Author's response to reviews

Title: Medical professionalism in the formal curriculum: 5th year medical students' experiences.

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Author's response to reviews: see over
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Dear Mr Aldrin Ulep,

Thank you for considering our manuscript *Medical professionalism in the formal curriculum: 5th year medical students' experiences* for publication in BMC Medical Education. We are submitting a revised version and have taken the comments from the peer reviewers into account with careful consideration. We believe that the report conveys an important message suggesting that further consideration of students’ experiences and acceptance of ‘ticking-boxes’, i.e. the explicit use of check-lists in addressing learning objectives, is required in order to inform practice so as to avoid learning situations that might dishearten students or generate negative learning experiences.

We look forward to hearing from you and hope that the revised manuscript is considered to be of sufficient interest to be published.

With best wishes

Yours sincerely

Dr Amelia Stockley
Responses to comments

First reviewer David Cox

Major Compulsory Revisions

1) Methodology

I think it is necessary to justify why focus groups particularly were chosen over other methods such as one-to-one interviews. Each may have had their advantages but the authors should make clear their decision process in selecting this as a method.

We have taken this into account and amended the methodology section accordingly. Line 107-110

2) Limitations: Related to comment 1 is the limitation that the students were interviewed alongside their peers, which may have influenced their responses in addition to the interviewer reflexivity already identified. This limitation should also be identified and its implications acknowledged (briefly).

We agree and have amended the limitations section. Line 330

3) Limitations: Another limitation that should be addressed is the very specific context of the Bristol curriculum that this study has taken place, and how the reader can apply the interpretation of these data to different students in different institutions with different curricula.

Again, we agree and have significantly altered the limitations section. Line 330

4) Discussion: Overall, the analysis is too descriptive, and there are instances where it lacks depth. Specifically, for example, the paragraph beginning at Line 364 describes some of the data, relates it to the literature, but fails to make that extra interpretive step, considering why students feel it is not relevant, why they were irritated and what this means for the phenomenon. The first paragraph of the Discussion (from line 341) displays interpretivism closer to that of what I would expect from IPA. I believe this paper would be much more analytically sound if the authors returned to their discussion and added more interpretive depth throughout. Quotes from the literature should be used to support interpretation of their data, rather than simply describe it further.

We have returned to the discussion and hope that our amendments meet expectations.

5) A statement needs to be made suggesting what this study adds to the existing literature.

We have mentioned in the discussion that there was very little in the literature regarding the experiences of students regarding the use of checklists in education, so our findings regarding the evident disregard for the use of checklists in the tutorials provides the focus for a new direction of enquiry. Line 509
Minor Essential Revisions

1) Line 21: "Tomorrow's Doctor" should be pluralised

   Thank you.

2) Notation of the focus group quotations is inconsistent: Line 167 states "Male 1, Group 3" while other quotes only use "Group x"

   Discretionary Revisions

   Thank you.

3) Some exploration of the idea of conscious/unconscious incompetence in the approach to interpretation of students' comments, especially those who see the curriculum as "not relevant" would be interesting but perhaps beyond the scope of this paper.

   This has been used in the revised discussion section. Line 389
Second reviewer Daniel Cummings

- DISCRETIONARY REVISION: It would be prudent to include demographic details of focus group participants to provide the context with which allow generalisation to the year group as a whole.

Thank you. Line 146

- DISCRETIONARY REVISION: Some limitations were stated, such as selection bias of strongly feeling individuals, however there was limited explanation of the structure of the tutorials, both in form and content so it is difficult to draw a meaningful conclusion as to HOW to implement or improve delivery without a framework through which to adapt implementation. Therefore it is difficult to assess if the data obtained can be generalised to professionalism teaching via tutorials as a method in itself, or the specific framework adopted for the tutorials given.

- Also, the paper states seven tutorials were based on the framework highlighted by the GMC however the only description of content comes from interpretation of quotes within the data. The GMC guidance itself is not subcategorised into seven sections.

We have explained the framework for the delivery of the tutorials in more detail. However, our study found that there was significant variability between interpretations of the learning objectives by different tutors. We therefore think that it is very difficult to conclude whether it was the framework or the tutorials (rather than lectures as an alternative way to teach professionalism in the formal curriculum, for example) that posed the problem. Line 69

- DISCRETIONARY REVISION: Whilst a good response rate was achieved online, only 25% of the year utilised the free-text section. There is one mention (line 337) that ‘unselected’ participants views mirrored that of the focus groups, however it is not explicitly stated if the quotes from online sources did or did not include the participants who also took part in the focus groups and are therefore getting increased representation in the data. Furthermore when it is stated that ‘unselected course evaluation free-text responses were similar’, there is no indication as to the extent of agreement or correlation between the chosen strands or themes, nor whether the analysis of free-text responses was done alongside or after analysis of the focus group transcripts (It is only mentioned that the focus group transcripts were also coded by a second party individual); allowing a potential for observer bias in the later analysis.

We have addressed this through recognising these valid points in the limitations section (line 347) and have also mentioned that analysis of the transcripts and of the questionnaire responses was performed contemporaneously. Line 132

- Minor essential revision: There was only one minimal typographical error noted. (Line 21: ‘Tomorrows doctor’ instead of ‘Tomorrows Doctors’).

Thank you.
- The last line of the abstract feels like a soundbite. It is not a direct inference of the data, and the phrasing ‘vertical or spiral’ followed closely by ‘hidden or informal’ makes the sentence read awkwardly. This could be made more succinct and relevant to the direct findings of this research.

   **We agree and have removed it.**

- There is one quote submitted which has the gender of the participant stated, whilst no others do. This should be standardised (I personally feel the participants gender is a useful qualifier and should be included’)

   **We have removed the gender of the participants throughout.**

- The phrase ‘ticking boxes’ is used three times in the abstract, and only within inverted commas once, the last time, which is where the idiom is contextualised. Whilst the phrase itself is used by students and thus would be a direct quote (and therefore should be within quotemarks), it reads awkwardly prior to this without definition.

   **We have made some minor adjustments to the abstract taking these comments into account.**

- Line 148: ‘shove’ and ‘whack’, are not particularly emotive terms, however ‘disheartening’ and ‘shame’ in the line before are. I would suggest that ‘shove’ and ‘whack’ are indicative of the students perceptions of delivery, and that integration of tutorials within the curriculum may seem forced.

   **Thank you. We have removed the word ‘emotive’.**

- I think the discussion surrounding tick-boxing (lines 341-363) may not only refer to the lackadaisical attitudes of some tutors, but also allude to the previous point regarding the integration of tutorials within the curriculum, and is being viewed not only as a check-list from the tutors point of view, but also as being seen as part of a check-list of educational outcomes they must be seen to have been delivered.

   **We agree.**

- Line 446: I would debate the use of the phrase ‘The consensus, however, is’, when only one paper is cited. Whilst this paper does indeed suggest that a combined approach is preferable for delivering professionalism teaching, without multiple references it is difficult to describe this as a ‘consensus’.

   **We have reworded slightly here.**