Reviewer’s report

Title: Evaluation of a longitudinal consultation skills course at a new UK medical school

Version: 1 Date: 17 March 2011

Reviewer: Barbara Buermann

Reviewer’s report:

Comments:

The authors present an interesting paper on a longitudinal course to enhance consultation skills and thus contribute to knowledge and development of communication skills teaching.

Major Compulsory Revisions

Abstract:

Paragraph Background and Discussion: I would suggest using terms like “feasibility”, “acceptability” and “cross-sectional evaluation” rather than “effectiveness” since no longitudinal data of learning progress throughout the course is presented. Furthermore the evaluation relies only on self-report assessment, no objective data (e.g. OSCE results) are included.

Introduction:

The precise research question of this paper does not become clear at the end of the introduction (e.g. is the focus meant to be on the course/curriculum development or on the evaluation).

Tailoring the whole background to the research questions could add to structure and appeal of the paper.

I would also suggest stating that the evaluation is cross-sectional, otherwise one might expect a longitudinal evaluation focussing on learning progress.

For an outsider the relation between the 14-module course, the PBL weeks and the described skills training sessions (experiential sessions and lectures) is not easily comprehensible. A short structured overview over the curriculum and the integrated skills training would be helpful.

Personally I think that the strength of the presented data is to gain insight into student’s views of learning outcomes and to learn more about how certain aspects of skills training are evaluated by students.

In paragraph 6:

Please clarify the abbreviation MB/BS.

Method:
I would suggest to outline the design of the consultation skills training (e.g., course structure, main learning outcomes and perhaps novel elements of the course) in the method section (incl. Table 1).

I would recommend presenting the study design (cross-sectional) and sample before describing the assessment tools (feedback questionnaire). A short reference to Ramsden’s criteria should be sufficient without giving the whole citation.

Regarding the tutors, a description of demographic data and background would be interesting, especially since the discussion refers to tutor selection and training.

Analysis and Results:
I would suggest a more concise presentation and selection of data according to the research questions. Analysis description could be condensed to relevant information (e.g., data was analysed by principal components analysis using varimax rotation ...). I would also suggest to describe the analysis in a separate paragraph.

Main learning outcomes for the separate years of study could be summarized and presented in a table.

Discussion:
Some information (e.g., regarding standardization between groups etc.) should be mentioned as part of the course description (method or introduction).

Main findings and their implications should be highlighted.

For example paragraph two: Instead of stating “consultation skills are integrated into the mainstream curriculum…[...]this may contribute to student satisfaction” I would suggest to draw the conclusions from the findings (e.g., Findings suggest that the integrated teaching approach contributed substantially to student satisfaction (if that is supported by the data)).

Regarding the study limitations it should be mentioned that the evaluation is based on self-reports and cross-sectional data acquisition. It could be mentioned why no correlation with OSCE results are presented (anonymisation?).

As mentioned above, this fact also limits the conclusion drawn in the last paragraph that the results confirm the effectiveness of the skills training.

- Minor Essential Revisions
The author can be trusted to make these. For example, missing labels on figures, the wrong use of a term, spelling mistakes.

Introduction:

Paragraph 2:
Please provide a citation for the OSCE.

Paragraph 6:
citation [0]should be clarified?

**Level of interest:** An article of importance in its field

**Quality of written English:** Acceptable

**Statistical review:** No, the manuscript does not need to be seen by a statistician.

**Declaration of competing interests:**
I declare that I have no competing interests