



Original Article

The individuals' initial reasons to pursue a nursing career and subsequent study dropout intentions: A cross-sectional study

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ABSTRACT

Background & Aim: Nursing staff shortages pose challenges for healthcare systems, worsened by student dropouts. This study explores the factors driving students to choose nursing to leave their programs and the relationship between reasons for choice and intentions to withdraw.

Methods & Materials: A cross-sectional study was conducted at three public nursing institutes in Marrakech-Safi, Morocco. Employing a consensus sampling approach with 725 nursing students, 696 individuals responded. A researcher-made questionnaire was employed for data collection, and the data were analyzed using SPSS software (version 22). We used descriptive statistics to understand why students choose nursing and why they consider dropping out. Logistic regression was utilized to explore the correlation between reasons for selecting nursing and the intention to drop out.

Results: Students primarily chose nursing to care for and help others (3.72±1.12), influenced by family/friends (3.60±1.19), and a personal interest in nursing (3.46±1.15). 28.45% of participants contemplated the idea of discontinuing their program. This inclination was mainly attributed to unfavorable clinical placements (3.59±1.21), psychological distress (3.38±1.28), and a tough curriculum (3.34±1.29). According to the predictive model, students motivated by job availability (3.587; 95% CI, 2.914-4.416; p<.001), salary prospects (1.259; 95% CI, 1.054-1.504; p=.011), and opportunities for international work and/or study (1.196; 95% CI, 1.010-1.417; p=.038) were more likely to drop out.

Conclusion: Improving clinical learning conditions, promoting a positive perception of the nursing profession, and admitting candidates driven by the aspiration to offer support and comfort to individuals appear to be pivotal in retaining students.

Introduction

Throughout the world, advances in living conditions and access to healthcare have raised life expectancy, leading to an increase in the number of older adults suffering from various chronic illnesses. The health system, thus, must provide adequate training for healthcare professionals in quantity and quality. In Morocco, for instance, despite considerable efforts made by the state, the number of nurses still falls short of the minimum requirements. The World Health Organization ranks Morocco among the 57 countries in the world that face an

acute shortage of nursing staff (1). Given that the pace of recruitment in Morocco cannot keep up with the need or compensate for cumulative retirements, and despite the fact that there are no official figures on dropout rates for nursing students, it is commonly known that the loss of a significant number of students each year only worsens the current shortage of nursing staff in Morocco. It is worth mentioning that students discontinuing nursing programs is not unique to Morocco; it exists everywhere. In Vietnam, for example, the rate is as high as 32,2 % (2). It is at

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least 20% in the United Kingdom and between 10 and 42% in Australia (3). Addressing this issue necessitates a deep understanding of the reasons why nurse students select their future careers and why they discontinue their training. This comprehension is of utmost importance to the profession, as it can assist nursing decision-makers in tailoring future recruitment strategies more effectively and enhancing student retention during training.

The decision to work as a nurse has been the subject of numerous studies around the world. A review of the literature has revealed that the selection of nursing as a career is influenced by a multitude of factors. The majority of studies indicate that the primary reason why students choose to become nurses is their desire to help and care for others (4-7). Other reasons for selecting nursing include the ease of finding a job (6,8-10), income (9,11,12), and opportunities to work or study abroad (13, 14). According to other studies, the positive social image of the nursing profession is one reason that motivates students to enroll in nursing programs (11,13,15). Factors such as the influence of family members and friends (5,13) and parental recommendations (9,12,13) have also been identified as factors to take into account when selecting a nursing profession.

Although one study mentioned that the media plays a role in guiding students toward the nursing profession (5), the results of other studies have not demonstrated the influence of the media on the decision to pursue a nursing career (13, 14). Other reasons for selecting a career include the experience of some students in a hospital, observing the nurses taking care of a family member (5,10), and an interest in nursing (6,7,15). However, some students generally select a career before considering their professional interests and enter a field of study without knowing that it will be their specialty (16). This unreflective choice could allow a student to enter the nursing field without having a deep vocation to become a nurse but rather to acquire a diploma. A study of 352 nursing students showed that the majority of participants dreamed of a profession other than nursing (8). According to Mooney et al., it appeared that

nursing was not the first career choice for all students (14).

Similarly, the Canadian study of 156 nursing students found that 27 participants (17.2%) selected nursing as their second choice because they were unable to get into their first-choice university (9). In the same vein, a finding by Bolan and Grainger is that one of the main reasons students gave for dropping out of the nursing program was that they no longer liked or wanted a career in nursing (17). In fact, to retain students in the field of nursing, it is essential that they have a realistic perception of the profession and that their professional expectations are taken into account. Some of the students interviewed as part of a study by Kox et al. had wanted to become nurses since childhood but very quickly felt, during their training, that nursing was not the profession they had dreamed of (18). Bakker et al. point out that experiencing a gap between their own expectations and reality is one of the reasons why student nurses abandon their program (3).

Dropping out of nursing school has consequences not only for the cost of training but also for the quality of care and patient satisfaction. Dropout is recognized as a complex phenomenon with multiple causes. In their study, Bakker et al. identified academic difficulties as a factor associated with dropout (3). However, another study indicated that despite good academic results, many students expressed that they had lost motivation to pursue the nursing program due to the unsupportive attitude of teachers (19). In addition to academic and relational difficulties, negative experiences during clinical placements can lead to students dropping out of training (3). On this subject, Clements et al. argue that clinical placement experiences can have an impact on students' professional identity and commitment to their chosen profession (20). The study conducted by Sorensen et al. showed that several students cited busy and stressful clinical practice as the reason for dropping out (21). For other students, the decision to end their nursing training was associated with feelings of emotional exhaustion (21). Psychological problems were among the reasons why some students left their program (3, 22). Lack of work

capacity due to health problems was also associated with a higher risk of dropping out (3, 18, 21). Finally, socio-economic factors, such as the social image of nursing as a less attractive profession and financial difficulties, have been associated with dropping out of training (23).

Many studies have focused on the factors that influence individuals to select a career in nursing, whereas others have focused on the reasons for dropping out. This study's originality lies in proposing a model that could predict potential dropouts based on career choice factors. Such knowledge can help to develop strategies for retaining nurse students who may wish to leave the training program.

The objectives of this study are to ascertain the reasons that motivate students to select a career in nursing, identify the factors that contribute to their discontinuation of the nursing program, and pinpoint the selection-related factors associated with the intention to dropout.

Methods

A multi-central cross-sectional study was conducted between April and May 2023, employing a consensus sampling approach.

696 nursing students, comprising second and third-year attendees from three training institutes located in Marrakech, Essaouira, and Safi, took part in this study. The institutes had enrollments of 468, 120, and 108 students, respectively. The only inclusion criterion used was that the study participant had to be a nursing student at one of the training institutes in the Marrakech-Safi region. Note that first-year students were excluded from the study because newcomers have not yet developed a clear understanding of certain elements that this study targets, specifically the clinical environment. After using a consensus sampling method with 725 distributed questionnaires, 696 were collected, representing a response rate of 96%.

The researchers developed a four-part questionnaire based on an in-depth review of the literature. The first part of the questionnaire focuses on the reasons that influenced the selection of nursing as a career (13 items on a five-point Likert scale, with 1 indicating

"strongly disagree" and 5 indicating "strongly agree"). The second part consists of a "yes/no" response to the question, "Have you ever considered stopping your nursing program?" If the answer was yes, respondents were asked to indicate their reasons in the third part. This section addressed statements justifying the intention to discontinue their program (10 items on a five-point Likert scale). Part 4 requested data related to the participants' educational profiles and socio-demographic information. All the questionnaires were distributed in class during a lesson.

The data were analyzed using the Statistical Package for Social Sciences (version 22). Descriptive statistics included means, standard deviations, frequency distributions, and percentages. Internal consistency was assessed using Cronbach's alpha reliability analysis. Binary logistic regression analysis was employed, with nursing students' intention to drop out as the dependent variable and significant factors affecting their career choice as the independent variables. The alpha threshold was set at $<.05$. The "Stepwise" conditional top-down logistic regression method was chosen, given the limited knowledge of possible predictor variables and the less explored nature of the research field.

The instrument was pre-tested on 34 nursing students from a different nursing training institute located in another region in Morocco; note that these students are excluded from this study. Initially, the third part of our questionnaire contained seven items. Based on the results of the pre-test, we made some modifications, mainly the addition of three more items: "mistreatment by a patient," "exhausting studies," and "problems with the language of instruction." Cronbach's alpha for this scale was .71.

It should be noted that we have received written permission from the three previously mentioned nursing institute administrations to conduct our research, informed the participants about the purpose of the research, and got their written consent to collect data. Confidentiality and anonymity were ensured to participants. Also, the study was approved by the local ethics committee of

Mohammed VI University Hospital of Marrakech, Morocco (N° 60/2023).

Results

The demographic characteristics of the students are presented in Table 1. As you can see, women predominated, with a sex ratio (F/M) of .30. The average age of the students (all options combined) was 20.58 ± 1.18 years, with extremes of 18 and 35 years. By the level of study, 370 (53.2%) participants were enrolled in the 2nd year and 326 (46.8%) in the

3rd year. The participants came from 10 different specialties, with the majority being general nurses 309 (44.4%).

The results presented in Table 2 show that the five factors for selecting the nursing profession ranked highest by the students according to their averages were as follows: desire to help and care for others (3.72 ± 1.12), influence of family and friends (3.60 ± 1.19), interest in nursing (3.46 ± 1.15), great job opportunities (3.44 ± 1.28), and salary (3.33 ± 1.23).

Table 1. Demographic profile of the participants

Characteristics	Group	N	%
Gender	Female	536	77.0
	Male	160	23.0
Age (years)	18-23	691	99.3
	24-29	4	.6
	30-35	1	.1
Year of enrolment	Year 2 (semester 4)	370	53.2
	Year 3 (semester 6)	326	46.8
Training institute	Marrakech	468	67.2
	Essaouira	120	17.2
	Safi	108	15.5
Training specialties	General nurse	309	44.4
	Family and community health nurse	89	12.8
	Mental health nurse	36	5.2
	Anesthesia and resuscitation nurse	46	6.6
	Emergency and intensive care nurse	45	6.5
	Neonatology and pediatrics nurse	38	5.5
	Laboratory technician	46	6.6
	Radiology technician	42	6.0
	Orthopedic-prosthetist	31	4.5
	Social assistant	14	2.0
Total		696	100

Table 2. Frequency tabulation of students' reasons for selecting nursing as a career

	Strongly disagree		Disagree		Neutral		Agree		Strongly agree		Mean	SD
	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%		
1. A desire to care for and help others	34	4.9	89	12.8	89	12.8	308	44.3	176	25.3	3.72	1.12
2. Influence of family and friends	57	8.2	80	11.5	104	14.9	297	42.7	158	22.7	3.60	1.19
3. Interest in nursing	50	7.2	104	14.9	137	19.7	285	40.9	120	17.2	3.46	1.15
4. Great job opportunities	59	8.5	148	21.3	79	11.4	251	36.1	159	22.8	3.44	1.28
5. Salary	66	9.5	126	18.1	146	21.0	230	33.0	128	18.4	3.33	1.23
6. Diploma	93	13.4	177	25.4	106	15.2	208	29.9	112	16.1	3.10	1.31
7. Parents' wishes	121	17.4	201	28.9	113	16.2	181	26.0	80	11.5	2.85	1.30
8. Working and/or studying abroad	128	18.4	210	30.2	137	19.7	141	20.3	80	11.5	2.76	1.28
9. Positive social image of the profession	134	19.3	236	33.9	78	11.2	185	26.6	63	9.1	2.72	1.29
10. Media influence	112	16.1	224	32.2	187	26.9	143	20.5	30	4.3	2.65	1.10
11. Last choice	155	22.3	233	33.5	138	19.8	99	14.2	71	10.2	2.57	1.26
12. Experience of a relative's illness	220	31.6	173	24.9	118	17.0	134	19.3	51	7.3	2.46	1.31
13. My own experience of illness	227	32.6	197	28.3	113	16.2	109	15.7	50	7.2	2.36	1.28

When asked whether they had thought of giving up their program at least once, 28.45% (n=198) of students answered in the affirmative. The three main reasons given by the students for their intention to leave the nursing program were poor clinical placement conditions (39.9% agree, 23.7% strongly agree), psychological distress and stressful experiences (33.8% agree, 21.2% strongly agree), and exhausting studies (39.4% agree, 17.7% strongly agree). Table 3 shows the reasons given by students who intended to leave their program.

There's a relationship between the intention to leave training and the initial reasons for career choice. A logistic regression model was constructed to predict the presence or absence of potential dropouts based on the reasons for selecting nursing as a career. The career choice factors significantly associated in logistic regression analysis ($p < .05$) with the intention to stop studying are presented in Table 4. The model obtained explains 49% of the variance in the intention to leave the program (Nagelkerke's R^2 is .491). This model is true in

84.1% of cases (overall percentage). It shows that students whose reasons for career choice were: ease of finding a job (3.587; 95% CI, 2.914-4.416; $p < .001$), salary (1.259; 95% CI, 1.054-1.504; $p = .011$), and opportunities to work and/or study abroad (1.196; 95% CI, 1.010-1.417; $p = .038$) are more likely to intend leaving the nursing program.

In addition, the desire to care for and help others (.791; 95% CI, .649-.963; $p = .019$), the positive social image of the nursing profession (.595; 95% CI, .502-.704; $p < .001$), and obtaining a diploma (.586; 95% CI, .489-.702; $p < .001$) were negatively associated to abandon program. In other words, a student who did mention the desire to help others as a reason for selection was 0.21 times less likely to intend to abandon nursing training. Similarly, students who stated that they had selected the profession because of its positive social image or to obtain a diploma were 0.41 and 0.42 times less likely to leave their program.

Table 3. Frequency tabulation of reasons why students intend to leave the nursing program

	Strongly disagree		Disagree		Neutral		Agree		Strongly agree		Mean	SD
	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%		
1. Poor internship conditions	17	8.6	23	11.6	32	16.2	79	39.9	47	23.7	3.59	1.21
2. Stress and psychological suffering	21	10.6	33	16.7	35	17.7	67	33.8	42	21.2	3.38	1.28
3. Exhausting studies	27	13.6	26	13.1	32	16.2	78	39.4	35	17.7	3.34	1.29
4. A profession underestimated by society	25	12.6	30	15.2	40	20.2	65	32.8	38	19.2	3.31	1.29
5. My studies do not match my aspirations	26	13.1	40	20.2	36	18.2	56	28.3	40	20.2	3.22	1.33
6. Discouraging attitude of a teacher	28	14.1	58	29.3	46	23.2	51	25.8	15	7.6	2.83	1.18
7. Mistreatment by a patient	43	21.7	50	25.3	51	25.8	42	21.2	12	6.1	2.65	1.21
8. Financial difficulties	42	21.2	61	30.8	40	20.2	37	18.7	18	9.1	2.64	1.26
9. Health problems	51	25.8	56	28.3	28	14.1	43	21.7	20	10.1	2.62	1.34
10. Problems with the language of study	48	24.2	60	30.3	33	16.7	41	20.7	16	8.1	2.58	1.28

Table 4. Association between intentions to leave the nursing program and reasons for selecting nursing as a career

	B	OR	95% CI	
			Lower	Upper
Great job opportunities	1.277**	3.587	2.914	4.416
Obtaining a Diploma	-.534**	.586	.489	.702
Working and/or Studying abroad	.179*	1.196	1.010	1.417
A desire to care for and help others	-.235*	.791	.649	.963
Salary	.230*	1.259	1.054	1.504
Positive social image of the profession	-.520**	.595	.502	.704
Constant	-.232	.793		
Nagelkerke R^2	.491			

* $p < .05$, ** $p < .001$

Discussion

In this study, the desire to help and care for others ranked very high as the reason for selecting the nursing profession. This result comes as no surprise and is in line with what has already emerged from previous research. A study by Halperin and Mashiach-Eizenberg found identical results: Jewish and Arab nursing students said that the opportunity to help others was the main factor that prompted them to select the profession (46% and 34.2%, respectively) (4). This finding is also confirmed by the conclusions of an Indonesian study of 400 nursing students: 50% of participants were mainly influenced by the desire to serve others (5). The second most important factor was the influence of close neighbors or friends. Marznaki et al. also obtained similar results. The results of these authors show that positive recommendations from family and friends were the main factors motivating Iranian students to pursue a nursing career (13). The results of another study illustrated that family members and friends exerted a significant influence on career choice decisions (5). Career interest came third. This result is consistent with the findings of two studies which highlighted that the reasons given by students for enrolling in nursing programs were mainly related to a love of nursing (7) and interest in providing professional care (6). This was followed by materialistic factors, namely job security and salary. Our results corroborate the study, which found that Turkish students cited the ease of finding a job as the main reason for undertaking nursing studies (8). Our results also corroborate the study that showed that income from the nursing profession was reported among the selection criteria that carried the most weight for students (12). However, in his study, Myburgh pointed out that some students choose to follow their passion regardless of how much money nursing will bring them (24). This was also confirmed by a study revealing that a good salary had less influence on career choices (4).

The results of our study revealed that two out of five participants had intended to leave the nursing program at some point

during their training (28.45%). This result appears to be lower than in other studies, as 48.85% of Canadian students had 'sometimes' considered leaving their program (22). Imagining stopping one's studies is, therefore, not uncommon. Similarly, Cameron et al. arrived at an important conclusion: "At least 50% of students who completed the nursing program considered leaving at some point but changed their minds" (25). This finding demonstrates that some individuals with the potential to drop out can be persuaded to remain in the program.

From our research data, it emerges that the main reason identified by students for their intention to drop out of the nursing program was poor placement conditions. Clinical placements are, of course, the cornerstone of nursing training and an essential vehicle for professional socialization. On this subject, Clements et al. argue that clinical placement experiences can have an impact on students' professional identity and commitment to their chosen profession (20). However, the findings of one study revealed that student nurses experience several difficulties in the clinical environment (26). These difficulties can lead to feelings of emotional exhaustion. Moreover, psychological suffering and stressful situations were cited by the participants as the second reason for dropping out. This finding is corroborated by the results of a study carried out in the Netherlands, where it was found that student nurses considered their psychological problems to be one of the reasons why they dropped out (3). A similar Moroccan study concluded that 59.10% of nurse students have a risk profile, and 19.20% have a perceived stress higher level and, consequently, a psychopathological perception of the training environment (27). In addition, participants cited exhausting studies as the third reason for ending their training. In our opinion, the face-to-face teaching method and a heavy curriculum, leaving less time for leisure activities, could explain this choice. By way of comparison, in the survey conducted in a Dutch study, academic difficulties were

identified as a cause of early dropout among student nurses (3).

Among the 13 reasons for career choice, our study identified six items significantly associated with the intention to leave the nursing program. Three reasons were positively associated, namely great job opportunities, salary, and the possibility of working and/or studying abroad—A relevant Moroccan research came to the conclusion that 47.3% of health professionals expressed their intention to migrate abroad (28)—. In other words, students are selecting nursing not out of interest or vocation and use it to serve as a springboard to another career, such as medicine (7).

The intention to leave the program was negatively associated with the willingness to look after and care for others. The study of 15 Danish students only confirms this finding, pointing out that some participants ended their training because they had lost the motivation and energy to help others and make a difference to patients (21). Thus, as Dal et al. noted, helping others achieve the highest level of well-being is the goal of nursing and one of the core components of professional nursing (15). The positive social image of the nursing profession was also negatively associated with the intention to quit the degree program. This result supports the placement of the item "profession undervalued by society" in fourth place as a reason for dropping out (32.8% agree, 19.2% strongly agree). As several studies have shown, the nursing profession is less recognized and less valued in society (29). The social image of the profession does not always correspond to reality, and nurses are not portrayed as autonomous professionals. In this sense, the study conducted by Sreeja and Nageshwar concluded that this negative public image discouraged students from becoming nurses (30). Also, the motivation to obtain a diploma was negatively associated with the intention to stop studying. What is striking in our study is that the fact of selecting a profession as the last choice had no influence on the intention to stop studying. This finding is corroborated by the results of a study showing that none of the students whose first

career choice was not nursing regretted having selected this profession (14). This demonstrates that a number of students who unintentionally choose nursing as a career can be persuaded to stay in the program. Finally, we invite other researchers to use our results as a basis for future in-depth analysis of the issue at hand. This further exploration should highlight that there is, interestingly, no correlation between selecting nursing as a last-resort profession with the intention to cease studying, which suggests that some students who unintentionally opt for nursing as a career can still be persuaded to remain in the program.

Study limitations

The primary limitation of this study is its restriction to nursing students from a single region of Morocco, which hinders the generalization of the results. It is, therefore, recommended that future research include a national sample. Another limitation is the cross-sectional design of the study. This design does not fully and comprehensively permit the assessment of causality. A longitudinal study would provide more information about discrete dropouts who actually take action.

Conclusion

The results of this study provided valuable information on two fronts: first, it sheds light on the motivating factors that attract candidates to the nursing profession, and second, it uncovers the factors that contribute to their decision to drop out of the nursing program. Utilizing logistic regression, we were able to establish a clear association between six reasons for career choice and the intention to discontinue training. The model proposed by our research can predict potential dropouts based on their career choice motivations. Future recruitment and retention strategies aimed at addressing the critical shortage of nursing staff should take into consideration these factors significantly linked to the intention to drop out.

Our results, along with the reviewed literature, highlight that the desire to provide support and comfort to people remains the

primary motivation for students selecting nursing as a career. This insight should guide stakeholders in the healthcare sector to refine admission interviews for nursing programs and select candidates who possess more altruistic motivations, such as the desire to help others, rather than purely practical considerations like job security, salary, or immigration.

Based on the outcomes of our research, we propose that those responsible for training nurses should develop strategies to create a clinical environment conducive to learning. They should also implement support and coaching strategies to ensure that clinical experiences offer richer learning opportunities and are less stressful for students. This approach is likely to enhance student motivation and reinforce their sense of belonging to the profession.

Furthermore, training institutes should collaborate with professional associations to enhance the public image of the nursing profession and elevate its social status. To achieve this, nurses should leverage their strategic positions and advocate through mass media and scientific events to showcase the real nature of their work. This concerted effort can contribute to greater social recognition and, consequently, help students leaving school perceive nursing in a more positive light.

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Conflict of interest

The authors declare no conflict of interest, financial or otherwise.

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