

Nursing Students' Self-interest in Selecting Nursing as a Career and its Association with Absenteeism; A Descriptive Cross-sectional Study

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Abstract

Introduction: Absenteeism among nursing students is a major concern in university education. This study aimed to determine nursing students' self-interest in selecting nursing as their career, its associated factors, and reasons for absenteeism from academic activities, examinations and clinical training.

Methods: A descriptive cross-sectional study was conducted among nursing undergraduates of the General Sir John Kotelawala Defence University. A self-administered questionnaire was administered to 232 undergraduates in all four academic years and considered the number of days absent in the previous semester. Data was analyzed using SPSS version 20 and using Pearson's chi-square tests.

Results: Mean $\pm$ SD age of the sample was 21.77 $\pm$ 0.93 years and the majority were females (72.4%, n=168). The majority reported (68.1%, n=158) selecting nursing as per their self-interest. Only 3.4% (n=8) were absent 0 days from lectures or clinical training, and 24.6% (n=57) were absent 0 days from practical sessions. Self-interest in selecting nursing had statistically significant associations with absenteeism from lectures ($p<0.05$), practical sessions ($p<0.001$) and clinical training ($p<0.01$) whereas no association was found with gender and parental education ($p>0.05$). Illnesses (50%), tiredness (35.3%) and exam/study workload (34.5%) were the main reasons for student absenteeism from academic activities whereas illnesses (50.9%), tiredness (46.1%) and lack of support from the clinical staff (18.1%) were the main reasons for the absence from clinical training.

Conclusions: A small proportion of students had poor self-interest in selecting nursing which was associated with absenteeism from academic activities and clinical training. Attention to students' clinical attendance is essential as nurses are the key personnel in patient care.

Keywords: Absenteeism, Nursing, Nursing students

Introduction

Student nurses' absenteeism in higher education troubles many university lecturers (Lipscomb and Snelling, 2014).

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Further, student absenteeism is a main concern for university education worldwide (Desalegn *et al.*, 2014). In addition, absenteeism is a problem that could negatively affect students' academic performance (Fernández-Martínez *et al.*, 2020).

Available studies showed that nursing students' regular attendance in class activities or clinical work improved their academic performance (Branson *et al.*, 2020; McCarey *et al.*, 2007), with attendance positively correlating with the final course grades of



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nursing undergraduates (Branson *et al.*, 2020). Despite the strictness of 'attendance policies' maintained at the university level, absenteeism is seen among undergraduates due to illness, family member's health issues, bad weather, fatigue resulting from previous classes, inappropriate physical conditions in the classroom, etc. (Mokhtari *et al.*, 2021; Joseph *et al.*, 2021).

As the available literature is scarce in the Sri Lankan context, this study aimed to explore nursing students' self-interest in choosing nursing as their career and the associated factors and reasons for absenteeism from academic activities, examinations, and clinical training.

Methods

Study design and setting

This descriptive cross-sectional study was conducted at the Department of Nursing and Midwifery, Faculty of Allied Health Sciences, General Sir John Kotelawala Defence University (KDU). When considering the study setting, the faculty recognizes that practical and clinical work are essential components in developing the required competencies for nursing students. To ensure that students achieve the intended learning outcomes, the faculty has implemented a strict attendance policy. Accordingly, students are required to maintain a minimum of 80% attendance in lectures, practical sessions, and clinical training in order to be eligible to sit for the end semester examinations.

Details of the sample and data collection

The study was conducted among 232 BSc Nursing undergraduates studying in four academic years of their degree. The study used a non-probability convenient sampling method. All undergraduates in their second semester of the 1st, 2nd, 3rd and 4th academic years were selected. All the nursing students had commenced clinical training during this study. Data collection was done using a self-administered questionnaire, which consisted of closed-ended questions on socio-demographic

data, students' interest in selecting the course, and self-reported absenteeism from lectures, practical sessions, and clinical training from 1st July-31st December 2016. The questionnaire was prepared in English since it is the language medium used in teaching at the faculty. The questionnaire was pre-tested using ten undergraduates enrolled in different universities. All the ambiguities were corrected before administering the questionnaire to the final sample. All study details and the importance of providing accurate information was explained to the participants prior to administration.

Ethical approval and participants consent

The study was conducted in accordance with the Declaration of Helsinki. Before data collection, ethical approval was obtained from the Ethics Review Committee of the Faculty of Medicine, KDU, Sri Lanka. The data collection process commenced after obtaining written permission from the university administration. The students received oral and written information about the study, including notice that their participation was voluntary and that they had the right to withdraw from participation at any point during the study. They were assured of confidentiality and were advised to refrain from discussing the responses.

Data analysis

Data were analyzed by using SPSS version 20. Descriptive statistics (frequencies, percentages, etc.) and inferential statistical techniques (Pearson's Chi-square test) were used.

Results

Socio demographic details, the prevalence of absenteeism from lectures, practical sessions and clinical training, personal interest in selecting nursing and its association with academic and clinical attendance, and reasons for absenteeism from academic activities, examinations and clinical training are reported below. The response rate of the study was 90.6%. The mean age of the sample was

21.77 years (SD=0.93 years). Most students were female (72.4%, n=168) and from the 3rd academic year (n=103, 44.4%) of their degree program. Regarding other academic years, 12.5% were in the 1st year, 20.7% were in the 2nd year and 22.4% were in the 4th year. When considering the education level of their

mothers and fathers, most of them had completed their secondary education (59.5%). Most undergraduates (68.1%) reported that they selected the nursing degree as their interest and only 31.9% selected it without their own interest (Table 1).

Table 1: Students' self-interest in selecting nursing

Self-interest	Total N (%)	Male N (%)	Female N (%)
Yes	158(68.1)	39(60.9)	119(70.8)
No	74(31.9)	25(39.1)	49(29.2)
Total	232	64(100)	168(100)

n = Frequency

Table 2 shows the degree of student absenteeism for lectures, practical sessions and clinical training. Results showed that 41.9% of the students were absent for three or less than three days for lectures and the

majority were absent (58.1%) for more than three days. Further, the prevalence of absenteeism for more than three days was 36.2% for the practical sessions and 53% for the clinical training.

Table 2: Demographical Data of Students

	Lectures		Practical sessions		Clinical training	
	Frequency (n)	Percentage (%)	Frequency (n)	Percentage (%)	Frequency (n)	Percentage (%)
0 days	8	3.4	57	24.6	8	3.4
1 day	25	10.8	47	20.3	18	7.8
2-3 days	64	27.6	44	19.0	83	35.8
4-5 days	45	19.4	25	10.8	80	34.5
>5 days	53	22.8	26	11.2	33	14.2
Cannot remember	37	15.9	33	14.2	10	4.3
Total	232	100.0	232	100.0	232	100.0

Pearson's Chi-squared test was performed to identify the association between self-interest in selecting nursing and attendance to lectures, practical sessions and clinical training and found statistically significant differences as $p<0.05$, $p<0.001$ and $p<0.01$, respectively

(Table 3). Further, the association between gender, and educational level of the mother/father with the self-interest of selecting nursing did not show statistically significant associations ($p>0.05$).

Table 3: Chi-squared test values between the self-interest in selecting nursing and absenteeism from lectures, practical sessions, clinical training and other socio demographic variables

Component	Chi-square value (Pearson)
Lectures	0.014*
Practical sessions	0.000***
Clinical training	0.001**
Gender	0.159
Educational level of the mother	0.414
Educational level of the father	0.808

* = $p < 0.05$, **= $p < 0.01$, ***= $p < 0.001$

Reasons for nursing students' absenteeism from academic activities, examinations and clinical training are shown in Table 4. Accordingly, many nursing students were absent from academic activities due to illnesses (50%), tiredness (35.3%), and exam/ study

workload (34.5%). Only a few (less than 5%) were absent from examinations due to illness, exam stress, not studying continuously, death/ hospitalization of a family member. Nearly 50% of the nursing students are absent from clinical training due to illness (50.9%) and tiredness (46.1%).

Table 4: Reasons for absenteeism from academic activities, clinical training and examinations

Category	Reason for absenteeism	n	%
Academic activities	Illness	117	50.4
	Stress	37	15.9
	Tiredness	82	35.3
	Exam/ study workload	80	34.5
	Doing a part-time job	18	7.8
	Financial matters	13	5.6
	Social activities	29	12.5
	Participation for sports	1	0.4
	Dissatisfied with the course	9	3.9
	Lack of subject interest	34	14.7
	Duration of the lectures	24	10.3
	Death of a family member	21	9.1
	Illness/ hospitalization of a family member	58	25.0

Examinations	Illness	10	4.3
	Exam stress	5	2.2
	Not studying continuously	2	.9
	Death of a family member	3	1.3
	Illness/ hospitalization of a family member	3	1.3
Clinical training	Illness	118	50.9
	Tiredness	107	46.1
	Lack of support from the clinical staff	42	18.1
	Stress	41	17.7
	Study workload	40	17.2
	Illness/ hospitalization of a family member	36	15.5
	Social activities	15	6.5
	Doing a part-time job	12	5.2
	Research work	10	4.3
	Dissatisfied with the course	10	4.3
	Death of a family member	7	3.0
	Participation in sports	1	.4
	Lack of transport facility	1	.4
	Whole-day clinical placement	1	.4
	Continuous clinical placement	1	.4

Discussion

This study examined the proportion of nursing students' self-interest in selecting nursing as their career, its associated factors and the reasons for absenteeism from academic activities, examinations and clinical training. We adopted a convenient sampling with a self-administered questionnaire survey at the university level. As all the nursing students from the University were selected, the authors believe that there was no selection bias, although the study selected a convenient

sampling technique in this study. Additionally, KDU is the only defence University in Sri Lanka; thus, the authors believed this method facilitated selecting a sample as representative as possible with easy accessibility to the population. Various studies have adopted similar sampling methods (Desalegn *et al.*, 2014; Mkhize and Nzimande; 2007; Sharma *et al.*, 2016). However, no similar studies have been conducted in a defence university. Thus, we believe the findings of this study are important locally and internationally. Most of the studies used self-administered

questionnaires to obtain information regarding student absenteeism. No study was conducted directly to find the association between the students' interest in selecting nursing as their career and their absenteeism from lectures, and practical and clinical training. However, some studies found that the lack of interest in nursing or nursing modules causes student absenteeism and facts associated with selecting nursing as a career choice (Hughes, 2005).

When considering gender as a socio-demographic variable, it is a strong factor in selecting nursing. However, most of the females were selected nursing without their self-interest, which is not in line with other studies. Studies found that women are more likely to consider nursing than men (Kikwilu *et al.*, 2000; Law and Arthur, 2003). For various reasons, women are more likely to be self-actualized and consider it as the main motivational factor. In contrast, men are more likely to choose nursing for economic reasons (Zysberg and Berry, 2005). Although the number of nursing professionals is increasing, men are the minority and may be discouraged due to the perception that nursing is "women's work" (Romem and Anson, 2005). However, the proportion of the females who joined nursing with poor self-interest is similar to that of the females in the sample, which shows the true representation of the sample.

The present study found that many of the students (68.1%) selected nursing as their own interest and which is a higher proportion when considering the findings of Mkhize and Nzimande (2007). They found only 12.9% of the sample chose nursing as their career as per their interest. Although most nurses joined nursing without interest, the students were encouraged to reconsider their selection of nursing as their career (Mkhize and Nzimande, 2007). In Sri Lanka, the reasons for selecting nursing would be the influence of family and economic background. They might not find another career or degree to select as per their school examination results.

Many studies worldwide reported low interest among school leavers in nursing as a career

(Mkhize and Nzimande, 2007). The present study found a significant association between the students' self-interest in selecting nursing and absenteeism from lectures, practical sessions and clinical training. However, no significant association was found with socio-demographic variables such as gender and educational status of the mother and father. As no studies were conducted to find the association between student interest in selecting nursing, it was impossible to compare this finding. However, studies conducted by Mogobolo and Dube (2019) and Desalegn *et al.*, (2014) found no statistically significant association between gender and absenteeism. It was suggested to obtain accurate attendance records and calculate absenteeism rates frequently and publish them to students to minimize their absenteeism (Mogobolo and Dube, 2019). In addition, as student nurses' training is mandatory, monitoring students (Doyle *et al.*, 2008), and introducing rules, regulations, disciplinary procedures and punitive approaches would decrease the excessive level of absenteeism (Doyle *et al.*, 2008).

When considering the literature on student nurses' absenteeism (Timmings and Kaliszer, 2002), most absenteeism episodes (94%) lasted for three days or less, with 73% lasting for only one day and only 7% absent for more than three days. However, in the present study, 41.8%, 63.9% and 47% were absent from lectures, practicals and clinicals for three or less than three days for the previous semester, respectively. Further, according to the study by Timming and Kaliszer, only 9% of students were absent from the lectures (Timmings and Kaliszer, 2002). When considering practical sessions, 24.6% were not absent for any day for practical and only 3.4% were not absent any day for the clinical training. Hence, the absenteeism for clinical classes among nursing undergraduates is higher than for lectures and practical sessions in the present study. This difference can be due to various reasons, including the lack of interest in selecting nursing as their career and other reasons that need further study. Desalegn *et al.*, (2014) explained a few reasons for the higher prevalence of

absenteeism observed in their studies, such as the age of students, chosen discipline, social drug use, preparing for another examination, lack of interest, lecturer's teaching style, and unavailability of lecture material (Desalegn *et al.*, 2014).

Many factors will affect absenteeism, such as lack of interest in the subject matter and poor teaching strategies (Thekedam, 2013), personal issues like physical illness, family responsibilities such as a death in the family (Hidayat *et al.*, 2012; Mahmoud, 2017), and problems with transport to clinical areas (Hidayat *et al.*, 2012; Mahmoud, 2017) support and guidance of students by lecturers and clinical mentors are highlighted to motivate student nurses to minimize absenteeism (Mahmoud, 2017). The major reason for absenteeism from academic activities, exams and clinical training is reported to be having illnesses and secondly, tiredness and exam/study workload. This is mostly due to the tight schedule of the academic activities and clinical training occurring in parallel during the semester. Another reported reason for absenteeism from clinical training was the lack of support from the clinical staff during the clinical placement, which shows the importance of proper clinical supervision and mentoring for nursing students. However, many respondents of the study conducted by Timmings and Kaliszer (2002) suggested that monitoring lecture attendance to minimize student absenteeism is important. (Timmings and Kaliszer, 2002). Therefore, considering the reasons for student absenteeism and implementing solutions based on those would be important to enhance student participation in academic and clinical training even though they have selected nursing without their self-interest.

Limitations

Although we have uncovered important results related to nursing education, this study was conducted at a university in Sri Lanka. However, this is the only defence university in Sri Lanka where a nursing degree is available. Furthermore, data on absenteeism was collected through self-reported information

based on students' experiences during the past semester. This method may introduce recall bias, potentially affecting the reliability of the findings. However, to minimize this limitation, the questionnaire included a response option of 'cannot remember' to allow participants to indicate uncertainty, thereby reducing the risk of inaccurate reporting to some extent.

Conclusion

The present study found a lower proportion of self-interest in selecting nursing among students. Student absenteeism for lectures and practical sessions was at a lower level when compared to attendance in clinical training. Absenteeism from lectures, practical sessions and clinical training is significantly associated with the undergraduates' self-interest in selecting nursing for their higher studies. Reasons for absenteeism, such as illness, tiredness, exam/study workload, and lack of support from the clinical staff during the clinical placement, need to be considered to improve attendance at academic activities, examinations, and clinical training. Moreover, attention toward students' clinical training attendance is essential as nurses are the key personnel in patient care after graduation. Calculating absenteeism rates at frequent intervals, conducting student clinical supervision and addressing their academic and clinical-related matters are essential to motivate student nurses. Conducting nursing research to identify factors associated with student absenteeism and poor self-interest in selecting nursing would be essential to enhance the quality of nursing education and the quality of nursing care in the future.

Conflict of Interest

None

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