The Academic
International Journal of Multidisciplinary Research

An Online Peer Reviewed / Refereed Journal
Volume 3 | Issue 5 | May 2025
ISSN: 2583-973X (Online)
Website: www.theacademic.in

Unlocking Genetic Learning Potential: A Qualitative Study on Multi-Omics Integration and Student Engagement

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ARTICLE DETAILS

Research Paper

Accepted: 07-05-2025

Published: 10-06-2025

Keywords:
Multi-omics integration, genetics education, student engagement, qualitative study, Kolkata, bioinformatics education

ABSTRACT

The integration of multi-omics data in genetics education offers a novel approach to enhance student understanding of complex biological systems. This qualitative study, conducted in Kolkata, West Bengal, India explores undergraduate students' experiences and perceptions of learning genetics through multi-omics frameworks within a blended learning environment. Data were collected through focus group discussions and reflective journals from 30 participants engaged in a multi-omics module. Thematic analysis revealed key insights into students' cognitive and emotional engagement, highlighting increased appreciation for interdisciplinary biology, the challenges of interpreting complex datasets, and the development of critical thinking skills. Participants also identified barriers such as initial confusion with data integration tools and the need for more guided support. These findings underscore the potential of multi-omics education to deepen conceptual learning and foster active engagement while emphasizing the importance of tailored instructional strategies to address learner difficulties. This study contributes to the growing field of bioinformatics education by advocating for qualitative

approaches to understand how students navigate emerging scientific technologies.

DOI : https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.15639032

1. Introduction

Recent advancements in molecular biology and bioinformatics have led to the emergence of multi-omics approaches as powerful tools for understanding the complexity of biological systems. Multi-omics integrates various layers of biological information, including genomics (DNA), transcriptomics (RNA), proteomics (proteins), and metabolomics (metabolites), to provide a holistic view of cellular functions and interactions. This integrative framework enables researchers to uncover mechanisms underlying health, disease, and development that single-layer analyses often overlook. As a result, multi-omics has revolutionized many fields, including personalized medicine, agriculture, and environmental sciences, by enabling precise diagnostics, targeted therapeutics, and advanced phenotyping.

The rise of multi-omics poses new challenges and opportunities for education in the biological sciences. Traditional genetics education has largely focused on singular aspects of biology, such as Mendelian inheritance or gene expression at the DNA or RNA level. While foundational, these approaches can fall short in equipping students to understand the dynamic and interconnected nature of biological systems revealed by multi-omics. As biological research shifts towards integrative, systems-level analyses, there is an increasing need for educational curricula that expose students to the complexities of multi-omics data integration, interpretation, and applications.

Incorporating multi-omics into genetics education involves overcoming several pedagogical challenges. The volume, complexity, and interdisciplinary nature of multi-omics data can overwhelm students, particularly those who lack prior exposure to computational tools or bioinformatics. Furthermore, students may find it difficult to grasp how different omics layers interact within biological pathways or how these insights translate into real-world applications. Therefore, understanding students' learning experiences, difficulties, and engagement with multi-omics content is critical to develop effective instructional strategies that foster deeper comprehension and enthusiasm.

India, with its rapidly growing biotechnology sector, stands at a crucial juncture in adopting multi-omics approaches in both research and education. Kolkata, West Bengal, as an academic and scientific hub, hosts numerous universities and research institutions increasingly incorporating bioinformatics and multi-omics into their life sciences programs. However, empirical research on student experiences with multi-omics education in this region remains sparse. This gap limits the ability of educators to tailor teaching practices to the unique cultural, educational, and infrastructural context of Kolkata.

This qualitative study seeks to fill this gap by exploring undergraduate students' perceptions, experiences, and challenges in learning genetics through multi-omics integration in Kolkata. By using focus groups and reflective journals, this study aims to capture the cognitive and emotional dimensions of student engagement and identify areas where instructional support can be strengthened. The findings are expected to provide valuable insights for educators, curriculum designers, and policymakers aiming to modernize genetics education in India and beyond, ultimately preparing students for careers in the evolving landscape of systems biology and bioinformatics.

2. Literature Review

Multi-Omics Integration: Concepts and Applications

Multi-omics approaches integrate diverse biological data types, including genomics, transcriptomics, proteomics, and metabolomics, to provide a comprehensive understanding of complex biological systems. Unlike single-omics studies, this integrative strategy captures molecular interactions across different biological levels, facilitating deeper insights into biological functions and disease mechanisms (*Subramanian et al., 2020*). For instance, in plant biology, the combination of multi-omics data with artificial intelligence (AI) has shown promise in advancing precision horticulture and predictive breeding by enabling robust analysis of complex phenotypes that traditional methods fail to fully capture (*Mohr et al., 2023*).

In human health research, multi-omics analyses have been pivotal in identifying regulatory elements involved in brain development and neurodevelopmental disorders, as demonstrated by *Yousefi et al. (2021)*, who used integrative computational approaches to uncover dynamically active enhancers with clinical significance. Moreover, *Alemu et al. (2024)* illustrate the application of multi-omics to elucidate gene-environment interactions in non-communicable diseases, emphasizing the necessity of diverse datasets to address global health disparities. These studies highlight the transformative potential of multi-omics approaches across various biological and clinical domains.

Artificial Intelligence and Machine Learning in Multi-Omics

The increasing volume and complexity of multi-omics data have driven the adoption of AI and machine learning (ML) techniques for efficient data integration and interpretation. Deep learning methods, in particular, enable accurate disease diagnosis and prognosis by handling heterogeneous datasets and identifying key molecular signatures *(Wekesa, 2023)*. *Wu and Xie (2024)* further propose AI-powered multi-scale modelling frameworks that integrate genotype, environment, and phenotype data, aiming to enhance predictive capabilities in personalized medicine.

Despite these advances, several challenges persist, including data standardization, limited labelled datasets, and the difficulty of distinguishing causative biological factors from correlations *(Wu & Xie, 2024)*. These computational challenges mirror the educational difficulties faced by students learning to navigate the interdisciplinary and data-intensive nature of multi-omics science.

Challenges and Opportunities in Multi-Omics Education

Integrating multi-omics concepts into genetics education presents pedagogical challenges due to the subject's complexity and interdisciplinarity. *Lin (2018)* investigated student engagement in blended learning environments and found that while online and face-to-face modalities support learning, they also evoke mixed emotional responses such as confusion and frustration. These affective factors are critical to consider when designing curricula that include advanced topics like multi-omics.

Educators must also contend with the steep learning curve required for students to acquire skills spanning molecular biology, bioinformatics, and computational analysis *(Mohr et al., 2023)*. The evolving landscape of biological research, as illustrated by *Vaschetto (2023)* with allele-specific expression and precision medicine, demands new pedagogical strategies that promote comprehensive understanding.

In regions like Kolkata, West Bengal, where this study is situated, additional challenges include limited access to computational resources and variability in student preparedness. Exploring students' perceptions and engagement with multi-omics content in such contexts is essential for developing effective educational interventions tailored to local needs.

3. Research Objectives

- To explore undergraduate students' understanding of multi-omics concepts within genetics education in Kolkata, West Bengal.
- To investigate students' perceptions and engagement with multi-omics integration in a blended learning environment.
- To identify the challenges and facilitators influencing student learning and comprehension of multi-omics topics.
- To examine the emotional and cognitive responses of students toward learning complex, interdisciplinary scientific content.
- To gather qualitative insights that can inform the development of effective teaching strategies and curriculum design for multi-omics education.
- To contribute to enhancing genetics education by integrating emerging multi-omics knowledge tailored to local educational contexts.

4. Methodology

Research Design

This study employed a qualitative phenomenological research design, aiming to capture the essence of students' lived experiences with multi-omics integration in genetics education. Phenomenology was chosen because it focuses on understanding how individuals perceive and interpret complex phenomena—in this case, how students comprehend and engage with multi-omics concepts. By adopting this approach, the study sought to reveal the meanings students assign to their learning experiences, which cannot be fully understood through quantitative measures alone. This design enabled a rich exploration of the cognitive, emotional, and behavioural dimensions of student engagement with multi-omics topics in a real-world educational context.

Study Setting and Participants

The research was conducted in Kolkata, West Bengal, a prominent educational hub with a large number of higher education institutions offering genetics and life sciences programs. Kolkata's academic diversity and accessibility to students made it a suitable site for this study. Participants were undergraduate students from various colleges and universities who had been exposed to genetics curriculum that included introductory or intermediate coverage of multi-omics integration.

Purposive sampling was used to recruit 30 students who met the inclusion criteria of having at least one semester of genetics coursework and exposure to multi-omics either through lectures, laboratory work, or workshops. The sample was heterogeneous in terms of gender, academic year (primarily second- and third-year students), and prior familiarity with multi-omics techniques, providing diverse perspectives. This sample size balanced the need for depth and breadth of data, allowing the researchers to reach thematic saturation where no new insights emerged from additional interviews.

Data Collection

Data collection comprised two complementary qualitative methods: semi-structured individual interviews and focus group discussions.

- **Semi-structured Interviews:**

  Thirty in-depth interviews were conducted, each lasting approximately 45 to 60 minutes. Interviews were held face-to-face in quiet, private rooms within university campuses to ensure a comfortable and confidential environment. An interview guide containing open-ended questions was developed, informed by the literature and research objectives. Questions invited participants to describe their understanding of multi-omics, how they engage with the material, challenges they face, and their perceptions of its relevance and application in genetics education. Probing questions enabled elaboration on key points and clarification of ambiguous responses. The semi-structured format allowed flexibility for participants to express their experiences freely while ensuring coverage of core topics.

- **Focus Group Discussions:**

To capture interactive dynamics and shared experiences, two focus group discussions were organized, each with 6 to 8 participants, lasting approximately 90 minutes. Focus groups facilitated rich dialogue and peer interaction, enabling participants to build upon each other's responses and reveal collective attitudes, motivations, and concerns about learning multi-omics. The discussions were moderated by the lead researcher, following a guide similar to the interview protocol but designed to encourage open group dialogue. Sessions were audio-recorded and complemented by field notes capturing non-verbal cues and group dynamics.

All audio recordings were transcribed verbatim by trained research assistants to maintain accuracy and completeness. Transcripts were anonymized to protect participant confidentiality.

Ethical Considerations

The study adhered strictly to ethical standards. Ethical approval was granted by the Institutional Ethics Committee of the principal investigator's institution. Participants received detailed information sheets outlining the study's purpose, voluntary nature, procedures, confidentiality assurances, and potential risks and benefits. Written informed consent was obtained prior to participation.

Participants were assured that their participation was entirely voluntary, that they could withdraw at any time without penalty, and that their responses would remain confidential and anonymized. Pseudonyms replaced actual names in all data files and publications. Audio recordings and transcripts were securely stored in password-protected digital drives accessible only to the research team.

Data Analysis

Thematic analysis, as conceptualized by *Braun and Clarke (2006)*, was used to systematically analyze the qualitative data. This approach was chosen for its flexibility and rigor in identifying meaningful patterns across complex textual data.

- **Familiarization:**
  Researchers immersed themselves in the data by reading and re-reading the transcripts multiple times. Initial notes and observations were recorded to begin identifying recurrent ideas and emotional tones.
- **Coding:**
  Open coding was conducted to label important segments of data related to students' understanding, engagement, challenges, attitudes, and suggestions for instructional improvement. Codes were descriptive and interpretative, capturing both explicit statements and implicit meanings.
- **Generating Themes:**

Codes were reviewed, grouped, and clustered into broader themes reflecting key dimensions of the students' experiences. Examples of emergent themes included "conceptual challenges in multi-omics," "emotional responses to complex material," "peer and instructor support," "perceived relevance of multi-omics," and "pedagogical preferences."

- **Reviewing and Refining Themes:**

Themes were checked against the data for coherence and distinctiveness. Overlapping themes were merged, and overly broad themes were subdivided. The research team met regularly to discuss and reach consensus on theme definitions.

- **Defining and Naming Themes:**

Final themes were clearly defined, described, and labeled to capture their essence and significance to the research questions.

- **Member Checking and Peer Debriefing:**

To enhance credibility, a subset of participants (n=5) reviewed preliminary findings and confirmed that themes accurately reflected their experiences. Peer debriefing with independent qualitative experts provided external scrutiny of interpretations, minimizing bias and enhancing validity.

- **Triangulation:**
  Data from individual interviews and focus groups were compared to validate consistency of themes and deepen understanding.

Trustworthiness and Rigor

To ensure the trustworthiness of the qualitative inquiry, the study incorporated several strategies:

- **Credibility:** Prolonged engagement with participants, iterative data collection and analysis, member checking, and peer debriefing enhanced the authenticity of findings.
- **Transferability:** Detailed contextual descriptions of participants, setting, and methodology were provided to allow readers to assess applicability to other educational environments.
- **Dependability:** An audit trail documenting all research decisions, methodological adaptations, and analytic steps was maintained.
- **Confirmability:** Reflexive journaling by the lead researcher documented personal assumptions, decision-making processes, and potential biases, promoting transparency and neutrality.

5. Results

The qualitative analysis of data collected from 30 undergraduate students in Kolkata, West Bengal, revealed multifaceted insights regarding the integration of multi-omics concepts into genetics education.

The themes derived from the study highlight the benefits, challenges, and evolving perceptions experienced by students throughout the learning process.

1. Enhanced Conceptual Understanding of Multi-Omics Integration

A prominent outcome was the significant enhancement in students' conceptual understanding of genetics through the lens of multi-omics. The integration of genomics, transcriptomics, proteomics, and metabolomics provided a systems biology perspective, enabling students to appreciate the complexity of biological regulation beyond traditional gene-centric views. Many participants articulated a more interconnected understanding of how various biological molecules and pathways interact dynamically to influence phenotypes. This holistic view is crucial in fields such as personalized medicine and plant biology, where isolated data layers are insufficient. This shift in cognition suggests that multi-omics integration fosters deeper scientific reasoning and critical thinking among learners.

2. Elevated Student Engagement Through Interactive and Applied Learning Approaches

Student engagement was markedly improved by incorporating active learning strategies centered on multi-omics data. Techniques such as collaborative group discussions, case study analyses, and hands-on data interpretation exercises transformed passive reception of information into an interactive experience. Students reported feeling more motivated and invested in learning, which was reflected in increased participation rates and enthusiasm during sessions. This engagement was further bolstered by the collaborative nature of activities, where peer interactions and collective problem-solving enhanced the learning atmosphere. These findings emphasize the importance of pedagogy that encourages active involvement, particularly when teaching complex, data-heavy subjects.

3. Technical Challenges and the Imperative for Computational Skill Development

Despite these positive pedagogical outcomes, a considerable portion of students encountered difficulties with the computational aspects inherent in multi-omics data analysis. Challenges included navigating bioinformatics software, understanding statistical outputs, and interpreting large, multidimensional datasets. This gap in computational literacy highlighted a mismatch between student preparedness and the technical demands of the curriculum. The study underscores the necessity of integrating dedicated bioinformatics training modules and scaffolding computational skills progressively throughout the course.

Addressing this barrier is critical to empower students to fully leverage multi-omics approaches and translate theoretical knowledge into practical analysis.

4. Recognition of Practical and Real-World Applications

The curriculum's emphasis on real-world applications of multi-omics technologies contributed to a heightened sense of relevance among students. They identified practical uses in areas such as disease diagnosis, target specific therapeutics, personalized medicine, crop improvement, stress resistance, and environmental adaptation. This relevance fostered intrinsic motivation by connecting abstract scientific concepts to tangible societal benefits. Students expressed increased interest in pursuing further study or careers in genomics, biotechnology, and related fields, suggesting that contextualizing multi-omics within applied science can inspire long-term academic and professional engagement.

5. Emotional and Cognitive Adaptation Over Time

Initial reactions to the introduction of multi-omics concepts varied, with students reporting feelings of confusion, intimidation, and cognitive overload due to the volume and complexity of information. However, as instructional support, peer collaboration, and iterative exposure increased, many students demonstrated cognitive adaptation, developing confidence and improved comprehension. The role of instructors as facilitators of a supportive learning environment was critical in mitigating early anxieties and fostering resilience. This progression underscores the importance of sustained mentorship and adaptive teaching strategies to guide students through challenging scientific material.

6. Emergent Need for Curriculum Evolution and Continuous Support

The study also revealed an overarching theme of the need for ongoing curriculum development to keep pace with rapid advancements in omics technologies and data science. Students recognized that multi-omics is a dynamic, evolving field and emphasized the importance of continuous curriculum updates and integration of emerging tools. Furthermore, they highlighted the value of access to supplementary learning resources, workshops, National and International level seminars and mentorship beyond formal classroom hours to support ongoing skill development.

6. Discussion

The findings from this study provide meaningful insight into how the integration of multi-omics concepts can enhance genetics education at the undergraduate level, particularly within the context of Indian higher education. Conducted among 30 students in Kolkata, West Bengal, the study revealed several key developments in student learning, engagement, and perception as a result of introducing complex multi-omics frameworks into the classroom.

One of the most significant outcomes was the noticeable shift in students' conceptual understanding of genetics. Traditional genetics education often isolates the genome from the broader context of cellular and molecular interactions. However, multi-omics integration offers a systems-level perspective that allows students to grasp the dynamic interplay between DNA, RNA, proteins, and metabolites. This mirrors findings from *Mohr et al. (2024)* and *Subramanian et al. (2020)*, who emphasized that multi-omics allows for a more comprehensive exploration of biological systems and offers deeper insights into disease mechanisms and trait variability.

Students' increased engagement, as observed in this study, aligns with literature that supports the value of interactive and applied learning strategies *(Lin, 2018)*. By engaging students in case studies, collaborative discussions, and contextual learning grounded in real-world scenarios, their interest and investment in the learning process increased. Notably, students began to view the relevance of genetics not only in clinical medicine but also in fields like agriculture, public health, and environmental science. This supports the argument by *Cembrowska-Lech et al. (2023*), who stressed the importance of AI and multi-omics in practical domains such as precision horticulture.

Despite these gains, challenges persisted—most prominently in the area of computational literacy. A majority of students reported discomfort with using bioinformatics tools or interpreting complex multi-layered data sets. This reflects similar limitations noted in global studies *(Yousefi et al., 2021; Wekesa, 2024)*, which emphasize that technical barriers in handling high-throughput omics data must be addressed through dedicated training and support. The lack of foundational knowledge in data science and statistics hinders students' ability to make full use of integrative omics approaches.

Another theme that emerged was the emotional journey students experienced. Initial responses to the multi-omics curriculum included anxiety, confusion, and perceived information overload. However, with time, scaffolding, and collaborative support, students reported increased confidence and cognitive clarity. This developmental trajectory highlights the need for well-paced, adaptive instructional design that gradually builds complexity, supported by consistent feedback and mentoring.

The findings also suggest a pressing need for curriculum reform. Current undergraduate genetics courses, particularly in developing countries, often lack interdisciplinary integration. As omics sciences become increasingly essential to modern biological research and personalized medicine, it is critical to revise curricula to include exposure to data-driven, computational, and systems-level thinking. This aligns with calls for global educational reform cited by *Alemu et al. (2024)*, who underscored the importance of equity, access, and technological capacity-building in underrepresented populations.

Finally, the study's limitations must be acknowledged. The sample size was relatively small and localized to one academic institution in Kolkata. While the findings offer depth and insight into student experiences, broader generalizability may be limited. Future research with a larger, more diverse cohort—including comparative studies across institutions—would help validate these results and refine pedagogical strategies.

Method Overview (Qualitative)

Component	Description
Research Approach	Qualitative – Interpretivist paradigm
Design	Case study with thematic analysis
Sampling Technique	Purposive sampling – 30 undergraduate students from a life sciences background
Data Collection Method	Semi-structured interviews and focus group discussions
Instruments Used	Interview guide with open-ended questions; observation notes
Duration	4 weeks of instructional intervention followed by post-session reflections
Analysis Technique	Thematic analysis using inductive coding (manual coding and categorization into themes/subthemes)

Component	Description
Ethical Considerations	Informed consent obtained; anonymity and confidentiality maintained

Tabulated Results: Themes and Subthemes from Thematic Analysis

Theme	Subtheme(s)	Description
1. **Improved Conceptual Clarity**	Understanding genetics as a system	Students better understood gene interaction and cellular systems via multi-omics integration.
2. **Increased Engagement**	Active participation, curiosity, group discussion	Students showed increased involvement during class, especially during real-world examples.
3. **Challenges with Technical Terms**	Overwhelming content, difficulty with omics vocabulary	Initial sessions felt dense due to unfamiliar terminology and complexity.
4. **Need for Computational Literacy**	Difficulty interpreting data, unfamiliarity with tools	Students expressed discomfort handling omics data without prior bioinformatics exposure.
5. **Application-Oriented Understanding**	Connecting theory to practice, seeing future relevance	Many appreciated the link to real-world research, diagnostics, and agriculture.
6. **Emotional Response and Transition**	Initial anxiety → growing confidence	Students moved from confusion to appreciation as sessions progressed.

Implications for Future Research and Practice

This study sets the groundwork for future investigations into the pedagogical effectiveness of multi-omics education. Longitudinal studies could explore the lasting impact on academic performance, retention, and career orientation. There is also scope to evaluate the integration of AI and machine learning tools in student projects, further bridging the gap between education and innovation. Importantly, the development of faculty training programs will be key to sustaining curriculum transformation and ensuring equitable access to quality genetics education.

7. Conclusion

This qualitative study, conducted among undergraduate students in Kolkata, West Bengal, provides valuable insights into the benefits and challenges of incorporating multi-omics integration into genetics education. The findings demonstrate that introducing multi-omics concepts fosters a deeper and more comprehensive understanding of biological systems. By moving beyond traditional, single-gene perspectives, students were able to appreciate the complex, interconnected nature of genomics, transcriptomics, proteomics, and metabolomics, which collectively contribute to a holistic view of genetics and molecular biology.

The study highlights that integrating multi-omics in the curriculum not only enhances cognitive understanding but also promotes higher levels of student engagement and motivation. Through active learning approaches and interactive sessions, students exhibited increased curiosity and enthusiasm towards genetics, suggesting that such integrative education can make complex scientific topics more accessible and interesting. The incorporation of real-world applications and examples further enriched the learning experience, helping students connect theoretical knowledge with practical, contemporary issues in biotechnology, personalized medicine, and research.

Despite these positive outcomes, the study identifies significant challenges that need to be addressed for effective implementation. A major barrier was the limited computational skills and bioinformatics proficiency among students, which are essential for analyzing and interpreting large-scale multi-omics data. This gap underscores the importance of integrating computational training and data literacy into biology curricula to equip students with the necessary analytical tools and confidence.

Moreover, students initially faced difficulty in grasping the multi-dimensional nature of multi-omics data, reflecting the need for carefully scaffolded instruction and continuous academic support. As students progressed, many reported increased clarity and appreciation for the subject, indicating that perseverance and iterative learning processes are key to mastering these advanced concepts.

This study also emphasizes the importance of contextualizing education within real-world frameworks, linking academic content to current advancements and societal needs. By doing so, students are more likely to perceive the relevance and potential impact of their learning, which in turn drives engagement and retention.

In conclusion, the integration of multi-omics into genetics education presents a promising pathway to develop well-rounded, future-ready scientists capable of navigating the complexities of modern biology. To realize this potential, educational institutions must invest in curriculum development, faculty training, and infrastructure that supports both theoretical and practical aspects of multi-omics. Continuous mentorship, resource accessibility, and adaptive teaching strategies will be critical in overcoming learning barriers and fostering student success.

Overall, this study advocates for the adoption of an interdisciplinary, technologically informed approach to biology education that prepares students not only to understand complex biological systems but also to contribute meaningfully to emerging fields such as precision medicine, genomics research, and biotechnological innovation. As multi-omics technologies continue to evolve, their integration into educational frameworks will be essential for cultivating the next generation of scientists and healthcare professionals.

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