

A Learning Network for the Alumni of the Oliver Tambo Fellowship Programme (OTFP)



PREPARATION * PRINCIPLES * NEXT STEPS

ERMIN ERASMUS

Basic network concept



- OTFP alumni network / learning network, conceptualised as a **community of practice**
- Key characteristics of a community of practice:

Characteristics	Applicability to OTFP
Group of people	OTFP alumni
Common concern, passion, interest	Management and leadership practices in the SA health system (especially public sector)
Regular interaction to better understand the common concern and to develop better practices in relation to the common concern	Various opportunities to share information, develop knowledge and work together

Why a community of practice?

- **It fits with key practical needs of the OTFP alumni**

Typical community of practice activities	Needs expressed by OTFP alumni
Seeking experience	Sharing experiences and ideas on successful practices
Requests for information	Sharing new knowledge on management and leadership
Mapping knowledge and identifying gaps	Promoting health system development by identifying and prioritizing issues which need action
Coordination and synergy	Creating a critical mass of skilled health managers who together can get things done

- **It fits with important values**
 - Network of equals, peer support, alumni not passive recipients

Preparatory steps so far



1. Consultation with alumni

- Face-to-face: mid-2009 and mid-2010
- Online survey: late 2010 (statement of purpose, intention to participate, view on e-platform for interaction and sharing)

2. Advanced draft of a statement of purpose

- Key values, e.g. collective growth and learning, health system improvement
- Key (diverse) needs, e.g. sharing knowledge and experience, working jointly on tasks or projects, building individual profiles, maintaining social links with like-minded people, staying in touch with the OTFP itself

Importance of buy-in, common definitions and expectations
The members drive the network, so it must make sense to them

Preparatory steps so far



3. Developing ideas around activities (principles)

- Balance between self-organisation (the community pursues what it sees as interesting and worthwhile) and central direction (stimulation of activity, rhythm)
- Taking care not too overburden participants
- Vary the nature of activities to keep the network interesting

4. Developing ideas around activities (practice)

- Online (dispersed group) and face-to-face (important for relationships and certain activities such as workshops)
- Activities around learning, sharing and peer support AND activities that build the community and community identity

Activity examples



	On-line activities	Face-to-face activities
Peer support, further learning and joint tasks	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Engaging with other alumni to obtain information, help with work-related problems or to discuss topical issues • On-line collaboration on documents or projects • Distributing useful information such as interesting journal articles or information on relevant conferences 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Study visits or conference attendance • Workshops or seminars on current policy issues and academic topics • Meetings for alumni who began collaborating on-line, but who now require face-to-face engagement • Alumni acting as guest lecturers to current OTFP students
Community and identity building	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Disseminating success stories or innovative alumni initiatives • Maintaining an on-line calendar where all members can post important events that they want to share with their peers • On-line polls to consult members about key aspects of alumni network functioning 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Tokens of community membership such as lapel badge or other OTFP branded item • Social occasions where alumni from different years and geographical areas can interact • Communicating success stories or innovative alumni initiatives

Preparatory steps so far



5. Developing ideas around online collaboration platform

- Important principles: **flexibility** (so that it can evolve over time with the community), **limited administrator control** (so that members can use it when they want, how they want)

Examples of design features considered

Member profiles	Document sharing	Document filing	Online calendar
Online chat	Member sub-groups	Online discussions	Notifications to whole group

Key questions / considerations



- **Much preparatory work has been done...If/how to proceed to launch and scale-up?**
 - Have we done enough to understand the needs of the alumni and to formulate appropriate goals and possible activities for the network?
 - How committed are alumni currently to the idea of a network?
 - Over time, what strategies can be developed to sustain alumni interest in and commitment to the network, especially in the face of many other commitments?
 - How to make any network financially sustainable as it will require both management time and expenses on activities such as workshops?