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AN INTERNATIONAL APPROACH TO MENTAL HEALTH PROMOTION WORKFORCE DEVELOPMENT

Position Paper of the Global Working Group on Mental Health Promotion

International Union for Health Promotion and Education - IUHPE

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POSITION

This Position Paper provides a framework for improving quality of practice, education and training in mental health promotion.

It sets out:
- Rationale and context
- What we mean by a mental health promotion workforce
- Skills required by the workforce
- Key components of mental health promotion training and
- A call to action across policy, training and practice.

Mental health promotion is essential for improving population mental health and wellbeing, preventing poor mental health, and achieving a wide range of health, social and economic outcomes (IUHPE, 2021; WHO, 2022). Improving mental health across populations requires a dedicated and well-prepared workforce across sectors. Workforce development is, therefore, a critical priority to ensure the system has capacity and individuals possess the knowledge, skills, and resources necessary to deliver high-quality mental health promotion initiatives.

RATIONALE AND CONTEXT

Globally, we are amid a polycrisis, with interconnected health, social, economic, and cultural challenges converging to produce multiple complex pressures on population mental health and wellbeing. Amidst the widening equity gap, we are also witnessing greater polarisation, forced displacement through migration, and the fragmentation of community cohesion. These developments coupled with the double-edged sword of AI, the commercial and digital determinants of health, and climate change represent major challenges to public health. As well as impacting physical health, there is increasing evidence that people's mental health is adversely affected, with disadvantaged groups and people from low- income and middle-income countries particularly at risk (WHO, 2022).

Despite substantial investments in mental health care and the growth of mental health professionals in recent years, the global burden of mental disorders remains persistently high, and in many contexts, continues to rise. It is increasingly recognised that treatment approaches alone are not sufficient and that mental health promotion and prevention strategies are needed to protect and enhance population mental health. These approaches aim not only to reduce the incidence of mental disorders but also to enhance protective factors for good mental health, strengthen communities and foster environments that support mental wellbeing for all (Barry et al., 2024; OECD, 2021; IUHPE, 2021; Patel et al., 2023).

There is a strong social, economic and scientific case for investing in mental health promotion. Cost-effective mental health promotion and prevention actions have been shown to improve population mental health, reduce risks for poor mental health, improve health and social wellbeing, and result in significant societal returns considering the substantial costs that are associated with mental health conditions (Le et al., 2021, McDaid et al., 2022). Low and middle-income countries may particularly benefit from investment in mental health promotion, given the chronic under-availability of treatment options for those with poor mental health in these settings (Bolton et al., 2023).

WHAT IS MENTAL HEALTH PROMOTION?

Mental health promotion is a multidisciplinary area of practice, which shifts the focus beyond individually-oriented clinical services to a concern with strengthening protective factors for good mental health, enhancing supportive environments and enabling access to skills, resources and life opportunities that promote the mental health and well-being of individuals and populations
(Barry et al., 2019).

PRINCIPLES OF MENTAL HEALTH PROMOTION:

- Involves the population as a whole, across the lifecourse and in the context of everyday settings
- Focuses on protective factors for enhancing mental wellbeing and enabling equitable mental health outcomes
- Addresses the psychological, physical, social, cultural, economic, commercial and ecological factors that determine the mental health of populations and individuals
- Adopts evidence-based approaches and integrated strategies operating from the individual to community and socio-environmental levels
- Involves intersectoral action, working across sectors and settings extending beyond the health sector
- Is based on public participation, engagement and empowerment.

THE MENTAL HEALTH PROMOTION WORKFORCE

The success of mental health promotion efforts hinge on its workforce and their capacity to deliver evidence-based supports that are accessible to diverse communities. A mental health promotion workforce spans multiple disciplines, including healthcare professionals, educators, social workers, peer support workers, and community and policy leaders, each playing a unique and complementary role. To date, investment in a mental health promotion workforce has been wholly inadequate. A skilled mental health promotion workforce is critical to strengthening population mental health, preventing mental health difficulties and fostering environments where individuals and communities can thrive.

Two complementary levels are envisaged within the mental health promotion workforce, which reflect its broad relevance to diverse sectors:

1. **Dedicated mental health promotion practitioners:** professionals with expertise in mental health promotion practice and implementation of evidence-based mental health promotion initiatives across a range of settings.

2. **Non-specialist providers:** individuals working at an individual and/or community level to deliver mental health promotion initiatives as part of their roles (e.g. teachers, social workers, community health workers, sports leaders, peer support workers, volunteers).

At both levels, the development of workforce capacity through education, training and ongoing professional development is essential to acquire the skills and competencies in mental health promotion.

COMPETENCIES AND SKILLS REQUIRED BY MENTAL HEALTH PROMOTION WORKFORCE

Training in mental health promotion is grounded in the Ottawa Charter for Health Promotion (WHO, 1986), which provides a positive and holistic framework for mental health promotion practice. A health promotion approach, underpinned by a socio-ecological model of health, brings a clear focus on strengthening the health potential of whole populations across the life course and in everyday settings. It provides vital information regarding the drivers and levers required to achieve progress across the individual, community and societal / structural level. This model shifts the focus from an individual, disease-oriented approach towards pro-active and positive action on the factors that enhance and strengthen population mental wellbeing (WHO, 2022).

CORE COMPETENCIES AND SKILLS

Identifying the core competencies and skills at a practice level is a critical step in strengthening capacity for mental health promotion. It also supports the development of a common language with which to communicate the work of mental health promotion with key stakeholders in other sectors including the wider public.

The IUHPE Core Competencies Framework for Health Promotion provides a comprehensive foundation for the essential knowledge, skills and values that are needed for effective mental health promotion practice. The framework (Figure 1) comprises 11 domains of core competency and includes:

- Assessment and analysis of health needs and assets
- Planning, implementation and evaluation of health promotion interventions
- Leadership and communication to foster supportive environments
- Enabling action, advocating for health and mediating change through partnership building and cross-sectoral collaboration
- Ethical practice and cultural competency to ensure equity and inclusion
- Health promotion knowledge base underpinning practice.

All of these core competencies for health promotion are considered central to mental health promotion.

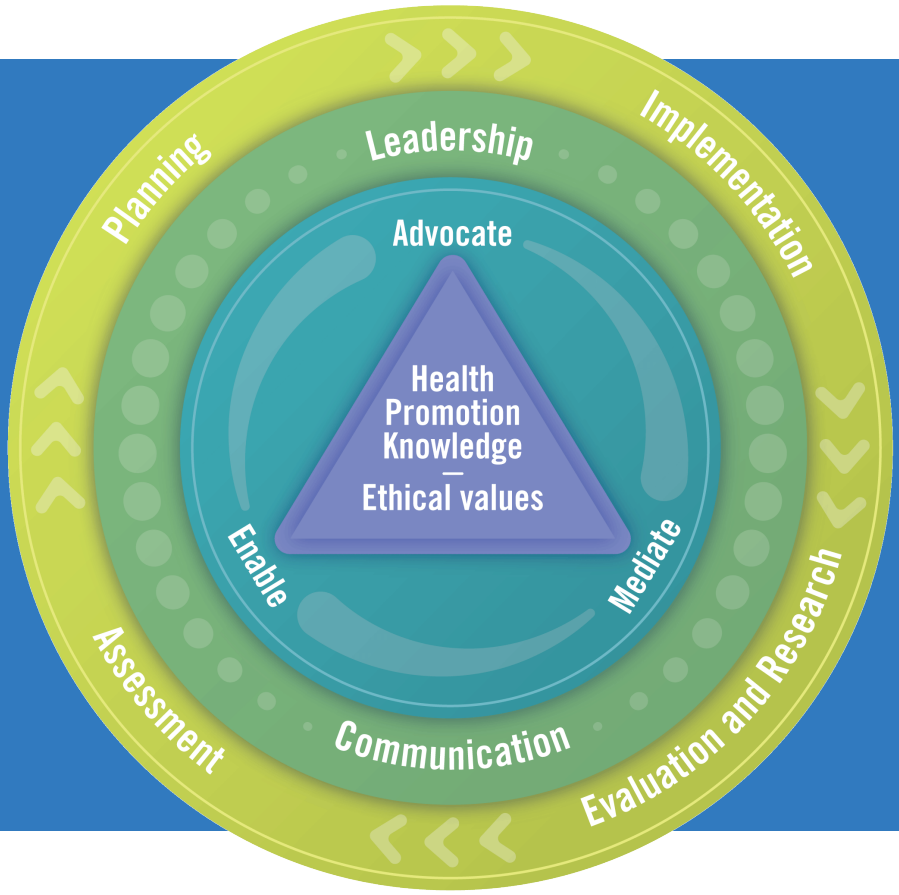

Figure 1: The IUHPE Core Competencies Framework for Health Promotion (adapted from Barry et al., 2012)

The following specific ***knowledge domains*** central to mental health promotion have been identified (IUHPE, 2022):

- Mental health promotion concepts and principles
- Determinants of mental health
- Theories and models of mental health promotion
- Systems and policies
- Awareness and respect for social and cultural diversity
- Research methods
- Effective communication strategies.

Combined, these competencies and knowledge domains form the foundation for developing a capable mental health promotion workforce and guide education and professional development.

KEY COMPONENTS OF MENTAL HEALTH PROMOTION TRAINING

Figure 2 outlines the workforce categories and the competencies (knowledge and skills) and training required at each level of the mental health promotion workforce.

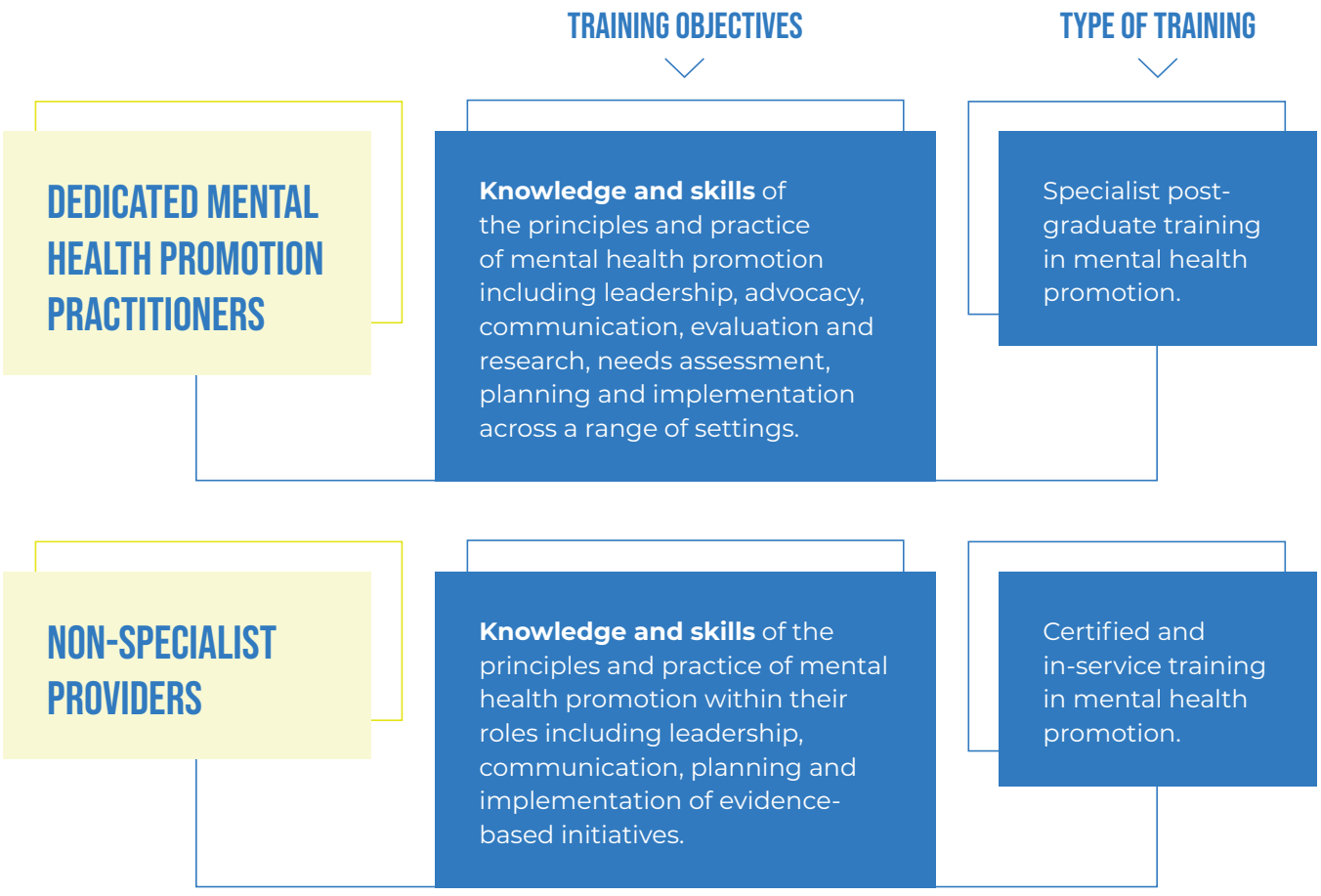

Figure 2: Mental health promotion workforce categories and training objectives (authors' compilation)

MENTAL HEALTH PROMOTION TRAINING: KEY COMPONENTS

The following core elements of mental health promotion training are proposed[1]:

- **Knowledge of the conceptual and theoretical base of mental health promotion**
  - Understanding the positive concept of mental wellbeing and its determinants from a socio-ecological perspective
  - Key concepts and principles underpinning a lifecourse, systems-based approach to improving population mental health and wellbeing
  - The concept of a 'mental health in all policies' approach and its implications for policy and practice.
- **The practical implementation of mental health promotion across the life course and in key settings**
  - Enable, advocate and mediate, working in partnership across sectors and settings, to improve population mental wellbeing and address the determinants of inequities in mental wellbeing
  - Leadership and communication skills in advancing mental health promotion policies and programmes with key stakeholders and diverse audiences
  - Assessment, planning, implementation and evaluation of strategies for enhancing mental wellbeing across the lifecourse and in key settings such as the home, schools, workplaces, communities, health services and digital settings.
- **Research and evidence-based strategies to inform policy and practice**
  - Adopt an evidence-based approach to planning and implementing mental health promotion programmes and policies at a population level
  - Use of research methods to evaluate and improve mental health promotion practice
  - Knowledge and use of appropriate indicators to measure mental health at programme and population levels.
- **Ethical values and principles of best practice in implementing mental health promotion policies and programmes**
  - Adopt an empowering and reflective approach to practice based on principles of equity, social justice, empowerment, co-production, and sustainability
  - Awareness and respect for social and cultural diversity and the inclusion of lived experience, community knowledge and Indigenous perspectives.

This outline of key components on mental health promotion training is intended to provide a practical framework that can operate flexibly to inform education and training outcomes and workforce planning in different countries and jurisdictions. Alongside the delivery of specialist level academic education and training programmes at undergraduate and/or postgraduate level, the delivery of non-specialist in-service training courses and Continuing Professional Development programmes is recommended to upskill personnel working across sectors in integrating mental health promotion competencies into their practice (case examples of existing courses are outlined in the Appendix). Training peer-leaders from a variety of organisations to deliver training can also promote greater engagement and the sustainability of training programmes. Policymakers and other leaders are also encouraged to engage with training and competency development in this area, as support for mental health promotion can have synergistic effects in achieving other policy goals.

1 Training components identified build on mental health promotion principles and health promotion core competencies and draw on a review of the literature (Harte & Barry, 2024) and existing mental health promotion courses.

CALL TO ACTION – POLICY, TRAINING AND PRACTICE

We call on key stakeholders across policy, academia and practice to commit to the development of a mental health promotion workforce.

Policy makers: We call on key international bodies, including the World Health Organization, the European Union, the OECD, national bodies (governments, ministries, departments) and non-governmental agencies to support the development of a mental health promotion workforce by:

- Prioritising mental health promotion as a strategic goal
- Enacting policies and prioritising funding and implementation strategies that support comprehensive mental health promotion training
- Developing employment opportunities for a dedicated mental health promotion workforce to deliver evidence-based initiatives at a population level.

Academia: The university sector should support the development of a mental health promotion workforce by:

- Designing and delivering specialist mental health promotion courses/modules within health and social science programmes, fostering interdisciplinary training and collaborating with practice settings to equip graduates with practical skills and competencies
- Designing and delivering Continuing Professional Development to professionals working at an individual and/or community level to support them in the delivery of mental health promotion as part of their roles (e.g. teachers, social workers, community health workers, sports leaders, peer support workers).

Practice Leaders, Professional Bodies and Associations: To effectively deliver mental health promotion across our communities, we call on practice leaders, professional bodies and associations to:

- Invest in (i) the ongoing professional development of the mental health promotion workforce through in-service training and (ii) the implementation of evidence-based mental health promotion practices that respond to the diverse needs in our communities.

Active investment in the development of a mental health promotion workforce is a strategic priority as it has potential to yield catalytic improvements in the health and wellbeing of individuals and populations.

APPENDIX: CASE STUDIES OF MENTAL HEALTH PROMOTION COURSES

CASE STUDY 1

Postgraduate Mental Health Promotion Training Development in Ireland

Specialist level training was jointly developed by the Discipline of Health Promotion at the University of Galway (https://www.universityofgalway.ie/hpr/) and Mental Health Ireland (https://www.mentalhealthireland.ie) in 2019, as a part-time academic course, the Postgraduate Certificate in Mental Health Promotion. This blended learning programme was designed for professionals working in different sectors who wish to develop knowledge, skills and competencies of mental health promotion and its implementation in practice.

Programme Aim: to provide participants with professional education and training in the principles and practice of promoting positive mental health and wellbeing.

Programme Structure: Underpinned by a health promotion framework and informed by the IUHPE Health Promotion core competencies, course learning outcomes included acquiring an understanding of; (i) the concepts, principles and evidence base for mental health promotion and, (ii) the practical implementation of mental health promotion interventions from a national and international perspective. Course participants gain skills and competencies for the effective implementation of mental health promotion interventions based on principles of evidence-based practice and policy.

Programme Delivery: The course employs a combination of teaching techniques including self-paced learning using online materials, lectures, participatory workshops and project work. The course is delivered by academics from the Discipline of Health Promotion, together with contributions from practitioners and those with lived experience in the specialist field of study.

Programme Evaluation: Over 100 participants from a wide range of disciplinary backgrounds completed the Postgraduate Certificate programme over a four year period. Pre- and post-course course evaluations show that the participants rated the course highly. They particularly enjoyed the blended learning approach, with a mixture of online materials, academic and guest lectures, and face-to-face tutorials. Participants also reported an increase in their skills and knowledge in promoting mental health from pre- to post programme.

This programme was also adapted for youth workers as a Specialist Certificate in Youth Mental Health Promotion, delivered in partnership with the National Youth Council of Ireland and Jigsaw. Training at a non-specialist level is currently under development with the national Health Service Executive. This includes short in-service training modules, developed as online materials plus an in-person workshop, for staff working in health promotion and the community and voluntary sector.

CASE STUDY 2

Introduction to Mental Health Promotion training in Australia

The Introduction to Mental Health Promotion training was developed in 2024 by *Prevention United* (https://preventionunited.org.au), a national mental health promotion charity based in Melbourne, Australia, to build greater literacy and capability across the mental health promotion workforce.

Programme Aims: To build the capability of Australian mental health promotion workers across settings where people live, work, learn and play. The core focus is on promoting understanding, design and delivery of evidence-based mental health promotion initiatives that improve community wellbeing and help prevent the onset of mental ill health. Participants are from a range of sectors including health, education, local and state governments, community organisations, libraries, the arts and sport.

Programme Structure: The training content was developed by Prevention United in 2024, in collaboration with a range of partners across the mental health promotion sector in Australia. The training provides a guiding framework for mental health promotion which explores the following questions:

- What is mental health and what influences our mental wellbeing?
- What is mental health promotion and why is it important?
- What works to promote mental wellbeing, prevent mental health conditions,
- and build mental health and wellbeing literacy?
- How can I apply this knowledge to my role?

Programme Delivery: The half-day training is currently being delivered in-person and online by mental health promotion experts at Prevention United.

Programme Evaluation: As of July 2025, over 400 people have participated in the *Introduction to Mental Health Promotion* training and 50% of those have completed an evaluation survey following the training. The overall average satisfaction rating from the survey was 4.4/5. Furthermore, 85% of the respondents said they felt confident to apply what they have learnt to their work. Participants generally found the training informative, relevant and helpful to their work, as well as engaging and thought-provoking. The training gave them an understanding of the underpinning approaches to mental health promotion and a framework to apply to their work.

Next steps: Planning is now underway to extend the training to other settings where mental health promotion is delivered, and complement with other relevant training focused on areas such as evaluation, community engagement and wellbeing-centred leadership. The overarching aim is to embed a range of training options tailored to different needs in a cost-effective way to support the professionalisation of the mental health promotion workforce.

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