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A Qualitative Study on the Experiences of Clinical Accompaniment among Nursing Distance Learners

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Abstract

Clinical accompaniment is essential to provide nursing students with a foundation to apply to practice. This study aimed to explore the e-PJJ nursing students' perception regarding their clinical accompaniment during their clinical placement. This qualitative phenomenology study was conducted using in-depth interviews and focus group discussion among eleven Bachelor of Nursing (e-PJJ) students. This study revealed three themes: *Supervision in Clinical Placement; Student-centered Learning, and Feeling Stress as a Distance Learner*. The need for clinical accompaniment among e-PJJ students was minimal, but they required written guidelines to facilitate them during a clinical attachment.

Keywords: Experience, clinical accompaniment, distance learners, qualitative study.

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1.0 Introduction

Clinical accompaniment is one of the essential parts of training nursing students. It is an essential aspect of nursing education since it helps integrate theory and practice. The e-PJJ students taking Critical Care Nursing as their elective code are required to have their clinical placement in the Intensive Care Unit (ICU). These students are all registered nurses with a minimum of 3 years of working experience. They are considered adult students, and they are expected to be more independent in providing nursing care to patients.

Being separated and far away from the nursing lecturer, the e-PJJ students might face many difficulties or problems during their clinical placement. One of the primary factors contributing to the student nurse's perceived lack of clinical skill was their supernumerary status. Many studies revealed that undergraduate nursing students need full supervision during clinical practice. However, a limited study among distance learners nursing students in Malaysia has been found. Thus, this study aimed to explore the Bachelor of Nursing (e-PJJ) students' experience of clinical accompaniment as distance learners. The research objective was to determine their perception regarding their clinical accompaniment during Intensive Care Nursing (ICU) clinical placement.

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2.0 Literature Review

Nursing Students' Experiences of Clinical Accompaniment during ICU Placement

Intensive care education is expensive and time-consuming as it produces students who have the skills standards and high boxes are on par with what is expected by the health staff and the students themselves. To ensure that the students are at par and able to deal with the health care process, the standards set are essential and must be observed by all parties. The students involved with critical care training are made up of graduate students undergoing training in expertise. Through more structured supervision and comprehensive comments, the supervisors' improved credentials benefited the students' learning (Irene Sommer et al., 2020).

Typically, trainees are exposed to the actual situation in intensive care in a state where they have a minimal preparation rate. It puts pressure on the students other than posing a high risk for managing patient safety at dangerous levels. The low inventory has resulted in the focus on teaching and teaching resources for the equipment itself.

Students' social contacts in the learning process were limited by distance education (Langegård, Kiani, Nielsen, et al., (2021). In distance education, teacher and student are separated by a distance of place or time (Moore & Kearsley, 1996). The students are separated from other students, and the learning resources are the norm for regular college students. Physical distance should be supported by a communication medium that will facilitate information delivery and access to reference materials and even provide an adequate opportunity and good interaction between teachers and students.

Several studies showed that clinical practice during the ongoing learning process is essential to ensure a successful learning process (Papp et al., 2003 & Seacomb, 2008). For example, Holmström and Larsson (2005) say that although 40% of the course content consists of practical training, nursing students still need more theoretical courses and focus on practical training. Some studies also emphasize the importance of clinical placement to be a real nurse. For example, Anderson and Kiger (2008) show that this placement is essential in helping to prepare students to serve as registered practitioners, for example, in learning the care management process, enhancing their knowledge and experience.

3.0 Methodology

This study was carried out using a Phenomenology Qualitative Study Design, which allows for a deep understanding of a phenomenon by exploring it from those who have experienced it (Teherani et al., 2015). The interpretive phenomenological research design was used to explore, describe and interpret the meaning of the critical care nursing students' experiences with clinical accompaniment in e-PJJ. The phenomenological approach used in this study aligns with Heidegger's interpretive approach.

This study was conducted through in-depth interviews and focus group discussions among eleven (11) students in year three at the Faculty of Health Sciences, UiTM Puncak Alam Campus. A semi-structured question was used in this study as an interview guide. The session began with the researchers briefly introducing themselves and briefly explaining the interview's objective. Then the open-ended plus probing questions were asked to initiate the conversation until data was saturated. Data reach saturation within a narrow range of interviews (9 to 17) or focus group discussions (4 to 8), particularly those with relatively homogenous study populations and narrowly defined objectives (Monique Hennink & Bonnie, 2021). Further exploration focused on the main topic, such as their experiences regarding clinical accompaniment and challenges during clinical placement in the ICU.

The recorded interviews were transcribed verbatim manually using thematic analysis. The process involved repetitive reading and careful line-by-line analysis of the manuscripts. First, each sentence was coded; then, similar codes were grouped to be the emergent themes with similar messages. We continued the process until there were no newer themes discovered. Discussions were done between team members over any disagreement on the themes or content. The final read of the articles was done to ensure that the theme represented the participants' general information. The interview stopped at the 11th participant as data was already saturated. Table 1 shows the coding used in this study.

Table 1: Coding of the Study

Code	Explanation
P1	Participant 1
P2	Participant 2
P3	Participant 3
P4	Participant 4
P5	Participant 5
P6	Participant 6
P7	Participant 7
P8	Participant 8
P9	Participant 9
P10	Participant 10
P11	Participant 11

(Source: Study Sampling)

4.0 Findings

Eleven female students participated in this study. All of them are married, except two of them are still single. They are all registered nurses with working experience ranging from 5 to 20 years. Most of them are working in ICU and CCU as staff nurses. Three themes and subthemes emerged from the analyses, as shown in Table 2. The results will be further explained in the discussion section.

Table 2. Themes and Subthemes

Themes	Subthemes
1. Supervision in Clinical Placement.	- Minimal supervision need during clinical placement.
2. Student-centered Learning.	- Lecturer's support in facilitating the students.
	- Students' personal and professional development.
3. Feeling Stress as a Distance Learner.	- Coping with stress.

(Source: Study Interview)

5.0 Discussion

5.1 Theme 1: Supervision in Clinical Placement

Supervision in the clinical placement area is crucial to ensure students integrate theory and practice into competent nursing care for the clients. Bernard and Goodyear (1998) defined *supervision* as an intervention provided by a senior member of a profession to a junior member or members of that same profession. Thus, this can be applied to supervising nursing during their clinical placement.

Nursing students need to be supervised in the clinical area to ensure they practice procedures with safe and competent skills. However, as e-PJJ nursing students, being registered nurses with ICU post-basics gave them the advantage of being independent compared to those full-time students who still do not have working experience and are unregistered as staff nurses. Therefore, the e-PJJ nursing students have some autonomy to perform procedures during clinical practice. Unfortunately, though, their supernumerary status as students sometimes resulted in some difficulties being there without clinical accompaniment by clinical staff.

5.1.1 Subtheme 1: Minimal Supervision Need during Clinical Placement

The participants need minimal guidance from ward sisters and senior staff nurses in the clinical field. They believed that they were mature enough to be in the clinical area even without direct supervision from CI. It is proved by this statement from the participants in Figure 1:

"They knew that I work in CCU, so we were given opportunity to in charge patient, and we have to do all what they are doing". (P1)

"I do have post basic in ICU, so I guess our experience in clinical practice is not a problem". (P3)

"but we are as e-PJJ students, we do not have CI, so I referred to the ward sister. Because if anything concerning the clinical practice, I would ask her". (P3)

Figure 1: Quotation from participants

(Source: Study Interview)

Based on our understanding, from all the statements made by the participants, she revealed that the e-PJJ nursing students could be in the clinical practice area without direct supervision from the lecturer or even CI as they are all staff nurses who have been working for quite some time in their working place. So, they do not need to be supervised directly as the unregistered nursing students do. The e-PJJ students are all adults who are assumed to be independent and self-directed learners. They can take responsibility for identifying what they wish to learn, and they have some self-concept in their minds that need to be sharpened by the guidance of the lecturer's learning facilitator. According to Novotny (2000), critical-care nursing students have a changed perspective from postponed knowledge to immediate application, and they are interested in how the knowledge can be applied to clinical practices.

The participants claimed they need a person they can talk to or discuss when they face some problems or issues regarding clinical assignments or report writing. In addition, they need someone to facilitate them in doing the given tasks by the respective lecturers. Contrary, the research results were done by Mntambo (2009) revealed that the participant (student nurses) in the study needed supervision during their practice in clinical settings to acquire the necessary knowledge and competence to become competent professional nurses. However, the participants claimed that they were insufficiently supervised during clinical supervision when required to perform procedures on patients.

5.2 Theme 2: Student-Centered Learning

Student-centred learning is accepted as one of the teaching and learning process approaches. According to Collins and O'Brien (2003), as cited by Froyd and Simpson (n.d), this learning model places the student (learner) in the centre of the learning process. The instructor provides students with opportunities to learn independently and from one another and coaches those in the skills they need to do so effectively.

In the e-PJJ mode of study, the effectiveness of clinical accompaniment is direct to the extent to which the lecturer can empower students and meet the clinical outcomes. Adult learners should be the key player in their own study needs in the student-centred learning process. The students should be given some authority over their study system. Brown et al. (2005) and Barret (2007) highlighted that the role of the lecturer in the regulation and students is unclear and not uniform. The lecturer's role is to facilitate the learning process, but the

main engine to make it work is the students themselves. To ensure that the students understand and are familiar with what they need to go through and are expected to do, the lecturers need to fulfil their roles in facilitating the students throughout the study period.

5.2.1 Subtheme 1: Lecturer's Support in Facilitating the Students

Lecturer's support is essential in running the e-PJJ program. The lecturer must show their commitment to facilitating students' learning process. The respective lecturer should provide feedback regarding students' performances to show their commitment. So, the students could improve their work from the specific comments and suggestions given by the lecturer. According to Nurtjahja and Lahur (2002), concerning written feedback, 76% of student-respondents preferred to have feedback that identified the exact errors and also provided suggestions, while only a few of them (17.7%) preferred to have a general comment. The student-respondents claimed that sometimes the general comment does not work effectively as often they do not know what the lecturers are asking for or trying to explain (Nurtjahja & Lahur, 2002). By identifying detailed errors and providing suggestions, they will be able to figure out their mistakes and improve the quality of their assessments in the future.

This study revealed that particular lecturers gave less student input and feedback. Some lecturers gave group work or initiated online discussions but were slow in giving responses or feedback to the students. The participants also expressed that they need to know lecturers' feedback on their group work, presentation, or written assignments. Levy et al. (2009) stated that adult learners value feedback as one of the components used to evaluate their progress. Students who do not meet the standard should be guided, whereas, for students who meet or exceed the standard, the lecturer should praise them (Levy et al., 2009). Lecturers should guide and nurture students to the highest ability that they can be. The participants expressed their feeling of disappointment, as shown in Figure 2.

"We have covered all topics in syllabus during presentations. The lecturer has to give some guidance. We were wondering whether we have presented the right thing". (P7)

"Like us, we teach ourselves, we have presented the topic that what we need to cover. Also, we learned from our friends. But we have not received any comment to tell that what else that we need to know regarding the topics" (P5)

"Yes. Sometimes the feedback response was late. For instance, when I replied the online discussion, the next week then I got the feedback. I need immediate feedback but I have to wait". (P4)

"We understand that lecturer is busy. But sometimes we need the lecturer involvement in our discussion. (P5)

Figure 2: Quotation from participants
(Source: Study Interview)

The students in this study expressed that they need guidance and support from the lecturers to ensure they are on the right study track. Reilly and Oerman (2000) mentioned that to lead learners to self-directed learning, the lecturer must be supportive enough to encourage independence and self-reliance in the learning process. The students then experienced personal and professional development throughout the learning process as they became more mature as time passed by.

5.2.2 Subtheme 2: Students' Personal and Professional Development

Nursing students' personal and professional development is essential to prepare them for future leadership. The students who participated in this study stated that the e-PJJ nursing program indirectly groomed their personal and professional development. Therefore, the lecturer should continuously monitor students' development throughout the study time. The participants self-reflected revealed that they have improved English, increased knowledge, and self-confidence. The report of the students is displayed in Figure 3.

"For me, I improved much in English language. In term of management I felt confident as I read and write in English. Before this, I haven't read English book, since I joined UiTM I have to read". (P3)

"For me, maybe English language also [laughed]. Because the exam was in English. Previously in UKM was dwilanguage and we can choose. But now fully English. Even in the ward we have to use English during conversation". (P4)

"I improved in self-confident. Especially during presentation, I felt nervous but we have learned how to overcome that situation. So I have got that improvement". (P7)

Figure 3: Quotation from participants
(Source: Study Interview)

According to Ayu Rita and Nadia Dalila (2008), English can have a debilitating effect and influence students' adaptation to the target environment and, ultimately, their educational goals. There is also agreement that anxiety is related to performance (Balachandran & Skully, 2004; Tobias & Everson, 1997) and that anxiety has been shown to have a debilitating effect on learning and achievement.

Based on our observation during the interview session, the participant giggled and laughed when they said they had improved in English. The students might felt embarrassed when they talked and revealed the truth about themselves. Based on the study by Ayu Rita and Nadhia Dalila (2008), feeling shy, nervous, or panicky also contributes to one of the causes of speaking English anxiety among students. Most participants admitted that their knowledge level increased since they joined the e-PJJ nursing program. However, becoming a quality nurse requires more mastery of knowledge. According to Benner et al. (2010), the process of transformation into professional nursing is applying the knowledge into evidence-based practice.

When the students have mastered the English language competently and increased their knowledge level, they indirectly increase self-confidence. Increased self-confidence and empowerment are related to improved motivation for learning and a better outlook on a situation (Bradbury-Jones et al., 2011). When students have a higher sense of self-confidence about their skills, they are more likely to think of them as necessary in nursing care and have an increased commitment to using them (Clark, Owen & Tholcken, 2004). These three elements become the strength of undergraduate e-PJJ students to enhance their personality and professionalism as nurses. Then they become role models for the rest of the nursing community to pursue their studies and, at the same time, improve the quality of nursing care.

5.3 Theme 3: Feeling Stress as a Distance Learner

Nursing is known as a stressful profession. Nurses who further study in e-PJJ may have increased stress levels due to all the academic and clinical workload. What more if they have a family commitment. Floyd (2010) found that training for a career in the nursing profession is associated with significant demands, such as learning large amounts of new knowledge, various assessments, and the burden of human life responsibility. The participant gave these statements during in-depth interviews:

"The reason of tired. Your brain is tired. Yes, by clinical posting, how to write the portfolio, with the family, like I cannot cope anymore". (P5)

"You know, because I worked in ICU for management reasons, I have done staff rostering, I have 153 staff. I have to make the roster alone. So, it is without doubt every week I have to do roster. Some more, I have to do the assignments". (P3)

"As for me, aa, it was stressful, because when we practical and wanted to start writing, what am I going to write? To do assignments was very stressful right, it's stress". (P9)

Figure 4: Quotation from participants regarding feeling stress as a distance learner
(Source: Study Interview)

The students' main stressors are no leisure time with family and self with the overwhelming burden. According to the participants, with all assignments, portfolio, presentation, work, and family responsibilities, most of the time, they felt burnout. They need to manage time appropriately to run everything smoothly without conflict. However, they could not have done that without their spouse's and immediate family's support. According to Schuemer (1993), which is cited by Gottschalk (1993), many older distance-education students have jobs and families. Therefore, they must coordinate the different areas of their lives which influence each other, their families, jobs, spare time, and studies.

5.3.1 Subtheme: Coping with stress

Coping with stress is one of the proactive approaches to preventing distress. An individual's coping ability is an inherent quality that may influence an individual's response to stress. Ramkumar et al. (2011) explained that individuals might vary in response to the same stress. Therefore, the coping ability of an individual may influence the stress response.

The study by Ramkumar et al. (2011) found that females tend to have a poorer coping ability to perceive stress. Compounded by the higher level of perceived stress, 22 females may be more prone to morbidities as a result of Stress. Thus, an individual's coping ability becomes very important in responding to stress. The participants of this study are all female. The results may be that almost every student reported being stressed with their study. However, according to them, they can still cope with Stress by doing some activities to reduce stress. Examples of students coping with stress as displayed in Figure 5.

"Yes! I love to go for holidays. I want to take leave and bring my family for vacation when I am done. This motivates me to continue my works". (P5)

"my style is, I often go for window shopping [laugh]. Walking around and then go back home. At night, I will sleep early and wake up early. It works. (P4)

Figure 5: Quotation from participants regarding coping with stress
(Source: Study Interview)

6.0 Conclusion & Recommendations

This project explored perception regarding clinical accompaniment during ICU clinical placement among nursing distance learners. We found that the e-PJJ nursing students need minimal clinical accompaniment during their clinical placement in the ICU as they are all registered nurses. The limitation of this study, it was conducted only among female students as no male students were available during the data collection period. If there were male participants in this study, the researcher would conduct different focus interviews, and the results could be compared with the female participants. It is recommended that a sizeable mix-method study be conducted in other nursing institutions among both genders to explore any different perceptions between male and female students. Also, the guidelines should be developed to facilitate students during clinical placement.

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Paper Contribution to Related Field of Study

This study contributed to the body of knowledge that could be used to enhance the management of nursing students during a clinical placement in health center / organizations.

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