

Electives as a Pedagogical Strategy for Fostering Medical Student Engagement and Exploration beyond the Standard Medical Curriculum

Dias, N.W.G.L.T.L., Karunathilake, I. M., Hettiarachchi, D., de Abrew, A., Amarasiri, M.M.P.L.

Introduction

Revamping a medical curriculum at a pace parallel to the development of medicine is an unattainable goal. Academic institutions consistently encounter difficulties in determining the appropriate content to include or exclude during curriculum development, given the vast expansion of core medical knowledge and the emergence of new medical disciplines (Harden et al., 1984). Standard medical curricula typically consist of fixed courses, often leave little room for students to meticulously study subjects of particular interest (Harden et al., 1984).

The incorporation of electives within the medical curriculum addresses this issue as it facilitates self-directed learning, allowing students to customize learning experiences to meet their diverse needs and personal interests in the ever-evolving field of medicine (Ramalho et al., 2020). Elective components provide significant benefits, as they enable students to broaden their perspectives beyond the confines of the standard curriculum (Lumb & Murdoch-Eaton., 2014). This engagement allows them to participate in activities that can shape their future careers and identify persistent issues within healthcare systems, ultimately seeking innovative solutions (Harden et al., 1984).

The Faculty of Medicine, University of Colombo transitioned from a traditional discipline-based curriculum to a more integrated and student-centered approach in 1995.

Faculty of Medicine, University of Colombo, Sri Lanka.

Corresponding author: Mr. N.W.L.G.T.L. Dias
Email: diaz94tl.physio@gmail.com

Teaching and learning activities were thus modified to incorporate methods that more actively engage students (Karunathilake et al., 2006).

As part of these reforms, the Faculty introduced a 4-week electives programme to the undergraduate medical curriculum, making it the first institution in South Asia to implement such an initiative. Over the past thirty years, this program has consistently provided students with a distinctive and enriching learning experience.

Structure of the Electives Programme

The Electives Committee of the Faculty is responsible for all aspects of the electives programme. This Committee comprises a panel of faculty-affiliated academics who are experts in various fields of medicine. Students commence the electives programme prior to the onset of the final year “Professorial” rotation during the 14th term of the curriculum. Students are first required to submit a proposal that includes the topic, a brief introduction, learning objectives, and planned activities for the four weeks. They have the autonomy to select a topic of their interest, which need not be directly related to health. They are encouraged to discuss potential topics with peers, senior students, and review previous electives to avoid redundancy.

Students are then responsible for selecting a supervisor with relevant expertise to guide them. They are expected to discuss the proposals and learning objectives with the supervisors, ensuring that these objectives are realistic, achievable and provide sufficient deep



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