



18th March 2020
Queensland Medical Students' Council
46 Oxford Terrace, Taringa
QLD 4068

COVID-19 and Queensland Medical Students

The Queensland Medical Students' Council (QLDMSC) is the peak representative body for over 4000 medical students at the four medical schools across Queensland. Our members are diverse, coming from both postgraduate and undergraduate medical programs at the University of Queensland, Griffith University and Bond University in the South-East of Queensland, as well as James Cook University in the North. QLDMSC is committed to working with Queensland Health, Queensland Medical Schools and other stakeholders to protect the health of students, patients and healthcare workers during the current outbreak of the 2019 coronavirus disease (COVID-19).

QLDMSC recognises the critical role that medical students may play in the unfolding response to COVID-19 and affirm that Queensland medical students have a strong desire to assist and contribute over the coming months. However, in any response, our primary consideration is always our students' welfare and safety, and that of our patients. Our priority throughout this crisis is to ensure that appropriate precautions are taken to protect the health and rights of medical students and to ensure students are working within their scope of practice to ensure patient safety at all times.

QLDMSC would like to thank everyone for their work so far in these difficult times, particularly the Deans and their faculties for their efforts to look after their students. However, with regards to COVID-19 and Queensland Medical Students, QLDMSC has identified 5 key areas of continuing concern.

1. Exams & Assessment

QLDMSC believes that assessment should not unduly pressure students to attend class or clinical placement should they feel unwell, or should the clinical environment become unsafe for students due to lack of supervision or increased scope of practice. QLDMSC also believes that traditional assessment methods may pose high risk environments for exposure, and thus alternate modes of assessment should be investigated to minimise the risk of student exposure.

QLDMSC calls upon Queensland university medical faculties to:

- Explore assessment methods that are risk free or minimised in risk ie. online exams, alternate assessment forms, take home exams

- Remove or reduce blanket rules around attendance as a requirement for academic progression, and investigate other measures of academic participation that may be used as accreditation markers instead

2. Content Delivery

QLDMSC takes the impact of COVID-19 on medical education and students' ability to meet medical degree demands seriously. QLDMSC believes that alternative arrangements and planning should be made to ensure that COVID-19 does not become a barrier to completion of the degree or progression. QLDMSC also believes medical students have a responsibility to work in safe environments to prevent carrier transmission and ensure patient safety. QLDMSC believes that students who may be particularly vulnerable to COVID-19 or who are the carers of someone who may be particularly vulnerable should be facilitated to have alternate learning arrangements to clinical placement for their, and their dependent's safety.

QLDMSC calls upon Queensland university medical faculties to:

- Prepare to transition to online course delivery for pre-clinical years
- Prepare for alternate methods of content delivery (ie. research terms, self study) should placements become unsafe, particularly with regards to access to PPE, appropriate training and levels of supervision
- Minimise in-person attendance where necessary content can be delivered by alternate means
- Remove students from placements with vulnerable community groups eg. aged care, resp wards, GP clinics
- Provide alternate learning arrangements for students who are particularly vulnerable to COVID-19
- Prioritise student safety in placements that do continue, including adequate access to PPE, training, and adequate supervision
- Ensure hospitals, hospital teaching staff, clinicians, and students are aware of clinical placement exit dates

3. Graduation

QLDMSC recognises that should students not be able to complete clinical placement, and subsequently be delayed in graduation, there are severe mental and financial consequences for students, especially international students. There are also significant workforce consequences of final year students not graduating on time. Any proportion of these students not being able to graduate or having a delayed graduation means that there will be a shortage of graduates in 2020 and an oversupply of graduates for 2021, which has significant implications for the medical workforce.

QLDMSC calls upon Queensland university medical faculties to:

- Ensure students graduate on time without delay, particularly final year students
- Conduct additional examinations and assessment only where there is insufficient evidence on whether a student is fit for practice
- Modify assessment where feasible to ensure students graduate on time, whilst still adhering to usual accreditation requirements as best as possible
- Ensure assessment is risk free or minimised in risk
- Provide letters of recommendation to graduating international students who wish to return home following graduation but are unable to complete a placement in their home country

4. Workforce involvement

QLDMSC strongly believes that medical student education should be privileged and protected, and should not be utilised as a method to fill workforce shortages. However, in the case that medical students should need to form a part of the medical workforce, QLDMSC has several key concerns that are outlined in our [position statement](#) on this issue.

QLDMSC calls upon Queensland Health and Queensland university medical faculties to:

- Protect medical education by ensuring Queensland medical students are not called to alleviate workforce shortages through the form of clinical placement or attachment
- Immediately cease supervisors from coercing students to act outside of their normal scope of practice without adequate training, PPE or supervision
- Ensure in the case that students are required to join the workforce in a formal capacity, that the student workforce is:
 - Recruited on a voluntary, opt-in basis with no coercion
 - Remunerated appropriately
 - Provided with appropriate workplace protections including temporary registration, sick leave, safe working hours, overtime, indemnity, WorkCover and other industrial protections
 - Exempt from having this work necessarily contribute to their academic progression and accreditation, in the first instance
 - Given access to appropriate PPE and training, including specific guidance for PPE use and COVID-19 protocols should this involve clinical work
 - Given access to safe levels of supervision and support
 - Involved in the workforce for the shortest time possible
 - Able to opt out at any time
- Prioritise methods that Queensland medical students may contribute to the COVID-19 response without frontline clinical attachment, eg. manning hotlines, contact tracing, providing childcare

5. Transparency and communication

QLDMSC believes that clear and consistent communication from Queensland university medical faculties and Queensland Health is needed to reassure students. Many medical faculties have only provided limited advice to students beyond central university messaging, which has been a source of confusion and fear for students. For example, at the moment, many students are still ignoring advice from medical faculties around attendance, given that there has not been clearly defined limits for what is deemed acceptable attendance. Some students have also faced confusion where faculty has advised them to attend placement, only to be turned away by their supervising clinician. Some students are also largely unaware of the broader conversation that is happening around COVID-19 and the potential for things such as recruitment into the workforce, due to limited direct communication from Queensland Health.

QLDMSC calls on Queensland university medical faculties to:

- Continue to provide regular updates to students
- Distribute communication along multiple channels, including email, social media and University medical societies
- Provide explicit, specific advice on what to do if a student feels sick
- Provide explicit, specific advice on clearly defined attendance requirements for progression, beyond stating that self-isolation will not affect progression, and regularly review these requirements
- Have regular meetings with relevant student representatives
- Ensure hospitals, hospital teaching staff, clinicians and students are all communicated consistent information

QLDMSC calls on Queensland Health to:

- Open a channel of communication between the Chief Health Officer's office and QLDMSC to ensure regular updates for students and a platform to raise overarching Queensland medical student concerns around COVID-19
- Provide regular advice to students on the status of COVID-19 through QLDMSC and Queensland university medical faculties

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