Author's response to reviews

Title: A survey of trainee specialists experiences at the University of Cape Town (UCT): Impacts of race and gender

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Author's response to reviews: see over
Response to Reviewers: MS: 1775651967246636  A survey of trainee specialists experiences at the University of Cape Town (UCT): Impacts of race and gender

Attached please find a revised manuscript.

The manuscript also now contains sections for 'Competing interests' and ‘Authors’ contributions’ as requested placed in the appropriate places.

Responses to the reviewers are itemised below after each reviewer’s comments.

Response to Reviewer 1:

The article has several discretionary revisions:
(1) The text uses the term black respondents in the abstract and background without explaining which groups it encompasses. The explanation would better be moved up from the methods section to earlier in the article.

Although the second reviewer appeared satisfied with the way this methodological issue had been handled, we have inserted a footnote into the first line of the paper to explain this issue very early. The footnote reads as follows: “The terms African, Coloured, Indian and White are used purposively in this study as part of a current attempt to redress past racial inequalities, recognizing that these racial descriptors were used to foster discrimination under apartheid and widely abused in biomedical research. Their use in this study is not intended to legitimate such distinctions other than as social constructions. The term ‘black’ is used to refer collectively to African, Coloured and Indian persons.”

The section of the paragraph in the methods on page 5 has therefore been accordingly shortened as follows: “…As pointed out earlier, race is used as a social construction in this paper, referring to apartheid categories African, Coloured, Indian and White, in order to reverse the consequences of past abuse under apartheid. The term ‘black’ is used to refer collectively to African, Coloured and Indian persons.”

(2) the paragraph in the discussion about the insider-outsider dynamic in the results section about the white respondents has a typo. I think the authors meant for the last phrase to be "who were from Cape Town" and not "who were not from Cape Town."

This has been corrected in the text

(3) It would be helpful for the text to make some mention of the extent to which the sample of respondents in the survey is representative when discussing the response rate under results. The text does not address this topic until

The reviewer’s comment has been cut off in mid-sentence in the pdf uploaded but it seems she is referring to the fact that the discussion about representivity is only dealt with late in the discussion (page 15). We have amended the discussion on page 15 and the conclusions on page 16 to give greater recognition to these limitations. We cannot say more than what we have about representivity in the results section, but we have added some reflection on the distribution of departments and ages of the respondents compared to the faculty profile. The paragraph reads now as follows: “There were many limitations to this study. First, a response rate of 19% means the sample is not representative of the registrar population at UCT, particularly given the over-
representation of Indian and under-representation of African registrars amongst the responders compared to the total registrar population. However, included in the respondents were 2/3 of all clinical disciplines and the only large clinical absent amongst responders was the Department of General Surgery. Further, the age range of responding registrars is broadly similar to that anticipated for registrars in the faculty. The low response rate is also not unusual for postal questionnaires and is, in fact, slightly higher than the response to an Institutional Climate survey held at UCT in 2007. However, studies amongst equivalent medical trainee populations have achieved much higher response rates, to the order of 50 to 80%, albeit using different methodologies.”

(4) The wording about experiencing discrimination is a bit confusing. It appears to refer to both experiences of personal discrimination and just observing discrimination to others. It would be helpful to clarify how the question was asked or whether there were two separate questions. Also at points in the text, for example the discussion about white respondents, it should be clarified if there were two questions, to which they were responding.

There were two separate questions and this is available for perusal now in the appendix included as supplementary material. One question asked if they experienced racial discrimination (personal experience). This has now been qualified as ‘personal experience’ in the text. A second question asked the reason why friends of colleagues decided not to apply to UCT – here the answers were post-coded based on the elaboration provided by respondents. This is now described as discrimination perceived by others in the text, so as to distinguish it more clearly from ‘personal experience.’ There were no questions about witnessing discrimination against others and the text has removed any confusion in that regard by removing any association of discrimination with the word ‘perceived.’

This has been done in text as follows:

- In the abstract, text has been amended to read: “…A quarter of respondents reported knowledge of a friend who decided against studying at UCT for reasons which included anticipated racial discrimination … Specific instances of personal experience of discrimination were uncommon and …”
- In the methods (page 5), the text now reads: “…The questionnaire explored demographics, including parental occupation, university of first graduation, factors influencing registrars’ choice to study at UCT, knowledge of reasons given by registrars’ friends or colleagues not to attend UCT (including others’ anticipation of racial discrimination at UCT), experience of the recruitment process, personal experiences of discrimination and of the learning, teaching, service and research environment at UCT…”
- In the results (page 9), the text now reads: “…Fourteen percent reported personally experiencing discrimination that had impacted on their training… There were no statistically significant differences in reported personal experience of discrimination by race or gender” and further on at the end of the same page “…There were non-significant poor ratings of the research environment in relation to registrars reporting personal experience of discrimination (OR = 1.99, 95% CI 0.57 – 6.97)…” This is also the case in the last paragraph of results (page 10) where the text refers to personal experience clearly.
- Page 12 in the discussion: “Although the numbers reporting experience of personal racial discrimination were low (n=7), it was personal reporting of discrimination that was significantly associated …” and further on the same page: “…The fact that white respondents were amongst those reporting personal experience of race discrimination…”
Page 13 in the discussion: “…there was a significant difference by race in relation to racial discrimination anticipated by colleagues, which was the most common single reason cited by respondents for others’ decisions not to come to UCT (n=7). Given that no differences were found in actual personal experience of racial discrimination reported by race amongst the same respondents …”

Page 15 in the discussion: “…Respondents in this survey may therefore have been systematically different to non-responders, particularly if they had personal experience of discrimination…” and further in the same page: “…The percentage of respondents reporting personal experiences of discrimination was similar to that found in the UCT climate surveys…”

In the conclusion on page 16: “Personal experiences of racial and gender discrimination, whilst relatively uncommon at UCT…”

The text in Table 4 has been corrected to reflect experience rather than ‘perception.’

The text should therefore now reflect more clearly the distinction between personal experience and reports of colleagues anticipating discrimination. There should be no impression of any data relating to witnessing discrimination against others as this was not asked.

(5) The sentence in the results which indicates the limitations of the small sample size would better be in the methods.

There is no discussion on the limitations of the small sample size in the “Results” section, only in the discussion, where it is appropriate to informing a general discussion on representivity of the findings. If the reviewer is referring to citing the response rate, that is appropriately included as a result in epidemiological studies, including cross-sectional surveys. It is not clear what would improve on the current presentation.

(6) If there are comparable data from other South African medical institutions, it would be interesting to mention them.

There are none. This study is the first to address this issue other than simple headcounts, which are cited in the introduction and discussion.

Response to Reviewer 2:

Minor Compulsory Revisions:

1. It may be beneficial to link the actual survey to the paper so that readers can understand which specific questions were asked.

We have attached the questionnaire used as a supplementary file. We have cited this as an Appendix 1 in the Methods section on page 5 to refer the reader to the supplementary material.

2. There is a possibility that those that responded were those with some sort of recollection bias, and I note that the overall response rate was low at 19%; this may obviate some of the findings here, notable as they are.

We have added reference to the possibility of recall bias in the discussion and suitably amended our discussion (page 14) and conclusions (page 15) to take that into account. The problem of low response rate is covered in the discussion on page 14 and is also acknowledged in the conclusions.
The relevant paragraph in the discussion now reads: “Respondents in this survey may therefore have been systematically different to non-responders, particularly if they had personal experience of discrimination or felt aggrieved by adverse experiences which they wished to voice. Further, responses to the questions may have been less than entirely honest, despite assured anonymity of the questionnaire. The direction of the response bias, if any, may have been either to under- or over-state problems. We can also not discount recall bias affecting the study, since respondents were asked to recall experiences or incidents over periods that may have been up to four years prior to interview. In such cases, it would be likely to underestimate the prevalence of reported racial or gender discrimination. Further, the small sample size may have made it impossible to distinguish large differences in practice and policy between and even within departments, a point raised in feedback discussions with registrars after the study.”

The relevant paragraph in the conclusion now reads: “We believe the study provide tentative evidence to support the following conclusions: In the face of relatively high levels of dissatisfaction with the experience of research and service in this study, registrars still valued the reputation of UCT and their department highly as centres of excellence. Recruitment to registrar posts occurs predominantly through word of mouth, and departmental heads play a critical role in facilitating informal networks of recruitment. Increasing the diversity of the pool of suitable candidates for selection into registrar programmes is therefore a key leadership challenge. Instances of racial and gender discrimination, whilst relatively uncommon at UCT, were reported and must act as signals to address the institutional culture of the organization, particularly given the evidence presented regarding a fairly high level of feeling unwelcome at the institution, especially for South African registrars whose home is not in the Western Cape. These provisional findings, which should ideally be confirmed in further research with higher response rates, coupled with subsequent interventions should aim to develop best practices to share within and between institutions, if South Africa’s health sector human resource needs are to be met.”

Discretionary Reviews:
1. One of the initial concerns I had while reading this was with the use of the terms “Black,” “Coloured,” and “African,” but the authors have explained why those terms were chosen and have noted issues relative to the social construction of meaning implicit here. I appreciate that clarification in the paper.

No further edits have been included here as the reviewer has indicated this has been dealt with satisfactorily.

2. I further appreciate the fact that the authors are careful in attributing the modest improvements they noted to the specific policies designed to do just that; the study is itself descriptive and could not support any further conclusion.

No further edits have been included here as the reviewer has indicated this has been dealt with satisfactorily.

3. I do feel that one additional step might have been considered, though I do not believe its omission should affect the publication of this manuscript. However, it would have been a good idea to hold a few focus groups or individual interviews to flesh out what respondents meant when, for example, they described the teaching and learning environment as “poor.” It is possible, again for example, that the poor environment was due to budget cuts and increased workloads, or due to discrimination and a feeling of being unwelcome.
We have actually another manuscript in preparation which did exactly this. Registrars who responded to the survey were invited to volunteer for in-depth interviews to explore precisely the issues mentioned by the reviewer and others. This will be the subject of a separate paper as it would be too much to include in one paper.

4. I also would have welcomed some information on how this survey was developed, pre-tested and revised. However, I find the study itself well designed and have no significant complaints over its methodology, save for its poor response.

The questionnaire was piloted in late 2004 with 4 registrars. We have added text to address this in the methods section on page 5 as follows: “Piloting of the questionnaire was conducted with four registrars who were shortly to complete their training time in late 2004. Amendments to the questionnaire were made based on their feedback and on review by the Faculty Management responsible for postgraduate support.”