

Education of occupational health nurses in Finland

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Abstract

The education and competence demands of occupational health nurses (OHN) in Finland are described in this article on three levels; public health nurse, complementary studies based on public health nurse's examination and studies on master level. The competence demands are defined on the levels 6-7 in the EQF-system (European Qualification Framework). Specific in the Finnish education system is advanced cooperation between ministry of social affairs and health, Finnish Institute of Occupational Health (FIOH), academies and labor market organizations. Education carried out in network has started 2008 concerning complementary studies and studies on master level.

Keywords: Occupational Health Nurse, competence demands, education

1 Introduction

The growing demands of working life and need to support and promote the work ability and health of the labor force requires that occupational health nurses have deep and specific competence so that they can answer to these challenges. Therefore a high quality education is needed on three levels: basic level education for public health nurses, complementary studies for occupational health nurses and master level studies that ensure professional and scientific competence (for nurses working) in administrative and development tasks as well as in education and research [7,9,10].

The occupational health nurses' education in Finland has been developed in cooperation with three universities, five universities of applied sciences and the Finnish institute of Occupational Health (FIOH) since 2008. It has been financed by ministry of social affairs and health. A working group, which follows up the finance and the results of the education, is comprised of representatives of FIOH, ministry, vocational organizations and academies.

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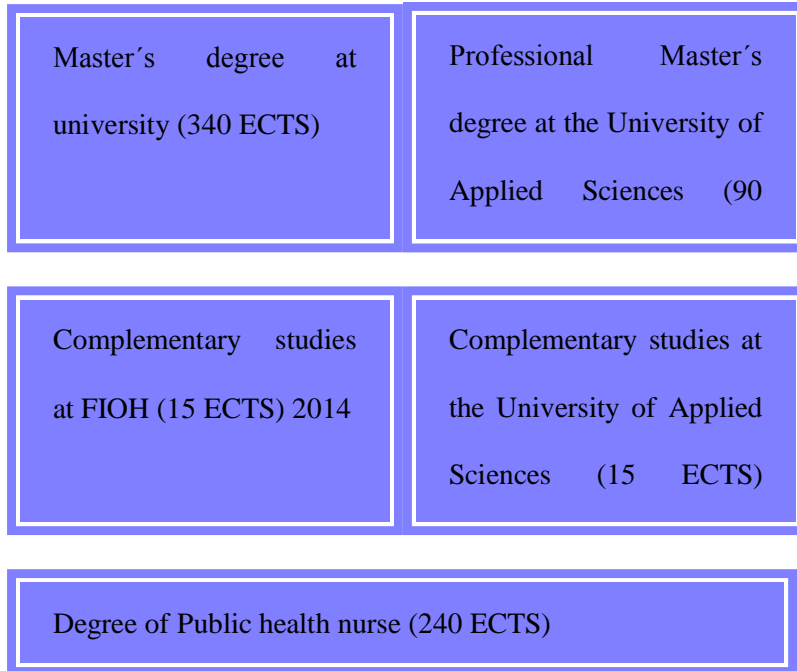


Figure 1: The structure of the education of occupational health nurses (OHN)

(ECTS is European Credit Transfer and Accumulation System. In Finland 27 hours student's work is one ECTS) [3]

Competence demands of occupational health education

The competence demands follow in Finland the EQF – descriptions, which are in Public health nurse examination on level 6, in complementary studies on level 6-7 and on master's level 7. (EQF – European Qualifications Framework) [2,4]

Competence demands in education of public health nurse

The competence demands are defined on the level 6 in public health examination. The demands are described as follows:

Description of level 6 in EQF-system;

Knowledge: Advanced knowledge of a field of work or study, involving a critical understanding of theories and principles

Skills: Advanced skills, demonstrating mastery and innovation, required to solve complex and unpredictable problems in a specialized field of work or study

Competence-1: Manage complex technical or professional activities or projects, taking responsibility for decision making in unpredictable work or study contexts

Competence-2: Take responsibility for managing professional development of individuals and groups [2,4].

In curriculum of public health nurses *concerning occupational health as a part of the whole examination*, the description on level 6 is as follows:

The student

- knows the national guidelines of public health and society and has competence to prevent non communicable diseases,
- knows the act of OHS (Occupational Health Service) and OSH (Occupational Safety and Health) and can act according to the Good Practice of OHS
- can act in multi-professional teams, working groups and networks
- recognizes physical, chemical, biological and psycho-social factors in work environment and can assess their significance to health and wellbeing of employees and work communities
- is able to make work place surveys and health examinations and can make proposals in order to make the work conditions better and follow up realization of them
- can support the health, wellbeing and workability of employees and work communities and guides to care and rehabilitation when needed
- knows the main occupational diseases and can motivate the employees and work communities to prevent them
- takes part to the health promotion of the unemployed and to the minimization of the disadvantages of unemployment [7].

The studies contain both theoretical studies and practice in OHS (10-14 ECTS).

A public health nurse can start working in OHS, but he/she must take the complementary studies during two years. The competence level in complementary studies is 6-7. The complementary studies are carried out multi-professionally either in FIOH or in the universities of Applied Sciences that collaborate closely during the studies.

The competence demands of complementary studies

These competence demands include the complementary studies of both occupational health nurses and physicians, physiotherapists and psychologists – the multi-professional team in OHS. In FIOH they study together. The competence demands are as follows:

- The student masters the legislation concerning OHS and is able to act according to it. He/she understands the principles and ethics of Good Practice in OHS and is able to apply them in his/her work.
- He/she knows the service system of health care and the role of OHS as a part of it. He/she knows the national development policies.
- He/she is able to act in multi-professional cooperation with other specialists and actors in health care and in cooperation with enterprises and employers.
- He/she can carry out occupational health services so that the focus is on client's needs in the total process of OHS (assessment of needs – setting the targets – planning actions – action – assessment of effectiveness)
- He/she can recognize the most important danger-, occupational hygiene-, stress and resource factors in the work environment and assess their significance to health. He/she knows the most common occupational health diseases and acts according to the legislation of occupational diseases.
- He/she can make the action plan of OHS in the cooperation with the employer and representatives of employees.
- He/she is able to do the health examinations to the employees taking into account the risks in work environment and the workability of employees. He/she can carry out health promotion activities on all four levels (promotion, primary-, secondary- and tertiary-prevention).

- He/she is able to work in OHS knowing the role and responsibilities of OHS in promoting the health and wellbeing of employees and to developing the work environment.
- He/she can assess and develop his/her own actions and the service processes of OHS according to the scientific evidence and good practices [5].

2 The competence demands on master level

The studies on the master level are carried out both in universities and in universities of applied sciences. The students are occupational health nurses and physiotherapists. Also these studies are carried out in cooperation with FIOH. The competence demands are on level 7 in EQF-system [2,4,8].

Description of level 7 in EQF-system;

Knowledge: Highly specialized knowledge, some of which is at the forefront of knowledge in a field of work or study, as the basis for original thinking and/or research

Skills-1: Critical awareness of knowledge issues in a field and at the interface between different fields

Skills-2: Specialized problem-solving skills required in research and/or innovation in order to develop new knowledge and procedures and to integrate knowledge from different fields

Competence-1: Manage and transform work or study contexts that are complex, unpredictable and require new strategic approaches

Competence-2: Take responsibility for contributing to professional knowledge and practice and/or for reviewing the strategic performance of teams [2,4].

The basics in the higher education (master level) are in the following programs:

- Health promotion
- Management and leadership
- Preventive nursing sciences (University in Eastern Finland)

The OHS-studies are integrated to the training programs above.

The competence description concerning the occupational health studies integrated in training programs in universities and universities of applied sciences is as follows :

The student:

- can develop and assess the quality and effectiveness of OHS on the strength of social and health political aims, guidelines and directions in cooperation with multi-professional networks,
- can develop innovatively the OHS actions taking account the challenges and changes in working life,
- can manage and coordinate OHS actions taking account the vision, strategies and financial factors,
- can market the OHS actions and act as an entrepreneur. In addition, he/she can plan, carry out and assess development projects of his/her own OH unit.

The student:

- can plan, carry out and assess OH actions to the enterprise as a comprehensive process on employee, work community and organization levels taking into account the changing needs of working life,
- can validate the significance of management, personnel administration and cooperation to the health, wellbeing and workability of employees and to productivity,
- can assess things from the point of view of the clients and ethics.

The student:

- can apply, assess and develop courses of action, methods, models and processes based on multidisciplinary and evidence based knowledge in multicultural tasks as a specialist,
- participates in the decision making concerning OHS taking account the public health and national social guidelines and programs,
- can widen and deepen the substance competence of OHS on different areas including environmental aspects [6].

The studies carried out in cooperation with FIOH and academies have utilized videoconferences (which are taped/recorded – pro connect), specialist (OHS) consultations and guidance, practice, exercises and scholarly thesis, internet courses (Moodle) and seminars.

3 Conclusion

OH nurses are specialized in health promotion, and one of their professional areas is work in occupational health services (OHS). In Finland the role of OH nurses is very central. They coordinate the services and manage the relationship between the enterprises and the OHS.

Because of changes in working life, the demands OH nurses face, have increased. Their work has increasingly become team work. In Finland a multi-professional team should exist in every OHS, consisting of an OH physician, a nurse, a physiotherapist and a psychologist. Also the role of the OH nurse has changed, and along that change broader and deeper expertise is needed. In order to answer the competence challenge in OHS, an OH nurse master degree has been available since 2008. In the near future it is important that the OH nurse can keep the specific role of a specialist of health promotion in the OHS team and develop new methods to meet the new demands of changing working life. Once a year assessment knowledge is collected from the lecturers and students. So far the feedback has been very good. The competence demands have measured up the challenges of working life. The education carried out in cooperation has been very cost effective.

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