

What Factors Affect the Attractiveness of Nursing Education-Nurse Teachers' Experiences

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ABSTRACT

Effective measures are required to mitigate the persisting nursing staff shortage. As the number of applicants for nursing education is decreasing, it is important to identify factors which can make the profession more appealing. This qualitative, observational, cross-sectional study brings in the nurse teachers' perspective. It presents nurse teachers' perceptions of factors that influence the attractiveness of nursing profession to potential recruits. Data was collected through online essays in May 2023 from 22 nurse teachers at a University of Applied Sciences in Finland. As in earlier studies with nurses, nurse students and nurse managers, the importance of improving the working conditions and promoting the general appreciation of nursing and nursing education was emphasized. The teachers appealed to nursing unions to speak for the importance of the profession in society rather than emphasize the poor pay and stressful working conditions. The participants also suggested improving the quality of teaching through evidence-based knowledge, individualized support, multiple modes of learning and effective teamwork between teachers. Concern was raised over the quality of the clinical training; finding clinical placements had been harder and clinical supervisors overburdened.

Keywords: (4-6) Attractiveness, Experience, Nursing Education

INTRODUCTION

Effective measures are required across the world to mitigate the persisting nursing staff shortage [1-3]. According to the International Council of Nurses, 13 million more nurses may be needed by the year 2030 worldwide [3, 4]. Among the causes of the shortage are the ageing of the population and of the workforce, a skewed work-life balance and decreased work satisfaction among nursing professionals. Further frequently cited background factors involve poor pay and working conditions, increased workload [1] and, most recently, the burden imposed by the COVID-19 pandemic [5].

The decreasing number of applicants for nursing courses increases the need to attract and retain nurses in the workforce [6]. Further research is required to examine what factors influence the attractiveness of the nursing profession [7, 8]. This study, conducted in Finland, presents nurse teachers' perceptions of the topic. Until now, there has been little research on the teachers' perspective. The information produced can contribute to the body of information that can be used to make the nursing profession more appealing to potential recruits. The article is part of a series of articles on the attractiveness and retention in the nursing profession.

Besides nurse teachers, the articles will cover the perspectives of nurses, nurse students and nurse leaders.

BACKGROUND

Some research has been conducted on factors that affect the attractiveness of the nursing profession from the perspectives of registered nurse students [9-11]; practical (enrolled) nurse students [12, 13], registered nurses [14] and nurse managers [15].

According to Wilkes et al. [16], the students' reasons for applying to nursing programmes are both personal and career related, with personal being more dominant. Although the desire to help seems to persist as a compelling motivator for nursing students [10, 17, 18], job security and a favourable employment situation may also affect students' decision to apply *to nursing programmes*. [10, 19]. Other potential reasons for choosing the profession have been found to involve family or friend role models [18, 20], prior healthcare exposure [19], and being suited for the profession [10, 21]. The image of nursing affects potential recruits' decisions significantly [21]. According to a recent study, nursing students found that the attractiveness of nursing could and should be increased by enhancing the social recognition of the profession at the level of individuals, organizations and society. Nursing students would appreciate meaningful duties, influence over their work and fair employment conditions and salary. Work and career advancement and good leadership were considered important for the appeal of the profession [9].

Similarly, nurses often report having chosen the profession because of their "calling" [23] and seem to find their work meaningful [24]. However, many of them report disillusionment later during their career [23], often due to an unhealthy work environment characterized by inadequate staffing, support and salary [25]. A current study reveals the nurses' wish that their profession should be made more appealing through increased appreciation and influence, compassionate leadership and professional development and wellbeing at work [11].

In a study from the nurse manager perspective, the results were not different from those with nurses and nurse students. The importance of good leadership and emotional atmosphere was emphasized. According to the managers, nursing could be an appealing choice, if the workplace ensured employee influence over their work and invested in constant development, flexible rota planning and diversification of duties. Employers and workplaces with a good reputation can attract and retain employees [15].

To summarize briefly factors that seem to undermine the attractiveness of the profession: Nursing is still sometimes perceived as a course for (female) students with poor academic ability and the work considered inferior to doctors' work, with a limited level of autonomy [19, 26, 27]. The gap between theory and practice [2] and idealism and realism [28], as well as safety threats experienced during clinical practice [29] can undermine students' will to continue studying. On the other hand, newly qualified nurses have found that they are entering an overburdened and understaffed healthcare system where they must transition quickly from students to effective, competent practitioners [30]. New nurses may experience a "transition shock" characterized by confusion and uncertainty [2]. Some studies have also raised concerns about the competence of new nurses [31-33]. According to nurse managers, the attractiveness

of nursing is marred by lack of resources, poor pay, stressful working conditions and a negative media image [15].

Some recruitment and retention strategies have been proposed to address the nursing shortage and to make the profession more attractive. Some of the proposals concern education, which might be one of the easiest areas to start with. In concrete terms, young people could be exposed to nursing in early school years to promote a better understanding of the role of nurses and their career options [16, 19]. Researchers agree that both students and the public need more realistic information of the nursing profession [9, 27]. In addition, exploring students' career choices by screening early during their enrolment might help understand factors that influence career choices [34]. During the nursing studies, clinical teaching behaviour is an important component [2]. Orientation and graduate transition programmes have been developed [30, 35] to support recently graduated nurses on entering the profession. It is important that new nurse gain access to supportive teams, and feel accepted and welcome at the workplace [36].

This study from the nurse educator perspective presents nurse teachers' perceptions of factors that influence the attractiveness of nursing profession to potential recruits.

METHODS

Study Design, Data Collection and Analysis

The study is based on an observational, cross-sectional online survey and on inductive content analysis of qualitative data. The COREQ checklist for qualitative studies was used to help conduct the study.

In May 2022, 22 nurse teachers at a University of Applied Sciences in Finland were contacted via a group e-mail address designed for nurse teachers at the University. They received a cover letter and a link to an online survey tool called Webropol, which allowed them to respond anonymously to the following question: "Describe factors that, in your opinion, influence the attractiveness of nursing education." The response rate was 54.5% (n=12). The teachers were also asked to give their age and number of years in nursing and teaching. They were not requested about their gender, as there was only one male teacher in the organization.

Inductive content analysis was used to analyse the data [37]. First, the data (16 pages, Times New Roman 12, spacing 1.5) was read through several times. Phrases, clauses and sentences with similar contents were colour-coded, and relevant parts underlined and reduced to 124 expressions. The reduced expressions were grouped to subcategories, which were combined into generic categories and finally collapsed to 2 main categories.

Ethics

The Code of Ethics Declaration of Helsinki of the World Medical Association [38] and Ethical guidelines of the Finnish National Board on Research Integrity TENK [39] were observed throughout the study process. Potential recruits were explained about the anonymity and voluntary nature of participation in the cover letter. They gave their consent to participate by ticking a box following the consent clause in the online form. Ethics committee approval was not required, because the study did not involve health service users [40]. The Research and Development Manager of the University granted the study permission. The response rate of

54.5% (12 out of 22 nurse teachers) can be considered adequate, since the data soon became saturated. The data (in the original Finnish language) is available from the author on request. The credibility of this qualitative study is supported by direct participant quotes, translated from the Finnish language into English. The investigator's long experience as a nurse teacher may have influenced the interpretation of the results. On one hand, pre-knowledge of the topic may have helped produce credible interpretations, on the other hand, the investigator made an effort to keep an open and neutral mind. The findings are transferable at least to Universities of Applied Sciences in Finland and they are likely to give international readers interested in nursing education perspectives to reflect on.

RESULTS

Participants

The participants were 22 nurse educators at a University of Applied Sciences in Finland. They were all women. Their age range was 42-61 years, with a means of 50 years. The participants' experience of nursing ranged from 4 to 30 years (median 15 years) and their experience as nurse teachers varied from 2 to 30 years (median 8 years).

The Main Categories

The analysis yielded two main categories. The first main category (labelled High-quality teaching and support and increasing the appreciation of the nursing profession) describes factors that, in the opinion of nurse teachers, did or could make nursing education an appealing option to potential recruits. The second main category (A negative perception of the workload in nursing practice and education), in contrast, depicted factors that decreased or could decrease the appeal of the profession.

Factors Increasing the Attractiveness of Nurse Education:

Table 1 gives an overview of what the first main category (High quality teaching and support, and increasing the appreciation of the profession) involved. A more detailed description of the findings, supported by participant quotes, is presented below. To avoid any ambiguity, the teachers who were the informants in this study, are consistently referred to as "study participants".

Table 1: Factors that increase the attractiveness of nurse education; teacher perspective

Subcategory	Generic category	Main category
Promoting the reputation and image of the profession in social media	Promoting the appreciation of the nursing profession	High quality teaching and support, and increasing the appreciation of the nursing profession
Promoting a positive attitude towards the profession in society		
Appreciation of the profession in healthcare organizations		
Teachers' knowhow up to date	Quality of the teaching	
Responding to the needs and challenges of nursing practice		
A wide range of state-of-the-art learning methods		

State-of-the-art teaching equipment and technology			
Effective teacher collaboration			
Course options available			Students' influence over their studies
Individualized study path			
Multimodal programme options			
Multimodal course options			
Teachers' genuine interest in student progress	Support for student learning		
Confidential teacher-student relationship			
Support for the continuity of the studies			
An atmosphere that promotes student wellbeing and safety	Promotion of student wellbeing		
Facilitation of student group development			
Equal treatment of students			

The social recognition of nursing was much discussed in the participant contributions. According to the nurse teachers, efforts should be increased to promote the appreciation of the nursing profession at the level of individuals, communities, organizations, nursing unions and society in general. The study participants recommended attracting public attention to the strong ethical principles, which underlay nursing practice and education, and ensured high quality, individual patient encounters and nursing care. Using social media was suggested to disseminate these ideas. To quote the participants' own words, "Talking about the profession in positive terms in social media, more public discussion on the good sides of nursing; versatile, important work" and "Increasing the recognition of the profession in media and public discussion, letting people know in a positive way the various good things the nurses' daily work involves".

Secondly, the quality of the teaching and the various factors that contributed to high quality teaching were mentioned in the participant quotes as important for the attractiveness of nursing education. Evidence-based teaching and capacity to meet the requirements and challenges of the world of work were emphasized in the study participants' essays. For example, "Planning curricula so that education is one step ahead of the practice - taking the latest evidence-based knowledge and competence to the field".

To reach high quality teaching, both the subject-specific competence and pedagogical skills of teachers needed to be updated constantly. According to the study participants, they as teachers had to be able to put a wide range of effective teaching methods into use. Fostering collaborative and interactive learning, whether classroom-based or online, was considered of utmost importance. Several study participants pointed out that teachers should keep an open mind to the possibilities of virtual and online teaching. Simulation-based learning was mentioned as a positive example of collaborative learning, which could take place either in a simulated environment in the classroom or virtually, for example through team collaboration software.

The debriefing, which usually followed simulation sessions, was considered especially meaningful for “deeper learning”. The following quotes illustrate the points made:

” We should use different teaching methods during each course and also every learning session: lectures, group work, simulations, online teaching etc., because there are different learners and because the students’ ability to concentrate is deteriorating all the time. Mostly the teaching should be in the classroom, though.”

“Collaborative learning must be supported. Ethically high standard debriefing after simulations”

” Fostering critical thinking. Simulation learning gives a good opportunity to do that”

In the opinion of the study participants, the quality of teaching also depended on the availability of state-of-the art equipment and technology. The same equipment and instruments should be used in teaching as in clinical nursing. Students should be introduced to technology, and potential fears and prejudices concerning technology should be overcome early on during the education.

Last, the quality of teaching was also seen to depend on effective teacher collaboration. According to the study participants, it was important for students to gain an impression of collegiality and mutual appreciation of expertise among teachers. Witnessing problems in collaboration could undermine students’ trust in the teachers’ competence, whereas high quality collaboration could motivate students even when some of the course contents were not their primary interest. To quote the study participants, “Effective collaboration in teams and between colleagues is reflected to the feelings of students”, and “Collegial and appreciative teacher collaboration can affect the reputation of the educational institution positively and provide a good example of professionalism”.

According to the study participants, **students’ influence over their studies** was another factor that could increase the appeal of nursing education. In practice, this could mean the possibility to use multiple modes of learning. Remote learning and web-based studies could motivate especially students with earlier education and work experience, for example those with a practical (enrolled) nursing background. In addition, offering courses that students could choose from, and providing alternative course formats could be an appealing factor to prospective students. Recognition of prior learning acquired through education and other means of individualising study pathways could also increase student motivation and satisfaction. Recognition of work-based learning or “studification” as it is called in Finland, was mentioned as an example. In the study participants’ own words,

“Individual study pathways for students and a possibility to have various modes of education”

“Recognition of prior learning and studification as an option.”

“Flexible study possibilities, online teaching is not for everyone. It suits those with enough self-direction”.

Support for student learning could make nursing education more appealing. The study participants pointed out that potential applicants often learnt from their student friends about the support provided at the university. The teachers' genuine interest in student progress and learning could be a major factor. A confidential teacher-student relationship, based on constructivist pedagogy and dialogue could support the continuity of the studies and encourage students to do their best. In the words of the study participants, "The teacher's genuine interest in factors that affect student learning and progress" and "Building on their earlier competence, appreciating competence".

Finally, the **promotion of student wellbeing was** emphasised by the study participants, especially since they thought students' mental wellbeing had been deteriorating in the aftermath of the COVID-19 pandemic. It was important that an atmosphere supportive of students' wellbeing was created from the very beginning of their studies. The environment should be safe and comfortable.

The study participants pointed out that the promotion of student wellbeing also concerned clinical training placements; awkward situations had been reported by students undertaking clinical training. The study participants said, "Talking about difficulties in clinical training placements, so that we could deal with the situation in time, preventing the escalation of the situations", and "A safe atmosphere, starting on the very first day, so that it is easy for the students to come and ask about anything that might concern them".

The facilitation of student group development was also mentioned as a factor that could increase the attractiveness of nursing education. According to the study participants, the importance of belonging to a group had grown following the COVID-19 pandemic and shift towards remote learning. Good group function could contribute to the development of collegiality, and learning to know each other could increase trust and team spirit. To quote one participant, "Making sure that the group is formed properly, giving time to get to know the other students".

The equal treatment of students also emerged as part of promoting student wellbeing. Students should be treated equally both in the classroom and in clinical training placements. According to the study participants, equality also involved accessibility. Students in need of additional support should be helped with discretion, so that they were not "singled out". To quote, "Supporting the learning of students who have various sensory disabilities, providing accessible learning materials and data".

Factors Decreasing the Attractiveness of Nurse Education:

Besides factors that could increase the appeal of nursing education, the study participants presented their perceptions of factors likely to decrease the attractiveness of the profession. These findings constitute the second main category. Table 2 gives an overview of the findings.

According to the study participants, **the reputation of nursing was poor**, which could decrease the appeal of the profession and diminish the number of recruits. Earlier, the social recognition of nursing had been higher and up until now, there had been adequate numbers of applicants to nursing education. Recently, however, the study participants had observed an

acceleration of negative comments on nursing in the social media. The contributions in the social media were of the kind that nurse managers or nurse teachers would have difficulty in dealing with. The study participants added that smaller generations and low pay had also contributed to staffing shortage.

Table 2: Factors that decrease the attractiveness of nurse education; teacher perspective

Subcategory	Generic category	Main category
Negative attitudes towards nursing in social media	The poor reputation of nursing	Negative perception of the workload in nursing practice and education
Negative communication from nursing unions concerning the situation of the profession		
Nursing underrated in value discussions in society		
Decreased number of clinical training placements	Challenges in clinical training placements	
The exhaustion of clinical training supervisors		
Students neglected in clinical training placements		
Extra shifts due to nursing staff shortage	Nurses' stressful working conditions	
Lack of empathy and collegial support		
Time pressure		
Poor media presence of nursing education	Poor marketing of nursing education	
Limited marketing of nursing education		

The study participants felt that negative communication from nursing unions concerning the situation of the profession had been provocative and "added fuel to the fire". Although the intention of the unions had been to support nurses, their communication had turned against the profession. Instead of emphasizing poor pay and stressful working conditions, the unions should have spoken for the importance of the profession for society and described the work as interesting and meaningful. One of the study participants said, "The attention was too much on the poor salary".

As a result of the negative social media contributions, nursing was underrated in value discussions. In the opinion of the study participants, the competence of nurses had been "trampled" by medical expertise. Both nurses and doctors were responsible for saving lives in serious situations, but the compensation was much lower for nurses and they were appreciated less in terms of status and image. To quote, "Doctors are appreciated much more than nurses, although nurses often have to work independently in demanding situations, for example in emergency services. The status of nursing is not so high up the scale".

The study participants further reported that **challenges in clinical training placements** had been a major "stumbling block" in nursing education recently. Finding clinical placements had been harder after the practice of paying the healthcare organizations for the supervision of

students had been stopped. The situation of international students had been most challenging; because of their inadequate Finnish language skills, many hospital organizations had been concerned about potential risks to patient safety. In the study participants' own words, "Hospitals don't take so many nursing students now because they don't get compensation for providing training", and "They don't want international students in some departments. They worry that students' lack of language skills could compromise patient safety".

The exhaustion of clinical training supervisors was mentioned in the participant contributions. Nurses had seemed tired after the COVID-19 pandemic, lacking the strength to assume responsibility for supervising students in customary numbers. Healthcare organizations had been stressed by the lack of staff, and nurses had been compelled to work extended or additional shifts, which had undermined their wellbeing further.

It had become more common that students were neglected in clinical training placements. According to the study participants, the placements had not been able to assign specific clinical supervisors for students, and the students had felt "abandoned". The constantly changing supervisors, with no one assuming overall responsibility, had led to excessive responsibility for students themselves and to more modest learning results. The study participants claimed that their students "may not have got the full picture" of patient care pathways or cause-effect links required when deciding on nursing interventions. The students had not always been called by their names, but simply referred to as "students". They had been assigned routine tasks that they could perform on their own, "tasks considered inferior" by the staff. For example, the students had delivered basic nursing care or taken patients to X-ray or other examinations. This meant that the students had been less involved in more advanced nursing interventions or doctors' rounds. To quote one study participant, "Nursing students don't have a supervisor or two, but there is a different nurse every day. This undermines the continuity of the supervision. It is caused by staff shortage and the nurses' exhaustion".

According to the study participants, **nurses' stressful working conditions** had been much discussed in the social media and in newspaper columns. This may have been one reason for the "millennials" not seeing nursing as an interesting option. The staff shortage, with the ensuing additional work shifts, had made the work even less appealing, despite extra compensation. To quote, "The rumours about having to do extra shifts make nursing education less attractive". According to the study participants, the millennials were more interested in self-fulfilment at work and valued the possibility to influence their working hours and conditions.

The lack of empathy and collegial support in clinical placement was seen to decrease the appeal of nursing education. According to the study participants, their students had reported feeling inferior to the nurses in the placements. The students had wished for a more collegial and appreciative attitude towards themselves. One of the study participants described the situation as follows, "Students experience inequality in clinical training. They are directed to the hospital canteen, only when they do night shifts are they allowed to eat at the same table with the nurses on the ward".

The perceived time pressure in nursing may also have affected potential students' interest in the profession. The study participants had learnt from their students that sometimes, a single nurse in a clinical placement had cared for more patients than the stipulated nurse-to-patient ratio. This, according to the study participants, could lead to the fear of committing errors and to patients experiencing that the nurses did not have sufficient time for them. Patient documentation was seen to demand too much time. To quote, "Too little time for patients, too much time spent at the computer documenting patient information".

Finally, **poor marketing of nursing education** may have been one reason for the decreased interest in the profession. In the opinion of the study participants, the marketing had not been adequately continuous or diverse. Although some marketing had been carried out in the social media and education exhibitions, a new approach and "more presence" was required. The study participants suggested "a bolder approach" and more international marketing, using real-life stories and positive experiences of nursing. To include two direct participant quotes, "Nursing education is not visible enough in the media", and "The marketing is intermittent".

DISCUSSION

This study, based on an observational, cross-sectional online survey and on inductive content analysis of qualitative data, revealed nurse educators' perceptions and experiences of factors that might make nursing an appealing profession. Much of the results resembled those gleaned from studies with nurses, nurse students or nurse managers. For example, the importance of improving the working conditions [1, 30] and promoting the general appreciation and media presence of nursing and nursing education [11, 15, 19, 26, 27] were similar results to earlier research. As earlier studies, the findings draw attention to the need to work for the social recognition and more effective marketing of nursing. In addition, this study mentions nursing unions as a source of negative communication, which could further harm the image of the profession. According to some participants in this study, the unions had failed to publicize the meaningful nature of the work or speak for the importance of the profession in society.

What was new about this study was the focus on the teacher perspective. Nurse teachers are connected to both students and clinical placements and they are well informed about nursing research and discussion across society. In addition, their work experience allows them to compare the effect of various changes on the appeal of the profession.

The nurse teachers in this study brought up the role of pedagogical issues in attracting new students. They suggested advertising and improving the quality of teaching through evidence-based knowledge, effective teamwork between teachers, individualized study pathways and multiple modes of learning. Individual support should be provided for students when needed, and students should be able to exercise wide influence over their studies. There was less emphasis on the role of digital and distance learning than might be expected in view of the objectives of the current *Digivisio 2030* programme [41] involving all higher education institutions in Finland. Instead, many teachers spoke for student wellbeing, supportive atmosphere, collegiality, a confidential teacher-student relationship and teachers' genuine interest in student progress.

Alarmingly, the teachers raised concern over the quality of the clinical training. As the healthcare organizations did not receive any compensation for the supervision of students anymore, finding clinical placements had been harder. The clinical supervisors had been overburdened, the students had not been assigned specific supervisors, and their learning results had deteriorated. Clinical training is an important part of the studies, so any problems, whether due to staff shortage or other reasons, should be taken seriously. An effort must be made to fight the threat of newly qualified nurses being inadequately competent to meet the demands of the labour market [31-33].

STUDY LIMITATIONS

The sample was small and the study was conducted in a single university, so the results do not allow for generalization. The findings can still be indicative of trends or patterns in the current healthcare settings and interesting to nurse educators in Finland and internationally. Direct participant quotes and a careful description of the research process increase the trustworthiness and transparency of the study.

The results show that for nurse teachers, influencing attitudes and promoting student learning and wellbeing through individual support, multiples modes of learning and collegiality are of great importance in making the profession and nursing education more attractive to potential recruits.

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