

# Challenges Facing Nursing in Saudi Arabia

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## Abstract

The objective of this paper is to review the current literature on the challenges facing the profession of nursing in Saudi Arabia. Google Scholar was searched for relevant literature. The recent studies spanning the past decade were reviewed so as to analyse the evolution of the profession, the challenges that have persisted over the years and potential interventions that may be implemented. Using a search criteria, approximately 400 papers were initially screened and then a shortlisted smaller number were then explored in detail. The research found that some of the key challenges include a poor image of the profession, lack of adequately trained staff in nursing institutions as well as an increasing workload. Issues of retention and training are also elaborated in this paper, coupled with recommendations on how to address the shortage of nurses in the country.

**Keywords:** Nursing, nursing education, Saudi Arabia, Saudization

## Introduction

Nursing is a key pillar of every country's healthcare system. In Saudi Arabia, the Ministry of Health established the General Directorate of Nursing in 1994 in order to ensure that nurses in the country receive high-quality education and training. Over the years, however, there has been a shortage of nurses in the country, with Saudi nationals comprising only 34% of the nursing workforce (Al Yami & Watson, 2014). This is a concerning figure when studied in the context of Saudi Arabia's rising population, 'which is expected to reach 37 million by 2025' (Alsadaan, Jones, Kimpton & DaCosta, 2021:395). This means that the country will also witness an increase in the cases of diabetes and other lifestyle diseases, further highlighting the urgent need to train and retain skilled nurses within the country's healthcare system. This, coupled with the rising life expectancy illustrates the urgent need to employ and retain qualified and trained nurses.

Over the years, the Saudi government has taken several measures, such as its Saudization policy, in order to encourage more Saudi nationals to enter the nursing workforce rather than to continue its reliance on expatriate workers. Although this has resulted in an increase in the number of Saudi nurses in the healthcare system, it is not enough to meet the local demands. Some of the reasons for this shortage of nurses include a poor image of the profession when compared with other professions in the country, as well as poor working environments for nurses (Alsadaan, Jones, Kimpton & DaCosta, 2021). With regard to expatriate nurses as well, there are several concerns such as language and cultural barriers, insufficient work experience and a lack of respect from their Saudi peers. In this context, this paper will examine some of these challenges in detail while also attempting to provide recommendations on how these challenges may be addressed. In the context of Covid, addressing these challenges becomes all the more pertinent, as healthcare systems have been stressed all over the world, further highlighting the need to employ, train and retain medical professionals and especially nurses.

## Methodology

A Google Scholar search was conducted using the relevant keywords. These were the following- Nursing + challenges + Saudi Arabia, Nursing education + Saudi Arabia, Nursing education + challenges + Saudi Arabia, and Opportunities + nursing + Saudi Arabia.

For each search phrase, 100 results were considered (overall 400 results). For these, an initial examination was conducted, using research studies that spanned several decades. Recent studies spanning the past decade were analysed to understand the evolution of the profession, the challenges that have persisted over the years and potential interventions that may be implemented.

The research found that some of the key challenges include a poor image of the profession, lack of adequately trained staff in nursing institutions as well as an increasing workload. Due to this, not only is it demotivating for people to join the profession, but it is also difficult to retain nurses due to the poor working conditions. In addressing these key areas, there is scope to transform nursing in Saudi Arabia to meet the country's Vision 2030 and transform the health delivery system. This is especially important given the country's ageing population with lifestyle diseases such as diabetes on the rise.

## Results

With regard to nursing in Saudi Arabia, the World Health Organization (WHO) suggests that while in 2004 the country had 40 nurses per 10,000 people in the country, this would significantly worsen over the years due to the migration of Saudi nurses to other countries (Lamadah & Sayed, 2014). This poses a concern for the country's healthcare system and for the country as a whole. This section of the paper will elaborate on some of the challenges faced by the profession in the country.

One of the key challenges facing nursing in Saudi Arabia is to do with the retention of staff. There are several factors that contribute to this as well. Poor working conditions play a crucial role in high turnover rates in this profession. Long working hours, an increasing load of patients as well as low pay prove to be demotivating factors for nurses in the country (Lamadah & Sayed, 2014). Research also suggests that the lack of access to affordable child care facilities discourage married women from continuing in this profession. A high turnover rate among this profession proves to be costly for the hospitals and for the entire healthcare system owing to the investment in nurses' training and education. Furthermore, the lack of sufficient nurses adds pressure on the hospital staff, which may contribute to 'an increase in accident rates and absenteeism levels among the nurses who remain' (Lamadah & Sayed, 2014:22). The figure below illustrates the nursing turnover rate in Saudi Arabia compared to that the nursing turnover rate in other developed countries.

One of the other challenges facing nursing in Saudi Arabia pertains to nursing education and training. Saudi Arabia currently has 39 nursing programmes, with the majority of nursing students being female. This is because men cannot be trained in female training facilities. This has further contributed to the shortage of nurses in the country. The negative perception around the profession in the country also plays a role in deterring prospective nurses from enrolling in nursing education and training. It has been found that secondary school students are dissuaded by their parents owing to the profession's image (Alghamdi, et al., 2019). Additional challenges that are attributed to the education and training of nurses in the country include a gap between theory

and practice due to the advances made in medical technology as well as a five-year programme as opposed to a three to four-year training programme the world over. The latter plays a role in dissuading aspiring nurses from pursuing their training in Saudi Arabia. Although there has been a sharp increase in the number of nursing education programmes in the country, teaching staff lack adequate expertise, clinical skills and professional experience as nurses. Thus, this highlights the need to adequately train teachers so that they may provide the requisite and updated skills and expertise to aspiring nurses in the county.

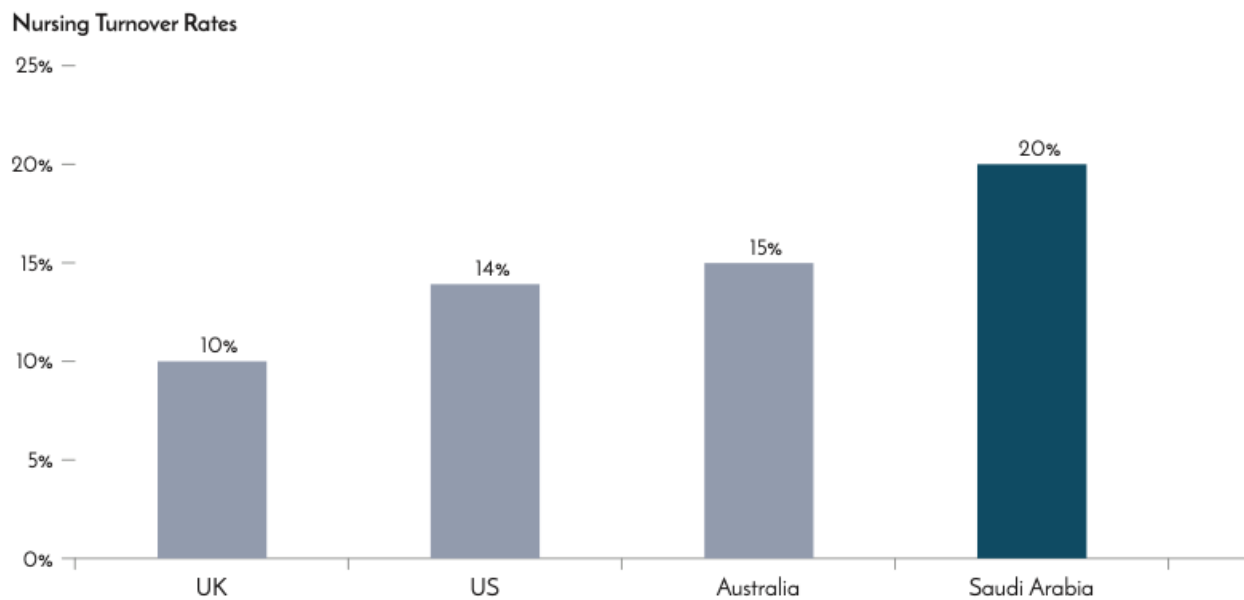


Figure 1: Nursing turnover rates (The Saudi Health Council, 2019:5)

A study of nurse educators also delved deeper into some of the challenges they may face in teaching the nursing programmes in Saudi Arabia. It was found that there is a need to ensure that the curriculum is updated in order to train nurses in the latest technical advancements (Alghamdi, et al., 2019). In addition to curriculum changes, teacher training is crucial since teachers themselves lack clinical experience or are experienced in outdated skills. A lack of focus on practical skills was highlighted as one of the challenges in nursing education in Saudi Arabia (Alghamdi, et al., 2019).

The image of nursing as a profession is another challenge since it influences the number of individuals wanting to be trained in this field. It has been found that Saudi nurses are not trusted by patients who prefer expatriate nurses. In addition to this, Saudi men would also be less likely to marry a nurse (Elmorshedy, AlAmrani, Hassan & Albrecht, 2019). These perceptions prove to be demotivating and discourage women from entering this profession, thereby contributing to the shortage of nurses in the country. Another related challenge is that of a lack of acknowledgement and respect of nurses in Saudi Arabia, which further adds to demoralising nurses in the country (Alghamdi, et al., 2019).

Lastly, since there are still a large proportion of expatriate nurses in the country, there are language and cultural barriers that persist. This is especially because the majority of the patients speak only Arabic while care providers speak in English, thereby causing communication difficulties (Alghamdi, et al., 2019). This then results in Saudi nurses being asked to interpret for

expatriate nurses, thereby adding to their workload (Alsadaan, Jones, Kimpton & DaCosta, 2021).

A mention must also be made of the fact that nursing continues to be a female-dominated profession in Saudi Arabia. However, in order to address the demand for nurses in the countries, it would be beneficial to introduce nursing programmes for men. While a few such programmes do exist, expanding them would provide more avenues for training men in this field.

This section has elaborated on the challenges in nursing in Saudi Arabia. The next section will delve into the recommendations and opportunities that this profession faces.

## **Discussion and Recommendations**

The profession of nursing faces several challenges in Saudi Arabia. This is especially pertinent to understand and address in the context of the country's ageing population and the need to have adequate and competent medical personnel to tend to the sick and elderly. In the context of Covid, healthcare systems have been stressed, and this has further highlighted the need to employ, train and retain medical professionals. Thus, while understanding the challenges is crucial, so too is providing recommendations to address the challenges.

One of the first steps in addressing the challenges that face this profession is that of its image. If the image of nursing is improved, it will attract more people to this field. It has been recommended that partnering with the media to increase awareness about the crucial role that nurses play in society would be a step in the right direction (Alsadaan, Jones, Kimpton & DaCosta, 2021). This may be coupled with highlighting the positive aspects of the profession, such as job security.

In order to address the quality of nursing education and training, the first step is to ensure that teachers have updated skills and clinical experience. Additionally, nursing programmes in Saudi Arabia span five years as opposed to international nursing programmes that span three to four years. Hence, there is a need to streamline nursing education while also ensuring that students are provided with the latest knowledge that bridges the gap between theory and practice. This may be achieved 'through competency-based training, increased exposure to patients and medical simulation, improved pedagogy and teaching materials' (Alluhidan, et al. 2020:7). Providing financial support through increased scholarships may also play a role in attracting more students to this field (Alsadaan, Jones, Kimpton & DaCosta, 2021). There must also be greater collaboration between the Ministry of Health and the Ministry of Education so as to ensure that the education curriculum is in keeping with the demands of the health system (Alluhidan, et al. 2020). Lastly, providing more nursing programmes for men would provide avenues for aspiring male nurses to be trained, thereby addressing the shortage of nurses in the country.

To address the challenge of cultural and social integration of expatriate nurses in the country, it has been recommended that these nurses could be provided with language classes in order to aid in their ability to communicate effectively with their patients (Alsadaan, Jones, Kimpton & DaCosta, 2021). This should also be coupled with training on the country's cultural and social norms, such as gender relations in the country. Training nurse managers to be more sensitive to other cultures and ensure seamless assimilation of expatriate staff may also be encouraged (Marrone, 1999).

Lastly, the issue of retention of staff is perhaps the most crucial. Incentivising skill improvement through enhanced opportunities for career progression may contribute to job satisfaction, thereby contributing to increased retention of nurses (Alluhidan, et al., 2020). In addition to this, nurses' income must be linked with their qualifications and training levels. Further, providing affordable and reliable childcare facilities for the nurses may aid in retaining female nurses who have to manage professional and personal responsibilities (Alluhidan, et al., 2020).

By making the above changes, there is scope to transform nursing in Saudi Arabia to meet the country's Vision 2030. Saudi Arabia's Vision 2030 envisions 'developments in the fields of health delivery systems, nursing, trade, education, communications, science, and technology' (Alsufyani, 2020:1). In order to make such changes and transform the health delivery system, it would be pivotal to bring about improvements at all levels of healthcare - primary, secondary and tertiary. One of the key pillars of this would be to address the demand for nurses in the country, which is expected to double by 2030. In order to ensure that this demand is met, it is critical to address the profession's bad reputation, working conditions, training and skill enhancement needs while also encouraging more men to enter the nursing workforce.

## Conclusion

Despite significant improvements in the health sector over the years, Saudi Arabia must address the challenges faced by the profession of nursing in the country in order to achieve its Vision 2030. This paper has made an attempt to review the most predominant challenges facing this profession while also making recommendations on how these challenges may be addressed. It is important to address these in the context of Saudi Arabia's ageing population, with rising cases of lifestyle diseases such as diabetes. In addition to this, as the country seeks to increase the number of Saudi nurses among the workforce through its Saudization policy, it is essential to address the issues around reducing the dependence on expatriate nurses, the profession's image, reputation, retention and education of nurses as well as the training of teachers in order to ensure that they are up to date on their knowledge and skills regarding the latest medical technologies.

This paper has provided recommendations regarding the challenges as well such as linking career advancement with job performance and certifications, incentivising training, providing language lessons for expatriate nurses so as to reduce the burden on Saudi nurses who have to translate for non-English speaking patients, and media partnerships to highlight the positive side of nursing to rehabilitate its image. These steps must be coupled with enhanced training of nurses to ensure that patients trust the skills and expertise of Saudi nurses. Nursing programmes for men must also be expanded so as to encourage more men to enter this profession and address the shortage of Saudi nurses in the country. Hence, it may be concluded that although there are several challenges faced by the profession of nursing in Saudi Arabia, these may be addressed in order to achieve the country's Vision 2030 goals and transform the country's healthcare system.

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