

# Lived Experiences of Female Undergraduate Students, at a Nursing College in Abu Dhabi, about Nursing as a Profession

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## Abstract

**Aim:** To explore the lived experiences of female undergraduate nursing students about nursing as a profession and the circumstances that have influenced their experience.

**Introduction:** Nursing as a profession is a relatively new practice, and thus in the developmental stage, in the UAE. The number of national students (Emirati) who enrol in the nursing program is relatively small. To understand the opinions, feelings and thoughts of these undergraduate nursing students about nursing as a profession, it was essential to explore their lived experiences.

**Research Methods and Design:** An exploratory, descriptive qualitative research design was used. The target population was third-year female undergraduates nursing students at a nursing college, in Abu Dhabi, United Arab Emirates. A purposeful sampling was used. Self-report data were gathered from each participant through written reflections. Each participant was asked to reflect on two questions. The sample size was concluded through data saturation. Data was analysed using Collaizi's 7- step method and guided the researchers to sort each transcript into themes, sub-themes and categories. Trustworthiness criteria was utilized to assess the validity and reliability of the results.

**Findings:** Analysis of data revealed four themes about nursing as a profession. These themes included changing perceptions, nursing as a career, scope of practice, and social stand of nursing as a profession.

**Conclusion:** Nursing students' lived experiences about nursing as a profession provided valuable information that could be employed to enhance students' recruitment into the nursing program. Consequently these experiences will inform the Emiratization process, as well as the issue of nursing shortage in the UAE.

**Keywords:** Nursing as a Profession, Nursing Profession, Nursing

## 1. INTRODUCTION

*“Three essential components of professional nursing are care, cure and co-ordination... Nursing is not simply a collection of specific skills, and the nurse is not simply a person trained to perform specific tasks. Nursing is a profession. No one factor absolutely differentiates a job or a profession, but difference is important in terms of how nurse practice.”*

*(Nursing Management, 2010)*

The American Nurses Association (2012) defines nursing as the optimization, promotion, and protection of health, as well as prevention of disease and injury. Furthermore, nursing focusses on relief of pain through the usage of clinical decision making, the diagnosis and treatment of human response, and empowerment in the care of populations. Kaur, Kaur, & Kaur (2015) emphasised that nursing is a health care profession whereby nurses are involved in the care of individuals of all ages and cultural backgrounds who are both healthy and ill (Kaur, Kaur, & Kaur, 2015). Nursing is supported and acknowledged by the World Health Organisation (WHO) as the foundation of health care structures around the world (World Health Organization, 2002). The concept of nursing as a profession has evolved over time and developed through different perspectives – organizational, disciplinary, and professional contexts.

Historically, people gradually began to accept nursing as a respectable profession in the society which was initiated mainly through Florence Nightingale's advocacy for nursing. Nursing was through the ages a predominantly a female profession. Worldwide, nursing professionalism has been developed through knowledge, development of nursing education, nursing protocols and guidelines. The Royal College of Nursing (RCN

Policy and International Department, 2012) reported that several countries, including England, Northern Ireland, Canada, the United States and New Zealand have each reformed the nursing profession through strengthening the nursing health system, policy and practice. Through reforming of nursing and workforce issues, nursing leadership becomes empowered.

Within Middle Eastern countries it is evident that countries such as Jordan, Saudi and Bahrain have a gradual increase in the number of students enrolled in nursing education and considered nursing profession as more appealing through a more positive attitude (Jarrah, 2013, Eman, Seamus, & Edgar, 2012, Miligi & Selim, 2014). At local level, the United Arab Emirates (UAE) continues to contract large number of expatriate nurses which has resulted in an overreliance on external manpower in most UAE healthcare facilities. Statistics reveal that Emiratis comprise less than 10% of the total nursing workforce (Gulf News, 2013). Emirati students remain significantly underrepresented which resulted in a delay of the Emiratisation process and consequently severe shortage of qualified Emirati nursing workforce.

## 2. RESEARCH PROBLEM

Nursing as a career is relatively new in the UAE and in the development stage. There is a considerable small number of nursing colleges that train nursing students and the numbers of national (Emirati) nursing students enrolling for nursing, is still small. To ensure sustainability of nursing education in the UAE and inform curricula, it is therefore imperative to know about nursing students' lived experiences of nursing as a profession. Furthermore, understanding of nursing students' lived experience toward nursing as a profession will inform recruiters of national senior school students for the nursing profession. Several literature about nursing as a profession is available in some countries in the Middle East, including Bahrain, Jordan and Kingdom of Saudi Arabia (KSA). However, no available literature about the topic could be found within the UAE.

## 3. AIM AND OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

The *aim* of the study was to determine the lived experiences of female undergraduate students, at a College of Nursing in Abu Dhabi, about nursing as a profession, as well as the situations that influenced their experience. The *significance of the study* is that, to date, no study could be found through search engines about nursing as a profession in the UAE.

*The objectives for the study were:*

- to explore the lived experience of the female undergraduate nursing students about nursing as a profession; and
- to explore the situations had an influence on this experience.

From the above the following research questions derived:

**Research question 1:** What is the lived experience of the female undergraduate nursing students about nursing as a profession?

**Research question 2:** What situations had an influence on this experience?

## 4. RESEARCH METHODS AND DESIGN

A qualitative, exploratory and descriptive research design was followed. Qualitative research utilizes a flexible design to perform an in-depth and holistic study of the qualities and characteristics of the phenomenon under study through the collection of rich narrative materials. This design employ rich descriptions and the phenomenon will be explored through an inductive process to identify themes and categories (Polit & Beck, 2014; Bothma, et al., 2010). Qualitative research principles were used to explore and describe the thoughts, feeling and opinions of the undergraduate nursing students. An exploratory approach is usually used to enrich the knowledge of the phenomenon under study, should not be generalized to large population and provides basis for confirmatory studies (Burns & Grove, 2014). The exploratory approach was applicable because no literature could be found about the phenomenon within the UAE. Burns and Grove (2014) explain that descriptive research describes the events and real-life experiences to discover new meaning. The researchers used the students' lived experiences to describe the phenomenon under study, namely the nursing profession

The setting of the study was at the Nursing Department at Fatima College of Health Sciences (FCHS), Abu Dhabi, United Arab Emirates. The FCHS is affiliated with the Institute for Applied Technology (IAT). Several

clinical institutions affiliated with the Health Authority of Abu Dhabi (HAAD) are utilized for clinical practice by the enrolled undergraduate nursing students from their second year of study.

#### 4.1 Target population and sampling

The target population was third-year female undergraduate nursing students enrolled in the nursing baccalaureus program at a College of Nursing in Abu Dhabi. A purposive sampling was done. Several authors (Burns & Grove, 2014; Bothma *et al*, 2010) describe purposive sampling as a non-probability sampling method that where the researcher consciously select certain subjects to include in a study. The purposive sampling method was applicable since the researchers wanted to gain insight about the participants' lived experiences about nursing as a profession. These participants were selected for a specific purpose and needed to comply with specific criteria, namely:

- female;
- third-year undergraduate nursing students; and
- enrolled at the College of Nursing.

In qualitative research the sample size is concluded by data saturation. Saturation of data was achieved after no new information arise through additional sampling as explained by Creswell (2013) and Seale (2013).

#### 4.2 Data gathering and data analysis

The researchers followed the process for data gathering as suggested by Moustakis (1994 in Creswell, 2013) where two main research questions were asked to third-year undergraduate nursing students, who were available and willing to participate in the study. Self-report data was gathered by means of these students' reflection of their lived experiences about nursing as a profession in English. According to Polit and Beck (2014), self-report data enables the researcher to know what people think, believe or feel, by asking directly about their perceptions, attitudes, beliefs, feelings, motives, plans, experiences, knowledge levels and memories. The two main questions that were asked are "What is the lived experience of the female undergraduate nursing students about nursing as a profession?" and "What situations had an influence of this experience?" The data gathering instrument, which was pre-tested on four participants, consisted of two parts, namely demographic data and written reflections. No participant experienced a problem to understand the question. Data was gathered from September to October 2015. Colliuzzi's (1997) 7-step method (illustrated in Figure 1) was used to conduct the data analysis.

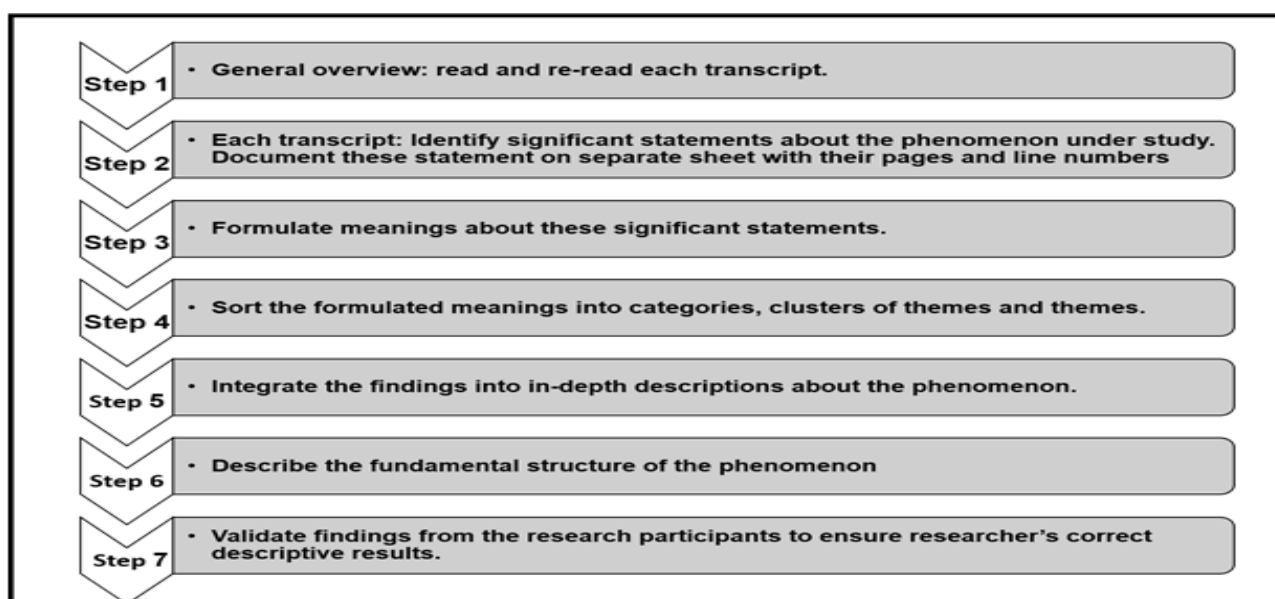


Figure 1: Colliuzzi's 7-step qualitative data analysis method

Reflections of participants were coded as verbatim and the coded items were presented in tables and used as a unit analysis. Unit analysis' ideas were further broken down, organized into clusters (sub-categories) and later into categories. Within the categories uniting points of views and discrepancies, concerns, familiarity and conclusions among participants were viewed. This resulted to further subdivision of the categories into sub-categories. Categories and sub-categories were clustered together to form themes.

Data analysis in qualitative research occurs concurrently with data gathering to determine data saturation. Data saturation was achieved after the reflections of 10 participants, followed by the additional 3 participants with no new categories emerged from the data. Table 1 provides evidence of the data saturation.

Table1: Data saturation

Documents (n=13)	Evidence of saturation
Analysed with new categories	10
Analysed without new categories	3
Total	13

## 5. TRUSTWORTHINESS

Lincoln and Guba's (1985 in Polit & Beck, 2014) five criteria to establish trustworthiness of qualitative inquiry, was utilized in this study. These criteria include credibility, dependability, conformability, transferability and authenticity.

## 6. ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS

The ethical principles described by Polit and Beck (2014) were applied to the study. This study was approved by the college's ethics committee. All participants were requested to sign informed consent. Confidentiality and anonymity were maintained throughout the study as the participants were assured that all names were protected through pseudo-names. The process of participation was entirely voluntarily without any external pressure and withdrawal could occur at any time of the study. Furthermore no incentive was promised to the participants upon their participation in the study.

## 7. FINDINGS

All 13 participants were female, Muslim and residents of the United Arab Emirates (UAE).

54% of the participants were nationals (Emirati) and 46% were non-nationals. Most of the participants were between the ages of 21 and 23 years old. The demographic findings are visualize in Figure 2.

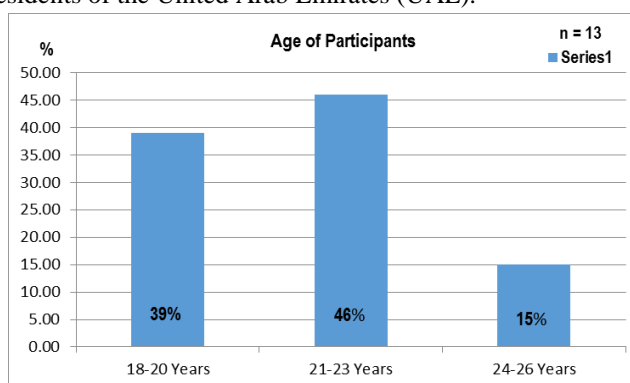


Figure 2: Age distribution of participants

Four main themes emerged from the data. The themes were changing perceptions, nursing as a career, scope of practice, and social stand of nursing as a profession. Pseudo names were used to ensure confidentiality of participants and protect their identity. The themes, categories and sub-categories are visualized in Table 2.

Table2: Themes, categories and sub-categories

Themes	Category	Sub- Categories
Changing Perceptions	Preconceived misconceptions	Do not value nursing
		Nurses are followers
		Not proud of basic nursing activities
		Nurses not autonomous
	Confusion about study choice	Undecided choice
		Undecided reasons
	Pride development	Knowledge-base
		Admiration
		Feeling proud
		Rewarding/satisfaction
Unclear scope of practice	Limited scope for nurse	
Clinical practice is as a change agent	“feel” nursing	
Nursing as a Career	Motivators to study nursing	Parents’ influence
		Passion with human anatomy, physiology and pathology
		Good remuneration
		Good, bright future
		Support systems
	Nursing shortage	Can’t live without nurses
		Country’s need
	Challenges	Workload
		Emotional abuse
		Difficult study
Fear		
Scope of Practice	Competencies	Knowledge, skills
		Critical thinking and positive decision making
	Spectrum of practice	Lack of using full spectrum of nursing modalities
		Broad spectrum of practice
		Different fields of exposure
	Individual’s characteristics	Born to be a nurse
		Caring
		Angels of Mercy
Social stand of nursing as a profession	Family’s initial perception of nursing as a profession	Do not want daughters to be a nurse
		Lack of awareness about nursing
		Nurses are doctors’ assistants
		House maids
	Changed family’s perception of nursing as a profession	Families are more educated about nursing
		Need for Arabic speaking nurses
	Stigma	Nurses are maids

7.1 Theme 1: Changing perceptions

Three categories emerged, including preconceived misconceptions, pride development, confusion about study choice, unclear scope of practice and clinical practice as a change agent. Table 3 provide the sub-categories for

each category as well as the participants verbatim reflections for each category and sub-category regarding Theme 1.

Table 3: Theme 1 Changing perceptions - participants' verbatim reflections

Category	Sub- Categories	Participants' Verbatim Reflection
Preconceived misconceptions	Do not value nursing	As a first year in nursing school I didn't appreciate nursing as a profession
	Nurses are followers	I used to think of nurses as followers, they follow doctor's orders and work hard to maintain patient satisfaction
	Not proud of basic nursing activities	As a bachelor degree student I think bed-making should not be done by nurses
	Nurses not autonomous	Nursing is a profession, but nurses I work with in the clinical, to be honest were more dependent. They didn't show the nursing autonomy. Whenever a physician arrive and ask about a patient, nurses give basic info from the MRN and they don't show autonomy.
Pride development	Knowledge-base	I really think nursing was about giving care physically, but after I experienced it, I knew it involves both physically and psychologically
	Admiration	Since my second year I started admiring nurses' job
	Feeling proud	I'm very proud of being a future nurse
		But it can make you proud of yourself
		The nursing job is the best job
Rewarding/satisfaction	Not anyone can be a nurse	
Confused about study choice	Undecided choice	.....see the patient smiling because of me.....praying for me
		I changed my major of study more than three times...this is the 5 <sup>th</sup> major for me to study nursing
	Undecided reasons	Really first I was so excited for it but unfortunately now I am not a lot of times I feel bored and regret my decision
Unclear scope of practice	Limited scope for nurse	At the beginning of studying this profession, I felt my choice is wrong I have to change it
		From the beginning it was my only choice to study nursing
	Lack of using full spectrum of nursing modalities	Nursing in UAE lack some important skills for example a nurse should know how to suture wounds, at least small ones. Here in the college we are not taught about this skill.
Clinical practice is as a change agent	"feel" nursing	I wanted to show what is nursing for the people, it is not about giving injection and following doctors' orders.
		Moreover I noticed that non-pharmacological methods in reducing pain are not being used.
		When I went to the clinic to the real situation.. I saw the patients.. I live the profession... I feel nursing
		As I went to clinical I saw area of nurse work so I think now I am aware of the life experience of being a nurse
		When I went to clinical training, it's the time where I felt more proud....
		I experienced nursing on clinical rotation. I feel exciting and enthusiastic

### 7.2 Theme 2: Nursing as a career

Three categories emerged, namely motivators to study nursing, nursing shortage and challenges. Participants had numerous opinions about nursing as a career which are reflected in Table 4.

Table 4: Theme 2 Nursing as a career - participants' verbatim reflections

Category	Sub- Categories	Participants' Verbatim Reflection
Motivators to study nursing	Parent's influence	..... she thought that it is the best major for me because of my high grades...
		...because my mom love to I be a nurse
		To improve my mom's dream
		my dad refuse, he thought that nursing is a 'dirty' major for females
	Passion about human anatomy, physiology and pathology	I started studying nursing because of my obsession of human anatomy and physiology and pathology
	Good remuneration	...can get us a good salary for non-locals
		The financial status of it considered good comparing to others jobs
	Bright future	...nursing has a good future it is easy in this program to complete high education
		...show people I know that nursing is good...you don't have to become a doctor or an engineering to have a bright future
		Not a routine job it will help me lifelong
		You can find job opportunity more than other careers
	Support systems	My family, college, teachers all supporting me in my way to the path of glory
		Everyone around me like friend or family member they always give me positive signals
When my family encourage me to be a nurse		
..god can recompense you in your loyalty to your job (Blessings from God)		
Challenges	Workload	nurses work for many long hours...duty is very hard for the human
		It needs a lot of effort
	Emotional abuse	Nurses don't defend themselves against physician's verbal abuse
	Difficult study	Things make me regret choosing nursing is the way of teaching is considered very difficult for students...a lot of tortures make you feel upset...don't know anything.
Fear	Fear from unexpected events with patient and hospital staff	

Table 4: Theme 2 Nursing as a career - participants' verbatim reflections (*continued*)

Category	Category	Category
Nursing shortage	Can't live without nurses	Nursing is a good profession ...can't live without nurses
	Country's need	I want this for my country...we have shortage in nursing profession
		In our country, there little no. of local nursing, so this is my job to work for our country dreams
		...UAE have shortage in this career.
		.....suffering a shortage of national (cadres) Arabic word English meaning is (nurses)
		...in UAE they need local nurses and I hope to do something good for my country
		Most of nurses are not local and they can't speak Arabic or understand Arabic language

### 7.3 Theme 3: Scope of practice

Three categories emerged, including competencies, spectrum of practice, and individual's characteristics. The findings are presented in Table 5.

Table 5: Theme 3 Scope of practice - participants' verbatim reflections

Category	Sub- Categories	Participants' Verbatim Reflection
Competencies	Knowledge, skills Critical thinking and positive decision making	Nursing is a profession...needs knowledge, skills and experience...critical thinking and positive decision making
		It needs a long time experience, skills and knowledge.
		Nursing use their specialized knowledge, experience and skills to initiate life-saving measures
Spectrum of practice	Lack of using full spectrum of nursing modalities	Moreover I noticed that non-pharmacological methods in reducing pain are not being used.
	Broad spectrum of practice	Nurses are diving-in in every field. It gives me the bonus over the other professions
	Different fields of exposure	Since I took rounds in medical and surgical wards and outpatient clinics only ... I am excited for the ICU and maternity units
Individual's characteristics	Born to be a nurse	..I think nursing is the best choice...for me I was born to be a nurse
	Caring	I really want to contribute to help people with my knowledge...
		Nursing is all about caring
		I want to help people...
		..to help people and saving lives..
		..I want to help people...saving lives...it's all about caring
		I believe that I have to study hard to graduate with high grades excellent practice because it is about patients life
		Nursing is a profession of caring of others...
		I like to care of other people who need my help.
I study nursing because it's a humanistic job...I can help people		
Angels of Mercy	.....nurses are angels of mercy.	



#### 7.4 Theme 4: Social stand of nursing as a profession

Three categories that emerged are family's initial perception of nursing as a profession, family's changed perception of nursing as a profession and stigma. Table 6 provide the sub-categories for each category as well as the participants verbatim reflections for each category and sub-category regarding Theme 4.

Table 6: Theme 4 Social stand of nursing as a profession - participants' verbatim reflections

Category	Sub- Categories	Participants' Verbatim Reflection
Family's initial perception of nursing as a profession	Do not want daughters to be a nurse	In the past, some families do not like their daughters to be a nurse
	Lack of awareness about nursing	.... because they don't know what is nursing... .. but they did not agree in the beginning related to our conservative society
	Nurses are doctors' assistants	....they thought only like assistance with doctor
Changed family's perception of nursing as a profession	Families are more educated about nursing	Now families are more educated much more better
	Need for Arabic speaking nurses	....they prefer local or Arabic nurse
Stigma	Nurses are maids	Some people always tell you that you are maids
		I had one patient told me that nurses are maids, they only clean the patients and I was shocked.
		.....just like house maid

## 8. DISCUSSION

Four themes emerged from the data analysis which included changing perceptions, nursing as a career, scope of practice, and social stand of nursing as a profession. Pseudo-names were used to present the discussion of the verbatim responses.

The most prevalent finding of the experiences of the participants was changing perceptions. Perceptions were influenced by preconceived misconceptions, pride development, confusion about study choice, unclear scope of practice and clinical practice as a change agent.

Many students have highlighted several preconceived misconceptions. For example, participants did not value nursing as a profession, believed that nurses are followers and not autonomous.

*"As a first year in nursing school I didn't appreciate nursing as a profession..... I used to think of nurses as followers, they follow doctor's orders and work hard to maintain patient satisfaction.... but nurses I work with in the clinical, to be honest were more dependent they didn't show the nursing autonomy...." (Hiba)*

This finding was supported by Cook (2003) (in Sand-Jecklin, & Schaffer, 2006) that students experienced a variety of pre-established perceptions about nursing as a profession. Similar results were found by Sand-Jecklin & Schaffer (2006) when the authors stated that the students had less positive perceptions when it was about public's perceptions about nursing as a profession.

Another perception which was evident among the participants, was clinical practice as a change agent. This result was supported by Jarrah (2013) when the author confirmed the positive correlation between the clinical environment and students' perceptions.

The social stand of nursing as a profession was evident as the second most significant finding. It seemed that many students' experience were affected by different factors related to the influence of culture and stigma including family's initial perception of nursing as a profession. From the findings of this study it is evident that parents do not want their daughters to become a nurse and viewed nurses as doctor's assistants and house maids:

*"In the past, some families do not like their daughters to be a nurse." (Salama)*

*".....they thought only like assistance with doctor" (Shamma)*

*".. but they did not agree in the beginning related to our conservative society" (Hana)*

These results were also supported by (Jarrah, 2013) who studied Associate Nursing Students' Perceptions towards the Nursing Profession in Jordan. He found that the family members had a significant impact on the social stand of nursing as a profession. Similarly, the study of Eman, *et al* (2012) confirmed this finding. They found that Bahrain families perceive nursing as an inconvenient profession for girls thus they are not encouraging their daughters to enroll in nursing.

Another aspect that appeared to have a negative impact on the social stand of nursing as a profession was stigma.

*"I had one patient told me that nurses are maids, they only clean the patients and I was shocked" (Shamma)*

*".....just like house maid"(Salama)*

*".....some people always tell you are maids" (Kholoud)*

Consistently, Gamal (2006) reported in their study that Saudi parents refuse the enrollment of their daughters in nursing. Therefore it negatively impacts the social image of nursing as a profession.

## 9. CONCLUSION

This study was imperative in being the first to report on student nurses perceptions in United Arab Emirates (UAE). The findings of this study validate the need to increase the number of Emirati nationals entering nursing in order to meet future health care needs in the UAE.

Thus, it is recommended to develop an awareness program about nursing as a profession. This awareness program should be implemented in the most public visited places. Moreover, it could be very effective to arrange nursing awareness booths at national day events to attract large numbers of young students into nursing. Furthermore, the nursing curriculum should emphasize the importance of the nursing profession through outlining clearly the nursing scope of practice with its full broad spectrum.

## 10. LIMITATIONS

A number of limitations in the study can be identified. The data was collected from one group of students whom are located in one educational setting. The inclusion of students from other local universities during different stages of learning would have definitely reinforced the findings.

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