Reviewer's report

**Title**: Differences in the Self-Assessment of Clinical and General Competencies Between Problem-based Learning and Conventional Curricula Among German Medical Graduates

**Version**: 2  **Date**: 5 May 2009

**Reviewer**: Vanessa Burch

**Reviewer's report**:

Differences in the self-assessment of clinical and general competencies between a PBL curriculum and conventional curricula among German medical graduates.

This paper evaluates the differences in self-assessment of clinical and general competencies between medical graduates of a PBL programme and traditional medical schools in Germany. The paper demonstrates that graduates of a PBL programme rated the vocational relevance of research competence more highly than graduates of conventional curricula while the latter rated medical knowledge as more relevant. They also show that PBL graduates identified the teaching of research competence and medical knowledge as deficiencies in their programme as compared to graduates from conventional medical schools. PBL graduates did however score their training in self-directed learning, medical practical skills, psychosocial competence, team work, problem-solving skills and interdisciplinary thinking higher than graduates of conventional programmes.

While the paper does make a contribution to the debate about the merits of PBL-based curricula as compared to conventional curricula, it is unfortunate that the sample size of PBL programme graduates (n=101) is very small and limited to one medical school. Furthermore the authors point out that the PBL curriculum student selection process was individualised. The overall generalizability of the findings is thus potentially limited. Another major limitation of the study is that these findings are based on graduate opinion and the authors do not provide any objective data to substantiate the opinions expressed. In addition, as pointed out by the authors the overall response rate of graduates from 34 medical schools was only 14%. There is great potential for bias in this study and the findings need to be seen in light of these significant limitations.

The paper contains a number of typographical and grammatical errors that need to be corrected:

- Line 21 page 2 should read “the training of seven of nine competencies”
- “Likert” should be in upper case
- Line 1 page 4 – the opening sentence is incomplete
- Line 18 page 6 – delete the “s” in the text
- Line 13 page 10 should read “Assessment of the competencies acquired…”
In the discussion the authors suggest that “… the PBL approach itself may lead to a greater willingness to respond to surveys.” They do not provide any evidence to support this conclusion.

Overall I think the paper provides some useful information regarding the vocational competencies needed by graduates entering clinical practice and the extent to which PBL programmes address these needs. There are, however, significant limitations which restrict the generalizability of the findings described.

**Level of interest:** An article of limited interest

**Quality of written English:** Needs some language corrections before being published

**Statistical review:** Yes, but I do not feel adequately qualified to assess the statistics.

**Declaration of competing interests:**

I declare that I have no competing interests