Author's response to reviews

Title: The social validity of a national assessment centre for selection into general practice training.

Authors:

Annette Burgess (annette.burgess@sydney.edu.au)
Chris Roberts (christopher.roberts@sydney.edu.au)
Tyler Clark (tyler.clark@sydney.edu.au)
Karyn Mossman (karyn.mossman@sydney.edu.au)

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Author's response to reviews: see over
The Editor,  
BMC Medical Education.

Dear Editor,

**MS: 1575502601133655**

**The social validity of a national assessment centre for selection into general practice training.**  
Annette Burgess Chris Roberts Tyler Clark and Karyn Mossman

Many thanks for providing both your own insightful comments and the detailed reviewer’s comments and for the opportunity to make corrections to the paper. We have addressed each of yours and the reviewers’ comments as highlighted below in yellow.

**Editorial Comment:**

- Address the relationship between candidate’s success and their experiences of the process, and any relationship that might have to equality or diversity related factors. It was not clear whether any attempt was made to link these, beyond the experiences of candidates for whom English was not their first language. If at all possible any data available on the different experiences of candidates with different outcomes of the selection procedure should be presented. Linking the qualitative analysis to quantitative outcomes would substantially strengthen and increase the interest of this paper.

We appreciate that data linkage between candidate performance, detailed demographics and candidates evaluative perceptions would provide a rich source of data, particularly around maintaining diversity. However this was not the purpose of this particular paper. We elected to use an anonymous questionnaire. Our experience has been that if candidates feel the data was linked to a unique ID, then reporting negative perceptions may some how be linked to their chances of selection. In Australia we do not routinely collect ethnic data, however candidates could declare where they had trained. Following your suggestion we have carefully compared the comments between those who declared their country of origin outside of Australia and found no significant differences.

- Given the findings of recent work in the UK on diversity issues in the selection processes (http://www.bmj.com/content/347/bmj.f5662) it would be worth either expanding on any such findings in this paper or including a clear recommendation that this be the subject of subsequent research.

Thankyou for drawing our attention to recent findings by Esmail and Roberts (2013). We have revised the introduction to draw attention to the issues of potential bias in selection systems across a range of sectors in additional to International Medical Graduates in postgraduate medical education. We have made a clear recommendation that avoidance of perceptions of bias from candidates by virtue of gender age ethnicity and culture must rely on a process informed by multiple methods of research.

- Comparing the title to the conclusions, I don't see a full match. The title refers to the social validity of a national assessment, but in the conclusions, I see the authors comment extensively on the usefulness of social validity theory to their research. Were they studying the usefulness of social
validity theory to assess the social validity of the national assessment or making a judgment on the social validity of the national assessment strategy using social validity theory. I think they must make a choice, and while the second point would be ok to discuss, the point of the study must be the major focus of the conclusions.

We acknowledge the confusion in the original manuscript. We made extensive revisions to the paper in order to make our position clear:

1. We propose that social validity theory provides is a useful tool with which to inspect the overall fairness and transparency of a large scale selection system.
2. We show that from the candidate perspective, the NAC system in this research has partially met the criteria for social validity, but there are recommendations as to further improve the candidate experience.
3. We suggest that social validity may be a useful concept for others to use in their research of assessment systems. We further suggest that social validity might be included in some over arching frameworks of validity.

- I believe they must answer the question, using social validity theory, what evidence do they have from their study that the national assessment strategy is valid from the point of view of the candidates?

We agree that this reflects our research question. We anticipate our extensive revision will make this relationship much more transparent. Our data, as evidenced by analysis of the candidates’ responses, that a national selection centre for selecting doctors to enter general practice has a modest degree of social validity. As stated above there is more for the selection organisation to do and further research required.

- I had trouble figuring out exactly what their research question was. I suggest it be clearly stated.

We have refined the previously stated aim of the study into a specific research question.

“What are the underlying factors which influence candidates’ perceptions of the fairness of a national assessment centre approach for selection into general practice training using the theoretical perspective of Schuler’s (1993) Social Validity Theory?”

- There should be a better justification of the decision to use social validity theory. What other choices are there out there?

Again our apologies that this was not made clear in the original manuscript. We have now revised the text to show that current widely accepted frameworks to look at candidates perspectives of a selection system rely on “acceptability.” We describe how we draw on frameworks of organisation justice (introduced into medical education by the based researcher Patterson) to apply Social Validity Theory from the broader organisational psychology literature

Organizational justice is a jargony term that should be defined.

This has been better defined in the revision. Organisational justice refers to the candidates’ perception of the organisation’s behaviours and actions.
Description of MMI marking schema and interviewer training, while providing extremely useful contextual information, does not link well to the goal of social validity. How do the marking schema, blueprint, and training explicitly address social validity?

In providing detail of the quality processes that underpin the MMI, the reader is able to reflect on whether the candidates’ comments are reasonable or not. It is thought that provision of the marking schema, blueprint, and detail of the examiner training add to the context by providing a greater explanation of marking domains and criteria that is considered during the process. However we accept this is well reported elsewhere, and have reduced this detail without loss to the article.

Title page: please include the email addresses of all authors, and the full postal address of the submitting author.

This has been updated.

Once again, thank you for your detailed consideration.

Best Wishes

Dr Annette Burgess
On behalf of the authors