

Covid-19 and e-learning

Elsie Kiguli-Malwadde relates the role of e-learning to the pandemic

E-Learning is the use of technologies to access educational materials outside of traditional classrooms. It has emerged as an important tool for continuous professional development for health workers and students.

Global health security has been challenged by the Covid-19 pandemic as the disease spreads across all continents. Fear has gripped the world, affecting the mental wellbeing of populations. Our social wellbeing has been disrupted by social distancing measures, mask-wearing, avoidance of hugs or touching, and so on. In a bid to restrict gatherings and keep people at home, schools and universities including health professions education institutions have been closed.

The Lancet Commission for Health Professionals for a New Century recommended transformative learning, which is about developing leadership attributes with the purpose of producing enlightened change agents. It also recommended moving from isolated to harmonised education and health systems; from stand-alone institutions to networks, alliances and consortia; and from inward-looking institutional preoccupations to harnessing global flows of educational content and teaching resources.¹ The Covid-19 pandemic has brought to light the need to implement these recommendations.

Considering that health professions education institutions have been closed and face-to-face Continuous Professional Development (CPD) activities and conferences cancelled, health professions have to adopt creative ways of sharing education materials. Strategies have to be adopted to ensure that learning continues. There is also urgent need to train health workers on Covid-19 and to keep them updated on its spread.

The use of Information and Communications Technology (ICT) and online learning for continuous training of health professionals has been adapted to a much greater extent than before. The WHO has been at the helm of this by producing materials in several languages to train health workers all over the world and also provides materials and updates on the pandemic.² It is also developing a Mobile Learning App for health workers. This app will include WHO guidance, tools and training materials which are updated real-time in six languages. This highlights the need to go beyond classrooms or face-to-face meetings and conferences and use new technologies to find information. Health professionals in all countries have seen the need to mobilise knowledge and to engage in critical reasoning so as to be able to

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filter what is beneficial and what is not. A numbers of webinars on Covid-19 have been conducted involving health professions worldwide. In some cases, conferences that were cancelled due to Covid-19 have been conducted online.

Despite the challenges with ICT technologies and connectivity in Africa, the continent has not been left behind. The Open Educational Resource (OER) has provided a unique opportunity to take advantage of digital learning and to make educational materials accessible. Their materials include full courses, course materials, modules, textbooks, videos, assessments, and software. OER Africa (<https://oerafrica.org>) provides information on OER and links to OER repositories in Africa. In the coming weeks, OER Africa will publish bi-weekly communications on OERs and their relevance within the context of the pandemic and beyond.

One of the under-recognised and enduring repercussions of the closure of training institutions and a complete move to digital training is the lack of clinical exposure which is critical for training of health professionals. This deficit will have a bearing on the production and quality of new health professionals in years to come. Efforts must be made to address this challenge.

Strengthening Inter-professional Education for HIV (STRIPE-HIV), a collaboration between the AFREhealth and University of California San Francisco, has also had to change its methods of operation. A team of nursing and medical educators developed a training package focused on core clinical, public health, inter-professional education and quality improvement domains related to HIV service delivery. The aim is to improve HIV care in the Sub-Saharan African region using small-group, case-based learning techniques and targeting newly qualified healthcare professionals and those about to complete health professionals training. Innovative ways of delivering packages using an online platform are being explored. Already, a module on Covid-19 has been added to the training package.

Health professions education and CPD have, like many aspects of life, changed. It has become more challenging but the professional community has responded with innovation, tenacity and resilience.

References

- 1 Frenk J, Chen L, Bhutta ZA, Cohen J, Crisp N, Evans T, Fineberg H, Garcia P, Ke Y, Kelley P, et al. Health professionals for a new century: transforming education to strengthen health systems in an interdependent world. *Lancet*. 2010 Dec 4; 376(9756):1923-58. Epub 2010 Nov 26.
- 2 See www.who.int/emergencies/diseases/novel-coronavirus-2019/training/online-training