



Another RDF funded Project Completed: Impact of COVID -19 Pandemic on Pharmacy Education in the Caribbean

The corona virus pandemic caused dramatic disruptions in pharmacy education in the Caribbean region and globally. In the Caribbean, limited financial resources and inadequate technological advancements made the impact more severe when compared with developed countries. The forced closure of academic institutions at all levels and the protocols for physical distancing made face-to-face education challenging. In light of this, Dr. Eugenie-Brown Myrie, Associate Professor, and Miss Yvonne Johnson-Reid, Lecturer, School of Pharmacy, College of Health Sciences, embarked on a study to determine how the pandemic impacted academic delivery, learning approaches, and assessment procedures offered in Pharmacy programmes in the Caribbean.

This research project, which employed a cross-sectional mixed-methods approach, was funded through the Research Development Fund (RDF) that is managed by the School of Graduate Studies, Research & Entrepreneurship (SGSRE). The researchers aimed to determine the student and faculty perspectives on the impact of COVID-19 and assess the teaching and learning strategies adopted to maintain high quality pharmacy education. The research was conducted among pharmacy educators and students from various pharmacy schools in the Caribbean, namely, University of Technology, Jamaica, University of Guyana, University of Belize, University of the West Indies, Mona, Barbados Community College and T.A. Marrayshow Community College, Grenada. Twenty-seven (27) full-time lecturers and 231 students participated in the study. Two highly structured pretested questionnaires were used to solicit responses from the participants.

Project Objectives

1. To compare teaching modalities employed before COVID -19 pandemic and those utilized during the pandemic.
2. To determine if there was a difference in how assessments were conducted before COVID -19 pandemic and during the pandemic.
3. To ascertain from students and faculty the extent to which online delivery played a role in pharmacy education pre and during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Results & Discussion

1. Eighty- nine percent (89%) of lecturers agreed that preparation and assessments online were more time consuming during the COVID-19 period.
2. Students agreed that online assessments were more time-consuming (58%) and that interactions with lecturers, facilitators and peers were often delayed (62%)
3. Delivery of the experiential training showed significance at the 95% confidence level during COVID for laboratories, pharmacy practice labs and clinical rotations, respectively.
4. Ninety-four percent (94%) of students indicated need for adjustment of learning styles for online learning; 59% stated they had increased costs as the increased use of online engagement resulted in increased unbudgeted expenses. The lecturers commented that there were challenges associated with internet connectivity. There was a significant difference in the use of the face-to-face, blended and fully online delivery methods before and during the pandemic.
5. For didactic methods only lectures highlighted a significant change in the use of laboratories and pharmacy practice labs before and during COVID-19.
6. Learning platforms Moodle, Blackboard Collaborate and Zoom recorded statistically significant increases in usage during COVID-19.

The results indicated that pharmacy faculty made quick adjustments during the pandemic. Similarly, students rose above the adversities of reduced interactions and adjusted to learning styles to achieve success. Also, both faculty and students reported significant reduction in laboratories and pharmacy practice labs. This could have serious implications for knowledge loss since in pharmacy, practical knowledge is as essential as theoretical knowledge. Students build confidence through exposure and hands-on training as preparation for entrance into the professional environment. Increased use of online engagement resulted in increased unbudgeted expenses. This can cause financial strain on lecturers, students and families at large and possibly result in negative overall impact.

Conclusion

The researchers concluded that faculty and students responded quickly to adapt to the remote teaching and assessment modalities during the pandemic. Faculty learned various platforms and tools; utilized them to deliver content and conduct assessments. Teaching modalities used during the pandemic were similar to pre-pandemic, and applicable in both periods. Online teaching/learning was the primary mode of engagement; however, students expressed a preference for the blended modality. The response mounted for the COVID -19 pandemic, and the positive results achieved are indicators that the virtual platform will most likely see greater integration in pharmacy curriculum across the Caribbean in the future.

Recommendations

The following recommendations were made:

1. Evaluate COVID-19 graduates to determine if deficiencies exist from reduced interactions or if learning gaps are identified.
2. If gaps are identified, educators should design strategies to ensure appropriate remedial work is introduced to enable adequate preparation for professional practice.
3. Administrations should make plans for ongoing training and acquisition of required resources to support online delivery in the future.

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