

Reflective Writing of New Graduate Students: Their Challenges and Experiences in an Open and Distance Education

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Abstract

The study was conceptualized out of the program educators' reflections on coping and adjustment experiences of new graduate students' transition into their first year of learning in an open and distance education graduate program in nursing. This study explored the questions raised by students during their first year in the program and looked more closely into their experiences and coping that they did in the open and distance education mode in their written reflections during their first year in the program.

The objectives of this research were to identify the challenges and learning experiences revealed in reflective assignments written by new graduate students undertaking an open and distance e-learning education in their first year in an open university in the Philippines and use the written reflections of the students to construct new strategies and practices for the development of the program for the future students.

Keywords: *e-learning, reflections, challenges, experiences*

Introduction

Studying through open and distance learning (ODL) can be problematic for any student, and to ensure that all students in ODL have a good learning experience and succeed, institutions established student-support as one of its components. However, as the demand for ODL continuously increases, there have been issues raised regarding the learning mode. Many studies have focused on the advantages and disadvantages of learning in an open and distance education but only a few focused on the ODL students' experiences in the system. This study explored the questions raised by students during their first year in the program and look more closely into their experiences and coping that they did in the open and distance education mode.

As educators, there is a need to know the challenges encountered by the new graduate students to be able to identify certain problems in the courses offered. Their good and bad experiences will also help educators and other staff in an open university to understand what they are going through, what strategies are working and which are not, which area needs improvement, and what actions need to be enhanced and/or retained. Reflective writing is a good tool to know the feelings, opinions, and reactions of the students towards what they experience in a new mode of education which is distance and open learning.

Objectives

The objectives of the study were to:

1. Identify the challenges and learning experiences revealed in reflective assignments written by new graduate students undertaking an open and distance e-learning education in their first year in an open university; and
2. Use the reflections of the students to construct new strategies for the development of the program in an open and distance learning education for future students.

Review of Related Studies

Open and Distance Learning

Open and distance learning (ODL) is now seen as a legitimate means through which an effective education can be provided (Fozdar & Kumar, 2006). The increased demand has seen ODL becoming an accepted part of mainstream education in both developed and developing countries (Moore & Tait, 2002). ODL as a delivery system provides learners with autonomy in terms of time, technology, and material, also, ODL institutions have developed policies of openness with regard to entrance requirements offering opportunities of learners without access to conventional institutions (Fozdar, 2015).

There are many factors that support that open and distance learning has potential as a means of educating students, first is because of wider access and cost-efficiency. Second is the rapid advancements in educational technologies, like availability of information and communication technologies (ICT) which has given rise to new opportunities for sharing information, resources, as well as experiences, and providing networking opportunities with peers, tutors, professors and the institution itself (Fozdar & Kumar, 2006).

ODL answers the demands of students within and across national borders to be able to have an education without having to relocate and give up work (Evans & Shortall, 2011). According to Moran and Rumble (2004), distance education is more cost-effective and can take place while continuing full-time employment. They also concluded that ODL could be an effective way of providing education for the development of skills required for an untrained workforce. Flexibility in distance learning programs gives chance to study without interfering with personal and social life; with distance learning courses, students can complete their course work from just about anywhere (Vlasenko & Bozhok, n.d.)

According to Komba, D.A., Komba,W., and Senkondo (2006), open learning is a much wider concept than distance education but it is much more difficult to implement since it encompasses all forms of education and training and it can take place within multiple modes. As such, it can be conducted parallel to or integrated with conventional education and training. Open learning refers to a philosophy of learning that is quality-assured, open to people, methods, places, and ideas, is learner-centered, and satisfaction to the person's circumstances and requirements (Angara et al., 2010) while distance education is an educational process in which all or most of the teaching is conducted by someone geographically removed from the learner, with all or most of the communication between teachers and learners being conducted through electronic or print mediums (UNESCO, 2006).

Fozdar (2009) shared the experience of an institution and assessed the potential of the ODL system in skills-development related activities. He examined the role of ODL system in providing education in the development of skills. The author stated that experience would be helpful in understanding the effectivity of the ODL system especially in offering the skill-based program. He also stated that ODL institutions have established strongly and also created extensive infrastructure and reach in India. The research finding provides a framework for offering a skill-based program through open and distance learning.

In the Philippines, ODL services are most pervasive at the graduate level (Largoza, 2003). The use of ODL in the basic and technical-vocational sub-sectors is substantially underdeveloped (Largoza, p. 67). Distance education in the Philippines is provided by a number of institutions, including two publicly-funded ODL providers. Online learning courses are mostly being offered at undergraduate and graduate levels (Madarang, 2004). The most established universities and colleges that have the infrastructure and foundation of quality education offer ODL since it is important to consider the credibility of the institution to offer such online courses and not to mention the financial resources needed (Arcaina, 2005).

OdeL students

Open and distance learning provides openness to students, it offers opportunities to individuals who are disadvantaged because of their location, gender, or economic constraints (Fozdar, 2015). Student attitudes and perceptions on the course instructor, instructors' expertise with technology and ability to overcome interactive problems have been found to be important factors that can influence distance education experience (Salisbury et al., 2002). Murphy and Crosser (2010) stated that one of the characteristics of students in distance education is low self-regulation.

According to McGrath (1995), distance learners have greater freedom to choose how to learn. In terms of theory and practice, Aldred (1996) stated that ODL students have greater opportunities to put theory into practice as they are presented with opportunities to shape their learning so that it is relevant to who they are and where they are at any given time. However, Broady (1995) noted that there are difficulties in developing learner autonomy and that theory, in particular, is discouraging when tackled alone. But despite this concern, Evans and Shortell (2011) believed that modern ODL can encourage learner autonomy through the use of new technologies since they allow learners to carry out worldwide online searches for learning resources and the ease of communication by email allows for learners to consult quickly if the students are having problems. In line with communication, Hyland (2001) pointed out that feedback is very important to distant learners since it may be their only opportunity to get information on their performance.

Bantayan (2007), stated that ODL is not only an advantage logistics-wise but also a benefit for the students in terms of learning. It is claimed that students get more efficient learning since there is more collaboration with colleagues in discussing subjects or courses and the program is more learner-centered. It is also claimed that students undergoing online learning are more motivated to learn and they develop more independence, discipline, and responsibility (Madarang, 2004). But of course, to be able to maximize the potential of ODL, students should be ready and must have a working knowledge of technology, they must understand the content and think critically, they must express themselves competently, especially in the written word in order to contribute to the discussions online (Teehankee, 1999).

A study by Evans and Shortell (2011) compared the advantages, disadvantages, and experiences

of ODL and On-Campus (OC) students who have completed the same Master's degree program in Teaching English at a British university. The results show that ODL students are more satisfied than OC students with their mode of study and ODL is a viable way of course delivery. The study also noted some disadvantages, especially in terms of communication. In some cases, ODL students experience isolation and lack of support from other students and teachers but they accepted it as a part of their choice and was able to strategize to overcome this problem. Overall, the study concluded that ODL students show contentment with their mode of education.

Another study done by Fozdar (2015) in India National Open University, aimed to develop a program evaluation instrument that can address the unique aspects of ODL science program and carry out a feedback survey using developed instrument in order to understand the profile of undergraduate learners, assess the adequacy, efficiency and usefulness of the print materials and suggest different mechanisms to improve overall teaching and learning environment of the B.S. learners based on the feedback data. The survey findings indicate that students need more counseling sessions and learners were not satisfied

Reflective Writing

Reflective practice is widely used as an important attribute to promote, develop, and foster students in different education programs (Bain, Ballantyne, Packer, & Mills, 1999). Hume (2008) traced the development of student journals over the years that was introduced into a tertiary science education course for pre-service teachers to promote enhanced learning. The findings of the research indicate that students' reflective skills improved and resulted in more focused thinking. The results of the reflection of the students varied but it gave the author a clear sense of direction and purpose in her own professional growth since she was able to modify her teaching approach based on the students' needs.

Thinking about one's experiences is believed to enhance professional learning and growths by helping students to develop an educational philosophy that will guide and improve themselves in teach (Wallace & Loudon, 2000). A more structured approach of reflective writing targets student learning of skills and can result in higher quality thinking about teaching and learning (Moore, 2005).

A self-reflection paper done by Mendoza (2013) tackled the state of openness of an Open University in the Philippines. It describes and explains the elements of the openness of the university and the causes and solutions to problems and concerns based on the four parameters of openness which were also described in her paper. The self-reflection of the Open University was based on the results of the survey among the authors' peers and it targeted the viewpoints of the OU academic personnel.

Fish (1991) stated that nursing and care training has a huge emphasis on research and proof-based practice but frequently the trainees face increasingly complex, uncertain, and multifaceted realities of practice which do not generally fit into examination and research; this is why reflection can help regardless of whether students are under training or are qualified professionals, to understand situations. It can help the students increase their new learning and can raise numerous points and inquiries that could help professors/lecturers to do an action plan (Burrows, 1998). The concept of reflective practice has been adopted by the nursing profession as the dominant model for professional practice. By encouraging reflection on practice issues, the practitioner's

skills, knowledge, and professional values will be enhanced and career development and lifelong learning will be promoted (UKCC, 1996).

Methodology

Research Design

This study employed a qualitative research design using the Gibbs Reflective Cycle, a reflection model by Professor Graham Gibbs, as a framework to formulate questions to collect the necessary information from the participants of the study.

Research Locale

The data collection was conducted online through the portal for students of the graduate program in nursing in an open university in the Philippines.

Participants

The participants of the study were graduate students who completed their first year in a graduate program in nursing in an open university in the Philippines. The samples were recruited through convenience sampling. A total of 13 graduate students participated in the study.

Research Methods

The study utilized Gibbs' Reflective Cycle as a framework to formulate the questions used to explore on the reflections of the graduate students on their experiences and the challenges they encountered in an open and distance learning education. The background information of the students, their feelings, thoughts, and good and bad experiences were elicited by means of an online self-administered questionnaire.

Plan for Data Analysis

The study utilized qualitative data analysis in order to highlight the significant points brought up by the participants regarding their experiences during their first year in an open and distance learning environment.

Scope and Limitations

The study focused on the experiences of students enrolled in a graduate program in nursing in an open university in the Philippines. The respondents were recruited from the enrolled graduate students who were currently in their first year in the program. Graduate students from other programs were excluded. Thus, the findings of this study may not be applicable to all graduate students and is only representative of graduate students in nursing.

Ethical Considerations

The study was conducted in compliance with the Data Privacy Act of 2012. The study was explained in detail to the participants, discussing the purpose, objectives of this study, benefits, and risks of

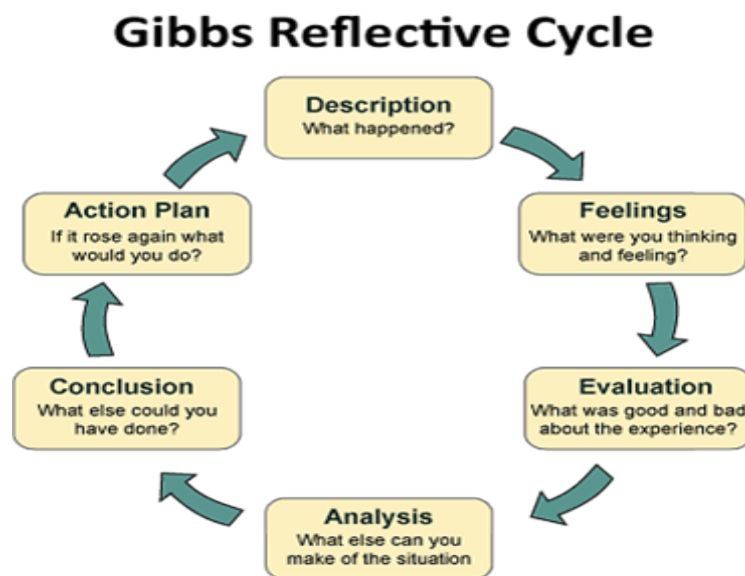
participation as well as the expectations from the participants. Informed consent was collected from all of the participants prior to data collection. The confidentiality of different information was ensured throughout the research process.

Conceptual Framework

The study utilized Gibbs’ Reflective Cycle or Model by Professor Graham Gibbs. It is a theoretical model often used as a framework in coursework that requires reflective writing (McGregor & Cartwright, 2007). All the data needed for the study such as background information, feelings, thoughts, and good and bad experiences of the individual were known and used for evaluation, analysis, and conclusion and for making future action plans.

The Gibbs’ reflective cycle was inspired partly by Kolb’s learning cycle that enables to effectively reflect on incidents and occurrences and learn from them (University of Bradford, 2010). Gibbs’ proposes that reflection takes place after an experience. The cycle provides a structure that generally guides the process of reflecting. The framework consists of cue questions, based on key concepts and provides a checklist for learners to work through answering and considering the cue questions as they progress. Gibbs’ also describes the application of the reflective cycle to a variety of educational methods including case studies, games, role plays and other simulations (Gibbs, 1988).

Gibbs’ reflective cycle is a popular model for reflection and it includes six stages of reflection, presented below. The internal dimensions of the theory reflect its aim and intent, which is to describe the reflection process in education. The system of relations in the theory is cyclical, and the starting point of the reflection process is defined and six stages are interdependent and each informs the next (Dye, 2011).



Gibbs, G. (1988). *Gibb’s Reflective Cycle. Learning by Doing: A guide to teaching and learning methods.* Oxford Polytechnic: Oxford

Figure 1. Gibb’s Reflective Cycle

The first part of the cycle is description, this includes background information and factual description of events; it focuses on the information that is relevant. The next part is feeling, this where feelings and thoughts about the experience are discussed. For the evaluation, this is the section that may include the theory and the work of other authors and discuss how well the thing went. The next section is analysis, it is the most important part, especially for higher level writing; this is where someone considers what might have helped or hindered the event and compare experiences with others. In conclusion, it is important to acknowledge, what could have been done, what is learned from the experience and consider other responses to improve things further. Lastly, the action plan sums up everything about the reflection, this also includes what strategies can be made or actions to be done to improve for next time (Dye, 2011).

The strengths of Gibbs' reflective cycle are: it is evaluated as a well-structured and easy model to follow in reflecting on events in clinical practice (Powley, 2013). This framework can be helpful to students at the beginning of a reflective work but should not be used continuously since it does not foster deeper reflection (Moon, 2007).

The purpose of the model is to explore different and new ideas and approaches towards different things, as well as to link in practice and theory by observing or applying knowledge. It also aims at self-improvement by identifying strengths and weaknesses and takes action to be able to address them. The cycle can be really useful in making reflections through all phases of an experience or activity.

Discussions

Among the first-year graduate students, 13 participants submitted their reflections.

Table 1: Participants' Profile

Profile	Frequency	Percentage
Sex		
Male	4	36.4%
Female	9	69.2%
Age		
Age 21-40	11	84.6%
Age 41-60	2	15.4%
Major		
Nursing Administration	8	61.6%
Maternal and Child Nursing	1	7.7%
Adult Health Nursing	4	30.8%
Gerontology and Geriatrics Nursing	0	0

Table 1 presents the percentage distribution of participants according to their sex, age group, and major tracks. The data showed that the majority of the participants were female (69.2%, n=9) while

the male participants were only $n=4$, 36.4%. Data also showed that the majority of the participants were from ages 21 – 40 years with 84.6% ($n=11$) compared to the age group 41 – 60 years old with only 15.4% ($n=2$). This implies that the majority of graduate students were in their middle age years. The majority of the participants were from Nursing Administration track with 61.6% ($n=8$), followed by participants from Adult Health Nursing with 30.3% ($n=3$). There was one participant from Maternal and Child Nursing and no participant was from Gerontology and Geriatrics Nursing.

Favorable Experiences

The 13 participants had variations of answers when asked what they liked most in their first-year courses. One was that they were able to study wherever, whether at home or at their workplace at their own time but at the same time be able to interact with their colleagues and professors during face-to-face or virtual meetings. According to Hill & Song (2007), online studies have many benefits including convenience and flexibility and it is generally believed that online learning gives more control of the instruction to the learners. This was further supported by the study of Wang (2014) wherein students as well as teachers agreed that flexibility is the greatest advantage of open and distance education. However, flexibility in terms of time and space in open and distance education does not always have positive effects on the learning environment of students. Since the students are responsible for creating their own learning environment, there are no restrictions on space. However, Wang (2014) learned that the choice of location of students was due to the lack of a better alternative because of different circumstances (e.g. distractions, other obligations) and not because of the satisfactory learning environment.

In terms of time, it was found that students tended to spend more time on a course that is more flexible and is time-wise. Furthermore, students have the opportunity to learn at their own pace but this becomes an obstacle to collaborative efforts (e.g. group discussions). It is worthy to note that while flexibility is considered one of the benefits of distance education, it also has negative effects on the students' learning environment. The majority of the participants enjoyed the face-to-face meetings during clinical practicum or during orientations since they were used to this kind of socializing. Madarang (2004) stated that students need to develop the necessary social skills that are usually seen in the traditional setting and this is one of the drawbacks of distance learning since their students and lecturers cannot meet all the time.

Another aspect the students liked the most was the theory courses which helped them understand the theories in depth and appreciate their application in actual practice in their workplace. For the majority of the participants, the actual interaction or practicum was their best experience during their first year. For them, it was a great opportunity to study in the open university and the actual application of the theories they learned was a great experience since they were also able to meet their co-students and learn from them. It also made the students feel satisfied when they see their grades and learn that it was beyond their expectations. It made them feel that all their hard work paid off and it became a great motivation for them to do better in terms of both clinical and academic performance.

Studying in an open university made the students feel more independent even though at first they felt overwhelmed by all the things that they needed to do for their studies. This is also concluded in the research of Ryan (1997) that students learn to work well independently and without constant guidance and monitoring of an instructor. Another student stated that he/she liked rising to the challenge of planning and managing time to be able to balance his/her social life, job, and studies. In the long run, they were able to enjoy the experience of learning through distance education

and have better confidence in their own capabilities. The support coming from professors and batch mates were also beneficial in helping students complete their courses successfully.

One student wrote,

“My best experience is to experience typing beyond my skills since I’m not good with this. This distance learning changed my profession in a positive way.”

Nicolaescu (2016) said that psychologically, students feel more secure under instructors’ guiding before they get used to studying online courses. In spite of all this, the advantages of using technological means are beyond doubt. Also, a combination of the traditional, conventional face-to-face interaction with their teacher with modern techniques in the digital media may be a good transition step for a more independent study with adults.

Challenges

Despite the increasing popularity of ODL and its benefits, it cannot be denied that students who enroll have to face many challenges in studying this mode of education. Most of the students answered their least liked experience was that their queries were not answered immediately; it takes a week or a month before the professor’s reply. “Not getting a response to my queries especially the urgent ones are the worst.” For the participants, delayed feedback was hard since they were in distance learning education and did not have a face-to-face interaction with the professors every day unlike in a regular university that put them outside of their comfort zone. Since there were delayed responses, they tend to ask information to someone else and sometimes lead to confusion.

This was also stated in the study done by Hannes Guenter (2014), he stated that in many situations, delays in information exchange can have substantial negative consequences for workplace outcomes, especially when the overdue information is needed before further action can be taken and when time is crucial. Delays have proximal effects on people in that they provoke anger and frustration and cause interpersonal tensions.

Other problems such as poor internet connection, online interruptions, technical problems as well as password confusion were also bad experiences for the students for these causes many delays in finishing their tasks, it also delays communication with the professors. “Since we are in the province, power interruptions occur and online signals are not as strong. Portal closed on you during exams due to circumstances beyond your control is worst experience for me.” narrated by one of the participants. According to Vlasenko and Bozhok (n.d.), not every student knows how to attend virtual classrooms well and some of them do not have the hardware or software capability to receive videos and other materials via web.

Vlasenko and Bozhok (n.d.), stated in their article that one challenge in distance learning is the difficult technology and accessibility and it is a requirement that a student has a computer with continuous internet facility to be able to access their lessons. This problem was also discussed by Fedynich (2013), he stated that the lack of access either due to logistics or economic reasons, will exclude participants from the cyber class. This is a limitation for all online programs that are reliant on Internet access. For the students, assurance was needed that they would not miss anything for the courses.

According to Musifangi et al., (2015) in their research study on ODL students of the Zimbabwe Open University, that the most reported challenges of students in ODL were lack of sufficient time for study, difficulties in access and use of ICT, ineffective feedback and lack of study materials. Other authors like Zirnkle (2001) also documented challenges like inadequate feedback, poor teacher contact, isolation and poor student support service. Overall, it can be summed up that the main challenge of students in ODL is the lack of feedback and this may prompt more problems in distance learning.

Discipline

Successful students in ODL must be highly motivated and self-disciplined since the course may be unmonitored, the learners themselves have full responsibilities for proceeding with the course and evaluating their mastery of a skill or subject (Duffy, 1997). Kember (1989) argued that poor time management leads to other challenges such as learners' inability to integrate the demands of off-campus study with family, work and other social commitments. Majority of the participants answered that time management was their biggest adjustment when they started their program in an open university. They had to prioritize their responsibilities at work, at home, at school and their social relationships. They had to discipline themselves and change their work ethics to a higher degree to be able to meet deadlines and also be consistent in their work.

One participant wrote, "I manage to budget my time and make sure that I finish all the modules of the subject on time," while another one responded, "*I had to plan my schedule 2-3 weeks ahead of time to cope with reading and course works.*"

These were also what they found challenging during their first year. It is a struggle for them when subjects overlap and have the same deadlines for assignments or group work. During the first few months, it was difficult for them to manage time especially when they just relied on announcements online. Later on, students were able to cope with those challenges by learning how to use time wisely by sticking to their schedule and focus on their goals. The key to being able to overcome those challenges was learning to prioritize tasks and not be afraid to ask for help from colleagues, professors, friends, and family. One participant responded, "To cope with the challenges, I learned to prioritize my tasks. I assess which of my activities in the courses need more time to accomplish. I also organized them by classifying which of them are easier and which of them are more difficult."

According to the study conducted by Song et al. (2004), 62% of participants reported that time management of the learner is a key element in the success of online learning. Other factors that were perceived by the participants that could affect this outcome include comfort with online technology (75%) and motivation of the learner (62%). Musifangi et al. (2015), documented that 75% of students of Zimbabwe Open University agreed that one of the biggest challenges is the lack of sufficient time for study and conflicts between work and study schedule.

Strategies for the Development of the Program

Successful learning in every learning environment involves the use of effective learning strategies. Researchers have indicated that strategy use is important in online learning contexts (Hannafin,

et.al., 2003) in that online learning may present challenges to learners that they have not yet experienced in face-to-face classroom learning.

One participant wrote,

“I recommend that feedback on FMAs be provided because it will really help students like us in evaluating our performance in the given course during the semester. Feedback of FMAs will give us an idea if we understood the lessons properly and applied the concepts correctly, and if we’re able to perform well in the given course.”

Feedback on performance is so important that Gibbs and Simpson (2004) said that feedback to the students on their assignments was the single most powerful influence on student achievement.

Feedback can also be a way of communicating to students since it can be in the form of questions, suggestions and statements. Thus, feedback in certain FMAs should be provided to students since it will help them improve their work, know their strengths and weaknesses and do actions that will help them with their studies. Professors or faculty should provide feedback for students through e-mail or the student’s portal chatbox, even if it just short feedback or comment regarding their work will be helpful. A poll can also help since it can be integrated with Google forms and can be easily accessed online.

Delayed responses were the main problem for the students, their experiences regarding this matter lead them to think that they are being disregarded by the professors. This problem was also discussed by Hara & Kling (1999), The timing of responses from the instructor and peers in an online learning context is another challenge, the response from the instructor is often delayed. Some researchers suggested that time management strategies could help improve this communication problem. Instructors or professors should render time to respond to the queries of the students to avoid this problem. Also, setting guidelines for response may assist in this matter. Instructions on different tasks should be given ahead of time clearly by the professors, as well as the other important schedules to follow to avoid unnecessary questions and confusion on deadlines. It is also essential to have an efficient dissemination system in order to avoid confusions on important announcements.

One participant commented, “Some of the learning tools/website referrals are not working. Maybe modules need to be updated.” Resources take different forms, which include but are not limited to human resources and information resources (Hill & Hannafin, 2001). Online learning, with its unique characteristics, presents both opportunities and challenges to learners in terms of resource use. It is important for the program to always update the learning tools for the students since they rely on it for information. The modules should be reviewed and evaluated at least every year to check if it is updated, especially in this new age wherein there are many different trends rising. Giving or assigning students to watch or listen to short lectures can be also a learning tool.

The program should also provide opportunities for updating, retraining and personal enrichment of faculty members, training on the use of technology especially on the use of course sites and websites related to the courses. The program should also provide updated high-quality learning materials by pooling the best resources to provide a higher quality of education to learners and to avoid problems on modules which were previously discussed. The challenge right now is to further improve the guidelines to meet the needs of the learners.

Conclusions

This study explored the challenges and experiences of the new graduate students of a graduate program in nursing in an open university in the Philippines. Findings revealed that the biggest challenge the participants faced was disciplining themselves to stick to their time management plan. The best experience among the participants was being able to study at their own pace and at their workplace since it taught them to be more responsible and independent while the least liked experience was the delayed responses of the professors on their important queries. Strategies or plans of action were constructed according to the challenges brought up by the participants, specifically: (1) giving feedback to students using different online methods such as e-mail, student portal or poll; (2) setting guidelines for responses of instructors or professors; and (3) learning tool enhancement and module review. These strategies should be studied further to be able to enhance the learning experience and provide better quality education for future students in the open university.

Recommendations

It is recommended to know further the challenges and experiences of students in an open university, not just on graduate programs but also on undergraduate programs to be able to improve the open and distance learning education. It is important to review the strategic or action plans discussed in this research to be able to address their issues on the ODL system. Also, it is one step of providing students with a quality education that they deserve and meet their expectations of the institution.

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