



## From placement to employment: Career preferences of Jordanian nursing students



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### ABSTRACT

This study examined employment planning and career preferences of final year nursing students in Jordan. Focus group discussions ( $n = 4$ ) were conducted by the first author with a convenience sample of 27 nursing students. N-Vivo 9 was used to analyze the qualitative data. The analysis revealed two themes.

The first theme focused on “moving from study to work”, and comprised two sub-themes: *being uncertain and hesitant* and *being a real nurse*. The second theme was “the place where I want to be”, and referred to participants' preferences concerning their future career. Participants showed interest in critical care units but they were not optimistic about their future career prospects due to the possibility of being jobless and the perceived low public image of nurses.

In addition to the nature of placement atmosphere, gender, family and cultural issues were found to shape participants' preferences. It is therefore important to periodically review the considerations of employment planning and career preferences of nursing students, otherwise devising interventions for sound recruitment of nurses in the future will be flawed.

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### Background

The final year of university is the link between the end of educational preparation and the beginning of a future career. Following graduation, it is important that nursing students choose areas of employment that are consistent with their needs and interests (Andrew, 2013; Dilek et al., 2010; McKenna et al., 2010). Research has found that clinical placements shape decisions about working in specific clinical areas and/or geographical locations (McKenna et al., 2010), and in addition they influence retention in nursing as a lifelong profession (Jeffreys, 2012). Therefore it is imperative to explore and understand what student nurses feel during their final practice placement and how it guides their future employment plans and preferences (Morrell and Ridgway, 2014).

However, the available literature offers a wide range of conflicting data about nursing students' preferred clinical areas and employment plans. For example, in the USA, medical–surgical

units are preferred by students, related to the wide range of skills that can be acquired in such settings (Coyné and Needham, 2012; Fenush and Hupcey, 2008). Similarly, Australian nurses were reported to prefer acute areas (McCann et al., 2010). Roles perceived as being more basic have been found to be less attractive for nursing students, such as providing care for the elderly and mental health patients, which students perceive as uninteresting and depressing (Happell and Gaskin, 2013; Hoekstra et al., 2010; Robinson et al., 2008; Stevens, 2011). Although critical care units are less preferable in that the students' role is merely observational rather than participatory in providing care (Hartigan-Rogers et al., 2007), students view these units as stimulating for the learning process (Ganz and Kahana, 2006; Rognstad et al., 2004).

Numerous more general factors also shape nursing students' career choices, including salary incentives, workload, the geographical location of the hospital and its size (Fenush and Hupcey, 2008; Jeffreys, 2012; Neilson and McNally, 2010; Rognstad and Aasland, 2007; Shih and Chuang, 2008). Additionally, the approach and support of staff members towards the students and the work atmosphere (Doiron et al., 2014; Magnavita and Heponiemi, 2011; Palaz, 2012), together with the availability of orientation programs (Park and Jones, 2010), are important factors

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considered by students. It should be noted that regardless of their professional preferences (e.g. care specialty), students often prefer to return to an employment area in which their placement experience was positive (Edwards et al., 2004; Gaberson et al., 2014; Henderson et al., 2012) and they frequently plan to be employed in the same institution (Jeffreys, 2012; Lai et al., 2008).

In light of the situation outlined above, it is reasonable to conclude that there is a significant body of research examining nursing students' employment plans and career preferences. However, much of the existing data are based on studies carried out in the Western environment and they have not been replicated in other cultural contexts. More specifically, little is known about how final year nursing students' decisions about future employment planning and career preferences in the developing countries are influenced by their educational experience, which is a notable gap given the widely divergent pedagogical systems found in (and indeed among) developed and developing countries. Therefore, the present research attempts to bridge this gap in the literature by focusing on final year nursing students from Jordan.

### Study context

Jordan has witnessed dramatic changes in nursing education, the main change was affiliating nursing education with institutions of higher education. Accordingly, successful completion of the secondary school *Tawjihi* (scientific or health education schemes) has become an admission requirement for nursing studies at the undergraduate level. In other words, the majority of students join nursing schools at the age of eighteen having received a fundamental scientific education.

Currently, Jordan has two levels of nursing education programs: bachelor's degree (BSc) programs and associate degree programs (two-year diplomas). A plethora of programs have been established in both public and private institutions throughout the country. This expansion came to address the increasing demand on nurses in Jordan as well as regional countries, for which Jordan is considered a resource of trained professional manpower. There are about 29 colleges offering an associate level in nursing and 13 public and private universities offering BSc qualifications. However, the expansion was beyond expectations, and inflated the number of nursing graduates beyond the actual requirements, especially males (Ahmad and Alasad, 2007). The image of nursing has dramatically improved in Jordan, nonetheless some nurses intend to leave the profession (Shuriquie et al., 2008) because of poor working conditions and other cultural reasons (for example, the mixing of genders in the hospital environment) (Shuriquie et al., 2008). As a result of increasing number of Jordanian nursing graduates together with the hospital beds (Zahran, 2012) and some nurses' intentions to leave the profession (Shuriquie et al., 2008), there is a need for effective recruitment and employment strategies. Consequently, the authors recommend ongoing evaluation of nurse education and placement to overcome the problem of unemployment among Jordanian nurses (Zahran, 2012). Understanding students' decisions and preferences about future employment planning would help in establishing better recruitment strategies prior to and after graduation.

### Study purpose

The present study explored future employment planning and career preferences of final year nursing students in Jordan.

## Methods

We were particularly interested in learning from the interactions and synergy between participants about their employment planning and career preferences. Consequently, the current authors employed a focus group discussion method to undertake the present research, enabling nursing students to engage in a semi-structured narrative to generate qualitative data pertinent to the research question. The researcher's engagement was limited to targeting the discussion towards the research question, making periodic summaries of the discussion, and confirming the developed summaries with the participants (Van Teijlingen and Pitchforth, 2013; Webb and Kevern, 2008). This was necessary so that the data obtained through the focus group discussions would reflect the views of the group rather than the individual (Liamputtong, 2011).

### Participants and sampling procedure

The participants were nursing students who completed the pre-graduation clinical placement course, an integral component of the Bachelor of Nursing Program. A convenience sampling approach was employed to recruit participants for the purpose of the study. A list of eligible students ( $n = 52$ ) was obtained from the Faculty of Nursing, Mutah University, Jordan. The eligible students were invited to an information session in which the first author introduced the study in terms of purpose, participants' rights. It was made clear that participation in the study will enable incorporating students' views in improving clinical placement. At the end of the information session, the first author advised the attendees that it is entirely their decision to either accept or decline participation in the study. The author added that their decision can be made over a period of two weeks, and not necessary to be now. Interested students were given the chance to report to the first author via telephone, E-mail or in person. After the two weeks period 27 students showed interest for participation.

### Ethical considerations

Ethical approval was sought by the current researchers and obtained from the Nursing Research Ethics Committee of Mutah University, Jordan. The current authors informed all participants that taking part in this study is totally voluntary and they can withdraw at any time without giving reasons. Students were assured that not taking part in the study would have no negative consequences on their academic performance/evaluation. The current authors were not involved in the academic activities related to the final placement course. Following receiving written and verbal information about the study, the first author obtained a signed consent form from each participant. Data were treated confidentially; students' real names were not used during the course of the study. Similarly, access to recorded data, computer files, and all other materials of the study were restricted only to the authors.

### Data collection

The first author conducted four focus group discussions including: 6, 6, 8 and 7 participants, respectively. All group discussions were conducted in late May, 2012, when all academic requirements of the course (the pre-graduation clinical placement) had been completed. The discussions were held in the staff meeting room of the Faculty of Nursing, Mutah University. The room was furnished with a round table for meetings and upholstered chairs with good lighting and ventilation. Such a venue enabled arranging

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