RESEARCH STUDY I: DrPH ORGANISATION AND/OR POLICY ANALYSIS (OPA) PROJECT - INFORMATION & GUIDELINES FOR STUDENTS

1. **INTRODUCTION**

1.1 Successful leadership in public health requires a range of technical skills in assessing needs, setting priorities, organisational and financial management, communication and influencing. It also requires a good understanding of the ways in which the organisation and management of public health institutions can support or constrain the development of effective public health policy and practice.

1.2 Research Study I, the OPA project, is a small policy and/or organisationally focused piece of independent, applied research. The student can decide whether the main focus is on a specific public health organisation or a policy process that may involve a number of different interest groups. It is designed to provide DrPH students with the opportunity to observe closely the operation of either a public health organisation, focusing on how it endeavours to fulfil an aspect of its mandate in its context, and from this to develop a better understanding of how public health organisations work; or an analysis of how public health policy is made and implemented in a specific environment; or the inter-play between a public health organisation and its wider policy context. The OPA project builds directly on material covered by the DrPH compulsory taught modules.

2. **RSI (OPA) PROJECT PURPOSE AND OBJECTIVES**

2.1 The primary purpose of the OPA project is to contribute to the student’s educational development. The student’s focus should therefore be on the opportunities the OPA project provides to observe and analyse how public health organisations attempt to achieve their goals with a focus on organisational dynamics, policy making processes, or both. It is expected that the experience will reveal both positive and negative features of the organisation, its relationships with other actors or the wider policy community around a public health policy issue.

2.2 OPA projects may be based in public, non-profit or private organisations that are engaged in public health practice and/or policy. OPA projects can be undertaken inside or outside (recommended) the student’s normal place of work. “Fieldwork” within the host organisation typically lasts 3-6 months during which time the student may be formally employed by the organisation or may be present as a researcher for an agreed time whilst s/he undertakes the project.

2.3 The required output of the OPA project is a written report of no more than 12,000 (pre 2018 regulations) or 15,000 (post 2018 regulations) words. The report is intended to be practical and to provide advice to the organisation or policy community in the form of a constructive critique, identifying areas for development or improvement and making actionable
recommendations. At the same time, it must be soundly informed by literature, theory and robust data collection and analysis. The student should thus use recognised theoretical and analytical frameworks from the fields of, for example: management, organisational theory, policy analysis, political science or sociology. Students are expected to use appropriate research methods, including, but not restricted to: observation, interviews, focus groups, surveys and documentary analysis.

2.4 The overarching purpose of RSI, the OPA project, is to analyse and evaluate how public health organisations function to influence public health policy and/or deliver public health goals. The objectives that contribute to this purpose will vary depending on the topic and methodology of the OPA project in question. It is expected, however, that all OPA reports will cover the following set of generic objectives:

- To outline the context and key influences on policy (if applicable) in relation to the specific public health issue and organisation chosen for the project;
- To assess the extent to which organisational factors and/or external relationships constrain or enhance the organisation’s ability to deliver its mandate;
- To develop clear, actionable policy or practical recommendations to increase the effectiveness of the organisation in influencing or delivering its public health goals;
- To gain experience in applying policy science and/or organisational management theories to the critical analysis of a real world organisational case study.

2.5 The specific objectives of the OPA are agreed with the supervisor/s and the student’s contact in the host organisation (mentor) in writing prior to starting the project. The role of the mentor is to help facilitate the student’s project within the host organisation, particularly in terms of gaining access to individuals, groups and documents.

3. **RSI (OPA) PROJECT RESEARCH PROPOSAL**

3.1 Students should prepare an appropriate study proposal (approx. 500 words) for their OPA project, setting out relevant literature, theories/frameworks likely to be utilised to guide the data collection and analysis, aims and objectives and research questions, proposed methodology and methods and the approach to be taken to the analysis of data. This proposal should then be agreed with the supervisor/s.

3.3 Students are expected to draw from the taught modules as well as their own experience and background reading relevant to the specific OPA project. Proposals should be developed in collaboration with the student’s supervisor/s and should be shared with the student’s mentor in the host institution before being finalised.

3.4 Prior to commencing data collection, you need to have completed sections A and B of the ‘OPA Project – Checklist for Students’. This includes confirming whether or not you are a Tier 4 visa holder. If you are a Tier 4 visa student, please inform the Immigration Advisory Service (IAS) of your travel plans. If you are unsure as to your visa status, please check with IAS.

4. **RESEARCH ETHICS APPROVAL**

4.1 Ethics approval must be obtained from the School’s Research Ethics Committee before
beginning the OPA project. Particular consideration should be given to how the anonymity and confidentiality of study participants will be achieved. The ethics committee will expect to see a detailed, concise description of the OPA study design in the proposal (see section 3), as well as drafts of any information sheets, consent forms and questionnaires to be used. Applications to the Research Ethics Committee should be made via an online submission to LSHTM Ethics Online (LEO) available at http://leo.lshtm.ac.uk. Note that in most instances ethics applications for OPA projects are fast-tracked and do not go to the full Committee.

4.2 Students are advised that it is their responsibility to determine the need (or otherwise) for additional approvals from host organisations or relevant national review boards and ensure that these have been agreed prior to commencing data collection and analysis.

5. THE RSI (OPA) PROJECT REPORT

5.1 The OPA is assessed by a research report not exceeding 12,000 (pre 2018 regulations) or 15,000 (post 2018 regulations) (excluding references, appendices and indices). The report should contain the following:

| 1) | A clear statement of the aim and objectives of the study and/or the questions to be addressed. |
| 2) | A description of and rationale for the data collection methods and theoretical framework(s) used in the analysis and interpretation of the data. |
| 3) | A description of the policy context (in relation to the selected public health issue or question), the key influences on policy on this issue and consideration of the host organisation’s position in this context. |
| 4) | A description of the host organisation (e.g. origins, history, rationale/mission, current-specific objectives, powers/areas of responsibility, partners, resources, sources of funding, main ways of working). (Note: unless this information is central to the main objective of the project it should be presented as an appendix). |
| 5) | Using quantitative and/or qualitative data gathered during the study, a critical assessment of the public health policy process or of the individual public health organisation’s ability to influence public health policy and/or its ability to deliver its goals. |
| 6) | A critical discussion of the strengths and weaknesses of the methods of information gathering and analysis used in the OPA research, including some reflection on the student’s location and role in the organisation during the project (i.e. ‘stance’ or ‘position’ of the reporter/analyst) |
| 7) | Clear, practical recommendations based on the findings regarding changes that may improve the effectiveness of the policy, process or of the specific organisation (e.g. its structure, skills, facilities, governance, management, organisational culture, accountability, incentives, external relations, etc.). These recommendations may be |
5.2 As previously noted, the OPA report is intended to provide actionable advice soundly informed by literature, theory and robust analysis of the data. Credit will be given to students who move away from elementary causes and effects and simplistic frameworks (for example, avoiding over reliance on the SWOT analysis and 7S framework, or Walt and Gilson’s ‘policy triangle’ by going beyond these to use more sophisticated evaluative analysis and more complex models). Moreover, the report should demonstrate a capacity for self-guided study; i.e. moving away from texts used on the taught courses to literature, research evidence, theories or concepts identified as relevant by the student themselves.

6. **SUBMISSION OF THE RSI (OPA) REPORT**

6.1 There is no deadline for the submission of the OPA project report. The student and supervisor/s should agree a deadline appropriate to the student’s schedule.

6.2 Once the content of the report has been approved by the supervisor/s, the student submits one electronic copy to the DrPH Administrator and notifies their supervisor/s of this. The OPA should include a front cover page with your name, title of the report, Programme: DrPH, host institution and word count (excluding references and appendices). The electronic copy of the report should be saved as a Word document so that the stated word count can be verified.

7. **ASSESSMENT AND FEEDBACK**

7.1 The supervisor/s will provide the DrPH Administrator with the names of two agreed OPA project markers (internal assessors) when the student submits their OPA report. The DrPH Administrator is responsible for distributing OPA reports to the first and second markers, along with the guidelines for marking. The first and second markers assess the OPA report independently and prepare their own preliminary reports before conferring. Once a recommendation has been agreed, the first marker prepares an agreed report that constitutes feedback to the student. Markers are asked to complete the marking process within four to six weeks of receiving the report. The first marker should submit the preliminary reports together with the agreed report and relevant assessment forms to the DrPH Administrator.

7.2 There are five possible recommendations open to the OPA assessors. For those submitted under the post 2018 regulations these are all provisional pending the formal examination at viva:

(i) **Ready for submission**

(ii) **Not ready for submission / minor amendments and/or corrections**

The candidate is required to make specified minor amendments to the markers’ satisfaction within one month of receiving the markers’ report and decision. The submitted report is then reviewed by one or both markers.
(iii) **Not ready for submission / major amendments and/or corrections**

The candidate is required to make significant revisions to the report in line with the markers’ feedback, conducting additional fieldwork and/or analysis and to resubmit within three months. Candidates are also required to prepare a supplementary document detailing specific revisions made in response to marker feedback. This supplementary document should be reviewed by the candidate’s supervisor/s before resubmission to the markers, together with the revised OPA report.

(iv) **Fail**

The candidate has resubmitted their OPA following feedback, has conducted additional fieldwork and/or made revisions to their OPA report, but the minimum standard has still not been met.

(v) **Outright fail**

The candidate has previously submitted a failed report, undertaken additional fieldwork and/or analysis, submitted a rewritten report and is again awarded a fail. The candidate is not able to continue with the programme following this outcome and will be withdrawn.

7.3 Unless a straight “Ready for submission” is recommended, feedback should indicate clearly any revisions that are considered necessary as part of a resubmission. It is important to note that the student is required to prepare a separate document responding directly to markers’ feedback and specifying explicitly what revisions have been made. It is strongly recommended that your supervisor/s review and approve this supplementary document prior to resubmission.

7.4 The Board of Examiners, which meets at least once a year, will review all RSI OPA assessment feedback and recommend appropriate next steps (i.e. provisional pass and proceed, recommend exiting the Programme).

8. **ACCESS TO THE RSI (OPA) REPORT**

8.1 Host institutions will not normally see drafts of the OPA project report. However, a final copy will be sent to the host institution by the student after the report has been examined and any changes required by the examiners have been made. The report cannot remain completely confidential to the organisation, because it will be assessed by two members of School staff and also by the viva examiners (post 2018 regulations), but this is a confidential process. A copy is also usually placed in the School’s library unless a specific application for restrictions has been approved.

8.2 In order to ensure that this is understood and explicitly agreed by the organisation, a letter to the host organisation is required to be sent by the student’s OPA supervisor/s at the time the agreement for the OPA is made. Once the report is completed, the student needs to obtain the consent of the organisation for the report to be shared publicly. There is a specific consent form for this purpose which is available on Moodle. If the organisation does not wish the report to be shared and this is indicated on the ‘Permissions Request Form’, then no copy is given to the Library and the formative assessors and viva examiners are also notified that the contents of the report are confidential.
8.3 Should it be judged by the student and the supervisor/s that this process does not sufficiently protect the confidentiality of individuals and/or the organisation, there is a further option: Any student who feels that there is material that assessors and examiners should consider, but that should not go in the report, may either:

a) submit a confidential appendix with the thesis submission which will be kept with the DrPH Examination Board papers, or

b) request an oral examination on the confidential parts of the report at the formative assessment stage as well as at the final examination. This would allow the RSI Report to be deposited in the LSHTM Library along with the RSII thesis.

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