



APHEA

Agency for Public Health
Education Accreditation

SITE VISIT REPORT FOR THE
INSTITUTIONAL ACCREDITATION

REVIEW OF THE

NOVA National School of Public Health
NOVA University Lisbon
Portugal

Site Visit Report

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

14.12.2021

AGENCY FOR PUBLIC HEALTH EDUCATION ACCREDITATION
SITE VISIT DATES: 6th to 8th October, 2021

SITE VISIT REVIEW TEAM:
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Executive Summary

Foreword

The Review Team would like to thank everyone involved with this process of institutional accreditation, and for the hard work that went into preparing for the validation and accreditation stages. The Team would also like to extend their gratitude to the School and University for their generous hospitality and openness during the accreditation site visit. As fellow academics, we greatly value these opportunities to visit other institutions and learn about their programmes and culture; these are great opportunities for learning and for building new relationships across the world of public health.

Introduction

The NOVA National School of Public Health was established in 1967 as part of the Portuguese Ministry of Health and in 1994 became integrated into the NOVA University of Lisbon. It delivers postgraduate education in public health and healthcare administration, continuing professional development (“specialisms”), research and knowledge exchange in seeking to improve the health of the Portuguese, to contribute to national and global health, and to support the Portuguese Health System. Its objectives are to produce and diffuse knowledge and innovation in Public Health and healthcare management and administration through its teaching, research and knowledge exchange partnerships.

The School offers a range of academic programmes and courses; these comprise three doctoral programmes, five Master’s degree programmes, two specialisation diploma programmes and ten additional postgraduate and continuous professional development courses. The majority of graduates are either already in employment or successfully secure employment following graduation within public health or the healthcare system. All PhD and Master’s Degree programmes are accredited by the Portuguese Agency for the Evaluation and Accreditation of Higher Education (A3ES).

Criterion I: Governance and Organisation of the Institution

The NOVA National School of Public Health is part of the NOVA University of Lisbon. The University, School and programmes are supported by a robust governance structure. NOVA is a public institution regulated by Government decrees and there is a comprehensive University governance framework of regulations, procedures, accountabilities and leadership. The University is accredited on a 6-yearly basis as a higher education institution by the Portuguese Agency for the Evaluation and Accreditation of Higher Education, which

enables it to award Bachelor's, Master's and doctoral qualifications and to deliver continuing professional development specialist courses.

The School and its Faculty evidently have strong bonds and well-established relationships with stakeholders within government and across the public services, especially within Portugal's health system. It is a well-regarded provider of public health and healthcare management education.

Responsibility for governance transcends the various strata of the institutional leadership hierarchy, from the most senior level of the University through to faculty and programme levels, where there are clear lines of accountability and strong relationships. Evidently, the School is well regarded as an important postgraduate arm of the University and benefits from an enviable degree of autonomy and independence that largely reflects its excellent standing within the professional community.

Criterion II: Aims and Objectives of the Public Health Institution and its Programmes

The School offers a range of pathways to students who aspire to study public health, health services administration and a range of linked continuing professional development programmes (or specialisms). These have strong synergies with the public health and healthcare professions in Portugal, with most students already in employment in the health sector, commonly on secondment to the range of programmes in the School. In this regard the School provides a valuable service to the national and regional public health and healthcare workforce with its strong inter-professional links. Furthermore, and as a consequence, the programmes have very high employability levels with most graduates in senior level positions. Overall, the programmes are well resourced. The range (or "mixed economy") of programmes and specialist courses provided by the School enable it to remain sustainable whilst being able to support relatively small numbers of students per programme/course that bring pedagogic benefits (in terms of appropriate class sizes). The Public Health provision at NOVA is underpinned by its ambitious and future-facing Gate Strategy 2019-23 that demonstrates a proactive strategic approach towards building the School's educational and research impact. The Gate Public Health Knowledge Centre communicates the School's goal to foster and make accessible national and global public health education, research and innovation, thus promoting the School's international reputation and brand.

The Master's and doctoral programmes have evolved predominantly to meet the market demands of the national and regional workforce. The curricula are well established and have evolved over fifty years in response to changes in public health and healthcare. The aims are

appropriate to postgraduate public health education and the mixed offer of intersecting programmes is a major asset for the University.

Criterion III: Programmes

The School offers a broad portfolio of public health and health services administration programmes and specialist courses, which, as stated, have been developed to meet the demands of the market. Unusually, the School offers distinct Master's programmes in public health and in health promotion, which have evolved with the demand for more specialisation in these areas. Nonetheless, each programme shares particular core curricula, whilst there is clear cohort identity within each distinct programme that partly reflects the backgrounds of students who choose the respective pathways.

The programme and courses have been confidently developed to appeal to a diverse professional market and, indeed, have responded with agility to the public health and health services administration markets with a diversified, relevant and broad portfolio. There is good opportunity for academically-minded graduates to progress or return to undertake doctoral study should they choose to, while the programmes have evolved primarily to meet the demands of the complex professional field. This agility is reflected in the strong academic-employment/professional practice culture of the School.

A key observation is that relatively few students enrolled on Master's programmes in the School graduate with the full Master's degree. While this could be interpreted as a shortcoming, it is evident that most students actively aim for an interim award of Postgraduate Diploma or Postgraduate Certificate. This suits the employment and work-life balance for many students, since the PG Diploma can be completed in one year, whereas the dissertation (that leads to the Master's) involves an extra year of study. This is a common pattern with other universities worldwide where the final dissertation (or one third of the programme) is not always considered essential for employment. Registration on the full Master's as opposed to PG Diploma or PG Certificate avoids the necessity to reapply to join a Master's on completion of the interim award. However, this means that completion rates can appear to be low for taught Master's programmes.

There is scope to further develop the social science orientated aspects of public health in the curriculum. The School evidently has a long association with clinical public health and the healthcare sector and it would seem prudent to consider ways to develop the curricula further to embrace more assertively broader disciplinary and philosophical aspects of public health; areas that merit consideration in that regard include qualitative or social research, health and social inequality, sociology of health and illness and the social determinants of health. It is certainly evident that there is appetite within the Faculty to introduce such innovations.

Criterion IV: Students and Graduates

Students tend to either be Portuguese citizens from professional backgrounds or overseas students from Portuguese speaking countries. Students from non-Portuguese speaking countries are by no means excluded from the University; however, the University has traditionally sourced students from Portuguese speaking countries where there are strong historical links and developed some key research relationships this way. As stated, for the most part, the programmes in the School have evolved to respond to the demands of the professional public health and health services sectors, especially given the historical legacy of the School within Portuguese government. Students therefore tend to have ambitions to seek employment in public health or health services administration or to advance their careers in these fields, seeking promotion or advancement.

The programmes in the School are evidently geared towards students with professional backgrounds, while there appears to be an increasing minority who are new to public health or the health system more generally who could benefit from more tailored support in completing a full Master's and finding their employment trajectory. The relatively small cohort sizes, nonetheless, mean that there is a lot of one-to-one support, personal tutoring, mentoring and dedication from Faculty academics to support students through their education. Moreover, the students appear to have a high level of collegiality and "voice" within the School. This is partly because the School delegates much of the pastoral support and mutual care to students, who are highly supportive of each other and have influence on various governance groups including the School Council. On the other hand, this level of "delegation" suggests that – certainly at the local School/campus level – there is a dearth of University provided pastoral support in terms of student wellbeing and academic support services. It is perhaps the case that undergraduate programmes on the main NOVA campus sites benefit more from student services, and that the University might consider how to more actively support the pastoral and extended needs of postgraduates.

There is an increasing demand for global public health programmes that recruit students from across the world, including from English speaking low and middle income countries. As mentioned, the NOVA School of Public Health tends to have a history of recruiting international students from Portuguese speaking countries. This probably works well for the School and the University in terms of teaching and research. However, the School could consider how to expand and develop its international brand by drawing students from a wider international market, which would impact student numbers but could also raise School income and long term sustainability. This would have resourcing implications (buildings, staffing, etc.) but could help to build the brand, reach and impact of the School as a global public health beacon.

Criterion V: Human Resources and Staffing

The School is supported by a well-qualified, agile and dedicated academic Faculty and library service. Its relatively small cohort programmes create a collegial and supportive atmosphere in the School, which students evidently appreciate and benefit from. Academic staff are approachable, accessible and supportive in their roles. There appears to be a high level of respect towards academics from students and there is a strong sense of camaraderie between staff who service the various programmes and specialisms. Moreover, many staff have professional backgrounds and good relations with the various professional fields.

The impression is that academic staff work intensively with students and are highly dedicated in their roles in providing academic support for students to help them achieve their educational potential. This is reflected in their accessibility to students – their responsiveness to student emails and willingness to have frequent one-to-one tutorials with individual students. On the other hand, it was recognised that most teaching occurs at weekends and during evenings, while academic staff can also be working throughout the working week during normal office hours. This suggests a high level of dedication but also implies that the School has had to respond to a norm within the professional field not to release students on day release for academic study. This would imply that many students work full time and therefore study in their own time, which may have an impact on academic performance and wellbeing. This is particularly pertinent for students with complex work-life balance demands. It may be prudent for the School to explore with employers the viability of day-release from employment to ensure students and academic staff can better balance the mix of education alongside working, which is more the norm within other European and US higher education contexts.

In terms of administrative resources within the School, as stated, the campus appears not to accommodate student support, wellbeing and pastoral support services that may be available at other campus sites and likely geared towards undergraduate students. Students have online access to the Bridge to support their health, wellbeing and psychological needs although these services are, as mentioned, centralised and students within the School tend to look to each other for support or to their academic tutors. Postgraduates in the School study on a part time basis and therefore have less contact time within the University, but they may have a range of support needs that may need to be considered at the local/campus level. This could be an area to explore with the University to ensure postgraduate students – including international students – are supported fully in terms of their academic and pastoral needs, as part of the University's duty of care.

Linked to this, it was noted that the University did not appear to have clear policies in place to cover issues of equality, diversity and inclusivity, especially with respect to race and ethnicity, gender and sexuality, disability (in its broadest sense) or other protected characteristics under international equality law. Given the broad goal of global public health to tackle inequalities, this may be a theme the School could take a strategic lead on to bring these important issues to the fore within University policy. This is evidently a University level issue.

Criterion VI: Supportive Services, Budgeting and Facilities

The School is located on its own geographical site, which brings identity and presence to public health education and to postgraduate study within the University. There are also plans to expand the site with a new building. As stated, the School has a highly committed academic Faculty who resource the programmes and courses, and a dedicated and supportive library team on site. Beyond this, most University services are sited elsewhere, generally geared towards undergraduate students, which students in the School do not connect readily with. This is partly due to the transient, part time status of postgraduates and what appears to be a culture of mutual support among students, who essentially draw upon each other rather than upon University provided services.

The campus houses relatively small teaching spaces designed for seminars, tutorials and modest sized lectures. This suits the scale of the cohort sizes, although it appears that student numbers per programme are limited to 30 per year (and a minimum of 10). This is beneficial in terms of pedagogy but impacts the potential of the School to increase its numbers. It was suggested that student recruitment is highly competitive, due to this ceiling in numbers. Additionally, home and international student fees are equalised. From a business planning point of view, it may be that the limits on student numbers and a relatively low international student fee limits potential for growth within the School, especially if fees income is curtailed. With greater opportunity for expansion, there could be additional opportunities to introduce new programmes (e.g. Bachelor's).

University owned accommodation for students appears to be scarce, limited to students with the greatest need. While it is recognised that many students live locally or regionally, students who migrate to Lisbon to study must find their own accommodation; this may work for Portuguese citizens but could be difficult for international students who would expect a campus experience. In this light, the University may therefore want to consider to what degree the institution supports students from overseas, as this will impact recruitment.

Criterion VII: Internal Quality Management

The University operates a hierarchy of “councils” with student membership at all levels. This appears to be an open and democratic process, which works well within the School since programme cohorts are relatively modest in size allowing for good student representation and in decisions about quality. Likewise, Faculty staff meet monthly to plan and evaluate at programmatic and modular levels.

The University has a robust, recently introduced quality improvement strategy that has a continuous improvement philosophy. There is a genuine commitment towards building transparency and openness into teaching, learning and assessment processes. This new quality infrastructure guides programme and module evaluation that feed into continuous quality improvement at a programmatic level. It ensures that the quality of teaching, learning and assessment are undertaken rigorously and transparently, ensuring clear lines of accountability. Moreover, students and Faculty have an active voice within these processes via the Pedagogic Council and the School Council.

The School and University have not routinely collected business intelligence data on graduate destinations in terms of alumni and employability. A new alumni network was launched in 2021 and is fast growing as a new “voice” within the School. There is potential for the University to consider extending its business intelligence portfolio to inform the planning of teaching and research at the School level. This should extend to recording demographic data on applicants running through to graduate destinations data.

Quality management in the University is focused primarily on pedagogy and the delivery of programmes and modules, essentially as process and outcome evaluation of teaching and assessment processes. The University does not appear to evaluate wider student experience, which may be something that could be developed as a feature of continuous improvement, and to aid with external marketing and recruitment. In this regard, the University could consider more sophisticated mechanisms to collect business intelligence data with a view to targeting new students in ways that positively acknowledge the diversity of the market – i.e. discriminating between students’ backgrounds (e.g. home and international; undergraduate and postgraduate). The University should also consider measures to raise the profile of inclusivity and equality as benchmarks of quality. This is an important ethical issue that the School should champion on behalf of the University.

Summary of Conclusions

Criterion I: Governance and Organisation of the Institution	
Sub – Criterion 1.1	Met
Sub – Criterion 1.2	Met
Sub – Criterion 1.3	Met
Sub – Criterion 1.4	Met with comments
Criterion II: Aims and Objectives of the Public Health Institution and its Programmes	
Sub – Criterion 2.1	Met
Sub – Criterion 2.2	Met
Sub – Criterion 2.3	Met
Sub – Criterion 2.4	Met
Criterion III: Programmes	
Sub – Criterion 3.1	Met with comments
Sub – Criterion 3.2	Met
Sub – Criterion 3.3	Met
Sub – Criterion 3.4	Met with comments
Sub – Criterion 3.5	Met
Sub – Criterion 3.6	Met
Sub – Criterion 3.7	Met with comments
Criterion IV: Students and Graduates	
Sub – Criterion 4.1	Met
Sub – Criterion 4.2	Met with comments
Sub – Criterion 4.3	Met with comments
Sub – Criterion 4.4	Met
Sub – Criterion 4.5	Met with comments
Sub – Criterion 4.6	Met
Criterion V: Human Resources and Staffing	
Sub – Criterion 5.1	Met
Sub – Criterion 5.2	Met
Sub – Criterion 5.3	Met
Sub – Criterion 5.4	Met
Sub – Criterion 5.5	Met
Sub – Criterion 5.6	Met
Sub – Criterion 5.7	Met
Sub – Criterion 5.8	Met
Criterion VI: Supportive Services, Budgeting and Facilities	
Sub – Criterion 6.1	Met with comments
Sub – Criterion 6.2	Met with comments
Sub – Criterion 6.3	Met with comments
Sub – Criterion 6.4	Met
Sub – Criterion 6.5	Met with comments
Criterion VII: Internal Quality Management	
Sub – Criterion 7.1	Met with comments
Sub – Criterion 7.2	Met
Sub – Criterion 7.3	Met with comments
Sub – Criterion 7.4	Met