Reviewer’s report

Title: “What Do They Want Me To Say?” The hidden curriculum at work in the medical school selection process: a qualitative study.

Version: 1 Date: 9 February 2012

Reviewer: Harold Reiter

Reviewer’s report:

Discretionary Revisions:

ABSTRACT
1. Last sentence of abstract, “highlighting factors which must be considered” – use of the word must seems a little bit strong

BACKGROUND
2. Minor issue, not for publication: Opening of second paragraph, “utilize” misspelled, then correctly later in BACKGROUND

METHOD
3. Is there anything in methods that might differentiate whether the on line versus on site essays would yield different results on qualitative analysis? This would make for an interesting question, but was not pursued by the authors.

RESULTS
nil

DISCUSSION
See conclusions below

CONCLUSIONS
4. “We suggest a number of ways in which the selection process might be modified to understand and address this effect.” The authors could be a little more explicit regarding the two steps suggested, i.e. just say, “there are two ways in which…” and then continue with how one is to avoid self-declared values, the other is to make the hidden curriculum more explicit

Minor Essential Revisions

ABSTRACT
5. Last sentence: “Studies such as this are important” – statement of confidence and destiny, see similar comment on conclusion

BACKGROUND
6. Opening sentence refers to “business” – do the authors really mean business? If so, then make the case of it being a business – data on the cottage industry for med school admissions prep, in volume of students and in cost in dollars.

7. 2nd paragraph - MCAT – should be stated what this is, reader identification of acronyms should not be assumed.

8. 2nd paragraph - Recommended elimination of the Writing Sample from the MCAT examination – needs citation, e.g. MCAT review group presentation at a meeting.

9. Last sentence of BACKGROUND is not quite what the study is about, see discussion comments on perhaps shifting a couple of sentences from there to here, with editing.

METHOD
I have insufficient background regarding qualitative analysis to make salient comment on the methodology.

10. Please add some background on the medical school at the University of Calgary, e.g. how many seats, how many years, how many applicants in the year under study, what domain(s) are meant to be measured with the essays, etc.

11. How were the 210 essays chosen out of all the essays, for qualitative analysis?

12. Should include the time of 30 minutes for essay writing on site, and explain why 30 min.

13. What constraints (time or other secure measures), if any, were applied to the online essays? This potentially spins off into issues of test security and impact on overall reliability. (While a full dissertation is hardly required, some acknowledgment of these issues for both the onsite and online essays should be stated in the discussion.)

14. First paragraph - “10% of the score” – specify whether a total of 10% or 10% each?

15. Post-analysis interviews – define the 20 applicants in these sessions – offered med school positions and accepted at U of Calgary, offered med school positions and accepted elsewhere, not offered positions – this may be relevant in terms of the hidden curriculum impacting their post-analysis interviews – are they still couching what they say because they may apply next year or because they are now students at U of Calgary? This should also be addressed in the discussion portion, on limitations of the study.

RESULTS
16. First paragraph - Presentation of the prior study results by White et al seems to be a better set-up for the reader in terms of why this study was done and ultimately what the findings would be. Consider moving this to the end of BACKGROUND, making that final part of BACKGROUND more in keeping with the central intent of the study. This would also avoid any potential initial confusion of whether “Analysis of the essays revealed that…” refers to this study.
or the prior published study by White et al, in Medical Teacher.

DISCUSSION

17. 6th paragraph, what is meant by “Canada, 2010#465)”? 
18. Limitations should include any ongoing hidden curriculum issues for students giving post-analysis interviews, particularly for those who were not admitted anywhere, or were admitted to U of Calgary. As well, while a full dissertation on issues of test security and impact on overall reliability is hardly required, some acknowledgment of these issues for both the onsite and online essays should be stated in the discussion.

CONCLUSIONS

19. “We suggest a number of ways in which the selection process might be modified to understand and address this effect.” – what ways? Are they stated explicitly? (could be a little more explicit regarding the two steps suggested, i.e. just say, “there are two ways in which…”) – one is to avoid self-declared values, the other is to make the hidden curriculum more explicit

20. “Studies such as this are important…” – statement of confidence and destiny. It was a bit humorous seeing the authors guilty of the same conduct they noted was practiced by applicants; it made me consider the hidden curriculum of those submitting articles for peer review!

Level of interest: An article whose findings are important to those with closely related research interests

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.