

Chapter 4.1.5

MULTINATIONAL MEDICAL STUDENT CLUBS

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Introduction

I have used the example of the Student Network Organisation (SNO) of The Network Towards Unity For Health (The Network TUFH) as an example of a multinational student club that has been operating since 1993.

Background

The Network began as a World Health Organisation (WHO) project in 1978, with a meeting of 18 'innovative' medical schools in Jamaica. While these universities were seen as those promoting academic community partnership, a major focus in the early years was on problem-based learning and small group learning.

In 1998 WHO began another project (Towards Unity For Health - TUFH) which extended the partnership approach to include policy makers, health service organisations and health practitioners. In 2000 these two merged to become The Network TUFH - no longer as WHO projects but in official relationship with WHO. The Network TUFH is also in official relationship with WONCA (the World Organisation of Family Doctors).

Purpose and structure

The Network TUFH has a number of task forces and has a yearly conference hosted by one of its member organisations. Most member organisations encourage student attendance and participation in The Network TUFH conferences and in 1993 this was formalised with the formation of the Student Network Organisation (SNO). SNO has its own membership base and elects its own committee. Support is provided from The Network TUFH Secretariat.

In the three years to 2009, The Network TUFH conferences were attended by 900 delegates, including 300 students who came from diverse countries including Kenya, Columbia, USA, Sudan, Australia, Belgium, Uganda and Holland.

Lessons

1. As a student organisation is, by its very membership, always changing it is important that it is supported by a less fluid organisation like Network TUFH.
2. It has been important for SNO that the students elect their own committee. This ensures that SNO is not seen as a minor addendum to the host organisation. The Secretary General of SNO is a member of the Executive Committee of the Network TUFH. Network TUFH conferences have few plenary speeches but it has been common for SNO to provide one of the plenaries.
3. SNO is consulted and has input to the conference programme. For instance at the Bogota conference (2009) SNO proposed a day-long pre-conference workshop on developing leadership as part of undergraduate activity.
4. While lasting friendships are made within SNO, it is not a tool for arranging overseas electives. These may happen, but there is a greater emphasis on student development within their own country.
5. At each conference there is an international mentor scheme where participating students are matched with a mentor, usually from another country. This sometimes develops into a lasting relationship after the student's graduation with ongoing discussion on career paths and further education options.
6. For non-student delegates, having the students participating at conferences is fun. There is a two-way flow of education, and established practitioners learn as much, or more, from the students as the other way around.
7. Students can make a huge difference to the success of the conference:
 - they participate in conference planning;
 - there is a separate poster prize for student posters;
 - they arrange the printing and sale of conference tee shirts – a small profit can make a huge difference for the students of the host organisation;
 - they may organise the conference dinner and dance – students know how to have fun!
 - they can act as conference guides and give advice on local activities for delegates and accompanying people;
 - they act as guides for the field trips that are part of The Network TUFH conferences.

Difficulties

As mentioned above, the biggest difficulty will always be that students move on from being students! This creates the need for succession planning, both in people but also in maintaining organisational momentum and history. There have been a number of ways that this has been addressed within The Network TUFH.

1. *Commitment of member organisations to supporting students to multiple conferences:*

The Belgian students who attended the Vietnam conference carried the SNO momentum to the next one in Ghent; the Ugandan students who were in Ghent carried on by organising in Kampala; the Columbian students who were in Kampala organised their colleagues for the next conference in Bogota.

2. *Ongoing commitment of member organisations to student attendance:*

Although the same students are not always there, there are enough to continue the momentum, with the support of some faculty¹ members. For example, the universities of Maastricht, New Mexico and Moi (Eldoret Kenya) continually support students – and these students tell others at their university so that there is a continuity of ‘corporate feeling’ even if the same students do not attend.

3. *Support from The Network TUFH Secretariat:*

In getting to know the students, in knowing their needs and in involving them in conference planning and activity the Secretariat ensures continuity of participation in SNO.

Possibilities

Social networking through the internet throws up all sorts of possibilities. SNO has had blogs both at the global and WHO regional level. Facebook has not been used systematically, but rather it used more by individual students to stay in touch.

Both of these options need moderators to ensure they continue safely, but also need to have enough content for participants to log on. Maybe this could be the focus of a permanent student elective?

¹ ‘Faculty’ is another term for members of academic staff.

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