Development, implementation and monitoring of exemplary blended-learning courses in the School of Health Care Sciences at Sefako Makgatho Health Sciences University

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Background

Sefako Makgatho Health Sciences University (SMU)'s main focus is to provide quality healthcare education to previously disadvantaged, marginalised and resource constraint students. The outbreak of COVID-19 and subsequent migration to online teaching and learning highlighted the digital divide experienced by students and forced lecturers to change their approach to teaching and learning. Despite the challenges of online teaching and learning, the University and lecturers have a responsibility to provide excellent education to the students. One of the ways in which the quality of education can be established is through the development and implementation of exemplary courses. The provision of exemplary courses will not only ensure that staff members educate the students optimally, but will contribute to the students' success during participation in these courses.

This project therefore aimed to:

1) Develop two guiding templates to lecturers in the School of Health Care Sciences (SHCS).
2) Monitor the uptake and satisfaction of the courses through staff- and student feedback.
3) Monitor implementation and usage of the available blended-learning strategies on Blackboard through usage reports and feedback.

Methods

A multi-phased approach was used to extract the information needed to complete the project. The sampling, methods and key findings will be presented per phase in this section.

Phase 1 determined the number of existing exemplary blended-learning courses in the SHCS. Extraction of existing information on Blackboard was done with the assistance of the e-leaning center. Exemplary modules were determined by course structure; presence of outcomes; course content; methods and resources; assessment and monitoring. It was determined that only two of the five departments in the SHCS had exemplary modules, and that the modules did not extend to all subjects within the Departments. The findings confirmed the need for guidance on the development of exemplary blended-learning courses.

During Phase 2, interviews were conducted with 12 staff members within the SHCS who had been teaching undergraduate students before and during the COVID-19 pandemic. The interviews explored the experiences of the staff members regarding online and blended-learning courses; challenges faced and recommendations they would make to ensure quality in teaching and learning.

Students were given a questionnaire to complete for Phase 3 of the study. One-hundred-and-eighteen students participated in this phase of the project and provided information regarding their experiences of online teaching and learning. Only students in the third or fourth (final) year of study were included as they experienced teaching and learning pre-COVID.

Achievements and Challenges

The information was collated and, with the help of a statistician, analysed to develop the guidelines. The guidelines (with a shortened reflection of the findings) were as follows:

Course structure: The results showed that well-structured courses are utilised more frequently and effectively by staff and students.

Lecturers / departments who are not experienced with course structure design should be encouraged to consult with an instructional designer that is familiar with the LMS.

Teaching approach: Three interesting points to note were identified from the respondents: 1) Students indicated that they enjoyed courses with diverse teaching approaches more than courses that were presented in a similar manner (irrespective of the type of approach employed by the lecturer). Students indicated that if all lecturers uses a similar approach (for example, if all lecturers use a flipped classroom), they became overwhelmed with the workload provided in the course. However, if multiple teaching approaches are used the students remain engaged in the teaching and learning activities and have a higher chance of successfully completing the course. 2) Students unanimously indicated that the active-learning approaches (such as inquiry-based learning; problem-based learning; and peer-led team learning) were more valuable and enjoyable than collaborative learning. The majority of students indicated that they found group work challenging and most of the students felt that they would have learned more about certain topics if a non-group approach was used. The lecturers also indicated challenges with group activities, especially regarding students who do not fully participate in the tasks/groups. 3) Teaching approaches where frequent continuous assessments were conducted were preferred by lecturers and students. Lecturers reported that using different approaches during teaching helped to retain students' attention during teaching and learning.

Outcomes: Traditionally, course outcomes are provided to students prior to the onset of teaching activities (Harris & Clayton 2019). However, different teaching approaches address outcomes in a different manner. The results of the project showed that students who developed their own outcomes (for example when following a problem-based learning approach) and students who receive outcomes prior to the onset of a course (for example when following a flipped classroom approach) made no difference in the overall success of the course / experience of the class participants.

Materials and resources: The highlights from the project are: Teaching materials should not only be considered for their scientific merit but also for their ease of access (i.e. should

be downloadable and in a format that displays well on various screen types). Resources should be well considered and 'content dumping' should be discouraged as it confuses students and results in excessive reading work.

<u>Unexpected findings:</u> The majority of students indicated that they experienced a lack of mentoring and tutoring during online teaching and learning. It is recommended that all courses should include a component of mentoring / tutoring in the course design. Students indicated the need for anonymous post-sites where they can seek help with course content as well as assistance with mental health issues. No online substitute for clinical-/ work integrated learning could be identified from this project.

The guidelines were formulated in table format for lecturers to implement – the experienced lecturers received guiding questions/statements to help them appraise their current teaching and learning content. New staff members received more detailed information (under the same headings) to assist in the process of course development. Unfortunately, some challenges arose during the conduction of the project. Despite optimistic expectations of the outcomes, there was not sufficient time after development of the guidelines to ensure implementation in all departments. As the implemented courses are still in the first cycle of use, monitoring could also not be done yet (although this is planned for October – December 2022). The implementation of the guidelines, although well received by the majority of staff members, required a lot of unforeseen technical assistance – it is therefore recommended that an e-learning center / ICT department at Universities be utilised to assist in the development and rollout of exemplary courses.

References

Harris, R & Clayton, B. 2019. The current emphasis on learning outcomes. International Journal of Training Research, 17(2), DOI:
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