Reviewer's report

Title: Expert validation of fit-for-purpose guidelines for designing programmes of assessment

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Reviewer: Gordon Page

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Review of the article
Expert validation of fit-for-purpose guidelines for designing programs of assessment, Dijkstra et al
Gordon Page
February 17, 2012

Thank you for the opportunity to review this article, which focuses on issues of particular interest to me. In essence, the paper addresses an important topic in medical education, being the principles guiding the design of high quality assessment programs. These principles are identified via a qualitative research approach seeking consensus among a group of individuals with recognized expertise in assessment. The discussions presented in the paper are in large part clear and illuminating relative to the guiding principles identified in the study. The paper is long and at times repetitive, and the authors could review it from this perspective – the goal being a more succinct report. Below are some specific comments on the article.

1. The abstract is clear and concise. There is one sentence under ‘Results’ which I do not understand, “Some guidelines were more generic and applicable to the design process: proportionality, rationales for decisions and required expertise.” A possible issue here is that readers of the abstract have not read the paper at this point – having read the paper may help in interpreting this sentence, but even then I found it a challenging sentence to interpret.

2. The “Introduction” on pages 3-5 provides a nice rationale for the paper and the study it reports. I do not know what the reference to ‘on institutional levels’ means in the following sentence on page 4, “To support assessment development there exist various standards, criteria, and guidelines on institutional levels.” The ‘Introduction’ is one component of the paper I would recommend the authors review from the perspective of ‘succinctness’.

3. The papers’ authors and study group are an impressive group of experts in the field of assessment in medical education.

4. The qualitative study design for this study appears suitable and effectively implemented.

5. Under ‘Results’ on page 9, the phrase, “on how to approach them …’ is open to interpretation? Does approach mean ‘interpret’ or ‘use’ or …? Perhaps there is
a better verb to clarify the authors’ intention?

6. The discussion of the guidelines from page 9 onward is excellent.

7. The emphasis of the article on defining/clarifying/agreeing upon the purpose of an assessment is very good, as this logically evident step is often neglected. It is an essential initial step underlying virtually all subsequent decisions about an assessment program.

8. The guidelines defined in this study nicely capture research results pertaining to the design of assessment programs. For example, in the context of domain mapping (page 13), ‘content prevails over format’ is a key guideline based upon many studies that show that format is a relatively unimportant variable in the design of assessment programs. Yet in many contexts format remains a key issue for debate among stakeholders. The ‘bottom line’ is that what is assessed is much more important than how it is assessed.

9. The literature cited is comprehensive and appropriate.

In summary, I support this article for publication, with minor revisions related to the issues discussed above.

**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