Theme 1 - What Knowledge and Skills for Humanitarian Workers?

Introduction

Within any recognised profession there exists a core set of values, knowledge and skills that bring coherence and connection to the professional workforce. The humanitarian community has clearly outlined the principles and values by which it operates, but it has yet to agree sector-wide knowledge and skills that are required or expected from its workforce. The repercussions of this ambiguity are felt on multiple levels, from the prospective humanitarian worker seeking to ‘get-in’ to the sector, to the field-based employee looking to develop and progress their career, to the challenges that universities face in seeking to create a degree course of relevance to humanitarian employers. The lack of clarity on what constitutes essential humanitarian knowledge and skills, creates stumbling blocks and barriers to access for many.

Over the past ten years there has been much discussion within and across the humanitarian community about the need to develop personal and technical competencies to improve humanitarian aid performance and the capacity of individual staff members, particularly in light of increasing complexity in the humanitarian workspace. In the absence of agreed occupational standards for the humanitarian sector per se, it has been incumbent upon organisations and educational providers to come up with their own way to identify the experience, skills and behaviours necessary for humanitarian workers to perform effectively in their given roles. By and large, agencies have responded by developing their own unique competency frameworks and training programmes for their specific organisation’s needs.

Many universities, on the other hand, have also attempted to develop degree courses that equip students with appropriate knowledge and skills to work in the sector, but have done so with often limited coordination with the humanitarian employers. As both the CERAH guide to University Training and Education Programmes in Humanitarian Action and ELRHA Scoping Study on professionalisation show, there are now dozens of ‘humanitarian’ degrees on offer today; however an analysis of these degrees reveals a remarkable diversity in the various curricula. Of some 17 universities which provided curriculum data to the ELRHA scoping study, all were found to differ in respect to what they identified as their most important ‘core’ courses; that diversity further extended to their listings of second and third most important courses. While diversity of knowledge and expertise, particularly in academic disciplines, should be valued, the humanitarian degree currently faces a problem of application. This was clearly identified by a focus group hosted by ELRHA in 2010 with 17 human resource and learning managers. This group emphasised the point

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1 It is recognised that the humanitarian sector is made up of many intersecting professional disciplines with their own occupational standards such as medicine, engineering, public health, logistics, etc.

2 This should not be understood to be caused by a lack of desire from universities to coordinate with humanitarian employers, many universities in fact berated the fact that they found it almost impossible to get input and feedback on the design of their curricula.


4 Professionalising the Humanitarian Sector - A Scoping Study, Walker, P., Russ, C. 2010
that the lack of consistency in humanitarian degrees meant that those in charge of recruitment had little idea of what skills and knowledge university graduates emerged with. They also identified that the lack of practical experience and residencies or internships within academic courses was the major stumbling block to offering graduates employment.

**Working with Competencies**

Competency models are used widely within the private and public sectors. They traditionally began in order to address discreet sets of technical competencies, but evolved in the 70s and 80s to identify the more generic personal characteristics that resulted in effective and high performing individuals.

Competencies summarise the experience, skills and behaviours required to perform effectively in a given job, role or situation. They are what a person has, i.e. a characteristic, attitude, skills, aspect of one’s self-image, or body of knowledge and behaviour which he or she uses. They are typically used in recruitment, performance management and performance development of staff.\(^5\)

In the humanitarian sector, much attention has been focused on the identification of competencies by agencies in the past decade but organisations’ different missions, ideologies, sizes and cultures meant that each framework created differed from the next: the result being that staff developed through one organisation’s competency framework couldn’t easily transfer to another; this ultimately contributed to an impasse in adopting sector-wide competencies.\(^6\)

In June 2007 People in Aid, conducted a review\(^7\) of the use and effectiveness of competency frameworks within the humanitarian sector and attempted to identify behaviours common to all the frameworks. The review concluded that those agencies that incorporated competency models into job roles helped national staff to better understand the expectations that organisations had of them and gave them clear guidance on how to grow and develop within the organisation. The research however, also found that competency frameworks and other performance related tools had not to date introduced adequate rigour into human resource processes and procedures in humanitarian response and that they needed to form part of an overall organisational capacity building strategy and HR process to have any real impact.

Since that study, further frameworks have emerged including those from the UN. There is now an increased recognition of the need for a more joined up approach and the creation of sector-wide agreed common competencies which could compliment and enhance agency specific ones.

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\(^6\) Professionalising the Humanitarian Sector - A Scoping Study, Walker, P., Russ C., 2010

\(^7\) Behaviours Which Lead to Effective Performance in Humanitarian Response - A Review of the use and effectiveness of competency frameworks within the humanitarian sector - Swords, S. People in Aid, 2007
Work to Date

Although the humanitarian sector as a whole cannot yet put claim to globally agreed standards, much ground work has begun towards this establishment. The ELRHA Scoping study launched a sector-wide consultation in 2009 which resulted in 21 humanitarian competencies being agreed and published in 2010. A year later, the Consortium of British Humanitarian Agencies (CBHA) produced an iteration of this with a distilled version of some 6 competencies that the 15 member agencies agreed to recruit and manage staff performance by.

There is currently a move to get wider agreement of common humanitarian competencies for professional development across the sector, and to link them up with those that are already gaining sector acceptance such as logistics, health, child protection and nutrition. Through a second professionalisation survey, ELRHA has been promoting the consultation of the CBHA developed competencies for wider adoption in the sector and asking a critical mass of stakeholders to comment on their wider applicability within the sector. It is suggested that only with sector-wide agreed humanitarian competencies, can the humanitarian community hope to build up international cadres of staff with the necessary inter-operability between agencies and countries; this could also help to address the issue of equity of access to people wishing to professionally develop in the south which has so far been severely lacking.

Examples of progress to date include the humanitarian logistics competencies which have been developed in consultation with a wide sample of NGOs from the UK and US and received accreditation by the Chartered Institute of Logistics and Transport; the UN Child Protection Cluster has developed sector-wide competencies which they are in the process of establishing into a year-long development programme and partnering with a university for professional recognition; a similar process is being undertaken with the UN Nutrition Cluster and Disaster Medicine and Public Health for All Health Professionals have undergone a rigorous process of development of core competencies in the US which is nearing establishment.

Another substantial project is The Australian Council for International Development (ACFID) members who began developing a core competency framework in 2007 – the ‘Humanitarian and Development Assistance Competency Framework’ – in consultation with the Community Services and Health Industry Skills Council (CSHISC). In their current form, the competency framework has established the basis for 2 new vocational qualifications, a Certificate IV or Diploma in Community Services (Development and/or Humanitarian Assistance) and these could be consulted on with a wider group of stakeholders to determine its transferability and adaptability in other settings. The

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9 http://www.thecbha.org/media/website/file/CBHA_Objective_1_Final_Report.pdf
10 http://www.humanitarianlogistics.org/about-hla/certification
NOHA network of universities has also integrated competencies amongst their university programmes.\(^{12}\)

The importance of peer-led learning and the emergence of a community of practice will be crucial if an independent professional community of humanitarian workers is to be recognised. The Harvard Policy and Conflict Research Program is one initiative that is actively working to encourage such a community\(^{13}\). Rather than deducting the professional character of humanitarian action from a set of legal and policy norms, they noted that participants in their focus groups were more inclined to induce the professional character of their activities from the growing exchanges among humanitarian workers on the challenges of operating in complex emergencies and the commonly felt desire of developing capacity to apply objective standards and tools throughout the humanitarian sector. This belief fuelled the development of the International Association of Professionals in Humanitarian Assistance and Protection (PHAP) in 2009\(^{14}\). PHAP and other peer-led communities recognize that the range and depth of experiences of humanitarian workers can and should play a critical role in the design of practice orientated humanitarian strategies and standards.

Not everyone, however, is a champion of the competency approach and there are those that suggest that it needs to be aligned with other approaches. Some critics say that top-down training methodologies providing a pre-defined set of core competences are unlikely to be sufficient to "professionalize" the humanitarian sector and may serve to create an ‘elite’ community that will cut humanitarian workers off from people affected by disasters. Rather, it is suggested that efforts should be driven toward better understanding the needs of this particular audience for professional knowledge, competence and skills, and the use of community of learning approaches to obtain the necessary scale of professionalization in the humanitarian sector.

The shifting dynamics of humanitarian crises and the diversification of actors that make up the ‘humanitarian system’ caution against too prescriptive an approach to defining one knowledge base for the sector. Competencies must not be seen as exclusive to other forms of knowledge and expertise; rather competencies when deployed effectively should equip humanitarian workers with the ability to recognise, value, seek out and engage knowledge and skills that can enhance humanitarian efforts. For example the Listening project identified through consultation with the recipients of humanitarian assistance that often the knowledge and expertise that is most valued by recipients of aid, is that of the local context. People interviewed included in this: language skills, cultural sensitivity and in-depth understanding of the local environment- not just the national environment. Another area of knowledge and expertise that is increasing in importance comes from technology and growing partnerships with commercial actors.

Leadership remains a critical issue for those working in the humanitarian context and the competency approach around senior level training becomes more problematic as it attempts to tangibly nail the skills, knowledge and competencies for tomorrow’s leaders where in fact these qualities often prove to be more intuitive and ephemeral. Recent work by organisations such as ALNAP, HFP, People In Aid, AHRMIO, Cranfield University (School of Management) and the Center

\(^{12}\) http://www.nohanet.org/noha-master-programme/professional-profiles-and-competencies-.html

\(^{13}\) http://www.hpcrresearch.org/

\(^{14}\) http://www.phapinternational.org/
for Creative Leadership and collaboratives such as the Emergency Capacity Building Project and the Consortium of British Humanitarian Agencies are deepening the understanding of leadership in the humanitarian sector. There is a need to ensure that education and training providers are brought into this conversation to ensure that future leaders are adequately prepared and equipped for the challenges they will face in the years to come, and ensure that educators' own understanding of leadership is changing in line with research, experience and expectations.

Summary

It would seem then, that while competency models are gaining traction in the sector that they need not to be working in exclusion of other models and approaches and there is perhaps an opportunity at this stage of the sector’s professional development offer, to explore other parallel systems and processes which could usefully contribute to learning programmes.

For the sake of humanitarian workers wishing to enter and develop within the sector, it is paramount to coordinate, communicate and promote the work of agencies, education and training providers and researchers in a coherent and transparent way. This will ensure that the best of what is being developed in each discipline within the humanitarian sector is made available to the majority of stakeholders and that they too have an opportunity to comment on and contribute to the shaping of what is becoming the underpinning professional infrastructure of the humanitarian sector.

The humanitarian sector, with all its intersecting disciplines is a complex system to manoeuvre within, but if it is to be fit for purpose for the predicted growth, it will have to have systems that facilitate new workers entering it at short notice, provide inter-operability between agencies and countries of operation, allow for scaling up in large emergencies and provide the necessary guidance to those entering from other disciplines and sectors.

Further Questions to pose

- What other models and approaches can we learn from and adapt for the humanitarian sector?
- What can universities do to enhance their relationships with recruiting agencies in order to increase their graduates’ employability?
- How can humanitarian workers be equipped to engage with forms of knowledge and expertise outside of the ‘traditional’ humanitarian sphere?
- How can we promote better access to professional development for workers from southern countries?

Further Reading


UN OCHA: Mapping the models: the roles and rationale of the humanitarian coordinator, R Kent, Humanitarian Futures Programme, King's College, London 2009


Behaviours Which Lead to Effective Performance in Humanitarian Response - A Review of the use and effectiveness of competency frameworks within the humanitarian sector - Swords, S. People in Aid, 2007