Reviewer's report

Title: Health worker preferences for working in rural clinics in Uganda: a discrete choice experiment

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Reviewer: Marjolein Dieleman

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Review article “Health worker preferences for working in rural clinics in Uganda: a discrete choice experiment”

Overall

The authors address a topic that remains important and describe in a clear and accessible way the DCE method. It is also interesting that the research provides DCE results for different cadres, because, as the authors rightfully state, health service delivery is team work. The study is systematically described and gives good insight in how the results could be used. The research question is therefore relevant for the area of HRH and is well defined. At the same time, some issues would need to be addressed to allow the reader to better place the study findings and the use of DCE in addressing HRH attraction and retention. Addressing these issues would improve contextualization of the research question and the understanding of the actual use of the research results.

Major compulsory revisions:

Title: the research addresses student preferences- and the title would need to be better aligned with the contents by replacing “health worker” by “last year students’ preferences”

Background:

The authors explain the importance of using DCE for various cadres by writing that it is appropriate to consider the “inter-cadre effects”- although the explanation of the need to have a good skills mix in the team and therefore retention strategies for different cadres is clearly described, it is unclear how this relates to “inter-cadre effects”.

It is important to write a short paragraph on current wages (in USD), incentive packages for attraction/retention, or generic incentive packages to better understand the results of the study. For instance: do health workers currently receive an allowance for housing, for rural areas? Is there a bonding program in place for different cadres- and if so: for how many years people have to work in a rural area? What is the current salary of the 4 cadres? A description of these issues will help to better understand the choices made by the students in the context of Uganda’s HRH policies

Methodology:
Well explained— and the additional technical appendix is useful for more in-depth understanding of the methodology. Two questions: how is “manager support” explained in the interviews and how was the amount of 500,000 USh decided upon?

It is also important to explain the location of the schools: Mulago in Kampala is very different from Mbarara and Jinja; Mbarara is in a rural area—does this lead to different choices among the students and were the students in these schools from rural areas? It is in this light also important to write that not having been able to include Gulu- and other rural schools might have created a bias.

Given school location—could the authors explain why all students from the same cadre, but from different school location were analysed together? It is important to know if they had similar choices or not. This also counts for gender: is there a reason why the authors did not compare if there were differences in preferences among male and female students?

Results
Currently the results present an interesting overview per cadre. In relation to the comment re sampling, it would be good to include results on analysis according to school location and for gender— or explain why this is not done (or that no differences were found).

Discussion:
The authors discuss the results systematically and provide a good overview of the alternatives in strategies, in particular in relation to salary increase. Although this is interesting, it is also important to put these results in the current context of Uganda and prospects of use of the study findings by the Ministry: therefore, it is advised to add a paragraph on the feasibility of the choices— is it financially feasible if all cadres would receive 500,000 USh in addition to their salaries? How does that fit with the current wage bill and with the risks of other cadres expecting similar raises? And in relation to management support program: what is currently being done to improve health facility management? And have results of this study been discussed— what will happen next?

Lastly: the authors indicate the limitations of DCE and the last sentences addressed the difference between stated choices and actual choice. Elsewhere DCE have already been conducted: in order to better understand the usefulness of DCE’s, the authors would need to add some of the results of other DCE studies: is there any proof of the actual implementation of preferred retention strategies in other countries? And with what results?

And are there studies showing differences in opinions on preferred strategies— comparing student results with results of studies among health workers in post?

Minor essential revisions
Background—please add references to the last sentence of the first paragraph on p. 4.
Add over what period of time and when the study was conducted
In discussion the authors write “management support program”, in the
conclusions “management training” these two are not necessarily the same and
need to be aligned.

**Level of interest:** An article whose findings are important to those with closely
related research interests

**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