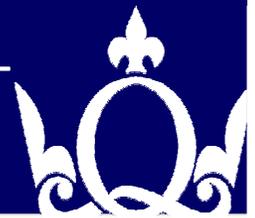


# The Value of Student Choice In The Modern Medical Curriculum - A Study Exploring Student Perceptions

Heena Pindoria, Martin Carrier



## Background

A key element of the UK medical curriculum is Student Selected Components (SSCs).

SSCs allow students the **choice** and **responsibility** to select areas of study which are:

- of interest to them,
- complement the core curriculum,
- provide a path to explore career options

They also offer scope to develop a range of **transferable skills** which prepares students for their professional lives (Fig 1).



Fig 1: Transferable skills that can be developed through SSCs.<sup>1</sup>

As the element of choice allows a degree of freedom in the utility of the component, it is important to consider whether students understand the role and value of SSCs and so utilise these learning opportunities fully.

## Aims

The aims of this study were to:

- Evaluate whether students understand the role of SSCs as defined by the General Medical Council (GMC).
- Provide recommendations for improving the current SSC programme.

## Methods

Year 1 and 5 medical students were invited to participate in the study.

The study began with a questionnaire phase for year 1 students which took place before and after their first SSC. This was followed by focus groups for years 1 and 5 (Fig 2).

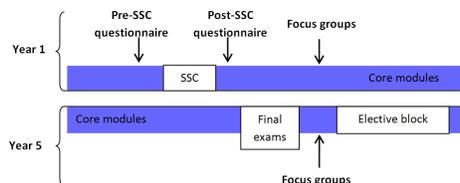


Fig 2: Data collection timeline.

Self constructed questionnaires asked students to rate their level of agreement on various statements (Table 1) on a five-point likert scale, ranging from strongly agree to strongly disagree.

Pre-SSC Questionnaire	Post-SSC Questionnaire
The value of SSCs in the curriculum.	The value of SSCs in the curriculum.
Range of topics available.	Overall experience of learning on SSC.
Influences on topic selection.	Factors affecting experience.

Table 1: Main areas explored in the Pre- and Post-SSC questionnaire.

The focus groups added a qualitative element to the study in order to triangulate and add to the validity of the questionnaire.

## Results

### Questionnaires

Year 1 Students mainly valued SSCs in providing

The perception of SSCs as a break significantly\* ( $p < 0.05$ ) increased after they completed their SSC. (Fig 3).

Overall, most students were satisfied with the topics available and based their topic selection on:

- The method of assessment
- Their interest in the topic

Less than half Year 1 students however, were happy with their SSC and felt that the purpose of SSCs was clear. The purpose did become significantly\* clearer Post-SSC (Fig 4).

Upon completion of the component, 64.3% of students enjoyed their SSC of which their interest in the topic was the main contributor to their enjoyment.

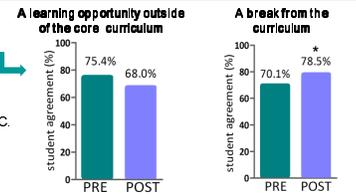


Fig 3: Areas where most students placed the value of SSCs in the curriculum both before and after completing their first SSC

### The purpose and importance of SSCs is clear

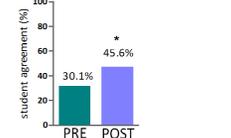


Fig 4: Students' understanding of the purpose and importance of SSC's.

### Focus groups

Upon reflection, final year students shared similar perceptions to year 1 students when they were in their pre-clinical years of study.

Both sets of students conveyed that their initial impressions of SSCs were that they provided a break and were a less serious part of the curriculum. This was emphasised by:

- the timing of SSCs with exams, where students prioritised their revision over the SSC.
- A lack of clarity in the relevance of certain topics to future studies, which deterred their motivation to excel.

Final year students identified that **student maturity** changed many of their perceptions from their first year and now recognise the purpose of SSCs as an **opportunity to venture interests and explore career paths** which became the basis of their choices, rather than the method of assessment.

This became clearer as they progressed on the course and suggests that the approach to SSCs in the later years is more in line with the GMC recommendations.

Both sets of students did however, demonstrate enthusiasm towards student choice in the curriculum and felt that a more rigorous approach was needed in order to maximise their choices from the outset.

## Recommendations

- > Consider the timing of SSCs within the curriculum alongside examinations and other pressures.
- > Highlight the relevance of topics to other areas of the curriculum and future academic and personal development in order to increase motivation.
- > Emphasise the value of SSCs before AND after their component to help inform subsequent choices.
- > Older students can act as ambassadors for SSCs and share their change in perception and experiences.

## Conclusion

- Students may not initially be fully aware of the beneficial educational outcomes that underpin student choice in the curriculum.
- Various measures can be taken to encourage students to maximise the opportunities available.
- The perceptions and experiences of students changes as a result of a natural progression, as they develop into adult learners and prepare for professional practice.
- SSCs can and do play a vital role in this process.

References:  
1. General Medical Council (2003) Tomorrow's Doctors: Regulating doctors, ensuring good medical practice