

Widening Participation in Medicine: A Medical Student Perspective [Letter]

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Dear editor

We read with great interest Ryan et al's article on the impact of medical student-led widening participation (WP) conferences.¹ As a group of students with experience of WP work and student society committee roles, we wish to offer our perspectives in this letter.

It is fantastic to see student society WP work being appraised and receiving recognition in the literature and the authors offer many examples of best practice for groups wishing to replicate such work. We would, however, like to offer additional points for consideration.

While the authors propose a "student-led approach to WP work," we believe a better approach is achieved by working closely with universities. Many universities worldwide have WP departments focused on improving access to higher education. In the UK for example, most universities must have and comply with an "access and participation plan" approved by their regulator (the Office for Students).² Our university, Bristol, commits investment of approximately £16 million for WP work³ with a dedicated WP office and trained staff. WP departments have more time, staff, resources, budget, expertise, and experience to undertake WP events, all of which were identified as barriers for student societies. Additionally, larger budgets in WP departments allow overheads such as catering to be covered. The authors proposed not providing catering as a method to cut costs for student societies, but catering can be crucial for WP conference participants, for example, those in receipt of free school meals. WP departments can also reimburse travel expenses, removing a further barrier to attending.

The article also discusses the need for "good reputation and adher[ence] to strict WP criteria," for those organising such events. WP departments can benefit from their universities' international reputations and usually have well-defined WP criteria that are used to evaluate the effectiveness of work. Indeed, in the UK, WP performance indicators are publicly published.⁴ This reporting, alongside better access to student data, has a second benefit, allowing tracking of long-term outcomes such as application success and retention, an identified limitation of this article.

The authors suggest medical students can commit 80 hours per year to WP work, however, the article cited was based on the anecdotal experience of two Master's students.⁵ This time commitment would challenge many medical students, especially those who themselves are from WP backgrounds and may have

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employment or caring commitments. WP departments offer the opportunity for students to receive remuneration for their time, reducing some barriers to committing this time.

Presenting research at WP conferences was shown to be beneficial, which in our experience, is not commonly offered by WP departments. They should therefore replicate this going forward. Additionally, the authors demonstrated the feasibility of medical students organising conferences. WP departments should capitalize on this (and near-to-peer mentoring medical students can provide) and involve student societies, particularly those focused on WP, in their work.

Medical students undertaking WP work are making medical schools more accessible and diverse. Our perspectives will hopefully further help those planning to deliver similar WP conferences and events.

Disclosure

JMcA is a paid part-time employee of the University of Bristol Widening Participation and Undergraduate Recruitment Office and reports personal fees from them.

JMcA and CM are past committee members of Galenicals, the University of Bristol Medical Students' Society, who undertake their own WP work. The authors report no other potential conflicts of interest for this communication.

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