THE PACIFIC OPEN LEARNING HEALTH NETWORK (POLHN): CONTINUING PROFESSIONAL EDUCATION FOR HEALTH WORKERS IN PACIFIC ISLAND COUNTRIES

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http://www.polhn.org/
Established in 2003
A World Health Organization (WHO) Western Pacific Regional Office (WPRO) program
Provides continuing professional education (CPE) via distance learning courses to health workers
19 POLHN learning centers in 12 Pacific Island countries
44 courses delivered to over 1000 health workers
POLHN’s Objectives

- Provide access to continuing education opportunities for health care workers in the Pacific
- Assist health care workers in upgrading education qualifications
- Provide access to health related information for health care workers in the region and globally
- Provide a facility for inter-country consultations and learning opportunities
POLHN Centers

- Located in hospitals or nursing schools, for convenient access by health professionals
- Managed by Ministry of Health (MOH) selected local Country Coordinators and supervised by senior MOH officials as members of Country Task Forces
- Provide computers with internet access, materials for computer-based on-line and off-line (e.g. CD-ROMs) learning, and a WHO blue trunk library
POLHN Courses

- Course topics include:
  - ICT Skills
  - Course Development & Distance Learning Pedagogy (TOT)
  - Diabetes
  - HIV/AIDS and TB
  - STI Counseling
  - Essential Medicines
  - Health Research

- To ensure regional relevance, courses are developed by academic institutions and organizations within the South Pacific and from:
  - Australia
  - New Zealand
  - Philippines
  - United States
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Evaluation in 2004

- External evaluation - mixed methods
  - Interviews and questionnaires with POLHN students, faculty, country task force representatives, and potential POLHN students
  - Site visits in Fiji, Samoa, Solomon Islands, Tonga
  - Review of materials (on- and offline)
- Findings were summarized in a Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities, and Threats (SWOT) Analysis presented to decision makers
Strengths

- Provides much-needed training in IT skills that are beneficial well beyond their involvement in POLHN
- Provides access to continuing health worker education in affordable and relevant manner
- Ability of students to both work and study simultaneously incorporates best educational practices in providing students with the opportunity to immediately apply their learning to the workplace
- Ongoing continuing professional education promotes higher job satisfaction and assists in both recruitment and retention of professional staff in country
Weaknesses

- Lack of investment in the end user – too much emphasis on the technological side
- Limited communication across islands
- Difficulties with engaging students, maximizing interaction, and retaining students
- Incorrect perception of the role of the WHO, leading at times to miscommunication with faculty and others involved
Opportunities

- Improve the health status of each country by enhancing the capacities of health professionals
- Link with other eLearning projects throughout the world, including greater coordination with other institutions delivering similar services in the Pacific
- Potential use of the OLCs as hubs for telemedicine and eHealth. If feasible, this could provide substantial assistance to health professionals who now have little access to expert opinion.
Threats

- Other commitments of their members may limit the effectiveness of Country Task Forces
- Lack of strategic plans for sustainability
- High internet costs and narrow bandwidth which limits content
- Inability to recruit and retain full time administrators may keep OLCs from reaching full potential
Actions since 2004

Expansion

- In 2007 alone, 18 new courses were developed and delivered to 350 participants.
- For the first time, one-third of these courses were developed and delivered by in-region institutions, addressing the recommendation in the 2004 evaluation that course content be tailored to the Pacific context.
- Twenty courses are planned for 2009 and there are more applicants than course seats available.
Training the trainers

- POLHN has developed two courses, *Developing Online Courses* and *Pedagogy of Online Instruction*, specifically for lecturers at the Fiji School of Medicine (FSMed) and nursing schools in the region.

- At the end of this training, each lecturer will have had the experience of developing an online course with the aid of experienced instructional designers.

- After lecturers have participated in the second course, *Pedagogy of Online Learning*, POLHN staff will work with them to deliver each lecturer’s online courses.
Upgrading educational qualifications

- POLHN is collaborating with the Fiji School of Medicine in adapting its Masters in Public Health degree so that it can be delivered primarily online.
- The first three of a total of 15 courses for the degree have been developed.
- The full masters degree will take two years to complete and will only require students to spend a few weeks onsite at the Fiji School of Medicine campus.
Increasing completion rates

- Successful completion rates in POLHN have continued to increase and average above 50 percent, with some courses reaching 100 percent.
- Course design and delivery are major factors in student completion rates and success; POLHN is working to ensure that each course meets appropriate standards.

Laboratory technicians with no formal training (apart from on-the-job) and no prior experience with computers or online learning show completion rates of 95 percent in courses leading to a certificate in Medical Laboratory Technology.
CONCLUSION

- POLHN's courses meet identified needs of Pacific Island health workers and have been generally well received by students.
- Through POLHN the WHO has successfully established lasting partnerships with regional MOHs in providing CPE for health workers.
- POLHN’s positive accomplishments, its responses to the 2004 evaluation, and its support of the forthcoming second external evaluation offer promise that the network will continue to effectively strengthen the coverage, accessibility and quality of continuing education for the health workers of the Pacific Island nations.
Thank You