

## Exploring the Barriers and Challenges Saudi Arabian Nursing Students Encounter during their Internship Program: A Qualitative Study

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### Abstract

Negative experiences on an internship can adversely affect the attitude and confidence of nursing students. This highlights the need to explore the experiences of nursing students as they progress through their training. The present study examines the challenges and problems faced by nursing students during their internship program at a hospital in Medina, Saudi Arabia. The study employed a qualitative exploratory study design by recruiting eight nursing students. Face-to-face semi-structured interviews were conducted to gather data. Moreover, the data were thematically analyzed. The major challenges and problems experienced by the nursing students were lack of support, distrust, improper behavior, and absence of a preceptorship program. There is a negative impact of these issues on nursing practice in clinical settings. The study concludes that positive outcomes are likely to be achieved by improving the internship program.

**Keywords:** Nursing students, support, learning barrier, internship program, negative experiences, attitude and confidence.

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### INTRODUCTION

Nursing students practice their clinical skills in the nursing college during their clinical placements and then in their internship program. These programs offer opportunities for nursing students to understand the complexity of the hospital environment and obtain clinical experience for personal and professional development (Walker & Campbell, 2013). Internship programs offer understanding about professional activities of nursing students to gain skills, knowledge, and clinical experience (Safan & Ebrahim, 2018). Murphy *et al.* (2012) highlighted the need to provide adequate skills, positive experience, and clinical competencies to nursing students in healthcare settings.

In Saudi Arabia, a one-year internship program was integrated into the four years curriculum of the Bachelor of Nursing to equip nursing students with intensive clinical practice and prepare them for the transition into a professional nursing role (Aboshaiqah *et al.*, 2018). It consists of several clinical assignments that allow nursing students to obtain fundamental

qualities of caring, applying knowledge, competence, critical thinking, clinical skills, and coping in real situations within the set standards (Alharbi & Alhosis, 2019).

The effective learning and growth of the nurses are prevented due to failure in identifying problems and challenges faced in the clinical learning environment (Jamshidi *et al.*, 2016). Non-effectively exposure of nursing students to the clinical learning environment makes them unprepared for the clinical environment and might drop out. Most nurses prefer to leave than stay at their profession due to the challenges encountered in the clinical setting, high workload, and work-life imbalance (Moloney *et al.*, 2018). One of the previous studies stated that preceptorship programs for teaching techniques to the nursing students to help them in the next stage of clinical competence was a robust solution (Althaqafi *et al.*, 2019). The 'internship' is a comprehensive orientation and training of a newly graduated nurse. Whereas working under the direct supervision of an experienced nurse (preceptor) that trains and teaches regarding the nursing role is known

as ‘preceptorship.’ Identification of challenges the nursing students face in a clinical learning environment could help improve the training of the students.

According to a review by Falatah & Salem (2018), there has been an increase in nursing turnover and turnover intention in Saudi Arabia, which is alarming. An increase in the population and expansion of the health care system requires trained and registered nurses. Therefore, it is important to explore the challenges and problems faced by nursing students during their internship to identify actions that might enhance students’ clinical practice experiences and help them meet the learning outcomes. In addition, it would also prepare and support nursing students’ ineffective work engagement and decrease turnover intention (Li *et al.*, 2019). Therefore, this study explores the challenges and problems nursing students face during their internship program at a hospital in Medina, Saudi Arabia. Results are likely to help nursing educators create an educational environment to promote the effective development of clinical skills. Additionally, it will also assist in analyzing which barriers are similar to what is experienced by nurses in other countries so that recommendations could be provided for the curriculum developers for designing specific curricula based on the clinical practice during the internship program of nursing students. The main research question addressed by this study is as follows;

What are the problems and challenges encountered by nursing students during their internship program?

## LITERATURE REVIEW

According to Polit & Beck (2008), the review of previous literature holds significant importance in the research process for understanding the topic and clarifying the significance of the study. The effective clinical practice of nursing students can be prevented due to the challenges faced during their internship program, as it has a significant impact on the professional development of students’ skills (Safam & Ebrahimm, 2018). Salvi (2019), indicated a substantial increase in the dropout rates among nursing students due to ineffective engagement in the clinical practice environment. Another study by Nadolski (2006), explained the major problems faced by nursing students during their internship program, including; lack of collaboration between healthcare facilities, nursing colleges, rotations, clinical evaluations, objectives of internship programs, clinical setting, clinical assessment, and competencies. It is known that the majority of nurses face difficulties in their practical life since, in the clinical setting, they are not provided opportunities for developing essential nursing skills (Ten *et al.*, 2018).

The difficulties experienced by nursing students during internship have been discussed by previous studies (Safam & Ebrahimm, 2018; Atakro, 2019). For instance, Atakro (2019), conducted a

qualitative descriptive survey among eight nursing interns that worked in tertiary hospitals in Ghana. Semi-structured interviews were conducted, it found that workplace management is affected due to inadequate application of the nursing process (e.g., not having logistics for care plan) and insufficient application of physical assessment by nurses (e.g., not applying the percussion, auscultation, and other aspects of physical examination taught in the curriculum). Another study conducted a comparative analysis among the nursing students in Benha hospital of Egypt (Safam & Ebrahimm, 2018). The results depicted that most nursing students experienced issues related to communication and supervision, along with obstacles associated with cultural and social factors.

A recent qualitative study explored the factors affecting nursing interns at Jeddah hospital (Al Najjar & Rawas, 2018). The results depicted that the negative experiences of nursing students included lack of instructors’ support, unfair treatment, and feeling embarrassed and restricted, which caused an adverse impact on their clinical practice. Another study by Alharbi & Alhosis (2019), identified the difficulties faced by nursing students: lack of communication and inappropriate behavior of nursing staff etc. For bridging the gap between practice and theory in clinical education, Démeh & Rosengren, (2015) suggested clinical leadership to be the most valuable tool. The transition of nurses from being students can be facilitated by simplifying and clarifying the nursing activities by the nursing management. For facilitated graduation of skilled nurses, there is a need to pay attention to the learning needs in nursing management among stakeholders in healthcare organizations and nursing education

## MATERIALS AND METHODS

### *Study Design and Setting*

A qualitative exploratory design was used to examine the problems and challenges faced by nursing students during their internship in a hospital in Medina, Saudi Arabia. This is a tertiary hospital that provides clinical training to nursing students at the Department of Nursing Education. Qualitative research gives an overview of the participant’s perception and understands of a phenomenon (Chapman *et al.*, 2015). Therefore, an experience of the nursing internees within their clinical training was described.

### *Study Sample*

The sample population for this study included nursing students from different nursing colleges who were doing their internship at a hospital in Medina. There were eight nursing interns, and all of them were recruited in the study through the purposive sampling technique. Purposive sampling is typically used in qualitative studies as it carefully selects subjects that will provide rich and unique information of value to the survey (Etikan *et al.*, 2016). Compared to convenience

sampling, non-probabilistic sampling and an increase in sample size increase the statistical power in quantitative studies. The sample size in purposive sampling is determined by data saturation. Therefore, the purposive sampling technique provides rich information to explore the issue of interest (Polit & Beck, 2008). The sample size of this study was eight nursing students from different nursing colleges based on the following inclusion criteria. Students are doing their internship program for the Bachelor of Nursing and students who had completed the orientation program and then embarked on their clinical internship.

The inclusion criteria were set to choose the nursing students who did the internship program at the selected hospital. Some students did only one or two months in the selected hospital and then transferred to another city or organization to complete their internship program.

Nursing students who were doing their internship post nursing bridging program were excluded from the sample. In Saudi Arabia, the nursing bridging program is for nurses who have a nursing diploma and want to complete their education to obtain a Bachelor of Nursing. They were excluded because they already have experience as nurses before enrolled in the bachelor program.

### **Ethical Considerations**

A subcommittee approved this study of ethics for humanities, social research at A University, and permission from the B Hospital. The participants have been explained the purpose of the study, and the written informed consent was obtained before conducting the interview. Confidentiality was maintained for the participants, and the right to withdraw from the study at any time was explained. The interviews were recorded and kept in a safe place to be only accessible by the researcher. Additionally, while writing the verbatim, pseudonyms were used, which were then used in the findings section to maintain the anonymity of the participants.

### **Data Collection and Management**

The face-to-face semi-structured interviews of the nursing students were conducted to collect data. The three main questions asked from the participants were;

- Was there anything that you dislike about the internship program?
- Did you encounter any challenges during the internship program? If yes, what were these?
- Do you think there is a need to improve clinical practice during the internship program? If yes, how do you think clinical practice can be improved?

The interviews were conducted in April 2020 at the nursing education department. Each interview was conducted in the Arabic language that lasted about 20 to 45 minutes. All the interviews were recorded and

transcribed. Also, all the transcripts were carefully reviewed for better understanding. The data was translated into the English language after the data analysis. According to Willig (2012), analyzing the data in the original language before translating the research can make the investigation close to the actual qualitative data. Similarly, the issues associated with the study of the translated version can be avoided.

## **DATA ANALYSIS**

The data gathered through interviews were analyzed through thematic analysis manually by the research team. Thematic analysis is the framework method that qualitatively analyses the content by identifying differences and commonalities in the data (Holloway & Galvin, 2016). It then focuses on the relationships within the data to draw explanatory or/and descriptive results clustered around the deduced themes. This method is widely used in healthcare research (Bradshaw *et al.*, 2017). The data analysis pattern included the following steps: data validation, data transcription, and data coding (Holloway & Galvin, 2016). The codes were developed from each recorded interview to indicate responses. Furthermore, another level of code was generated by reviewing all the data and creating families and similar grouping families as themes (Polit & Beck, 2008). In the present study, the credibility of the data was established by asking the participants to read the transcripts, provide their comments, and share the extracted themes with them. For dependability, the interviews, data analysis, and recordings were saved by the researcher.

## **RESULTS**

The participants were eight nursing students doing their internship program at a hospital in Medina, Saudi Arabia. There were four male participants: one from X University, two from Y Nursing College, and Z University. Similarly, four female participants were two from X University, Y Nursing College, and Z University. After going through thematic analysis, four main themes were analyzed: lack of support, improper treatment, distrust, and the need for a preceptorship program.

### **Lack of Support**

The participants expressed their feelings about the lack of support from the registered nurses at the hospital during their internship program. For instance, nursing students stated that some of the nursing staff at the hospital were not supportive while practicing nursing skills. It can be illustrated from the following: “*When I want to practice medication preparation and administration, nurses at the unit are reluctant to help me to learn how to prepare and use the medication for the patients.*” (Participant ‘F’).

Moreover, nursing students required clarification about nursing procedures during their practice to understand how to deal with specific

situations. However, all the participants noticed that nursing staff were always busy and did not treat them as intern nursing students. For instance, one nursing student stated that:

*“During the training, we need to know the patient’s progress, and there are things about the patients not clear to us, but there was no support from the nurses or our faculty. They all were busy.” (Participant ‘A’).*

Participants highlighted the nurses’ busy schedules, preventing them from properly guiding the interns. One participant stated:

*“During my practice, I sometimes need to ask about something related to nursing care, but the nurses are usually busy, and there is no visit from the faculty to help us address some concerns.” (Participant ‘W’).*

#### **Improper Behavior**

The participants in this study encountered some issues with the nursing staff, the instructors, and the patients during their clinical practice. All participants agreed that most of the unit nurses treated them appropriately, which adversely affected their clinical practice. For instance, some nursing staff even used the nursing students for some work that was not related to their training objectives.

*“The unit nurses use us to go with several patients to X-Ray and MRI, which take time outside the unit, and as a result, we miss many clinical procedures.” (Participant ‘T’).*

They also highlighted that allocation of more trivial work takes all of their time, and they have less time to focus on learning important practical skills.

*“Nursing staff usually ask to do some work like completing the discharge papers and following the lab results. We need more focus on some important skills like nursing procedures and interventions.” (Participant ‘R’).*

In addition, the attitude of the nursing staff was the major issue that all participants reported. The interns complained about the behavior of nursing staff that affected their clinical practice negatively. For example, one student narrated that:

*“I asked the nurses some questions in the units and repeated my questions several times, but they usually ignore and leave without answering them.” (Participant ‘R’)*

#### **Distrust**

The nursing students also expressed their concern regarding the distrust from nurses and other health professionals at the hospital. The nursing students complained that they were not considered capable enough to take patient care responsibility due to being an intern. For example, participants in this study noticed that nursing staff did not like to be with the nursing students.

*“One day, I asked the unit nurse to be with her when she providing nursing care to her patients, but she refused and said, you cannot take more responsibilities.” (Participant ‘M’).*

In addition, nursing students during their internship program encountered some challenges in dealing with the clinical environment. According to the participants, there was no collaboration of the health professionals in the departments. More specifically, one of the students complained that:

*“One day, I asked a physician for some information about his patient, but when he knows that I am an intern, he said, you are not a nurse in this unit and asked to call the unit nurse.” (Participant ‘K’)*

#### **Need for Preceptorship**

The study participants further reported that they were not given any effective training strategies in the hospital. They suggested that a preceptorship program is essential to guide and achieve desired outcomes during their training. For instance, one participant stated that:

*“The clinical instructor should select one nurse in the unit to be responsible for us and guide our work during the whole shift to learn and focus more on his or her patients and be more effective for our clinical practice.” (Participant ‘T’).*

Moreover, the participants believed that being with a specific nurse during their practice would make them feel more confident to provide care to the patients and be familiar with each unit’s nursing skills. For example, one nursing student expressed that:

*“As we practice on a manikin at the nursing college, I feel afraid and worried to deal with a real patient at the hospital, and thus it is important to work with a specific nurse to guide and help me feel confident when dealing with the patients.” (Participant ‘F’)*

#### **Similarly, another one stated**

*“In the unit, I usually do not have a specific nurse to be with, and this will not allow me to gain more clinical skills because I cannot focus when working with several nurses at the same time.” (Participant ‘A’).*

## **DISCUSSION**

The present study has focused on the problems and challenges encountered by nursing students during their internship program at a hospital in Medina, Saudi Arabia. The results depicted that the training provided to nursing interns at the hospital is not adequate, and the nursing students are not satisfied with it. Health professionals’ clinical and environmental support directly influences the clinical training of nursing students during the internship program (Bryan *et al.*, 2013). Nursing students in this study expressed their feeling of lack of support in their clinical practice. They reported that the unit nurses were always too busy to

improve their nursing skills to address their concerns. In contrast to this, Althaqafi *et al.* (2019), discovered that nursing staff were supportive of the nursing students during their internship program and encouraged them to participate in nursing interventions. Therefore, it is believed that the supportive clinical environment can promote the confidence level among students and achieve desired learning outcomes Saylor *et al.*, 2018).

The participants in the present study reported that the nursing staff at the hospital did not support nursing students. Nursing students were ignored, and sometimes, they were used for the work that was not included in the training objectives. The finding of the present study was congruent with the results of previous research. It revealed that the nursing interns were being treated inappropriately by the nursing staff during their practice (Alharbi & Alhosis, 2019). In addition, Jamshidi *et al.* (2016), found that healthcare professionals treated nursing students influence their exposure to the clinical environment. According to Del Prato *et al.* (2011), healthcare providers and instructors should deal with nursing students respectfully to reduce their anxiety and improve their clinical learning environment.

It is believed that providing clinical learning opportunities to nursing students during their internship program would affect their clinical practice and increase confidence (Papastavrou *et al.*, 2010). However, in the current study, the nursing interns indicated that they were provided inadequate opportunities to practice essential nursing skills due to distrust from nursing staff. Similarly, Alharbi & Alhosis (2019), found that nursing students reported a lack of opportunities to practice clinical procedures during their internship program in the clinical setting. Therefore, this issue may influence the clinical practice and cause hindrance in achieving desired learning objectives during the internship nursing program.

Assigning the nursing students to expert nurses as clinical preceptors are important to guide and mentor the students to achieve desired training outcomes (Alharbi & Alhosis 2019). However, the present study revealed that no specific preceptor for each nursing student was one of the major challenges faced by the nursing students. Therefore, this finding highlights the importance of the preceptorship program to assist the nursing students during the internship program to improve their skills and increase their confidence to practice safely (Weng *et al.*, 2010).

The study recommends that the stakeholders pay attention to making the experiences of nursing interns a positive one to gain confidence in their clinical practice and have a more positive attitude towards the profession, which seems deteriorating due to predatory behavior that they face during their internship.

The present study includes some limitations, such as the study was a single-centered study that recruited nursing students from a hospital. The transferability could be achieved by a thick description in which the research process was described in detail; however, this study was limited to the selected hospital. Another limitation is the inclusion of a small sample of participants because there were only eight nursing students in the internship program at the chosen hospital during the data collection. However, the study successfully established rigor via the feedback and agreement of the findings from the participants. The study was also limited in finding the themes that were affecting the clinical skills. Another task could be conducted that may focus on internee relation to leadership and management, interpersonal skills, reflection, etc.

## CONCLUSIONS

The present study has highlighted the major problems and challenges perceived by the nursing students during their internship program at a hospital in Medina, Saudi Arabia. The results demonstrated that nursing interns experienced issues related to clinical practice. Those issues included lack of support from nurses and health professionals, inadequate training, apparent distrust of students by nurses and physicians about patient care, and the absence of preceptorship to guide during the internship program. Therefore, the study recommends that nursing instructors develop a clinical training environment and tackle them by mentoring them and enhancing their practice. This can be achieved by providing them with adequate mentoring and a positive clinical setting to help them learn and boost their confidence in their approach.

## DECLARATIONS

### Ethical approval

A subcommittee approved this study of ethics for humanities, social research at King Saud University, and permission from the King Fahad Hospital.

### Funding

This research is not funded by any source.

### Informed Consent Statement

The participants have been explained the purpose of the study, and the written informed consent was obtained before conducting the interview. Confidentiality was maintained for the participants, and the right to withdraw from the study at any time was explained. Participants were from Taibah University, Aljad Nursing College, and Tabuk University

### Data Availability Statement

The data sets used and analyzed in this study are available from the corresponding author.

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## Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflict of interest.

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