

REPORT

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Teaching Humanitarian Action: NOHA Joint Master's Programme at 30

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Abstract

Assuming that higher education has a role in the professionalisation of humanitarianism, this article discusses humanitarian work as a subject in higher education. The Network on Humanitarian Action (NOHA) joint master's programme in International Humanitarian Action is used as a case study for understanding the challenges and potentials in teaching the subject. Teaching challenges are discussed in relation to three themes: interdisciplinary, work-integrated learning and intercultural competencies. These themes are an integrated part of the professionalisation of humanitarian work, since they concern how humanitarian action should be understood and implemented. The NOHA joint master's programme incorporates a variety of approaches, such as student mobility and a range of courses, to strengthen the student's education in each of these themes. The last part of the article discusses the future prospects of the programme in response to trends that affect higher education: online teaching and rapid technological change. It is argued that the NOHA network and the NOHA joint master's programme are well positioned to navigate these trends and continue to be relevant for educating humanitarian professionals.

Keywords Teaching, Professionalisation, Humanitarian action, Intercultural competence, Interdisciplinary, Resilience, Work integration

Introduction

Scholars such as Michael Barnett argue that the humanitarian sector has changed. The original humanitarian ethos of volunteers trying to do their best to help people in need is fading away. The new ethos aims to create measurable positive change while being accountable to many stakeholders (Barnett 2011). The new ethos has led the humanitarian sector to professionalise, namely to build up knowledge and skills in order to avoid harming people in need to ensure that change is for the better. As Walker and Russ put it as follows:

We are thus seeing an evolution of humanitarian action from an ad hoc, emotive-based, largely West-

ern-driven system to a more global system of defined service delivery, which is increasingly pressured to define and regulate its competence, coverage, and purpose (Walker and Russ 2011, p. 1195).

Walker and Russ describe how the humanitarian sector includes more signs of professionalisation, including mapping of core competencies, certification, apprenticeship, professional associations and accreditation (Walker and Russ 2011; also Redmond 2015; James 2016). Accreditation overlaps with the mandates of higher education institutions, since these institutions provide systematic recognition and quality control of expert skills and knowledge. Thus, the higher education sector is part of the overall professionalisation process of humanitarian work.

Professionalisation faces several drawbacks. James (2016) lists three such drawbacks: (1) distance from beneficiaries (or partners) in the form of special terminology and thinking, (2) barriers to entry and dissolution of voluntariness and (3) risk aversion and eventual

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decline in innovation that make the sector less adapted to change. Some of these drawbacks with professionalisation and higher education will be discussed later in this article.

This article aims to use a case study to provide insights into higher education's role in the professionalisation of humanitarian work. I will analyse the Network on Humanitarian Action's (NOHA) joint master's programme in International Humanitarian Action and its relation to professionalisation.¹ The analysis will include not only the current teaching challenges but also how global trends can affect the organisation of the programme. Specifically, this article seeks to answer the following three questions:

- 1) What is the current structure and content of the NOHA joint master's programme?
- 2) What are the main teaching challenges facing the programme and how are they managed?
- 3) How can the NOHA joint master's programme continue to be relevant to different stakeholders?

This article is organised according to the following structure. The “[NOHA network and NOHA joint master's programme](#)” section seeks to describe the current NOHA network and NOHA's joint master's programme, but I do not attempt to provide a full history of the network. The “[Meeting challenges](#)” section addresses teaching challenges under three themes: interdisciplinary studies, work integration and intercultural competence. These themes are part of the professionalisation of humanitarian work. Humanitarian action can best be understood from across academic disciplines, where such work needs to be learned on the job, and success in the field assumes an ability to work with and in different cultures. The “[NOHA joint master's programme and trends in higher education](#)” section offers suggestions on how to think about the future relevance of the NOHA joint master's programme in response to two global trends that affect higher education: online teaching and rapid technological change. The “[Conclusion](#)” section offers the conclusion.

NOHA network and NOHA joint master's programme

The network on humanitarian action was founded in 1993 as a joint European initiative by Université catholique de Louvain, Belgium; Universidad de Deusto,

Spain; Aix-Marseille Université, France; Ruhr-Universität Bochum, Germany; and University of Oxford, UK.

The current mission of NOHA is as follows: “... to increase the effectiveness and quality of humanitarian action through the provision of excellent and internationally recognized education, research and training” (Mission statement, June 2021). The network has various activities. A first example is the NOHA Global initiative, aimed at supporting the creation of local university networks for education in humanitarian action in different parts of the world, such as South East Asia. A second example is the European Universities on Professionalization on Humanitarian Action (EUPRHA) project. EUPRHA was coordinated by the University of Deusto and funded by the European Commission's Lifelong Learning Programme. It entailed 30 European universities, NGO's plus Sphere Project and the International Council of Voluntary Agencies. The project sought to contribute to the professionalisation of the humanitarian sector by promoting a competencies-based framework for the education of humanitarian professionals. The project ran between 2011 and 2014 (Einarsdóttir et al. 2014).² A third example is the European Humanitarian Roundtables, co-organised with the European Commission (Directorate-General for European Civil Protection and Humanitarian Aid Operations, DG ECHO) as preparation for the World Humanitarian Summit 2016. A fourth example is the *Journal of International Humanitarian Action*, established in 2016, published by Springer. The journal publishes peer-reviewed articles on the full range of humanitarian action-related topics.³

The NOHA network comprises the following European partner institutions: Aix-Marseille Université (AMU), France; University of Malta (UM), Malta; Rijksuniversiteit Groningen (RUG), Netherlands; Ruhr-Universität Bochum (RUB), Germany; Universidad de Deusto (UD), Spain; University College Dublin (UCD), Ireland; Uniwersytet Warszawski (UW), Poland; Uppsala Universitet (UU), Sweden; and Vilniaus universitetas (VU), Lithuania.

Eight of these nine network members provide the NOHA joint master's programme, but membership does not require that an institution has to provide the NOHA joint master's programme. All institutions participate in activities depending on their current ability. For example, Vilnius does not currently provide the master's but arranges short-term courses in the humanitarian field. The eight master programme universities are partners in

¹ See official NOHA homepage <https://www.nohanet.org/> (retrieved at 2023–06–07).

² <https://www.nohanet.org/euprha/?euprha> (accessed on 2023–06–07).

³ <https://jhumanitarianaction.springeropen.com/> (accessed on 2023–06–07).

the NOHA consortium that is the institutional structure for the master's programme.

The main activity of NOHA is the joint master's programme in International Humanitarian Action. The NOHA joint master's programme is attuned to the European Higher Education Area's (EHEA) higher education structure. The creation of this structure was effectively initiated by the 1999 Bologna declaration to harmonise European higher education. This declaration started a multi-layer process with some main features. A first feature was the creation of the European Credit Transfer System (ECTS), where one semester of teaching represents 30 ECTS or the equivalent of 20 weeks of teaching. A second feature was the creation of a common two-cycle system. The first cycle of the bachelor education has a range of 180–240 ECTS, and the second cycle of the master's education has a range of 60–120 ECTS (Faber and Westerheijden 2011).

The NOHA joint master's programme was first created as a 60 ECTS programme but was subsequently increased to 90 ECTS (2004) and to 120 ECTS (2017). These changes were motivated by a subsequent addition of more courses, such as work placement and career development. The NOHA joint master's programme has proved itself as a high-quality educational programme by receiving the Erasmus Mundus status four times (2004, 2009, 2017, 2020). The Erasmus Mundus Joint Masters (EMJM) are European Commission-supported high-level and integrated study programmes delivered by an international group of higher education institutions. These programmes must include both European Union partners and non-European partners. The Erasmus programme offers a number of scholarships for the best students worldwide.⁴ These scholarships make the NOHA joint master's programme more accessible, since both European and non-European students are otherwise required to pay 12,000 euro in participation costs.

The average student cohort in the NOHA joint master's programme between 2014 and 2022 was 126 students per year, but there are large annual variations. The year 2014 had 103 students starting the programme, and the largest ever cohort in 2020 had 153 students. The latest cohort in 2022 started the first semester with 107 students. The average age of the 2022 cohort students was 27 years. Gender distribution was 81 females (76%) and 26 males (24%). The cohort included 66 Europeans (62%) and 41 non-Europeans (38%). The non-European group had 14 students (13%) from the global north and 27 students

(25%) from the global south. Turning to the alumni, it is noteworthy that more than 4000 students have finished the programme since 1993. NOHA alumni surveys show that the majority of these alumni are working in the development/humanitarian sector.⁵

The current 120 ECTS NOHA joint master's programme has four semesters. The first semester starts with the intensive programme (IP) held at a partner university. This important event brings together all different classes from the different partner universities plus various staff. Typical number of participants is 150 persons, with 75% being students and 25% staff. The IP provides the beginning for the programme and is a shared experience that strengthens the students' NOHA identity. The rest of the semester includes a number of different courses: anthropology and intercultural aspects of humanitarian action, world politics in humanitarian action, international law in humanitarian action, management in humanitarian action and public health in humanitarian action. All universities provide these courses with the same learning objectives; however, the order of the courses and the teaching approach differ.

Students move from their first semester university to another university during the second semester in order to specialise in the humanitarian field. The idea is that the students will both benefit from the specialised subjects taught at another university, but also that the students experience another study culture in another country. The current specialisations are as follows: AMU, "Legal and Geopolitical Approach of Humanitarian Action"; UM, "Forced Migration and Human Security"; RUG, "Humanitarian Analysis and Intervention Design"; RUB, "Humanitarian Policy and Practice: From Delivering Aid to Ending Needs"; UD, "Protection in Humanitarian Action"; UCD, "Resilience: Localising the aid effort"; UW, "Armed Conflicts and Humanitarian Action"; UU, "Conflict, Peace-building and Religion" (<https://www.nohanet.org/masters>).

The third semester provides two optional study paths for the students: (1) mobility to a university outside Europe to one of the twelve global partner universities or (2) work placement in a humanitarian organisation. The current non-European partner institutions are as follows: Fordham University, USA; Universidad Javeriana, Colombia; Universitas Gadjah Mada, Indonesia; Université Saint-Joseph, Lebanon; Chiang Mai University, Thailand; International Christian University, Japan; Deakin University, Australia; Tata Institute of Social Sciences, India; German Jordanian University, Jordan;

⁴ See European Commission Erasmus Plus webpage. <https://erasmus-plus.ec.europa.eu/opportunities/opportunities-for-organisations/cooperation-among-organisations-and-institutions/erasmus-mundus-joint-masters> (accessed on 2023-06-07).

⁵ For example, the NOHA 20 alumni survey report states that 72% of the respondents currently work in the humanitarian or related sectors.

Universidad Rafael Landivar, Guatemala; University of Makeni, Sierra Leone; and Doha Institute for Graduate Studies, Qatar.

The third semester adds either other perspectives on teaching and research or the experience of working in an organisation. Both experiences provide different contexts for learning. The fourth and final semester focuses on writing a master's thesis. A student who has successfully finished the thesis semester and completed the previous semester's courses can apply for a degree in International Humanitarian Action. Students receive a master's degree in International Humanitarian Action. The degree is either a joint degree or a double degree, depending on national regulations. Universities differ in what kind of degree they offer, ranging from a Master of Art degree to a Master of Science degree.

The NOHA board of directors and the NOHA coordinators do the day-to-day coordination of the programme. Each university appoints officials who represent their universities but has the common responsibility for implementing the programme in the respective university. The coordinators make sure that students' registration, credit transfers and student exchange work according to plan. The directors' primary responsibilities include representation in the board of directors and running the respective national programme. One of the main tasks for the board is to translate the joint programme into the format required by national authorities. This includes several issues, such as the length of the master thesis, how many credits the courses should have or the correct balance between oral and written examination.

A number of different mechanisms help to maintain quality assurance. The board of directors meet regularly to discuss issues related to the programme. The NOHA consortium has agreed to have common study and examination regulations that set minimum standards for the educational quality. The different national authorities evaluate each programme to maintain accreditation rights. Finally, the intensive programme includes the Joint Programme Committee. This is a joint forum held one time per year at the IP that brings together viewpoints from all the students participating in the programme. The forum includes students, teaching staff and the NOHA coordinators to make sure that issues reach a broad number of stakeholders.

The next section will discuss teaching challenges in relation to the three themes: interdisciplinary education, work integration and intercultural competence. I will describe the themes, how the programme incorporates these themes and offer some observations of the future development of the programme.

Meeting challenges

Interdisciplinary education

Humanitarian action is multidimensional. A humanitarian worker will benefit from knowing history, international relations, management, public health and numerous other topics. This worker will also use a number of different skills and competencies to solve the task. Walker and Russ suggest that all humanitarian workers need some core competencies, such as resilience, cultural awareness, security consciousness and accountability to affected populations (Walker and Russ 2011). NOHA's EUPRHA project was one example of the empirical work done to map relevant humanitarian competencies. This data was used to develop the Humanitarian Action Qualifications Framework (HAQF), which has subsequently affected the curriculum development for the NOHA joint master's programme (Einarsdóttir et al. 2014; another example is Walker and Russ 2010). However, a meta-study of humanitarian worker's competencies does not provide a simple answer to what exact competencies are needed, nor how "competencies" should be understood (Ripoll Gallardo et al. 2015). A conclusion is that there are several proposals, but no clear consensus on what a final list of competencies could look like.

From a higher education perspective, one insight from the study by Ripoll Gallardo et al. (Ripoll Gallardo et al. 2015) is that no single discipline can develop all competencies needed in humanitarian work, and that an interdisciplinary approach is reasonable. Interdisciplinary studies integrate insights from different disciplines to understand different issues, e.g. humanitarian work, but also make the distinctions between the disciplines less rigid. One relevant definition of interdisciplinary studies is as follows:

Interdisciplinary studies is a process of answering a question, solving a problem, or addressing a topic that is too broad or complex to be dealt with adequately by a single discipline and draws on disciplinary perspectives and integrates their insights to produce a more comprehensive understanding or cognitive advancement (Repko 2008, p. 12).

Interdisciplinary studies require teaching and research collaboration over the traditional discipline boundaries to create new understandings of the study topics. This can also imply that scholars and students from one discipline are trained in another discipline.

Interdisciplinary education includes several benefits. Individual disciplines provide incomplete pictures of the study subject. A student who learns from several disciplines can apply a variety of concepts, theories and methods so that a subject can be understood from different perspectives. This will ideally lead to a better overall

understanding of the topic, including how to position the topic in a larger context. An important outcome of interdisciplinary studies is the boundary-crossing skills, such as “...the ability to change perspectives, to synthesize knowledge of different disciplines, and to cope with complexity” (Spelt et al. 2009, p. 366).

Interdisciplinary studies face several challenges. One challenge is that teachers usually have a background from one discipline, and that it might be difficult to adapt to concepts, theories and methods from other disciplines. Teachers need both support and incentives for developing knowledge and competence in providing interdisciplinary education. Another challenge, from a teaching perspective, is to achieve the conditions for discipline integration and how to measure this. Understanding and applying several theories and methods from different disciplines are difficult. Cognitive processes, such as comparing and synthesising, require that a student not only understands different theories and methods but also has the skill to relate to each other in an independent fashion. This is an inherently creative process (Spelt et al. 2009). Interdisciplinary teaching requires that courses and programmes include learning outcomes, teaching processes and assessment tasks that support these cognitive processes. There is also a need to establish better methods for measuring interdisciplinary understanding to make sure the students achieve such outcomes (Schijf et al. 2022).

The NOHA joint master’s programme incorporates several disciplines into the programme to provide a holistic understanding of humanitarian action. The first semester has courses dedicated to anthropology, management, public health, law and world politics. These disciplines are applied on the subject of humanitarian action, with emergency relief work in crisis or conflicts as the paradigmatic examples. The idea is that each student needs to put together his or her understanding of humanitarian action today with the help of the different courses. The first semester could be understood as multidisciplinary, where several disciplines are applied to the same topic. Some universities offer interdisciplinary studies in the second semester specialisation, such as UCD with the theme “Resilience: Localising the aid effort”. Moreover, rational processes such as analysis and synthesis are essential to complete the full programme successfully; this approach is in line with interdisciplinary studies in general. The main part in which students can show how well they managed to incorporate the different disciplines in an interdisciplinary fashion is the fourth semester master’s thesis course.

The EUPRHA project provided the content for common learning objectives for the NOHA joint master’s programme. A remaining challenge is to develop

a consensus on how to achieve these objectives in the framework of interdisciplinary education. This provides a strong argument for continuing network-wide collaboration between teachers from different disciplines. It could, for example, include training and use of pedagogical models in designing the courses and assessment. A consistent use of models such as Biggs SOLO taxonomy (Structure of the Observed Learning Outcome) could help in understanding student development processes and the end goal of the process (Spelt et al. 2009). Integration of such models can help to strengthen the interdisciplinary teaching in the programme but also provides an even stronger foundation for understanding humanitarian action better.

Work integration

NOHA joint master’s programme aims to support professionalisation in the humanitarian field. The programme is thus aimed at professional development; however, it is also aimed at providing high-quality academic education, which ends with a master’s thesis. These master theses are important contributions to the humanitarian action research field. On the other hand, a pure academic master’s degree risks being irrelevant to the humanitarian field. This provides a strong argument to focus on learning adapted to fit the future profession. As noted by Silva et al. on work-integrated learning (WIL) approaches as follows:

Despite the diversity of approaches, all WIL strategies share the same learning goal. They invite students to apply theoretical knowledge into new contexts and, therefore, acquire and refine specific working skills while performing particular tasks (Silva et al 2018, p 5.).

Thus, a relevant master’s programme should seek to include WIL strategies, such as an internship. Walker and Russ (2011) also note the relevance of internships for developing new professionals in the humanitarian field. Work-integrated learning integration is done in several ways in the NOHA joint master’s programme. The primary vehicle for workforce integration is the work placement or internship. The work placement represents 20 ECTS from the third semester. Work placement can be done in any organisation working with humanitarian action. Some reoccurring placement organisations are Médecins Sans Frontières, European Civil Protection and Humanitarian Aid Operations and different Red Cross and Red Crescent associations. A career development-training course runs parallel to the work placement and consists of 10 ECTS devoted to building a career plan, identification of knowledge and skills gaps plus preparing for the post master’s degree career.

NOHA alumni consistently rank the work placement as one of the most valuable parts of the programme, since it provides new contacts for future employers and a chance to experience humanitarian work, which has been especially important for those students who did not have previous work experience. Given the number of alumni who ends up working in the humanitarian and broader development sector, the value of the work placement can be high. Systematic studies also show that there is a link between internships and employment (Silva et al. 2018).

There are also some challenges facing the work placements. McRae and Ramju note that work integration is strengthened when the higher education institutions and future employers become partners in the student's education (McRae and Ramji 2017). This observation provides an incentive to make sure that the students are employable and is an argument for NOHA to continue to establish institutional relations with humanitarian organisations. Moreover, there is space to improve the outcomes of the work placement by linking the students to different alumni, who can function as mentors or coaches during and after the work placement.

A structural challenge is that the work placement is conducted during the third semester in the programme. The ideal is that the students will use the insights from the work placement to write an original master's thesis that could make a contribution to the humanitarian field and then graduate. However, there are examples where students successfully complete their work placements in the organisation and then are offered a temporal work contract. Such opportunities are interesting for both the students and the organisations. It can also be seen as a successful work-integrated learning experience, since it leads to (temporal) employment. This situation is less optimal from the perspective of the master's programme, where the ideal is that the student will write their thesis and graduate on time. It is therefore paradoxical that the NOHA joint master's programme's success in work-integrated learning also undermines the timely completion of the student's study path.

Intercultural competence

The humanitarian sector employs individuals from numerous national, ethnic and religious backgrounds, and the probability that an individual will work together with staff who have different backgrounds is high. It is, therefore, clear that one of the keys for successful humanitarian work is intercultural understanding and competence (Walker and Russ 2011).

Different activities can help students in humanitarian action to develop intercultural competence. Krajewski proposes that people develop such competence over time through the process of experiential learning:

"Intercultural communication can be learned to a certain degree, but intercultural competence needs to be developed over time and can best be developed through real-life intercultural experiences" (Krajewski 2011, p. 141).

Krajewski applies Kolb's theory on experiential learning to understand how people form intercultural competence. The learning cycle includes four different parts: (1) concrete experiences, (2) observation and reflections, (3) formation of abstract concepts and generalisations and (4) testing implications of concepts in new situations. A key feature of experiential learning is to make sure that students not only experience but also reflect on their experience (Krajewski 2011; Kolb 1984; McRae and Ramji 2017).

The desired outcome of the experiential learning of intercultural competence is that a person is not only able to but also flexible in adopting different communication styles and behaviours to new cultural environments. The person should have the capacity to see things from other perspectives. Clear verbal and nonverbal communication is necessary to navigate different cultures successfully. This also includes abilities to manage emotional responses (Krajewski 2011).

The NOHA joint master's programme includes several structures to support the development of better intercultural competencies. The double-edged nature of professionalisation is a reoccurring theme during the first semester courses, particularly in the anthropology course. Moreover, even if English is the main teaching language in the programme, there are three official languages in the programme: English, Spanish and French. This captures the need to have language skills beyond English to work in the humanitarian sector. The majority of the students are from Europe, but this continent has clear differences in language, values and norms. Moving from one European country, Spain, to another, Sweden, is a clear change in context. There is evidence that participating in student mobility has a positive impact on cultural awareness (Haas 2018; Black and Duhon 2006). The programme includes the option of moving to a global partner during the third semester to provide a non-European perspective on the humanitarian sector.

However, simply moving to another university might not strengthen intercultural competence. There are reasons to facilitate more interaction between the students that move to another university and the students they meet at that university, since there is a risk that these two groups study parallel to each other. This suggests that NOHA could benefit from adopting policies that support more integration between these two student's groups (Hartwell and Ounoughi 2019). An important part of Kolb's model of experiential learning is also that students can reflect on their experience. The NOHA programme

includes this feature in the wide variety of written and oral assignments and reports.

A general observation is that interdisciplinary, work integration and intercultural competence all imply a high level of student engagement, and that students get the opportunity and guidance to systematically reflect and learn from his or her experiences. Students can benefit from having a teacher/mentor who guides this reflection. NOHA alumni are in a good position to support reflection, since they both know the programme and the humanitarian field. A high inclusion of NOHA alumni in the teaching staff is therefore beneficial for the students' learning process. This provides an argument for finding systematic forms to engage alumni in teaching and mentoring new students.

NOHA joint master's programme and trends in higher education

This section will answer the third question: How can the NOHA joint master's programme continue to be relevant to different stakeholders? The answer is highly dependent on how we understand global educational trends.

The NOHA network and joint master's programme were created after the fall of the Berlin Wall during a time when international student mobility grew as an educational part of globalisation and European integration. Although globalisation has suffered some recent setbacks, including the global effects of the Ukraine-Russia war and the increased tension between the USA and the People's Republic of China, humanitarian work will continue to have a role in the globalised world of tomorrow. There will be a demand for professional humanitarian workers to fill this role. A key issue is as follows: What kind of higher education will be most fitting for the needs of students in humanitarian action during this new era? The answer to this question must include several dimensions related to the organisation of teaching, the subjects taught and the methods used (Staley 2019). It is possible to discern at least two trends that are directly relevant to the NOHA joint master's programme.

The first trend is that fully online and hybrid education is here to stay. Online education has been around for decades (Maeroff 2003), but the global pandemic made online teaching a necessity. For example, the NOHA joint masters' programme switched to online teaching during the spring of 2020. Online teaching has clear benefits and drawbacks (Ozdamli and Karagozlu 2022). The flexibility is beneficial for mid-career professionals and those who must support their studies with full-time work. Online teaching can also counteract government policy changes, such as Visa requirements, which hamper students' mobility. In terms of professionalisation of humanitarian work, online certification is well established in the

humanitarian sector (Walker and Russ 2011; Einarsdóttir et al. 2014). The certification trend partly offsets the risk that professionalisation becomes a barrier for entry into humanitarian work, but it does not address the barriers to higher education in humanitarian action. Few mid-career professionals can participate in the NOHA joint master's programme if it requires 2 years of full-time campus studies.

Online higher education cannot fully replicate the classroom experience, where participants can interact and communicate directly. Lecturing works on campus when the teacher is in a constant dialog with the students. Lecturing online does not provide the same level of interaction. Students who study in another country are even more affected by these limitations. These students have a harder time developing their intercultural competence and extending their social network during online teaching. Taking these insights seriously, online education could seek to meet the social needs of students by adding group work or by creating platforms for informal interaction between students (Tavares 2022).

The technical systems for online education could make it possible to personalise a study programme so that students can create their degree from a set of courses offered in a "course bank". This would add more flexibility and choice for the students (Staley 2019). A practical issue that needs to be addressed for online education with a global reach is the challenge of different time zones. Asynchronous online teaching can partly offset this challenge. On the other hand, such teaching might not be most effective in stimulating informal interaction and improving intercultural competence.

The NOHA network is in a relatively good position to adapt to the online trend, given the network's 30-year history of managing a complex master's programme involving a large number of higher education institutions. There is a common online learning platform on which to build new content. Moreover, the international structure of the programme consortium has made the staff familiar with the online coordination of educational administration. The challenge for NOHA is to utilise the online environment to provide relevant high-quality humanitarian education that does not simply replicate the campus programme but innovates in relation to the particular character of online teaching and lowers the barrier for entry.

In terms of work integration and intercultural competence, the NOHA network needs to develop the online environment so that it supports a similar experiential learning process, like those that students have from mobility. A number of NOHA students conducted online work placements during the pandemic, and these could partly support the experimental learning process.

Finally, the network needs to find new ways to maintain the NOHA identity for both the campus and online students. The campus intensive programme has been successful in creating the NOHA identity; therefore, it is reasonable that online courses and programmes would benefit from some kind of campus event.

The second trend is rapid technological change. This change has the potential to disrupt both the humanitarian sector and how this subject is taught in higher education. The humanitarian sector clearly has a high need for different kinds of specialised training, such as in medicine, psychology and engineering. It is difficult to implement humanitarian projects without such specialists. However, not every humanitarian worker needs specialist training, since the rapid flow of information and technological innovation can disrupt all specialisation. Professionalisation does not simply translate into specialisation. Instead, recent educational thinking has suggested that twenty-first century education must focus on broader “soft” skills, or competencies, which can prepare students to handle complex nonroutine situations centred on human interaction (Thornhill-Miller et al. 2023). One framework for such skills is the four C’s: creativity, critical thinking, communication and collaboration. The idea is that those who develop these skills will be more successful in the twenty-first century workplace:

... we suggest that the 4C can be seen as highest-level transversal skills—or “meta-competencies”—that allow individuals to remain competent and to develop their potential in a rapidly changing professional world (Thornhill-Miller et al. 2023, p. 4)

If change is the only constant, at least part of a higher education must prepare students to deal with change, to adapt and to be resilience. This provides an additional reason for developing resilience, in addition to Walker and Russ’s (2011) suggestion that resilience is a core competence for humanitarian workers.

There is also an ethical dimension to the competencies relevant in the future. Relief in conflict situations and emergencies is foremost about supporting fellow humans in great need. It requires personal virtues, such as courage, honesty, empathy and care. As Slim puts it:

On a daily basis, humanitarian leaders need to endorse and model ethical awareness and concern across their agency or NGO. They need to ask ethical questions of programming choices and strategic decisions. They also need to model and enable simple cultures of ethical deliberation at all levels of their organization. Project reviews and evaluations need to

include an ethical appraisal of operational paths that have been taken and avoided (Slim 2015, p. 247).

Ethical thinking is primarily not training in a specialised field but the outcome of many forces. One is ethical codes, and another is following the path of ethical role models. Nevertheless, there are reasons to claim that the main force behind ethical development is a wide range of experiences, including a personal growth path. This implies that a student needs to meet a range of different ideas, perspectives and experiences. In particular, this will involve intercultural experiences. Thus, additional specialised skills will not help to develop the kind of ethical consciousness that Slim thinks future humanitarian leaders require.

The NOHA joint master’s programme includes features that prepare the students for a future that is both uncertain and changing. Students who move from one university to another will directly experience different teaching methods and perspectives on humanitarian action. Students get the chance to immerse themselves in another culture and get a better understanding of how they can manage and succeed in a new environment, a prerequisite for personal resilience. The programme could also strengthen resilience by teaching the students to be lifelong learners.

Conclusion

There are several challenges and global trends facing higher education in humanitarian action. Successful educational programmes should find ways to develop in response to these challenges and adapt itself to be in line with the trends. The NOHA joint master’s programme is well positioned for continued success. The organisation and teaching of the programme are designed for interdisciplinary studies, to support work integration and to strengthen intercultural competence. The NOHA network could find ways to develop online and hybrid education to offset mobility restriction as long as these continue to provide high educational quality and support the NOHA identity. Finally, to prepare future humanitarian professionals, there is an ongoing need to understand humanitarian action as located in a changing and uncertain world. This requires that we design the educational experience so that it strengthens students’ resilience and teaches skills that will be relevant even in the future.

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