Author's response to reviews

Title: Education of research ethics for clinical investigators with Moodle tool

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Author's response to reviews: see over
Executive Editor  
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Dear Executive Editor Adrian Aldcroft

We would like to thank the reviewer for encouraging and valuable comments and suggestions concerning our manuscript entitled “Education of research ethics for clinical investigators with Moodle tool” by Halkoaho A, Matveinen M, Leinonen V, Luoto K & Keränen T. We have taken into account all comments and suggestions, which have helped us to amend our paper. A point-by-point response to the comments is appended to this cover letter.

Yours sincerely,

On behalf of research group

Arja Halkoaho

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Response to the comments:

Detailed comments by the reviewer:
Reviewer #2. Thank you for your kind response.

Reviewer #1: We would like to thank for these valuable comments.

Question 1: General remark: A lot of attention goes to the content of the courses, but not to the research that has been conducted to evaluate these courses. How were the questionnaires distributed? Online or were they posted via mail? Were they given at the end of the lesson? The method section needs to be more elaborated.
Answer: This has been written in the method part.

Question 2: Abstract (p. 2): Methods: “Data were analyzed using quantitative and qualitative content analysis” What is meant with quantitative content analysis? Is it an reference to descriptive statistics?
Answer: This detail has been corrected as: “Data were analyzed using quantitative methods and qualitative content analysis.” Also more information about analysis has been added in the method part.

Question 3: Introduction: Some language:
“This is especially important in vulnerable subjects such as children (…)”
“Thus, clinical investigators need to possess knowledge and understanding of ethical principles, and conduct guidelines (…) à How can one conduct guidelines? Maybe the authors mean that the investigators should adapt their conduct according to the content of the guidelines?
“Training me well be being provided (…)”
Answer: These language errors have been changed as suggested.

Question 4: “Despite long-term efforts”: What kinds of efforts are meant? Development of guidelines? Elaboration of courses concerning research integrity? The installation of commission that deal with research misconduct allegations? à Only giving a reference to the publication of Steneck does not adequately answer these questions. They state that it is not obligatory in Europe to provide training, “even though its value in explaining in (again some sloppiness in the language used) research ethics has been recognized.” References are needed to support this statement. Certainly because the efficiency of research ethics courses has been questioned. There is no thorough reflection that compares the advantages and disadvantages of online courses with those of traditional courses. The only item that is mentioned is that online courses can be taken at any time.
Answer: This part has been rewritten. Marked red in the manuscript (change version). Manuscript has been checked by the native English translator.

Question 4: Methods:
When it comes to evaluating the student, it is important to stress that research ethics and ethics in research cannot be learned by a single course. The reflection is an ongoing process.
Answer: This has been noticed in the discussion part.

Question 5: Tutors: there is no reflection concerning the possible influence of the hierarchical position of the tutor. If the tutor is a professor, the student might be discouraged to share his experiences.
Answer: This has explained in the method part: “The tutors were neither supervisors of the participating student nor members of the study group in question.”

Question 6: “The course did not include interactions or discussions between students, only between the individual student and tutors.” Why? The interaction is a crucial part of research integrity training. The authors need to justify why this was not included. Simply stating at the end of the discussion that this was one of the limitations is not sufficient.
Answer: This has been explained in the method part: “In order to ensure confidentiality of the research plans, the course did not include any interactions or discussions between the students; only the tutors could view the returned assignments.” This was at the time only way to run this course.

Question 7: Participants were doctoral students of two universities. It is not justified why (only) these two universities were included.
Answer: There was only one university and reason for this is that every university offer own courses to the students.

Question 8: How did they guarantee the anonymity of the survey?
Answer: In the Moodle feedback tool, it is impossible to tutors find out identifications of the respondents. This has been stated as follows: After finishing the course, the students completed a course evaluation form delivered via the Moodle environment in order to ensure anonymity.

Question 9: Discussion:
The discussion contains results.
Answer: This part has been removed.

Question 10: It refers to “a previous study that found that on-line and on-site training results into rather similar improvements in the knowledge in research ethics.” However, 2 references are given.
Answer: This has been corrected.

Question 11: “We consider the availability of tutors to help in preparation of students’ research protocols as well as evaluation of the discussion on ethical issues of their studies as very important.” Why? The authors need to justify this statement.
Answer: This has been changed as follows: “We consider that a major advantage of our course was the availability of on-line tutoring of the students. The tutors, experts in research as well as educated in ethics, were able to recognize individual learning needs of the student and provide immediate feedback. However, a major challenge in this kind of Moodle teaching is to be able to recruit tutors who can commit themselves to the course for a prolonged period of time.”

Question 12: The authors discuss the possible limitations of the course, but not of the research they conducted which evaluated of the course.
Answer: This has been corrected in the discussion.