anxiety resulting from the absence of support systems and familiar surroundings and cultural practices. The available literature reports that international students are typically exposed to different beliefs about what constitutes knowledge, and how it should be learnt, taught and assessed.^[10] Furthermore, the transition period in a foreign country is associated with disorientation, insecurity and incomprehension, all of which may negatively affect the learning process and preclude skills transfer. During the transition period there may be a disparity between a

Table 1. Examples of professional roles and attributes enhanced through Master of Nutrition students' participation in the NOMA track module 'Nutrition, Human Rights and Governance', as perceived by the students

Roles of HNPs^[5]	Summary of perceptions of NOMA track students	Selected quotes to illustrate the development of professional attributes
As communicators, HNPs effectively facilitate the carer/service-user relationship and the dynamic exchanges that occur before, during and after interaction	Gained confidence in expressing own feelings Communication with people from different cultures	'I felt within the group I could ask the questions I needed to ask to get an understanding, because the others were better in English than we Norwegians. Sometimes they laughed at our understanding but I can handle that.' (Female student, Norway) 'And sometimes you don't know what they are thinking and that can lead to a lot of confusion because you could potentially keep on saying things that annoy them, but in their culture they don't complain ... they just keep it inside or ignore it' (Female student, SA) '[There is a] different way of thinking: as a Norwegian person I may have understood one situation as positive and an African person may have understood the situation completely otherwise ... you meet people and think everything is okay and that you are just behaving normally, but then you realise after a while that you have been rude or been perceived that you have been rude.' (Female student, Norway)
As collaborators, HNPs effectively work within a team to achieve optimal service-user care (the community included)	Students from different countries embraced the diversity as a platform to grow as person and as a professional Adapting to foreign cultures Embracing cultural differences Conflict management	'There were some good interactions among the students. We got to know each other. By the time we left Norway, we were very familiar with each other ... eventually we became one team.' (Female student, Uganda) 'We respected the fact that we were from different cultures, we are different people raised up in different countries. So we needed to respect each other.' (Female student, Uganda) 'Try not to compare it to your own culture or the culture you just been to, but you have to accept it that is just the way it is.' (Female student, Norway) 'What seems right in the one country, you realise was wrong in another.' (Female student, Uganda) 'From my perspective it is very strange not to help people, if you are insulted it is considered the norm to tell people how you feel ... and for them not telling, disappointed me, because I don't want to offend my friends ...' (Female student, Norway) 'When it comes to culture, it brings out a positive something. But as soon as it does not coincide with the other countries, then they bring up those issues of someone being offended.' (Female student, Uganda) 'I think it was good for me to learn the SA way of thinking, and to understand that the Norwegian way of thinking is maybe more progressive and it is not the way of thinking as the rest of the world.' (Female student, Norway) 'If you put a bunch of people together that are basically strangers and you expect them to live together, study together, work together, travel together, you know ... it gets hectic.' (Female student, SA)
As managers, HNPs are integral participants in organisations, organising sustainable practices, making decisions about allocating resources, and contributing to the effectiveness of the relevant systems	Prioritising Time management Problem-solving Need to influence policy makers	'I certainly feel more equipped and competent to work at a level where I am not just on the ground but I am able to work with ... people who are possibly making policy decisions ...' (Female student, SA) 'If you want to start a program or launch a project you should decide who you want to reach, how you want to reach them and what difference you want to see or make. To involve and empower people, e.g. if you distribute soup, how can you empower them instead of what you could gain ...' (Female student, SA)
As health and nutrition advocates, HNPs responsibly use their expertise and influence to advance the health and nutritional wellbeing of individuals, communities and populations	Inclusion of the community during the planning phase Enhanced awareness of people's needs Representation of vulnerable groups Advocacy for nutrition using HRBA	'If you have a patient sitting in front of you who has a malnourished child, not eating well is not the problem ... there are so many other things; and you need to be able to tell them that ... and speak to the people who can solve the other problems which you as a nutritionist cannot.' (Female student, SA)

continued ...

Table 1. (continued) Examples of professional roles and attributes enhanced through Master of Nutrition students' participation in the NOMA track module 'Nutrition, Human Rights and Governance', as perceived by the students

Roles of HNPs^[5]	Summary of perceptions of NOMA track students	Selected quotes to illustrate the development of professional attributes
As scholars, HNPs demonstrate a lifelong commitment to reflective learning, as well as the creation, dissemination, application and translation of knowledge	Diversity enhanced learning process Intention to teach others about HRBA	'You were not just hearing the lecturer speak ... just give you information ... You'd go back and discuss. It wasn't "this is the way it is ... and there's no other way". You could engage ... argue back and forth ... and fight. You have an idea of how it can be applied in different settings.' (Female student, SA)
As professionals, HNPs are committed to ensure the health and wellbeing of individuals and communities through ethical practice, professional self-regulation and high personal standards of behaviour	Improved understanding of the broad scope of factors having an impact on nutrition Motivated to promote preventive care Ability to incorporate human rights principles in own work ethic	'Not to just rush into something and try and change things but rather to look at the reason why you want to change things ... what impact it will have on people.' (Female student, SA) 'I believe using the human rights way where you have inclusion ... even the marginalised people, if they are involved in the planning, if you work to get an impact, then they will help you; to create a sense of ownership and responsibility for everyone.' (Female student, Uganda) 'I feel the impact will come. It's not going to be an immediate thing where you suddenly see the light and that everything just flows smoothly. It is a process.' (Female student, SA)
As healthcare and nutrition practitioners, HNPs integrate all of the professional attribute roles, applying profession-specific knowledge and professional attitudes in their provision of person-centred care	Broadened understanding of their role as professional Holistic approach to nutrition and human rights Life changing	'I don't think I could have foreseen how it would change me or the way I look at things.' (Female student, SA) 'My interest within the nutritional field is at a global level ... and the prevention of diseases more than the clinical treatment of diseases. It made me more politically interested and I see my future more clearly than I did before.' (Female student, Norway)

HNP = health and nutrition professional.

student's learning expectations and accomplishments and those anticipated by lecturers.^[10]

In the first part of this series, Marais *et al.*^[9] reported the perceptions of NOMA students about the development and process of the NOMA track module, which presented students with different challenges. The objective of this article is to describe attributes associated with professional competence deduced from NOMA students' own accounts of their experiences of the module.

Twenty NOMA students (16 female and 4 male), enrolled for a Master's degree in nutrition at universities from different countries (4 from Norway, 7 from SA and 9 from Uganda), consented to participate in the study (91% response rate). Their mean age was 30.2 (standard deviation (SD) 6.0) years. Some participants had between 1 and 18 years of working experience as community dietitians, nutritionists, research scientists or cooks, while others had only been registered students with no previous work experience.^[9]

Methods

Data were collected during October and November 2012. As the students resided in different countries, two trained research assistants conducted in-depth interviews (35 - 125 minutes) telephonically in English. A discussion guide was used, based on topics and probes relevant to the module. An example of one topic was students' experience of participating in the module and its effect on their personal skills and professional competencies.

Transcriptions were checked to ensure that the text was a true reflection of the recorded interviews and a systematic approach was used to analyse unstructured data. Constant comparison of information ensured that the themes reflected the original data. An inductive process was followed, as themes emerging from the text were used to compile a code list and code-

transcribed text, using a text analysis computer programme (ATLAS.ti version 6, Germany).

Results from the study are reported in two articles. As reported in the first part of this series, the participants appreciated the module content, study visits, experienced lecturers and interactive teaching style.^[9] Another set of themes that emerged related to development of the competence required of nutrition professionals; the attributes displayed by the participants were grouped according to the seven professional CanMEDS roles and are presented in this article.

Ethics and legal aspects

Approval for the study was obtained from the Health Research Ethics Committee of the Faculty of Medicine and Health Sciences, Stellenbosch University (ref. no. N12/08/044). Informed written consent for voluntary participation as well as for voice recording of interviews was obtained from all participants. Anonymity and confidentiality were maintained during interview transcription and whenever direct quotes were used. The transcripts and voice recordings were stored in protected files and the voice recordings were destroyed after 6 months.

Results

The participants generally described the module as memorable and a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity, with 'an incredible learning curve'. The study illustrates the concept of lifelong learning, as participants testified to professional development and personal growth resulting from the experience. This was also evident from the set of emerging themes grouped according to the different professional roles^[5] that nutrition professionals

must fulfil (Table 1), i.e. those of communicator, collaborator, manager and leader, scholar, health (and nutrition) advocate and a professional, culminating in being a (nutrition) practitioner.^[6]

Communicator: Learning to effectively participate during dynamic exchanges

Students testified to personal growth as they grew more independent during the study period in foreign countries and gained confidence in expressing their feelings. Even though the more reserved students were afraid of 'saying anything wrong' whenever sensitive issues were discussed, other students felt supported by the group and free to ask questions:

'You learn when to keep quiet and when to say your say ... to state why you disagree or have different ideas.' (Female student, SA)

It was a source of frustration for some students when fellow students did not voice their opinion during the lectures. Some identified communicating in English as a second language as a barrier, limiting spontaneous participation and self-expression at times. Students willing to interact in a meaningful way learnt from each other how to participate in discussions and debates in a culturally sensitive manner.

Collaborator: Learning to embrace differences

Participating students, being from different countries and studying at different universities, were introduced to perspectives, values and social norms that partially differed from those they were used to:

'Take it in your stride and inhale as much as you possibly could ... Look to compare ... so many differences but so many similarities ...' (Female student, SA)

Overall, students embraced the opportunity to meet people from different nations and used the opportunity to find out 'why they believe what they believe'. Mature students or those who had been exposed previously to other world views and cultures seemed more tolerant of and respectful towards inherent differences. In this context, culture is understood in the broader sense; it is the total way of life in a society, which distinguishes members of human groups from others in terms of shared beliefs, ideologies and norms that influence actions.^[11] These cultural differences were a potential source of misunderstanding and conflict; for example, differences in time management sometimes interrupted the teaching schedule.

Cultural differences became most pronounced in Uganda and some of the foreign students adapted with difficulty. To enable co-operation and develop an understanding of different cultures required some effort, and awareness that there may be issues within one's own culture or country unacceptable to foreigners. What was considered as rude or discourteous differed according to the cultural context. For example, in Uganda, all conversations start with a reciprocal enquiry about each individual's wellbeing before the actual conversation begins. In contrast, people in Norway use fewer formalities, 'If you want to do something, you don't waste any time doing it'. Additionally, in Norway, religion is regarded as a private matter but in Uganda it is discussed freely:

'When it comes to culture, it brings out a positive something. But as soon as it does not coincide with the other countries, then they [foreign students] bring up those issues of someone being offended.' (Female student, Uganda)

Diversity also provided many opportunities for interesting and sometimes heated debates, and those who were able to accept differences refined the skill of dealing with difficult situations. Unknowingly, an 'ignorant' question was sometimes perceived as being offensive or it came across as being derogatory. For example, a lack of awareness that sometimes things in Uganda are just accepted and not challenged created a situation where a student offended people by asking questions – according to the Ugandan culture, it is rude to tell someone if they are in the wrong.

People have different ways of coping with stress and unfamiliar situations. More than one student admitted that they needed to become more tolerant and to learn how to deal with conflict. One student mentioned that she initially became psychologically disengaged to avoid offending people by saying 'something wrong'. The stress caused another student to overreact; she became emotional 'where I didn't expect I would have'. Others learnt how to manage their own emotions and felt better equipped to handle difficult situations in future.

Manager: Learning to enhance effectiveness

'I certainly feel more equipped and competent to work at a level where I am not just on the ground but I am able to work with people who are possibly making policy decisions ...' (Female student, SA)

Problem-solving skills were enhanced as students had to evaluate situations, identify areas for improvement and compare different countries. Students felt better equipped to be part of an inter- or transprofessional group, as knowledge of the HRBA '... adds to any professional that works with people, policies or scarce resources that you need to redistribute'. Students learnt how to prioritise their responsibilities and how to manage large volumes of information. One student realised that '... time is a very, very important factor which I did not take into consideration [previously]':

According to their current job description, some students felt apprehensive about immediate implementation of an HRBA, realising that to effectuate change, the usual planning process needed to be followed, requiring hard work and perseverance:

'I feel the impact will come. It's not going to be an immediate thing where you suddenly see the light and that everything just flows smoothly. It is a process.' (Female student, SA)

Health and nutrition advocate: Learning to influence the wellbeing of individuals and communities

Students became aware that nutrition is interrelated and integrated, and that issues of food, nutrition and food security cannot be addressed without attention to broader sociocultural, political, economic and technical issues. They anticipated the future implementation of an HRBA in their daily practice by assessing individuals in a holistic manner, involving the person/community in decision-making processes and consulting the community about new projects:

'Not to just rush into something and try and change things but rather to look at the reason why you want to change things ... what impact it will have on people.' (Female student, SA)

Some students were enthusiastic about newly acquired skills when advocating for nutrition or engaging with public officials or non-governmental organisations. Another student was more cautious, as she realised that government officials may have a limited understanding of food as a human right. She regarded it a challenge for nutrition professionals who want to act as agents for change:

'We have to first teach people in government about human rights ... because if they don't understand it, they can't accept nor implement it.'
(Female student, Uganda)

Scholar: Lifelong learning

The module provided students with a global perspective and challenged them on intellectual, emotional and physical levels. Students felt enriched by being exposed to new concepts and unique experiences. It motivated them to share their knowledge with colleagues and to train other health professionals.

Students accepted the responsibility of acting or speaking on behalf of vulnerable groups in the future and providing accurate information about their situation. In various ways, diversity helped to develop a better comprehension of the module content. Some male students expressed the opinion that diversity in the group prevented the module from becoming 'static'. Students with previous work experience were familiar with working in an inter- or transdisciplinary environment and could provide practical examples, explain specific situations or compare policies and programmes implemented in different countries.

Students from all countries benefited from new information about their own countries and found that they understood global events and processes better. Other interests relevant to nutrition were developed, e.g. the interrelationship between nutrition, agriculture and political stability.

Professional: Conducting ethical practice

Examples given above show that students embraced diversity and adopted a holistic approach, indicating their enhanced perception of professional and ethical practice. Some students felt relieved when they realised that they did not necessarily need to conform to peer pressure and that they should remain true to their values.

Healthcare and nutrition practitioners: Integrating their competencies

Overall, an awareness of hardship experienced by vulnerable population groups was developed, one which helped to foster a changed mindset, '... to give more than I receive. To look where I can make a difference ...'. Students' passion for nutrition was reinvigorated, inspiring them to serve needy communities in a meaningful way. They finally realised the extent of their calling as dietitians/nutritionists, and that it included being 'advocates and consultants for human rights'.

NOMA students regarded themselves as privileged. They realised that they had previously had a narrow technical focus without a broader contextual understanding of food and nutrition security. They were now equipped to foster a person-centred approach, as part of a global network promoting the right to adequate food.

Discussion

Frenk *et al.*^[11] argued that 'tribalism of professions should be replaced with collaboration to optimise mutual learning opportunities across countries'. As an example of transnational education (where a student is in a different country than the host university and where academic qualification is obtained),^[12] the development of the NOMA track module was brought about through successful collaboration between universities from different countries, with a willingness to form a network and share educational resources. In search of sustainable solutions to nutrition-related problems,

the module strived to integrate human rights and nutrition using an HRBA. Professionals from both fields aimed at educating students to contribute to societies as they currently exist and for future changes as they evolve.^[7,13] Professionals representing both fields had as their objective the education of students, through whom current and future changes to societies will be influenced.

The structure of the module was such that the NOMA students had to adapt to different cultures and educational systems every 6 weeks. Even with the assistance of peers, international students still needed time to adjust to the different sets of social rules that regulate interaction and communication. Kelly^[10] suggests that while students are still adapting, they are less inclined to be interactive; this may have caused gaps in understanding, as lecturers and peers may have perceived students as being unwilling or unable to participate.

It is particularly important for lecturers of transnational students to be aware of the potential for culture to influence student preferences and expectations and introduce sufficient flexibility into their approach to teaching to accommodate various nationalities, educational backgrounds, learning styles and language proficiencies.^[14] Lecturers may have had unrealistic assumptions about NOMA students' competence, e.g. their ability to manage a large volume of literature.^[9] Even though international students may be English literate, using a second language may negatively affect their ability to participate optimally during interactive learning opportunities.^[10] Based on the findings of this research, it is recommended that the following aspects should be considered during the introduction of any transnational module: introductory lectures on world view, time management and academic writing (including referencing).

Academic institutions should strive to reduce the transition period for international students by reassessing whether the curriculum is culturally responsive and relevant to the needs of such students, making them feel included rather than excluded or disadvantaged. If not, the potential exists to promote surface learning and/or an inability to solve problems independently.^[10]

Different teaching strategies to help the adaptation process and to enhance learning were employed in the module.^[9] However, there is no single correct way to learn. Ultimately, different learning cultures have the potential to stretch individual students beyond their established styles, and to develop learning strategies/approaches that are more adaptive. This may also create a greater capacity to engage in lifelong learning and professional development opportunities.^[14,15] Thus, lecturers need to consider carefully the choice of approaches that they encourage/discourage, and their use and development.^[14]

Several NOMA students from different countries formed close relationships and it is possible that collaboration and understanding would have been further enhanced if more opportunities for socialisation were integrated in the module programme.^[10,16] During the development of future modules for transnational students, the use of team bonding exercises, cross-cultural communication activities and allocation of mentors, to facilitate the adaptation process and to develop skills in collaboration and teamwork, may be considered.^[10]

The interviews revealed that some underlying tension and conflict during the training period may be ascribed to interpersonal differences. However, this may have been influenced by power differences between groups formed during the 4-month period, or caused by a lack of leadership, indicating the absence of a common group identity and resulting in misunderstandings

arising from poor communication.^[17] There were situations that arose because of cultural insensitivity or poor communication that might have been avoided by proactively developing a mutually agreed process for handling disagreements within such a diverse group.^[18]

Some students embraced diversity by learning more about observable elements (i.e. language) and hidden elements of cultural characteristics (i.e. customs).^[19] NOMA students identified the need for an introductory lecture about cultural diversity to enhance mutual understanding.^[9] However, students should also be advised that they will not always fully understand a foreign culture, that it is often helpful to assume the role of the 'respected outsider' and be encouraged to focus on commonality rather than separateness.^[19]

Generally, the need to develop competence generates an intrinsic interest in what is being learnt.^[10] Students who previously had a strictly scientific approach to nutrition were drawn to participate in the module because of their keen interest in the link between nutrition and human rights. Students were also introduced to aspects of political science and agriculture, nurturing the potential to join in public reasoning as informed citizens and on behalf of vulnerable groups.^[1,2] After completion of the module several students were inspired to contribute in diverse contexts beyond their own countries^[9] and to act as agents for change in the organisations in which they may work or act as leaders or co-ordinators during interaction with community groups and policy makers.^[1,2]

Similarly to undergraduate module development, it is recommended that during the development of modules at a Master's degree level, a rigorous competency-based curriculum design process is followed, clarifying beforehand the competencies that the specific module should help to develop and, most importantly, how these competencies will be assessed.

Conclusion

According to the recommendation made by the Lancet Commission to 'promote quality, uphold a strong service ethic, and be centred around the interests of [individuals and] populations', the NOMA track module addressed an integrated approach to human rights and nutrition. Based on the perceptions of the students, it became evident that the professional competency attributes of a group of Master of Nutrition students were also enhanced.

Transnational and transprofessional education provided nutrition professionals the opportunity to broaden their competency base. Besides learning to respect

diversity and embracing cultural differences and similarities, the students learnt to see critical issues from the perspective of political, social and agricultural sciences. Without this understanding, intolerance and prejudice often create a barrier to optimal intervention or education of a person/community requiring professional advice. The development of future transnational modules will benefit from the inclusion of professional competencies as part of the module outcome, by following a competency by design process.

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