

doi: 10.1111/1753-6405.13244

Government support and commitment to university-level public health education, research and workforce development is critical

Tracy Gurnett,^{1,2} Kathleen Prokopovich,³ Rebecca Ivers,⁴ Katherine Cullerton,⁵ Naomi Stekelenburg,⁶ Terry Slevin²

1. The Council of Academic Public Health Institutions Australasia (CAPHIA), Deakin, Australian Capital Territory
2. Public Health Association of Australia, Australian Capital Territory
3. School of Health & Society, University of Wollongong, New South Wales
4. School of Population Health, University of New South Wales
5. School of Public Health, The University of Queensland
6. School of Public Health and Social Work, Queensland University of Technology

The education and training provided by the Council of Academic Public Health Institutions of Australasia (CAPHIA) member institutions has underpinned the Australasian response to COVID-19.

To advance public health safety and ensure the wellbeing of our local communities, the current and future public health workforce needs a range of government supported collaborative programs and strategies.

It is vital to include CAPHIA and its members in the development and implementation of enhanced public health workforce planning. Without explicit communications pathways between CAPHIA, its member institutions and government, public health workforce planning, education and implementation will continue to be detached and siloed, rather than integrated and focused on supporting public health pathways and the future workforce. This includes plans for the implementation of the National Preventive Health Strategy, once released by the Australian Government.

Now more than ever the Australian Government must be steadfast in their support and commitment to university-level public health education and research agendas. Key to this is the maintenance of a skilled and educated public health workforce.

To achieve this, CAPHIA and the Public Health Association of Australia (PHAA) call on the Federal and State Governments to commit support through financial investment in their 2022 Budget process to the following four key initiatives:

Better Government support for the future public health workforce

Increase the number of Commonwealth Supported Places for public health undergraduates & postgraduates

Higher education in Australia needs to change and evolve in order to cater to labour market demands and an increasingly diverse student population.¹ To build Australia's future public health workforce it is critical that funding towards Commonwealth Supported Places (CSPs) for public health undergraduates and postgraduates is increased. Not only will this allow students facing educational disadvantages to successfully complete higher education,² it will also enable universities, especially those in regional areas, to meet the costs associated with the delivery of higher education.²

Practical experience for newly trained public health professionals

The development and funding of a national public health officer training program is critical to support public health professionals in their important public safety roles

As outlined by the PHAA^{3,5} a national training program could be a partnership between the Australian Government and all states and territories. If based on the similar program organised by the New South Wales Health Department, a national program would ensure that Australia is prepared to handle any future communicable and non-communicable disease challenges. This program rotates public health professionals through a range of public health workplaces so that broad practical experience can be obtained by those who have completed a Masters of Public Health.

By recruiting individuals from a wide range of educations and/or career backgrounds, this national program could be designed to meet the needs of public health sub specialities including Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Health, biostatistics, epidemiology, health

promotion, program evaluation and others.^{3,5} This 'graduate' style program fills a current obvious gap in supporting the public health workforce.

Ongoing professional development for the current public health workforce

Government funded micro-credentials for the public health work force are key to ensuring continued high standards of service delivery within Australian communities

The COVID-19 pandemic has revealed gaps in "the size, training, structure and credentialing of the public health workforce".^{3,4}

Ongoing professional development is critical to ensure that the workforce receives appropriate up-to-date training. Further national investment across the public health workforce through significant numbers of fully funded micro-credentials should be made available to those currently engaged in public health workforce roles. CAPHIA is well placed to administer this national roll out and ensure a diverse mix of skills and credentials is available throughout Australia.

Further, as outlined in our submission to the Review of the Australian Qualifications Framework (AQF),⁶ CAPHIA recommends the expansion of the AQF to include micro-credentials and introduce a credit points system to enable easier comparisons between Australian and international qualifications. This could include funding CAPHIA to partner with member universities offering micro-credentials, in the same way the VET sector can offer Certificate 1-4 qualifications.⁶ University-level micro-credentials could be harmonised with existing systems of professional education (i.e. such as doctors and psychologists) to ensure appropriate recognition of public health skills gained in these courses.⁶

Long-term strategic planning with public health stakeholders

Government strategic planning that incorporates the view of public health stakeholders including educators and researchers needs to be long-term and include a thorough review of the scope and needs of the public health workforce in Australia into the future, as recommended

This is an open access article under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivs License, which permits use and distribution in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited, the use is non-commercial and no modifications or adaptations are made.

by two decisions of National cabinet in June (<https://www.pm.gov.au/media/national-cabinet-statement-0>) and November (<https://www.pm.gov.au/media/national-cabinet-2>) 2020, be implemented as a matter of urgency.

These proposed strategies are clearly in the national interest and ensure that, through investment in the public health workforce, the safety and well-being of Australian communities is maintained. If you would like to support these three initiatives, please email caphia@phaa.net.au.

References

1. James R, French S, Kelly P. *Visions for Australian Tertiary Education*. Melbourne (AUST): University of Melbourne Melbourne Centre for the Study of Higher Education; 2017.
2. Australian Department of Finance. Program 2.1: Commonwealth Grant Scheme. In: *Budget 2017-18; Portfolio Budget Statements 2017-18; Budget Related Paper No. 1.5 Education and Training Portfolio*. Canberra (AUST): Government of Australia; 2018 [cited 2021 Sep 7]. Available from: <https://www.transparency.gov.au/portfolio-budget/education-and-training/2017-2018/22-budgeted-expenses-and-performance-outcome-2-3>
3. Public Health Association Australia. Capital Investment for a Healthier Society. In: *Rebuilding a Healthy Society: Supplementary Submission on Strategic Directions for the 2020-21 Commonwealth Budget*. Canberra (AUST): PHAA; 2020. p. 23.
4. Slevin T. *Where are All the Public Health Workers?* Canberra (AUST): Public Health Association Australia Intouch Public Health Blog; 2020. Available from: <https://intouchpublichealth.net.au/where-are-all-the-public-health-workers/>
5. Public Health Association Australia. *Build Back Healthier: Strategic directions/Pre-budget Submission for the 2021-22 Commonwealth Budget*. Canberra (AUST): PHAA; 2021. Available from: <https://www.phaa.net.au/documents/item/5029>
6. Council of Academic Public Health Institutions Australasia. *Review of the Australian Qualifications Framework: Discussion Paper*. Canberra (AUST): Australian Government Department of Education, Skills and Employment; 2018. Available from: <https://www.dese.gov.au/system/files/documents/document-file/2020-12/095-council-of-academic-public-health-institutions-australasia.pdf>

Correspondence to: Professor Rebecca Ivers, School of Population Health, Faculty of Medicine and Health, UNSW Sydney, NSW 2052; e-mail: rebecca.ivers@unsw.edu.au