

'No student left behind': justice as a driver for equitable remote learning in the COVID-19 era

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Abstract

Background: The 2020 COVID-19 global pandemic necessitated drastic changes to the training of undergraduate medical students at the University of Botswana. Emergency remote teaching, in various forms, has been utilised to ensure that the academic year is not lost, and student learning continues. However, in the African context, at the University of Botswana, Gaborone, emergency remote teaching implementation was compounded by the fundamental issue of equitable access to the infrastructure that enables it. Given that students are from diverse socio-economic situations with homes scattered over an area the size of France, the Department of Medical Education was tasked by the Faculty of Medicine with developing a fair and just emergency remote teaching programme.

Objectives: To explore the readiness of the Faculty of Medicine at the University of Botswana for emergency remote teaching and learning and develop a fair and just emergency remote teaching programme.

Methods: We conducted cross-sectional surveys utilising Office 365 Forms targeting all undergraduate medical students across the five years of study and teaching staff. Quantitative and qualitative data analyses were conducted.

Main Findings: Surveys revealed a high penetration of smartphones amongst students, but poor internet accessibility. Some teaching staff also reported internet and device insufficiencies. WhatsApp was the only application accessible to both students and teaching staff.

Conclusions: This study findings were consistent with Rawls' concept of 'justice as fairness' which provided a useful, reflective theoretical lens for understanding our implementation of a fair and just emergency remote teaching programme during the COVID-19 pandemic. A subsequent ruling from the Botswana Quality Assurance administration declared that any distance learning must be accessible by all. Students were allowed to return to campus where they all had equal access for any distance learning/ERT curriculum as social distancing, mask requirements, and other practices were implemented.