

Effective strategies to support students' research during an unprecedented time

Tha, K.K. & Mariapun, J.

Monash University Malaysia

Background:

The year 2020 was a challenging year for all academic programs, especially the research-based honours programs. The BMedSc (Hons) program at Monash University Malaysia is a full-time two-semester research-based honours program. It offers medical graduates a higher level of research skills and experience in various disciplines such as biomedical science, public health, clinical medicine, and medical education. Due to the various restriction of movement orders and lockdowns, the students' ongoing research projects were significantly affected, increasing anxiety. Thus, we had applied various strategies to solve these challenges effectively.

Method:

The strategies used were (1) continuous monitoring of the progress of the research projects by the academic coordinators, (2) communicating with supervisors and students on the feasible remediation plan if required, (3) continuous online academic advice sessions, (4) extension of the deadlines of assessments, (5) transforming the assessments into online versions, (6) organizing training and briefing sessions for assessments for both examiners and students, (7) continuous liaising with the course management committee in Monash University Australia and (8) consideration of relative to opportunity due to movement restrictions.

Results:

With all these strategies, students completed all projects (n=11) within the extended deadline. The research areas that the students were involved in included neuroscience, biomedical, obstetrics and gynaecology, medicine, paediatrics, and dermatology. The inaugural online assessments, such as faculty oral and poster presentations, went very well with good final grades. Six students confidently presented their projects in 3-minute thesis presentations at the clinical school research week symposium. Overall, the student performance for the assessments, which was well aligned with the learning outcomes and research activities, was very well done. However, there were some limitations in the laboratory-based projects and clinical projects that involved face-to-face data collection due to the movement restriction orders.

Conclusion:

The challenge of the COVID-19 crisis made us accept changes and adapt quickly to a "new normal" in coordinating the program and its essential components of assessments and student support. This experience gave us confidence in supervision and effective delivery of the academic program, and we will carry this practice forward in the coming years.

Keywords: *Research Student, New Norm Coordination*

