



Emirati Student Profile within Nursing Education

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ABSTRACT

Background: Nursing started in the United Arab Emirates with the arrival of expatriate nurses in the later part of the nineteenth century, but fifty years on though, nursing education in the country is still in its infancy, and currently only 3% of the local population are taking up the profession as a career choice in the country.

Objective: Being an inaugural study in the UAE, in the Abu Dhabi Emirate, and within nursing education, the objective of this study was to create a profile of existing Emirati Nursing student characteristics, with a view of identifying specific sub-groups within the population that could later be the focus of customized recruitment and retention strategies.

Design: The research design used was quantitative with an exploratory descriptive design, using a convenient sampling technique. Data for this study was collected from students studying at a College of Health sciences in the Abu Dhabi Emirate. This college is the only one currently offering baccalaureate degree Health Science related programs in Nursing, in the Emirate. Therefore, the subjects of the questionnaire data collection method included all Emirati pre-entry, undergraduate and bridging students studying in the nursing program (n=140), at the college, during the period of the study.

Findings: The pre-entry, undergraduate and bridging Emirati students in the College of Health Sciences are mostly traditional, with respect to being female (100%) and being between the ages of 18 – 24 (88.6%), but are also nontraditional in terms of some of them following a different educational pathway into the program (25%), for example an art major in high school, not studying in their native Arabic language, and being a first generation college student.

Conclusions: The study findings are relevant for Emirati student recruitment and retention practices in the nursing program in the Emirate of Abu Dhabi today. This was the first study to investigate pre-entry, undergraduate and bridging Emirati student profiles in the College of Health Sciences and in the nursing program. Non-traditional students are an essential component in contributing to the growth of the profession, and support measures including recruitment campaigns need to be in place to recruit and retain this vulnerable subset of the nursing population.

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1. Introduction:

Nursing today is a dynamic profession, constantly evolving itself to meet the health care needs of the society to which it caters. It is one of the largest healthcare professions in the world, with professionals working in a myriad of healthcare settings, such as hospitals, clinics, primary health care centers, schools, and colleges. A distinct profession grounded on a growing body of knowledge that governs its professional practice, nursing maintains a unique role that recognizes autonomy, accountability and responsibility as critical concepts in its scope of

practice. While for some the path to becoming a nurse and entering the nursing profession is straightforward, rewarding and fulfilling, for others it is standing at the career crossroads of life where the road to nursing requires guidance.

The United Arab Emirates, since its unification in 1971, has developed at a very remarkable pace with modernization in oil, tourism and education followed closely by a need for better health care services. The nursing profession started in the UAE with the arrival of expatriate nurses in the early 1960s (El-Haddad, 2006). Fifty years on, though, nursing education in the



country is still in its infancy. Educational reform in nursing education is the need of the hour to advance the profession from the diploma level to the baccalaureate degree and to provide a solution to the nursing shortage in schools and hospitals (Wollin & Fairweather, 2012). With only 3% of the nursing workforce being Emirati locals, the need is urgent for Emirati nurses to step in and change the face of the profession, from a political and socio-cultural perspective.

2. Background:

In the Middle Eastern region, the development of the nursing workforce is at various stages of progress, with Yemen having as few as 0.65 nurses and Qatar having 4.94 nurses per 1000 population. But these statistics alone fail to present a complete picture, for while Jordan, Qatar and the UAE seem to have relatively similar number of nurses per 1000 at 3.24, 4.94 and 4.18 respectively, it should be noted that in Jordan only 6% of the work force is foreign, while in Qatar 94% of the nurses and in the UAE 97% of the nursing workforce is comprised of expatriates (WHO, 2006). Humanitarian organizations like the UAE Red Crescent Society have been active in the UAE since 1983 but did little to contribute to the growth of the nursing profession in the region.

The United Arab Emirates is situated in the gulf region, along the tip of the Arabian Peninsula. At the end of the British occupation in 1970, a federation was formed among neighboring states and in 1971 the UAE became a sovereign nation (Abdulla, 2005). It is comprised of the seven Emirates of Abu Dhabi, Dubai, Sharjah, Ajman, Ras Al Khaimah, Umm Al Quwain and Fujairah. The educational system is composed of three stages: six years of primary education, three years of middle school and three years of secondary education. This is followed by higher education in the various public and private universities that are provided in the UAE. The Ministry of Education and Scientific Research (MOHESR) is the federal authority that regulates all public and privately-run higher education institutions in the country.

In the health care sector, nursing education seeks to provide the theoretical background and technical skill competency required of nurses to meet these educational demands. In the 1970s, Institutes of Nursing in the various Emirates, backed by the Ministry of Health, offered the diploma program in nursing, and nursing education in the Emirate of Abu Dhabi began with the first nursing school in 1974 (Kronfol & Athique, 1986). Since the 1990s, various schools of nursing affiliated with universities or government agencies have for short periods provided the baccalaureate degree in nursing programme, an

example being the Institute of Nursing in Abu Dhabi which was dissolved to give way to the nursing programme in the Higher Colleges of Technology in 2004, which was subsequently closed in 2009. Currently, the Fatima College of Health Sciences in Abu Dhabi, opened in 2006, is offering the nursing degree to its students (Wollin & Fairweather, 2012). The Federal Department of Nursing in the UAE Ministry of Health (MOH) had set one of their goals for the year 2011 as, “to encourage more UAE nationals to join the nursing and the midwifery profession” (Annual Report, 2011, p. 4). At the end of the year, however, they were able to report only “339 Emirati nurses working in the MOH facilities/districts in the UAE” and the establishment of “an Emirati Nurse Representative group to discuss issues relating to enhancing the image of nursing in the community” (p. 5).

In the UAE, as with other higher education programmes, there is an import of foreign curricula in the field of nursing education, an example being the American system which was used in the Higher Colleges of Technology from 2004 to 2009 and the Australian nursing curriculum currently being used in the Fatima College of Health Sciences (Wollin & Fairweather, 2012).

There is a growing number of women in the higher education system in the UAE in recent years but an overdependence on expatriate nurses, coupled with common misunderstandings regarding the role of a nurse, lingering perceptions of nurses being the handmaidens of doctors, low educational levels and limited knowledge regarding the scope of practice of nurses, have resulted in only 3% of the local population taking up the profession as a career choice (Wollin & Fairweather, 2012). There are currently four universities offering an entry-level baccalaureate program in nursing in the UAE, three of them government supported and one private. They are Sharjah University, the Higher Colleges of Technology (HCT), the Fatima College of Health Sciences, and the private Ras Al Khaimah Medical and Health Sciences University.

Within the Emirate of Abu Dhabi, there is currently only one College of Health Sciences, the Fatima College of Health Sciences, offering the baccalaureate degree in nursing, and students entering the college complete a pathway of one foundational year followed by a three year degree in their area of specialization – either nursing or pharmacy, or medical imaging, or radiology, or the paramedics program. During the foundation year, relatively more Emirati students join the College, but following the first year, they either discontinue this program in favor of another program in another university or choose one of the other specializations excluding

nursing. Very few Emirati students enter into the nursing program(s) at the college.

The UAE Ministry of State for Federal National Council Affairs (2008), in their report on ‘Women in the UAE: A Portrait of Progress’ typifies UAE’s achievement by the ‘evolution and growing prominence of Emirati women as partners and contributors in this remarkable nation-building process’. According to the report,

Women, who account for 49.3 percent of the national population, are today at the forefront of the workforce in the UAE in both the government sector as well as a growing number in the private sector. Aided by the government’s commitment to empower women and provide them with equal opportunities, the status of women within the UAE has flourished in parallel with the country’s growth. (p.1)

Within the college of Health Sciences though, at the end of the recruitment process, and after one year of exhausting college resources as well as student personal time, it is frustrating to bear witness to poor Emirati numbers within the nursing baccalaureate degree program(s). Several studies both in the West, and from within the Middle Eastern region have discussed this shortage in nursing education, and yet until date no one has researched this problem within the context of the United Arab Emirates.

3. Purpose and Research Question in this Study:

Being an inaugural study in the UAE, in the Abu Dhabi Emirate, and within nursing education, the purpose of this study was to identify Emirati student profile characteristics within the nursing program, in Abu Dhabi, UAE. The research question that guided the study was as follows,

1. What is the profile of the Emirati student within the nursing program(s) in the Abu Dhabi Emirate?

4. Review of Literature:

This section includes the theoretical framework guiding the study and a review of the relevant bodies of literature.

4.1. Jeffreys’ (2014) Nursing Universal Retention and Success model (NURS)

Jeffreys’ (2004) believes that students within the nursing discipline have distinctive characteristics that separate them from other professions and necessitates the development of a uniquely suited model. She developed the Nursing Undergraduate Retention and Success (NURS) to examine the wide range of factors that influence retention among nursing students in order to guide administrators and educators identify at-risk students and develop strategies towards effective recruitment and retention.

“Academic outcomes interact with psychological outcomes whereby good academic performance results in retention only when accompanied by positive psychological outcomes for the nursing program and profession” (Jeffreys, 2004, p.11).

After several years of exploring and examining the multi-layered factors surrounding this issue, Jeffreys’ (2014) refined the model and called it the “Jeffreys’ Nursing Universal Retention and Success Model” (NURS), to provide nurse educators with an organizing framework to optimize student outcomes. According to the model, successful student recruitment and retention into a nursing program is based on an interplay between student profile characteristics, student affective factors, academic factors, environmental factors, academic outcomes, psychological outcomes, societal surrounding factors, and professional integration factors. The model can be applied to the Emirati nursing student in the UAE, who is faced with all of these factors while contemplating a professional career as a nurse in the country (Figure 1)

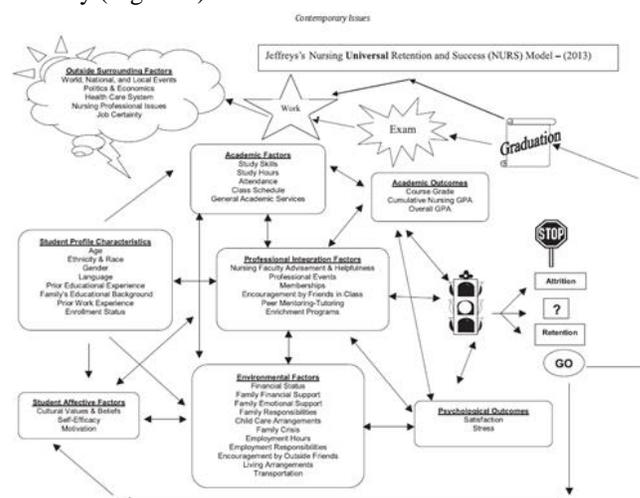


Figure 1. Jeffreys’ (2014) Nursing Universal Retention and Success (NURS) Model

Jeffreys (2014) explains that student profile characteristics include age, ethnicity, race, and heritage, gender and sexual identity, first language, prior educational experience, family's educational background, prior work experience, and enrolment status. The intention is to identify influencing factors categorizing the student as a member of an under-represented group, non-traditional, or first generation college student. According to Jeffreys (2014), a non-traditional student would be one who meets one or more of the following criteria: a) is older than 25 years; b) studying in a part-time mode; c) male; d) a member of the minority community; e) having children; f) entering the program from another

different pathway and g) having prior exposure to the health care field.

Student affective factors would include their attitudes, values and beliefs regarding the nursing program, including societal cultural beliefs and the motivation to succeed. Jeffreys (2014) explains that students enter nursing education with prior values and beliefs that guide thinking, decisions making and actions within all aspects of life and is an important area of focus in student recruitment and retention. While academic factors and positive psychological outcomes have implications for student retention, societal surrounding factors related to the uncertain political and economic conditions that are unique to a country and which vary over time are equally important.

4.2. Emirati Youth in the United Arab Emirates

In the United Arab Emirates, since the 1970s, rulers of the nation have embarked on ambitious strategies aimed at diversification away from the petroleum industry, which involved providing alternative career paths for their youth into leading roles in new sectors across all levels of the society. The UAE National Strategy Vision 2021 (2010) asserts that

Ambitious and responsible Emiratis will successfully carve out their future, actively engaging in an evolving socio-economic environment... In their professional lives they will prove that the route to success lies through personal commitment, dedication, and a strong work ethic. Satisfaction and motivation will reward their self-reliance and initiative; their appetite for risk-taking will be fueled by a vigorous entrepreneurial spirit ... [it envisions a] diversified and flexible knowledge-based economy will be powered by skilled Emiratis and strengthened by world-class talent to ensure long-term prosperity in the UAE (pp. 2, 4, 14).

Jones (2011, p. 20) recently conducted a salient scoping quantitative study for the Al Qasimi foundation in Ras Al Khaimah to ascertain the career goals and aspirations of the Emirati youth, and these have served to provide a baseline for comparison away from popular stereotypes of UAE nationals as “lacking a strong work ethic, the motivation to achieve, a sense of civic responsibility, and a number of other attitudes seen as important for national development”, in large part because of their eligibility for social benefits provided by the government. These assumptions are discussed by Al-Waqfi and Forstenlechner (2010) in their research on stereotypes in the UAE by the expatriate labor market.

In his study concerning economic, social, and political attitudes in the Ras Al Khaimah Emirate comparing Emirati and non-Emirati youth (n= 62),

regarding their choice of career, and the reasons behind the choices, Jones (2011) found in economic attitudes that most young Emiratis are interested in public sector careers. Over fifty percent of the study participants chose careers such as “government,” “police,” or “military” as their top preferences when given a choice of seven sector options, including government, education, military, police, private business, government business, entrepreneurship, and non-profit organization. Twenty-three percent of the Emiratis in the study selected government while another thirty-two percent selected military or police related careers (Jones 2011), compared to the non-Emiratis where the majority selected private sector careers.

When asked to comment on their career preferences, Emirati responses demonstrated a priority given to degree qualifications rather than the career itself, similar to the non-Emirati responses. Jones (2011) suggests that unlike non-Emiratis where the influencing factors were internal such as personal likes and dislikes regarding a profession, for the Emiratis the factors could be external and related to exams and qualifications. But he is quick to add that for Emirati youth, another factor could be lack of exposure to different occupations and professions when compared to non-Emirati youth who all had expatriate parents working in various levels and careers in Ras Al Khaimah.

Regarding societal attitudes, Jones (2011) found that “Emiratis reported significantly more favorable attitudes toward the role of science and technology in society” (p. 16) and regarding the independence that women enjoy, Emiratis significantly agreed with the statement, “It’s more important for a woman to have a family than pursue a career”. Surprisingly, in the demographic distribution of his study, Jones (2011) fails to mention what percentage of the sample were female Emirati. Not surprisingly, Emiratis demonstrated that among values that should be encouraged in the UAE, obedience, love for country and religious faith had the most significance. Politically, Jones (2011) study shows that Emiratis are significantly more interested in local politics and federal politics in the UAE than in politics in the Middle East region, and while non-Emiratis in the study sample felt that business people should have more influence in society, Emiratis felt that popularly elected representatives (such as members of the Federal National Council) should have more influence in the political arena.

5. Research Methodology:

The methodology section discusses the site and participant selection in the context of the study, followed by the collection of data for analysis and

interpretation. Then data collection methods are discussed, followed by the ethical considerations.

5.1. Site and Participant Selection:

Data for this study was collected from students studying at a College of Health sciences in Abu Dhabi, having initial program accreditation from the Ministry of Higher Education for Scientific Research (MOHESR), and institutional accreditation from the UAE Commission of Advanced Accreditation (CAA). This college is the only one of its kind in the Abu Dhabi Emirate, offering baccalaureate degree Health Science related programs in Nursing, Pharmacy, Paramedics, Medical Imaging and Radiology to the community. Established in 2006, the College aims to meet the United Arab Emirates' growing need for skilled healthcare professionals. The College presently offers the Bachelor of Science in nursing degree along with other diploma and higher diploma courses.

The purpose of the program in the Al Rowdah Academy is to support entry into desired diploma and degree courses in IAT. These students are at the threshold of forming their career choices, and as such are an important source of information for the current study. Subjects for the study were recruited from a college of Health Sciences in Abu Dhabi. The college has campuses in Abu Dhabi, Al Ain, Ajman, Al Gharbia and Morocco, but the nursing program, at that time, was only being offered at the Abu Dhabi and Al Ain campuses, therefore only subjects from those two campuses participated in the study.

The subjects of the questionnaire data collection method included all Emirati pre-entry, undergraduate and bridging students in the nursing program. In this study, convenient purposive sampling scheme has been adopted because of the availability of only one College of Health Sciences in the Emirate, and because the purpose of the study is to profile the Emirati student in the nursing program, in Abu Dhabi, UAE. Thus, Emirati students at different levels of the program included, pre-entry (80 students), undergraduates (48 students), and bridging students (12 students), making a total of 140 participants. This sample size is adequate for small population sizes, as according to Brace, Kemp and Snelgar (2000), for a statistical test to be administered an acceptable size must be at least 100 participants.

5.2. Data Collection Methods:

In this study, quantitative data from Emirati students to establish student profiles were collected using questionnaires. According to Jeffreys (2012), today nursing students represent greater variability in terms of age, gender, ethnicity and race, prior educational experience, prior work experience,

family's educational background, and enrollment status than ever before. These factors have been taken into consideration during the formulation of the questionnaire for this study and consists of the above information that would be collected from the students in congruence with the NURS model, to determine the Emirati student profile. As the inclusion criteria only included Emirati students, the ethnicity was not included as part of the question. The data in the questionnaire distributed included the student's age, sex, level in the program, selection of major in high school, parent's educational and occupational experience, any previous health care related experience, any family members in the health care profession, and the area they live in.

5.3. Data Analysis:

For the analysis of the quantitative data, the researcher created a database to store the results from the questionnaire. The Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) 22.0 was used to conduct statistical analyses as it was assumed that the statistical package would be essential for interpreting the data in order to answer the research question formulated in this study, which is:

1. What is the profile of the Emirati student within the nursing program(s) in the Abu Dhabi Emirate?

The data was used to portray the Emirati student within the health sciences program and was analyzed using descriptive statistics analysis. The calculation of the mean and percentage frequencies identified the characteristic profile of the Emirati student within the nursing program(s) in the College of Health Sciences.

5.4. Ethical Considerations:

Ethical approval for the study was obtained from the British University in Dubai based on the university's guidelines for ethics in educational research. The ethical approval stage at the research site took about six months to procure because of other administrative reasons more urgent to the college. For purposes of confidentiality and anonymity, no identifiers were requested on the questionnaire.

5.5. Researcher Role:

The researcher was the sole investigator in the study. The research was conducted in a college where the researcher has been teaching nursing students from Abu Dhabi for the past 6 years.

6. Results:

Quantitative measures were used to determine the profile of the Emirati student studying in the College of Health Sciences. Questionnaires were



collected from all Emirati students at different levels of the program, pre-entry (80 students), undergraduates (48 students), and bridging students (12 students), making a total of 140 participants. The results of the data have been presented below to describe student characteristics. Within the variables, data sought included age, sex of the student, marital status, level in the program, major in high school, and place of residence in the Emirate, and have been represented in the following cohorts. All the participants in the study were females (100 %).

The majority of the students in the population were traditional students in the 18-24 year age group (88.6%) (Table 2). Students in the United Arab Emirates typically complete 12 years of schooling and then continue with higher education at one of the public or private universities in the country. The reason for the majority of participants being in this age group could be attributed to the differences in the population distribution between the pre-entry, undergraduate and bridging students. At the end of the first year, they make their respective career choices and then enter into the second year. So the 18-24 year age group is a reflection of the ages of participating Emirati students in the pre-entry and undergraduate levels of the nursing program in the college.

This finding is similar to a study conducted by Al-Kandari and Lew (2005) among Kuwaiti female high school students, where the participants were all between 14 – 20 years and unmarried, and another study by Eman et al. (2012) among Bahraini nursing students where the majority was female (87%), in the 18-20 year age group. But a study conducted by McCann et al. (2010) among nursing students in Australia showed that the 18% of the participants were male, and 20% were older than 30 years. “Students today include traditional college-age learners, and first-time adult learners”, according to Hallmark et al. (2014, p. 348, in Jeffreys’, 2014).

As indicated in Table 2, participants in the study belonged to three levels in the program, the pre-entry, under graduate and bridging levels. The majority of the students belonged to the pre-entry level. Bridging students relate to those students who had previously completed a diploma level in nursing or related subjects and were currently undergoing a bridging program to bring themselves up to the baccalaureate level.

The majority of students in the college have completed a science major in high school before entering it. It is interesting to note also that 23.6% of the participants enter a program in Health Sciences with no prior background in the sciences. This affects their ability to make a smooth transition into a rigorous science program.

Table 1: *Participants profile data*

No.	Demographic	Variables	Frequency	Percentages
1.	Age	15 – 24	124	88.6
		25 – 34	10	7.1
		35 - 44	6	4.3
		45 – 54	0	0
		55 - 65	0	0
2.	Sex of the student	Male	0	0
		Female	140	100
3.	Marital status	Unmarried	128	91.4
		Married	12	8.5
		Others	0	0
4.	Level in the program	Pre- entry	80	57.1
		Undergraduate	48	34.3
		Post-graduate	12	8.6
5.	Major in High School	Science	106	75.7
		Arts	33	23.6
		Commerce	1	0.7
6.	Residence in the Emirate of Abu Dhabi	Abu Dhabi Island	46	32.9
		Suburbs(Khalifa City, Shahama)	67	47.9
		Al Ain	27	19.2
7.	Family socio-economic status	≤ 10,000 AED	15	10.7
		10,000 – 50,000 AED	45	32.1
		50,000 – 100,000 AED	19	13.6
		≥100,000 aed	61	43.6
8.	Father’s Educational level	Not Educated	16	11.4
		Primary School	10	7.1
		Secondary School	34	24.3
		Undergraduate level	21	15
		Higher Degree	59	42.1
9.	Mother’s Educational level	Not Educated	19	13.6
		Primary School	20	14.3
		Secondary School	50	35.7
		Undergraduate level	27	19.3
		Higher Degree	24	17.1
10.	Father’s Occupational status	Nursing	2	1.4
		Other health related	3	2.1
		Non – Health Related	135	96.4
11.	Mother’s Occupational status	Nursing	3	2.1
		Other health related	3	2.1
		Non – Health Related	134	95.7

A majority of the students who participated in the study (47.9%) lived in the mainland suburbs near the College. In Osaka and Ziady's (2001) study conducted in Qatar, the majority of students came from the urban areas. But the majority of these participants live in the suburbs (47.9%) compared to the Abu Dhabi island city center / island (32.9%), but it could be explained that the College is located in the suburbs and therefore there are more students from the adjacent surrounding areas. This close proximity could have been a deciding factor in their choice of higher education in the college.

Results of the study further indicate that (42.1%) of the participants' fathers had a higher degree educational level, followed by (15%) who had an undergraduate degree educational level, while among the mothers of the study participants, a lesser percentage had a postgraduate degree (17%), compared with those who had an undergraduate degree (19.3%). At the other end of the spectrum, some participants also had parents who were uneducated, with fathers at (11.4%) and mothers at (13.6%).

A study conducted by Law and Arthur (2003) among nursing students in Hong Kong showed that the majority of parents (fathers and mothers) of the respondents were primary school graduates (43.6% and 50.9%, respectively). This is dissimilar to the findings in my thesis which shows that the majority of parents are secondary school graduates. This also varies from Okasha and Ziady's (2001) study in Qatar, where the majority of parents were illiterate or just able to read and write. The fast pace of the economic and industrial revolution in the UAE that started forty years ago could be responsible for the first generation of graduates in the UAE (Kirk 2010).

It is evident from the results that most participants had parents in non-health related professions or occupations with fathers at (96.4%) and mothers at (95.7%). One limitation of the questionnaire not identified during the piloting stage was the inclusion of an option for participants with parents who did not work. Nnadi-Okolo (1990) suggests that during self-administration of the questionnaire if the participant has a question requiring clarification, the person administering the questionnaire can explain the question but not answer it. During the administration of the questionnaire in this study, students were offered an alternative to select the non-health related option, as it was more important to document results of parents being in the health care profession including nursing.

Concerning the occupational status, none of the respondent's parents in a study conducted by Law and Arthur (2003) in Hong Kong, were in nursing or other health related professions, while from among my

participants 3.5% had fathers in the nursing or other health related category, and 4.2% had mothers in the nursing or other health related professions. Jabeen (2010) conducted a study relating to attitudes towards career women's roles in the UAE, finding that parents' higher educational and occupational levels contributed to positive attitude formation towards women in career roles.

The majority of the participants in the study (43.65%) reported an annual socio-economic income of greater than 100,000 AED. Tong (2010) published a report on the 'Wages Structure in the United Arab Emirates' for the Institute for Social & Economic Research (ISER) at Zayed University, reporting that,

Geographically, workers' salaries differ significantly from some emirates to others. The Emirate of Dubai has the highest annual salaries on average (52K), followed by the Emirates of Abu Dhabi (42K) and Sharjah (30K). The Emirate of Ras Al Khaimah has by far the lowest salaries on average (13K). The difference between the highest and lowest pay is striking for such a small country. The other three northern emirates, Ajman, Umm El Quawain, and Fujairah, have similar salary levels ranging from 18K to 20K in 2008, and their differences are not statistically significant (p. 5).

This report included both the Emirati and the expatriate population with a reported average for Abu Dhabi at 42,000AED. A combination of the last two scale intervals demonstrate that 57.2% (43.6%+13.6%) of the participants' earned more than the Emirate's average in terms of monthly income. Law and Arthur (2003) associated family income with the intention to pursue nursing as a career among students in Hong Kong and found that as the family income increased, the choice to take up nursing as a career decreased.

The majority of participants in the study (86%) have seen a nurse in action prior to entering the College of Health Sciences for their higher educational degree, while only 9% of the participants have worked, 20% have volunteered and worked, and 32% have volunteered in a health care facility prior to entering the college. Interestingly, a large percentage of the population (56.4%) have no prior personal experience in health care before joining the Health Sciences College.

Nursing as a profession is not an entirely new concept for the participants -10.7% of the participants have one or more family members are in a healthcare profession when compared to 45% of the participants who do not have family members in the health care profession.

Interestingly, a small percentage (5%) of participants had one or both parents as nurses. But this percentage falls quite short in comparison to a study

by Sand-Jecklin (2006), conducted among first year nursing students in the United States. In her study, 78% of the students reported having worked in the health care industry, or having a close family member who worked in health care, although it is not clear in what capacity, that is, as volunteers or in full-time paid positions.

Thus, in summary, as can be seen from the tables above, the majority of the students in the population sample are traditional students, being females (100%), in the 18-24 year age group (88.6%), pre-entry students (57.1%) who had taken science as a major in high school (75.7%), and lives in the suburbs of Abu Dhabi (47.9). Similar studies among nursing students in Qatar (Okasha & Ziady, 2001) and Jordan (Safadi et al., 2011) also show similar student characteristics in terms of demographic variables. But a study conducted by McCann et al. (2010) among nursing students in Australia showed that the 18% of the participants were male, 20% were older than 30 years, and 82 % lived in the metropolitan area.

Several experts (Dapremont 2013; Yateman, 2004; Stroup, 2013) have stressed that to solve the nursing shortage, one of the important interventions is to “prime the pipeline” (Goodin, 2003), meaning recruit more students into the nursing profession, and the changing nature of the nursing profession suggests that more non-traditional students are entering programs of nursing. According to Jeffreys (2014), it is crucial to ascertain whether the nursing student:

a) Represents the profile of a student traditionally (historically) enrolled in nursing, or b) may be categorized as a member of an under-represented group, nontraditional, and/or first generation college student (p. 2).

A nontraditional would be one who meets one or more of the following criteria: a) is older than 25 years; b) studying in a part-time mode; c) male; d) a member of the minority community; e) has children; f) is entering the program from a different pathway; and g) has prior exposure to the health care field. According to Jeffreys (2014) nontraditional students and first generation college (post-secondary education) students have difficulty making career decisions. For first generation college students, mismatched expectations of the college academic and social experience pose challenges to academic achievement, and recruitment and retention. In addition, social isolation (or the feelings of not belonging) among nontraditional and first generation college students are also reported as factors adversely influencing recruitment, retention and success across all levels of nursing education.

The pre-entry Emirati student in the College of Health Sciences is traditional with respect to being female and between the ages of 18 – 24, but is also

nontraditional in terms of some of them following a different educational pathway into the program, for example an art major in high school, and a first generation college student. The educational status of participant parents shows that 42.8% of the fathers and 63.6% of the mothers of the participants are only educated up to the higher secondary level or less. The bridging Emirati student is more nontraditional in terms of being ≤ 24 years of age, marital status being married, having children, currently working, studying in a part-time mode, and entering the program through a different educational pathway, for example completing a diploma nursing program first and currently pursuing a bridging baccalaureate degree in nursing.

9. Discussion:

Jeffreys’ (2014) suggests that the profile characteristics of students in a program is a crucial factor in recruitment and retention. According to him,

Student profile characteristics describe characteristics prior to beginning a nursing course and include age; ethnicity, race, and heritage; gender and sexual identity; first language; prior educational experience; family's educational background; prior work experience; and enrollment status (p. 2).

Most of the Emirati students in the study entering the College of Health Sciences were traditional high school graduates, but they were also first generation college students in some cases and were non-traditional by studying in a language that was not their first language. Bridging students were more non-traditional by being married, working, having children, studying in a part-time mode and by not studying in their native language.

This finding is similar to other studies in the region. Osaka (2001) conducted a similar quantitative study among Qatari nursing students and found that the majority of the undergraduate students were between the ages of 18 and 35, and unmarried (77.2%). A look at their parents’ level of education showed that a half of their fathers and three-fifths of their mothers were illiterate or just able to read and write, indicating that they were first generation college students as well. According to Seidman (2007, in Jeffreys’, 2014), nontraditional students and first generation college students have lower recruitment and retention rates. Concerning first generation college students, Jeffreys’ (2014) adds that,

mismatched expectations of the college academic and social experience, especially during the first six weeks of transition to post-secondary education, pose challenges to persistence, motivation, self-efficacy, academic achievement, and retention, and includes social isolation (or the feelings of not

belonging) among nontraditional and first generation college students as reported factors adversely influencing retention and success across all levels of education (p.2).

He recommends that nursing educators should develop “proactive, transitional and ongoing strategies to capitalize on student strengths, prevent deficits and improve weaknesses”, among this group of non-traditional and first generation college student population (p.3).

Another study quantitatively conducted by Safadi et al. (2011) in Jordan found that first year nursing students in the study had a mean age of 21 years, but also interestingly reports that 26% were male students among their nursing population. A similar study, using mixed methods by Eman et al. (2012) in Bahrain found that the first cohort of nursing students in their program in 2006 included 5 males and 33 females. And AbuAlRub (2007) discusses strategies for the nursing shortage in Jordan and suggests that enrollment of male students in the nursing program would help increase numbers within the profession. He argues that as one of the cultural reasons associated with the nursing shortage in the region was family disapproval to working the night shift, the inclusion of male nurses in the profession could provide a possible solution to low rates of participation.

Male students in the program, though, would still require further additional awareness, motivation, familial and governmental support to enter an up-to-now female dominant career in the UAE. A qualitative dissertation by LaRocco (2004) conducted in Boston among male nurses, on “Policies and practices that influence recruitment and retention of men in nursing” found that males in the profession frequently chose other careers before settling on a career in nursing, and admitted to a lack of awareness regarding the profession before entering the program. Motivation to enter and stay in the program were related to job security and financial benefits, but since entering the profession, participants in the study reported that they now believe that nursing is a “genderless profession”.

10. Limitations of the Study:

Limitations of the study relate to it being conducted only among female Emirati students studying in Fatima College of Health Sciences and living in Abu Dhabi, UAE, as there are no male students currently enrolled at the college. Emirati students living outside the Abu Dhabi Emirate, and expatriate students living in Abu Dhabi or elsewhere, and pursuing a nursing degree, were outside the scope of the study.

11. Implications of the Study:

11.1. Education

The study findings are relevant for Emirati student recruitment and retention practices in the nursing program in the Emirate of Abu Dhabi today. This was the first study to investigate pre-entry, undergraduate and bridging Emirati student profiles in the College of Health Sciences and in the nursing program, in the Abu Dhabi Emirate. Non-traditional students are an essential component in contributing to the growth of the profession, and support measures including recruitment campaigns need to be in place to recruit and retain this vulnerable subset of the nursing population. First generation college students are also an important subset of the Emirati nursing student population, and need more support, advising, mentoring, counseling and guidance in their career trajectory.

11.2. Management

Administrators in the college of Health Sciences could utilize findings from this study since it provides important information about the different types of students within the college population who would be receptive to a career in nursing. Recruitment in colleges need to target this important student population, earlier (middle school) and more effectively through multifaceted approaches. Increasing a positive perception towards the nursing career involves early education about all the exciting options and opportunities that a nursing career has to offer.

12. Conclusion:

The results of this study have added to the paucity of literature regarding Emirati student profile characteristics, in nursing education in the UAE. Several factors significantly influenced the Emirati student in her decision to choose a career in nursing, including prior program major and fathers’ and mother’s educational and occupational level. . This study contributes to the information that national policy makers and stakeholders in the country could use, to customize their campaigning and recruitment strategies, given the current UAE health care climate of rapid evolution to meet high quality standards, and the crisis of only very few Emiratis in the nursing workforce to lead the change.

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