

Galenicals Committee 2008-9: Reflections and Feedback

As we come to the end of an enjoyable and fascinating year, the Galenicals committee 2008-09 would like to offer some reflections and feedback on our work with the Faculty of Medicine and the Centre for Medical Education (hereafter referred to as “the Faculty”) over the last twelve months. It has been a pleasure and privilege to represent the student body to a senior management team who so encourage and welcome our input. As our ultimate aim has been to make the student experience of Bristol medical school as fulfilling and enjoyable as possible, we have written the following paper to highlight aspects of the Medical School which we believe make a significant contribution to achieving this aim, and to make suggestions for further improvement.

1. Communication between the faculty and the student body

1.1 Introduction

We are grateful that our role in student representation has been taken seriously, that opportunity to offer feedback has been generous and that this feedback has been well received. Special thanks must be given to Dr Cahill who has been particularly receptive and always prompt in responding to our comments and issues.

We do feel that there are still several areas where communication between the faculty and the student body could be improved. In November we met with Professor Mumford to discuss the results of the National Student Survey and we would like to reiterate what was said at that meeting. Although those few members of the committee who have had close dealings with the faculty have observed that student concerns are of the utmost importance to the faculty, this not the perspective of the wider student body, which seems a shame. We believe that communication with students is a key determinant of the nature of the relationship between students and the faculty. We have seen examples of both good and poor communication in our term and we would like to and would like to highlight the impact this has on students.

1.2 Administration

1.2.1 Recent changes to CfME

We welcome the changes in the administrative set up to the CfME. The introduction of a receptionist and a single coordinator for each year group has made the CfME more accessible to students. We believe that there is scope to do even more to ensure that everyone is fully aware of the new setup. The contacts list that was emailed to all was helpful, but not sufficient for many students to appreciate the extent of the changes. We suggest that it would be useful to have photographs of staff on Medici alongside their job descriptions. Administrative staff make a valuable contribution to the student experience as shown by the popularity of figures such as Elaine Anderson and Kate

Walter. It would make a real difference if administrative staff were to introduce themselves to the relevant year group on the introductory day at the start of each academic year.

1.2.2 Administration Errors

We believe that the faculty is too often let down by simple administrative errors. Whilst we recognise that occasional errors do occur, e-mails sent to the wrong group of students or mistakes in the information can cause unnecessary anxiety amongst students and has a negative impact on their perception of the faculty. Unfortunately we think that these errors are occurring too frequently at the moment. A recent example of this was when the Year 4 block 3 COMP 2 SSC results were published on blackboard before they were verified. A week later the results were removed and students were sent an e-mail stating that these were not the final marks as the essays had not been double-marked.

1.2.3 Awareness of current issues

Students really appreciate administrative staff being up to date with deadlines and requirements throughout the academic year for example with regards to NHS bursaries, elective and SSC submissions. That the member of staff who was responsible for handling the NHS bursaries in 2008 was away over the submission period illustrates why this is so important. Lack of access to support at this time left many students without money for the beginning of the year. We are grateful to Gail Parker for her positive response to our feedback regarding these problems.

It is vitally important that there is consistency between what students are told by administrative staff and what is written in handbooks or on blackboard. Recently we have been concerned by:

- Students being told that they have to have their visas sorted before the elective deadline when on the form on blackboard this states that this just needs to be in process.
- Confusion over how to apply for 5th year SSC placements and lack of information as to what the year 5 SSC entails. We were grateful for the constructive discussion at a recent SSLC meeting.
- Confusion over the third year clerking portfolio and exactly what was required of students.

1.2.4 The role of Galenicals

We feel that it is inappropriate for queries to be forwarded to Galenicals that administrative staff should be able to answer themselves. For example the Galenicals secretary was asked to email the doctor-led project NNedPro from Cambridge University with the term and exam dates of the fourth years.

1.3 Email correspondence

We believe that the tone of e-mails sent to students is very important. The e-mails sent by Richard Edwards, Gail Parker and Ros Forge are examples of good communication that students are receptive to and e-mails composed in this way can help students to feel engaged and part of the medical school community. We think it would be helpful if more e-mails used a similar tone as sometimes staff can come across as unfriendly and disinterested.

Although email correspondence has been an effective way of communication as a committee we have been at times frustrated by the fact that emails are not always responded to. This problem has also been reported by other students, and especially noted by 2 in 1s, fourth year students and students on Erasmus. Erasmus students in particular are already in a stressful, isolated environment and rely on email support. We understand that staff at CfME are busy but an acknowledgement of receipt and a delayed response would be greatly appreciated.

Tragically this year has seen the death of two of members of the student community. Whilst on the subject of communication we would like to commend Richard Edwards and all responsible for the sensitive manner in which the most recent student death was announced to students. This was a vast improvement on the handling of the previous loss and we would support adoption of this approach as protocol should the Faculty be faced with another such tragedy in the future.

We would like to emphasise that email is the primary interface between students and staff and significantly influences the students' perceptions of the medical school.

1.4 Blackboard and other online resources

1.4.1 Blackboard

Students would really appreciate access to all previous courses in medicine on Blackboard including Hippocrates. It is common for students (including intercalators) to want to refer to material from earlier stages of the course and it would be really useful if access could be maintained to all areas throughout the entire course.

1.4.2 Medici

We have received feedback from students that Medici is not user friendly. This may explain why putting information on this website is not currently an effective means of communicating with students.

1.4.3 Portfolios and records of achievement

It would be extremely useful for students to have an electronic record of achievement at medical school either on Blackboard or 'student info'. This might contain SSCs, exam results and extra-curricular achievements including research, publications and prizes. This be invaluable for applications and would also allow students to reflect on their professional and academic development whilst at medical school. Allowing students to demonstrate their extracurricular activities would help to acknowledge the many things

students do outside of their course and also help them when applying for their foundation posts in the fifth year.

1.5 Timetables

It has been previously agreed that timetables will be sent to students no later than the Thursday before the first week of the attachment. This is extremely important as it allows students to arrange transport to Academies as well as commitments outside of the course. We are grateful to all academy administrators who have achieved this and would urge the Academy Managers to ensure that this continues to happen across the board.

1.6 Feedback and Exams

1.6.1 Exam results

It was agreed with the previous Galenicals committee that exam results would be released within three weeks of the exam being taken¹. We would like to thank the Faculty for where this has been achieved as it makes a huge difference in instances where results affect plans for summer employment, projects, SSCs or electives. However we are concerned that this has not been the case in all instances this year and would like to emphasise the importance of providing students with a date as to when exam results can be expected. We would also like to point out that individual queries about exams and results often reflect the anxieties of a number of students and that in many cases it may be useful to consider emailing the whole cohort to prevent speculation and rumour causing unnecessary anxiety.

We are grateful to the faculty for the proactive concerns surrounding the ACS exam. Clearly this was an unprecedented event and we hope that procedures are now in place to prevent any future problems of this nature. We feel sure that the faculty must appreciate the impact that this had on a significant number of students, not only with regards to the elective plans of those who were told that they had failed, but also in terms of damaging students' confidence in the assessment process. Unfortunately we are concerned that this was not conveyed in the letter sent to students on revision of the results.

1.6.2 Feedback

We appreciate the effort the Faculty have made to improve feedback. The provision of both a clinical and written mark is really useful in enabling students to reflect on areas in which they need to improve. Oral feedback after OSCE exams is incredibly valuable and we would support the continuation of this system.

¹ Galenicals Committee Wish List 2007-08

2. Careers

MMC has increased the pressure on students to think about their career paths earlier. We feel that there is currently insufficient careers advice at all stages of medical education and that there is too great a reliance on Galenicals to provide this. We would encourage and support:

- Provision of more information about MMC including Academic foundation posts and MTAS in YEAR 3 at the latest. Some students have even suggested that this should be as early as year 2 as this may affect their decision as to whether to intercalate.
- A careers section on Medici with contacts in each speciality
- A 'mentoring system' to improve access to references and guidance re consideration of referees during the pre-clinical years.

We think that existing careers provision (e.g. the fourth year careers day) needs to be organised for a time when students are likely to be receptive to it e.g. at a time when students are not pre-occupied with exams.

Galenicals have a careers representative, whose job should be to supplement the information disseminated from the Faculty rather than be the primary provider. However we believe that education on the foundation programme application system and information about academic foundation programmes is essential information for students they should not have to rely on their colleagues for its provision. Whilst we appreciate that the faculty does provide some excellent guidance to the foundation programme application when students return from their electives, we believe that more input is needed earlier so that students can begin to prepare for the form (e.g. by keeping a record of relevant cases/experiences).

3. Welfare and support

3.1 Introduction

We appreciate that much has changed regarding student support over the last couple of years. We believe that the student advisor is a good addition to the faculty and provides equal access to support to all students in a way that the original personal tutor system failed to do. It does not however combat the feeling of anonymity expressed by many students at Bristol medical school. At the Wesleyan Medical Students Society Conference we were intrigued by the various welfare systems employed by other medical schools, in particular by the following system.

3.2 Medical students mentor group system

Students are allocated to a "pastoral group" of 30-40 students, perhaps 6 or 7 from each year group. A team of two or more clinicians or academics are responsible for each group as mentors. The groups meet once a term for group discussion/feedback/socialising or talks of interest. The mentor meets with all first

year students on arrival to university – either individually or as a group. There is potential for the mentor to meet with other year groups as appropriate. Within the groups students are mentored by students in higher year groups; for example the Galenicals “Mums and Dads” system could operate within these groups to further cement the community. Pastoral groups are encouraged to meet on a social basis and Galenicals could arrange competitive events to encourage inter-year bonding.

The benefits of this scheme include:

- Consistent contact with the same member of staff and students for the duration of a medical school career
- Increasing inter year mixing/mentoring
- Closer contact and a greater sense of community at medical school.

This proposed system is not a reinvention nor dilution of the previous personal tutor system, and would complement rather than substitute the student advisor. It does however aim to personalise the medical school experience in a way that the current support system does not have the capacity to achieve.

3.3 Academy Representatives

There was limited interest in the 3rd year students for Academy reps, this resulted in a delay in the posts being filled, which is detrimental to the students in that academy and the relationships between students and members of staff. These problems were discussed with the Academy Deans themselves and we are grateful that in future they will elect students on the initial days of their placement. This will improve communication between Deans and Representative and minimise the time without an Academy Rep.

3.4 The needs of 2 in 1s and premeds

It has been a long-standing problem that these smaller groups of medical student often feel excluded from the medical community. As Galenicals it was one of our aims to offer more support and contact to these individuals. We have created the role of a post-graduate representative who has worked hard to improve the support however she does not feel the Faculty has supported her work. With regret we do not feel we have engaged with the premedical students as we had aimed to. We hope that the creation of a pre-clinical vice president will provide more focused support to this group of students. From the Faculty’s point of view we feel it may be beneficial that they have a specific administration and welfare support staff member who they can turn to. As a result of the recent SSLC the 2 in 1 students will be meeting with CfME staff to discuss issues further. We are grateful for the positive responses to this feedback that we have had.

3.5 Change to the structure of the Galenicals Committee

Changes to the structure of the Galenicals committee have been made. There is now a Pre-clinical and a Clinical Vice President which will deal with issues of welfare and the Welfare post has been discontinued. This was in response to the increasing demands

made of the welfare representative and the greater potential for the role, and also due to a lack of direction and post specification of the role of the previous vice president.

4. Conclusion

We have been privileged over the last year to have an insight into what makes Bristol Medical School work. From our work this year and from our conference we have come to appreciate just how lucky we are to study at Bristol Medical School. We hope that the above comments are constructive and will help to enhance the student experience.