

WN *Guest editorial*

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Education

Nutrition is taught wrong

[Access April 2015 Update on Project Phoenix here](#)

[Access May 2015 Update on Project Phoenix here](#)

[Access this issue Brooke Aksnes' letter on nutrition curricula here](#)

[Access this issue Maria Alvim's letter on nutrition curricula here](#)

Institutions where nutrition is taught are turning out graduates who have very little grasp of the relevant realities of this century, and who are not able to think outside the rigidly reductive biochemical framework that has been imposed on them. The courses are boring. They are also irrelevant except for those students who go on to do inside-the-box work in schools, hospitals or better paid work for industry, or who move up to teach in the same way.

Before and after graduating in the US I thought I had just made poor life choices, or else that my field of study is simply a narrow biochemical science concerned with nutrients, growth, and various diseases. Now that I am based and working in Europe, and especially a member of the *WN* editorial team, I know better. I think my experience as a student has been generally typical to everywhere – thus my letter published in *Feedback* this month (access above) and also that of fellow *WN* team member Maria Alvim (access above) who had a similar experience in Brazil.

Sarah Pauwels, a paediatric nutritionist in Belgium, tells me that her education included no economic, cultural or political elements of nutrition (although a recent update has added cultural aspects of food). The University of British Columbia (UBC), whose nutrition programme is accredited by Dietitians of Canada (as my US course was by the American Academy of Nutrition and Dietetics) requires a mere four courses in five years touching on social aspects. Students are being taught by way of omission that the big nutrition picture does not exist.

My challenge here is effectively part of *WN*'s current *Project Phoenix* (access above and in this issue), which I fully support. The project makes the needed charge that conventional nutrition is unable to grasp most of the big issues of our times when an understanding of the diverse contexts of nutrition is especially crucial. It follows that nutrition as now taught will also be impotent to meet today's challenges.

Missing - quality

One big issue is ignorance of quality. In keeping with the outdated clinical blinders of current nutrition practice, current curricula teach students to disregard all things qualitative, and to learn only the strictly quantitative – an approach based on examination and analysis of numbers by ever-more intricate and expensive methods. But nutrition has psychological, social, cultural and environmental aspects that statistics and mathematics cannot comprehend – and this incomprehension is turned into a doctrine that in effect claims that all such non-biological aspects of nutrition do not matter or do not exist!

Thus, of the four ‘bigger picture’ courses offered at UBC, three are related to the same promising subject of ‘land, food and community’. But they are centred on quantitative data analysis. This eliminates the opportunity for students to understand the larger implications of these critical topics in their field.

Nutritionists from the US, Belgium and Brazil tell me that qualitative research was not mentioned once during their education, and that they were expected only to consider ‘strongly evidenced’ topics – in which what counts as evidence is exquisitely crunched numbers. Students leaving today’s nutrition programmes are perfectly prepared for the profession – in the circumstances of half a century ago, and before then.

My statements are general. There are exceptions. At the University of Pretoria in South Africa, the Institute of Food, Nutrition and Well-being draws together its faculties of education, law and agriculture, health and veterinary sciences. The faculties work in collaboration to ‘address the underlying vulnerabilities and find ways of building a more resilient agriculture and food system to reduce hunger, malnutrition and promote consumption behaviour that ensures human productivity and overall well-being.’ Students from five faculties – and many future professions – think systematically. This is just one example that is a model for change.

Clinical nutrition is important. But so are farming and food systems, dietary patterns, food culture, food security, pandemic obesity and diabetes, inequity, poverty, and climate disruption, in all of which nutrition is central or relevant. Nutrition as a biochemical discipline concerned with physical health and disease is important. But so is nutrition as a social, economic and environmental discipline, also concerned with mental, emotional and spiritual health and well-being. Quantitative research is essential, but only when it is balanced with qualitative learning, knowledge and wisdom. Mathematics and statistics alone will not generate reliable results or policies. What are needed, very urgently, are transformed curriculums and teachers inspiring new generations of student to become professionals who understand and are equipped to take action at every level affecting nutrition in the world we live in now.

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