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TWELVE TIPS

Twelve tips for turning quality assurance data into undergraduate teaching awards: A quality improvement and student engagement initiative

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ABSTRACT

Data on teaching awards in undergraduate medical education are sparse. The benefits of an awards system may seem obvious at first glance. However, there are also potential problems relating to fairness, avoidance of bias, and alignment of the awards system with a wider strategy for quality improvement and curriculum development. Here, we report five-year single-center experience with establishing undergraduate teaching awards in a large academic teaching hospital. Due to lack of additional funding we based our awards not on peer review but mainly on existing and very comprehensive quality assurance (QA) data. Our 12 tips describe practical points but also pitfalls with awards categories and criteria, advertising and disseminating the awards, the actual awards ceremony and finally embedding the awards in the hospital’s wider strategy. To be truly successful, teaching awards and prizes need to be carefully considered, designed and aligned with a wider institutional strategy of rewarding enthusiastic educators.

Introduction

Awards are ubiquitous in the corporate world (Frey 2007) but receive comparatively little attention in medical education (Huggett et al. 2012). MacDougall and Drummond reported that rewards for teaching are rare in the UK (MacDougall & Drummond 2005) although Wheeler and Gill reported good experience with a student led award scheme in Birmingham (Wheeler & Gill 2010). Many reports stem from outside the UK such as Canada (Posluns et al. 1990), South Africa (Olmesdahl 1997) or the USA (Viggiano et al. 2000; Huggett et al. 2012). However, teaching awards may be under-reported, for example if they represent low-profile local or student-led initiatives.

Here, we report five-year, single-center experience with setting up a new system of undergraduate teaching awards at Lancashire Teaching Hospitals, a 920-bedded teaching hospital in the UK. The main driver of this development was to recruit new educators despite heavy clinical workload and competition i.e. the fact that senior doctors such as consultants could choose between additional roles in management, research or education.

In this article, we describe how we utilized our existing system of quality assurance (QA) to develop an awards system. Our tips relate to the awards scheme itself (Tips 1–3), describe how to advertise the scheme (Tips 4–6) and how to organize the awards ceremony (Tips 7–9). Finally, we suggest ways to embed the awards scheme in a wider educational strategy (Tips 10–12). We also provide a brief review of the literature, discuss potential problems with awards and propose avenues for future research.

Tip 1

Aim for fair and transparent awards criteria and be prepared to refine the criteria over time

Teaching excellence is a poorly defined concept (Elton 1998; Hammer et al. 2010; Gunn & Fisk 2013) and we made every effort to establish fair and transparent criteria. Macdonald provides an exhaustive list of criteria for teaching awards (MacDonald 1998) which is helpful. We decided against the educational team nominating candidates and note that others have previously emphasized that teaching awards work best with participation of the students (Swain 2014). We therefore made a conscious decision to rely mainly on quality assurance (QA) data derived from student feedback, not least because we lacked funding to establish a system of independent evaluation of teaching (Carusetta 2001). For ward-based student placements we obtained feedback in focus groups and via survey monkey™ emailed to the students as part of our QA (Table 1, available online as supplemental material). Other categories proved more difficult, for example the Personal Excellence Pathway (PEP) Supervisor Award relating to small projects in Year 4 of the curriculum. Table 2 (available online as supplemental material) provides an overview of award categories and criteria to determine award recipients. Note that only two out of eleven tutor awards are based on nomination whereas all remaining are based on student feedback.

We are conscious of the fact that our awards system is to some degree a popularity contest. We also emphasize the need to scrutinize and develop award categories and...
criteria every year based on feedback from tutors and students (Table 3, available online as supplemental material). Over the years we have seen contraction and expansion in the number of categories and a conscious effort to reward a large enough group of enthusiastic tutors (as opposed to just rewarding the “stars” (MacDonald 1998)) while avoiding “inflation” of award categories.

Tip 2

Think about what motivates your tutors

Several studies have described altruism (Dahlstrom et al. 2005), goal-setting and enthusiasm as features of award recipients (Lewis 1993). While financial rewards (Ruedrich et al. 1986) played little part (Dahlstrom et al. 2005). These findings were corroborated by others (Brawer et al. 2006; Dybowski & Harendza 2014).

Our awards provide a unique non-monetary reward and play to the competitive personality trait of these individuals. Once we realized this we also developed the ceremony from students baking cakes for tutors (Figure 1(A), available online as supplemental material) into a high-profile event with attendance of the Chief Executive (Figure 1(B), available online as supplemental material). There is also evidence of competition leading up to the ceremony with heightened interest in the awards overall and placement providers asking for their ranking among their peers. While we do not disclose scores at this point we do encourage an atmosphere of good-humored competition.

As part of our program evaluation we also conducted an email survey of award recipients of the 2011/2012, 2012/2013 and 2013/2014 award ceremonies. This showed that 90% of respondents felt that receiving an award motivated them (Table 4, available online as supplemental material). We agree with others that intrinsic factors drive our clinicians to teach and also their desire to bring their specialty and the students together (Goldsmid et al. 1977); although factors may differ between countries and systems. There may also be an influence of seniority whereby residents’ attitudes may differ (Dotters-Katz et al. 2016).

Tip 3

Find ways to enlarge the recognition and include mechanisms that prevent the “usual suspects” from dominating the teaching awards

Another interesting observation in the first one or two years of the awards was that one Year 3 placement lead won the award every year. We were concerned that this might discourage or even frustrate other placement leads. Conversely, we were reluctant to curb enthusiasm by for example “banning” award recipients from the awards for a year. We eventually introduced awards for the “best improved placement” and “best new placement.” This mechanism ensures that enthusiastic newcomers are rewarded and gives an additional incentive to struggling placements to work with our undergraduate team to improve the students’ educational experience. Others have previously cautioned that awards cannot succeed if only a small number of individuals are rewarded each year (Schindler et al. 2013).

Tip 4

Advertise the awards early on in the academic year

Early on during the academic year, we advertise the awards and award categories to our placement providers, with particular attention being given to publicize new additions, for example the recent introduction of an “Innovation Award” to recognize innovative developments in teaching. A flyer was designed in-house to advertise this new development and circulated to those involved with undergraduate education. The QA team provides statistics to ensure the award process is fair and to ensure transparency these are published in a report, with feedback scores as an average for the academic year. We do not disclose scores outside the leadership team to avoid embarrassing providers who did not do well. We also mention the awards every time we meet new potential tutors and during all meetings with current placement providers.

Tip 5

Publicize the awards ceremony widely in your institution

The date/time of the ceremony is circulated well in advance to placement leads and tutors, with a reminder sent nearer the time. As part of our program evaluation we conducted a brief survey of hospital consultants which showed that 47% was aware of our annual teaching award ceremony, and 25% was aware of recent award recipients. The hospital’s social media sites, along with the hospital magazine and Educational newsletters have all been used to advertise the event and award recipients are published in the hospital newsletter. We also publicize our awards scheme during the Induction with the new intakes of Foundation Year doctors, and with other junior/middle grade trainees. All of these steps have helped to increase the audience. We emphasize that a poorly attended awards ceremony essentially disrupts the message of the event and needs to be avoided at all cost.

Tip 6

Ensure active participation from your institutions top leadership

The Hospital’s Chief Executive, the Director of Workforce & Education, the Undergraduate Dean and Associate Deans are all invited to attend the ceremony and indeed play an active role in the ceremony itself. Roles include opening the ceremony with a short speech, presenting the awards and saying a few words about the award recipient, not forgetting those all-important photographs. In our experience, involvement of senior leaders has been key to raise the profile of the event and boost publicity. It also encourages the wider group of clinicians, including those who do not currently teach, to reflect on teaching (Searle et al. 2012) and to perhaps consider a role in education for themselves.
Tip 7

*Involve your students in the awards ceremony*

Others have previously emphasized the myriad ways in which good educators facilitate students learning on placement and the mutual benefit in a student-educator partnership (Rodger et al. 2014). It only seems logical to invite all students to the award ceremony. The student committee also promotes the event via social media, such as their Facebook page. For the 2015 award ceremony, student representatives were invited to present some of the awards to increase their involvement in the actual ceremony itself. Others have previously emphasized the benefit of students (as opposed to staff or teaching faculty) presenting teaching awards (Swain 2014).

For the last two years, we have also included Student Achievement Awards for each year group. These awards are determined by the highest exam results in each year group. Last year, volunteers from the Patients as Educators scheme, who work with the students in teaching sessions to practice history taking and examination skills, presented the student achievement awards. This serves to improve student participation in the awards ceremony and widens the scope of the event into a celebration of undergraduate teaching and its achievements.

Tip 8

*Give award recipients certificates but also something tangible such as a statuette to make them visible ambassadors for undergraduate education*

In designing our awards we thought long and hard as to how award recipients would utilize the awards for their career. Others have previously examined whether educational excellence helps with promotion (Atasoylu et al. 2003). True promotion is not realistic for most of our award recipients since in the UK undergraduate teaching is mostly delivered by consultants for whom lifetime employment at this career rank is the norm. The prospect of promotion may apply more in continental Europe or the USA (Klingensmith & Anderson 2006; Searle et al. 2012). We hypothesized that our award recipients would use their awards in their appraisals and were therefore keen to give them a tangible symbol of their achievement (other than a certificate) that would look good in an appraisal discussion. This prompted us to design statuettes (Figure 2, available online as supplementary material) which serve as visual tokens of achievement in the offices of award recipients. In our experience award recipients bring the statuettes to their annual appraisal and also use them when they apply for leadership roles. We are also aware that our teaching awards are widely used in applications for regional NHS Clinical Excellence Awards and therefore serve as valuable “currency” for career progression.

Tip 9

*Provide certificates for runner-up and third prize and aim for an atmosphere of good-humored competition*

We found it important not to frustrate tutors who did not win, given the fact that our awards are now widely publicized within our organization. We therefore decided to provide certificates to those qualifying for second and third prize in each category. For hardly any additional cost or effort this widens the group of tutors that receives appreciation for their efforts. To facilitate an atmosphere of good-humored competition we advertise the awards early in the academic year and also mention them in our meetings with the placement leads.

Tip 10

*Make the awards part of a wider recruitment strategy and send postcards to every single junior doctor who has been praised for teaching*

Early on in our experience with the new scheme we thought how we could make enthusiastic young educators feel equally appreciated and recruit them for educational activities later on. We started mining the focus group reports produced by our QA team for names of junior doctors who were praised for their teaching by the students and we tried sending “thank you” emails and letters. However, we hypothesized that these just drown in the noise of daily correspondence. In search of a novel approach we trialled sending thank you postcards signed by the Associate Dean to every single junior doctor who was praised by the students during the focus groups. We found this to be a simple yet extremely effective tool: Post cards stand out and will be appreciated and used for the trainees’ portfolios. Following receipt the recipients regularly contact us asking for further teaching opportunities and we now send thank you post cards to every single junior doctor who is explicitly praised and named by the students during the focus groups.

Tip 11

*Embed the awards in your quality assurance strategy, ensure that struggling placements are well supported and reward improvement*

Student feedback on placements is gathered at regular intervals; both qualitative data and quantitative data are collected via focus groups and electronically via survey monkey. The latter mainly ensures that students can give an honest verdict on a placement if they feel uncomfortable about this in a face-to-face discussion. There are also other channels that the undergraduates can utilize to flag concerns, for example informal meetings between the students and the educational team but also regular meetings between the elected student representatives and the leadership team. All feedback is forwarded to relevant teaching placement leads, and shared with educational and clinical teams. Review meetings are held for each placement lead, at the end of module and again at the end of the academic year, to ensure regular points of contact for all placement providers. Our approach is holistic and inclusive and our enthusiasm for the awards program is mirrored by an equally comprehensive strategy to support struggling placements. This also allows us to identify placement providers who may eventually receive a most improved award and ensures that providers who are struggling are not
disenfranchised by the success of others in the awards program but encouraged by it.

**Tip 12**

**Align the awards with performance criteria and the remainder of your strategy so that awards are not seen as an isolated mission statement**

All placement leads have an annual educational appraisal which aligns with the awards and also the educational strategy overall. Student feedback from focus groups, feedback scores and survey monkey results are all provided to the appraiser and form an important part of the educational appraisals with the placement leads. All feedback scores during the academic year and in previous years are available to the appraiser, as well as trends and comparison with other placement providers. Presence of the hospital’s leadership at the awards ceremony also ensures that the awards are seen as part of a wider strategy that recognizes excellence in education as crucial to the long-term objectives of the institution. This is also reflected in the values statement of our institution which reads “Safe and compassionate care through education excellence.”

**Conclusion**

The idea of institutional teaching awards is not new (Centra 1978; Huggett et al. 2012) but data on current use and limitations in undergraduate medical education are sparse. What our report adds is contemporary single-center experience from a large teaching hospital in the UK. Our experience has been overwhelmingly positive with very little extra cost or workload. We accept the limitations of an awards scheme based solely on student feedback. However, a universal peer review system would have required not only substantial additional funding but also major cultural change in our institution. We speculate that many large teaching hospitals in the UK are in a similar position and we think our experience will be highly relevant to them, despite our reliance on student feedback. We also feel strongly that our awards do by and large reward the right individuals i.e. enthusiastic tutors who act as ambassadors of our educational agenda within the institution.

One key driver for our initiative is the fact that there is clear competition for enthusiastic individuals in the UK’s National Health Service in that senior doctors have a choice between non-clinical roles in service development, research or teaching. This situation is not helped by the fact that additional funds to pay clinicians for teaching are increasingly limited – a situation that is not unique to the UK (Kumar et al. 1999). We speculate that many institutions worldwide are faced with a similar dilemma i.e. how to recruit, motivate and reward enthusiastic teachers in the face of ongoing financial austerity and competition for high achievers. However, it was also important to us to broaden our initiative and include award categories for nurses as well (Table 2, available online as supplemental material).

The value of teaching awards has been questioned and caveats do exist (Mackenzie 2007). Dybowski and Harendtza (Dybowski & Harendza 2014) reported that rather than receiving personal awards, their tutors would prefer reinvestment of evaluation-based funds into supportive measures to improve curriculum delivery (Dybowski & Harendza 2014). We would respond by saying that in our institution teaching awards and investment in curriculum are funded differently and that our entire awards system can be delivered on less than £1000, annually, a sum that would not allow for any meaningful investment. We also realize the limitations of our approach based on student feedback, not least the fact that tutors may subconsciously modify their educational approach (including feedback for students) to ensure their popularity and thus increase their chances of winning. Finally, the fact that our large teaching hospital lacks a large and competing research program limits the generalizability of our findings: The tension between research and teaching remains a feature of universities and influences the dynamics of teaching awards in such institutions (Jackson 2006).

Transparency of criteria and fairness of the process as a whole are also important and the impression of favoritism must be avoided at all cost. We circulate criteria several times during the academic year and the awards list is produced by our QA team without any involvement of the educational leadership team. In addition we see our initiative as good practice of student engagement. It is also important that awards criteria align with performance criteria elsewhere. In this regard, we ensure that the student feedback scores which underpin our awards system also form one important part of our annual educational appraisals with the placement leads. More alignment is certainly possible and one could consider making the awards one criterion for advancement in the educational hierarchy toward more senior educational lead roles. Another conundrum is what to do if one placement constantly outperforms others – should this placement win every consecutive year? Will this antagonize those who did not win? Should award recipients be banned for a year or will this act as unjust punishment? Finally, awarding individuals does not do justice to the educational reality of teams delivering teaching. Further research should be conducted to study how recipients and non-recipients perceive awards and team awards should be considered.

More worrying is a report by Aucott et al. from the USA (Aucott et al. 1999) who report that 48% of their award recipients eventually left the institution, often with the feeling that teaching was not a core institutional value. These findings emphasize that teaching awards need to align with the remainder of the educational ethos (Menges 1996). Another factor to consider is the reaction of those who were unsuccessful. A study from Australia reported that a significant proportion of award recipients experienced negative reactions (Scott & Dinham 2002). We have not experienced such reactions but remain very mindful that they may exist. We also acknowledge that our concept of friendly and good-humored competition is cultural and contextual and may not work in a different setting.

In summary, a total annual expenditure of less than £1000, provides our institution with a unique, popular and visible tool to promote a culture of teaching, showcase education and recruit new enthusiastic tutors. Our 12 tips should encourage other institutions to share the experience.
Twelve tips

The awards scheme
1. Aim for fair and transparent awards criteria and be prepared to refine the award categories over time.
2. Think about what motivates your tutors.
3. Find ways to enlarge the recognition and include mechanisms that prevent the “usual suspects” from dominating the teaching awards.

Advertising and disseminating the awards
1. Advertise the awards early on in the academic year.
2. Publicize the awards ceremony widely in your institution.
3. Ensure active participation from your institution’s top leadership.

The ceremony
1. Involve your students in the awards ceremony.
2. Give award recipients certificates but also something tangible such as a statuette to make them visible ambassadors for undergraduate education.
3. Provide certificates for runner-up and third prize and aim for an atmosphere of good-humored competition.

Embedding the awards scheme in a wider strategy
1. Make the awards part of a wider recruitment strategy and send postcards to every single junior doctor the students praise for teaching.
2. Embed the awards in your QA strategy and ensure that struggling placements are well supported.
3. Align the awards with performance criteria and the remainder of your strategy so that awards are not seen as an isolated mission statement.

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The authors report no conflicts of interest. The authors alone are responsible for the content and writing of this article.

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