

IMPACT OF OPEN DISTANCE LEARNING PROFESSIONALISM & EMPOWERMENT COURSES ON CLINICAL NURSE PRACTICE

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ABSTRACT

Clinical nurse professionalism includes empowerment which is associated with increased nurse satisfaction and improved patient outcomes, both being elements of a healthy work environment. This study aims to compare the academic results of learners in open distance learning (ODL) professionalism course with the purported display of professional behaviour in clinical practice. In addition to demographic data, the survey included in quantifying information on nurses discerning qualities in displaying professionalism and empowerment in their daily nursing practice from their superiors and compared with the learner's academic results upon completion of the course. Data analysis using descriptive statistics involving 73 respondents (63%) from nurse supervisors who rated their nurses. Nurses moral principle is rated highest on acting honestly (65.8%), followed by acting justly (58.9%). On personal integrity, nurses can look after their own wellbeing (56.2%) and act under pressure (58.9%). Their expertise skills showed ability in working and acting independently and being autonomous (50.7%). Their power of making decisions is 52.1% in the clinical area. Nurses who are future-oriented can promote new ideas at the workplace (52.1%), and their sociability level is 50.7% in solving problems responsibly. The above professionalism and empowerment qualities showed a positive trend and relevancy with their academic performance. In conclusion, this study professed to show academic performance of nurses from the course is internalised and visible in their professional behaviour in the clinical area.

Keywords: *Open and Distance Learning, Online, Nurses, Professionalism, Empowerment*

INTRODUCTION

Nurses represent the most significant number of professionals in the health care environment. Today's profession of nursing is evolving as a valuable public service. In Malaysia experience, the nursing profession is undergoing a gradual progression toward professionalism where positive aspects of nursing professionalism must be recognised and implemented in the clinical practice.

Professionalism and Issues in Nursing is one of the coursework for students pursuing the baccalaureate in nursing at OUM distance learning (hereafter DL) programme. The course offers the foundation to professional nursing, understand current issues relating to the profession and a platform to discuss challenges and barriers to attaining professional status. Besides clinical skills, nurses need a strong sense of professional values and identity. The module includes focusing on the concept of empowerment as empowerment is vital to ensure nurses can work effectively. Its focuses on what empowerment is and the relationship between power and empowerment, the need for empowerment in nursing, and qualities of an empowered nurse. The five qualities of an empowered nurse (QEN) by Kuokkanen et al., (2016) related to moral principles, personal integrity, expertise, future – orientedness and sociability which encompass the issues on nursing profession related to the enhancement of nursing image and empowerment that is aligned with the Nursing Practice Act and regulation in Malaysia.

This study purportedly show from the academic results obtained from this course is internalised in their professional behaviour at the clinical practice. The elements of professionalism are enunciated in the learning outcomes of the course, comprehended and articulated by the nurses in their areas that influence their nursing practice. Balang & Burton (2014) carried out a qualitative study and concluded that this would be assimilated and gesticulated into a very positive habitual and rituals among nurses and surely to be illuminating into their practice, and hence positive patient outcomes and good philanthropic nursing care are seen. From the viewpoint of an individual nurse, the empowerment process consists of both critical introspection and outside guidance leading to an appropriate modifying action (Balang & Burton, 2014; Kuokkanen et al., 2016). The nursing practice environment is often very involved with demands on high-level competence and capability to collaborate as a member of the care team.

Professionalism is one of the essential topics in nursing communities globally, and the last half-century has become an unfaltering issue of much concern within the nursing fraternity [Anderson & Mangino, (2006); Gugerty et al., (2007); Girard et al., (2005)]. Since 2009, Birks, Francis, Chapman, Mills, & Porter have argued that nursing in Malaysia still has a long way to go in terms of its nurses' professionalism. However, there are efforts and positive evidence that this profession in Malaysia is slowly moving forward (Birks, Francis, & Chapman, 2009). One of these positive indicators is these nurses are presently accepted and in demand globally as substantial numbers of them are working abroad and the number is increasing yearly.

In this study, the approach to teaching and learning of these professional values through open distance learning is very much a challenging one. Not only are they often studying part-time with all the pressures of family responsibilities or work, but also, distance education students often had to overcome negative perceptions about the overall quality of the programmes taken and qualifications (Gaskell & Mills, 2014). Concerns about the quality of distance education and the knowledge, abilities and skills of successful students have been expressed internationally. This is undoubtedly related to the local context and expectations of study at a campus-based university, but is relevant to the perceived quality of distance education and, hence, the possible outcomes and perceived employability of those who have studied through this mode (Jung, Wong, & Belawati, 2013).

LITERATURE REVIEW

Professionalism is one of the fundamental concepts of nursing (Karadağ, Hisar, & Elbaş, (2007); Wynd, (2003). Balang, Burton, & Barlow (2017) reported from previous studies, although professionalism in nursing's original context is relatively straightforward to define, it is neither simple nor easy to describe or recognise in absolute terms, whether the behaviour is professional or unprofessional. Also, professionalism in nursing is equally an essential component of competency that enables nurses to work safely and efficiently.

Initial concepts into defining professionalism vary, the earliest theories being are the Miller's Model, entitled "Wheel of Professionalism in Nursing" from 1984 (Wynd, 2003). The contemporary conceptualisation of professionalism described as an extent to which an individual identifies with a profession and adhere to its standard and way of relational caring practice caters on the physical and psychological needs of health care consumer (Zakari, Al Khamis, & Hamadi, 2010). Creating a culture of excellence requires making explicit a set of values and performance expectations to which all nurses can subscribe, and that influences practice behaviours (Girard et al., 2005). Further described by (Girard et al., 2005) that professionalism in nursing is a commitment to behaviours of compassion, caring and strong ethical values; continuous development of self and others; accountability and responsibility for insightful practice and demonstrating a spirit of collaboration and flexibility as cited in Balang & Burton, (2014).

The concrete association between professionalism and empowerment create the authentication of the attributes of professionalism into nursing practice and significantly contribute positive health outcomes and patient satisfaction. Empowerment is an abstract and dynamic concept, which is not feasible to confine exactly in space or time. It has been described both as a state and a process. The previous study by Kuokkanen et al., (2016) described empowerment and competence of fresh graduates fairly high indicating competence had the most substantial effect on newly graduated nurses' empowerment. Empowerment has been discussed from three aspects using critical social, organisational and psychological theories, On the one hand, empowerment being portrayed as an essential part of human nature and development, and on the other hand, it has been described as an aspect to organisational effectiveness and quality. The psychological empowerment based on personal development examines empowerment from the viewpoint of individuals (Kuokkanen & Leino-Kilpi, 2000).

Much existing research recognised education as a crucial element in professional identity development for nurses. Post-registration degree courses are an essential means by which registered nurses can access tertiary education in order to further develop as professionals (Numminen et al., 2014). Empowerment has been described as both a process and an outcome (McCarthy & Freeman, 2008). Hawks, (1992 p.610) defined empowerment as "the interpersonal process of providing the resource, tools, and environment to develop, build, and increase ability and effectiveness of others to set and reach goals for individual and social ends". This definition aligns with Kanter's theory of structural empowerment, which relates to the increased level of organisational commitment, autonomy, and self-efficacy for learning to accomplish personal and professional goals (Faulkner & Laschinger, 2008). The central idea is related to the acquisition of power by individuals to effectively accomplish their work. Studies have demonstrated that empowered clinical nurses have a more positive attitude towards their work, achieve job satisfaction, and experience less stress than others. Meanwhile, from the aspect of education, it is seen that nursing programmes enhancing empowerment may affect psychological empowerment, competence and job productivity (Kuokkanen & Leino-Kilpi, 2000).

Another aspect of professionalism being recognised is collaboration. In the clinical setting, collaboration and teamwork is a critical factor and a critical strategy that helps maintain a safe and effective clinical environment (Miller, Adams, & Beck, 1993; Zamanzadeh, Irajpour, Valizadeh, & Shohani, 2014). In the qualitative study, it was found that the participants considered collaboration as an important and influential potential in their work, with subsequent positive outcomes such as

providing safe care, with reduced error and mutual satisfaction of the personnel and patients (Zamanzadeh et al., 2014).

The findings from Birks, Francis, & Chapman, (2009) stated changes occurred overtly through the study of therapeutic and professional communication subjects and obliquely through the development of collateral knowledge, cognitive skills and attitudes that accompanied the learning experience of nurses who underwent a professional process transition. Becoming professional impacted on and responded to changes that occurred for the individual personally and as a nurse. A self-reported study indicated 'moral principles' reflects human values in nursing and from the viewpoint of an individual nurse, the empowerment process consists of both critical introspection and outside guidance leading to an appropriate modifying action.

The Baccalaureate in nursing program at OUM by distance learning programme is designed to meet the professional development needs of nurses, first-line nurse managers, and nurse supervisors. Based on principles of open learning it is, as a distance learning programme, unique in a field where face-to-face teaching and learning are the norms for developing the skills, values and knowledge for professional practice. Open and distance learning gives learners increased autonomy, choice and control, and introduce components of flexibility into the learning process in that students can choose, what, where, when and how they learn as cited by Gaskell & Mills, (2014).

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Findings

A descriptive cross-sectional design was applied. In this study, empowerment was measured using the 17-item qualities of an empowered nurse (QEN) scale (Kuokkanen & Leino-Kilpi, 2000) based on the five categories representing moral principles, personal integrity, expertise, future orientedness, and sociability. These five categories were adopted as the conceptual framework for the questionnaire used in this study.

Table 1 provided that the total number of respondents is $n = 63\%$ (73/116). Some of the sample characteristics are remarkable as these demographic profiles of nurses studying at OUM can influence the findings of this study. The average age of nurses involved in this study is between 31–40 years old 54.8% (40/73). Below 30 years of age is 19.2% (14/73); above 40 years old is 24.7% (14/73). This indicates that the majority of practising nurses are in their prime years. The response rates are staff nurses 62% (44/71), and the senior management group as head nurse or nurse managers consist of 38% (27/71). Majority of them are above five years working experiences 91.8% (67/73). 59.7% (43/72) are working in public hospitals, 27.8% (20/72) are from private hospitals, and 15.3% (11/72) in community health clinics. The disciplines involved are medical 9.6% (7/73); surgical 16.4% (12/73); community health clinics 15.1% (11/73) and specialised units form the majority 65% (48/73). This indicates that the majority of practising nurses have different specialised nursing qualifications.

Nurses' moral principle is rated highest on acting honestly (65.8%), followed by acting justly (58.9%). On personal integrity, nurses can look after their own wellbeing (56.2%) and act under pressure (58.9%). Their expertise skills showed ability in working and acting independently and being autonomous (50.7%). Their power of making decisions is 52.1% in the clinical area. Nurses who are future-orientedness can promote new ideas at the workplace (52.1%), and their sociability level is 50.7% in solving problems responsibly.

Table 1: Qualities of an Empowered Nurse (QEN) (n = 73, Range 1–5; 1 = Strongly Disagree, 5 = Strongly Agree)

Variables		Total N = 73 N (%)
Moral Principles Treat others with respect	Strongly Disagree Neutral Agree Strongly Agree	2(2.7) 3(4.1) 20(27.4) 48(65.8)
Acts honestly	Strongly Disagree Disagree Neutral Agree Strongly Agree	2(2.7) 1(1.4) 4(5.5) 23(31.5) 43(58.9)
Acts justly	Strongly Disagree Disagree Neutral Agree Strongly Agree	3(4.1) 4(5.5) 5(6.8) 33(45.2) 28(38.4)
Personal Integrity Look after own well being	Strongly Disagree Disagree Neutral Agree Strongly Agree	1(1.4) 2(2.7) 8(11) 41(56.2) 21(28.8)
Dares to say and act, been assertive and courages	Strongly Disagree Disagree Neutral Agree Strongly Agree	2(2.7) 1(1.4) 8(11) 42(57.5) 19(26)
Able to act under pressure	Strongly Disagree Disagree Neutral Agree Strongly Disagree	2(2.7) 2(2.7) 7(9.6) 43(58.9) 19(26)
Broad minded and flexible	Strongly Disagree Neutral Agree Strongly Agree	2(2.8) 6(8.3) 33(45.8) 31(43.1)

Expertise Acts skilfully and are competent	Strongly Disagree Disagree Neutral Agree Strongly Agree	2(2.7) 1(1.4) 5(6.8) 32(43.8) 33(45.2)
Has personal power to make decision	Strongly Disagree Disagree Neutral Agree Strongly Agree	1(1.4) 2(2.7) 9(12.3) 38(52.1) 23(31.5)
Acts independently and autonomous	Strongly Disagree Disagree Neutral Agree Strongly Agree	1(1.4) 2(2.7) 12(16.4) 37(50.7) 21(28.8)
Responsible to consult and teach colleagues	Strongly Disagree Neutral Agree Strongly Agree	2(2.7) 6(8.2) 35(47.9) 30(41.1)
Future-orientedness Innovative, creative in finding a solution	Strongly Disagree Disagree Neutral Agree Strongly Agree	2(2.7) 1(1.4) 8(11) 39(53.4) 23(31.5)
Promote new ideas and enthusiastically at work place	Strongly Disagree Disagree Neutral Agree Strongly Agree	1(1.4) 2(2.7) 10(13.7) 38(52.1) 22(30.1)
Forward thinking, plan ahead, assess effects before acting	Strongly Disagree Disagree Neutral Agree Strongly Agree	2(2.7) 1(1.4) 8(11) 36(49.3) 26(35.6)
Sociability Open-minded and discuss openly	Strongly Disagree Disagree Neutral Agree Strongly Agree	2(2.7) 2(2.7) 6(8.2) 32(43.8) 31(42.5)

Respected by others as she/he work for common goal	Strongly Disagree	1(1.4)
	Disagree	3(4.1)
	Neutral	6(8.2)
	Agree	29(39.7)
	Strongly Agree	34(46.6)
Socially responsible to solve problems	Strongly Disagree	2(2.7)
	Disagree	2(2.7)
	Neutral	4(5.5)
	Agree	37(50.7)
	Strongly Agree	28(38.4)

Table 2 showed the overall academic results with 166 students taking the course work and final exam. The mean score for course work achieved was 35.74 while final exam 26.49. The overall mean score achieved was 61.88 by the majority of students.

Table 2: Course: NBBS1204 Professionalism and Issues in Nursing Results

	Overall	Course Work	Final Exam
Std Dev	10.65	8.38	5.5
Mod	70.13	40.25	28.75
Median	63.69	38.88	26.25
Mean	61.88	35.74	26.49
Incomplete	2	4	3

Figure 1 illustrated an overall grade of students undertaking the course n = 116. Majority of students (32/116) are awarded scoring marks between 60–64 (B-); 25 out of 116 achieved marks between 65–69 (B); 17 out of 116 achieved marks between 70–74 (B+). 11 out of 116 students achieved marks between 55–59 (C+); 10 students achieved 50–54 (C); 7 out of 116 students achieved 75–79 (A-); 6 out of 116 students achieved marks between 45–49 (C-); 2 out of 116 achieved 40–44 (D+); only 1 student achieved marks of 80–100 (A), and there were 5 failures with scoring between 0–34 (F).

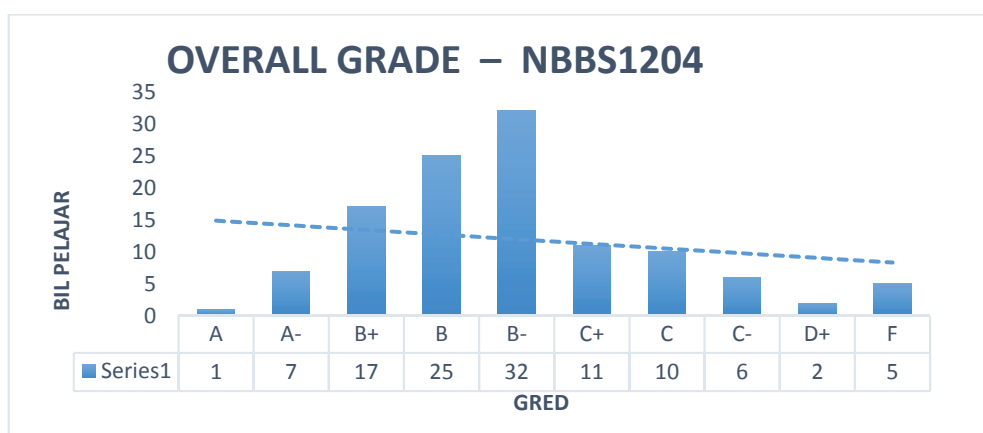


Figure 1: Overall Marks

Discussion

Knowledge of Professionalism and Empowerment

Nurses with varying levels of practice experience from various clinical settings completed the course via ODL, and academic results showed in Table 2 and Figure 1 explained students' detailed performance which indicates that 95.6% have successfully passed the course. This determines their cognitive level of professionalism and empowerment in nursing. It is encouraging to compare this figure with that indicated by Numminen et al., (2014) that tertiary post-registration education is a crucial element in professional identity development for nurses. These results agree with the findings of the previous study by Birks, Francis, & Chapman, (2009) which stated, changes occurred overtly and obliquely through the development of collateral knowledge, cognitive skills and attitudes that accompanied the learning experience of nurses who underwent a process professional transition. Nurses were becoming professional impacted on and responded to changes that occurred within the individual personally and as a nurse.

Efficiency in Professionalism and Empowerment

The evaluation on the level of efficiency in professionalism and empowerment upon completion of the module in the BNS program is shown in Table 1. The five categories of QEN are moral principles, personal integrity, expertise, future – orientedness and sociability. Moral principle is rated highest on acting honestly (65.8%), and the other four categories which were rated above 50% include looking after their wellbeing and acting under pressure. In expertise skills, nurses have the ability to working and acting independently and are autonomous with power in making decisions in the clinical area. Nurses who are future-orientedness can promote new ideas at the workplace, and they are solving problems responsibly. The findings observed in this study mirror those of the previous studies that have examined the effect of creating a culture of excellence with an explicit set of values and performance expectations to which all nurses can subscribe, and influences practice behaviours. This set of explicit values of professionalism in nursing is a commitment to behaviours of compassion, caring and strong ethical values; continuous development of self and others as asserted by (Girard et al., 2005). This finding is consistent with Balang & Burton, (2014) who viewed accountability and responsibility for insightful practice will demonstrate collaboration and flexibility.

The Internalisation of Professionalism and Empowerment

It is apparent that a clear trend is observed between academic performance (Figure 1) that transcends to the qualities of professional behaviour and empowerment (Table 1) among students on completion of the course. Many nurses enter the course had many years of experience in nursing practice and the age group, length of service, and years of experience is related to professionalism (Yoder, 1997) which this study concurs although the significance of the relationship is not being tested in this study. This finding corroborates with the ideas of Kuokkanen & Leino-Kilpi, (2000) who suggested that cognitive outcomes on completion of the course influence their professional behaviour through adopting belief system and philosophy of professionalism and empowerment within the reality of practice setting. This characterised insightful practice, affect competency, job productivity and satisfaction through positive attitude towards their profession.

CONCLUSION

This preliminary descriptive cross-sectional study was applied to measure five qualities of empowerment among nurses who had taken a professionalism course. Preliminary data has limited the inferential analysis of this study. The five empowerment qualities provide a real association between cognitive performances of nurses in academia. In conclusion, this study professed to show academic performance of nurses from the course is internalised and visible in their professional behaviour in the clinical area.

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