



Salvaging the academic year – resorting to online learning

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COVID-19 most certainly altered the old norms. People used to visit each other, first year students in universities used to have their “Fresher’s Balls” or “meet and greet”. All these used to be platforms where people would interface with each other, meet new folks and certainly forge relationships, some of which result in permanent friendships that last beyond university lives. Among these, another important casualty in the pandemic (COVID-19) was the important interaction between students when they are physically in lecture halls.

The moments like being able to assist each other about pharmaceutical calculations, not to mention that laughter directed at a colleague who cannot successfully use a Vernier scale. Students share equipment during titrations or even back-titrations in a pharmaceutical chemistry laboratory. All these and some of the funny moments when students share laughter in a lecture or during classroom presentations that would either be conducted individually, or in groups, happen to be the fondest memories that students experience throughout their university journey.

However, quality of life is more of a priority than most of the other activities/factors of value that initially or even currently still matter to many people. Recently, the South African Pharmaceutical Students Federation (SAPSF) Presidential Committee (PRESCO) has been inundated with requests and suggestions from students, alumni, and some university lecturers. Lecturers would often propose online learning wherein students would need to attend classes and submit most of their work electronically. However, some student leaders often raised concerns over some of the technical glitches around connectivity, including the impacts of loadshedding.

All these suggestions and concerns appear to be legitimate. However, one thing that remains outstanding is that at the end of this academic year, progress must have been made. There must be achievements so that students can ascend to the succeeding grade. In this regard, online meetings and/or conferences have been the latest order of the day in almost all corners of the universe. Universities, as microcosms of society and students, as “strata in transit”, should by all possible means position themselves strategically in the centre of the driving force of the society. Not only should the youth participate in the latest developments, but the students, as the intellectual front of society, should actively participate in providing solutions.

SAPSF therefore encourages all BPharm students to resume all academic programmes. In addition, as we make the call for students to return to the lecture hall, we equally encourage universities to ensure that all mitigating measures are put in place to ensure that all students are furnished with all the necessary equipment to advance their learning. Student leaders have raised genuine issues which may impinge on the progress of the students in other areas. However, notwithstanding the genuine issues raised by the student leaders, it may be worthwhile to remind all personnel of how one scientist defined properties of an “ideal drug”. It should be:

- non-toxic,
- biocompatible,
- biodegradable, and
- physiochemically stable in-vivo.

These are indeed ideal. If humanity was to ever obsess over some of these properties without acknowledging pragmatic solutions, then most drugs would not be used because some medicines exhibit side effects and/or adverse effects, yet they have a place in our armamentarium for use with special care. Students should commit to completing the learning objectives per module so that they eventually complete the year. SAPSF therefore contends very strongly that the 2020 academic year may not necessarily be lost if students can adopt the concept medicine use as a metaphor to the operations during COVID-19 operations and beyond. The medicines that are not necessarily “ideal” but at least are designed and used in such a way as to exhibit the properties of an ideal drug.

“Education is the most powerful tool that can be used to change the world.” Nelson Mandela

SAPSF once again encourages all students to stand firm and adopt the many latest methods of learning so that education and the culture of learning can be advanced. COVID-19 altered the old ways of living across all ways of life, and it is high time that BPharm students, as researchers, care-givers, leaders, communicators, managers, teachers, and most importantly, as life-long learners, should resume their culture of learning.

“Never waste a good crisis.” Winston Churchill

In an attempt to not waste a good crisis, SAPSF wishes all BPharm students a fruitful academic journey until all academic objectives for the year 2020 are achieved and beyond.