Commentary

Student Academic Committees: An Approach to Obtain Students' Feedback

Dujeepa D Samarasekera,[1] *MBBS (Colombo), MHPE (Maastricht)*, Indika M Karunathilake,[1] *MBBS (Colombo), MMedEd (Dundee)*, Ranjan Dias,[1] *MS (Colombo), FRCS (UK)*

Abstract

In 1995, the Colombo Medical Faculty changed its curriculum from a traditional model to an integrated one. The major challenge to the Faculty was obtaining students' feedback on their learning activities. To overcome this, a new method where staff and student groups from different years of study engage in an interactive discussion relating to their learning environment was developed. This feedback was then processed and forwarded to the relevant authorities for necessary action.

Ann Acad Med Singapore 2006;35:662-3

Key words: Curriculum evaluation, Student academic committees, Student feedback

Introduction

The shift of medical curricula from a traditional subject-based to an integrated module-based system can be seen in many medical schools worldwide. The change in curricular design was introduced to encourage student-centred learning and equip students with essential skills for future practice.

It is important to periodically evaluate new curricula for their effectiveness. However, to engage in a systematic and regular course evaluation is a challenge to many institutions. Programme evaluation provides feedback to teachers and educational authorities regarding the effectiveness, achievement of goals and standard setting.[1,2] There are many stakeholders in the curriculum and it is important to obtain their feedback. The primary stakeholders are the students.[2,3] Therefore, student feedback regarding the curriculum is an essential component of any curricular evaluation process.[2]

This paper discusses a novel approach in obtaining student feedback on their educational environment and their perceptions regarding the new method.

In 1995, the Faculty of Medicine, University of Colombo, Sri Lanka changed its curriculum from a subject-based to an integrated model.[4] The current curriculum has more student-centred learning methodologies. The major challenge to the Faculty was obtaining regular students' feedback. The usual practice was to obtain this information at the end of a module or an academic programme. However, much of the details were forgotten by the students and many do not give proper feedback, as they were fatigued by the large number of questionnaires given by different academic programmes running concurrently. The teachers with limited resources were burdened with analysing large number of questionnaires. To circumvent these challenges, the Medical Education Development and Research Centre (MEDARC) initiated a new method of obtaining student feedback in May 2005, through the formation of interactive committees called Student Academic Committees (SAC).

Materials and Methods

Each cohort studying in different years of the undergraduate medical course was asked to form a SAC. There were approximately 180 students per cohort. From each year of study, 10 to 20 members were elected by students' vote and the batch representative functioned as the chairperson. The student members functioned as elected members for a year. At the outset, the MEDARC held a workshop with the 5 SAC to discuss the objectives and process design. The system that is currently practised is described below.

A minimum of 3 meetings will be held during an academic term, conducted by the MEDARC with teachers who are involved in learning activities for that particular cohort of students. Before the meeting, the Chairperson of the student

[1] Medical Education Development And Research Centre, Faculty of Medicine, University of Colombo, Sri Lanka
Address for Reprints: Dr Dujeepa D. Samarasekera, Medical Education Unit, Dean's Office, Yong Loo Lin School of Medicine, National University of Singapore, Block MD11 #01-08, Clinical Research Centre, 10 Medical Drive, Singapore 117597.
Email: dujeepas@gmail.com

group will hold a meeting with his/her student cohort to discuss the issues faced by them and formulate discussion points.

During the meeting with the staff, the SAC members are first informed of the ethical aspects of the discussion and the objectives of the meeting. The format is a semi-structured interview (Appendix 1 – attached interview Agenda).

After the meeting, the MEDARC prepares a report based on the findings. This is then forwarded to the Curriculum Development and Evaluation Committee (CDEC). After discussion, the CDEC reports to the Faculty Board for necessary changes. The changes and recommendations will be published by the MEDARC in their newsletter and the students will be informed during subsequent meetings with the respective SAC.

Results and Discussion

The main advantage is (a) the manageability and the cost effectiveness of the process and (b) the students can express their views freely on curricular matters. However, due to the small sample size some of their views could be biased. This effect is minimised by allowing the students to select their own representatives every year and also by requesting the SAC to hold a batch meeting prior to their discussion with the faculty.

The SAC have helped the faculty to identify good learning activities and academics, who are supportive of students. They have also assisted in identifying weaknesses in our system such as poor sequencing of learning activities, issues relating to the administration, poor exam formats, unsupportive academics and issues relating to student accommodation.

The acceptance of SAC by the Faculty authorities was mainly due to the following reasons:

- The process could identify issues faced by the students and sensitise authorities quickly
- Its ability to resolve many issues immediately on the spot. This is possible due to the presence of many stakeholders during the meeting with SAC
- The process is transparent and it is difficult for a third party to conceal any student issues.

The main drawback is that the students expect all their issues to be addressed after the meeting. Sometimes, the committee expresses dissatisfaction when some of their issues are not addressed.

The students' feedback on SAC is satisfactory. This is evident from feedback comments such as

- "I feel happy at least that I was able to express thoughts directly to academic staff"
- "We feel that by giving feedback in an open discussion with the staff we were able to clarify matters and discuss in-depth on some issues"
- "I feel that my comments/views as a student are taken seriously by the Faculty now, when important decisions are taken on the curriculum"
- "We appreciate the immediate action on major issues raised by Student Academic Committees when compared to the usual written format (filling of questionnaires)"

Conclusion

The Student Academic Committees currently in place at the Colombo Medical Faculty is achieving its expected objectives.

REFERENCES

1. Hutchinson L. Evaluating and researching the effectiveness of educational interventions. BMJ 1999;318:1267-9.
2. Posner JG. Analysing the Curriculum. 2nd ed. New York:McGraw-Hill, 1995.
3. Wilkes M, Bligh J. Evaluating educational interventions. BMJ 1999;318: 1269-72.
4. Student Handbook. Colombo: Faculty of Medicine, University of Colombo, 2004.

Appendix 1. Student Academic Committees Agenda

Objectives

- To obtain feedback from students on their current academic programme with regard to:
  - Content and sequencing
  - Teaching/Learning process
  - Assessment
  - Administration
- To obtain feedback on facilities – learning support, IT, library, accommodation
- To obtain feedback on student counselling service and language support

Agenda

1. Introduction to the meeting and ground rules
2. Stream work
   – Introductory Basic Sciences
   – Applied Sciences
   – Behavioural
   – Community
   – Clinical
3. Student Support – learning support, IT, library and accommodation
4. Student counselling service and language support
5. Any other matter
6. Feedback regarding the Student Academic Committee process