

# Experiences of Nursing Students switching from traditional learning to distance learning due to COVID-19: A qualitative study

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## **Abstract:**

The aim of this research is to understand nursing students' educational experiences and expectations regarding educational changes in the wake of the rapid shift from face-to-face to distant learning. The present state of emergency caused by the COVID-19 outbreak has required a change in nursing students' learning from traditional to distant learning. Education systems have switched to distant learning during the COVID-19 outbreak and compulsory shutdown. The COVID19 epidemic caused a hasty transition to distance education. These circumstances created a slew of problems for teachers and students in higher education around the world, notably in nursing education programs, which are often provided in a face-to-face setting with hands-on practical experience. The objective of this study was to examine and assess nursing students' transition from traditional campus-based learning to online learning. Methods; this study followed a qualitative approach, semi-structured interviews of nursing students, data were collected from 21 September 2021 to 20 January 2022. One hundred twenty-seven interviews, the sample included students of 3rd and 4th-year of nursing program. Participants formed a large proportion of 100 females and 27 males, ages ranging between 20- 23 years. Results, four major themes emerged from data analysis and they are arranged as follows: Time concerns; instructors' availability; Friends distancing. Some students have expressed concern about their time management skills. In addition, challenges seemed to come from the excessive time spent on communication when attending an online study. Lack of contact with the instructors left many students in fear and gave them thoughts of withdrawal from the course. In conclusion, although face-to-face instruction is preferable, online teaching has enabled theory to be substituted for clinical settings, demonstrating that clinical practice is essential for nursing students' education.

**Keywords:** COVID-19, Students, Nursing, distance learning, teaching, qualitative research.

## **1. Introduction:**

COVID19 has officially defined as a pandemic by the World Health Organization (WHO) on March 11, 2020. To prohibit the outbreak from spreading further, governments across the world adopted self-isolation, social distance, and travel bans <sup>[1]</sup>. In preparation for the worldwide outbreak, several colleges and universities are obliged to transition to a distance learning system during the Spring 2020 semester to halt the virus's progress. Students faced several problems when they transitioned from face-to-face education to an online learning system. Technological infrastructure, technological assistance, timekeeping, educational environment, family, and job are among the concerns <sup>[2]</sup>. Nursing education is facing a change from traditional to distant learning. Students deemed university college education to be beneficial for their development in programs that used mixed teaching approaches with both distant and campus-based learning. A combined learning method combining campus-based learning with online learning may provide students with enhanced motivation in their education process concerning distance learning alone <sup>[3]</sup>. According to an assessment of the research, online nursing education is just as successful as traditional campus-based study. Furthermore, past research on the advantages and disadvantages of traditional campus-based learning and distance learning through digital resources for nursing education produced conflicting or consistent outcomes <sup>[4]</sup>.

## **2. Literature reviews:**

According to a definition of distance learning through digital technologies, distance learning is becoming more widely used in university education institutions across the globe. "The use of technologies to achieve, assist, and improve both learning and teaching, and major contributing

factors among learners and instructors employing online information [5]. Distance learning can help students make the transition from an educator strategy, in which courses are delivered in a one-way approach to a student approach, in which students engage with their lecturers and other students. Distance learning with electronic technologies can help with a wide range of learning scenarios and course material [6].

The utilization of distance learning as a teaching method is quite important. It allows students to decide when and how they seek to learn. According to the study, student nurses rated their distance online learning behaviour and outcomes as positive. Students indicated slight worries of infection in the school environment and elevated anxiety about infection in the healthcare setting, according to Lovric et al., [7], producing online learning is an effective choice to alleviate these concerns. In normal settings, there is a lot of evidence of distance learning. Students' academic progress is greatly improved by online learning, according to a meta-analysis of 28 publications on nursing students and 46 research on students in health and non-healthy fields. Participants' evidence-based practice competency self-efficacy in a practice sense of wonder and personal gain have also been demonstrated to improve with online learning. It is also beneficial to nurses as a way of continuous education, although it is unsatisfying if presented at work owing to distractions [8].

Students may study through their schedule and directly participate in conversations, arguments, and lateral thinking through online learning. The enormous distance learning that has occurred as a result of the COVID-19 epidemic, which has abruptly halted face-to-face communication between instructors and students, is a source of worry in this research. The influence of sudden distant learning on students' attitudes, engagement, and clinical education has been investigated in the literature [9]. The sudden distant learning has been acknowledged as helpful in streamlining the delivery of critical education, it also has several drawbacks, including context limitation, inadequate use of online technologies, and content distribution efficiency. The perceived ease with which students can use technologies is a predictor of their willingness to switch to distant learning [10].

Campus-based courses are an important aspect of nursing education learning. A campus-based focus strategy can take root in classroom instruction and spread throughout an organization or subject, causing resistance to new and emerging techniques and technology. Teachers' lack of expertise and understanding of using digital technologies while designing learning activities may be a challenge to remote learning implementation and integration in nursing school. Teachers' fears that distant education may decrease or replace traditional campus-based lectures may also have an impact on adoption [11]. Several institutions throughout the world were forced to change swiftly from traditional campus-based learning to distance learning using digital resources as a result of the COVID-19 breakout in spring 2020. This change caused considerable difficulties for both instructors and students, and it warrants additional research. Additional information about students' interactions with various teaching modalities, such as distant learning, is needed to improve nursing education instructional methods [11]. The goal of this study was to describe and evaluate nursing students' educational transition from traditional campus-based learning to online learning using digital resources.

### **3. Methods**

#### **3.1 Study Design**

A qualitative method was used, and inductive thematic analysis was presented for the purpose to understand the experiences and expectations of participants.

### **3.2 Research objectives**

This study aimed to contribute to online textbooks with a complete understanding of the online learning experiences and feedback from students. Students' experiences during the COVID-19 epidemic lockdown and after should assist in creating better education methods in future. In addition, this study also aimed to provide a comprehensive discussion of what steps can be taken to improve education delivery of online learning. Officially, this study was guided by semi-structured questions that started with asking students open questions and the answers of students guided the discussion. The discussions started with introductory questions about the lockdown, online learning discussion and experiences with online education.

### **3.4 The sitting**

This research study was conducted a few months after the lockdown of the year 2021. Then another interview session was performed with the same students after the lockdown. In Saudi Arabia, a Bachelor's in Nursing degree is four years. The students selected for this study were students of all ages and all levels studying Bachelor's Degree in Nursing. Participants were selected using a large sample variants strategy to obtain diverse and rich information that represented a major sociodemographic variable such as; gender, age, year of study and level of study. Before interviews students were given a link through the blackboard describing the process of interviews. If they agree to the study purpose and were given the information they can come for the interviews. In this study, none of the students involved refused to participate. Students were also invited to participate in a university student team, using a snowball sample. This process allowed us to create a sample by requesting each interviewer's suggestions of people who had the same or different views. This is the way to find a place for importantly knowledgeable informants. The field filling condition was used to obtain the number of required knowledge, an acceptable method for measuring sample size.

### **3.5 Data Collection**

Informal interviews were conducted to obtain information from the participants. Interviews took between 20 and 40 minutes for each participant. Semi-structured interviews are usually based on the text, in which the title and part of the questions were pre-configured, but also offer the opportunity to modify or add new queries to the interview. The most important aim was that interviews questions were fulfilling research objectives. Data were collected from 21 September 2021 to 20 January 2022. In this study, 127 students were interviewed. This study was performed a few months after the lockdown and after the lockdown. The interviews focused on the psychological and social impact of the lockdown and distant learning for learning and achieving outcomes that can be used to support, or not, the methods used in this study. All interviews were conducted after agreeing on a date and time with the participant. Interviews were recorded and notes were taken. Writing notes in detail was performed immediately after the interviews. All interviews were conducted by experienced researchers. The interviews followed the changed script depending on the answers of the participants. Questions of interviews dealt with common aspects of lockdown, teaching methods, distance learning, and useful learning methods.

### **3.6 Data Analysis**

This study proposed a few phases of data analysis, first one was to find the repetitive words, then generate initial codes; look for themes; then thematic reviews; after this define and naming themes; the last step was to report themes. Recorded conversations were transcribed into texts. Once written, discussions were entered into MAXQDA 12.

Transcript coding was completed once themes-themes were discussed by a team of researchers for confirmation. In the end, they did not participate and provided feedback on the findings. The study was reported by the Consolidated Criteria for Reporting of Appropriate Research.

### **3.7 Ethical approval**

This study was permitted by the Research Ethics Commission from King Khalid University approval number is ECM#2021-5717. All participants received a link of invitation to be interviewed through blackboard. Also, a document of information about the purpose and process of the research was attached to the link, which could be retained later. They were advised that their participation was voluntary. They can ask and discuss any part they do not understand before the interview. Each participant was given a code to keep their information anonymous. The study was voluntary, and all student participants who received a link to the invitation to take part in the study, came to the interviewer's office to complete a consent form, obtain a contact form and book a meeting time.

#### **3.7.1 participants' consent**

The participant gave their consent to participate in this study, Helsinki has been followed for human subjects.

### **3.8 Study rigour**

This study followed a few steps to maintain its credibility. The author explored the methods and questions used in the discussions and whether the questions helped to raise issues related to this study. The author has created a practical text of body language, the vocabulary used, and the voice of participants. The same words as readers used to analyse chat data to maintain the authenticity of their voice. Reflexivity was combined with recording the emotions and expressions of students' responses. This was done shortly after the interview and was used to close the information gap and avoid misinterpretations. Asking students to repeat their answers or clarify what they meant by other statements, helped to keep the research strong throughout the process.

## **4. Results**

One hundred twenty-seven interviews were held, and they took between 20 and 40 minutes. In short, the discussions were in line with the most advanced learning years (3rd and 4<sup>th</sup>-year students). In this study, participants formed a large proportion of 100 females and 27 males. Participants' age ranges from 20- 23 years. The sample is composed of 43 students enrolled in their first or 2nd year of the program. The rest of the students were from the 3<sup>rd</sup> and 4<sup>th</sup> years of their study program.

Four major themes emerged from data analysis and they are arranged as follows: Time concerns; instructors' availability; Friends distancing.

### **4.1. Time concerns**

Some students have expressed concern about their time management skills. Challenges seemed to come from the excessive time spent on communication when attending an online study.

Many students felt they did not manage time for all studied subjects and a few students failed to pass the program requirement during the online study.

*"I was unable to do all the assignments and I failed a few quizzes, I didn't have time to do*

*everything at once”.*

*“...was no easy task to manage time, I preferred the face to face education”*

Finding time to study at home was another challenge for students, as many of them described how they had all family members gathered in the house during the lockdown made it very difficult to study or perform the requested tasks.

*“I had to do a lot of house chores, barely find time to study”*

*“I pegged my tutors to give me extra time to submit an assignment or to rewrite a quiz, it was impossible to submit every task on time”*

Many students agreed on the difficulty to deal with some online new aspects of learning such as blackboard. They spent a few weeks learning how to respond to a question, submit assignments, receive comments from their tutors and respond to them and solve exams.

*“Many weeks spent on learning the education system when I understood everything it was close to the end of the semester”*

*“Face to face was much better, I had time to study and do the exams on papers, online schooling was so sudden and I had few weeks to learn the programs and submit a task”*

*“Referring back to these days of online learning, a nightmare, it was hectic, I had to learn the online system given from the college so fast, didn't have the time to do everything at once”.*

#### **4.2. Instructors' availability**

Instructors' accessibility was an important theme in the data, and that the tutor was present and accessible became a powerful influence on the student experience. Some experiences were positive and many were unpleasant.

For example, students stated they appreciated the fast response of their instructors and other students indicated that the lack of response from their instructors made them stressed and fell behind.

*“I thought my instructors were able to respond to my inquiries and need for assistance quickly, at times it took weeks for them to answer a question”*

*“Memories only take me to the negative side of distance learning, I was on the edge of my nerves every day, I didn't get much assistance from the instructors”*

*“I received assistance from one or two instructors but most of them were reluctant to assist or they didn't get to my assistance until it was late in the semester”*

Unfortunately, not all students had optimistic experiences with their teachers, and so their online experience suffered. Lack of contact with the instructors left many students in fear and gave them thoughts of withdrawal from the course.

### **4.3. Friends distancing**

Differences in learning styles also highlighted that college students had different needs at each level in the program. In particular, the students from the 2<sup>nd</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> year level of dependency on their friends in learning were high. Males appeared to have better experiences than females in distance learning and did not mind to be apart from their friends. It was found that the level of knowledge of online learning and English may indicate their inability to engage in independent learning. In addition, differences in attitudes reflect different communication needs and interactions between different students, meaning that first-year students rely heavily on teachers and their friends, are armed with strong communication skills, are and highly prone to interact with their peers.

*"I couldn't call my friend often because her mother won't allow her to speak much on the phone, I thought I could get my friend to explain to me the assignments, she is way better in English, we used to study together in college.*

*"I used to be in my first year in the course, it was hard to be apart from my friends we used to help one another in studying"*

*"We used to study in groups for one hour or two in the college before the lockdown, lockdown meant online schooling, so I knew I was in trouble, am glad we are back to college again".*

### **5. Discussion:**

The global medical issue caused by the COVID-19 pandemic has affected every aspect of humanity, such as education. Crawford et al. [12] investigated worldwide 1st-wave pandemic feedback. Higher education institutions responded in a variety of ways, varying from no reaction to quick revision for totally online courses. Furthermore, students in this study who were accustomed to traditional learning/teaching and were at the start of a season expressed mixed feelings about the rapid change. At times, all of the students in the current study experienced fear of the unknown and uncertainties, powerlessness, pressures, and exhaustion. Other research done under normal settings found similar feelings about e-learning becoming the primary mode of instruction [13].

When nursing students were presented with the use of computers as part of their studies, Kenny [14] published details of many studies demonstrating that they felt dread, stress, dissatisfaction, and emotions of pressure. The majority of the students in the current study were concerned about achieving the clinical courses' skills and targeted learning goals. They expressed concern that despite the use of a variety of platforms and tactics, such as educational content, scenarios, and case analysis, they would not be able to master the abilities they needed to practice. In other words, students' mental toughness in clinical status was not enhanced by distant learning.

According to Dost et al. [15], the absence of fast feedback may raise concerns that online learning may undermine students' practical skills and confidence. Other challenges raised by students in the latest research were information technology access, difficulties, and anxiety. Some said they didn't have their computers at home, or if they did, they would have to share them with other relatives and family members who were either students or worked from home. Others voiced dissatisfaction with the exorbitant cost of internet access, while many others expressed dissatisfaction with the weak and sporadic connection, which prevented them from enrolling in

classes, taking tests, or submitting files and assignments. These issues have also been documented in the literature. Technical concerns upset learners and limit their learning, according to [16]. The idea of being assisted, on the other hand, was seen as more of a problem than the real technical difficulties.

The relevance of peer connections and student-teacher interactions as important to students' educational success is emphasized in theoretical approaches. Universities have shuttered as a result of the epidemic, which has imposed social distance. Due to social alienation and university closures, physical appearance is lacking, and relationships are mostly conducted through technological channels. The students ached for their friends and the "good old university days." Students see their contact with friends and professors as crucial to their learning; nonetheless, many find social media to be unsatisfying. In the literature, many have expressed similar emotions. According to Raymond et al. [17], one reason people hate online learning is the lack of face-to-face interaction with other students and instructors [17].

In addition, the students in this study gave some suggestions for making online learning more pleasurable for them. They requested that the institution design a system capable of handling the expected number of users, making it easy to publish homework and take tests. They also sought e-learning training classes throughout their first year of study. They also asked for professional technicians to assist them with technical issues as required. These suggestions, on the other hand, are not unique to the kids in the research. Many studies have come up with similar suggestions [18].

### **Conclusion:**

After adjusting to the confined circumstances and establishing new online teaching techniques for the first week, the students settle into a new routine. E-learning imposes extra restrictions on senior students, who have employment and family commitments, live in a rural setting, and have restricted access to digital. Although face-to-face instruction is preferable, online teaching has enabled theory to be substituted for clinical settings, demonstrating that clinical practice is essential for nursing students' education. The online completion of lessons is only one aspect of online education. Due to the uncertain future of a short-term control of COVID-19, the affected parties should now start working on this for the following school year. Given that schooling, before COVID-19 is now a thing of the past, this research has several significance for nursing research and education. Nursing teachers must be ready to teach online and to create opportunities that enhance teaching and learning as well as the development of effective and useful communications, particularly among students. Nursing students should get ongoing education and help in professional nursing to advance and be prepared with the learning strategies required to provide safe evidence-based practice. Hospitals should be aware of this situation when hiring this cohort of students who pass the licensing examinations and factor it into their orientation program to ensure patient safety.

**Limitations** We should know that the sample studied may not represent the reference population, which can affect the generalization of the results.

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**Conflicts of Interest** The author declares that there is no conflict of interest.

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