

Title:

Establishing the efficacy of program evaluation for a new Problem- based learning (PBL) curriculum in a medical school in a developing country

Author: Jacqueline M van Wyk

Context and setting

A new system to monitor, evaluate and report on areas affecting the teaching and learning processes that accompanied curriculum change was done through establishing an evaluations office at the Nelson R. Mandela School of Medicine (NRMSM).

Why the change was necessary

The functioning of the new evaluations office was impacted by combining the evaluations and implementation function because of severe staff shortages during the implementation phase of PBL. The purpose of this study was to investigate the efficacy of continuing a separate student feedback system through an evaluations office, as a means of providing direction for curriculum review as well as support for student learning and staff development activities at the NRMSM.

What was done?

To determine the usefulness of student feedback data, qualitative analysis was conducted of the feedback on five curriculum units in the second year (during 2004) and compared with similar second year student feedback (during 2005). The results were provided to student representatives, PBL facilitators and faculty members to determine the value of this evaluation system. The data were also available to the Health Professions Council of South Africa (HPCSA) during an accreditation visit in 2005.

Evaluation of the results and impact

After learning that student feedback had effected substantial changes in the second year curriculum, students had an increased sense of empowerment to partake and influence curriculum decisions. They were grateful for the changes made that ensured an improved teaching and learning climate. These included: formally structured dissection programme, improved sequence of curricular learning units to avoid competition for textbooks, more structured feedback sessions after assessments, inclusion of question and answer sessions at regular intervals to address issues before conclusion of the units, noticeable increase in structured interactive large group resource sessions, availability of lecturer's notes/presentations, and inclusion of subject study guides. Students were also appreciative of individual feedback that they received based on facilitator reports, as were facilitators of their feedback from students.

The 2005 student feedback revealed some concerns that still remained: negative attitudes of some faculty who did not allow discussion during lectures, did not make notes available, were not always audible to the class, or cancelled classes without prior notification. Students provided suggestions to improve learning: more health care contacts and hospital visits during learning units, more specific objectives in PBL cases, and improved study guides.

The importance of the above data and the evaluations system was affirmed by the HPCSA recommendations. These included separation of staff development and curriculum evaluation functions from that of curriculum implementation, because of potential conflicting interests.

Impact of the study.

It is important for curriculum evaluation units to demonstrate efficacy of their functions to all stakeholders, including students, faculty and administrators. The present study documented the utility of student feedback in improving the teaching and learning climate during implementation of a new curriculum in a resource constraint setting. Moreover, the importance of separating curriculum implementation from evaluation and staff development functions was affirmed.

Correspondence

Jacqueline Van Wyk, Head of Evaluation
Undergraduate Medical Education, Nelson R. Mandela School of Medicine
University of KwaZulu-Natal, Durban, South Africa
vanwykj2@ukzn.ac.za