

A Thematic Service Evaluation of Progress Test Remediation: What can be done to improve?

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Background

Progress Tests (PTs) are longitudinal examinations undertaken by Cardiff University medical students to assess progression through the course. Students who fail to progress at the required level are offered remediation. In this context, remediation may be defined as 'the act of facilitating a correction for trainees who started out on the journey towards becoming a physician but have moved off course.' (1)

In 2023/24 small group sessions were established for students resitting year 4 and has since expanded to include students from year 3 and 4 identified as failing to progress. This service evaluation has been established to review PT remediation provided by Cardiff University's Centre for Medical Education (C4ME), to determine the most effective elements and identify areas for improvement.

Theme 1: Identification of Underperforming Students

'Early identification and broad ranging remediation support packages are likely to be key elements of effective support.' (2)

PTs provide frequent, longitudinal performance data which is utilised by faculty to identify students failing to meet the required standard. Support is offered directly to these students.

Academic faculty recognise that more students may benefit from targeted remediation, however limitations such as teaching hours and funding affect the scalability of this remediation model to a wider cohort at present.

Students who progress at a level just above the threshold for remediation may not be recognised until a critical event such as failing to pass the year due to an 'unsatisfactory' or 'borderline' aggregate.

Focus Group Participant

It started making me think more about things I was seeing on placement, [and] more about the differentials and managements

[I'm] being more reflective – ensuring I spend time on topics I find difficult and saving [them] to read again in the future

Focus group participant

Initially it felt a little bit daunting, but actually it was a really nice, welcoming environment and all of us [students were] in the same position

Focus group participant

Most Valuable Elements of Remediation Identified by Recipients

- 'Creating questions prior to the session and going through these in a systematic approach.'
- 'Understanding how to dissect an exam question and get to the root of it.'
- 'Following other students' thought processes in coming to a correct answer.'
- 'Breakout rooms – seeing how others interpret the question.'
- 'Discussion of questions and the rationale behind the answer, identifying further areas that need revision.'

Project Aims

- Review remediation practices for PT, including trying to identify best practice by reviewing current literature in this field
- Determine what elements of the current Centre for Medical Education remediation sessions are most effective
- Identify areas for improvement to inform future practice

Methods

A literature review was conducted to generate three key themes. A questionnaire was sent to students who attended remediation sessions in 2023/24 and 24/25 (n=51). Fifteen responses were received and used to devise prompts for a focus group with students, and semi-structured interviews with academic faculty. Thematic analysis of qualitative data was undertaken to develop recommendations for future practice.

I always try to over invite, looking at who may struggle. There are a lot of teacher hours put into [remediation]

Academic Faculty

I may not have been on the radar as someone who is struggling, but [failing to progress] was still a possibility

Focus group participant

You can't send everyone for remediation, so you have to draw the line somewhere.

Academic Faculty

I had to email someone to say 'Can I have some support?' rather than the other way around, which is a bit disappointing

Focus group participant

Theme 2: Style of Remediation

'It helps greatly to have peer support and coaching through the process.' (3)

In C4ME remediation sessions, students write single best answer questions (SBA) on challenging topics prior to the session and are supported by a clinical facilitator to dissect questions and develop exam strategies.

- 100% of students who wrote questions agreed this was a useful tool, improved knowledge and promoted active learning, 77% agreed that writing SBAs improved their study skills
- Constructing and breaking down SBAs in a facilitated group setting helped students develop a systematic approach to tackling questions and prompted reflective practice about clinical placement experiences
- Some students felt that writing questions was a time-consuming method of study compared to using online question banks
- Group size preference: 40% - 2 to 4 students, 40% - 5 to 8 students, 13% 9 or more students, 7% no preference
- Questionnaire recipients were asked if remediation sessions had improved their preparedness for clinical placement – 73% were neutral, 20% disagreed and 7% agreed
- Students expressed that they benefited from a supportive learning environment with peers in a similar academic position, reflecting on each other's perspectives, successes and weaknesses.

Theme 3: Factors Contributing to Underperformance

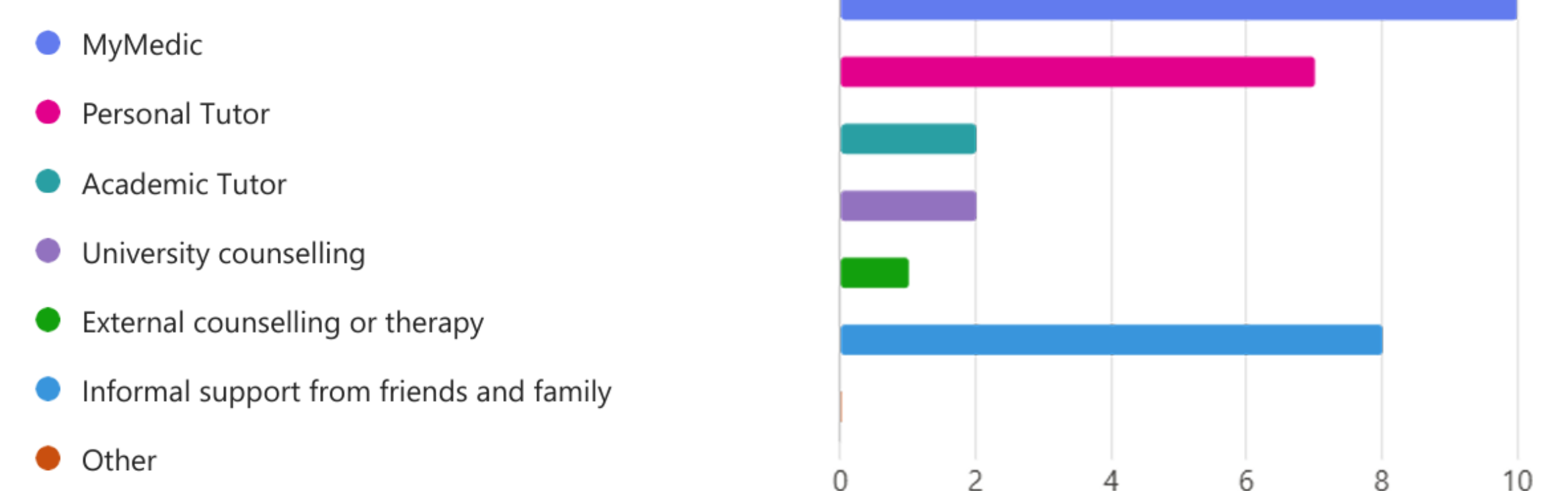
'A supportive institutional culture is important as even the most academically high-achieving students may suffer setbacks.' (4)

At Cardiff University, underperforming students are invited to meet with their year director to discuss results and explore personal circumstances which might be impacting their progression. Faculty signpost students to the resources and services most appropriate, including to My Medic, a service which provides confidential advice and support to School of Medicine students. (5)

'Most medical students are historically high-achievers unfamiliar with academic struggle', (6) therefore teaching academic skills alone is likely to be inadequate in providing effective remediation. External impacts to performance are common (7) It is important to look at the context within which underperformance occurs and explore the individual's view on what contributed to their circumstances. (4)

The most common factor that questionnaire respondents identified as affecting their academic performance was 'mental or physical ill health' (73%), followed by 'heavy workload' (60%). 11/15 respondents answered they had accessed pastoral care, or wellbeing support, in the past year. Figure 1 shows the types of support accessed.

Figure 1. Types of support accessed by questionnaire respondents in the past year



We work hand in hand with My Medic who have that role of supportive advising.

Academic Faculty

There's a wide range of things [My Medic] can help with, it's really nice to have that support on a one-on-one basis

Focus group participant

My Medic is intended to pull together anything that might be impacting on that student's ability to thrive and enjoy the course

My Medic Faculty

Conclusions

- Targeted remediation and facilitated analysis of SBA questions improved student assessment literacy and improved progression outcomes
- Students want earlier identification of underperformance, for earlier targeted remediation offered to a wider cohort of students – further consideration to overcoming limitations is warranted
- A holistic approach is essential, as students rarely struggle academically in isolation, as wider issues impact learning
- Remote, online delivery of small group sessions is an effective tool for geographically disparate students, creating a supportive peer-learning environment
- Students found constructing SBA questions prompted reflective practice on clinical placement experiences and real patient cases
- Further consideration to how this approach may affect a student's experience on clinical placement is warranted, including how clinical teachers can play a role in facilitating remediation and how remediation practices can be developed to support students in the clinical environment**
- Adapting and upscaling to include near-peer delivery may be valuable to students early in the course and a cost effective, sustainable addition to the curriculum

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