Introduction

International Medical Electives (IMEs) are popular, and form an integral part of the global health curriculum. Forty percent undertake their IME within resource-restricted settings, however there is a need for greater reciprocity and collaboration between local and host institutions to ensure mutual benefit. Uniquely within the University of Aberdeen (UoA), all students are required to undertake a project during their elective. Project proposals are submitted 7-12 months prior and an interview undertaken to ascertain project viability and ethical approval. In line with Medical Schools Council guidelines, we used a mixed methods study (“Sink or Swim?”) to evaluate the experience of IMEs from the perspective of students and their host supervisors.

Methods

Final year MBChB students undertaking an IME between January and May 2018 were invited to complete a pre-IME questionnaire, a reflective diary, and participate in a post-IME focus group. Host supervisors were invited to complete an online questionnaire. Quantitative questionnaire data was analysed descriptively. Reflective diary and focus group transcripts were reviewed independently to identify emerging themes.

Results

Nine (out of 41 eligible) students and five host supervisors participated in the study. Most students were female, undergraduates and identified as ‘white British’. All students were UK residents and under 30 years of age. Five students undertook an IME in a low or middle-income country (LMIC). Qualitative themes are presented below:

Student preparation for the elective project

All students had conducted an audit or research project prior to their IME, however student concerns predominated around their project. Not all who required ethical approval had received training in research ethics, and the responsibility for guaranteeing approval appeared to be left to student.

Value of conducting an elective project

While both students and hosts were divided regarding the benefits of conducting a project. Students who could see that their project was valued by their host felt a great sense of achievement. All host supervisors found the project of interest and most felt it was of use to their department. Students who did not consider the project beneficial, were also those who faced difficulties collaborating with their host supervisor.

Communication with host supervisors prior to IME

Most students did not undertake an IME in an institution with a long-term partnership with the UoA and 2/3rds were unable to contact their host supervisor before arrival. All students and host supervisors from LMIC would have preferred better prior communication, particularly to facilitate project planning.

Conducting an elective project during IME

Students found data collection in a different environment challenging, and students visiting LMIC required greater administrative support. Some host supervisors had a different perspective from students regarding the project, which created conflict between host and students in some LMIC settings. Most students did not complete their report in the 8-week elective, leaving some students unsure how their project report would be received by their host.

Discussion

Planning and conducting a project within student IMEs posed specific challenges. Effective communication to allow collaboration was valued but not achieved by the majority. Uncertainties existed in the acquisition of ethical approval, and data collection within unfamiliar systems, which resulted in a greater administrative burden for LMIC host institutions. Value from the projects undertaken appeared dependent upon mutual benefit and engagement. In addition, conducting a project brought some students in conflict with their LMIC host. Although numbers within this study are small, the importance of mutuality in research conducted whilst on IME is concordant with the literature, and important considerations for future practice have been highlighted.

‘Sink or Swim?’ – Preparing medical students for International Elective projects

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References

1. Dowell & Merrylees. (2009). Electives: Isn’t it time for a change?