Reviewer's report

Title: The national portfolio for postgraduate family medicine training in South Africa: A descriptive study of acceptability, educational impact, and usefulness for assessment

Version: 2 Date: 18 January 2013

Reviewer: Bryan Burford

Reviewer's report:

Major compulsory revisions

The paper describes trainee and supervisor responses to a questionnaire concerning a learning portfolio in family medicine education.

My concerns about this paper relate mainly to how it links to the existing literature on learning portfolios in medical education, and consequently the extent to which it presents anything which adds to that literature. The literature is limited and not yet saturated, and so I think there is still space for a study like that reported here, but I do feel it lacks some focus.

The introduction provides a good introduction of the theoretical rationale behind learning portfolios, but the concentration on theory, particularly the detail in the second paragraph, does not link to the remainder of the paper. A more developed review of empirical studies, with the theoretical rationale dealt with in a couple of references, would contextualise the data better (in the interests of transparency, I am co-author of two such studies in the UK). On questions of engagement and acceptability, the wider literature on workplace based assessments, and the barriers to their utility, may also be useful.

I felt that some of the information in the method section, specifically the setting subsection, would be more appropriate in the introduction, and that this would benefit from more detail about the content of the portfolio. Box 1 summarises the content, and reference is given to your earlier paper on the development of the portfolio, but there is no detail of what form the content actually takes – what the written assessments are, how observations by supervisors are recorded, etc. This level of detail is important in considering whether participants’ responses may be more influenced by some aspects rather than others.

In the data analysis section the description of statistical power is not clear, and should be revised. However, I’m not sure the inclusion of chi-square tests adds much value here anyway. The test is not referred to in relation to many of the results. There is also the issue of multiple comparisons increasing the risk of a type I error (false positive).

While it is stated that a framework analysis was carried out on free text responses, no details of this analysis are given, and the few free-text responses
that are included do not seem to relate to any framework. I don’t think there is a problem with including quotes simply to illustrate or elaborate on points made in the quantitative results, but if an analysis has been carried out, it should be presented in more detail.

The discussion is clear and well-written, but suffers from the lack of detail given about the portfolio earlier on. Linking the main points of acceptability, impact and assessment more to the specific content and requirements of different elements of the portfolio would be more interesting, and more useful to readers who may want to apply the findings to portfolios (or assessments in general) in their own work.

Minor essential revisions

p12, second full para, last sentence, “in 59.2%” should read “for 59.2%”

Discretionary revisions

The aims could be stated a bit more in depth, with the terms ‘acceptability’, ‘educational impact’ and ‘perceived usefulness’ given a working definition to encompass the data which are reported under them. In the results some findings seem to not fit clearly under their headings (e.g. questions relating to understanding the portfolio are under the heading ‘Acceptability of the portfolio’, details of meetings under ‘Impact’), but framing what is meant by those headings earlier on would make those sections read a bit more smoothly. The results section seems quite long, and could perhaps be made more concise and given a bit more ‘punch’. It may be that reorganising the results with different, and finer-grain, subheadings, makes the section overall flow better and make its points more concisely.

The wording on p9, para 2: ‘their contribution to the different sections of the portfolio’ is not clear, and may be better rephrased to make it clear that what is being compared is essentially the registrars’ and supervisors’ engagement with the portfolio.

On p10 the data regarding registrar and supervisors’ views of the other group’s understanding of the portfolio is interesting, but it would be useful to have a comparison with their own understanding of it, i.e. do supervisors overestimate registrars’ understanding, and vice versa?

Level of interest: An article of limited interest

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.