

# Student Self-Assessment:

Do students have more insight into their abilities than we give them credit for?

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## Background

Reflection on performance is an attribute heavily endorsed in medical practice, with General Medical Council guidance stating reflection is an activity doctors must undertake regularly. In order to prepare medical students for the transition into professional, reflective medical practice, reflection on performance is an activity now integrated into the undergraduate curriculum. Reflection has its basis in experiential learning, a well established theory of how learning is significantly shaped by the experience and perceptions of those engaged in that learning activity<sup>1,2</sup>.

## Self-assessment Reflection within the Undergraduate Medical Curriculum

For many years medical students have engaged in Student Selected Components (SSC's), 2-4 week research projects conducted in groups of 5-8 students. Peer assessment has always been a part of the overall assessment of the SSC but this year, for the first time, a non-contributory self-assessment element was introduced where students were asked to suggest a hypothetical grade which they felt reflected their contribution to the project. They were asked to justify this mark in terms of reflecting on the positive contribution they had made to the project while also considering their responses to any challenges encountered.

## Responses to Self-Assessment Reflection

Despite not contributing to their summative grade student responses to the request for reflection on their own practice have been extensive, mature, insightful and demonstrated thorough engagement with the process. Almost all 170 students wrote a short account of their role within their team, reflecting on both their performance as a team player and their academic contribution to the exercise.

## Preliminary Analysis of Self-Assessment

Self-reflection broadly fell into one of three categories:

**1. Students underplaying their contribution to the project:** This was the most common finding and may reflect the higher incidence of perfectionism in high achievers such as medical students<sup>3,4</sup>. Students in this category marked themselves harshly through over-critical analysis of relatively minor errors or anxieties. Often this self-reflection was at odds with the perception of the individual by the group (identified through peer assessment):

Self- assessment remarks such as *"I have taken a mark off myself for being nervous about the presentation"* were accompanied with peer assessment remarks such as *"[student name] was particularly well organised and made an outstanding contribution to the group which I feel deserves some note"*

**2. Students accurately assessing their contribution to the project and perception thereof by the group:** While less common than the above, a significant number of students accurately identified their own achievements, or failings, in the project and acknowledged that these had been to the benefit, or detriment, of the team respectively:

*"This project was a real eye-opener for me. I have a strong personality with very strong opinions.....Next time I will try to be less argumentative as I believe I was the "problematic" group member"*

Peer assessment grades aligned with the self assessment grades of students in this category.

**3. Students overestimating their contribution to the project** (as perceived by the others in the team): although this was the least common outcome there was a noticeable number of students who felt their contribution to the project had been greater, or more positive, than that perceived by the rest of the team. There are many possible reasons for this but one interpretation would be these students experience a lack of insight into how their actions are perceived by others, for example a student may think they are being helpful, while others perceive their behaviour to be domineering.

## Conclusions and Future work

Preliminary analysis of results suggests the majority of first year medical students positively and proactively engaged with the self-assessment reflective process thus beginning the transition to professional, reflective medical practice. Few students overestimated their performance, most either underestimated their own abilities and worth as team players, or made accurate judgements on their performance. This supports the notion that high achievers are less likely to overestimate their own abilities and can be prone to undue self-criticism<sup>4</sup>. Formal statistical analysis of the responses will now be carried out to determine if one particular thought process dominates in the first year medical student cohort.

### References

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