



Career intentions of PhD students in nursing: A cross-sectional survey

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ABSTRACT

Background: Despite the rapid growth of Chinese nursing PhD programs, little is known about the career intentions of students in this field.

Objective: To investigate the career intentions of nursing PhD students.

Design: Online cross-sectional survey.

Participants: Nursing PhD students at Chinese universities.

Methods: An online questionnaire was designed and the data were analyzed using SPSS.

Results: The mean age of the participants was 31.53 ± 4.92 years, and most were female (89.9%), married (74.2%), and had been employed previously (69.7%). Most intended to work in the city where their family lived (34.8%) or near their previous workplace (32.6%). Most (60.7%) desired to work in an educational institution (e.g., a university or college). The most common expected salary was 8000–11,999 RMB/month. The work benefits perceived as indispensable were “Five Insurances and One Fund” (77.5%), good educational resources for children (59.6%), financial allowances for PhD graduates (52.8%), staff dormitories/housing subsidies (50.6%), and tenure (50.6%). Nursing education (75.3%) and research (70.8%) were the most favored fields. The key job characteristics were the opportunity to put strengths to fullest use (79.8%), time to conduct research (60.7%), and work-life balance (51.7%). The key research conditions included a good research incentive mechanism (77.5%), a Basic Scientific Research Foundation (68.5%), opportunity to apply to conduct research projects (66.3%), and the nursing team's atmosphere regarding research (64.0%), and 91.0% were eager to study abroad (e.g., as part of an international exchange).

Conclusions: Nursing PhD students would like to work in their hometown or near their previous workplace. Most preferred working in an educational institution, and the most popular fields were nursing education and research (rather than clinical care), despite the high demand of hospital management for nursing PhD graduates. Flexible work, high-quality research conditions, a certain salary, work benefits, and training were key expectations.

1. Introduction

In 2004, two universities in China implemented Doctor of Philosophy (PhD) programs in nursing. This marked the initial establishment of an integrated professional education system for nursing, including junior college, undergraduate, master's, and PhD students (Jiang, 2006; You et al., 2010). Although the development of nursing PhD programs started relatively late in China, they have evolved rapidly in recent years, especially since 2011, when nursing was classified as a “first-class” discipline (in China's discipline categorization system) by the Academic Degree Committee of China's State Council (Guo, 2015; Ministry of Education, 2017). There are currently 38 colleges or universities in China that are allowed to recruit PhD students in nursing, and approximately 80 new students enrolled in 2015 (Guo, 2015). China Graduate Enrollment Information Network statistics showed that

at least 71 students were enrolled in PhD programs in nursing in 2017 (Ministry of Education, 2017).

Traditionally, a PhD has been seen as a remarkable academic credential that is a symbol of advanced study and training, and as a key element for new knowledge creation (Ma and Liu, 2009; Pan and Lee, 2012). A PhD in nursing is the unique type of nursing doctoral degree in mainland China as there are no other doctoral nursing programs, including Doctor of Nursing Practice programs, in mainland China. The basic goal of these PhD programs is to develop the science of nursing and to cultivate effective professors, instructors, researchers, administrators, and policymakers in the field of nursing (Guo, 2011, 2015; Guan et al., 2016). However, little is known about the career intentions of PhD students in this field in China.

The Career Expectation Theory provided the framework for investigating the key expectations of PhD students in nursing regarding

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accepting a job and career development (David, 2004). It focuses on the relationship between career intentions and work performance. In particular, it emphasizes the theme that an employee will do their best in work when they regard their goals as having great importance. Their motivation will be influenced by the possibility of achieving their goals, and by whether their needs will be met if their desired goals are achieved (David, 2004). Logically, information on the career intentions of PhD students is one of the fundamental factors required to design the targets and approach of doctoral programs and establish the ideal unified system. This information can also be used as a reference for employers trying to implement effective strategies to attract and make full use of PhD students in nursing.

Therefore, this study aimed to investigate the career intentions of students pursuing a PhD in nursing to provide an insight into this topic and inform the development of the above-mentioned strategies.

2. Methods

2.1. Study Design and Sample

A network-based cross-sectional survey was carried out in China to collect data from PhD students in nursing.

2.2. Study Measures

As no survey tools addressing the topic in question were found, a questionnaire for this study was specially developed based on the literature (Wilkes and Mohan, 2008; Liu et al., 2011a, 2011b; Pan and Lee, 2012; Zhang and Meng, 2012; Chen, 2013; Guan et al., 2016) by the research team. The questionnaire contained 22 items that addressed a) sociodemographic factors; b) reasons for pursuing a PhD; and c) expectations regarding future work location, type of institution, salary, work benefits that were perceived as indispensable, work role, research conditions, and training. These factors were identified from the literature and assessed using both single- and multiple-answer questions, depending on the item. The Delphi method was used, and ninth nursing experts with PhDs were invited to review and modify the part of the questionnaire referring to career intentions of PhD students in nursing to ensure its content validity. This part consisted of 11 items originally. Experts were asked to rate the degree of their agreement with each option of per item on a Likert scale, ranging from 1 = totally disagree to 4 = totally agree. High scores on the scale indicated a high level of compatibility. These experts averaged 46.67 ± 9.14 years old, ranging from 33 to 64 years old, and their average length of experience working in nursing education field was 17.44 ± 7.32 years, ranging from 4 to 29 years. The average degrees of authority were 0.89, and the significance level of the Kendall's W of expert opinions was < 0.05 ($P < 0.05$). Eventually, 3 items' options were revised and 1 item was removed from the questionnaire as considering the judges' comments. The final version consisted of 10 items in this part.

2.3. Sampling and Data Collection

We collected information from PhD students in nursing at Chinese universities that offer these programs and ethical approval was obtained from the Center for Medical Ethics Central South University. First, we designed a questionnaire using a professional online questionnaire software platform Questionnaire Star, which is widely used in China and can be accessed via chat programs (such as WeChat and QQ) and email. The questionnaire also stated the purpose and method of our study and the risk of participating in the survey was described to get informed consent. We then sent a link to the questionnaire to potential participants in a WeChat group chat that we established for all the doctoral students in the third batch of the "PhD program of the China Medical Board China Nursing Network" seminar. In addition, students and teachers sent the link to WeChat chatrooms for nursing doctoral

students at several institutions including Sun Yat-Sen University, Central South University, Fudan University, and the University of Hong Kong. Thus, based on a snowball sampling technique, the link was disseminated by participants (i.e., PhD students in nursing), teachers of nursing at the above mentioned universities, and staff in the China Medical Board China Nursing Network. Participants who would like to join the survey simply clicked the link and followed the prompts to complete the questionnaire. The survey was conducted from October 25, 2016 to December 4, 2016.

2.4. Statistical Analysis

SPSS v20.0 (IBM Corp., Armonk, NY, USA) was used for data entry and analysis. Descriptive statistics (frequencies and percentages) were used to summarize the responses to the questionnaire. To assess associations between the categorical variables, we used Pearson's chi-square tests or likelihood ratio tests to analyze the single-answer questions, and weighted chi-square tests to analyze multiple-answer questions. P values ≤ 0.05 were considered statistically significant.

3. Results

3.1. Sociodemographic Characteristics

The survey link was successfully disseminated, and 91 participants completed the questionnaire. After excluding two participants who had graduated before the survey, 89 participants were eligible. The mean age of the participants was 31.53 ± 4.92 years, and 89.9% were female. Most were married (74.2%), and 57.3% had at least one child. Most had been employed before enrolling in their PhD program (69.7%); 43.8% worked in nursing education, 14.6% worked in clinical care, and a few worked in nursing management (7.8%) or nursing research (3.4%). Before enrollment in their PhD program, 46.1% had worked for > 5 years (Table 1).

There were 39.3%, 23.6%, and 28.1% in the first, second, and third year of their PhD program, respectively (as well as students who had not graduated on time and were therefore in their PhD program for > 3 years), and the majority had majored in clinical nursing (38.2%) or community care (23.6%) (Table 1).

3.2. Reasons for Pursuing a PhD

The most common reason for pursuing a PhD was because the participant regarded it as a part of their career plan (73.0%). The next most common reasons were wanting to improve their research abilities (53.9%) and to gain a promotion (38.2%) (Table 2).

3.3. Career Intentions

3.3.1. Expectations Regarding Workplace Location, Type of Work Institution, and Field of Work

As shown in Table 3, most of the participants expected to work in the city where their family lived (34.8%) or the location of their previous workplace (32.6%), and a few wanted to work in a first-tier city in China (6.7%) or abroad (2.2%). Most of the participants (60.7%) desired to work in an educational institution such as a university or college, and, of these 54 participants, 29 intended to work at a university with an excellent reputation. For those who intended to work at a medical institution, almost all of them stated that they would choose to work at a grade A hospital, which have > 500 beds and provide high-level medical care, teaching, research, and prevention in several regions across China. In terms of the field of work after graduation, the most common expectations were nursing education (75.3%) and nursing research (70.8%), while relatively few wanted to work in clinical care (16.9%).

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