

Academic Challenges Faced by Undergraduate Students in Nursing Colleges: A Quantitative Analysis

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Abstract

Nursing Schools have an ethical responsibility to graduate highly skilled and competent nurses who can make patient-focused choices in different healthcare settings. Nursing education programs worldwide encounter many difficulties, and BSN students face academic challenges during their duties. The objectives of the study aimed to identify the educational challenges faced by nursing students at BSN in KPK (Pakistan). A quantitative descriptive cross-sectional design was used. The study's sample size was 213 Generic BSN students from 20 private and public nursing colleges in KPK. The five-item Likert scale questionnaire was adopted, which consisted of ten questions related to challenges faced in an educational environment. Data was collected via Google form from July 15 to July 25, 2023. Findings of this research revealed that the prominent challenges faced by respondents are a theory-practice gap (73%), teachers following conventional methods of teaching (68%), and institutes favoring practical students in grades and exams (57%). The most crucial finding students faced was a need to integrate theoretical knowledge with clinical practice, favoritism, and outdated teaching methods. Efforts are needed to reduce these challenges; it is essential to improve the curriculum, conduct practical demonstrations in labs and clinical settings, and enhance the professional development of faculty members.

Keywords: Nursing Students, BSN Students, Theory-practice Gap, Academic Challenges.

Introduction

Beeman and Waterhouse (2001) emphasized the ethical duty of nursing institutions to produce highly knowledgeable and proficient nurses capable of making patient-oriented decisions within diverse healthcare systems. To excel in this field, students require a conducive learning environment, up-to-date information, and timely guidance to develop their abilities and succeed in their chosen areas. However, unfortunately, the current conditions are unsatisfactory, leading students to face challenges throughout their academic journey (Gouifrane et al., 2020).

According to Jeffreys (2015), Nursing education programs globally face numerous challenges, and nursing students encounter various academic obstacles throughout their Bachelor of Science in Nursing (BSN) studies. Undergraduate nursing students encountered various challenges during

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their studies, which stemmed from multiple levels of context, including internal, family, school, social, economic, and policy-related factors. Several studies have identified factors like the student's profile, academic performance, psychological and emotional aspects, as well as family background and economics, affecting the academic performance of nursing students (Beauvais et al., 2014; Glew et al., 2015; Wambuguh et al., 2016; Mthimunye & Daniels, 2017; Mthimunye & Daniels, 2019). Furthermore, school-related factors, such as the integration of professional knowledge and the teaching and learning environment, along with social, economic, and policy-related aspects, also significantly influence the academic performance of nursing students (Ali & Naylor, 2010).

In a study, nursing students faced challenges related to living conditions, part-time employment, curriculum structure, academic and clinical support, and the educational environment (Katlego et al., 2020). Many challenges in nursing practices arise due to the need for more implementation of nursing theoretical concepts into clinical practice. This gap is mainly attributed to the need for more understanding and application of nursing theories at the clinical site, leading to a disconnect between theory and practice (Shahzadi et al., 2017).

Despite being most commonly observed in clinical contexts, evidence suggests that bullying is also prevalent within academic settings (Joshua et al., 2017). Studies reveal that nursing students who experience bullying face a wide array of adverse effects encompassing psychological, emotional, physical, professional, and spiritual realms (Magnavita & Heponiemi, 2011; King, 2011).

These consequences encompass attrition, anxiety, depression, reduced self-esteem, illness, poor academic attendance, and compromised clinical performance. The impact of bullying can extend far beyond the academic realm, significantly influencing students' professional roles and personal lives (Jackson et al., 2011). Tragically, there have been reports of self-harm and suicide resulting from severe bullying incidents (Vessey et al., 2010).

According to the Pakistan Nursing Council, in 2022, there are 510 nursing institutes in Pakistan, with approximately 150 of them located in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KPK). It means that around 30% of the nursing colleges are situated in KPK.

Pursuing a Bachelor of Science in Nursing (BSN) degree in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa is a significant undertaking for many aspiring nursing professionals. However, this journey often comes with various academic challenges that can negatively impact students' learning experiences, academic performance, and overall success.

There needs to be more research conducted in KPK, necessitating a comprehensive study in the region that includes both genders and a larger sample size.

Therefore, this study aims to identify the academic challenges faced by male and female nursing students across multiple Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KPK) colleges. By conducting this study, researchers aim to address the existing gap in research on this subject in KPK and provide valuable insights to improve the nursing education system and support the academic success of nursing students in the region.

Methodology

A descriptive cross-sectional design was used in this study to assess the academic challenges faced by undergraduate nursing students. The study population was 20 public and private sector nursing colleges of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa. The enrolled students in all semesters were included in this study, while students on clinical rotation and not attending regular classes were excluded. The convenient sampling technique was used to collect data from 213 students. Data was collected

through Google from July 15 to July 30, 2023. The questionnaire was adopted and comprised of five sections. Demographic and educational information such as age, gender, institutional status, and study year were included in the first section. The remaining four sections were related to challenges in an educational environment. Two questions in the second section were related to teaching challenges in an educational environment, followed by a single question in the third section related to resource availability in an educational environment. The third section consists of four questions related to curriculum strengths and weaknesses, followed by three questions in the fourth section related to educational outcomes. Items were measured on a 5-point Likert scale, showing 1= strongly agree, 2= agree, 3= neutral, 4= disagree, and 5= strongly disagree.

The questionnaire was validated by six experts in the field of nursing education, and Reliability analyses were applied to the tool to assess challenges faced in an educational environment. It was found that the internal consistency of the tool was measured to be good (Cronbach's Alpha =0.849) Approval for this study was obtained from the IRB of Elizabeth Rani College of Nursing and Allied Health Sciences Mardan. Permission was obtained from the participant institute for data collection, and informed consent was given to participants after full descriptions of the study's purposes, benefits, and risks.

Result

Demographic and Educational Information

Most of the respondents n=162 (76%) of this study were from private institutes, and most of them (40 %) were in the third year Generic BSN, followed by the fourth year (26%) and first-year 21%.while the remaining students n= 51 (24%) were from public institutes. The majority n= 172 (81 %) of the participants were male, while n=40 (19 %) was female. More than a third-fourth (76%) of the participants were placed in the age group of 21-25, followed by age group 18-20 (22%).

Table 1 The description of demographic Characteristics of students

Characteristics	Category	Total (n=213)	%
Gender	Male	172	80.6
	Female	41	19.4
Age	18-20	48	22.5
	21-25	162	76.1
	26-30	3	1.4
	>30	0	0
Institutional Status	Public	52	24.4
	Private	161	75.6
Program by year	BSN 1 st year	47	22
	BSN 2 nd year	26	12
	BSN 3 rd year	86	40.7
	BSN 4 th year	54	25.3

Academic Challenges Faced in Educational Environment

Section 1: Challenges of Educational environment related to teaching

More than four scores (81%) of the participants agreed that teachers would give them feedback on time. Merely (10%) of the participants disagreed with the teacher's timely response to student performance. Most of the participants (68%) agreed and strongly agreed with the statement that teachers follow the traditional ways of teaching during regular classes, while some participants (11%) disagreed with the statement.

Section 2: The challenges of the educational environment related to resource availability

Almost half of the students 46% stated positively regarding the availability of teaching material in their institution, while 12 % showed concern over the available resources in their organization.

Section 3: The challenges of the educational environment related to curriculum strengths and weaknesses

Almost two-thirds (63%) of the participants agreed and strongly agreed with the statements; teachers mainly focused on completing lengthy content, but on the other hand, 38 Students (18%) were neutral, and 36 Students (17%) disagreed with the statement. Nearly a third-fourth of respondents, 155 (73%), agreed and strongly agreed, whereas 34 (16%) disagreed with the statement that there is a gap between education and practice. Nearly half of the participants, 101 (48%), agreed with the statement that the amount of time devoted to teaching nursing-specific knowledge, followed by 40 respondents (19%) and 38 respondents (18%) strongly agreed and neutral, respectively. Regarding the relevance of theoretical course contents for clinical needs, 138 Students (65%) agreed and strongly agreed, while 38 Students (18%) disagreed and strongly disagreed.

Section 4: The challenges of the educational environment related to educational outcomes

The number of students who agreed with the statement that teacher use problem methods to track Students learning were 95 (45 %), while about 40 (19%) disagreed. 89 Students (42%) responded with agreed, while 42 Students (20%) did not agree, followed by 15 Students (7%) strongly disagreed regarding the statement that the institution favors particular students in grades in the final examinations. Most of the students, 110 (52%), responded with agreed, followed by 59 Students (28%) who responded with strongly agreed regarding the last statement (10th), Teaching the theoretical subjects based on specific knowledge of nursing.

Table 2 Challenges related to educational environment.

Statement	Strongly Agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
The challenges of the educational environment related to teaching					
Teachers are willing to give feedback on time	24.8%	56%	8.7%	10.5%	0%
Teachers following traditional ways of teaching during regular classes	20.1%	47.9%	20.1%	11%	0.9%

The challenges of the educational environment related to resources availability

Teaching aids (resources) are present in the institute	24%	46.1%	14.7%	12.4%	2.8%
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The challenges of the educational environment related to curriculum strengths & weaknesses

Teachers mostly focus on completing lengthy contents	19.2%	43.4%	17.8%	17.4%	2.2%
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There is a gap between education and practice	32.7%	40.6%	8.8%	15.7%	2.2%
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The amount of time is enough to devote to teaching special nursing knowledge	18.9%	47.9%	17.5%	12%	3.7%
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Relevance of theoretical course's content and clinical needs.	18.4%	47%	17.1%	14.3%	3.2%
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Displays the challenges of the educational environment related to educational outcomes

Teachers use problem-solving methods to track students' learning	16%	44.6%	17.4%	19.2%	2.8%
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Institution favors particular students in graded and final exams	15%	42.1%	15.9%	20%	7%
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Teaching the theoretical subjects based on specific knowledge of nursing	28.1%	51.6%	9.9%	7%	3.4%
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Discussion

Nursing students encounter many hurdles throughout their educational journey, with academic challenges prominently featured. These challenges significantly impact students' performance and their overall competency levels. Addressing and surmounting these challenges is imperative to attain proficiency as a nurse. This research aims to pinpoint nursing students' specific academic challenges across Khyber Pakhtunkhwa colleges. The study illuminates some prevalent challenges shared by nursing students in this region.

This research identifies a primary issue as the fusion of theoretical understanding with practical application in nursing education. Theory plays a pivotal role in nursing education, but it becomes effective with its application in practice. Conversely, optimal nursing practice relies on a solid theoretical foundation. However, the insufficient integration of theoretical knowledge into nursing practice is a notable concern. The study's results indicate a noticeable disconnect between theoretical knowledge and nursing procedures. These findings align closely with earlier research, highlighting a substantial gap between theory and practice. According to statistics, 96% of students acknowledge the existence of this theory-practice gap (Soomro et al., 2021; Fatima et al., 2019; Jahanpour et al., 2016; Ali et al., 2023).

Furthermore, another study suggested that students encounter several challenges, including the struggle to integrate their knowledge into clinical settings and apply theoretical concepts practically (Magnavita & Heponiemi, 2011). Many difficulties in nursing practice stem from the inadequate implementation of theoretical nursing concepts in real-world scenarios. This gap primarily arises from a need for more comprehension and application of nursing theories in clinical settings, resulting in a disconnection between theory and practice (Shahzadi et al., 2017).

Another significant issue highlighted in this Study is teachers' reliance on outdated teaching methods instead of embracing modern approaches. Many studies share a strong correlation with the findings of this research. Approximately 54% of students expressed concern that teachers must incorporate contemporary methods in their lectures. These findings are consistent with a study conducted in Lahore, Pakistan (Soomro et al., 2021; Fatima et al., 2019). Qualitative research also aligns with these findings, indicating that students are anxious about one-way teaching methods (Kermansaravi et al., 2015).

Furthermore, another study suggested that traditional teaching approaches contribute to subpar clinical practices among nursing students. These conventional methods fail to engage students actively in the learning process and harm applying clinical skills (Zhou et al., 2015). Therefore, this Study supports previous research by corroborating their findings.

This Study has brought attention to another issue: favoritism among students regarding exams and grades. According to the findings, more than 50% of the students agree that the institution shows favoritism when it comes to grading and exams. A similar study conducted in Pakistan had similar results, with 29% of students supporting this claim and a majority (52%) remaining neutral (Soomro et al., 2021). In the Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KPK) region, the examination policy in nursing institutes differs slightly. According to the Khyber Medical University, with which most of these institutes are affiliated, 30% of the subject marks are allocated as internal marks by the institutes. It means that specific students receive favorable treatment regarding these internal marks, as it is at the discretion of the institutes.

The results of the present study provide evidence supporting the sufficiency of teaching aids in educational institutions, as 70% of the participants agreed with this statement. Conversely, the majority of previous research has contradicted these findings. For instance, one study revealed that 87% of students were dissatisfied with the idea that colleges have the necessary facilities to assist teachers in delivering lectures effectively (Soomro et al., 2021). These recent findings align with the outcomes of a comprehensive research endeavor that employed a sequential exploratory mixed-method approach. This research aimed to uncover the perspectives of nurse educators regarding their clinical and academic teaching practices. This investigation identified several obstacles to effective classroom teaching, including inadequate resources such as subpar skill and simulation laboratories, an underdeveloped curriculum, and a high teacher-student ratio (Younas et al., 2019). It is essential to note that the current research diverges from previous studies due to its specific context. This study was conducted in the Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KPK) region of Pakistan, and most respondents were from affiliated institutes (affiliated with Khyber Medical University). These affiliated institutions benefit from stringent oversight by the parent university, ensuring essential supporting resources are available.

In this study, over 50% of students agreed that teachers cover extensive content in nursing schools. This finding goes against what other studies have discovered. Another study found that most students (80%) disagreed with this idea (Soomro et al., 2021). Nursing faculty often need help when they have to cover many class materials. Strategies have been developed to improve students' reading experiences or offer meaningful alternatives to ensure they engage with assigned readings

(Sue et al., 2020). However, this current Study contradicts that notion. This difference can likely be attributed to the participating institutes' multimedia systems, specifically PowerPoint presentations. Teachers often deliver multimedia lectures, which saves time compared to other methods like reading from books or writing on whiteboards. Consequently, these differing teaching methods lead to different research results.

This study also revealed that teachers provide timely feedback for classroom activities. However, this contradicts a study conducted in Sindh, Pakistan, which found that teachers there often delay feedback; therefore, according to the Study, more than 60% of students disagreed with the statement about teacher feedback (Soomro et al., 2021). Feedback is crucial for the growth of nursing students and is highly appreciated by both learners and instructors. It plays a significant role in their professional development (Ahmed et al., 2020).

Conclusion

This study aimed to identify the academic challenges faced by nursing students at BSN in KPK. This Study highlighted various challenges faced by nursing students in KPK nursing colleges. These challenges are related to teaching, resource availability, curriculum strengths and weaknesses, and educational outcomes. Some prominent challenges are as follows: Most students revealed that they faced gaps when applying theoretical knowledge into practice, and some showed that teachers need to follow modern teaching methods. Finally, some students described as institutes favor particular students in examinations and grades. The results of this study will help the nursing staff, nursing students, and nursing administration to understand these challenges and develop strategies to address these challenges. That will be a good step towards preparing students to be competent, skillful, and professionally developed nurses.

Recommendations

The study recommended that a thorough curriculum review and update are needed to bridge the theory-practice gap effectively. Students should be taught in a way that allows them to apply what they learn immediately in labs or clinical settings. Instructors should adopt learner-centered approaches, encourage interactive sessions, and diversify teaching methods. Institutions should also organize workshops for faculty members to enhance their professional development and introduce contemporary teaching techniques. Lastly, institutions should ensure fair grading, offering all students equal opportunities.

Limitations

This study has some limitations, and it is essential to acknowledge them. First, it focused on the KPK region, so the findings may not be generalized nationwide. Second, the study used a non-probability sampling method (convenience sampling), potentially introducing bias and limiting generalizability. Additionally, data collection through online questionnaires via Whats App groups may have hindered students' complete comprehension of the questions. Future research should encompass other provinces and employ probability-based sampling methods to address these limitations for more robust and representative results.

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