



# Work values and intention to become a registered nurse among healthcare assistants

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## ARTICLE INFO

Article history:  
Accepted 21 October 2013

Keywords:  
Career choice  
Work values  
Nursing education  
Allied health personnel  
Logistic models

## SUMMARY

**Purpose:** To examine the work values of Swiss healthcare assistant students, who, at the end of their vocational education in hospitals and nursing homes, choose to pursue a registered nurse degree.

**Design:** A prospective, cross-sectional survey was administered to a full cohort of healthcare assistant students in their last year of study in the canton of Bern ( $n = 272$ ).

**Method:** Multivariate methods (logistic regression) were applied to estimate the joint effect of work experience and work values in choosing to pursue a registered nurse education.

**Findings:** Among work values, extrinsic values (regarding wage, career and educational perspectives) had a strong effect on the decisions of healthcare assistant students to pursue further education as registered nurses. Grades, socio-economic background and satisfaction during education also had an effect.

**Conclusions:** Higher valuation of income, career and further education affect the career intentions of nursing assistants who have already obtained a recognized healthcare education and nursing experience. Teachers and trainers should actively identify the work values and expectations of these students. Provision of adequate advice and suggestions for the career development of these students may be an important route by which to address the nursing shortage and recruitment problems.

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## Introduction

The nursing shortage is a major problem in the Swiss healthcare system, as it is in many developed countries. A better understanding of the career choices of future generations of nurses is crucial for recruitment and retention strategies (Price, 2009). Many research projects have focused on the career choice of high school students as the target group for nursing education (Furnham, 1988; Matutina et al., 2010; Miers et al., 2007; Neilson and McNally, 2010; Tulgen and Martin, 2001) and present evidence regarding (work) values as a key influence for high school students in choosing a nursing education. Several European countries, including Switzerland, established vocational education at the same level as high school, i.e., on an upper-secondary level, which enables graduates to obtain a certified qualification in a specific sector. To meet the future demand for nurses and an appropriate mix of skills in the nursing workforce, the Swiss government introduced a new vocational education in healthcare that leads to a recognized degree as “healthcare assistant” (HCA). In contrast to high school students, they acquire first-hand experience during their education and are thus able to evaluate their future work conditions as registered nurses (RNs). The graduates are an important pool of candidates for further education tracks leading to a registered nurse degree: The Swiss Federal Statistical

Office expected a future demand of 50% HCA transitions into tertiary nursing education, but also a demand of 30% remaining in the HCA workforce (Jaccard et al., 2009).

The influence of work environment and work satisfaction in choosing to stay in or leave the nursing profession has been established in many studies (Aiken et al., 2009; Cho et al., 2012; Janssen et al., 1999; Kovner et al., 2006). Regarding the career decisions of newly graduated nurses, some studies address in addition the topic of work values and analyze the role of changing work values with increased work experience (Brodie et al., 2004; Rognstad and Aasland, 2007). However, limited research is available regarding the role of work values for career choices of vocational students of high-school age who have already acquired work experience (in contrast to high school students) and who have the potential to pursue a career in nursing. Therefore, this paper examines the career intentions of vocational educated healthcare assistant students, the so-called *Fachfrau/Fachmann Gesundheit* (FaGe) in Switzerland, to develop strategies to integrate FaGe into the registered nurse workforce.

## Related Literature and Research Question

Given the local context of the Swiss FaGe, we will first describe this occupation in an international context. Swiss FaGe may be characterized as allied health assistants who assist or provide any type of support to the work of a qualified allied health professional (Lizarondo et al., 2010). FaGe students attend an educational program

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for an upper-secondary degree and are mainly adolescents at the age of 16 years at the beginning of the program (Federal Office for Professional Education and Technology (OPET) (2012)). The education of FaGe lasts for three years and includes a mixture of instruction at vocational school and on-the-job training in hospitals, nursing homes and home care institutions. The duties of the Swiss FaGe are similar to general health care assistants or nurse aides, but because of their three years of standardized education, they have more competences and many opportunities for subsequent higher healthcare education (Federal Office for Professional Education and Technology (OPET), 2010).

Graduates of this vocational education program are the main pool of candidates for higher education tracks leading to registered nurse degrees; upon graduation as FaGes, they must decide whether to continue their education to become a RN or to work as a licensed FaGe in their learned occupation. In Switzerland, higher education as a registered nurse lasts three years of full-time school at a university of applied sciences (UAS, Bachelor of Science) or a professional college (diploma) with clinical education (Spitzer and Perrenoud, 2007). More than 80% of all nursing students attend professional colleges.

#### *Work Values and Work Experience as Career Influences*

Similar to basic human values, work values are beliefs pertaining to desirable end-states (e.g., high pay) or behaviors (e.g., working with people) (Super, 1952). It is basically accepted that values guide behavior, including work values; in the sense of professional goals people try to attain (Eccles, 2005; Rokeach, 1972, 1973; Ros et al., 1999). Young adults' first experience in the labor market has been described as a time during which they adjust their professional goals to reality (Johnson, 2001, 2002). Several nursing studies addressed this topic, showing that work values changed during nursing education as experience increased (Lai et al., 2008; McCann et al., 2010; Rognstad and Aasland, 2007; Stevens, 2011). Additionally, the turnover of newly graduated nurses seems to be influenced by aspects of the students' experiences during clinical practice, notably hospital characteristics, work satisfaction, stress and perceived support from staff nurses (Cho et al., 2012; Lai et al., 2006). These results are in line with the general concept of the relationship among work values, work experience and career choice (Kalleberg, 1977; Lindsay and Knox, 1984; Mortimer and Lorence, 1979).

The evidence from the studies cited above suggests that work values together with work experiences have an effect on the decision to initiate nursing education after graduation as a FaGe.

#### *Types of Work Values as Career Influences*

Several researchers identified several types of work values (Eccles, 2005; Elizur, 1984; Ros et al., 1999). Intrinsic values are values that reflect the enjoyment gained from performing a specific task and whose attainment is derived directly from the nature of the work experience (Eccles, 2005), i.e., autonomy, meaningfulness or use of one's abilities. In contrast, extrinsic values refer to the usefulness of a task to reach a goal or the importance placed on external rewards (i.e., income, achievement, advancement, job security or status) (Eccles, 2005; Ros et al., 1999). Several nursing studies support an important role of intrinsic values in pursuing a nursing education and working as a nurse (Bomball et al., 2010; Brodie et al., 2004), but are more ambiguous regarding extrinsic values and external rewards (Coomber and Barriball, 2007; Lai et al., 2006; Spetz, 2002). Some researchers indicate a decreasing level of intrinsic values and an increasing emphasis on high salary (or other extrinsic rewards) while in school and after graduation (Miers et al., 2007; Rognstad and Aasland, 2007). Extrinsic motivations such as financial rewards, especially wages, are also found to influence career intentions (Shields, 2004; Spetz, 2002). However, findings relating to the effect of extrinsic rewards and remuneration on turnover are

varied (Hayes et al., 2006), and limited evidence is available regarding the joint impact of extrinsic and intrinsic values for a career choice in nursing.

Therefore, the study question involves the role of FaGe students' extrinsic and intrinsic work values in choosing further education as a registered nurse. We examine the hypotheses that 1) work values influence the career decision even if students gain work experience in nursing and 2) extrinsic values impact the career choice of this group to a higher degree than intrinsic values.

## **Methods**

### *Study Design, Setting and Sample*

A prospective, cross-sectional survey was administered to a full cohort of students in their last year of education in the canton of Bern in the German-speaking part of Switzerland in the autumn of 2009. At this time, 296 students were in their third year of training as FaGes in the canton of Bern, of whom 291 were surveyed. Because of missing values in central variables, 19 participants were excluded from the analysis. The data used in the analyses consisted of 272 observations, which almost comprised the full cohort (92%). The study received logistic and financial support from the Ministry of Health and Social Affairs of the canton of Bern.

### *Ethical Considerations*

Participants were informed through written and verbal instruction by the project staff and in the questionnaire regarding the survey's intentions and how their responses would be used and protected according to the national statistics and data protection laws. Anonymity of all data and invisibility of the results to third parties were guaranteed. Because the survey occurred in a school setting, students were explicitly informed that they were free to answer or not to answer the questions. They signed the forms to give consent that their answers could be used for analysis. The participants had two class sessions (90 min each) to fill in the questionnaire. A member of the project staff was present and offered assistance where necessary. None of the teachers or trainers had any access to or insight into the completed questionnaires.

### *Variables and Measurements*

The paper-and-pencil questionnaire was analyzed for readability and understandability by field experts (teachers, trainers of the students and nursing managers) and subsequently tested in two rounds of pre-tests, each with a class ( $n = 20$ ) of FaGe students.

### *Dependent Variables (Intended Career Decisions)*

Students were asked to choose among 15 different career options in the short term, i.e., directly after completion of their FaGe education. The dependent variable for this analysis was a dichotomous variable, i.e., whether a FaGe student chose further education in nursing (1) or not (0).

### *Main Explanatory Variables (Work Values)*

Scales and items concerning the extrinsic and intrinsic values were obtained from a Swiss longitudinal youth survey (Bergman et al., 2011) based on the concept of "work values" (Ros et al., 1999). A factor analysis confirmed the two scales on a four-point Likert scale, ranging from "not important" to "important". The "extrinsic work value" scale contained three items on the importance given to 1) wages, 2) career and 3) further education (Cronbach's  $\alpha = 0.74$ ). The "intrinsic work value" scale contained four items on the importance given to 1) autonomy, 2) meaningful tasks, 3) diversified tasks and 4) matching of tasks and one's own skills (Cronbach's  $\alpha = 0.78$ ).

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