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Student Focus Groups as an Element of the MPharm Quality Management Programme

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We report the successful introduction of student focus groups (SFGs) as an element of our School of Pharmacy quality management programme. Student focus groups feature focused discussion, problem-solving and brainstorming, which allow students at each level of the Master of Pharmacy (MPharm) degree to contribute opinion, commentary, ideas and solutions to the School of Pharmacy (the *School*) and, in so doing, enhance their own and their colleagues' education. Focus group outputs are formally reported to the MPharm Course Board and the focus group facilitator closes the reporting loop by reporting Course Board decisions back to the SFG. The group facilitator moderates meetings, and is a member of the teaching staff who has a pre-existing professional relationship with the group. The School demonstrably benefits from SFG inputs, while the group members benefit by gaining transferable skills. Group members also gain the opportunity to contribute to the School quality management and assessment process. Qualitative and quantitative evaluations are included which indicate that such groups provide a valuable contribution to the quality management programme of the School. The variety of ways in which the group members and the whole student body benefit are described.

Keywords: Quality management; Focus group; Service-providers; Respondent

BACKGROUND

Quality management/assessment in pharmacy undergraduate teaching can be either in the form of quality *enhancement*, or quality *management* (or control). We have previously reported various developments that have enhanced the quality of undergraduate pharmacy learning and teaching. These include School-wide implementation of

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intranet-based learning resources (Sosabowski *et al.*, 1998), bespoke spreadsheets for pharmaceutics practical classes (Sosabowski *et al.*, 2001) and fully automated submission, assessment, grading and commentary for laboratory practical scripts (Olivier *et al.*, 2001). Similarly, quality enhancement innovations most often originate from the education service-providers (i.e. teaching staff). Quality management (or control) is normally an organisation-based characteristic, most commonly a top-down cascade of committees and procedures originating from the Academic Board or equivalent and counterbalanced by bottom-up monitoring/evaluation reports and course reports. Hitherto, the input into quality management from the service-recipients (i.e. students) has been limited to student representatives on selected local committees. However, student-based evaluation of teaching service provision has increased in recent years, as has external assessment of the same, leading to the need for a broader role for students within pharmacy school quality management programmes. Traditionally, the student role has been restricted to completing end-of-module or course questionnaires for monitoring and evaluation reports that are then presented to the relevant boards of study or course boards and ultimately to an Academic Board, the final internal arbiter of academic quality. Staff–student committees may also contribute, but these tend to focus on acute housekeeping issues rather than chronic matters, or on longer-term academic issues.

Focus groups are a comparatively new idea in service/product evaluation (Morgan, 1993) originating in industry, particularly from the retail sector. Apart from pharmacy professional subjects where they are used in a different context, focus groups are relatively uncommon in higher education, and only recently have begun to be used as a tool for quality enhancement and student input (Dreisbach *et al.*, 1998). We know of no precedent for them within the pharmacy higher education arena.

In this paper, we report the successful introduction of MPharm student focus groups, commencing with the 1997/98 intake, their adaptation and optimisation within the School, with some specific issues that they have tackled and raised.

PERCEIVED ROLE—WHAT IS A FOCUS GROUP?

Focus groups are discussion fora that consider specific issues associated with an identified topic. In our model, they are a self-selecting group of the appropriate year cohort who have volunteered to take part in the project. They differ from the traditional staff–student committee with regard to the nature, breadth and spectrum of matters they address. For instance, the staff–student committee may be regarded as a forum for students to bring to the organisation's attention, acute issues (for example, "Can we have a coffee machine by the lecture theatre?" or "Professor X always over-runs his lecture making us late for the next"). Student focus groups most often consider chronic rather than acute quality matters (i.e. addressing the negative) or put forward ideas for innovation and improvement (i.e. enhancing the positive). These aims can be achieved in the following ways:

1. by considering specific issues that they have been asked to look at from the students' point of view (by teaching staff, the facilitator or the student body) and proposing solutions;
2. by considering specific issues which the focus group members feel they wish to raise or for which they have identified and constructively propose change;
3. a more general charting of their journey through the degree and sojourn at the university, comparing expectation with delivery.

Their purpose is served by the fact that focus groups are comprised of service-recipients rather than service-providers, and they provide information that cannot be gathered in other ways. If

the organisation accepts that, as service-providers, the teaching staff will invariably not be able to assess certain areas of their own service provision objectively, then there is clearly a need for focused and facilitated student input.

Focus groups are administered, facilitated and run by a member of the teaching staff, who already has some form of relationship with the group. SFGs are focused brainstorming, discussion, problem-identifying and solving fora.

The reasons that any organisation may feel that individual students would want to be part of the focus group, in addition to benefits for the entire student cohort, include:

1. transferable skills. We define transferable skills as generic non-indicative-syllabus attributes which are not specific to one particular workplace but are applicable in all working environments, e.g. communication skills, teamwork, organisational problem-solving, coping with and benefiting from changing organisational dynamics, etc. These skills enhance the value of curriculum vitae, are reportable to potential employers, and are transferable to future workplaces;
2. the intangible reward of knowing they have made a direct contribution to the School;
3. the opportunity to shape/direct their own future;
4. an enhanced stakeholding in the School;
5. a tangible opportunity to make a difference to the quality management and assessment of the School;
6. a formalised opportunity to bring to the School's attention, issues that would otherwise be invisible or overlooked, and to propose solutions to address those issues.

PROCESS OF IMPLEMENTATION

The project was introduced to the Level 1 (L1) intake of the 1997/98 MPharm degree during normal contact time, after the facilitator had developed a professional lecturing relationship with them during the first series of lectures. The point of introduction was approximately halfway through the first semester; the timing was deliberate since it was felt that to enable students to be confident, honest and open in such a forum, a pre-existing relationship between the facilitator and the group would have to exist. The initial number of recruits for L1 was 60 (of a possible 120 students) but only a core of about 15 stayed with the project for the full four years of the MPharm degree course. As each new intake was inducted, the same process was repeated. All four levels now have a working student focus group.

The approach for each intake's initial focus group meeting consists of introductions, a re-explanation of the purpose and role, establishing reporting structure of the group and consideration of the group goal (long term longitudinal study). The aims and objectives are set out as:

1. to compare expectation with delivery;
2. to compare perceived delivery of service provision by the service-providers with actual service experienced by the recipients;
3. tracking the learning experience over the four year period of the MPharm degree;
4. to identify problems and issues, and propose solutions.

The SFG is then instructed, specifically, to consider the following questions:

1. Before you arrived, what did you expect to get?
2. What did you get when you did arrive?
3. What is the difference between the two?
4. Why the MPharm degree?
5. Why this university?

The second focus group meeting for each level considers issues of the students' own choosing, often brainstorming by forming sub-groups which report back at the end of the session. The facilitator then writes up outputs, and these are reported to the MPharm Course Board, which is required for each of the points raised to act,

advise, defer judgement or refer back. A student representative sits on the Course Board and the focus group facilitator then takes these Course Board reports back to the focus groups to close the reporting loop.

Early examples of unsolicited matters raised by the student focus groups include:

1. rules of discipline in lecture rooms (for example, disruption caused by late arrivals, whether justified or not; cellphones ringing; etc);
2. the personal tutor system and ensuring equality of student experience;
3. students working to supplement their incomes;
4. childcare and associated issues (for example, fitting lectures around family for students with young children) and how the university can or should assist;
5. pre-existing student disadvantage (for example, students with non-traditional entry qualifications, provision to assist overseas students and students with English as a second language).

Item 1 resulted in one member writing a formalised contract of learning—this is currently under discussion. Items 2–5 have resulted in the administration and distribution of questionnaires that solicited further student attitudes toward the relevant issues.

EVALUATION

A 14-item questionnaire was provided to all student focus groups in 2000/2001. The questions asked had a combination of qualitative and quantitative responses. A summary of these questions is shown in Table I.

FOCUS GROUP DEVELOPMENT

The initial briefs of the student focus groups were broadened after their potential was realised by teaching staff. In particular, several staff members have presented specific problems to the facilitator for the focus groups to consider. These are outlined in Table II.

STUDENT EVALUATION

Thirty-three undergraduates from L1 through 4 from a possible 400 undergraduates regularly attended student focus group meetings. All these participants completed the questionnaire summarised in Table I. The majority (72%) of respondents fell within the age range 18–25. Seventy-nine percent of the respondents were female. These data reflect the student demographics within the MPharm undergraduate population.

When asked to comment on the issues they thought should be addressed by the focus groups, many respondents considered that the issues put forward by teaching staff and the facilitator (33%) were as important as those issues raised by the focus group members themselves (33%) (Fig. 1).

When asked to rate the relative effectiveness of the focus groups' ability to address student-, staff- and facilitator-originated issues on a 1–4 scale (Fig. 2), most respondents indicated that the focus groups were best at addressing issues that members brought up during meetings, and those issues that the student body brought to the attention of the facilitator. Curiously, respondents appeared to be reluctant to rate the focus groups' ability to address any of the issues with a code 4 (indicating the types of issue that the focus groups are worst at addressing), with 7 out of 85 respondents giving one of the choices, a 4 rating (Fig. 2).

It was considered critical from the beginning of the project to ensure that the focus group members felt that their ideas and inputs were taken seriously and given the attention they deserved by the School. Figure 3 illustrates that the majority of the respondents (53%) felt that

TABLE I Evaluation questionnaire completed by focus group members

(1)	To which age bracket do you belong?
(2)	Please indicate your gender by circling the appropriate answer:
(3)	Please write 1 or 2 sentences to summarise what you feel the role of the Student Focus Group is:
(4)	Which issues do you think that the Student Focus Groups should address?(you may circle more than one answer) (a) issues that the student body brings to the attention of the facilitator (b) issues that teaching staff bring to the attention of the facilitator (c) issues that the Focus Group members bring up during Focus Group meetings (d) other (please specify)
(5)	Of the following issues, please indicate which you think that the Focus Groups are BEST at addressing by putting a number 1 against the BEST, and a number 4 against the one you feel that they are WORST at addressing. If you think any are joint equal then give them the SAME number: (a) issues that the student body brings to the attention of the facilitator (b) issues that teaching staff bring to the attention of the facilitator (c) issues that the Focus Group members bring up during Focus Group meetings (d) other (please specify)
(6)	With regard to Student Focus Group outputs, how seriously do you think that the School listens to what is said? (a) outputs are taken very seriously (b) outputs are taken seriously most of the time (c) some outputs are and some are not (d) outputs are not taken seriously most of the time (e) outputs are not taken seriously at all
(7)	What is your perceived difference between the student focus group and the staff–student committee? (a) no difference (b) the following difference (explain in 1 or 2 sentences)
(8)	At what venue do you think the Focus Group should meet? Whatever your answer, please explain your reasons: (a) a lecture theatre (b) Blackwells (author's note—a premium cafe in the University) (c) the refectory (d) the facilitator's office (e) elsewhere (please explain below)
(9)	How often do you think that the Student Focus Groups should meet? Answer: times per month/term/year (circle your answer)
(10)	Do you think you should have had a pre-existing professional relationship with the facilitator or should the facilitator be completely unknown to you? Whatever your answer, please explain your reason below: (a) the student focus group members should have had a pre-existing professional relationship with the facilitator (b) the facilitator should be completely unknown to the focus group (c) other
(11)	Do you think that the facilitator should be present or absent during student focus group discussions? Please explain your answer: (a) present all the time (b) present for introduction and administration only then absent (c) absent all the time (d) present until/except when asked to leave
(12)	Please explain what you feel the benefits of the Student Focus Groups are to the WHOLE MPHARM STUDENT BODY
(13)	Please explain what you feel the benefits of membership of the Student Focus Groups are to YOU PERSONALLY:
(14)	What other changes/improvements/developments do you think should be implemented in the Student Focus Group project?

their views are taken seriously most of the time. Seven percent felt their views were taken very seriously by the School, and 4% considered that their views were not taken seriously most of the time. No respondent considered that their output was not taken seriously at all by the School.

Bearing in mind that the student focus group is intended to be a two-way communication

TABLE II   Staff-solicited focus group topics for consideration and resolution

- evaluation of a web-based system for a fully automated method of submission, assessment, grading and commentary for laboratory practical scripts (Olivier et al., 2001)
- discovering why, in a particular end-of-module examination, a pair of questions showed apparently significantly different numbers of candidates attempting
- with regard to clinical pharmacy
  * general housekeeping for the whole process
  * organisation of the week
  * nurturing environment vs. fending for themselves
  * educational support
  * preparation for the week
  * content of the week
  * appropriateness of coursework
  * appropriate examination (OSCEs) in terms of relevance and representation of experience in hospital
- module evaluation forms: do they need to name individual teaching staff. When should they be distributed? Should they be taken away to return later or completed in situ?

medium between students and staff functioning alongside the pre-existing staff–student committee, respondents were asked whether or not they considered there to be any difference between these two groups. The majority of respondents (96%) indicated that there is a difference.

Initially, it was perceived that effective and productive meetings would necessitate that members were at ease within their immediate setting. Opinion was therefore sought on respondents' preferred venue. A lecture theatre, offered as one of the options attracted a 37%
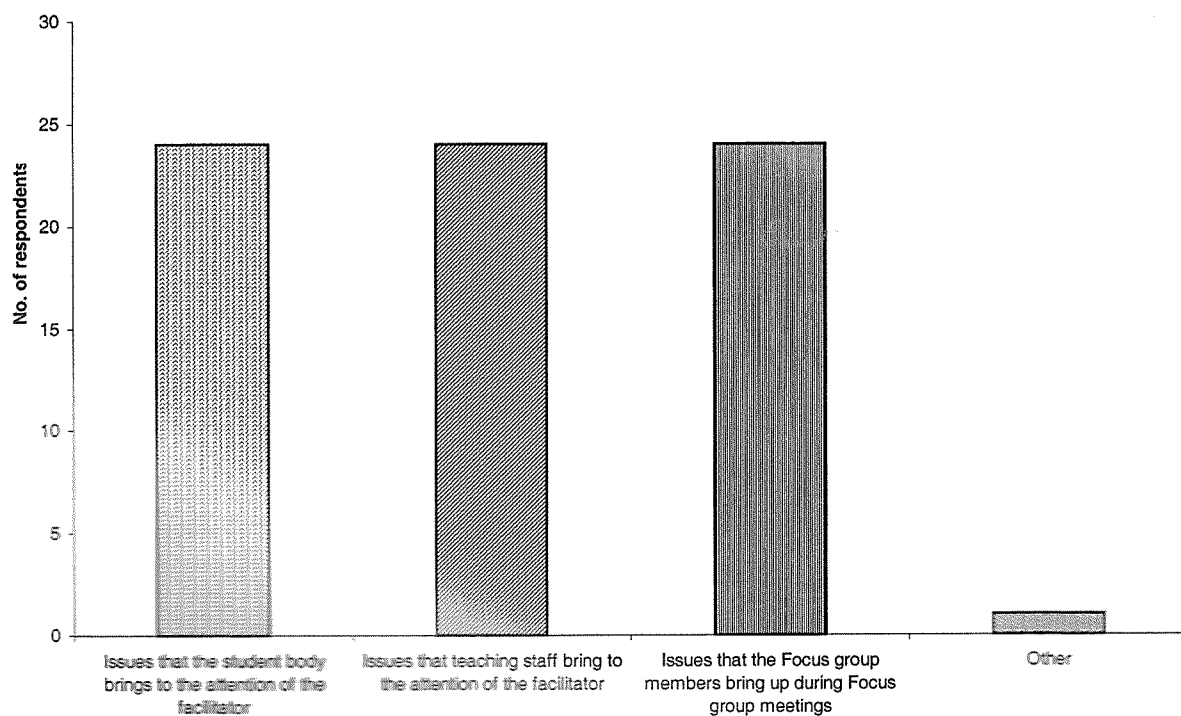

FIGURE 1   Focus group members' views about which issues should be addressed.
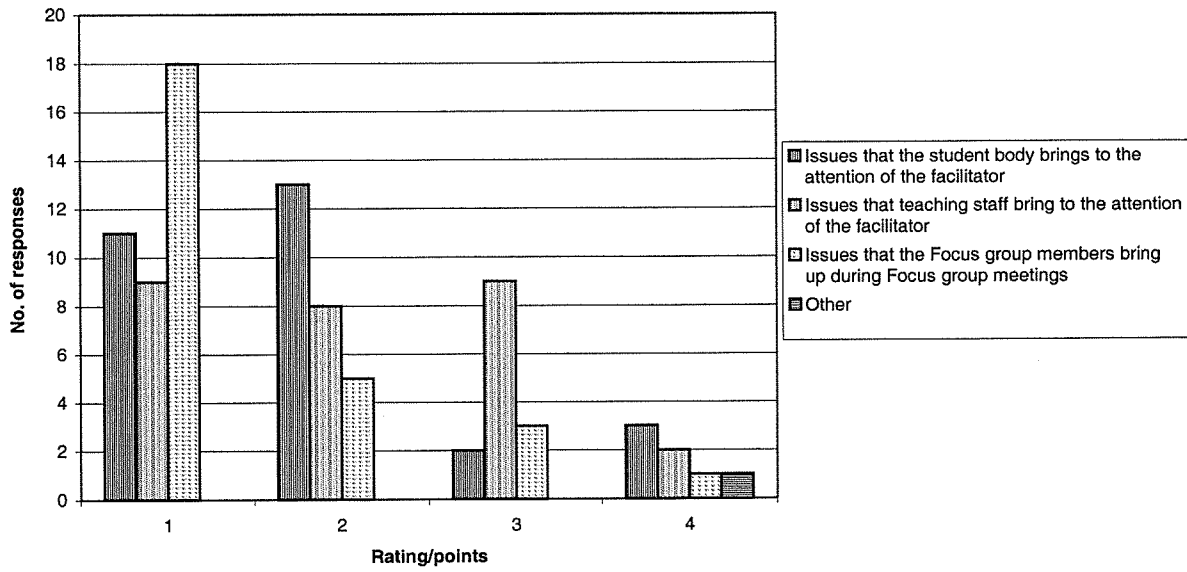
FIGURE 2   Types of issues that respondents felt the focus group were best or worst at addressing (BEST = 1, WORST = 4).
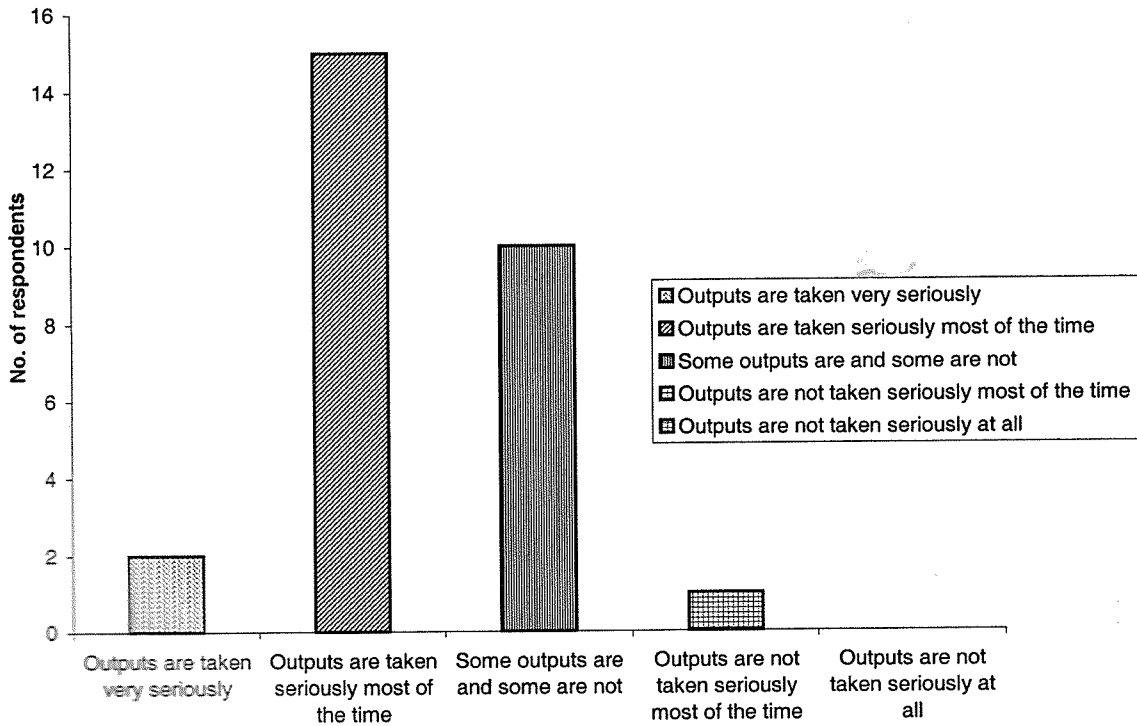

FIGURE 3   Respondents' opinions as to the relative importance of focus group outputs as perceived by the School.
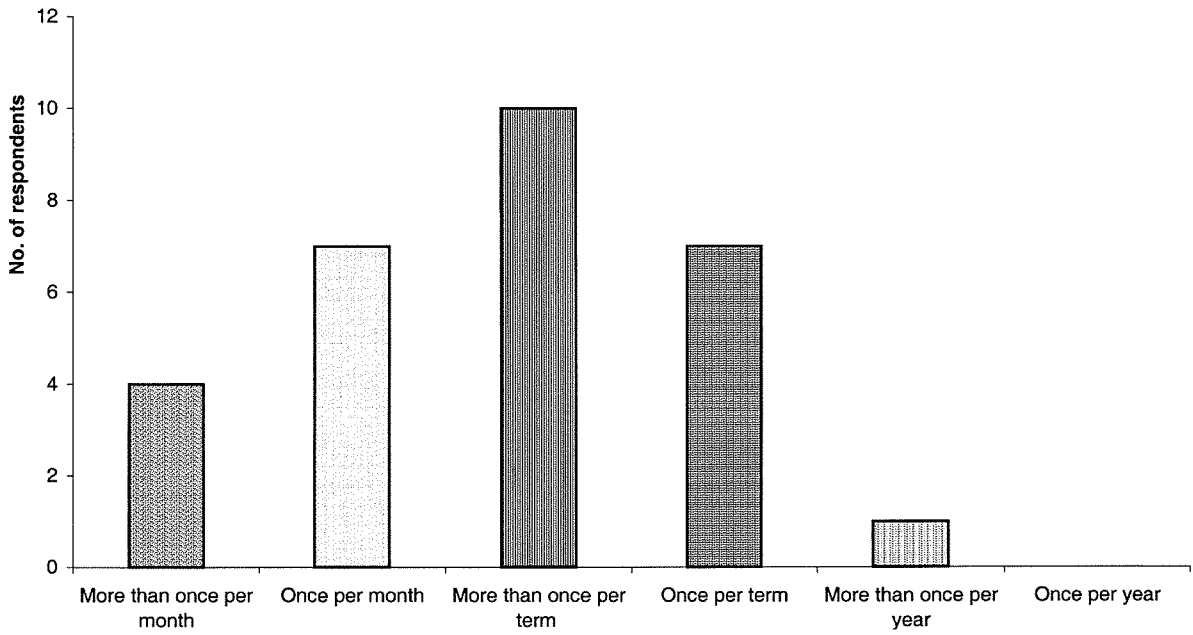
FIGURE 4   Respondents' opinions as to the optimum frequency of focus group meetings.
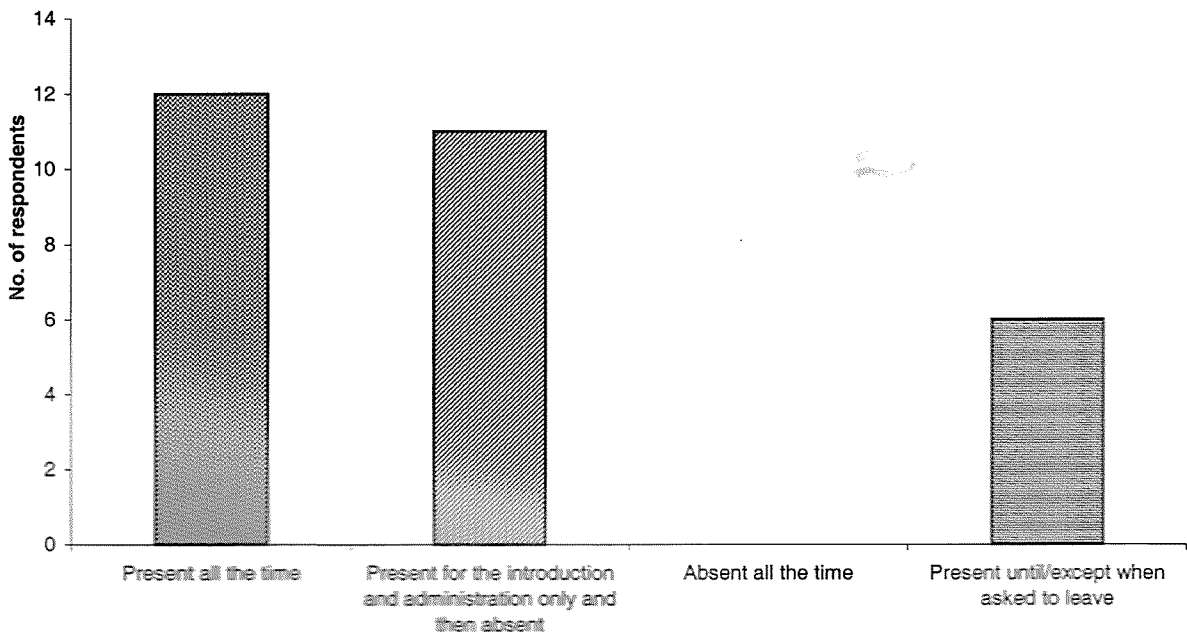

FIGURE 5   Respondents' preference for the facilitator's presence/absence.

TABLE III   Focus group qualitative responses

Question 3—perceived role of the focus group
  To bring to the Board's attention issues which the Staff–student committee does not address
  To propose solutions to problems in a student-oriented manner
  To allow a student–staff connection other than via the student reps
  Helps to bridge the gap between students and the establishment
  To provide a point to which issues can be brought which are then taken to a higher level
  To emphasise beneficial aspects of the course
  To help improve the course for following intake years
  To allow anyone and everyone to air their views
  To find solutions to problems
  Common complaints are being aired in a meeting recognised by the School giving credence to our opinions

Question 7—perceived difference between the student focus group and the staff–student committee
  Student focus group (SFG) is less formal than staff–student committee (SSC) and therefore issues that may be considered trivial can be addressed
  SSC has more influence
  SFG addresses long-term problems whereas SSC addresses short-term problems
  SFG is more student-oriented with freer (sic) speaking by students
  Anyone can attend SFG
  SFG has an input from more people so provides a better illustration of student opinion
  SFG has a higher student to staff ratio
  SSC discusses issues in more detail
  SFG allows input from more students
  SSC rep is not always informed of issues or may not share opinion
  SFG is more informal and less intimidating than SSC
  Large numbers of students in SFG allows a wide range of opinion to be voiced
  Reduces the potential for misinterpretation by SSC rep
  SFG is more anonymous than SSC

Question 10—opinion on the necessity of a pre-existing professional relationship with the facilitator
The unanimous response was that it is important that the students should have a pre-existing professional relationship with the facilitator for the following reasons:
  Confidence that issues will be taken seriously
  More open and honest communication as students feel more relaxed
  To ensure that the facilitator understands issues relating specifically to the MPharm course
  The facilitator would understand issues relating to the pharmacy course
  It is more likely that the facilitator would be able to demonstrate commitment and interest in student issues

Question 11—opinion on facilitator's presence during meetings
The group felt the facilitator's presence was important:
  To keep the group discussion focused and help reach achievable conclusions
  To explain School policy and rules where appropriate
  To identify key issues voiced by the general group
  So that the facilitator can hear and join in with everything being discussed

Some respondents felt the facilitator should be present unless asked to leave because:
  An issue under discussion may be concerning the facilitator
  An individual may find it difficult to express his/her opinions in the presence of the facilitator

Question 12—perceived benefits of the SFG to the MPharm student body
  Improves the course for existing and future students
  The SFG is a student-orientated route through which issues can reach the course board
  Provides feedback to the departmental hierarchy. To resolve problems affecting the whole MPharm student body
  More beneficial to the following year
  Awareness of issues affecting other year groups
  Increased student input leads to more student-orientated improvements to the course

Question 13—perceived personal benefits of the SFG

Satisfaction from expressing personal opinion and in being proactive in resolving student issues

SFG involvement can be included on CV and will enhance employment prospects

The development of debating and communication skills

A chance for students to influence their own destiny

Satisfaction from being involved in a procedure which makes learning more effective

Looks good on CV

Good stress reliever

Good to know that other people have the same opinions

Important to know there is someone to whom students can address problems

Question 14—suggested changes/improvements/developments to the SFG project

Ensure that the whole student year is made aware of forthcoming meetings e.g. an announcement during lecture time by a lecturer. Posters on notice boards/leaflets in pigeonholes

Verbal feedback via a focus group rep to the year group

Meet more often

More feedback from the facilitator to the Focus Group

Inter Focus group communication

The setting up of a mailing list for Focus group members

More staff input and opinion

Be able to call a meeting when problems arise (within reason)

More prior notice of forthcoming meetings to be given

Give staff a chance to discuss any issues they have at focus group meetings

Focus group members should present SFG minutes with facilitator at course board meetings

Important to keep the focus group meetings informal because a comfortable atmosphere is conducive to free speech and it encourages people to attend

preference, as did the option of "other". Suggestions for "other" were requested within the reply and many respondents considered that a seminar room or similar would be suitable. The facilitator's office was not considered suitable by any of the respondents.

Focus group meeting frequency and regularity were considered, respondents being asked to give a quantitative opinion as to these two matters. It can be seen (Fig. 4) that over half the respondents (59%) opted for once or more per term and 24% suggested once per month. It appears that the respondents are keen to maintain a regular meeting pattern.

Respondents' opinion was solicited regarding the facilitator's relationship with the members and his/her presence at the focus group meetings. Eighty-three percent of respondents considered a pre-existing relationship with the facilitator appropriate. No respondent felt it would be appropriate for the facilitator to be unknown to them. Figure 5 depicts that opinion on the facilitator's presence during meetings was

split with no obvious preference other than the fact that no respondent indicated that the facilitator be absent at all times. Sixty-two percent deemed it appropriate that the facilitator be present either all the time or until asked to leave by respondents, whilst 38% of respondents felt it would be better if the facilitator took part in only the meeting introduction and any relevant administration but was absent during meeting discussions.

Selected qualitative responses are shown in Table III.

SUMMARY

We propose that the student focus group project has achieved the goals originally set and others besides, and that SFGs provide a window on the four-year "journey" through the MPharm degree. SFGs also allow the students a platform whereby they may offer their ideas to the School, identify chronic issues and offer proposals for

resolution. In doing so, the focus group members benefit inasmuch as they have the opportunity to develop transferable skills and assist shaping both their own future, and that of subsequent cohorts of students.

Acknowledgements

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