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Clinical Internship Placement: Experiences from Final-Year Nursing Undergraduates during the COVID-19 Pandemic

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ABSTRACT

Clinical learning is essential for nursing students pursuing undergraduate studies to gain experience, skills and knowledge. Clinical internship placement for final-year nursing undergraduates can be stressful as they adapt to their new roles, responsibilities and environment. This study uses a qualitative phenomenological study to explore the experiences of final-year nursing undergraduates pursuing their Management Module Practicum in the Surgical Ward of Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia. Two (2) focus group discussions with eight (8) participants were conducted using semi-structured questions. Interviews were transcribed verbatim and thematic analysis was performed using ATLAS.ti Version 8 software. Eight (8) reflective writing submissions were analysed for data triangulation. Two (2) primary themes emerged in the analysis: the undergraduates' emotions before clinical placement and their adaptability to their new roles, responsibilities and environment. Results show that the undergraduates faced difficulties at their initial placement stage. Further understanding of their emotions and adaptability can facilitate the undergraduates' clinical learning.

Keywords: *Clinical learning, Internship clinical placement, Final-year nursing undergraduates, COVID-19 Pandemic*

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INTRODUCTION

Clinical learning is crucial for undergraduates pursuing nursing studies to develop new knowledge, skills and abilities (1,2). These students acquire clinical experience in various places as part of their curriculum requirements. Their clinical placement corresponds with the modules they enrol in their current semester, ensuring their clinical learning objectives can be achieved. For example, medical and surgical wards are often used as clinical placements because these wards provide the students with many clinical learning opportunities to acquire and practice various skills (3).

Nursing undergraduates must complete a minimum of 52 weeks of clinical placement, equivalent to 26 credit hours, before registering with the Malaysian Nursing Board (MNB) (4). This 52-week clinical placement covers various disciplines, including clinical management. This management module is usually offered to final-year students; it includes nursing theory and a nursing practicum. The module prepares students to face the working world eventually. For clinical management placements, the credit hours range between two (2) and four (4) credit hours, differing among the institutions (5)(6)(7). Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia (UKM) offers the Management Module Practicum with three (3) credit hours in the eighth semester of the final undergraduate year (8). The Management Module Practicum spans six (6) weeks, where the students are assigned to the surgical ward for three (3) weeks and the medical ward for the remaining weeks.

Final-year nursing undergraduates at UKM experience clinical placements as early as their first year of study. However, the Management Module Practicum differs as it requires the students to independently assume the role of a nurse. During the three (3) weeks of clinical placement, the students must interact with the clinical environment, including the nurses and patients in the surgical ward. Medical and surgical wards differ in ward routines and patient types. Patients admitted to the surgical ward usually require surgical intervention and pre-and post-operative care. As such, the students may find the Management Module Practicum stressful as they learn to adapt to their work, the ward culture and a new environment (9,10).

Previous studies indicate that final-year nursing undergraduates become stressed when caring for patients with complex care needs (10). They deal with highly emotional situations and make difficult decisions (11) while struggling with interpersonal interactions and communicating with other healthcare professionals. They strive for a positive working relationship with the ward staff (10). Nursing undergraduates enter the ward expecting to be able to work with everyone as a team; their lack of knowledge and various care skills make it a challenge (10,11).

When entering a clinical setting, these nursing undergraduates face numerous learning challenges (12). While learning is the main objective in clinical placement, it comes second to completing routine clinical work (10). Unsupportive clinical environments will likely disrupt clinical learning, leading to stress and anxiety among students (9,11,13). They affect students' clinical performance and competency to care for the patient (9). Hence, this study focuses on the three (3) weeks of the Management Module Practicum in the surgical ward to explore the undergraduates' learning experiences, observing their emotions and methods of adapting to their new roles, responsibilities and environment. It can assist them in future to embrace their job roles, apply nursing skills competently, and carry out their responsibilities precisely in critical areas like the surgical ward (13).

MATERIAL AND METHOD

A qualitative phenomenological approach was applied to this study to explore nursing undergraduates' experiences while pursuing their clinical internship placement. Focus group discussions were the primary method of data collection. Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia (UKM) served as the point of study. The Medical and Surgical Wards are the clinical internship placement for final-year nursing undergraduates at UKM. The clinical internship placement is where students shadow nurses to learn the profession's role and function; in UKM, it is known as Management Module Practicum (8). This module has three (3) credit hours, comprising one (1) week of theoretical lectures and six (6) weeks of clinical placement. Students are assigned to the surgical and medical wards for three (3) weeks each. This clinical practice exposes the students to a nurse's role in managing the ward as a team leader and delivering holistic nursing care to patients as an intervention, admission, and discharge nurse. Students must also document their patients' activities in their nursing reports and conduct shift work (8).

This study's approval came from the Research Ethics Committee, Faculty of Medicine [UKMPPI/111/8/JEP-2020-270]. Purposive sampling was the sampling technique to achieve this study's research objectives. The inclusion criteria for this study were final-year nursing undergraduates who completed the Management Module Practicum in the surgical ward before Malaysia invoked the Covid-19 Movement Control Order (MCO) in 2020. Nineteen (19) students met these inclusion criteria and were invited to participate in focus group discussions using Google Forms.

Out of nineteen (19) students, eleven (11) students responded; out of the eleven (11), five (5) students expressed interest in participating in this study. For the first session, one (1) student could not attend and instead scheduled for the second session. For the second session, the study participants were recruited in a snowball manner, where the study participants for the first session suggested the names of the participants for the second session. Three (3) participants were recruited through this method, giving their written consent. Study participants were then put into two (2) focus discussion groups designed by the researcher using the Microsoft Teams application. This study's researcher was the moderator, listener, observer and analyst. The focus group discussions followed; the same moderator conducted them to ensure consistency. Semi-structured questions were reviewed by the study's supervisory team members and used to guide the discussions. The study participants provided informed consent before the sessions began. The focus group discussions were conducted online and lasted about 90 minutes for each group. They were recorded for transcription purposes and for the researcher to review and identify important information. Video recording served as an auxiliary to record student expressions during the discussions and for instances where the audio quality turned out low.

The recordings were transcribed verbatim, and the transcriptions were sent to the students for member-checking to ensure accuracy. Data collection and analysis took place concurrently. Thematic analysis was performed using ATLAS.ti Version 8 software. The data reached saturation after the second focus group discussion, with no new themes emerging. For data triangulation, the eight (8) participants provided reflective writing that was analysed to add credibility to the primary data source. Reflective writing served as the students' reflections on their emotions, performance, and learning experience during the Management Module Practicum. Students submitted their writing weekly to the clinical instructors for review, totalling three (3) across the three (3) weeks of clinical posting at the surgical ward. External experts were invited to review the data coding process to improve analysis and identify areas that needed clarification to ensure the validity of the themes and sub-themes.

RESULTS

Participant Demographics

The participants were females aged 23 to 31 years old. One participant had a Diploma in Nursing (n = 1), while others enrolled with Matriculation certificates (n = 6) and Malaysian Higher School Certificates (STPM) (n = 1). All participants completed most of their clinical postings by the seventh semester. Table 1 displays the demographics of the participants.

Table 1: Characteristics of respondents

ID	Age	Gender	Level of education before entering the Degree program
FGD1P1	24	Female	Matriculation
FGD1P2	31	Female	Diploma
FGD1P3	24	Female	Matriculation
FGD1P4	23	Female	Matriculation
FGD2P1	23	Female	Matriculation
FGD2P2	24	Female	STPM
FGD2P3	24	Female	Matriculation
FGD2P4	24	Female	Matriculation

Two (2) significant themes were identified from the focus group discussions and substantiated in their reflective writings: (a) students' emotions before the clinical placement and (b) students' adaptability to their new roles, responsibilities and environment.

Theme 1: Students' Emotions Before the Clinical Placement

The students' new experiences triggered various emotions, likely fuelled by their miscalculation of the module's offerings. Their emotions before the clinical placement are categorised into three sub-themes: nervousness, fear and excitement. These sub-themes are explained below in detail.

Nervousness

Nervousness involves feeling worried, anxious or restless. All the students reported that they felt nervous before the Management Module Practicum. They became emotional and experienced the physical signs and symptoms of nervousness, such as cold and sweaty palms and restless sleep.

'Management posting... I have to manage from A to Z, so I think can I do all that?
... I feel nervous.'

(FGD2, Participant 4, Matriculation)

'Before entering the Management posting, I was nervous because I never had
experienced what kind of ward management was.'

(FGD2, Participant 1, Matriculation)

'Before that, as usual, I felt nervous ... scared, like I didn't sleep... Hah ... I slept...
(but) I thought a lot. What a cool hand! It's very nervous, I haven't entered the ward
yet but my hands are cold.'

(FGD1, Participant 4, Matriculation)

'In the first week, I felt a little nervous because I had not done management in the
ward for a long time.'

(Reflective writing (Gr.1), Participant 2, Diploma Holder)

It indicates that the students feel nervous when a situation forces them to question their future and ability to perform as a nurse.

Fear

Fear involves being afraid and is a distressing emotion aroused by an impending difficult situation. A student reported that she was afraid of failing a given task and not performing as expected by the clinical instructors. A diploma-holder student worried that others would have too high expectations of her.

'I was afraid I would not finish my work ... I was afraid I would not be able to
perform as a clinical instructor expectation.'

(FGD2, Participant 1, Matriculation)

'I left working in the ward for two (2) years. I am afraid people will say, "Eh, you
are already working, but why you still can't do work? Because I never worked in
Surgical Ward, I feel lost.'

(FGD1, Participant 2, Diploma holder)

It indicates that others' expectations, like clinical instructors and nurses, can instil fear in the students, revealing their lack of self-confidence and inexperience.

Excitement

Excitement involves being happy and eager in anticipation of something positive. One student expressed her excitement about the Management Module Practicum.

‘I feel excited because of management, the first time [...] I have to do what I have to experience.’

(FGD2, Participant 2, STPM)

It indicates a student's anticipation of learning something new and gaining new experiences as a nurse's shadow in the surgical ward. The excitement relates to the student looking forward to transitioning from being a student to entering the workforce as a nurse.

Theme 2: Adapting to Their New Roles, Responsibilities and Environment

Learning a new module requires adaptability, especially at the beginning of the clinical placement. This adaptability involves the students learning about their new roles, responsibilities and environment. It is categorised into three sub-themes: adapting to their new roles, responsibilities and environment, processing/working through, and coping and conforming. These sub-themes are explained below in detail.

Adapting to their new roles, responsibilities and environment

While learning a new module, students must adapt to their new roles as team leaders and as intervention, admission, and discharge nurses, interacting with the elements of the clinical environment. Their first week of the Management Module Practicum was described as challenging, hectic and disorganized:

‘I struggled during the first week. There were so many things to try, it's been a long time since I left clinical posting... It's really bad at first.’

(FGD2, Participant 3, Matriculation)

‘The first week was chaotic, I don't know what to do. I did not even know what to write in the nursing report.’

(FGD2, Participant 2, STPM)

‘That was my first time in charge of the patient. The first week is like it's hard to adapt ... in the first two-three days, I can't arrange ... when I want to write the nursing report when I want to do the procedure.’

(FGD1, Participant 1, Matriculation)

‘I feel a bit awkward and still in the process of adjusting to training myself as a real staff.’

(Reflective writing (Gr.2), Participant 1, Matriculation)

It indicates that the first week of clinical placement is difficult for the students, learning about their new roles, performing new tasks, and adapting to the surgical ward environment. Transitioning from being a student to an actual nurse is a challenge for them as they lack experience; they realise that they must learn to be independent.

Processing/working through

The students described that after the first week, they began familiarising themselves with their roles and responsibilities in the surgical ward. They felt less intimidated in the following weeks of clinical placement. They felt more confident about their environment.

‘After that (in the second and third week), I don't seem to be very scared.’
(FGD1, Participant 3, Matriculation)

‘After that, when I enter the second week and the third week, I feel better and can manage. Any procedure I remember how to do it.’
(FGD2, Participant 3, Matriculation)

‘After that (second week onwards), it was okay. I'm used to it. I feel a little more confident.’
(FGD2, Participant 2, STPM)

‘During the second week, I felt like it was more organized compared to the first week.’
(FGD2, Participant 3, Matriculation)

‘Able to manage time better than the first week.’
(Reflective writing (Gr.2), Participant 4, Matriculation)

It indicates that the students become more confident in themselves and their environment after a challenging first week of clinical placement. They become better at organising themselves and managing their time by the second week of posting. By then, they find themselves immersed as nurses and feeling more positive from the first week.

Coping and conforming

The students were required to do clinical practice in the surgical ward for three (3) weeks. This duration allowed them to adjust to the pressures of the surgical ward while learning about the module. They were able to cope with their roles and responsibilities and conform to the demands of the surgical ward:

‘I think the surgical ward was okay because it has a specific routine for patient recovery, pre-operative.’
(FGD2, Participant 3, Matriculation)

‘The staff are all friendly. Because we've known each other for three weeks, we are like friends. We got used to the surgical ward. It didn't feel very awkward.’
(FGD2, Participant 1, Matriculation)

‘The end process was quite okay ... I managed to overcome.’
(FGD1, Participant 4, Matriculation)

‘And then, finally, I can cope. I feel I can work there (surgical ward).’
(FGD1, Participant 2, Diploma holder)

‘I feel comfortable. I think of continuing until week 6.’
(FGD1, Participant 1, Matriculation)

‘I feel comfortable about the work and environment of the ward.’
(Reflective writing (Gr.1), Participant 4, Matriculation)

It indicates that the positive and empathic behaviour of the nurses and staff of the surgical ward makes the students feel secure and accepted. The students quickly adapt to their new roles and responsibilities because of the surgical ward's specific pre- and post-operative care routines.

DISCUSSION

Before starting the Management Module Practicum, the students will likely experience various emotions of nervousness, fear and excitement. They have a preconceived notion of what they think they will be learning and experiencing during the clinical placement in the surgical ward (14). Nervousness and fear can cause stress and anxiety in students. Prolonged stress causes physical and mental conditions such as sleep and anxiety disorders (15). However, stress can motivate students to learn better. Positive emotions such as excitement to learn something new must be advocated to encourage students to learn continually. It becomes the catalyst for them to thrive throughout life.

This study finds that students worry about the high expectations of their clinical instructors and other staff in the surgical ward. Clinical instructors monitor, evaluate and grade the students in the learning environment (16). Poor interpersonal relationships between students and clinical instructors, lack of collaboration and poor communication negatively influence students' learning (17). A previous study reveals how students become concerned about their instructors' high expectations and grading (15). Another study argues that vague expectations and ineffective communication hinder students' clinical learning (18). Students are vulnerable in new environments; a support system must assist them in their clinical learning. They are predisposed to making mistakes while learning; they must be given room to improve.

Scholars are generally interested in exploring first-year students during their first clinical placement (19,20). These students have no experience in such learning environments and are supposed to be challenged from the beginning, especially at their first clinical posting (19,20). On the other hand, final-year nursing undergraduates are expected to be familiar with the clinical setting and to cope with the likely responsibilities and environment naturally. However, this study finds that they encounter similar difficulties with their roles and tasks; they appear disorganised in their first week of clinical placement. It indicates that final-year nursing students need support during their initial clinical placement when adapting to their new vocation.

Meanwhile, their learning is influenced by their first impressions of clinical placement (21), communication, attitudes, and behaviours of staff, clinical instructors, and health professionals (22). The staff warmly receive the students, making them feel like they belong in the environment, especially when the nurses consider them part of the ward's clinical team (23,24). It helps them to quickly adapt to clinical situations in their new roles and responsibilities. As such, it will likely influence students' tendency to work in certain wards in the future (21). Nurse turnover is an international issue of concern; their optimism will play an essential part in motivating the students to stay in the nursing profession (25).

The surgical ward has specific tasks and routines that must be done by the end of every shift. A previous study reports that students' satisfaction in clinical placement is higher among those concerned with task orientation (24). They are likely to gain confidence if they are assigned specific tasks repeatedly. A transparent ward routine assists students in adjusting and managing their time. This study coincides with previous studies; once students understand the specific clinical activities in the ward and can continually perform, they become less apprehensive of the learning environment (23).

Ultimately, by the end of the clinical placement, the students declare that they have successfully adapted to the ward routines and environment. They suggest that six (6) weeks of clinical placement in the surgical ward is appropriate as the time provides ample exposure to clinical settings, helping

them understand clinical learning (26). It improves their ability to adapt and cope. Furthermore, their positive experiences in the clinical learning environment strengthen their resilience, developing their self-esteem to be more confident and competent (19).

This study has limitations, especially concerning participant demographics. All the study's participants are female, limiting the perspective to one (1) gender. In addition, only half of the students from two (2) groups went for clinical practice before the MCO. The study initially had three (3) focus group discussions to ensure data saturation, but after the MCO, there were changes to the clinical practice structure, creating differing student perspectives. Hence, the third focus group discussion was not included in this study.

Furthermore, this study's results cannot be generalized to other final-year nursing undergraduates as the content and structure of the Management Module Practicum are likely to differ between institutions. Job scopes and ward routines may also influence ward selection for clinical internship placement. Nonetheless, these results are essential because they consist of two (2) student perspectives: those with prior working experience as a nurse and those without experience.

IMPLICATION

The results demonstrate a new perspective on final-year nursing undergraduates in their clinical practice. They face difficulties in their clinical placement, emphasising the need to understand the students' emotions and adaptability. It will help clinical instructors and the faculty take appropriate measures to facilitate student learning, specifically during the first week of clinical placement. Furthermore, clinical instructors should get actively involved in mitigating student issues; giving advice and reflecting on their daily activities are some ways. Students can optimise their clinical learning experience and develop a positive professional identity by learning their new roles and responsibilities and managing their new environment effectively. Future studies can determine a student's readiness for clinical internship posting and the ways of intervention to overcome the challenges of conducting a clinical internship placement.

CONCLUSION

This study explores the learning experiences of final-year nursing undergraduates pursuing the Management Module Practicum in UKM's Surgical Ward. The results indicate that students experience various emotions before clinical placement, such as nervousness, fear and excitement. The nervousness and fear persist, especially during the initial stage of clinical placement. They seek support from their clinical instructors, faculty, and peers, as facilitators and collaborators in the clinical environment to help them express and share their emotions and knowledge throughout their learning. Positive emotions must be nurtured to enhance the learning experience. This study also finds that students face challenging situations in adapting to their new roles, responsibilities and environment, particularly during their first week; the subsequent weeks reveal that the students can cope and conform with the clinical placement. Empathic staff facilitate the learning environment, making it conducive for the students to transition and adapt quickly to their new surroundings.

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