



## LEARNING DIFFICULTIES OF NURSING STUDENTS RELATED TO THE OVERLOADED STUDY PROGRAM, CURRICULA AND DISPROPORTIONATE RATIO OF THEORY TO PRACTICE

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**Abstract-Introduction :** Student- centered approaches to teaching and learning have grown in popularity over the years. Addressing the challenges that nursing students face during their study period is an important part of the performance of the academic institutions that provide their education. Identifying and finding solutions for students' concerns requires continual endeavor through the involvement of many decision-making actors. Currently, the programs of students studying nursing have a counterproductive division of the time that students spend in the classroom versus that in the clinical practice. The programs are disproportionately heavily loaded with theory which misses the main point of their educational goal and causes the students to have severe concerns on how this will affect their professional training.

**Purpose:** The study purpose is identifying the impact of curriculum design and number of subject per semester on students' performance.

**Method:** The qualitative method of research and focus group discussion was used to carry out the research. The data was collected through a group discussion with first-year, second-year and third-year bachelor's students. Two semi-structured discussions were held with each group for each year of study.

**Results:** The conclusions drawn from this study helped to identify the expected concerns of the students and others that were not expected. They revealed that they face great difficulties during the period of study. The following problems were identified: insufficient hours of engagement in clinical practice, shortage of clinical practice instructors, the use of passive teaching methods, assessment of student's performance not based on defined standards, a large number of subjects to study each semester and not sufficient time to study as it is expected from the students'.

**Recommendations:** Establishing a task force to immediately analyze and solve the students concerns in order to facilitate an effective learning process.

Unification of teaching programs according to the recommendations made by the European Union and WHO on creating interactive, empowering, student-centered learning environments.

**Keywords:** *students concern, competencies, standard, integration.*

### INTRODUCTION

The importance of addressing the challenges that nursing students face during their period of study is an important part of the success of the academic institution that provides education. Identifying and addressing students' concerns requires a serious and multi-sectoral commitment. Currently, the programs of students studying in the nursing program have an unfair division of the time that students spend in the classroom compared with the time spent in clinical practice. The programs are loaded with unnecessary subjects, a load which has brought ever-increasing concern to students as it has affected their professional training.

Fooladi in her study about the factors associated with undergraduate nursing students' academic performance... quoted: *"The preparation of students with sufficient levels of academic and clinical skills by the faculties is a matter of vital importance for the future of the nursing profession. A strategy to address this issue is to identify the barriers/difficulties that prevent students from performing well during the years of study"* (Fooladi et al.2022).

The changes that have affected the health system in recent years around the world have determined the future consideration of the nursing workforce education. The nursing profession



requires more education and preparation to take on new responsibilities and roles in response to the rapidly changing health care systems and environments (Newton & Moore, 2013). A strategy to address this issue is to identify the barriers that prevent students from achieving a good performance during the years of study.

Dante et al. (2013) in a systematic literature review regarding indicators of academic performance confirmed the complex nature of academic performance for nursing students, asserting that the influencing factors for one student may be very different for another. According to the available literature, a number of studies have shown that during the years of study, nursing students face many difficulties.

For this study, the conceptual model of reducing the achievement gap in the Nursing program and promoting success for all by Perna and Thomas (2006) was adapted. According to Perna & Thomas, these challenges can be the result of the interaction of several factors such as internal factors, family factors, school factors, social, economic and political factors (Perna & Thomas, 2006).

Based on the findings it is important for our educational institution to identify the challenges experienced by nursing students at the Tirana University of Medicine, the curriculum overload of Albania's Bachelor Program as well as their suggestions to overcome these challenges.

This study aims to explore and describe the learning difficulties experienced by nursing students of the Faculty of Medical Technical Sciences related to the overloaded study program, curricula and disproportionate ratio of theory to practice.

Nursing education in the European Union (EU) countries follows EU requirements and directives. Even Albania, as a candidate country, in relation to nursing and midwifery education, should begin planning to implement the standards defined in the EU directives. Under the Bologna Process, European governments engage in discussions regarding higher education policy reforms and strive to overcome obstacles to create a European Higher Education Area. According to "the State of the world's nursing 2020" report: "...investing in education, jobs and leadership comes as the world witnesses unprecedented political commitment to universal health coverage...Now, more than ever, the world needs them working to the full extent of their education and training...". In the document is specify minimum requirements of 2300 hours 'theory and 2300 hours 'practice in programs leading to the initial qualifications of nurses and midwives (A report to the World Health e, g Valerie Fleming and Anna Holmes March 2005).

## METHODOLOGY

In this study, a qualitative research approach and an exploratory-descriptive research design were used to recognize and understand the difficulties encountered by students in relation to the phenomenon of academic performance of nursing students. Qualitative research attempts to make a detailed explanation of human attitudes, feelings and perceptions (Tong et al., 2012). This design is useful in this study to explore the difficulties nursing students' face, as well as suggestions for improving and overcoming these challenges.

The study was conducted at the Faculty of Medical Technical Sciences (University of Medicine, Tirana, Albania) which also prepares nurses in accordance with the Bologna system of education (ehea.info.). In our faculty training at the bachelor's level continue for 3 years and training in the master's programs continue for a period of one or two years accordingly (Master in Profession and Master in Science)

Fifty-one Bachelor students, randomly selected using the lists of names of each year of study, accepted our invitation to be part of the study. However, not all students accepted the invitation to participate. Twenty-four students from the first year agreed to be part of the study, thirteen from the second year and from the third year fourteen students consented to take part on the study.

From 2 discussions in focus groups were conducted with each year of study, in the period of October -December 2022 where each lasted about 50 minutes. All six focus group discussions took place in a meeting room at Faculty of Medical Technical Sciences.



Focus group discussion is a technique where the researcher discusses with a group of individuals a specific issue, aiming to draw out the complex personal experiences, beliefs, perceptions and attitudes of the participants through a moderated interaction (Cornwall & Jewkes, 1995).

The data were collected with the help of the research assistant. The main researcher as well as the supervisor of the study oversaw the process and the quality of the collected data. In order to obtain the required data on the disproportionate ratio of theory to practice and program overload faced by the nursing students in Faculty of Medical Technical Sciences related to the curriculum and its load with different and non-specific subjects of the profession, as well as suggestions for improving, semi-structured and open-ended questions were compiled, giving students the opportunity to express themselves without limits on their perceptions regarding many issues that we thought affect the quality of their study. Probing questions allowed the research to delve deeper into the discussion. The discussion was recorded with the consent of the participants using a tape recorder and the observer made brief notes about the comments of each participant. The answers were categorized and according to the categorization it was decided which of them and how will be analyzed, trying to simplify the conveyance of the students' concerns and data obtained. The interviews were conducted in the Albanian language.

### FINDINGS

The analysis generated 238 citations and 56 codes which were categorized. A total of 12 categories emerged from the data. For the purpose of this study, data related to curricula, program overload, and clinical practice issues faced by students were separated from the rest of the data.

#### 1. Clinical Practice

The nursing students of the Bachelors Study program complained that they are not properly supported by the clinical supervisors contracted by the faculty. The students admitted that the practice hours are not enough to enable them to take care of the patient and they faced an environment that did not make them feel empowered. Some of the students' statements are:

- ✓ "The problem for us is the short time we spend in clinical practice. We are spending more time in a classroom setting learning theory, compared with the amount of time we spend on clinical practice when this practice is crucial for our profession. I think, it should be the opposite." 'FGD 20'.
- ✓ "In some units, where we go to practice, the unit staff tells us not to stay in their way. We stay in a corner because we don't want to bother them... so we don't learn anything, we don't assess or observe any patient". 'FGD3'.
- ✓ "Our time in clinical practice should be taken more seriously by the staff that supervise us in the clinical area. I have encountered very unsatisfactory behavior from the staff in the unit, sometimes to the point where it is not professional and helpful at all." 'FGD 18'.
- ✓ "Student practice groups should be reduced in number so we can learn the basics." 'FGD 24'. This statement was supported by all second and third year students.
- ✓ "I lose interest when they don't support us in practice." 'FGD 13'.
- ✓ "The lecturers of the relevant subjects of the faculty should be in contact with us during practice time." 'FGD 11'.
- ✓ "In order for us to achieve our practical goals, more collaboration is needed." 'FGD 19'.
- ✓ "More clinical practice, and better communication..." 'FGD 22'.
- ✓ "Clinical Practice leaves a lot to be desired, it is not given the attention it needs and this has resulted in unsuccessful training." 'FGD 19'.
- ✓ "Clinical Practices should be improved, better organized and have more dedicated time to it." 'FGD 17'.



## 2. Evaluation

One of students' concern was also related to the evaluation. Some of them complain about the way grades are calculated, and subject are organized. They appointed:

- ✓ "The large number of medical theoretical subjects cause us to be distracted from the nursing subjects of our profession. We have maybe 9 or 10 medical subjects." 'FGD 3'.
- ✓ "Class participation and assignments are not taken into consideration for the final grade." 'FGD 8'.
- ✓ "I think I deserved more than the grade I got in my finals." 'FGD7'.
- ✓ "There is an unfair evaluation in exams and we are not given the opportunity to check our mistakes in the exam." 'FGD 24'.
- ✓ "The large number of exams in a short time is unbearable." 'FGD2'
- ✓ "...we have too many exams in a short period of time, which is very stressful" 'FGD3'.
- ✓ "The preparation time for the last exams is very short" 'FGD 18'.
- ✓ "The student must be placed at the center of learning. There should be better management from those that are responsible for this.". "Revise the schedule and placement of subjects in the school schedule, for example, Latin classes should be taken before or simultaneously with anatomy to familiarize you with the medical terms..." 'FGD 14'.


## 3. The curriculum and program overload

Many of the students responded critically about the subject which are an integral part of the curriculum. They believe that many of the subject they have to study are not specifically related to their profession. This overload of the curriculum has led to the destruction of students making them confused about the competencies they should acquire during the study program. They stated;

- ✓ "Unlike other faculties, I think that we have more subjects and exams, some of these seems unnecessary to me." 'FGD5'.
- ✓ "The reduction of subjects that are not related to the nursing profession, as well as the reduction of credits in other less important subjects." 'FGD 24'.
- ✓ "Better organization of the curriculum There is a lot of reading load in the subjects with minimum credits" 'FGD 25'
- ✓ "Loaded curriculum, handling loaded lectures." 'FGD 9'
- ✓ "Usually the lecturers conduct the class according to their wishes and not as described in the class schedule." 'FGD 11'.
- ✓ "The literature used by lectures, needs to be related with nursing care rather than medicine." 'FGD 17'.
- ✓ "Online learning has left us with many learning deficiencies." 'FGD 18'.
- ✓ "The equal distribution of theory and practice." 'FGD 21'.
- ✓ "A bad alternation of lecture and seminar hours, since we do all the lectures first and the seminars at the end of the class, this method does not seem constructive to me." 'FGD 9'.
- ✓ "The difficulties in the program lie in the curricula and teaching methodologies." 'FGD 10'.
- ✓ "At the beginning of the year, I had difficulty with the adaptation in relation to the volume of the study material requested, and study method and time management" 'FGD 16'.
- ✓ "Heavy load of lectures, some of which are not necessary." 'FGD 17'.
- ✓ "We have many subjects that are not related to the profession"
- ✓ "The large number of subjects leads to the increased number of exams." 'FGD6'.
- ✓ "Large number of exams puts a lot of stress on us" 'FGD6'.
- ✓ "More laboratory time is needed for practical subjects." 'FGD 16'.

## 4. Student efforts

Regarding their efforts to manage their studies, students refer that they try and use their own methods to achieve satisfactory results. Referring to their answers, it was noticed that they use different learning approaches to cope with the stress. They admitted that:

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- ✓ "I regularly prepared by studying every lesson regardless of the fact that maybe it is was not worth trying., and my results in the exam were weaker than the results of the students who cheated in the exam." 'FGD1'.
  - ✓ "I dedicated a very long time to my studies; I did voluntary work in the hospital and various clinics." 'FGD4'.
  - ✓ "I have reduced other activities to devote myself to studies, I read every day for several hours" 'FGD3'.
  - ✓ "I have managed my time better to make more time for studying." 'FGD 9'.
  - ✓ "I read regularly throughout the year." 'FGD 12'.
  - ✓ "I try to learn the lessons myself when they are not teaching us." 'FGD 10'.
  - ✓ "I use alternative learning methods for example, with sketches, to study bones. I watch videos on you tube to study physiology, and I read every day to familiarize myself with the concepts from the lectures." 'FGD 16'.
  - ✓ "I tried to reduce the stress before the exams and organize learning according to topics in case I don't learn them systematically during the class." 'FGD 14'.
  - ✓ "I try to find different methods to consolidate my knowledge, such as using the Internet, reading additional literatures, and learning in groups." 'FGD 17'.
  - ✓ "I followed the lessons regularly." 'FGD 19'.

### 5. Program improvement

One of the topics that was discussed with the students, was related to their opinion regarding the improvement who can be made in the curriculum. They identified several areas where intervention could be done to address their concerns. They identified;

- ✓ "The number of exams we have to pass in the end of each semester should be reduced." 'FGD4'.
- ✓ "Teaching staff should be able to provide feedback in a constructive and non-derogatory way." 'FGD3'.
- ✓ "Teaching staff should be more transparent." 'FGD 2'.
- ✓ "Teaching staff should evaluate correctly, and the teaching methodology should be improved." 'FGD1'.
- ✓ "Teaching staff should be more transparent with students, create more opportunities for us, and more standardized clinical practices where we can learn." 'FGD2'.
- ✓ "Improving teacher-student communication." 'FGD 17'.
- ✓ "The number of not very relevant subjects should be reduced. More care should be given to student's during clinical practice..." 'FGD 16'

### DISCUSSION

Findings that were conducted from the analysis of the data extracted from the focus groups helped us to identify some important students' concerns. They stated that they are not properly supported during clinical learning, and the large number of students in a ward causes overcrowding and management impossibility by nurses, and theory - practice should go hand by hand in order to provide for them effective practical education (Lim, S.Y, 2023).

It seems that the success of clinical practice has received attention from many researches. On one study done about clinical evaluation, from e group of nursing researchers in University of Ottawa was stated that: "Clinical learning is at the heart of education experience for nursing students and their trainer's. collaboration and collegiality have been kay elements in consensus building." (Bourbonnais, F.F. et al. 2008). Even in a conducted study is was concluded that learning in clinical environment has several benefits but it can be challenging, unpredictable, stressful, and constantly changing (Memarian, R, et al. 2015)

Student's assessment style was another area of concern for a large number of students. It brought dissatisfaction to them and led to a decreased interest on their study over the years. The

suggestions were made to be careful in evaluating the student's achievements to arouse their interest and follow the study program to the end successfully.

One of the main points that was identified in this study, that requires an immediate intervention, is the program overload and a large number of subjects per semester. This causes students to be distracted from professional subjects and unfairly burdened with a multitude of subjects not directly related to nursing.

One of the strongest point of this study is the curriculum of the nursing degree, which has a large numbers of subjects that constitute a significant theoretical content and a reduction in the number of the hours of practice, as well as the unstandardized assessment of practice.


Another finding of this study, that requires an immediate attention, is the load of the program in a large number of subjects. This causes students to be distracted from professional subjects and unfairly burdened with a multitude of subject not directly related to nursing. Based on the student's concerns is evident that nursing students studying in Faculty of Medical Technical Sciences are overwhelmed with amount of information given to them.

### RECOMMENDATION

Unification of teaching programs according to the recommendations made by the European Union and WHO which have compiled specific documents to help the development of nursing education around the globe. A professional nursing team would be a strong pillar to establish a standardized program that meets the expectations of our students.

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