Differential Attainment case study

Exploring the progression and success of medical students on a bespoke widening participation ‘Gateway’ programme

Rebecca D’Silva – Postgraduate researcher in Medical Education, University of Southampton
Dr Sally Curtis – Batchelor of Medicine 6 year (BM6) Programme Lead, University of Southampton

What was the problem?

Students on the BM6 programme at the University of Southampton have a lower success rate than those on the standard entry medical degree programme. The BM6 programme is one of a growing number of ‘Gateway’ programmes at UK medical schools that have a specific focus on widening access and recruit across the UK. These programmes aim to address the persistent underrepresentation of those from lower socioeconomic backgrounds in medicine. The BM6 programme consists of an initial ‘Year 0’ in which 30 students are taught and supported by dedicated staff, after which they enter Year 1 alongside students on the standard medical programme.

Previous analysis at both Southampton and another institution have shown a 7% lower retention rate for these students compared to those on the standard medical programme, but there is little understanding of where and why these differences occur.

What was the solution?

The solution was to undertake research into and evaluation of the progression of Gateway students through their medical degree in order to identify particular additional support needs. A PhD mixed-methods project is underway to explore this problem and aims to identify facilitators of and barriers to success. The first study explored routinely collected data to identify similarities and differences in progression between the standard entry and Gateway programmes. It also aimed to identify predictive factors for success on entry for students on the Gateway programme.
What were the challenges?
Changing entry requirements and assessment structures over the years of the programme made identifying a large enough sample size with a consistent profile challenging. Scores were calculated for all assessments in order to allow collation of different cohorts into one data set. Using routinely collected data was problematic as data was collected from a variety of sources, and not all data had been collected with the same level of detail; significant cleaning was required to create a usable data set.

What were the results?
Results showed that students on the Gateway programme were more likely to struggle in progressing through the programme compared to standard entry students in years of significant transition, such as from Year 0 into Year 1, and in the first clinical year. This finding fed into the development of a programme of voluntary support sessions for students preparing for clinical practice. These sessions have been trialled in 2017, and initial evaluation has been positive. Long-term follow up will be carried out to identify if these sessions impact student success.

The Gateway programme has eligibility requirements for application, such as being a first generation applicant to higher education. Results showed that none of these factors were predictive of success or failure. It is reassuring to know we are not setting students up to fail by selecting them using criteria predictive of failure.

The next phase of this research project is a qualitative study exploring Gateway student perceptions of success at medical school, and then qualitatively exploring facilitators of and barriers to their success.

Want to know more?
Rebecca D'Silva can be contacted at: R.R.D'Silva@soton.ac.uk