

Exploring Socio-Emotional Conflict and Challenges in Open and Distance Learning Among Post-Registration Nursing Students

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Abstract

In the dynamic landscape of nursing education, continuous professional development is imperative for nurses to stay current and relevant. This study investigated open and distance learning, specifically examining socio-emotional conflicts and challenges faced by post-registration nursing students at Open University Malaysia (OUM). With integrated e-learning becoming a cornerstone in nursing education in Malaysia, this pilot study aimed to shed light on the intricate aspects of socio-emotional dynamics in this unique learning environment. Conducted as a qualitative phenomenological study, the research engaged six participants through in-depth semi-structured interviews. Three overarching themes emerged from the data: the benefits of online classes, the delicate balance in managing workload, and the crucial role of peer support. The participants highlighted the flexibility and accessibility of online classes as advantageous, allowing working nurses to engage in ongoing professional development while navigating their demanding schedules. However, the study also unearthed challenges, including the intricate juggling act of managing academic responsibilities alongside professional commitments. The significance of robust peer support mechanisms surfaced as a key factor in mitigating the socio-emotional conflicts experienced by post-registration nursing students. This pilot study contributes valuable insights into the limited knowledge surrounding the socio-emotional conflicts and challenges nursing students face in open and distance learning environments. By identifying key themes, the research opens avenues for understanding the unique dynamics at play within OUM. The findings have potential implications for developing targeted interventions and support mechanisms tailored to the specific needs of post-registration nursing students engaged in open and distance learning. These can ultimately enhance the overall educational experience and foster a lifelong learning culture in nursing.

Keywords: challenges, educational technology, nursing education, online learning, Open and Distance Learning, post-registration, socio-emotional, technological frames

1. Introduction

The integration of digital technology into education is on the rise, replacing traditional learning with online alternatives (Khasada & Hongguang, 2018; Sprenger & Schwaninger, 2021; Ronzhina et al., 2021). The shift towards online learning, also known as e-learning, has significantly impacted the overall learning landscape, prompting numerous comparative studies on online and traditional university classrooms (Northey et al., 2015; Southard et al., 2015). In nursing, professional development necessitates the acquisition of skills fostering continuous and lifelong learning, often in the absence of structured formal

education programmes (Pool et al., 2015; Mlambo et al., 2021). Information technologies and the Internet have transformed the educational landscape globally, enabling rapid and widespread learning. The rapid advancements in information and communication technology (ICT) drive the unprecedented revolution occurring in educational institutions worldwide. Despite the numerous advantages of online education, a considerable number of students struggle to complete their studies online, and the underlying reasons remain poorly understood. Statistics reveal significant challenges faced by nursing students in pursuing their studies, emphasising the need for further investigation into the challenges associated with the successful implementation of fully online courses. In the Malaysian scenario, this is of considerable importance in order to enable a greater number of post-registration nursing students to commit to lifelong learning study opportunities without compromising their professional commitments.

Open University Malaysia (OUM), established over two decades ago as Malaysia's pioneering open and distance learning institution, has continuously offered high-quality online curricula. Leveraging its proprietary learning management system, myINSPIRE, OUM stands as an educational technology trailblazer. With my INSPIRE, students can access e-learning resources, including modules, learning kits, video lectures, digital library materials, online activities (such as H5P-rich content) and quizzes, all using various devices at their own pace. The asynchronous online environment enables continuous interaction with teachers and peers through supervised discussion forums that are available around the clock. Responding to the challenges posed by the COVID-19 outbreak, OUM has transitioned entirely to online learning after two decades of utilising a blended instructional approach. This transition reflects increasing enrolment numbers, diverse teaching styles, and the rapid evolution of technology, surpassing our understanding of the factors driving technology acceptance and use. Given the ever-changing landscape of their profession, nurses are now required to stay abreast of industry advancements, efficiently utilise essential information technologies, and demonstrate adaptability.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Technological Frames

Worldwide, the educational landscape has been profoundly reshaped by the incorporation of digital technologies such as artificial intelligence (AI), virtual reality (VR), and other emerging technologies (Burbules et al., 2020; Guan et al., 2020; Spieth et al., 2021). Educational technology uses a variety of terms like online learning, e-learning, web-based learning, computer-supported learning, computer-assisted learning, virtual learning, and distance learning to describe technology-enhanced learning environments (Dağhan & Gündüz, 2022; Rhim & Han, 2020). Hence, the researchers consider it important to investigate the concept of educational technology based on *technological frames*, which encapsulate the assumptions, expectations, and knowledge that people use to understand the use and impact of technology (Kaplan & Tripsas, 2008). Orlikowski and Gash (1994) initially developed the concept of the technological frame analysis, focusing on exploring the assumptions, interpretations, and expectations that individuals have regarding technology. As a concept, defining technology is challenging because of its dynamic nature that is constantly evolving and expanding due to advances in society, culture, aesthetics, and science (Carroll, 2017). Technological frames thus act as perceptual lenses, through which we interpret the actions of others and our environment, helping us to understand the continuously changing technological landscape. In their early work, Orlikowski and Gash (1994) pinpointed various critical themes associated with technology. These themes covered aspects such as the "nature of technology," which looks at its capabilities and functions, "technology strategy," which addresses the strategic thinking involved in its deployment, including underlying motivations and visions, and "technology in use," which refers to the concrete results derived from its application and operation.

2.2. e-Learning Challenges

e-Learning, a web-based system rooted in digital technologies, aims to provide students with an open, learner-centred, personalised, enjoyable, supportive, and interactive learning environment ((El-Sabagh, 2021; Rodrigues et al., 2019). Adult learners in online distance education face challenges categorised as

internal, external, and programme-related, as identified in few literature review (De Paepe et al., 2018; Smith & Mehmet, 2019) encompassing 36 key journals in distance education. These challenges form the basis for investigating the challenges faced by the participants in this study.

2.3. Technical Hurdles

Global adoption of ICT in universities has enhanced the quality, sustainability, accessibility, and delivery of education, particularly in developing countries (Latchem, 2018; Sharma et al., 2021; Wu, 2016). Despite the positive impact of ICT-based innovations, barriers persist, including limited access to necessary technologies and resources such as laptops and Internet plans and bandwidth, which hinder the participation of students from remote areas (Chillemi et al., 2020; Das et al., 2021). Technological factors, including suitable software and hardware, significantly influence e-learning outcomes, emphasising the need to thoroughly examine technological readiness (Bhuasiri et al., 2012; Das et al., 2021).

2.4. Socio-Emotional Challenges

Online learning, often perceived as less interactive than traditional methods, nevertheless provides cost-effective and convenient educational opportunities. However, learners face challenges like insufficient support from families and workplaces (Bali & Liu, 2018). Working adult students at OUM, who often have to assume multiple roles in their lives, may experience stress without the proper support. Motivation is crucial; learners lacking self-motivation and independence may struggle in online courses (Fletcher, & Sarkar, 2012). Communication-related challenges, including inadequate interaction with instructors, the absence of face-to-face socialisation, and the need for structured communication in virtual classrooms, contribute to the complexity of online learning (Zhong et al., 2020; Abaid et al., 2021). At OUM, forums in the myINSPIRE platform are designed to facilitate discussion and reduce feelings of isolation and loneliness. This pilot study aims to explore the socio-emotional conflict and challenges faced by nursing students at OUM.

3. Research Method

3.1. Study Design and Setting

In this pilot study, the researchers followed the phenomenological method outlined by Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-step framework (Braun & Clarke, 2012; Sandler et al., 2019). A thematic analysis aims to identify themes (Braun & Clarke, 2006), i.e., patterns in the data that are important or interesting, and subsequently use these themes to address the research or say something about an issue. This is much more than simply summarising the data; a good thematic analysis interprets and makes sense of it (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Braun & Clarke, 2012; Sandler et al., 2019). The researchers' goal was to explore socio-emotional conflict and challenges experienced by nursing students at OUM.

3.2. Procedure and Participants

The participants in this study were post-registration nursing students from the Bachelor of Nursing Science with Honours (BNS) programme. These were the inclusion criteria: (a) active students in the BNS programme, (b) nurses who served as medical front-liners during the COVID-19 pandemic, and (c) students who registered between the January 2020 and January 2023 semesters. This group of nursing students were affected by the COVID-19 pandemic outbreak when their nursing education shifted to a fully online approach. Using purposive sampling, this phenomenological study selected six post-registration nursing students from the programme (one male and five females). Hence, in this study, the researchers' intention was to obtain in-depth information from each participant. The interviews were discontinued when data saturation was reached, in accordance with the Braun and Clarke methodology (Table 1).

The OUM's Ethical Approval Committee approved this pilot study.

3.3. Data Collection

In-depth and semi-structured interviews were used to collect information. The interview questions were constructed based on the purpose of the study. The three main questions were: (a) Kindly share your online class experiences during COVID-19, (b) How did you feel when the OUM hybrid mode shifted to a fully online mode? and (c) What do the challenges of these online classes look like to you now?

The researchers also asked additional questions based on the information provided by the nursing students in order to prompt more profound feedback, such as “How so?”, “Can you tell me more about ...?”, “What do you mean when you said ...?”. Interviews were conducted by one researcher (RAB) and checked by another (YBL). In order to ensure data validity and accuracy, both RAB and YBL checked the transcripts and coding process. On average, each interview lasted between 30 to 90 minutes. Privacy and anonymity were maintained throughout the process. All participants were coded accordingly. All interviews were recorded and transcribed. The Braun and Clarke six-phase framework used in the thematic analysis comprised the following steps: (a) become familiar with the data, (b) generate initial codes, (c) search for themes, (d) review themes, (e) define themes, and (f) write-up (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

Table 1. Braun and Clarke’s six-phase framework for conducting a thematic analysis

Braun and Clarke’s six-phase framework	
Step 1:	Become familiar with the data
Step 2:	Generate initial codes
Step 3:	Search for themes
Step 4:	Review themes
Step 5:	Define themes
Step 6:	Write-up

3.4. Trustworthiness of the Study

The trustworthiness of this study was based on Lincoln and Guba’s method (Speziale et al., 2011), which involves the following: credibility, dependability, transferability, and confirmability. A trusted rapport and relationship were established with the participants to examine this pilot study's validity. The participants’ responses were reported verbatim. Both RAB and YBL’s suggestions were checked throughout the research process. The interviews’ “thick description” and notes that included rich descriptive data drove the researchers’ data credibility and transferability. Likewise, peer checking provided the dependability of the data.

4. Findings and Discussion

4.1. Demographic Information and Emergent Themes

Table 2 outlines the participants' demographic details, while Table 3 presents three principal themes and nine subthemes derived from their extensive interviews.

Table 2. Characteristics of the participants (n=6)

Characteristic	n (%)
Gender	
Male	1 (16.67)
Female	5 (83.33)
Marital Status	
Single	1 (16.67)
Married	5 (83.33)
Widowed	0

Characteristic	n (%)
Shifts	
Yes	2 (3.33)
No	4 (6.67)

Table 3. Major themes and subthemes of a nursing student’s socio-emotional conflict and challenges at OUM

Major themes	Subthemes
Benefits of online classes	Flexibility
	Good platform: myINSPIRE
	Nurture young family
	Financial benefits
Juggling with life commitments	Juggling with workload
	Time management
	Coping
Good peer support	Friends outside the classroom cycle
	Good online peer interaction

4.2. Benefits of Online Classes

The positive aspects of online classes emerged as significant elements in the socio-emotional challenges faced by post-registration nursing students at OUM. Notably, the benefits of asynchronous online classes were recognised even before the onset of the Covid-19 pandemic. However, the impact of synchronous online classes during the pandemic was particularly profound for nursing students.

Participant F described the convenience of weekly classes, especially for individuals with demanding work schedules and shift duties. This hallmark of online learning provided flexibility, enabling students to access recorded (asynchronous) sessions if they happen to miss live synchronous ones. All six participants unanimously agreed that revisiting offline recordings significantly aided their studies and fostered deeper understanding, as emphasised by Participant A.

“... because the classes only once a week ... only on Saturday ... got to work, got to go for a meal again, then want to rest again ... can at home even that's why it's an ease for us ... While eating can even go to class. No need to busy travelling ... we work shift duty, very busy!” – Participant F

“... by watching the recording again and again, make me understand more.” – Participant A

Participant C echoed this sentiment, highlighting the opportunity to care for her daughter while listening to recorded sessions. OUM's innovative learning management system, myINSPIRE, further facilitated online classes. With the option of attending live synchronous sessions via Google Meet or accessing offline asynchronous recordings, students could tailor class participation to their individual schedules, thereby saving on commuting and accommodation costs, as noted by Participant E.

“You can see the recording if you cannot attend the class. And, at the same time, I can take care of my little daughter ... when listening, you know!” – Participant C

“You know ... now, we no need to wake up so early anymore to travel, to be stuck in a traffic jams, to find parking ... Because nursing classes are only on Saturday ... but now, we save money so much already, to take a class at home, I mean ... Also, online examination is advantage to the student.” – Participant E

Furthermore, online examinations were considered advantageous, providing time and cost savings. All participants, including Participant B, appreciated the flexibility of not having to worry about attire for online classes.

“Save time ... I don't need to think what to wear because it is online classes.” – Participant B

All participants reported positive experiences with the myINSPIRE platform, praising its user-friendly interface, engaging features, and comprehensive e-learning resources. The forum within myINSPIRE

served as a valuable tool for communication with tutors and peers, fostering understanding and continuous discussions throughout the semester.

“myINSPIRE is very good. New version, I like. Getting interesting, getting colourful ... You can get everything there in myINSPIRE ... good e-lesson ...” – Participant D

“... forum has very close communication for us ...” – Participant C

“myINSPIRE? You also can use this chatbox. Can talk with tutor ... Also, when everybody discusses, more understanding ... The discussion can continue until the end of the semester ... that is very good for me ... Now we have online participation. One more thing, the forum is good. If you cannot communicate with the tutor in the live class, you can ask in the forum ...” – Participant E

“I guess we talk in the forum more, we understand the assignment more.” – Participant E

Moreover, Participant A added: *“We can find new friends in the forum too.”*

However, Participant B expressed a slightly negative experience with myINSPIRE, suggesting an opportunity for improvement in technical support and responsiveness.

“I think, you know, the University needs to improve a bit on the technical support ... Sometimes, not very friendly to use ... Also, sometimes, there is no response in the forum when asked questions. Anyway, I don't really rely on the forum.” – Participant B

4.3. Juggling with Life Commitments

Under the subtheme of juggling commitments, including workload, time management, and coping, participants provided varied feedback on the socio-emotional aspects of online learning.

Participant A highlighted the challenges of a five-hour time difference between Malaysia and Saudi Arabia (where they happen to be located) but acknowledged the ability to manage their studies thanks to shift duty. Conversely, Participant B found the classes manageable, given divided duty and minimal interference with work commitments.

“You know, we have a five-hour difference in Saudi, but is still okay for me ... I am shift duty ... Honestly it was very difficult at the time ... juggling.” – Participant A

“I am divided duty. So, it is okay for me ... The classes did not interfere with my work ... You see, we are always running out of time to work. The workload. A bit juggling, sometimes.” – Participant B

Several participants felt demoralised when dealing with time management challenges, with Participant C complaining of saturation and stress during busy periods. Even unmarried participants faced challenges, as noted by Participant E, who emphasised the importance of managing time for a better future.

“I am probably not good anymore in time management ... It is quite saturated and stressful again ... when time was busy, I mean. It is also time-consuming to scroll back ... to check many posted forums. – Participant C

Even as an unmarried person, Participant E spoke of juggling with life commitments:

“All right, challenges? I am single, so I don't have challenges arranging the kids ... but I try to manage my time. I want a better future pathway ... after this degree.” – Participant E

Participants with health-related issues, such as Participant F, faced unique challenges in balancing life and work during their studies. Financial coping was also emphasised by Participant F, who, without financial aid, relied solely on their salary, necessitating substantial savings.

“... all right, because I have congenital heart disease. Then, in 2019, I had open heart surgery, and they discovered that I had a pulmonary haemorrhage. So, I have to be intubated. Hmm, how am I going to recover from that situation? Pulmonary haemorrhage, you know, takes a long time to recover. I was very tired.” -- Participant F

Financial coping is also part and parcel of one candidate. Participant F voiced out:

“Another challenge for me. Yeah, financial. Because I didn't take PTPTN. I only have my salary. I do not take loan. So, you see, I got to save a lot.” -- Participant F*

*PTPTN refers to an educational loan offered by the Malaysian Government to students enrolled in academic programmes at higher education institutions in Malaysia.

4.4. Good Peer Support

In this pilot study, effective peer support emerged as a constructive response to the socio-emotional challenges of online learning. Participants acknowledged the value of peer assistance beyond the virtual classroom, particularly from colleagues in the workplace. Seeking help in understanding assignments and rubrics was a common practice, as illustrated by statements from Participants A, B, and F, respectively:

“I read both Malay and English. I don't understand the rubric at all ... at least when I asked some seniors, they are okay to explain to me.” -- Participant A

“I don't understand the rubric. At all. I was afraid to ask in online classes ... So, I asked others, then. After the class, of course ... Another thing, APA style is difficult for me. I used lots and lots of apps to do it. But they make me understand now.” -- Participant B

“When we have colleagues in the ward we support each other. We discuss ... on and on ... during the working time ... They make us understand how to do the assignment, especially.” -- Participant F

The impact of online peer support was evident in the positive experiences shared by the participants. Participant F expressed satisfaction with online peer discussions, emphasising their effectiveness in addressing various topics, including assignments. Participant E highlighted the social aspect of online peer discussions, emphasising the opportunity to forge new connections and friendships.

“Online peer discussion? Good. We discuss lots of things ... related to assignment too.” -- Participant F

“The OCP [online peer discussion], we make new friends.” -- Participant E

5. Discussion

In OUM's BNS programme, tutors are required to allocate 10 hours per subject for instructional purposes in one semester, and relevant study materials are uploaded on myINSPIRE. This platform serves as a hub for accessing subject-specific content, allowing the students to engage with tutors and peers. However, Kew and Tasir's (2021) study using content analysis indicated low cognitive engagement in online discussion forums, and Mariya et al. (2022) found that 75.9% of students cited the absence of in-person interactions as a major difficulty in online programmes. The intricacy of thought and intellectual stimulation are challenges students face in online courses, highlighting the importance of clear learning objectives for part-time tutors to guide students in taking responsibility for their education. Moreover, Chitra and Raj (2018) assert that online learning is practical for incorporating education into daily life, but Mukasa et al. (2021) reported poor time management among participants, contradicting the former claim. Financial constraints are significant among adult learners in online tertiary education in Malaysia, with Saedah and Yee (2019) finding that 54.3% cited lack of money as a major obstacle. This aligns with Ahmad's (2018) research, revealing nurses' distress over rising college costs as a barrier, especially for those unable to take time off work.

Even during the peak of the COVID-19 pandemic, this study discovered that post-registration nursing students at OUM remained motivated about their studies. Despite the challenges faced, they exhibited resilience, juggling multiple demands on their physical capabilities, personal resources, income, and time.

Coping strategies were employed to achieve balance and personal equilibrium, emphasising the importance of their socio-emotional capacity for successful learning and digital readiness (Naykki et al., 2014; Kamei & Harriott, 2020; Handel et al., 2020). While online learning offers benefits, Pramana et al. (2022) reported negative perceptions among students in Indonesia, where participants preferred face-to-face classes. Similarly, Goodwin et al. (2022) noted a preference for physical learning in their qualitative study involving student nurses in Ireland. Recommendations for optimising online learning include emphasising synchronous live sessions, incentivised learning, and ongoing formative informal assessment to maintain engagement.

This pilot study sheds light on socio-emotional aspects of post-registration nursing students at OUM, with online class benefits, juggling of life commitments, and peer support as key themes in its preliminary findings. The study emphasises the need for enhanced support and attention to the concerns surrounding the nursing workforce globally, especially in addressing workload challenges that can have an impact on time management. Chang et al.'s (2020) discussion on emotional intelligence among nurses underscores the significance of this study, revealing a significant association with demographic variables such as age and years of nursing experience.

6. Conclusion

This qualitative pilot study significantly contributes to the literature by introducing new insights into the relatively unexplored topic of socio-emotional conflicts and challenges faced by nursing students at OUM. This study suggested viable implications for the development of specific support interventions aimed at enhancing the educational experiences of post-registration nursing students enrolled in academic programmes conducted in the open and distance learning format. This is particularly pertinent as online education offers the potential to overcome barriers traditionally associated with conventional educational methods, enabling educators to extend their reach to a large number of students without being bound by geographical or temporal limitations. Such intervention strategies could include interactive modules, real-time virtual discussions, and personalised learning pathways that cater to individual student needs while accommodating their professional and personal commitments. These enhancements could alleviate some of the identified socio-emotional challenges and contribute to a more engaging and effective learning environment. Ultimately, embracing these new educational approaches could lead to more profound educational outcomes and better-prepared nursing professionals. This would mark a significant advancement in how nursing education is delivered at OUM, potentially setting a benchmark for similar programmes globally. As such, this study underlines the critical role that tailored, supportive educational interventions and innovative delivery methods play in the advancement of nursing education in an increasingly digital world.

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