

RESEARCH ARTICLE

Open Access

The students' voice: Strengths and weaknesses of an undergraduate medical curriculum in a developing country, a qualitative study

Priyanga Ranasinghe*, Sashimali A Wickramasinghe, Ruwan Wickramasinghe, Asela Olupeliyawa and Indika Karunathilaka

Abstract

Background: In medical education, feedback from students' is essential in course evaluation and development. Students at Faculty of Medicine, University of Colombo, Sri Lanka complete a five year medical curriculum comprising of five different streams. We aimed to evaluate the five year medical curriculum at the Faculty of Medicine, University of Colombo, Sri Lanka.

Methods: A qualitative research was conducted among recent graduates of the faculty. Students' opinions on strengths and weaknesses of the curriculum were collected via questionnaires, which were analysed and classified into common themes. A focus group discussion (FGD) based on these themes was conducted among two student groups, each comprising of a facilitator, two observers and nine students selected as a representative sample from questionnaire respondents. FGDs were conducted using a semi-structured set of open-ended questions to guide participants and maintain consistency between groups. The FGD evaluated the reasons behind students' perceptions, attitudes, emotions and perceived solution. Verbal and non-verbal responses were transcribed and analysed.

Results: Questionnaire response rate was 82% (153/186). Students highlighted 68 and 135 different responses on strengths and weaknesses respectively. After analysis of both questionnaire and FGD results the following themes emerged: a well organized module system, increased frequency of assessments, a good variety in clinical appointments, lack of specific objectives and assessments at clinical appointments, community and behavioural sciences streams beneficial but too much time allocation, lengthy duration of course, inadequate knowledge provided on pharmacology and pathology.

Conclusion: We demonstrate how a brief qualitative method could be efficiently used to evaluate a curriculum spanning a considerable length of time. This method provided an insight into the students' attitudes and perceptions of the present faculty curriculum. Qualitative feedback from students highlighted certain key areas that need attention and also possible solutions as perceived by the students'.

Background

Curriculum evaluation can be broadly defined as the "continuous systematic process of gathering information about all elements of a curriculum, analysis and interpretation to help arrive at an understanding of the extent to which goals, objectives and outcomes have been achieved and subsequently take informed decisions for further improvement" [1]. Hence, systematic evaluation forms a cornerstone in curriculum development as it; helps to define the

quality of educational experiences, demonstrates whether or not a program is meeting its educational goals and objectives, elicits feedback and satisfaction data from learners, helps to identify the need for changes thereby implementing improvements for future learners and enables medical educators to use evaluation data to disseminate evidence based educational innovations through presentations and publications [2].

Curriculum evaluation is a continuous process with a wide variety of different approaches. Characteristics of an ideal evaluation strategy are; reliability, validity,

* Correspondence: priyanga.ranasinghe@gmail.com
Faculty of Medicine, University of Colombo, Sri Lanka