

Increasing Representation in the Medical Curriculum through Student-Staff Partnership.

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Abstract.

The Student Engagement and Partnership (StEP) programme at RCSI University of Medicine and Health Sciences is a truly progressive model of student-staff partnership. Together, the perspective of the students and the expertise of staff enables reform which is both innovative and enduring. Through the StEP framework, the REPRESENT project was proposed by a medical student as a result of the paucity of clinical images representing clinical presentations on Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic skin tones in the medical curriculum. The project resulted in a significant increase in the percentage of lecture slides shown to students which include clinical images on both white skin and skin of colour, highlighting the StEP framework as a catalyst for student-led curricular change. These projects are a true reflection of the university's commitment to heralding students as the co-creators of their learning experience. It is inspiring to see how the university acknowledges the importance of contributions from every member of the academic community in driving progress and in shaping the future of the University.

Keywords: Curriculum reform; Diversity; Inclusivity; Student-staff partnership.

1. Introduction.

Student engagement and partnership is a cornerstone of progressive change within the academic infrastructure. Indeed, student-staff collaboration enables a degree of dynamism that would be unattainable without both the perspective of the student, and the expertise of staff. When effecting change in the context of long-standing academic traditions and structures, the insight and perspective of the student is a powerful driving force.

Herein, we explore the merits of a student-staff partnership project which aimed to increase

diversity and inclusivity in medical learning and teaching. The REPRESENT project (Revising medical Education for Progress against Racism through Education, Skillsets and Empowerment) was a curriculum development project that was proposed by a medical student as a result of the paucity of clinical images representing clinical presentations on Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic skin tones in the curriculum.

The motivation for the project is a strong example of the value of the student perspective in academic reform initiatives. As a result of experiencing and engaging with the curriculum as a student, the student partner was able to provide insight into gaps in the curriculum which might have otherwise been overlooked given the longstanding structure of the preclinical curriculum. The primary aim of the project was to increase representation of clinical images on dark skin tones in the curriculum by generating lectures slides demonstrating clinical presentations on both dark and white skin tones, to be directly incorporated into preclinical lectures. This curriculum gap was flagged as a result of a student's ongoing conversations with peers, and was subsequently brought to the attention of university faculty through the forum of the university-wide Student Engagement and Partnership Programme, wherein students and staff can propose projects which will better the university in any capacity.

The merits of student-staff partnership are largely driven by the student as a source of innovation with respect to curricular change (Aung et al., 2021). Analyses of both student and staff perspectives on the experience of student-staff partnership have revealed merits for both parties involved (Healy et al., 2014; Martens et al., 2020; Rao et al., 2020). In order to champion student-staff partnership, there must be a robust framework for quantifying and classifying curricular change that is effected through student-staff partnership. Burk-Rafel et al. utilise Kotter's change management framework to further categorise student roles in curricular change (Burk-Rafel et al., 2020). Importantly, the authors identify activators of student engagement as incorporation of collaborative faculty, broadening student leadership roles, empowering student leaders, and recognizing student success (Burk-Rafel et al., 2020).

Prior to implementation of the REPRESENT project, only 2% of clinical images shown to graduate entry medical students at the RCSI University of Medicine and Health Sciences were on skin of colour. Following distribution of slides and implementation of the project, up to 18% of clinical images shown were on skin of colour. While this project demonstrates an objective improvement in the number of clinical images shown to students on dark skin tones, another important emerging theme was how to ensure that the change achieved was enduring.

To that end, faculty involvement proved especially valuable. Discussions between both the student and staff partner resulted in agreement that in order to increase awareness of the importance of representation, the best approach was to educate the educators. A brief fifteen-minute tutorial was developed for staff that covered the importance of increasing representation in the curriculum, the resources available for sourcing dermatological images on dark skin tones, and how to navigate student questions pertaining to representation in the lecture setting. Staff were asked to complete pre-tutorial and post-tutorial questionnaires to assess for changes in their knowledge on resources, and their confidence in addressing representation questions in a lecture setting.

The REPRESENT project ultimately prompted university faculty to reflect on the pedagogy of medical diagnosis. Without the questioning of students or an outlet for the student voice to engage in curriculum reform, faculty might not have paused to reflect on the fact that the images shown to medical students need to be reflective of both a diverse student body and a diverse global population. Collectively, the literature in this area overwhelmingly supports the position of the student as a catalyst for change in the setting of medical education (Ludwig et al., 2020; Walmsley, 2021; Solomon et al., 2021). In a curriculum where white normativity is so overwhelming, it is perhaps easy to forget that the norm is not necessarily best practice. As a result of the REPRESENT student engagement and partnership project, the level of representation of clinical images on dark skin tones in the medical curriculum was significantly improved. This highlights the importance of student-staff partnership in enabling the student perspective to be translated into active curricular reform with the help and expertise of the staff partner.

The Student Engagement and Partnership programme at RCSI is a truly progressive model of student-staff partnership. Together, the perspective of the students and the expertise of staff enables reform which is both innovative and enduring. The opportunity for students to engage in the process shaping their own academic experience benefits the entire university insofar as it inverts the age-old power dynamic in academia. By adopting an increasingly collaborative approach to effecting change in an academic setting, universities will prosper from student-driven policies and practices that will undoubtedly enhance student learning.

Ultimately, student-staff partnerships reflect the university's commitment to heralding students as the co-creators of their learning experience. What better way to champion reform and progress than to invite students to propose and enact change through a student-staff

partnership? It is inspiring to see how the university acknowledges the importance of contributions from every member of the community in driving progress and in shaping the future.

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