Reviewer's report

Title: A randomized evaluation of the quality of scientific writing using Web-based versus traditional workshops

Version: 1 Date: 8 August 2008

Reviewer: Ana Marusic

Reviewer's report:

General comments:
The question posed by the authors is well defined and the study is well executed. The methods are appropriate, but they would benefit from better description, particularly about the organization of the traditional and web-courses. For example, it is not clear whether the mentors in the two types of teaching were the same. Mentor may be important for the success of the course and participants' satisfaction with it. Furthermore, only at a single place in the manuscript it become clear that the students did not write all parts of the manuscript but either introduction or discussion – as writing these manuscript parts differs, and different skills are needed, this may also influence the results. It is not clear if the groups differed in the parts of the manuscript they wrote. Also, SSQS scales are not well described, and the reference for them is a book, which cannot be easily retrieved. It would be necessary to present the scale and its components in an appendix to the manuscript.

With necessary clarification of the methodology, the data presented are sound, and their presentation follows the standards for reporting this type of study. As this was not a proper randomised controlled trial, not all items of CONSORT were followed, but this was not necessary. However, there should be numbers of participants indicated for each part of the flow chart.

The discussion and conclusions are well balanced and adequately supported by the data. The limitations of the work are clearly stated, and the relevant literature is acknowledged in the manuscript. The manuscript is well written.

The title is accurate, but the abstract needs clarification for the use of abbreviations, such as SSQS, which are not explained at all in the text of the abstract.8. Do the title and abstract accurately convey what has been found?

Major Compulsory Revisions:

Abstract, page 3:
- SSQS scales are mentioned, but there is no explanation of the abbreviation. The term Intercooled Stata is also not explained.
- The abstract states that the study was carried out in 2007, but the text states that the follow up of the participants ended in November 2006.
- Error rates are not defined, as is not the minimum/maximum scores for the
SSQS scale so that the mean result presented cannot be appropriately evaluated.

Methods, page 7
- Covariates subsection: one of the confounding factors is listed as “choice of writing section (introduction of discussion) – this is the only time we learn that the students did not write the whole manuscript but only its parts, and different parts, too!). This confounding factor is not analyzed later on. This is an important factor for the study and must be better explained in the methodology, the data on how many students in each group wrote which part of the manuscript, and whether it was a predictor of satisfaction or frequency of communication with the mentor.

Methods, page 8
Online, Web-based writing … subsection: It is not clear from the manuscript if the mentors were different for the classical and on-line course. As mentors may be an important factor for satisfaction with the course and frequency of interactions, this should be clearly stated and also included in the analysis.

Methods, page 10
- SSQS scale subsection: the elements of this scale are not explained in enough detail, and the reference given is a book. I recommend that the scale is published as an appendix to the manuscript
- Assessment strategies subsection: It is stated that manuscripts were analyzed by the experts in the field, but there is no mention of how many there were and what was the definition of such an expert. Also the criteria are just listed, but not explained – for example. How was “fitness for submission to a journal” assessed? Or relevance to the field, depth of investigation or ethical appropriateness? These are important measures, and should be properly explained and addressed in the study.

Results, page 11:
- The scores on SSQS scale are presented but there is no min-max range for the score, so that the result cannot be appreciated. The same is true for satisfaction with the course.
- Table 2, with only 2 numbers in it is not necessary.

Discussion, page 13:
- The part describing Wallace and Mutooni’s study (ref. 19) states that they found web-based instruction superior to traditional methods, but the p value given is 0.063 which is not significant.

Figure 1, page 21:
- The individual parts of the flow chart of the participants should present the number of participants for each part.

Level of interest: An article of importance in its field
Quality of written English: Acceptable

Statistical review: Yes, but I do not feel adequately qualified to assess the statistics.

Declaration of competing interests:

'I declare that I have no competing interests