



**Faculty of Medicine and Health Sciences**

**UNIMAS Nursing Students' Experiences during Clinical Attachment in  
Sarawak General Hospital (SGH), Kuching**

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## **ABSTRACT**

The purpose of this qualitative research was to explore the experiences of UNIMAS nursing students during clinical attachment in Sarawak General Hospital (SGH), Kuching. Purposive sampling was used and semi-structured interviews with open-ended questions were held with ten nursing students who were in their third and final year of the Bachelor of Nursing with Honours Programme. The data were analyzed manually according to the research questions and research objectives. Nine themes emerged from the data: mixed feelings, improved self-confidence, “You are my angel”, overcrowded clinical settings, inadequate equipments, uncaring attitude of ward staff, theory-practice gap, inadequate clinical supervision and labeling of nursing students. The findings indicated that there were aspects which impacted negatively on clinical experiences of nursing students. This valuable information was important to create awareness among nursing academia and nursing practice professionals about the challenges faced by nursing students in clinical area. Therefore, recommendations to enhance the clinical learning experiences of nursing students were outlined.

**Keywords:** Clinical attachment, experiences, nursing students, clinical learning

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## **TABLE OF CONTENTS**

	<u>Page</u>
<b>ABSTRACT</b>	i
<b>ACKNOWLEDGEMENT</b>	ii
<b>TABLE OF CONTENTS</b>	iii
<b>KEY TO TRANSCRIPTION</b>	vi
<b>INTRODUCTION</b>	
Background of the Study	1
Statement of the Problem	2
Research Questions	5
Research Objectives	5
Significance of the Research	5
Operational Definition of the Terms	6
<b>LITERATURE REVIEW</b>	
Introduction	7
Emotional Experiences of Nursing Students	7
Challenges of Nursing Students during clinical attachment	9
i.    Ward Environment	9
ii.   Attitude of Staff Nurses	9

iii.	Theory-Practice Gap	10
iv.	Teaching and Learning Support	11

## **METHODOLOGY AND METHOD**

Qualitative Research Method	14
Ethical Consideration	15
Data Collection	16
Setting	16
Sampling Method	16
The Participants	17
Questions Guideline	17
The Interviews	18
Research Procedures	19
Data Analysis	20

## **FINDINGS**

Introduction	22
Part 1: Emotional Experiences of Nursing Students	22
Mixed Feelings	22
Improved Self-Confidence	27
“You are My Angel”	29
Part 2: Challenges of Nursing Students during	
Clinical Attachment	31
Overcrowded Clinical Settings	31

Inadequate equipments	33
Uncaring Attitude of Ward Staff	35
Theory-Practice Gap	37
Inadequate Clinical Supervision	39
Labeling of Nursing Students	41
<b>DISCUSSION</b>	
Introduction	44
Nursing Students had Mixed Feelings in Their Clinical Experiences	44
The Challenges Faced by Nursing Students during Clinical Attachment	46
Limitations	50
Recommendations	
Recommendations for Nursing Education	52
Recommendations for Clinical Settings	53
Recommendations for Future Research	54
<b>CONCLUSION</b>	55
<b>REFERENCES</b>	56
<b>APPENDICES</b>	
A: Application Letter for Ethical Approval	61
B: Ethical Approval Letter	62
C: Informed Consent Form	63
D: Questions Guideline	67

## KEY TO TRANSCRIPTIONS

<b>Keys or symbols</b>	<b>Meaning (s)</b>
Name	Pseudonyms were used for all the participants to maintain confidentiality throughout the study.
<i>“Excerpts”</i>	The excerpts in the study were in italic with open close bracket that can be in words, phrases, sentences, statements or paragraphs.
...//...	This symbol in the excerpts indicated next event that are stated by the same participant at different times during interview.
...	This symbol represented unrelated words, phrases or sentences in the excerpts by the participants, and/or a pause during interview.

Adopted with permission from Zabidah, 2010.

## **INTRODUCTION**

### **Background of the Study**

There are two important aspects of nursing education, theory and practice. Clinical practice is an integral part of nursing students' education. It allows the nursing students to have direct experience with the real world of nursing, to practice the clinical skills, to learn about general nursing routines and to learn about the responsibility of the nurse. In other words, clinical practice aims in preparing the nursing students to apply the classroom-based theoretical knowledge and skills into the real patient care situations. According to McKenna, Wray and McCall (2008) and Reilly and Oermann (1992), through the clinical experiences, the nursing students learn and acquire the kinds of professional and personal skills, attitudes and values thought essential for entering the health care system and become socialized into the nursing profession.

In nursing, the importance of clinical learning has been clearly acknowledged. McCabe (1985) described clinical learning experience as the 'heart' of professional education, as it provides students with an opportunity for consolidating knowledge, socializing into the professional role, and acquiring professional values. Similarly,

Stewart (1943) spoke of clinical experience as being at the heart of the educational programme for nursing.

According to Malaysian Nursing Board (2011), approximately 50% of the nursing curriculum is devoted to clinical practice. Nursing Programme at Universiti Malaysia Sarawak (UNIMAS) bears some differences with the nursing education programmes of the other nursing colleges in Malaysia and worldwide. UNIMAS undergraduate nursing programme lasts four years and leads to a bachelor degree in nursing with honours whereas other government-funded or private nursing colleges offer three-year diploma in nursing course. The UNIMAS nursing students start their clinical placement training from the second semester and this is run concurrently with the theoretical courses until the end of the fourth year (Nursing Handbook, 2008). The nursing students are attached to Sarawak General Hospital (SGH), Bau Hospital, Serian Hospital, Bintulu Hospital, clinics and community according to the curriculum.

### **Statement of the Problem**

After entering into the world of nursing, most of the students find that nursing is really a challenging profession. Despite many studies about the importance of students learning during clinical practice, many researches report on the negative experiences of nursing students during clinical placement.

Nolan (1998) pointed out that student nurses experienced anxiety and fear during clinical placement and that affected their responses to the clinical learning environment. A study conducted by Admi (1997) reported significant differences between students' preclinical expected stress levels and the actual levels of stress in the clinical setting. However, Rhead (1995) stated that nursing students experienced more stress than the registered nurses.

According to Hathorn, Machtmes and Tillman (2009), negative attitude of nurses could impede the learning of student nurses. Mabuda, Potgieter & Alberts (2008) further stated that negative attitude of the ward sisters caused negative clinical learning experiences of student nurses in the hospitals.

Besides that, interpersonal relationship is another issue identified by the student nurses (Mabuda et al., 2008). The study done by Mabuda et al. had identified poor interpersonal relationship between the staff nurses and nursing students. They also found that lack of communication amongst ward sisters frustrated student nurses and impacted negatively on their clinical experiences. In addition, Mabuda et al. mentioned in their study that no accompanying by college tutors during their clinical practice can also influence the learning of the student nurses in the clinical settings.

However, there is mushrooming of nursing institutions nowadays. Uncontrolled nursing students' intake is another issue to be concerned. Hence, there are nursing students from different institutions attached to the hospital. Moreover, lots of nursing

students are found posted to one ward. Consequently, the students need to compete with each other to get the procedures in order to achieve their targets as required.

In spite of that, when there is limited procedure, some nursing students may have no chance to practice their clinical skills. Furthermore, the students sometimes encountered a paucity of equipments in the ward and the equipments are really messy. This may affect the conduciveness of clinical learning environments. In relation to that, I was prompted to conduct this study to explore how the UNIMAS nursing students experience clinical practice during their clinical attachment in SGH, Kuching.

## **Research Question**

This study will therefore seek to answer the following question:

1. What are the clinical experiences of nursing students during their clinical attachment?

## **Research Objectives**

The objectives of the research were:

1. To explore the experiences of nursing students during clinical attachment.
2. To explore the nursing students' feelings during clinical attachment.
3. To identify the challenges encountered by nursing students during clinical attachment.

## **Significance of the Research**

At the moment, researchers from other countries had conducted a lot of studies about the clinical experiences of the nursing students. However, only a few data had been found in Malaysia regarding this issue. Understanding how the nursing students learn in the clinical workplace setting can assist academics and clinical teachers to support and facilitate such learning. Thus, the strategies can be arranged to improve the learning experiences of the nursing students. Apart from that, the researcher also hopes that the findings from this study will be useful in the development of nursing education and profession.

## **Operational Definition of Terms**

The significant terms used in this study brought specific meaning only for the benefit of this study.

1. **Nursing students:** Nursing students in this study were the Third Year (Year 3) and Fourth Year (Year 4) UNIMAS undergraduate nursing students who are pursuing their four-year Bachelor of Nursing with Honours programme.
2. **Clinical experiences:** The clinical experiences focused on the experiences of nursing students during their clinical attachment in SGH, Kuching.

## **LITERATURE REVIEW**

### **Introduction**

As a part of the nursing education, the nursing students are required to participate in lectures and clinical practices in the hospitals. Like most vocational apprentice-type experiences, these clinical practices aim to prepare the nursing students to work independently and care for patients in an appropriate manner. According to Mabuda, Potgieter and Alberts (2008), clinical teaching facilitates the student nurses to integrate their knowledge and skills learned from classroom setting into clinical setting, which becomes the art and science of nursing. This mutual relationship between theory and practice, and the building of meaningful experience take place during clinical practice in the health care services. However, there are many literatures reporting problems that affect the students' clinical experiences and clinical learning.

### **Emotional Experiences of Nursing Students**

A qualitative research done by Sharif and Masoumi (2005) on Iranian nursing students' experiences of clinical practice revealed that clinical experience is one of the most anxiety-producing parts of the nursing programme as identified by the nursing students. They also found that almost all of the nursing students felt anxious

during their initial clinical attachment and the feeling lasted for the first month of their training. Fear of giving wrong information to the patients, fear of harming the patients due to lack of knowledge, and fear of making mistakes and failure during procedures were reported by the nursing students as the main causes of student's anxiety in their initial clinical experience.

Similarly, in a descriptive correlational study by Beck and Srivastava (1991) on perception of level and sources of stress in second, third and fourth year baccalaureate Canadian nursing students, they reported that clinical experience was the most stressful part of the nursing programme. Lack of clinical experience, unfamiliar areas, difficult patients, fear of making mistakes and being evaluated by faculty members were expressed by the nursing students as anxiety-producing situations in their initial clinical experience.

On the other hand, Chapman and Orb (2000) in their study of the nursing students' lived experience of clinical practice found that on some instance the nursing students regarded clinical practice as exciting, interesting, important and enjoyable, however somehow they felt scared, nervous, stressed, intimidated and awkward. Additionally, Halarie (2006, cited in Nik Mazureen Faisa 2009, p.48) also discovered a mixture of positive and negative feelings in the students, including interesting, challenging, stressful, 'a new sense of being' difficult, unexpected, intimidating, although enjoyable.

Besides that, a study done by Peyvori, Yadavar-Nikraves, Oskouie and Bertero (2005) on Iranian student nurses' experiences of clinical placement found that the student nurses had increased in their self-confidence within the clinical environment after gradual adaptation and contact with realities. Dunn, Ehrich, Mylonas and Hansford (2000) also described in their comparative study of students' perceptions of field experience in professional development that students' sense of confidence was a gradual process that took considerable time, effort and energy.

### **Challenges of Nursing Students during clinical attachment**

#### **i. Ward Environment**

Mabuda et al. (2008) found that one of the problem that hindered clinical teaching and learning was overcrowded clinical facilities by large numbers of students in certain disciplines of nursing. In addition, the study conducted by Gibbon and Kendrick (1996, cited in Mabuda et al. 2008, p.23) on practical conflicts addressed that the number of nursing students attached in a ward should be controlled in order to allow more effective learning environment.

#### **ii. Attitude of Staff Nurses**

In the study done by Redmond and Sorrell (1996) on creating a caring learning environment, they revealed that the students described uncaring behaviours of clinical instructors as lack of interest in student nurses, being unapproachable, refusing to give clarification on student nurses' questions, openly criticizing student nurses in

front of others, and being rigid. Besides that, the study by Chapman and Orb (2000) revealed the attitudes of ward staffs towards tertiary education for nursing. Some of the participants in their study expressed that some ward staffs considered that tertiary educated nurses were incompetent as they lacked of knowledge and experience.

Besides that, interpersonal relationship is another issue identified by the student nurses (Mabuda et al., 2008). This study had identified poor interpersonal relationship between the staff nurses and nursing students. Mabuda et al. also found that lack of communication amongst ward sisters frustrated student nurses and impacted negatively on their clinical experiences.

### **iii. Theory-Practice Gap**

Theory-practice gap has been an issue that is well-debated in nursing for many years and it still exists in nursing today. The study by Sharif and Masoumi (2005) concluded that student nurses had found difficulty to integrate theory into clinical practice. This caused delaying in student learning. In this study, all the students clearly demonstrated a gap between theory and practice.

Additionally, Mabuda et al. (2008) further indicated that the student nurses are lack of theoretical background because some lectures were only being taught after they were exposed to the clinical setting. Mabuda et al. also believed that there were differences between theory taught in the nursing college and the real clinical practice in the hospital. Thus, the student nurses felt very confusing when they found what

had been taught in the college were different from what was practiced in the real clinical setting. On the other hand, Chapman and Orb (2000) pointed out that theory-practice gap was the reason that made clinical learning more difficult. Also, the students felt strongly that what they had been taught in the classroom was too ideological and not functional in the real patients' situations.

#### **iv. Teaching and Learning Support**

In the study done by Mabuda et al. (2008), the student nurses viewed college tutors as a source of support and guidance. However, the student nurses claimed that there was no accompaniment by college tutors during their clinical practice. They continued to report that the college tutors were only seen in the clinical area when they came to do the evaluation of student nurses' performance. Therefore, when the college tutors did not accompany the student nurses, they were left to rely on the ward sisters, who also could not offer the necessary guidance, clinical teaching and supervision due to heavy workloads and staff shortage.

Moreover, ward staff or registered nurses did not teach the student nurses because they have no education qualification, no pay for them to teach the student nurses and no time due to heavy workloads (Mabuda et al., 2008). Thus, the presence of clinical teachers or college tutors in the clinical setting is very important as they are there to supervise, guide, direct and teach the student nurses. A research conducted by Magnussen and Amundson (2003) on undergraduate nursing student experiences of 12 nursing students from a public university of Hawaii supported that teachers were

regarded as “pivotal” in student’s learning experiences as they were crucial in shaping the learning environment. However, the concern is the effectiveness of the methods they used to make the environment learnable for the students.

Besides no accompaniment of college tutors, Mabuda et al. (2008) found that there were also no clinical preceptors in the wards. Absence of the clinical preceptors and college tutors caused the learning in the wards to become more difficult. As a result, the students had to carry out the procedures alone without any supervision by registered nurses. They also stated that tutors only demonstrated procedures using manikins in the nursing college, but never did follow-ups in real patient care settings. These had affected student nurses’ experiences negatively.

Andrews, Brodie, Andrews, Wong and Thomas (2005) in their study about students’ clinical experiences and their preferences for first employers identified that students were involved exceptionally various mentor support during their clinical placements. Some students received a wide range of support and the opportunity to achieve associated learning outcome. Other students experienced with no mentor assigned at all for the whole duration of their placements. These findings suggested that the absence of the mentor together with unsupportive staff often caused the students to seek for surreptitious learning experiences. Furthermore, Andrews et al. (2005) found that students often designated to do menial jobs, which were not conducive to effective learning or their learning objectives.

In conclusion, there are many researches done on nursing students' clinical experiences in other countries. However, there is few similar study conducted in Malaysia. In Sharif and Masoumi (2005) study, four elements emerged from nursing students' experiences of clinical practice as important factors in clinical experience: initial clinical anxiety, theory-practice gap, clinical supervision and professional role. Mabuda et al. (2008) studied "student nurses' experiences during clinical practice in the Limpopo Province". Four major categories concerning the student nurses' experiences in the clinical learning environment emerged: "teaching and learning support", "opportunities for learning", "integration of learning and practice", and "interpersonal relationships between the college tutors, students and the ward staff". Therefore, it seem necessary to conduct this study in order to understand and gain deeper insight into UNIMAS nursing students' experiences of clinical placement in SGH, Kuching.

## **METHODOLOGY AND METHOD**

### **Qualitative Research Method**

In this study, a qualitative research approach was chosen to explore the UNIMAS undergraduate nursing students' insights relating to their clinical practices in SGH, Kuching. As mentioned by Zabidah (2010), qualitative research approach is the most appropriate design to answer the objective of the study and provides a unique appreciation of the reality of the human experience. Qualitative research focuses on understanding the whole, which is consistent with the holistic philosophy of nursing (Baer, 1979; Leininger, 1985; Ludemann, 1979; Munhall, 1982b, 1989, 2001, cited in Burns & Grove, 2003). Thus, the qualitative research was conducted within a holistic framework to allow the participants to describe freely without rigid structure as in qualitative methods. Within the holistic framework, it explores the depth, richness and complexity inherent in phenomena.

Therefore, the qualitative methods are appropriate for studying humanistic, subjective beliefs, values, world view and unspoken life conditions that vary from person to person. Moreover, the qualitative research is useful in understanding people's experiences such as pain, caring, powerlessness and comfort (Burns & Grove, 2003). According to Morse and Field (2002) it is essential to understand people's

experiences and to present their uniqueness of each participant's individual situation by gaining rich and in-depth information.

### **Ethical Consideration**

Prior to the study, an ethical approval was obtained from the Ethic Committee of Faculty of Medicine and Health Sciences, UNIMAS (refer Appendix B). Once the ethical clearance was approved, the eligible participants were selected among UNIMAS nursing students for the individual face-to-face interview. A suitable and convenient time and place was arranged with them for the interview sessions. All the interviews were conducted at the researcher's residence.

At the beginning of the interview session, individual informed consent was given to each participant who was chosen to participate in this study. Permission to audiotape was obtained from the participants before the actual interview session began. After that, the selected participants were given oral information about the nature and purpose of the study, study procedures, its potential risk as well as its possible benefits. This is aimed to ensure that the participants understand the information given and are able to make a voluntary decision whether to participate in the study.

Before the participants agreed to participate in the study, they were informed about their rights to withdraw from the study at any time during the interview. In addition,

all the participants were also assured that their personal details will be kept confidential and anonymity will be used throughout the study. All the information collected will also be kept confidential in order to protect individuals' privacy. After the participants have read and understood all the information about the research study, participants who volunteered themselves were asked to sign the Informed Consent Form (refer Appendix C).

## **Data Collection**

### **Setting**

The setting for this study was the researcher's residence. In consultation with the participants, it was agreed that the researcher's residence setting was a suitable venue as they felt comfortable and relaxed in that environment.

### **Sampling Method**

Within the study, purposive sampling method was used to recruit UNIMAS nursing students from the degree in nursing program because the researcher believed that the nursing students have a particular knowledge about the issues under study (Polit & Beck, 2010). Besides that, purposive sampling method is the best way to gain insight or to obtain in-depth understanding of their clinical experiences and the challenges that they are facing at the hospital (Burns & Grove, 2003).

## **The Participants**

A total of ten UNIMAS undergraduate nursing students participated in this study. Those interviewed consisted of two males and eight females. The participants were four from third year undergraduate nursing students and six from fourth year (final year) undergraduate nursing students. The reason for choosing this group of participants was they had already been exposed to different clinical settings in SGH, Kuching. They would therefore be able to reflect on their various experiences during clinical practice. Also, they had more clinical attachments in SGH if compared to first year and second year undergraduate nursing students who had only once or no clinical placement in the hospital during the study was conducted. Thus, the first year and second year nursing students were excluded from this study due to their limited clinical placement in SGH, Kuching.

## **Questions Guideline**

Questions were generated as a tool guideline for this study. In generating the questions guideline, the researcher formulated the questions into themes to ensure that the interviews will run smoothly and subsequently ease the data analysis process. The questions guideline were developed based on related literatures and books, and also further discussion with my supervisor. Zabidah (2010) stated that these pre-determined questions helped to prevent any missed questions especially the important ones.