Reviewer's report

Title: How do postgraduate trainees regulate their learning and what helps and hinders them? A qualitative study.

Version: 1 Date: 14 April 2012

Reviewer: Marc Van Nuland

Reviewer's report:

This is an original and well written report of a qualitative study which took me great interest in reading it.

My comments don’t regard fundamental objections but are rather suggestions to improve the article (Discretionary Revisions).

1. I guess the title should mention this report is about GP trainees (generalizing to all trainees has not been addressed in the discussion section: it could be an option to mention it in the discussion but I don't find it a necessity)
2. Abstract: the method section mentions 'saturation' – it seems better to me to mention this in the results section
3. Methods/design:
   3.1. “Stratified purposeful sampling” is mentioned but the author doesn’t explain how this was done (stratified to year one and three I suppose, but also male/female, Maastricht/Nijmegen trainees, etc? – which purpose or purposes were considered in the ‘purposeful sampling’? – how secure was this done?)
   3.2. “in order to enhance transferability of the findings”: I would like to see this more explained
   3.3. I propose to mention the initials of the researchers in the sentence telling about the members of the research team to make it clear “who is who” – it’s surprising that 4 researchers contributed and only 3 are mentioned as authors...
   3.4. Was there any pilot testing of the semi-structured interviews?
   3.5. There is no explanation about by which procedure the different interview topics (appendix 1) were formulated: was this done by the whole research team?
4. Methods/ Data analysis: I would prefer to mention saturation after analyzing 14 transcripts in the result section – the method section could mention that when saturation was met, the remaining transcript were used to confirm the results. This also shows that data retrieval took place before the analysis started and also suggests that the researchers overestimated the number needed to obtain saturation. Maybe this can be mentioned.
5. Results:
   5.1. Coding: there is little information about how many codes finally have been retrieved and how they were organized: the author mentions ‘higher-order codes’, ‘dimensions’ and ‘themes’ but it is unclear to me, as a reader, how this
was conceptualized. Similarly, it remains unclear on which level ‘saturation’ was assessed: no new ‘specific codes’, no new ‘higher order codes’ or no new ‘dimensions’?

5.2. Little mentioning of differences between first and third years trainees in the result section, whereas this was a particular point of interest in the design of this research project.

6. Discussion:

6.1. I find it an interesting choice to discuss the findings from the perspective of theories.

6.1.1. I would change the final sentence of the first paragraph of the discussion:...

6.1.2. I would not put the paragraph discussing ‘differences between first and third years trainees’ between the paragraphs discussing the results from the perspective of theory, but rather would put it before (or incorporate it in) the ‘Strengths and weaknesses of the study’.

6.2. Wouldn’t it be better to put the short section discussing ‘further research’ in the discussion section than in the conclusion?

7. Acknowledgements: SBOH is not explained

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'