Original research

Employers’ expectations of core functions, credentials and competencies of the community and public health nutrition workforce in Australia

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Objectives: To review position descriptions of the community and public health nutrition workforce in order to assess employers’ expectations of workforce functions and competency requirements.

Design: Qualitative content analysis of job descriptions obtained from a sample of the known community and public health nutrition workforce in Australia and collation of position descriptions advertised in the February 2002 to August 2002 period.

Subjects: Community and public health nutritionists in the Australian health system.

Main outcome measures: Descriptive qualitative data about employers’ expectations of the core functions, competencies and credentials of community and public health nutritionists, as expressed by position descriptions.

Results: From a total of 64 position descriptions obtained, 46 were included in the analysis. This sample consisted of 35 existing (occupied) positions and 11 new (advertised) positions. These were distributed across 29 entry-level and 17 advanced-level positions. The most consistent core function domains, as represented by duty statements, were community-based nutrition intervention management (planning, strategy development, implementation and evaluation), capacity building and nutrition-related research and evaluation. Entry-level positions were more likely to have direct-care or clinical dietetics functions and there was a stronger emphasis on coordination, capacity building and research in the advanced-level positions. Competency expectations, as represented by key selection criteria, focused on experience of intervention management, knowledge of public health nutrition issues and strategies, interpersonal communication skills and the ability to adopt a multidisciplinary working style. Almost all of the entry-level positions required mandatory dietetic qualifications.

Conclusions: As a proxy of employers’ expectations, analysis of workforce position descriptions by duties (functions) and selection criteria (credentials and competencies), provide an alternative and complementary method to inform workforce development. Position description development may be an important organisational response to facilitate progressive workforce development and re-orientation.

Key words: employers’ expectations, workforce development, core functions, competencies, public health nutrition, position descriptions

Introduction

Dietitians have been identified as the dominant professional group, at least numerically, through the limited workforce information available that enumerates and profiles the designated public health nutrition workforce in Australia (1,2). This has implications for the development of the public health nutrition workforce because it appears that dietetic training programs provide the entry-level (and in most cases highest) qualifications upon which much of the public health nutrition workforce is built (3,4). There are no existing specific competency standards for public health nutrition in Australia to guide workforce development, although some have argued in the past that existing entry-level dietetic competency standards serve this function (5). Recent consultations however, support a view that specialist-level competencies for public health nutrition are required (2,3,6).

The methodologies used in developing dietetic competencies in Australia have focussed on functional analysis, critical incident debriefing and professional consultations (7). The perspectives of the employing organisation (hereafter referred to as the employer) appear not to have been specifically canvassed in the context of competency standards and workforce development, which is the concern of the present study.

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