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Very short answer questions: a viable alternative to multiple choice questions

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Abstract

Background: Multiple choice questions, used in medical school assessments for decades, have many drawbacks such as hard to construct, allow guessing, encourage test-wiseness, promote rote learning, provide no opportunity for examinees to express ideas, and do not provide information about strengths and weakness of candidates. Directly asked, directly answered questions like Very Short Answer Questions (VSAQ) are considered a better alternative with several advantages.

Objectives: This study aims to compare student performance in MCQ and VSAQ and obtain feedback. from the stakeholders.

Methods: Conduct multiple true-false, one best answer, and VSAQ tests in two batches of medical students, compare their scores and psychometric indices of the tests and seek opinion from students and academics regarding these assessment methods.

Results: Multiple true-false and best answer test scores showed skewed results and low psychometric performance compared to better psychometrics and more balanced student performance in VSAQ tests. The stakeholders' opinions were significantly in favour of VSAQ.

Conclusion and recommendation: This study concludes that VSAQ is a viable alternative to multiple-choice question tests, and it is widely accepted by medical students and academics in the medical faculty.

Keywords: Very short answer questions, Multiple choice questions, Best answer questions
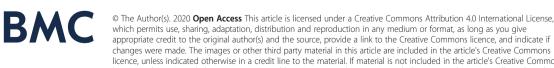
Background

Multiple True/False (MTF) and One Best Answer Questions (BAQ) are widely employed by the medical faculties by virtue of their advantages of instant machine scoring, freedom from examiner bias, and dependable reliability [1–4]. In this article, 'MCQ' is used to refer to both these instruments of assessment. The reliability of a test is higher when the subject coverage is wider [5, 6]. Reliability refers to test reproducibility with similar results when used for different batches, but it does not ensure validity [2, 3]. MCQ tests seem to sacrifice validity

for reliability [3]. A primary purpose of any assessment is to let students know what is important to learn [6]. Assessments are supposed also to enable feedback to students and direct the teaching strategies [1, 7–10], and this is applicable especially to formative assessments. MCQ tests do not provide information, which would enable feedback, as they do not require students to construct the answers [1]. It is an established fact that assessments drive the learning style [1, 6, 10, 11]. MCQ is blamed for promoting rote learning, guessing, test-wiseness, and turning students into data banks [2, 5, 7, 12–14]. MCQ tends to test trivia [2] and they are not able to test complex issues [3, 7]. MCQ does not provide any opportunity for students to express their understanding [15]. What is required in a medical school is

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