

Disruptions to Medical Education during COVID-19: Perceptions and Recommendations from Students at the University of the West, Indies, Jamaica

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Abstract : Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, the Faculty of Medical Sciences of The University of the West Indies (UWI) Mona in Kingston, Jamaica, had to rapidly migrate to digital and blended learning. Students in the preclinical stage of the program transitioned to full-time online learning, while students in the clinical stage experienced decreased daily patient contact and the implementation of a blend of online lectures and virtual clinical practice. Such sudden changes were coupled with the institutional pressure of the need to introduce a novel approach to education without much time for preparation, as well as additional strain endured by the faculty, who were overwhelmed by serving as frontline workers. During the period July 20 to August 23, 2021, this study surveyed preclinical and clinical students to capture their experiences with these changes and their recommendations for future use of digital modalities of learning to enhance medical education. It was conducted with a fellow student of the 2021 cohort of the MultiPod mentoring program. A questionnaire was developed and distributed digitally via WhatsApp to all medical students of the UWI Mona campus to assess students' experiences and perceptions of the advantages, challenges, and impact on individual knowledge proficiencies brought about by the transition to predominantly digital learning environments. 108 students replied, 53.7% preclinical and 46.3% clinical. 67.6% of the total were female and 30.6 % were male; 1.8% did not identify themselves by gender. 67.2% of preclinical students preferred blended learning and 60.3% considered that the content presented did not prepare them for clinical work. Only 31% considered that the online classes were interactive and encouraged student participation. 84.5% missed socialization with classmates and friends and 79.3% missed a focused environment for learning. 80% of the clinical students felt that they had not learned all that they expected and only 34% had virtual interaction with patients, mostly by telephone and video calls. Observing direct consultations was considered the most useful, yet this was the least-used modality. 96% of the preclinical students and 100% of the clinical ones supplemented their learning with additional online tools. The main recommendations from the survey are the use of interactive teaching strategies, more discussion time with lecturers, and increased virtual interactions with patients. Universities are returning to face-to-face learning, yet it is unlikely that blended education will disappear. This study demonstrates that students' perceptions of their experience during mobility restrictions must be taken into consideration in creating more effective, inclusive, and efficient blended learning opportunities.

Keywords : blended learning, digital learning, medical education, student perceptions

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