

# **Competencies and applicability of Master of Public Health (MPH) programmes. A qualitative study of Graduates from South African Universities**

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## **Background**

The Master of Public Health (MPH) is a post-graduate academic qualification offered by several universities worldwide. It is seen as an entry program into public health that upskills the workforce by giving them skills to understand and engage with health issues at population level.

## **Objectives**

The study investigated the professional roles of MPH program alumni from South African universities following graduation and the extent to which such individuals were prepared to undertake their respective roles during the COVID-19 pandemic using the knowledge and skills acquired through their MPH coursework.

## **Methods**

A qualitative exploratory study was conducted by utilising thematic secondary data analysis (SDA) of interview data collected from a parent study. The parent study interviewed MPH alumni who studied at eight South African Schools of Public Health and obtained their MPH degrees before 2012 or after 2016. An interview guide was used to elicit graduates' preparedness in their roles as Public Health (PH) cadres and identify gaps in skills and content in their training.

## **Results/Findings**

Outcomes of the study show that South African PH alumni are employed across many sectors, mainly in the public sector, not-for-profit organisations, academic institutions, multinational organisations, and the private sector. Most participants felt that getting an MPH catapulted their careers and enabled them to pivot to new roles, for which they felt prepared. However, alumni identified gaps needed for graduates to be work ready. They highlighted that there are specific skills, such as monitoring and evaluation, leadership and management and communication, that employers expect them to be proficient in. In addition, most participants felt that they should have in-service experience while in training to gain employment. This would give them insight into the work expectations of MPH graduates.

## **Key Messages**

In light of the COVID-19 pandemic, there is a pressing need to allocate resources to bolster the education and training of skilled PH practitioners able to work in low- and middle-income countries (LMICs).

## **Advocacy Message**

Universities must identify knowledge and skills gaps among MPH graduates and institute initiatives to help students acquire the necessary competencies over the two-year MPH program.

**Key Words:** Master of Public Health, Competencies, Roles