Reviewer's report

Title: Experience with a 'social model' of capacity building: the Peoples-uni

Version: 2 Date: 29 January 2009

Reviewer: Jan Philipp Schmidt

Reviewer's report:

The article describes a novel approach to capacity-building in public health, which holds promise to increase access to quality education, especially in developing countries. It addresses a broad research question ("can a community-based approach to formal education offer an alternative mechanism for public health training?") and uses a narrative description of the Peoples University project to answer this question.

The article presents a valuable contribution and I recommend publication with minor revisions.

* Major Compulsory Revisions (which the author must respond to before a decision on publication can be reached)

None.

* Minor Essential Revisions (such as missing labels on figures, or the wrong use of a term, which the author can be trusted to correct)

I found this sentence confusing - please clarify for the reader.

"Despite very little publicity or advertising for this initial intake, 117 students enrolled on 170 course modules in October 2008, and a limit of 30 students per module meant that all except one had to close before the end of the enrolment period."

* Discretionary Revisions (which are recommendations for improvement but which the author can choose to ignore)

My main suggestion, if the journal editors permit extending the scope of this paper, would be to add more detail. It's such a novel and interesting approach, that a little more background information would be useful for most readers. Some examples:

* The article does not mention significant challenges that were encountered, and how such challenges (assuming there were some) were overcome.

* The article mentions that UK Faculty of Public Health trainees provided a substantive part of the course content. Adding a frequency table of contributions, or a little more information about how contributions are distributed among individual authors and countries would be interesting.
* Very little information is provided about the participants in the currently running courses, except the number of nationalities that are represented. If the project has any further demographic or other data on these participants, it would be interesting to find out more about their work, career-levels, etc.

Considering the significant potential benefit of the described social approach to formal capacity building, it would be valuable to briefly mention what characteristics of this project, or public health as the field of instruction, might be unique -- and if similar projects could work in other disciplines as well.

This project is interesting for scholars in different disciplines, including in Economics, Sociology, Education or Computer Science. A more extensive literature review -- including contributions from these disciplines -- would be useful to situate the article within this broader inter-disciplinary research field.

**Level of interest:** An article of importance in its field

**Quality of written English:** Needs some language corrections before being published

**Statistical review:** No, the manuscript does not need to be seen by a statistician.

**Declaration of competing interests:**

I declare that I have no competing interests.