Advanced Academic Degree for Nurses: Challenges and Career Opportunities

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Article info

Article history:
Received: January 28th, 2023
Revised: February 13th, 2023
Accepted: March 10th, 2023

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Background: Obtaining an advanced degree in a nursing career is a multifaceted career move that could open multiple opportunities that can hasten one's career. But despite the promise of endless possibilities that an advanced degree could offer, there are multiple challenges that a nurse must undergo to achieve one's degree. Objective: The study aimed to explore the lived experiences of working nurses simultaneously pursuing their advanced academic degrees. Methods: This study employed a qualitative-phenomenological design. The career nurse participants were chosen from the officially enrolled Master of Nursing (MN) or Master of Arts in Nursing (MAN) students at Western Mindanao State University's College of Nursing Graduate Program for the Academic Year 2019-2020. A total of 10 respondents were selected as data saturation was already present with such a number. The interview was the data gathering methodology, and thematic analysis was its method for data interpretation. Results: There were 2 two themes identified; (1) Challenges Met and (2) Perceived Opportunities with multiple subthemes for each general theme. It was found that the following were the identified challenges of the respondents during the interview, and there were corresponding perceived opportunities available once challenges were addressed and the advanced degree was obtained. Conclusion: This study was able to identify the different challenges experienced by the nurses who are taking up their master's degree and the challenges they are experiencing it. Based on the identified themes, some challenges were essential for them to surpass to achieve the possible opportunities. Recommendation: Future research may be conducted to explore further and expound the different experiences of the nurses taking up the challenge of having an advanced degree. As this study shall influence future undertakings, the data shall prove its use as a benchmark to improve further the quality of advanced degrees available for career nurses.

Keywords: nursing education; post-graduate degree; opportunities; challenges; advance degree

International Journal of Nursing and Health Services (IJNHS), Volume 6, Issue 2, Apr 20, 2023
DOI: 10.35654/ijnhs.v6i2.698
E-ISSN: 2654-6310

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INTRODUCTION

Nursing education is a never-ending method of learning. It motivates nurses to achieve higher levels of success in the clinical institutions where they work; it broadens their skills by teaching them new techniques for delivering safe and productive patient care. It also has a sophisticated and educated workforce that provides the best possible health care to the public (1,2,3,7).

Currently, most baccalaureate graduate nurses are pursuing a post-baccalaureate degree. A baccalaureate/degree bachelor's in nursing is a limited certification for professional advancement (3,4). Career nurses sought a master's degree in Nursing for several reasons; others were involved in the post-graduate study because of the advantages they would receive while training and after graduation (16). Certain employers require it to qualify for a job promotion and enhanced position (13,16,20).

Graduating with an advanced academic degree in nursing earns you both admiration and appreciation from your colleagues and other healthcare professionals, increasing your self-confidence and self-esteem (6,13,16,25). Most career nurses expected that obtaining an advanced academic degree would boost their professional status and educational qualifications. Others were looking for a shift in their career paths to pursue better opportunities (25,26,28,34).

Groube claimed in his research that nurses were motivated to partake in an advanced academic degree, but they were anxious about the unexpected challenges of their study (2,8). Lack of knowledge of an advanced academic degree was a burden, as nurses were generally in the workforce for several years before they undertook an advanced academic degree, which increased anxiety in their return to study (10,17,22). Their limited computer literacy worsens it, deprived backing from course supervisors, and lack of understanding of the academic procedures (24,39).

Limited research directly tackles the difficulties and career opportunities that arise from these opportunities, despite the significance of advanced academic degrees for nurses in supporting patient care and career advancement. Previous research has mainly concentrated on the difficulties of earning advanced degrees in the healthcare industry (9,17,27,34,37), but it has yet to examine how these degrees affect nurses' careers entirely. Comprehensive data on the professional development and job outcomes of nurses with advanced degrees are also limited (20). By identifying the difficulties and professional opportunities connected to advanced academic degrees for nurses, this research attempted to address this research gap. Thus, this research seeks to explore nurses' difficulties and challenges when pursuing higher degrees and the professional opportunities that arise from obtaining such degrees. The study's results shall be helpful for nurses, educators, and legislators alike since they shall help identify the strategies for encouraging nurses to pursue higher degrees, hence fostering professional advancement and improving patient care in the same aspect.

OBJECTIVE

The study aimed to explore nurses' difficulties and challenges when pursuing higher degrees and the professional opportunities that arise from obtaining such degrees.

METHODS

Design

This study was a Qualitative descriptive type of research employing phenomenological research that focuses on the commonality of lived experiences of the working nurses pursuing an advanced academic degree. Its main goal was to extract the truth from people's accounts of their perceptions and emotions to provide detailed explanations of the phenomenon (5,13,40). One of the studies described it as an encapsulation of participants' lived experiences, beliefs, and feelings about a phenomenon (38).

Sampling Technique

The study utilized simple random sampling to select the respondents
representing responses from the selected population (11). The participants were selected according to the following criteria.

**Inclusion Criteria:**
- Career Nurses who were chosen from the roster of students officially enrolled in the Nursing Graduate School program.
- Must be currently enrolled in the school year 2019-2020.
- At least obtained a total of 30 units of academic requirements.

**Exclusion Criteria:**
- Must be working currently in a clinical-hospital area.
- Nurses who did not have at least one year of clinical-hospital experience.

In this study, the determinants for challenges of career nurses include Age, Marital Status, and Income Status. On the other hand, the determinants for opportunities were Position and Length of Service. The study reached data saturation and ended the process with the 8th participant.

**Table 1. Determinants for Challenges**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Marital Status</th>
<th>Income Status</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>A</td>
<td>41 years old and above</td>
<td>Married</td>
<td>Shared Expenses</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B</td>
<td>20-30 years old</td>
<td>Single</td>
<td>Shared Expenses</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C</td>
<td>20-30 years old</td>
<td>Single</td>
<td>Shared Expenses</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>D</td>
<td>20-30 years old</td>
<td>Single</td>
<td>Shared Expenses</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>E</td>
<td>30-40 years old</td>
<td>Married</td>
<td>Breadwinner</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>F</td>
<td>20-30 years old</td>
<td>Single</td>
<td>Share Expenses</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>G</td>
<td>20-30 years old</td>
<td>Single</td>
<td>Shared Expenses</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>H</td>
<td>20-30 years old</td>
<td>Single</td>
<td>Bread winner</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Data Collection**

Once approval of the research tool and process was obtained from the University's Technical and Ethics Board Committee, the researcher screened and selected the available participants for the study. The participants were informed about study participation through email. Consent was also obtained through electronic mail. After recruitment, each participant was scheduled for an interview.

**Table 2. Determinants for Opportunities**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant</th>
<th>Length of Service</th>
<th>Position</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>A</td>
<td>5 years above</td>
<td>Head Nurse</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B</td>
<td>2-3 years</td>
<td>Staff Nurse</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C</td>
<td>2-3 years</td>
<td>Staff Nurse</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>D</td>
<td>2-3 years</td>
<td>Staff Nurse</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>E</td>
<td>5 years and above</td>
<td>Staff Nurse</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>F</td>
<td>0-1 year</td>
<td>Staff Nurse</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>G</td>
<td>4-5 years</td>
<td>Staff Nurse</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>H</td>
<td>2-3 years</td>
<td>Staff Nurse</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Three (3) participants agreed to be interviewed at their own residences while the remaining five (5) were conducted via Zoom about the government's COVID-19 restriction. The interview was completed utilizing an interview guide checked and validated by the university experts. Briefing with regards to the background, the rationale of the study, and their rights as participants. Utilizing a semi-structured interview tool (see Table 3), each participant's interview lasted for at least 30-45 minutes.

Follow-up questions were asked as needed to obtain data related to their continuously vague answers. The recording was done during the interview with the consent of the participants to review the participants' statements as they were only interviewed once.

**Data Analysis**

This study utilized Braun and Clarke’s thematic analysis. Qualitative researchers used a scalable data analysis plan to create themes from interview data (5,13,23, 40). There was a six-phase method for performing thematic analysis. First, data familiarization was established through interviews following the five (5) guide questions presented to the participants.
Table 3. Guide Questions

| 1. What made you decide to study in the Graduate School Program? |
| 2. What motivates you to continue your post-graduate degree? |
| 3. What opportunities are you expecting while pursuing and after finishing the post-graduate degree? |
| 4. What challenges/problems have you encountered while studying and at the same time working? |
| 5. How do you manage your time and resources as an employee and simultaneously pursue your advanced academic degree? |

These guide questions passed the screening committee. Following the government's protocol for Community Quarantine, out of the eight (8) participants, three (3) of them were personally handed the instrument, and personal interaction was conducted in their residence, whereas, for the five (5) participants, the interview was conducted via the teleconferencing application. Subsequently, each career nurse was assigned the generation of the initial code. Afterward, identification of the theme was recognized. All data from the participants were well scrutinized, and the common answer was merged to develop a theme. Re-examining and reviewing themes were steered, and the definition of final themes was shaped to produce the desired data.

The study adheres to the highest technical and ethical principles as it adheres to the university's protocol for the conduct of research. The researcher ensured the tool was validated by the university's experts and complied with the ethical requirements required before conducting the study.

The themes were also presented to the research adviser to ensure that data analysis was on track and aligned with the study's objectives. Recordings were reviewed to ensure that data was included.

Ethical Consideration
The study's ethical aspect adhered to the university's protocol requirements. For the use of the video teleconferencing app, adherence to the Data Privacy Law of the Philippines was ensured as the researcher informed the participants. Approval from the Ethic Committee Board was obtained with the reference number of WMSU-CERC Code: 2020-003-CN-GS-SBR. Informed consent was ensured first before the conduct of the study. Transcripts and all audio recordings were kept in a secure cloud that was only available to the research team.

RESULTS
1. Available Demographics of the Selected Participants
Most of the selected participants are under the age range of 20-30, under the young adult bracket. (See Table 1) Most are currently employed with at least a year of experience but not more than a five-year experience. Only two of the respondents have an understanding of more than five years. (See Table 2)

2. The challenges and opportunities.
The study found two (2) themes with multiple sub-themes categorized under each general theme that described the challenges and opportunities of respondents.

Table 4. Summary of the Identified Themes

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Theme 1. Challenges Met</th>
<th>Theme 2. Perceived Opportunities</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Subtheme 1.1 Employment Instability</td>
<td>Subtheme 2.1 Professional Development</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Subtheme 1.2 Problems in Time Management</td>
<td>Subtheme 2.2 Work Promotion</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Subtheme 1.3 Financial Status</td>
<td>Subtheme 2.3 Shift of Career Expertise</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Theme 1. The Challenges Met
There were three (3) identified subthemes during the data-gathering process. The following sub-themes were supported by excerpts coming from the participants.
1.1 Employment Instability

The result from the interview shows that some of the nurses taking up an advanced degree have employment instability since they become a consideration on the management's hierarchy and schedule from where they are employed.

"It reflects on my duty schedule shift and conflicts" - Participant F.

"Conflict in the schedule. Low staff ratio and increasing ward census, which is unavoidable at times, require us to have overtime or sometimes to report on duty on the same day of the class schedule, which results in sometimes overlapping on my schedule or missing some classes." - Participant G.

1.2 Problems in Time Management

Some participants verbalized that managing the time in their work with the demands of the advanced degree is tiring. Due to the influx of patients during the COVID-19 era, combined with the influx of requirements from the advanced degree they are taking, makes time management hard for them (21).

"It’s tiresome. Maintaining focus in class is hard when you are tired from duty." - Participant B.

"My schedule at work is one of my obstacles. I need to balance my work and school to be able to attend my class." - Participant D.

1.3 Financial Status

The extra expenses that the participants spent taking up the advanced degree are another challenge they must address. There needs to be more than the current salary status of the nurses in the Philippines at times to cover all their expenses, especially if there are other factors to consider while they are taking up their advanced degree.

"The requirements that must be submitted. As well as a little on finances since part of the income received will have to be set aside for school fees.” - Participant A

"Finances, Problems in duty schedules, and the mass pandemic, covid 19" - Participant B

"...Financial status is also considered as studying will spend money for their projects and other school fees." - Participant H.

Theme 2. Perceived Opportunities

There were three (3) identified subthemes during the data-gathering process. The following sub-themes were supported by excerpts coming from the participants.

2.1 Professional development

Professional development helps career nurses continue to enhance their knowledge and abilities, which is essential to maintaining high learning principles. It also offers sufficient resources (an advanced academic degree) and clearly defined goals. This is one of the most perceived opportunities of the participants.

"I was hoping that I could use my master’s degree in advancing my nursing career by using it as a credential when I apply for a job that requires higher educational attainment." - Participant G.

"Pursuing post-graduate study opens many doors - opportunities after finishing a master’s degree can help you secure a particular role, aid career progression, boost your salary, and enable Ph.D. study if you want to." - Participant H

2.2 Work Promotion

Most of the respondents said during the data-gathering process that taking up an advanced degree would increase the probability that they would be promoted or apply to a desired position they want to.
"I will be given priority in the managerial level and since more hospitals are being foreseen to open in the future." - Participant A

"I will be promoted to a position as a head nurse or working abroad with a higher degree." - Participant C.

2.3 The Shift of Career Expertise

Most participants said that when they successfully obtain the advanced degree they are pursuing, they could shift their career specialization or expertise anytime, as this will be a career opportunity for them.

"I was hoping that I could use my master's degree in advancing my nursing career by using it as a credential when I apply for a job that requires higher educational attainment." - Participant G.

DISCUSSION

The purpose of the study was to explore the different challenges and opportunities perceived by the participants as they take up an advanced degree. In summary, the findings reveal that the perceived chances of the respondents motivate them to finish the chosen advanced degree, despite the challenges they experience.

The demographics presented do not significantly affect the perceived opportunities as these are the main reasons the participants continued their study. The length of service in their workplace also does not affect their motivations to pursue the degree that they have. Most of the reason is for professional development and further open career options related to their career. Various studies indicated that investment in post-graduate education is a crucial strategy for growing the nursing workforce and enables nurses to influence patient outcomes (15,21,27,30,34,39) significantly.

The results of this study are supported by Zahra et al., conducted last 2019, who reviewed the literature on professional development among nurses in Ireland, the United Kingdom, the United States, and Australia (39). They discovered that nurses' primary motivations for engaging in professional development through advanced degrees were boosting their self-confidence and self-esteem and expanding their opportunities for promotion (27,39).

IMPLICATION AND LIMITATIONS

The data from this study can now be used as baseline data to improve practices on decreasing challenges experienced by the nurses. Finding appropriate methodologies to address concerns and challenges may enhance the rate of nurses enrolling for an advanced degree. There's no doubt that the benefit of obtaining an advanced degree is prevalent. Still, multiple challenges make 'advance degrees' a challenge for our nurses in general, especially with the status of the nurses in the Philippines.

The study's limitations must be considered when interpreting the results. Due to time restrictions and the ethics review's recommendation to limit participant exposure to those who could be coping with relevant difficulties, protracted or limited participation is the first reason. Second, triangulation was not used due to the government's mandate since the study was conducted during the COVID-19 Pandemic.

CONCLUSION

The challenges career nurses experience while completing their post-graduate degrees have been brought to light by the research. These challenges, which include a hectic schedule of clinical work and academic commitments, can have a negative effect on job satisfaction and entail the formation of motivating incentives.

On the other hand, the completion of advanced degrees provides career nurses with numerous opportunities for advancement, recognition, and financial rewards.

Future studies on the experiences of career nurses obtaining post-graduate degrees can utilize the study's findings as a
The quality of the advanced degree programs that are offered to these nurses may be improved with further research into the experiences of these nurses.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

The researchers thank Western Mindanao State University, Nursing Graduate Program, for their experience writing this study. The nursing faculties assisted and shared their expertise during the process. The researchers would also like to thank the participants who joined this study. No sponsorship or any source of funding was received for this study.

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