

Letter to the Editor

The Rise of Private Bachelor Nursing Degree Programs: Boon or Bane for a Quality Nursing Workforce?

De Silva, D.K.M.

Department of Clinical Nursing, Faculty of Nursing, University of Colombo

The rapid expansion of private higher education institutions offering Bachelor of Science in Nursing (BSc) degrees has sparked much debate within academic, professional, and healthcare circles. With the increasing global demand for nurses, many private institutions have responded by offering nursing degree programs, capitalizing on the need for more healthcare professionals. However, this growing trend brings with it complex questions surrounding quality, ethics, and workforce development. To explore these issues, the current article examines the quality of education provided by private nursing institutions, focusing on key challenges such as faculty qualifications and clinical training opportunities. It also delves into the commercialization of nursing education, highlighting the ethical and financial implications for students. Finally, it discusses the broader impact of private nursing programs on the nursing workforce, including the potential consequences for healthcare delivery and public perception of the profession.

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Correspondence: D.K.M De Silva, Department of Clinical Nursing, Faculty of Nursing, University of Colombo, Sri Lanka, Email: kavishkamadushan1@gmail.com  <https://orcid.org/0009-0006-1465-3194>

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The emergence of private nursing institutes: Filling a gap or exploiting a demand?

The global shortage of nurses, exacerbated by an ageing population and increased healthcare needs, has driven the demand for nursing professionals (De Silva et al., 2024). In response, private institutions have entered the market to fill this void, especially in countries where public universities may have limited capacity to enroll a sufficient number of students.

In the Philippines, private institutes have been able to rapidly scale up nurse production, generating employment and foreign exchange remittances (Reynolds et al., 2013). Similarly, in Brazil, the expansion of private nursing education has been a key driver in the overall growth of the nursing sector (Fehn et al., 2021; Soares & Oliveira, 2022).

Private nursing institutions have played a critical role in expanding access to nursing education, allowing more students to pursue nursing careers (Masselink & Lee, 2010). They provide an alternative pathway for students who may not have been able to secure a spot in public universities due to competitive entrance exams, limited seats, or geographic barriers. In Mali, for instance, a United States Agency for International Development (USAID) funded project supported the accreditation of private nursing schools to improve the quality of education and increase the supply of qualified health workers (Touré et al., 2021).

However, the question remains: are these private nursing institutions genuinely invested in producing competent, compassionate, and qualified nurses, or are they merely capitalizing on market demand for their financial gain? Studies in India have found that the quality of education in private institutes is often poorer than in public institutions, especially in resource-constrained regions (Mayra et al., 2021). The uneven distribution

of nursing institutes has also led to geographic inequalities in access to nursing education (Soares & Oliveira, 2022).

Furthermore, the profit-driven motives of private institutes have been highlighted as a potential issue, as they may prioritize financial gains over educational quality and the needs of the domestic health sector (Mayra et al., 2021; Timmons et al., 2016). The commodification of education, where students are viewed as "customers" and degrees as "products," raises concerns about the motivation of private institutions. Unlike public institutions that often adhere to strict accreditation standards and are driven by educational missions, some private nursing institutions may prioritize profit over the quality of education, leading to the dilution of academic rigor and the production of inadequately trained professionals.

Quality of education

One of the most pressing concerns about private nursing degrees is the variability in the quality of education provided. Public universities often have long-established reputations, experienced faculty, well-equipped clinical training centers, and collaborations with healthcare institutions that ensure comprehensive training for their students. In contrast, the quality of education in private institutions can vary widely. Some private nursing institutions may provide a high-quality education that meets international standards, while others may cut corners in areas such as faculty qualifications, clinical placements, and student support services.

A significant challenge lies in the fact that some private institutions may focus on enrolling as many students as possible, without a proportional investment in resources or infrastructure. For instance, clinical training is a crucial component of nursing education (Amoo & Enyan, 2022), and students require hands-on experience in real healthcare settings to develop their skills (Akyüz & Ergöl, 2022). However, private institutions with fewer partnerships with hospitals and healthcare facilities may struggle to offer adequate clinical

placements. It may lead to graduates who lack the practical experience needed to provide safe and effective care (Gemuhay et al., 2019). In addition, faculty qualifications in some private institutions may be subpar, with instructors who may not have sufficient experience in clinical practice or teaching. This can further compromise the quality of education (Sreedharan et al., 2023). Without a strong foundation in both theoretical knowledge and clinical skills, graduates of these programs may not be adequately prepared to meet the demands of the nursing profession, which could ultimately affect patient outcomes (Saifan et al., 2021).

Nursing as a business

The commercialization of nursing education is another contentious issue. In some countries, the cost of obtaining a private BSc nursing degree can be exorbitant, placing a significant financial burden on students and their families. This raises ethical questions about whether private institutions are exploiting vulnerable individuals who are eager to enter the nursing profession but may not have access to affordable education.

Moreover, the business model of private nursing institutions may emphasize profitability over student success. For example, private institutions may have lower admission standards to attract more students, but they may not provide the necessary support to ensure these students succeed academically or professionally. This could result in a high attrition rate, with students who are unable to complete their degree. In some cases, private institutions may prioritize graduating as many students as possible, even if those students are not fully prepared for the demands of the profession. This not only diminishes the value of the degree but also poses a risk to the quality of care that these graduates provide once they enter the workforce.

Several strategies can be employed to prevent

these risks. Effective regulation and accreditation of private nursing institutes are crucial to ensure the quality of nursing education is aligned with the needs of the domestic health sector. Regulatory bodies should establish and enforce standards for curriculum, faculty qualifications, and infrastructure to maintain educational quality. In particular, collaborations between the public and private sectors can help strike a balance between the profit-driven motives of private institutes and the broader societal needs. Public-private partnerships can facilitate the accreditation of private institutes, improve the quality of education, and ensure that the domestic health sector benefits from the increased nurse production. Further, upholding ethical values, such as confidentiality, patient advocacy, and professional integrity, should be a core focus in nursing education and practice. Regulatory bodies and nursing organizations should ensure that private institutes instill these values and hold nurses accountable for maintaining high ethical standards.

Impact on the nursing workforce

The rise of private BSc nursing programs has undoubtedly contributed to an increase in the number of nursing graduates entering the workforce (Masselink & Lee, 2010). However, the quality of these graduates remains a point of contention. While some private institutions produce highly competent and skilled nurses, others may contribute to an influx of underprepared professionals who are ill-equipped to handle the complexities of modern healthcare.

This has significant implications for the nursing workforce as a whole. If private institutions prioritize quantity over quality, the result could be a workforce with wide variability in competence. Healthcare institutions may find themselves with a mix of highly skilled nurses alongside others who require additional training and support to reach the necessary level of competence. This could place an additional burden on healthcare facilities, which may need to invest in remedial education or ongoing professional development to bring these nurses up to standard.

Moreover, the influx of poorly trained nurses could also impact the public perception of the nursing profession. If patients encounter nurses who lack the necessary skills or knowledge, it could erode trust in the healthcare system and contribute to negative stereotypes about nurses (Blau et al., 2023). This is especially concerning in countries where nurses play a critical role in delivering primary care, particularly in underserved or rural areas.

Nursing staff who have experienced the differences between graduates from public and private nursing institutes can provide valuable insights. Studies have found that stakeholders, such as registered nurses, lecturers, and nurse managers, often perceive newly graduated nurses from private institutes as not being fully ready for practice (Dlamini et al., 2014). This highlights the need for improved quality and alignment with the healthcare system's needs.

Safeguarding quality through regulation and accreditation

To ensure that private nursing institutions are held to the same standards as their public counterparts, regulatory bodies, and accreditation agencies play a vital role. Accreditation is a key mechanism for ensuring that nursing programs meet specific educational standards and produce graduates who are competent and prepared for the profession (Mooney, 2024). However, in some countries, the regulatory framework for private nursing institutions may be weak or poorly enforced, allowing substandard institutions to operate without adequate oversight.

Governments and professional nursing organizations must strengthen their oversight of private nursing institutions. This includes enforcing strict accreditation standards, conducting regular evaluations of programs, and ensuring that private institutions have the necessary resources to provide high-quality education. In addition, efforts should be made

to standardize nursing education across both public and private institutions to ensure that all graduates, regardless of where they obtained their degrees, are held to the same level of competence.

Conclusion

The emergence of private BSc nursing degrees presents both opportunities and challenges for the healthcare system. On one hand, these programs have expanded access to nursing education, helping to address the global nursing shortage. On the other hand, concerns about the quality of education and the commercialization of nursing raise important questions about the long-term impact on the nursing workforce.

Ultimately, the goal should be to strike a balance between increasing access to nursing education and maintaining high standards of quality. Private nursing institutions must be held accountable to the same rigorous standards as public institutions to ensure that they are producing competent, skilled, and compassionate nurses who can meet the demands of the profession. Nursing education should not be reduced to a business model where profit trumps quality. Instead, it must remain focused on its fundamental mission: preparing the next generation of nurses to provide high-quality, patient-centered care.

To address the challenges posed by private BSc nursing programs, governments and professional bodies must enforce strict accreditation standards, mandate faculty qualifications, and establish clinical partnerships to ensure educational quality. Regular evaluations should be conducted to uphold these standards and address gaps. Promoting public-private collaboration can align the profit-driven motives of private institutions with broader societal needs, ensuring better outcomes for students and healthcare systems. Additionally, nursing education must emphasize ethical principles, including patient advocacy and professionalism (De Silva et al., 2024) which regulatory bodies should ensure are embedded in curricula. A unified framework for nursing education across public and private institutions

can further standardize quality and produce a consistent, competent workforce. Moreover, private institutions should invest in experienced faculty, adequate infrastructure, and improved clinical placements to provide comprehensive training and prepare students to meet modern healthcare demands effectively.

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