



SURG-Ed - a Global North-South Collaboration to Develop a Global Surgery Research Module through Student Partnership

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The SURG-ED Project highlights the lack of opportunities for medical students from the Global North to acquire relevant skills through contextualised projects, and to address this gap through the development and foundations for a global surgery research skills module co-created with and informed by students at RCSI and Stellenbosch University in South Africa.

Introduction and Context

The SURG-Ed project is presented here as a case study of academic-student partnership in the development of an innovative, demand-driven teaching module. The project was developed based on a need to strengthen the research skills of students who often come to collaborate with staff at the Institute of Global Surgery (IGS) at RCSI University of Medicine and Health Sciences. A stakeholders' consultation process was done in the summer of 2022 to map and better understand the needs of students interested in global surgery research.

Medical students from the Global North who are interested in gaining research experience in global surgery often lack opportunities acquire relevant skills through contextualised projects. Global surgery issues, and relevant research methods, are rarely included in medical school curricula¹. Furthermore, there is a general lack of guidance and mentorship in understanding how to pursue a sustainable career in the field¹. The default for medical students from the Global North who are interested in global surgery research is to participate in short-term volunteering trips, which have ethical ramifications, are unsustainable, and can be harmful to the local communities².

While “medical tourism” practices should be discouraged, this leads to a gap in opportunities for students to pursue their interests in the field². Therefore, the onus is on medical schools to offer suitable educational modules and encourage meaningful engagement in mutually beneficial partnerships with organisations in the Global South, thus promoting truly “global” surgery learning for students.

Research and Development

The overall goal of the SURG-Ed project is to develop foundations for a global surgery research skills module co-created with and informed by students at RCSI and Stellenbosch University in South Africa.

The module's objectives are to (i) fill a gap in current teaching at RCSI; (ii) establish a platform for interaction and knowledge exchange on global surgery research between Global North and South students. The project leverages the existing partnership between the RCSI IGS and the Faculty of Medicine and Health Science at Stellenbosch University.

Our approach is based on one of the key principles of adult learning theories: adults perform better on learning tasks that are meaningful and which fall within their domain of interest, hence their engagement in planning curricular direction should be encouraged³. Our experience so far is showing that the input of students in course development is very valuable to (i) ensure the relevance of the curriculum and stimulate learners' motivation to engage with the course once it is launched; (ii) identify and address skills gaps that may be omitted by top-down approaches to course development.

Actions Taken During the Project

Action	Brief Description
Action A	The SURG-Ed project is implemented by a team of student and staff volunteers who collaborate in all decisions and actions.
Action B	<p>Students in the team are being guided and supported to carry out focus groups with their peers at RCSI (completed) and Stellenbosch University (forthcoming). The focus group sessions allowed us to collect meaningful feedback from the student participants about gaps in current research training and opportunities, desired skills and topics to be covered in the proposed module, and expected outcomes from participating in the research module. The feedback included the preferred methods and levels of engagement with medical students from the counterpart university in the future.</p> <p>This activity also enables students in the team to learn new skills – developing topic guides, running focus groups and report writing, and working with experienced researchers.</p>
Action C	The project team engaged with senior academics and researchers at Stellenbosch University to share preliminary findings. A roadmap for developing a collaborative global surgery research module has been agreed upon.
Action D	In the coming months, the team will advance development of the curriculum content through an engagement process involving experts, students, and other stakeholders from both the Global North and South.
Action E	The new global surgery research skills module will be launched in 2024.

Reflections on Engagement

Students working hand-in-hand with the IGS staff in this project:

- Play a major role in the design of a teaching curriculum that reflects their needs and career aspirations.
- Build their research methods capacity by participating in dedicated training sessions on the conduct of focus groups and subsequently leading the research undertakings.
- Have the opportunity to play a key role in contributing to the ethos and mission of the institute and, in so doing, develop a deeper insight into issues in global surgery which can be life-changing for them.
- Expanding their knowledge of teaching and learning pedagogies in higher education.
- Gaining experience as leaders or 'change agents', enhancing their confidence as well as broadening their communication, management, collaboration and research skills.
- Improving their personal and professional networking opportunities within the wider student, academic and professional communities around the world.
- Improving their writing skills leading on project reporting under the supervision of senior researchers.

Participation in the project is beneficial for IGS staff in strengthening the efficiency and impact of their engagement with students.

At the institutional level, by providing students with a forum to shape upcoming educational initiatives, the quality and pertinence of such initiatives can be enhanced. Based on the voiced needs of the students, a global surgery research module could provide an opportunity to develop critical research skills essential for their future careers as practitioners. By incorporating hands-on research exercises and assignments, students can gain practical experience in study design, data analysis, and interpretation of results.

Further, the proposed module will foster interdisciplinary and cross-cultural understanding among medical students in two diverse settings. The module will allow students to collaborate with researchers and future clinicians from different backgrounds. This will enable them to appreciate the challenges and opportunities of working in a multicultural team and develop effective communication skills across cultural boundaries.

This project may serve as an example of how to incorporate student feedback and ideas into curriculum building, facilitating improvements in the quality and relevance of the material. This can enhance the overall learning experience for RSCI students and improve their engagement and satisfaction. The experience from this project can inform other initiatives to bring the educational offering closer to the students' needs.

In the case of a complex project like ours, involving international collaborations, some operational challenges occurred, related mainly to differences in time zones and in the academic schedule of the students from the Global North and South. This has led to some minor delays and increased workload for both the students and staff involved. Careful planning ahead of undertaking activities is therefore required considering such challenges (e.g. setting up meetings well in advance, flexibility in time schedules, proactive problem solving). Nevertheless, the commitment of the team enabled the project to be completed successfully and there was great enthusiasm for this initiative in both student bodies.

References

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