



RESEARCH ARTICLE

AN EXPLORATIVE STUDY INTO THE LEVELS OF INVOLVEMENT OF FACULTY IN GUIDING DISSERTATION OF POST GRADUATE MEDICAL STUDENTS

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Received 22nd April, 2018; Accepted 06th May, 2018; Published 30th June, 2018

ABSTRACT

A formative assessment was conducted among the faculty guiding or co-guiding dissertations of Post Graduate students in Medical Sciences. The rationale was to encourage the learning involved in doing/guiding research. A questionnaire comprising of twelve questions was distributed and the received responses analysed. The response rate was 51%. Among 21 responses received, 16 (76.2 %) could name project and 17(81%) could name co-guide correctly; but not all. Nineteen (90 %) responses indicated start of review literature, and 13 (62%) prepared summaries. Seventeen (81%) responses confirmed periodical review of the progress. Four (19%) students already made presentations. A baseline data on guides' involvement in dissertation could be generated. Lack of enthusiasm by faculty in supervising research and its possible reasons discussed. The need for remaining aware of current research literature is highlighted and necessity of periodic review stressed. More training programs for teachers need to be put in practice to improve their research output and gain visibility of their research through publications.

Key words: Medical Sciences, PG dissertations, Medical PG Guides, Dissertation, Work Assessment.

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Citation: Kumudam Unni, Praveenlal Kuttichira and Varghese, P.R., 2018. "An explorative study into the levels of involvement of faculty in guiding dissertation of Post Graduate Medical Students" *International Journal of Current Research in Life Sciences*, 7, (06), 2344-2346.

INTRODUCTION

Assessment may be defined as any method used to better understand the current knowledge that a person possesses. It is an ongoing process of gathering and interpreting information about the knowledge, skill and / or behaviour of a learner. Policy makers use assessment to set standards, focus on goals, monitor the quality of education, reward/sanction various practices, formulate policies and direct resources including personnel/money. One cannot trust an assessment to be effective unless it has been proven by research. Studies have shown that assessment drives learning (Wormald *et al.*, 2009; Mclachlan, 2006). Optimizing learning is a continuous challenge for medical schools. Seeking and incorporating feedback is necessary for continuous improvement in medicine. There are two types of assessments: formative and summative. The importance of a formative assessment lies in its usefulness for helping learners and assessors to know and understand their position and identify areas in which they need to improve. This type of assessment when done impromptu and appropriately in the form of descriptive feedback must be timely and specific (Rolfe, 1995).

The main question here is not pass/fail but intention is to optimise the learning pathway (Schuwirth, 2004). Summative assessments are more appropriate for making high stakes' decisions, such as promotions/graduations. In this study, we conducted a formative assessment on guides of post graduate students to generate baseline values on their knowledge/awareness of their student's work. This indirectly will show the quality of supervision of guides on the mandatory thesis work done by the PG students in Medical sciences.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

A questionnaire comprising 12 questions (Annexure 1) was prepared and circulated among 21 guides and/or co-guides of departments conducting Post-graduate courses in medical sciences. The questionnaire was distributed and responses gathered at the beginning of training program for guides/co-guides of PG students. The Research Director introduced the program following which there was an interactive session with all the guides.

RESULTS

Forty five PG teachers guiding or co-guiding PG dissertations were invited to participate in the program.

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Twenty three (51.1%) faculty members participated and one expressed his inability to attend due to his Out Patient or Operation Theater responsibilities. Out of 23 participants, 2 didn't return the filled up proforma. Both were senior professors. Among 21 responses received, 16 (76.2 %) correctly named the current projects with the titles. Two (9.5%) were unaware of the projects and 3 (14.3 %) were unable to correctly name the project. When asked if they could name the co-guide working with them in the same project, 17 (81%) answered correctly and 4(19%) could not. When asked whether the student had started review of literature, 19 (90 %) replied in the affirmative and the rest replied in the negative. Thirteen (62%) reported that the students had prepared summaries of what they read, 7 (33%) reported their student had not started and one guide did not answer the question.

When asked whether they held review meetings with their student, 17 (81%) replied in the affirmative and one guide did not answer the question. Only 4 (14%) of the students had completed their sample collection. Four (19%) of the guides said that their students' work had already been presented in a conference of professional organization of their specialty.

DISCUSSION

Everything starts with research. One cannot trust an assessment or program to be effective unless it has been proven by research. In this era of "Publish or perish", the number of presentations in conference and articles published in scientific journals are of relevance. Here, we present data on the levels of involvement of PG teachers as guides in the post graduate research program. Out of 21 departments required for conduct of MBBS course, 15 departments in our college run PG courses with a total of 29 seats. As the course is of three years at any point of time there would be triple number of dissertation works going on in the college at various levels of completion. Newly joined student has to submit synopsis by the end of first semester and the final year student has to submit one semester prior to the appearing of examinations. A PG teacher can guide one student per year. An eligible teacher may be guiding one to three PG dissertations at any point of time depending on the number of PG students selected each year and the availability of PG teachers in the department.

The title of the study should ideally be constructed after full review of literature when there is better awareness of the gap area. Here the learner does only a part review of literature and constructs the research question/ hypothesis. This very often leads to title change at the end of the study. It is a common observation in our Institution. However the University (Kerala University of Health sciences, Thrissur, Kerala) stipulates submission of synopsis of dissertation before the end of first 6 months of the PG course and title change is not routinely allowed. Hence forming title before the end of literature review is inevitable. In spite of invitations from the academic administration of the college and pre-intimated full time participation of the director of research institute attached to the college (who is a well known scientist), the participants constituted only half of invitees. This response rate can be considered as a broad indicator of the enthusiasm of PG teachers to the field of research. Teachers' ignoring the importance of dissertations will reflect in the enthusiasm of students also, whose primary intention is to pass the examination. This in turn will lead to doctors keeping away from research, adversely affecting profession and medical

science. Not returning the filled questionnaire could be because they were senior professors and being privileged they were not willing to undergo routines. Or they were reluctant to expose their responses, perhaps privately knowing the limitations of their knowledge and skill. However it points to the fact that any attempts to improve the research capability should start from the top end or there should be some mechanism to exempt them (without compromising their prestige) from guiding PG students in doing dissertations. The finding that a few guides are unaware of the research topic and their co-guide in the same project needs to be noted. It points to the casualness of some of the faculty in their approach towards research. This seems to be more common among senior faculty. In the days of their learning, clinical research might not have been given its due importance, or being immersed in clinical practice currently, they might have lost their interest in doing research. The fact that funding of research is not so easily obtained is also probably a deterrent for them to do research currently or previously.

Most of the guides reported that their students started review of literature, but only half agreed the summaries were prepared. The questionnaire didn't explore the authenticity of these responses. Reading of research articles are the backbone for updating knowledge and creation of research questions. With advances in the field of Information Technology and Library science, getting access to current research and knowledge are at a distance of computer key boards. Availability of medical journals related to the respective subject is ensured in any college due to strict stand by the Medical Council of India on the minimum standard requirements for starting UG and PG courses. Regular reading of a few journals of standard is the best method required. However journal reading habits of faculty and PG students need to be improved. Current practice is to go to journal articles when a need arises and the search will be confined only to the topic of interest. Usually that reading will be for the limited purpose of bulking the discussion portion of the write up with references. Critical evaluation of the published article rarely happens.

Sample collection remained partial in many of the dissertations. This was acceptable as the students were at various levels of their dissertation project work. The participated guides had their students of first, second or third year of their studies. There is no standard mechanism for monitoring the progress of data collection. Ideally the first few samples at least, is to be taken in the presence of guiding faculty. A periodical and regular monitoring of the data collection and occasional direct scrutiny are required. In spite of overall unsatisfactory responses, four PG students could complete their dissertation and present paper in conferences. This appears a welcome sign. With active professional organizations for every subject specialty there are opportunities for any budding scientist in medical sciences to make presentations in scientific forums. As University made it mandatory for such presentations to be eligible for appearing in examinations, these opportunities are now widely made use of. These data may be considered baseline values. Further studies are required to assess the knowledge, skill and attitude about doing research by the guides. The Medical Council of India requirement (MCI) for publications for promotions does facilitate the faculty involvement in research. Guiding a PG student will help the faculty to reach that goal. For a publication to be good, the two important factors are citations and publication in a high impact factor Journal. However

insisting on these two may not be good at this stage as it is only the beginning of entry by students of Kerala Medical Colleges to the field of research. For improving the research output, more and more students need to be supported to opt for doing research. The first focus needs to be the faculty than the students. Only from teachers, the knowledge, skill and attitude can be transferred to the student. The need of the hour is to introduce research to the faculty in a non-threatening way and to improve their skill in doing and guiding research.

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ANNEXURE 1

- A: Name of Guide
B: Number of projects you are currently guiding with the titles
C: Name of co-guides working with you in each project
D: Has the student started Review of Literature?
E: How many articles has the student actually read?
F: Any summaries prepared?
G: How many of the read articles were discussed with you?
H: What is the desired sample size?
I: How many samples collected / procedures done so far?
J: How many samples collected/procedures done under your direct observation?
K: How many are the review meetings held with the student related to research?
L: How many review meetings took place in the department?
M: Any conference presentations made / scientific articles published out of the work done so far ?
