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Summary report on the

Regional consultation on setting up a master's degree programme in mental health policy and services

Cairo, Egypt
5–6 November 2012



World Health
Organization

Regional Office for the Eastern Mediterranean

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Contents

1.	Introduction.....	1
2.	Summary of discussions	2
3.	Recommendations.....	4

1. Introduction

The number of mental health professionals of all categories available in the WHO Eastern Mediterranean Region is estimated to be 9.7 per 100 000 population, ranking the Region fourth among WHO regions, behind Europe, the Americas and the Western Pacific. The estimated shortfall for all categories of mental health professionals in the low-income and middle-income countries of the Region ranges from 20 to 30 per 100 000 population. The paucity of trained human resources for mental health is one of the major challenges identified in the regional strategy on mental health and substance abuse, which was endorsed by the 58th session of the WHO Regional Committee for the Eastern Mediterranean in 2011. The strategic directions proposed in the strategy to address these challenges include strengthening leadership and governance of mental health systems, scaling up the integration of mental health into primary care and strengthening the specialist mental health service. In order to realize these strategic directions, one of the cross-cutting actions suggested was the development and setting up of a master's degree programme in public mental health policy and services in the regional centre(s) of excellence.

To move this agenda forward, the WHO Regional Office for the Eastern Mediterranean organized a regional consultation on setting up a master's degree programme in mental health policy and services on 5–6 November 2012. The objectives of the consultation were to review potentials/capacities of select regional institutions to establish a master's programme in mental health policy and services, and to develop an action plan for the establishment of such a programme in select institution(s) in partnership with international institutions with experience in running the programme.

The consultation was attended by representatives from centres of excellence in countries of the Region (Egypt, Jordan, Kuwait, Lebanon, Oman, Pakistan and Saudi Arabia) and from Nova University of Lisbon, Portugal, a centre with international experience in providing a master's programme on mental health policy and services.

2. Summary of discussions

During the discussion of challenges, participants noted the lack of a strong and coherent policy and legislative framework to guide the development of integrated and quality mental health services, compounded by widespread stigma and discrimination.

In terms of capacity, there is a shortage of qualified professionals experienced in public mental health. As well, use of the public health approach is inadequate in existing training programmes for health professionals in general, and in mental health professionals in particular.

Financial resources will be needed for establishment and maintenance of a new master's degree programme, incentivizing and recruiting the required faculty and supporting students enrolled in the programme.

Among the programmatic challenges, participants noted the diversity of procedures for setting up a master's programme among different institutions, and the lengthiness of the process of establishing such a programme within an institution. As well, selection criteria will have to be identified for selecting: eligible institution(s) for setting up the master's degree programme; and eligible candidates (knowledge/skills-based) for the programme.

Once the programme is established, a final challenge will be to ensure proper placement of its graduates in the mental health systems of Member States.

Participants concluded that the shortage of mental health professionals specifically qualified in public health is evident in the available figures. There is a need and demand for experts in this area.

To address the challenges related to capacity development and programmatic issues identified in the discussions, five options were suggested. Institutions can apply any or all methods according to their capacity and willingness.

- 1) Consider specified placements from countries of the Region in the master's degree programme at Nova University.
- 2) Establish phased collaboration between the regional institutions and Nova University. The regional institution will receive full support from Nova University in curriculum development, training activities and staff development. The final objective is running the master's programme independently when the minimum standards are met.
- 3) Establish partial collaboration between the regional institutions and Nova University. The regional institution will bear the main responsibility for the master's programme and will collaborate with the Nova University in mutually agreed upon areas such as curriculum development, faculty development etc.
- 4) Set up diplomas and certificate courses, credits of which can be transferred to the master's degree programme either in the regional institutions or Nova University's programme.
- 5) In case an existing master's programme in the regional institutions covers modules which are proposed for the mental

health master's degree programme, credits can be transferred mutually between the two programmes.

Mechanisms for providing required financial resources could include tuition fees and national and international grants. Nova University and WHO can help with identifying potential donors and resource mobilization including through the small research grants programme of the Regional Office.

3. Recommendations

To participating institutions

1. Facilitate the establishment process through:
 - providing the Regional Office with expression of interest (EOI) letter from their respective institution which indicates their level of commitment in setting up the master's degree programme
 - identifying and introducing key persons in their institution for shepherding the process.
2. Engage in finalization of the curriculum of the master's degree programme, which will be in two phases:
 - developing the general framework of the curriculum
 - developing the comprehensive curriculum based on the framework.
3. Facilitate proper placement of the graduates through defining objective criteria for selecting the proper candidates for the master's programme.

To WHO

4. Support regional collaboration through:
 - forming and coordinating a network of regional and international experts and a technical working group to adapt and finalize the curriculum.
 - conducting consultation meetings.
5. Facilitate the technical working group in:
 - defining objective criteria for selection of eligible institution(s) for the master's degree programme
 - selecting the eligible centre(s)
 - developing the training curriculum.
6. Develop partnership agreement between the Regional Office, selected institution(s) and Nova University.
7. Support the selected institution(s) in resource mobilization.
8. Support the selected institution(s) in running the master's degree programme through:
 - collaborating in training activities
 - supporting thesis projects
 - collaborating in monitoring the course.



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