

SHORT COMMUNICATION

Postgraduate Nursing Education in Malaysia and Advanced Nursing Practice: Where Are We and What's Next?

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ABSTRACT

The nursing profession plays a pivotal and indispensable role in the promotion of public health, disease prevention, and comprehensive care delivery to diverse populations. As in other healthcare-related fields, the continuous development of nursing education assumes paramount importance in addressing the myriad challenges posed by the modern era. This paper presents a thorough examination of the historical origins, current status, and future prospects of postgraduate nursing education in Malaysia, encompassing a thorough exploration of its evolution. Furthermore, the study critically examines the interface between postgraduate nursing education and advanced nursing practice within the healthcare landscape of Malaysia. By analysing these dimensions, this paper contributes to a deeper understanding of the strategic enhancements necessary for further strengthening the nursing profession in the country.

INTRODUCTION

The nursing profession in Malaysia plays a vital role in promoting health, preventing disease, and delivering quality patient care. To ensure the competence and preparedness of nursing professionals to meet the evolving demands of healthcare, postgraduate nursing education assumes a critical role. This paper seeks to analyse the current status of postgraduate

nursing education in Malaysia, assess the challenges faced, and propose strategies for the future of advanced nursing practice in the country.

Historical Perspective

Nursing is a major workforce in the healthcare system (Fawaz, Hamdan-Mansour & Tassi, 2018). Preregistration in nursing is at a bachelor's degree in many parts of the world, especially in Western countries. Meanwhile, there are two types of preregistration nursing education (basic) in Malaysia, namely, a Diploma and a bachelor's degree. While Diploma holders account for the majority of Malaysia's nursing workforce, the bachelor's degree programme only began in 2003. In the Malaysian context, the next steps for nursing specialisation are Post Basic in nursing (6-month course) or Advanced Diploma (12-month course), which are also called post-registration programmes in speciality areas. Most of these programmes are offered by the Ministry of Health and some private higher education institutions (Ministry of Higher Education, 2010). To date, diploma holders are the majority in the nursing workforce, while 'fresh' degree holders have limited positions in Malaysian government hospitals (Ellin & Che Hassan, 2022).

Current Landscape of Postgraduate Nursing Education

The postgraduate nursing education landscape in Malaysia has seen significant progress over the last two decades. Three public universities, namely the University of Malaya (UM), Universiti Teknologi Mara (UiTM), and the National University of Malaysia (UKM), led the way by offering specialised programs with a focus on clinical practice. These programs aimed to produce graduates who could apply their expertise in teaching and delivering quality care to clients (Ministry of Higher Education, 2010). Currently, postgraduate nursing education in Malaysia offers a diverse range of specialised programs, including clinical specialties, leadership, and

management. While some programs have gained recognition, others face challenges due to resource constraints and limited faculty expertise. There is a need to align these programs with emerging healthcare trends and technological advancements.

Nurses in Malaysia have ample opportunities to pursue postgraduate education, with both public and private universities offering various master's nursing degrees. The Ministry of Health supports continuing education by providing study leave and allowances to successful applicants. While public universities such as UM, UiTM and UKM began to offer master's in nursing degrees in 2010, other private universities, including MAHSA University College and Open University, are also offering nursing-related courses at the master's level (Ministry of Higher Education, 2010). At the latest, a total of 25 master's and Doctor of Philosophy (PhD) programmes in nursing-related fields are open for applications in the academic 2023/2024 session (Ministry of Health Malaysia, 2023). Public universities such as Universiti Sains Malaysia (USM), International Islamic University Malaysia (IIUM), and Universiti Malaysia Sarawak (UNIMAS) and a few more private universities have been added to the list. Malaysia's Ministry of Health also supports continuing education among Malaysian nurses by providing study leave, allowance, or *Hadiah Latihan Persekutuan* to successful applicants (Ministry of Health Malaysia, 2023).

Despite the progress, it remains unclear to what extent the initial objectives of postgraduate nursing education have been achieved in both the educational and service sectors. However, the increasing number of nursing-related programs available for the upcoming academic session indicates positive growth in the field. Continued efforts to improve and adapt these programs to meet the evolving demands of healthcare will further enhance the landscape of postgraduate nursing education in Malaysia.

Challenges Faced by Aspiring and Practicing Nurse Professionals

Aspiring and practising nurse professionals encounter various obstacles in pursuing postgraduate education. Financial barriers, limited research and publication opportunities, and inadequate recognition for advanced nursing practice are key challenges. The absence of a clear career progression pathway and insufficient support for continuing professional development may also hinder nurses' motivation to pursue higher education.

Despite the availability of Master of Nursing degree programmes, most graduates end up in education and administration roles rather than providing direct patient care. This deviates from the initial goal of producing nurses with expert content to teach and provide clinical care. Encouraging nurses with at least a bachelor's degree to work in government hospitals and then supporting their pursuit of master's degrees in specialised areas could be a step forward where currently limited/no posts for advanced nurse practitioners available (Ministry of Higher Education, 2010; Mohd Ariffin & Che Hasan, 2022). A recent study revealed that Malaysian nurses with bachelor's degree qualifications have significantly higher critical thinking scores compared to nurses with a post-basic/advanced diploma in nursing and certificate/diploma in nursing ($p = 0.003$) (Daphne et al., 2020).

A disparity exists in the clinical functions of nurses providing patient care, primarily based on their qualifications. While U29 nurses, comprising diploma holders with or without post-basic qualifications, carry out clinical functions at 80% capacity, their U41 counterparts, possessing degree qualifications with or without post-basic qualifications, are operating at a capacity of only 70% (Ministry of Health Malaysia, 2021). Additionally, the availability of U41 nurses is severely restricted, with less than ten nurses of this category typically present in each hospital.

Furthermore, the roles of U29 and U41 nurses predominantly revolve around routine care. This situation raises concerns about optimising the utilisation of nursing resources and the distribution of specialised care and advanced roles within healthcare institutions.

Advanced Practice Nurses (APNs), including CNS and Nurse Practitioners, require a minimum master's degree (Wheeler et al., 2020) and play crucial roles in advancing care and research (Ministry of Higher Education, 2010). Master of Nursing degrees in Malaysia should target practice nurses with a bachelor's degree and a strong clinical focus. For instance, IIUM offers Master of Advanced Nursing Practice programs in Critical Care, Emergency Care, and Renal Care, aligning with the Ministry of Higher Education expectations in 2010.

Given the complexities in healthcare, there is a growing demand for nurses with critical thinking abilities and advanced skills to address challenges effectively (Hooper, 2014; Daphne et al., 2020). To meet the expectations of APN roles, developing a practice-focused Doctor in Nursing Practice (DNP) curriculum instead of solely research-focused PhD programmes would be beneficial. This would equip nurses with the necessary competencies to navigate the evolving healthcare landscape successfully.

What's Next for Postgraduate Nursing Education

To enhance postgraduate nursing education in Malaysia, several crucial strategies should be put in place. Firstly, it is important to strengthen the partnership between academic institutions and healthcare facilities to promote research and clinical exposure. Secondly, it is necessary to develop standardised and accredited postgraduate nursing programmes to ensure consistent and high-quality education. Thirdly, it is to reiterate the imperative of addressing a pressing concern to the government regarding the heightened engagement of nurses with

higher educational qualifications in hospital settings, particularly in roles that encompass well-defined clinical functions parallel to those of advanced practice nurses. In this context, there is a call for an intensified focus on research initiatives aimed at scrutinising the effects of such involvement on patient care outcomes. To advance this critical endeavor, it is suggested that research activities be channelled through capstone projects facilitated within the framework of Master of Advanced Nursing Practice programmes and PhD projects that are directly aligned with the enhancement of patients' well-being. This approach promises to provide invaluable insights into the tangible impacts and advantages of integrating highly educated nurses into the healthcare system, ultimately promoting superior patient care and overall healthcare system efficiency. Finally, leveraging technology and incorporating digital health components into the curricula will equip nurses to thrive in the increasingly technologically advanced healthcare industry.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, Malaysia can overcome the challenges and seize the opportunities in postgraduate nursing education to create a robust system that produces highly skilled, specialised, and technologically proficient nursing professionals with the right approach. The future of postgraduate nursing education in Malaysia relies on acknowledging and legitimising the significant role of advanced nursing practice. Healthcare policies should emphasise the contributions of nurse practitioners, clinical nurse specialists, and nurse educators, leading to a more clearly defined career path for nursing professionals. Prioritising advanced nursing practice and investing in nursing education will undoubtedly lead to an improvement in the quality of healthcare services across the country.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

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