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Improving Access in Applying to Medical School for Widening Participation Students in the UK: a Pilot Study

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Abstract

Introduction: Students from low socioeconomic backgrounds, ethnic minorities, and non-selective state-funded schools have low medical school application rates.^{1–3} Contributing factors include limited understanding of the application process, reduced access to work experience, and less school support.³ This pilot study aimed to (i) identify challenges faced by widening participation students applying to medical school, and (ii) implement a programme to address these, to improve confidence and preparedness.

Methods: Twenty participants (aged 16-18) attended a widening participation programme at Great Western Hospital, Swindon, completing anonymous pre-(n=16) and post-(n=18) programme surveys with responses paired through anonymous identifiers. Confidence and preparedness were evaluated on Likert scales (1-5) and analysed using Wilcoxon signed-rank tests, while free-text responses on support needs and useful interventions were thematically analysed using Braun and Clarke's method.⁴

Results: Confidence in knowledge of the application process (n=13, p=0.003, r=0.79, median 3(IQR 3-4) ?4(IQR 4-5)) and interview preparedness (n=11, p=0.003, r=0.90, median 2 (IQR 1-3) ?3 (IQR 3-4)) increased significantly (Fig.1). Free-text responses (Fig.2, Fig.3) indicated students most desired 'information about the application process' (notably interview skills (50%) and logistics (31%)) and 'clinical exposure' (38%). Students found 'clinical and career' exposure most useful (67%), followed by mock interview practice (39%) and understanding professional roles (39%). Post-programme, participants requested further work experience (57.9%) and mentorship (47.4%).

Conclusions: This programme improved confidence in the application process, interviews, and clinical exposure among widening participation students. Such initiatives could be easily adopted by other centres, incorporating more work experience and mentorship to better support underrepresented applicants.

Keywords: Widening Participation; Widening Access; Medical School Applications; Confidence; Preparedness