Evaluation of university academic support services as perceived by nursing students during COVID-19 pandemic

Maha Alreshidi [1], Najoud Alrashidi [1], Petelyne Pangket [1, *], Van Andrew Villaverde [1], Jordan Llego [2], Lea Dando [1], Enrique Mina [1], Mohammad Alboliteeh [1]

[1]College of Nursing, University of Hail, Hail, Saudi Arabia
[2]Faculty of Nursing, Chulalongkorn University, Bangkok, Thailand

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ABSTRACT

The outbreak of COVID-19 prompted the temporary closure of schools, leading to the implementation of online classes and the restriction of face-to-face sessions. These measures were taken in response to concerns about the potential transmission of the virus among students, which could result in increased mortality and morbidity rates. However, the introduction of online classes necessitated schools to allocate resources for this transition, leading to limitations on other academic support services provided to students. This unique and extensive disruption of school services served as the impetus for the current study, which aimed to investigate how nursing students perceived the support services offered by the school during the COVID-19 pandemic. Employing a quantitative-comparative approach and convenience sampling, data were collected from nursing students enrolled in the academic year 2021-2022, with exclusion criteria applied to those who were absent or on leave during the study's execution. The respondent pool comprised 56.90 percent of female participants, with the majority in their second year of study. Overall, the participants held an effective perception of the university's academic support during the COVID-19 outbreak, as indicated by a mean score of 2.675. Statistical analyses, including one-way ANOVA and Post Hoc Tukey HSD tests, were conducted to assess the potential influence of gender and year level on nursing students' perceptions of the academic support provided by the University of Hail. The results revealed that gender did not significantly impact students' perceptions, regardless of their year level. However, the students' year level exerted a considerable influence on their perceptions, with fourth-year students displaying significantly different views compared to those in their second and third years. In conclusion, this study demonstrates that nursing students perceived the academic support offered by the University during the COVID-19 pandemic as effective. Despite the challenges posed by the transition to online classes, the institution's support services were generally well-regarded by the participants.

1. Introduction

On March 11, 2020, the World Health Organization (WHO) declared the coronavirus disease (COVID-19) pandemic a global emergency. During that time, the number of cases outside of China had surged by 13-fold. WHO Director-General, Dr. Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus, predicted that the virus undeniably impacted all countries across the globe (Cucinotta and Vanelli, 2020). Until a recent point in time, WHO has reported a global rise in COVID-19 morbidity and mortality. Subsequently, the pandemic and associated containment measures posed a profound challenge to interpersonal and communal interactions, resulting in considerable harm to social relations. The implementation of social distancing measures and isolations significantly contributed to this adverse impact on social dynamics (Singh and Singh, 2020; OECD, 2020; WHO, 2023).

COVID-19 has posed a significant threat to educational systems. It altered teaching and learning at all higher educational institutions [HEIs]. The IAU

Global Survey Report (Daniel, 2020) reported that two-thirds of the HEIs had their classroom instructions replaced by distance teaching and learning. The movement from face-to-face to distance classes has been challenging, including access to technology infrastructures, distance learning competencies and pedagogies, and requirements for specialized fields of study. Furthermore, various studies illustrate the massive impact of the COVID-19 epidemic on HEIs worldwide (Marinoni et al., 2020). For example, the change to online learning in nursing education has had a significant impact on the nurse educator's job since the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic (Rose, 2020; Ahmed et al., 2020; Crawford et al., 2020; Toquero, 2020; Ali, 2020). Academics in the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) of the Arab States, including Kuwait and Saudi Arabia, offered various viewpoints, perspectives, and actions on how academia has stepped up for the global fight against COVID-19, both professionally and socially (Al-Taweel et al., 2020).

In the meantime, the provision of academic support services to students has become an enormous challenge to numerous higher education institutions during the COVID-19 pandemic (OECD, 2020). Several studies reveal that student academic support plays a vital role at the college level and is often associated with a higher level of adjustment in the university (Thompson and Mazer, 2009; Awang et al., 2014). For example, Yau et al. (2012) identified the dimensions of university support necessary for students' transition. They also found that social adjustment positively impacts academic and psychological adjustment. The study of Avcı and Doğan (2020), on the other hand, showed that determining the perceived university support of first-year students is an influential factor in the adjustment processes, which directly impact the psychological, social, and academic performances of students.

There are no studies relevant to this issue in Hail, Saudi Arabia. However, the above facts and the necessity to assess the academic support services provided by the University of Hail to its nursing students during the COVID-19 outbreak have prompted and inspired this current study's conduct. The researchers hypothesized that the nursing students' perception of the Academic support services provided by Hail University during the COVID-19 pandemic has no significant difference between and among the nursing students across their year level. Moreover, the result of this study will provide insight into the basis for improving academic support services in the whole kingdom of Saudi Arabia.

2. Materials and methods

The research design employed in this study involved a quantitative-comparative approach to assess the academic support services received by nursing students amid the COVID-19 pandemic. The study participants consisted of students from the second-year to fourth-year levels of the Bachelor of Science in Nursing program, during the first semester of the academic year 2021-2022. Convenience sampling was utilized, and only students present during the data-gathering process were included as respondents. Notably, individuals on sick leave or emergency leave were excluded from the study.

Data collection relied on a questionnaire as the primary tool, comprising two parts. The first part collected demographic information such as gender and year level, while the second part consisted of 21 questions related to the university's academic support services. For this study, the researchers adapted the Student Perception of University Structure and Support tool (SPUSS) developed by Wintre et al. (2009). The Likert scale was adjusted, using the following scales: Not effective (1), least effective (2), effective (3), and very effective (4).

To establish the reliability of the modified scaling, a pilot test was conducted involving twenty-five nursing educators at the University of Hail. The internal consistency of the instrument was measured using Cronbach's Alpha, resulting in a reliability coefficient of 0.81, indicating relatively high reliability.

Before proceeding with data gathering, approval was sought from the dean of the nursing college. Once approval was obtained, the researcher identified an instructor-in-charge for each year level and requested permission to collect data from their respective classes. A brief orientation was conducted to inform the nursing students of the study's objective. Subsequently, the students were given 10-15 minutes to complete the questionnaire, with the researchers present in the classroom to address any queries regarding the instrument.

Following data collection, the information was collated and analyzed using SPSS version 26. Descriptive statistics such as frequency and percentage were employed to present the demographic profile of the respondents. Additionally, the mean was calculated to gauge the perception of the respondents regarding the effectiveness of academic support services during the COVID-19 pandemic. Standard deviation and independent sample t-tests were used to explore potential differences in perception between male and female nursing students. Furthermore, an analysis of variance (ANOVA) was performed to identify significant variations in perception across different year levels. Post hoc Tukey HSD test was also applied to pinpoint significant differences between each year level in terms of their perception of academic support services during the pandemic.

3. Results of the study

Table 1 shows the demographic profile of the respondents. Based on the data, most of the respondents who answered the questionnaire are females comprising 56.90%, while their male

counterpart comprises only 43.10%. On the year level of the students, the 2nd year classes have the highest number with 73 (38.80%), followed by the fourth-year numbering 68 or 36.20%. The third-year classes have the least number of participants, 47 or 25% of all the respondents.

Table 1: Demographic profile (N=188)

Variable		Frequency	Percentage
Gender	Male	81	43.10
	Female	107	56.90
Year Level	Second	73	38.80
	Third	47	25.00
	Fourth	68	36.20

The values, mean of 2.675 and ±SD=0.41 in Table 2, indicate that the perception of nursing students on the level of academic support services provided by the university during the COVID-19 pandemic is effective.

Table 2: Perception of nursing students on the level of effectiveness of the academic support services (N=188)

Mean	±SD	Interpretation
2.675	0.41	Effective

Table 3 displays the results of the one-way ANOVA and Post Hoc Tukey HSD tests determining whether there is a relevant variation in the nursing students' perception regarding the effectiveness of the academic support services during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Table 3: Difference between the perception of nursing students on the effectiveness of academic support services across their profile (N=188)

Variable	Test	df	Significance
Gender	(t) -0.695	186	0.488
Level	(F) 6.145	SSb= 2	0.003
		SSw= 185	
		SSt= 187	
Post hoc Tukey HSD	Mean Difference	Significance	
Year level			
Y2- Y3	-0.161	0.082	
Y2-Y4	-0.231	0.002	
Y3-Y4	-0.070	0.002	

When the respondents are grouped according to gender, the resulting p-value is 0.488, which means there is no significant difference in their perceptions. In other words, the perceptions of male nursing students do not vary so much from that of females. However, when they are grouped according to their year level in the school, the one-way ANOVA test reveals a p-value of 0.003(F=6.145) which shows a significant difference.

The Post Hoc Tukey HSD test was used to determine from which year-level significant differences exist. When the second year (Y2) is likened to the third year (Y3), the p-value is 0.082, which indicates no significant difference. But if Y2 and Y3 are paired separately with the fourth years' (Y4), both pairings yield the exact p-value of 0.002, which indicates a significant difference. With the above results in this study, relevant variation in the perception of the nursing students on the effectiveness of the academic support services during the COVID-19 pandemic, therefore, appears between the 4th year and 2nd year and between 4th year and 3rd year levels.

4. Discussion

At the height of the COVID-19 Pandemic, the survey was carried out to understand better the students' impressions of the academic framework and support provided by their university. Using the Statistical Analysis of the Mean approach, the survey findings suggested that the university's academic services for nursing students are satisfactory or adequate and, as perceived by the students, effective. The educational services, such as the online classes provided by the University amidst protracted suspension of "face-to-face" lessons because of the pandemic, as generally felt by the students, are reasonable. Akin to the investigation by Wilkins and Balakrishnan (2013) and Kakada et al. (2019), students assessed themselves to be satisfied with the support services their school provided for them, albeit in a normal situation where there is no pandemic or massive suspension of classes. In recent and related studies, Zeeshan et al. (2020), Jena (2020), Johnson et al. (2020), and Al-Maskari et al. (2022) found that university students during the COVID-19 pandemic had some difficulties transitioning to online classes. Still, students were satisfied with their institution's technical help. Their finding is consistent with the result of this current study. However, the academic support services provided by Hail University to nursing students during the COVID-19 were perceived by them as just as "effective," which can be interpreted as needing more enhancement. Consequently, the researchers urge Saudi Arabian universities to provide continued and improved support for all students, even in times of crisis.

As per result, a significant difference in the perception exists between nursing students belonging to the fourth year and those from the third year. At the same time, the fourth years' perceptions significantly differ from those of students from the second years' classes. In such a case, the null hypothesis is rejected. However, the null hypothesis is accepted in the case between the second-year and third-year students, whose perceptions on the effectiveness of the academic support they received from the university during the COVID-19 pandemic are statistically not significant. It is interesting to note that the students from the second-and third-year class have the same level of perception while statistically differing from those of the fourth-year class. If it is the support from the university through its faculty and staff to the 1st, 2nd, and 3rd-year students that are assessed, then it is like the findings of Maymon et al. (2019) and Friedlander et al. (2007). In Maymon et al. (2019) and Friedlander et al. (2007) study, it was indirectly mentioned that university students, particularly first-year undergraduates, received occasional support from

faculty and staff, which impacted their performance during their first few courses in the academic program. It is proposed that a second study be done to identify what characteristics, if any, contribute to the effectiveness of the assessment of students' perceptions toward the academic support services provided during the COVID-19 outbreak. To ensure that students are satisfied with the educational support services, educational institutions should ensure that they receive regular help throughout their academic careers, particularly during their early years in the academe, by establishing a student support system. In addition to obtaining full assistance from their university mentors, students will attain their highest performance levels while enrolling in and completing their academic degrees.

5. Conclusion

The present study reveals that nursing students perceive the academic services provided by the university during the COVID-19 pandemic as effective, adequate, and favorable. Nonetheless, these perceptions vary depending on the students' year level. More specifically, a notable distinction exists between the perceptions of fourth-year nursing students and those of second and third-year students combined. To validate and corroborate the findings of this study in other academic disciplines, a parallel study could be conducted.

Compliance with ethical standards

Ethical considerations

Orientation regarding the research objectives was conducted before the instrument was given to the participating nursing students. Part of the orientation was the collection of consent to participate in the study. The consent contains the basic rules on confidentiality of sharing and handling of information. It was stated in the consent that participation in the study as respondents is voluntary and that anyone from them can withdraw anytime they feel uncomfortable answering the questions or have other reasons not to finish the questions in the tool. It was reiterated that respondents' information would be kept confidential, and their respective identities would not be disclosed to protect their privacy. The respondents will also be informed of the result of the study for their information.

Conflict of interest

The author(s) declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

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