

Perceptions of the Nursing Students and Academic Staff on College Recruitment Policies in the UAE

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Abstract

Background: Higher education in field of Nursing in the United Arab Emirates faces many challenges regarding the increasing number of nursing students at the Baccalaureate level in nursing programs, which in fact, is a similar situation in all parts of the world (Saifan et al., 2021; Wollin & Fairweather, 2012 & Torregosa et al., 2015). **Method:** This qualitative research is intended to discover the perceptions of UAE nursing undergraduate students, along with their teaching faculty, regarding the recruitment policies within the nursing colleges of the UAE. The grounded theory constructivist approach was followed. In addition, the “Conceptual Model of Academic Performance” has explained the data analysis of the responses. A focus group interview has been conducted with ten nursing students who were in their third year and five nursing lecturers. These students are attending nursing colleges in Abu Dhabi. In order to gain a clear understanding of their impressions, an open-ended interview has been conducted about current recruitment policy (in general), with a focus on the IELTS and GAP (tests) requirements, ie: minimum scores. **Conclusion:** The findings indicate that students were dissatisfied with the requirement of “Band (6)” for the IELTS test score. They suggested decreasing this requirement to a band of 5 - 5.5 for accepted college admission requirements. They were, however, happy with the high school GPA policy whereby more consideration was given to some students, which minimizes the expectations while simultaneously increasing their chances of becoming Emirati qualified nurses. Furthermore, by easing the requirements, the UAE has helped in reducing the current nursing shortage.

Keywords: nursing, recruitment, IELTS, enrollment score, UAE, college admission

1. Introduction

“Utilizing the perspectives of nursing students, nursing educators can strive to build a vibrant, diverse and well-educated nursing workforce that will ensure our ability to continue providing top quality health care to all individuals” (Diefenbeck, Michalec & Alexander, 2016. p. 43). Today, the world is facing a critical risk in finding highly qualified health care professionals in the health care services field, because of the massive shortage of nurses (Jeffreys & Zoucha, 2017). The decreasing enrollment number of students in nursing schools has led to an obvious increase in nursing shortages, worldwide, in coming years. For this reason, many nursing recruitment policies need an urgent review, in order to produce newer, more flexible educational strategies, capable of enticing young people into a nursing career (Herzlinger, 2013). The students’ perceptions of the nursing profession have been affected since middle school. Accordingly, the nursing image has limited the coming generations' enrollment numbers, limiting the nursing colleges for possible careers (Foxall, 2013). Lacking a good understanding of the nursing career within the health care systems and the community is one of the main issues in the nursing students' recruitment process (Abou Hashish & Bajbeir, 2018).

This study aimed to explore the UAE nursing students' and academic staff's perceptions of their colleges' recruitment criteria. Nursing students' perceptions of the nursing programs measured against the college recruitment policy tackling the main two factors: the students IELTS score and the school GPA. Moreover, this study aimed to modify the nursing students' recruitment policy to help in solving the local nursing shortage issues.

Research question

- 1) What are the students' perceptions of college recruitment criteria in the nursing department?
- 2) What are the academic staff's perceptions on college recruitment criteria within the nursing department?

The admission policy for any nursing bachelor school in UAE nursing colleges is requesting that all the students submit their high school "Science Stream" certificates, with a minimum percentage score of 75 % and a minimum 80% if students studied other streams. Furthermore, this college is requesting academic IELTS certificate with a Band of 6 is also required, as a minimum score for admission. Torregosa et al. (2015) has argued that the English language and academic GPA scores are causing a monumental barrier for prospective nursing students, who wish to join and progress at the nursing colleges. The limited English background of students in the UAE has caused them significant challenges in the enrollment process, within nursing schools, as they are unable to score the requested band. Most of these students coming from public UAE high schools have several other choices in addition to nursing. Kaddoura (2017) claimed that the general cultural rejection of the nursing profession has limited the numbers of prospective nursing students within the UAE community at large. There is simply a lack of interest when expectations for the registration of nursing school has been set so high.

The UAE is not only experiencing the global nursing shortage, but they are also facing challenges in regards to their student's linguistic abilities, compounded with their low GPAs from local government high schools. Although the UAE has moved extremely fast with upgrading education through modernization, as well becoming the leader, globally, in many aspects, it still has the predicament whereby the background of nursing students, socially, culturally, and religiously is causing massive limitations to the student's progress within the nursing field (Abou Hashish & Bajbeir, 2018; Randeree & Faramawy, 2011).

Significance of the Study

Nursing education is facing serious challenges within the Emirati community, as a result of many cultural restrictions and due to the nature of local high school graduates. UAE higher education keeps on updating its nursing educational strategies to increase the number of qualified nursing students in the local community and overcome the existing nursing shortage (Wollin & Fairweather, 2012).

2. Literature Review

The student admission policy has been implemented by many nursing universities to standardize their educational ranking level. A descriptive exploratory study has been conducted over 184 students from the baccalaureate-nursing program in the United States. The study aimed to find out the correlation of high school GPA and the IELTS academic scores as an enrollment policy on the quality outcome of the graduates. They claimed that adopting this policy was the most applicable way to advance the quality of the nursing field through having academically competent candidates. Although the high school GPA and the IELTS high academic scores were the two main admissions requirements to assure the student's guaranteed ability to proceed in the program, the quality of students' academics was not clear by the end. Additionally, they argued that the actual potential should be noted by the quality of the nursing student's outcome regardless of the limited number of graduate nurses in the workforce (Newton, Smith & Moore, 2007). Potential may not or may not be determined solely by assessing their high school GPAs.

The present nursing shortage with the great need for health care professionals in general in the United States has encouraged healthcare managers to think of ways in finding out the reasons behind this shortage (Akman & Alagöz, 2018). In addition, the existing cultural diversity has made the college management study the effectiveness of bilingual students of the nurses and correlate that with the students' academic success regardless of the initial GPA. The study compared and measured the students' entrance level and their perseverance and success performance level at the end through measuring the students passing level on the 'National Council of State Boards of Nursing licensure examinations' (NCLEX-RN) exams. By the end of the study, the researchers concluded that students with higher GPAs more than 'M = 3.2' were more competent. The students were able to pass the standardized exit nursing exam (NCLEX-RN) smoothly whereas those with lower GPAs less than 'M = 2.5' had been faced with significant problems in passing the same exam. Finally, they mentioned that the language had no significant effect on the students' academic success (Bosch, Doshier & Newsome, 2012).

Further, the studies have proven that students GPA results may cause a falling risk for the students at the nursing program as it is measuring many variables like 'biology, anatomy, physiology, chemistry, biochemistry, psychology, Composition I, and Composition II' which is less reliable than the TEAS. The 'Test of Essential Academic Skills (TEAS) is another assessment tool that is used instead of testing the core subjects 'math, reading, science, and English'. This test had affected the students' knowledge and abilities to fit in the nursing programs (Newton, Smith & Moore, 2007).

The students' entrance GPA score has a significant association with their academic and social progress at the nursing colleges. The study claimed that the students with initial potential to study nursing were motivated to achieve high marks at the college. In addition, they were able to build up strong social connections, academic networks, and self-confidence to debate their subjects' marks at the college. Their earlier academic experience added to their

knowledge and it was the inspiring base for their progress in college (Akman & Alagöz, 2018; Martin, 2009).

(Salamonson et al., 2011) explored the influence of the English language level on the academic performance of nursing students. The study utilized the correlations between English language proficiency (ELP) and the nursing student's academic performance. While others' studies argued to prove the opposite and gave clear evidence, there is no relatable factor between the two variables (Uyehara et al., 2007). Newton, Smith & Moore (2007) stressed the need for students' admission policy in every college is to assure the success of their students. Furthermore, Planas (2009) had argued these results: the students with higher fluency in English skills had more confidence, socially and academically.

Many factors were challenging the recruitment process of prospective nursing students (Kaddoura, 2017; Jennifer, 2017). Globally, limited recruitment and a high retention rate at nursing colleges are the two main factors behind the nursing shortage (Diefenbach, Michalec & Alexander, 2016). Many efforts have been implemented in the United States to encourage the recruitment of Alaskan youth to the field of nursing. The senior students provided the most effective tool used to inspire new students to join the nursing career. They supported the new students by giving them sincere guidance from their own previous experience, and these stories helped some to overcome their frustration and challenges with the profession. Accordingly, peer guidance has been considered a successful instrument to help most of the new students to do well in their NCLEX-RN and exit exam tests (DeLapp, Hautman & Anderson, 2008).

3. Theoretical Framework

This study used the grounded theory constructivist approach which was guaranteed to be the best way to study individuals' feelings and views. "The constructivist approach of Charmaz (2000) focused on the subjective meanings of participants' values and beliefs, and suggestive or tentative conclusions" (Creswell, 2012. p.443). Constructivists have had a great effect on improving the higher education educational systems within a multicultural context (Constantine & Erickson, 1998; Creswell, 2012). However, the 'Conceptual Model of Academic Performance' explained and analyzed how the UAE nursing students had a new and improved outlook regarding the effect of the GPA as well as the background of the English language exam IELTS on the students' academic performance in college. The conceptual methodology is used to correlate the student's academic achievements in general, to their satisfaction, and find a scientific measuring assessment for their progress (Torregosa et al., 2015).

4. Methodology

This research has conducted a qualitative exploratory descriptive study to explore the Nursing student's and academic staff's perception of college recruitment policy in the UAE. Burns and Grove (2014) have supported the idea of using the descriptive research method to determine the person's life experiences.

A focus group interview using open-ended questions was conducted with participants from the nursing colleges in Abu Dhabi to understand the nursing college's recruitment policy. Group interviews have been recommended to test the people's attitudes and opinions about their learning styles (Creswell, 2012). Group interviews are considered the best methods to collect unlimited responses from the nursing students clearly, as they motivate the students to talk through providing a freely unrestricted atmosphere (Diefenbeck, Michalec & Alexander, 2016). Afterwards, multistep coding processes were used to analyze the collected data (Miles, Huberman, & Saldaña 2014). A piloting study took place with a small group of three students to guarantee the validity of the questions and used a trial meeting to edit the prepared questionnaire. However, the students from the piloting study were excluded from the actual number of study participants. The piloting process was recommended to facilitate the tool used after evaluating the feedback of the tested group (Creswell, 2012).

5. Data Analysis and Results

This study had collected the data through a pre-piloted open-ended questionnaire throughout a planned focus group interview. A purposive sample methodology of (10) nursing students at the year 3 and five nursing lecturers from the same college were interviewed. The student's sample had a clear orientation to the user terms and to the research study purpose and objectives. The sample was consisting of (7) local nursing students, while the other (3) were non-local students'. This sample is matching with the cultural and linguistic diversity among the students at the UAE nursing colleges and the homogenous structure of the students in the researched college. The students' sample had seven local students with average IELTS scores between (5-5.5) and the three non-local students had the same average while their school GPAs were between (89%-95%). The students' responses have been gathered and coded then analyzed, and categorized into shared themes that matched with similar viewpoints.

The study aimed to find out the UAE nursing students' opinions and feelings concerning the college's existing recruitment policy within a group of local and non-local students. A stress-free environment has been provided for the students by informing them that this research is very confidential and their identity is not going to be recognized

by any entity. Their willingness to proceed with the discussion is highly recommended but it is voluntary and they can stop, quit at any stage without causing them any academic, personal, or psychological harm. The chosen sample of the students was taken from the year three nursing students in their second semester. Accordingly, they expected to have a good and clear reflection about the college recruitment policy after passing through all the challenges and express their impression more efficiently. At the beginning of the group interview, a brief introduction about the research purpose was given. Moreover, the participant's background was asked in order to break the ice and develop a positive relaxing atmosphere surrounding the meeting room.

The collected data were coded and then analyzed to find the concluding answer that explained the findings and answered the study questions. Ralph-Birks and Chapman (2015) had discussed the grounded theory strategies for assessing the people's social perspectives to examine the queries of any research question and find an explanation to the phenomena within one group of participants.

The students' answers were gathered and analyzed into clear themes generated from the gathered information. After paraphrasing, the students' specific replays matched to find the interrelationship of the coded themes and their categorized themes. As any qualitative study does, this study had analyzed the student's words into a clear, meaningful language, easily understood by anyone who should read it. This was followed by interpretation of the answers and linked to answering the research question through a comparative analysis. Furthermore, for generalizing these findings within the realm of UAE higher education, the sample we used has been chosen as a recommended one by the qualitative researchers in the field (Geburu & Willman, 2010; Creswell, 2012).

The data analysis revealed the following common themes: unfair recruitment standards, IELTS scores leading to student limitations, more chances and fewer expectations from the nursing students.

As per the below examples:

Unfair recruitment standards

The students responded to the first open-ended question that asked about their general perception of the nursing college recruitment policy with rejection to the current criteria. Mainly, they had a generalized fair from not being accepted to the nursing college. The students had a clear doubt of not having a guaranteed chance to study nursing because of the many challenges in the acceptance policy although it was their dream. Generally, the students found it challenging whereby UAE high school graduates had to achieve the required criteria. However, some of them were fine with the recruitment policy as they found it fair to have such requirements to keep the standards within the nursing profession. For instance, one said, "The recruitment policy is fair as it makes the students recruited based on clear international standards". While the majority of the students replied that the recruitment policy is "not fair and it has many challenges and limitations". Moreover, others said, "We did not like it, it required more than our abilities after graduating from our high schools" and finally, "That was a very hard time for all of us and our families".

IELTS satisfactory score

The second question asked about the student's IELTS minimum score as a reliable measurement for admission to the nursing college.

Most of the students argued about their ability to obtain a score of six on their IELTS exam, and they found it very advanced compared to their actual level of English. Generally, all the students agreed that they had not been adequately prepared at their high schools to pass the IELTS exam with such a score. The majority of the students came from the UAE government high schools where Arabic language is the medium of instruction for most subjects. Furthermore, their English language was limited to the curriculum-mandated English classes, coupled with the fact they were not practicing the language outside school. On the other hand, many students agreed on the importance of having an adequate level of understanding of the English language, as it is the common language for all subjects within the nursing curriculum at college.

The students thought, "It is good to have an adequate level of understanding English to start at the college". On the other side, many students did not agree, "it is unfair for Arabic (speaking) students with minimal English background to be asked to score 6, so do not judge us based on our English score" while some others said "it is important but not (necessary to have a) score 6".

Expectations from the nursing students

The third question asked about their perception of students' school GPA as an admission recruitment criteria to be a reliable measurement of education.

Surprisingly, most of the students were against the idea of accepting nursing students depending on their school GPAs, as it was not reflective of their passion for the profession. They felt that high school GPA was limiting their

chances to join the nursing college and ignoring their accumulative abilities during the previous school years. They had argued that their high school results assessed only one aspect of their personality. In addition, many students went through psychological challenges and social stressors during high school which had affected their academic outcomes. Lastly, most of the students expressed having a passion for studying nursing and they felt sad for the others who were rejected from joining the nursing college based on the current admission criteria. They all believe that nursing education needs caring and passionate students as one of the admission criteria, rather than the school GPA scores.

Many participants said, “The school GPA scores are not reflecting our abilities” and, “sometimes the family circumstances made us have (lower) scores which limited our chances to study what we like”, and, “Many of our friends were not able to do it and they missed the chance to be nurses which was their dream profession”.

Finally, the participants had many ideas on how we could overcome the present restrictions in the nursing recruitment policy within the UAE. The majority of the students had agreed on one response that “IELTS (minimum scores between 5 -5.5) is more than enough for the students to understand their lectures in the nursing college and they could improve with time through more practice of the language”. Others had suggested that the nursing image is another limitation for them. Accordingly, they need more orientation with their families about the nursing career. In addition, they suggested more positive recruiting and marketing strategies targeting the high schools.

Adding to this discussion, the interviewed faculty members also shared many responses about the recruitment policy, as follows. “The policy needs to be revised, as the courses at the college are offered in the English language, a suitable score must be attained by the students to facilitate their learning, to promote equity among students and to avoid wasting time in translation”. While, they were happy with the GPAs “it is appropriate to raise the quality of students’ learning to a standardized level”. They suggested, “Preparatory courses at the secondary schooling levels and before admission to the nursing college are recommended. Awareness campaigns to overcome and improve the negative image of nursing perceived by the community, through panels of Emirati nursing professionals.”.

6. Conclusion and Recommendations

The great need for increasing the enrolled number of nursing students in the UAE nursing colleges made this exploratory qualitative study dig deeper into the current recruitment policies within these colleges. After many investigations, the study found that two main factors that were playing a major role in limiting the recruited number of nursing candidates were the IELTS and high school GPAs minimum scores. The study concludes its findings with a clear recommendation for nursing schools administration: to revisit their current recruitment policies and to consider the desperate need for nurses within both local and global communities. A previous study has been conducted in the United States measuring the GPA enrolment policy of the 192 students at a four-year college to investigate the candidate's acceptance and rejection cases. The study argued that high school GPA had a great effect on the student's academic success (Sawyer, 2013). The participants suggested recruiting nursing students based on their passion for the career in addition to having good GPAs and IELTS scores. Moreover, they suggested keeping the door open for the interested student to have more chances by decreasing the current required scores. Accordingly, the study found that the UAE cultural and educational background made the students have limited acceptance chances considering the six band IELTS score. The students had a great challenge in scoring 6 whereas they could achieve a score of 5 - 5.5 with fewer challenges.

Nevertheless, this study is encouraging future studies to compare the nursing student's entrance GPAs at the recruitment period with their exit GPAs at graduation and associate the findings to study the effect of the students’ academic improvement during their college time with the admission criteria.

7. Limitations of the Study

The study was trying to have the impression of more students at varying levels to have a better generalization with the findings. The study interviewed only third-year students as they went through these challenges. Unfortunately, the year four students were in their clinical settings for practical training, so the researcher was not able to have their impression.

The nursing college head of department and the “Scientific Research Committee” ethical approval (accreditation) took place at the time of this study. Hence, support to the researcher was somewhat limited as compared to other times.

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