Reviewer's report

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

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Reviewer: Erkki Olkinuora

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

Margaretha H Sagasser, Anneke WM Kramer and Cees PM Van der Vleuten

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When assessing the above manuscript I take into account the points recommended by BMC editorial:

1. The research questions set by the authors are clearly defined and produce from the theoretical point of view interesting and practically useful knowledge about postgraduate students' self-regulation in professional training sessions. There is much more knowledge about students' learning in ordinary, less complicated study courses, but we need much more knowledge about the more demanding practice-oriented clinical study sessions, which produces key competencies for future work. Many students who are successful in theoretical studies are not so successful in practical training and on the contrary. However, both kind of studies should contribute to each other in order to produce really competent physicians.

2. The theoretical background for setting aforementioned research questions is clear and relevant. However, in order to be able to elaborate certain analysis of results and their interpretation it would have been beneficial to enlarge a little bit the theoretical points of view. When we think the connections between theoretical studies and the ability to make high level clinical diagnosis and treatment plans one can assume that instead of general medical knowledge measured in this case by ordinary knowledge test we would have needed measures representing deep conceptual knowledge in order to know whether students have learned relevant theoretical concepts in their right scientific meaning or perhaps adopted them only partially or even in the form of misconceptions.

One would have expected also some theoretical considerations with respect to Vermunt's classification of dimensions of self-regulation included in his well-known ILS-theory. Also the role of meta-cognitive awareness of students in professional type of action would have deserved attention in theoretical part. Referring to results it seems that there are two levels of meta-cognitions, one linked to short loop of self-regulation and the other connected more to the long loop. I admit however, that everything cannot be included in a compact
theoretical framework and already in the present form theoretical framework is ok.

In order to take more fully into account also certain affective aspects likely influencing the ways of students’ self-regulation in learning and their readiness to seek and accept external assessment student’s study and learning orientations should perhaps been noted, too. They have been demonstrated to influence crucially students’ learning strategies and outcomes in higher education. Situation-specific learning orientations has an effect on the ways students experience different learning situations in general and those very challenging and demanding study situations emphasized in this study in special. Intermediate study orientations influence how students experience different parts of their studies (for instance, theoretical study courses versus practical studies) and so-called general study orientations have an effect on the meaning of one’s studies as a whole. Expressed will to become a good doctor may include a combination of certain types of general and intermediate study orientations, which would help to define more exactly the motivational structure of this general level of interest and its effects on ways of studying.

3. The qualitative methods applied in this study are based on good arguments and have been skilfully and carefully implemented. They have produced results which seem to be thrust-worthy and credible. However, the larger validity and generality of results presupposes relating these phenomenological results to behavioural measures, which can be done in future research.

4. The design of the study is relevant for giving good possibilities to answer to the defined research questions. In order to be able to catch larger variation of contextual factors it is good to have post-graduate students from two universities. This creates however, also possibilities to compare those group with each other for finding whether there are so crucial differences in the study environments between the universities in question that it could be seen also in certain results.

5. An interesting finding was that few students (however, not many) were dissatisfied to their supervisors. If we assume that the relationship of a postgraduate students to his/her supervisor is a very basic factor concerning the effectiveness of his/her self-regulation of learning in clinical study sessions (as seems to be the case according to the results) one would have tried to analyse the internal consistency of answers of these students in the interview. Are negative experiences concerning the methods of supervision or the personality traits of supervisors largely reflected in the level of dissatisfaction to their present practical studies.

6. The discussion and the conclusions seem to be well balanced and adequately supported by the data. Researchers are well aware of the restrictions of their study, but also of the merits of their phenomenological approach. Relating main results to Eraut’s and Schön’s conceptual differentiations and the elements influencing self-regulation to Self-Determination Theory clarifies further the meaning of these research findings and their credibility. I agree with the authors’ statement that relying on informal learning may involve certain risks and therefore critical reflection is needed. However, one should specify what they mean by critical reflection in this connection. Is it only critical comparison of
alternative paths of action based on comprehensive utilisation of also external feedback, or should it include also one’s own conceptual starting points and even attitudes (cf. Mezirow’s analysis of different levels or types of reflection).

7. I have mentioned above some limitations of the theoretical background and in some measures and analyses. However, they can be regarded as Discretionary Revisions, which the authors can choose or ignore. Such points of view can be taken into account in future studies targeted at similar themes or when experimenting with certain elaborative analyses.

8. It seems that authors are clearly acknowledging most central of the work upon which they are building their own research.

9. The title and abstract convey accurately enough what has been found.

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

**Quality of written English:** Acceptable

**Statistical review:** Yes, and I have assessed the statistics in my report.

**Declaration of competing interests:**

I declare that I have no competing interests