

Perceptions of Diploma Holder Nurses on Continuing Higher Education: A Qualitative Study

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ABSTRACT

Continuing higher education is essential for nurses to adapt to the evolving healthcare landscape. As an essential part of the healthcare system, nurses should pursue further education to broaden their knowledge, develop specialized knowledge, and become experts in their fields. This will promote their professional development and increase their ability to provide high-quality treatment. However, the percentage of registered nurses (RNs) with a degree in Malaysia is still low. Therefore, this study aims to explore the perception of continuing higher education among diploma-holder nurses in Malaysia. A qualitative study was conducted on nine diploma-holder nurses who had extensive experience in public hospitals in Malaysia. Semi-structured interviews were used to collect the data from October 2023 until November 2023. All interviews were recorded, translated, and transcribed verbatim. Thematic analysis was applied to the transcripts for a comprehensive assessment of the gathered data. Two themes were identified concerning nurses' perceptions of continuing higher education: (1) personal achievement with the following subthemes – a) self-satisfaction and improvement, b) reputation, and c) career pathway, and (2) professional competence in nursing with the following subthemes: a) expanding nursing knowledge, b) self-improvement in patient care, and c) sources of reference. The identified themes on nurses' perceptions of continuing higher education encompass a multifaceted spectrum. Nurses are highly motivated to pursue higher education, at least to the degree level, to provide better care for patients, enhance their competence, expand their knowledge, and elevate the overall reputation of nursing. As health treatments and care evolve, the motivation to advance the nursing profession through higher education becomes increasingly important for nurses.

Keywords: diploma, higher education, nurses, perception, qualitative

INTRODUCTION

Nurses seeking a bachelor of science in nursing courses or above had greater awareness and application of professional values than those with lesser levels of academic or non-academic education (Sibandze & Scafide, 2017). Their research indicates that highly educated nurses will likely accept professional values as essential to providing high-quality nursing care. Continuing education refers to courses specifically designed to assist individuals in further developing their skills and abilities in particular areas of interest or expertise, which are typically offered by universities or colleges to adult learners within the community (Agyepong & Okyere, 2018). Therefore, nursing education must undergo rapid evolution to equip nurses with the necessary skills to effectively tackle issues related to social determinants of health (SDOH), enhance population health, advocate for health equity, new professional roles, adeptly utilise emerging technologies, navigate evolving policy landscapes, and effectively lead and collaborate with professionals from diverse sectors and disciplines (Wakefield et al., 2021).

Continuing higher education is crucial for nurses to adapt to the evolving healthcare landscape, advancing their academic qualifications to bachelor's, master's, or PhD levels, which enhances educational, research,

administrative, and patient outcomes (Anthonysamy & Wan Mamat, 2024). Nursing diploma holders often find themselves at a crossroads, contemplating whether to pursue higher education to enhance their skills, knowledge, and career prospects. This decision is influenced by various factors, including the influence of significant others, such as family members or peers, self-motivation, the reputation of the nursing profession, career improvement, sponsorship, and availability of a course (Anthonysamy & Wan Mamat, 2024). Nashwan et al. (2022) emphasised that nurses and midwives are eager to pursue a master's degree focusing on leadership and management, while Maré et al. (2018) reported that nurses' motivation to advance their nursing profession through higher education has become increasingly important as health treatments and care evolve. Educational values, which are the essential integration and condensation of educational philosophy, directly influence motivation, behaviour, and outcomes in education (Deng & Wang, 2022). Understanding the perceptions of these nurses towards continuing education is crucial for developing effective educational programmes and policies that cater to their needs and contribute to the overall advancement of the nursing profession.

Despite the clear benefits discussed earlier, diploma-holder nurses face several challenges in their pursuit of higher education. Limited opportunities in the nursing system, financial constraints, family responsibilities, limited access to educational resources, age, and experiences are some of the primary obstacles (Anthonysamy & Wan Mamat, 2024). According to Mbombi and Mothiba (2020) and Ng (2015), nurses are concerned by three major impediments in pursuing their studies, i.e., barriers concerning: 1) employment 2) higher education institutions, and 3) personal issues. These challenges can deter nurses from enrolling in higher education programmes despite their interest and recognition of the potential benefits. Addressing these barriers through financial support, flexible scheduling, and online learning opportunities renders higher education more accessible and feasible for diploma-holder nurses.

The perceptions of diploma-holder nurses on continuing higher education are pivotal in shaping the future of the nursing workforce. As a crucial component of the healthcare system, nurses fulfill various roles, including promoting health, preventing illness, and caring for individuals of all ages with disabilities, mental illnesses, and physical illnesses in diverse community settings (Phoon, 2022). Thus, the perception of nursing as a dynamic and autonomous professional group that can effectively manage patients and assume greater responsibilities has been consistently recognised. According to Courtenay (2018), this evolving view highlights the capacity of nurses to operate independently and take on expanded roles within the healthcare system. By understanding how they perceive continuing higher education, educational institutions and healthcare organisations can design programmes that support and encourage nurses to advance their education. This, in turn, can lead to improved patient care, enhanced professional satisfaction, and a more robust and capable nursing workforce. As the healthcare landscape continues to evolve, investing in the education and development of nurses remains a critical priority for sustaining high-quality care and meeting the complex demands of the industry.

BACKGROUND OF THE STUDY

Nursing education in Malaysia is structured under the Ministry of Higher Education (MOHE) and the Ministry of Health (MOH), with 98 public and private institutions offering diploma and degree programmes in nursing (Ministry of Higher Education, 2010). Among these institutions, 88 primarily offer diploma programmes, which contribute significantly to nursing workforce qualifications (Ministry of Higher Education, 2010).

In Malaysia, a high proportion of registered nurses (RNs) hold a diploma compared to those with degrees. Meanwhile, globally, most RNs possess an associate or bachelor's degree in nursing (Ng, 2015). Ng (2015) further emphasised that Malaysia aims to ensure that all RNs have a nursing degree and are appropriately qualified by 2020. This goal compels RNs with diploma qualifications to pursue degrees, prompting questions about why they did not proceed with their post-registration nursing degree. In response to this, MOHE and MOH collaborate to ensure that at least 60% of the country's nurses obtain a professional degree in nursing by 2020 to meet the evolving needs of client care. The Ministries' plan reflects a recognition of the importance of nurses in pursuing higher education.

A local study among 792 participants revealed that 76% of RNs were diploma holders, 2.3% had a degree, and none held a Master's or PhD certificate (Ng, 2015). The low percentage of RNs with a degree persists within the broader RN population, prompting the question of why nurses do not pursue higher education despite the critical role of nursing in providing care and treatment for people. Aiken et al. (2014) reported that the mortality rate decreased from 10% to 7% when patients were cared for by nurses with a degree. Additionally, Blegen et al. (2013) stated that hospitals with a higher percentage of bachelorette nurses experience lower rates of congestive cardiac failure mortality, pressure injuries, and post-operative complications, such as deep vein thrombosis or pulmonary embolism. However, despite the positive impacts on nurses with degrees, there is still a low percentage

of RNs who continue higher education. Therefore, this study aims to explore the diploma-holding nurses' perceptions of continuing higher education.

METHOD

This study applied a qualitative study design to explore the nurses' perspectives on continuing higher education. The qualitative method was chosen because it allows researchers to gain an in-depth understanding of individual experiences and insights (Thomas et al., 2015). The study was conducted among nine nurses from three government hospitals in Malaysia, two in Peninsular Malaysia and one in East Malaysia. By selecting hospitals from both regions, researchers can capture a more diverse participant population and gain insights into the similarities and differences in nursing education, resource allocation, and facilities between the two regions. Prior to the recruitment of participants, the researcher informed and discussed with the nurse leader in the ward regarding the study. The nurse leader then provided the name list of the potential participants. The researcher approached eligible participants using purposive sampling that fulfilled the inclusion criteria: 1) registered nurses with diplomas, 2) having at least three years of working experience, 3) being able to speak either Malay, English, or Tamil, and 4) agree to participate in the study.

Instrument

A topic guide was used during the interview. Examples of the main questions are: 1) What is your view regarding continuing higher education? 2) What do you think of the benefits you get from higher education? and 3) What do you think the patient's perception towards you if you have a higher education qualification? The interview sessions were conducted in the participants' preferred language. As the interviews progressed, the researcher wrote field notes based on each participant's responses. When participants shared their views that were particularly relevant to the research but lacked detail, the researcher made keynotes to seek further clarification later through probing. Probing is a technique used by interviewers to elicit more detailed information from respondents (Polit & Hungler, 1997). In this study, examples of probing questions include: "Can you tell me a little more about reputation?" and "You mentioned about reference centre. Can you explain what you mean by that?"

Ethical Consideration

The research obtained ethical approval from the Kulliyah of Nursing Post Graduate Research Committee (KPGNRC) and IIUM Research Ethics Committee (IREC2023-KON/DOCCN01). Participants were contacted at prearranged times and given a consent form along with a personal information sheet. Before the interviews, all relevant details about the study were explained to them. They were also assured that their confidentiality and anonymity would be maintained throughout the study.

Data Collection

Potential participants were recruited through social media via advertisements posted on each researcher team member's personal Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram platforms. An appointment was arranged for the interview session once the participants contacted the researcher to participate in the study. All interviews were conducted in an informal, semi-structured, face-to-face, and conversational style. Qualitative interviews offer researchers a platform to explore deeply the complexities of social phenomena (Chong, 2022). The interview sessions were conducted privately to ensure confidentiality, with recordings made using audiotape with permission and field notes written during the session. The interviews, which took place at the participants' homes, lasted between 45 minutes to 1 hour. The sample size of the study was determined by data saturation, and the interviews were stopped when no additional information emerged and no new codes could be produced (Guest et al., 2006). The interviews were conducted by the first author, who is trained in qualitative interview techniques. The interviews were conducted in Malay or English to capture the experiences of women from different ethnicities since the interviewer was able to speak and write well in these languages. None of the participants spoke Tamil during the interviews.

Data Analysis

The tape recording was transcribed verbatim after repeatedly listening to the recorded audio to ensure accuracy and comprehensiveness. The analysis of the transcribed data was conducted using thematic analysis (Caulfield, 2022), a method that allows the identification and interpretation of patterns within qualitative data. The initial step of this analysis involved familiarising oneself with the data, which entailed reading and re-reading the transcripts to gain an in-depth understanding of the content. The data were coded, i.e., significant portions of the text were labelled with codes that represent key concepts or ideas. This process helped in organising the data into meaningful groups.

The next phase involved generating themes by identifying patterns and similarities among the codes. These themes were constructed to encapsulate the main ideas that emerged from the data. The subsequent step was to review the themes to ensure they accurately represented the data and were relevant to the research questions. This involved refining and modifying themes as necessary to ensure a coherent and comprehensive representation of the data. Once the themes were confirmed, they were defined clearly to ensure that each theme was distinct and understandable. Finally, the analysis culminated in the production of a report that described the findings in detail. This report included a narrative that explained each theme, supported by illustrative examples and quotations from the data to provide context and evidence. This step ensured that the results were presented in a way that was both informative and engaging, providing a thorough account of the study’s findings (Caulfield, 2022). The data analysis must be conducted in the language spoken by the participants to avoid any confusion or misinterpretation of what the participants were saying. According to Riessman (2008), finding equivalent words in English for referential content is never easy in any translation. Therefore, after completing the analysis, the Malay transcript was translated into English for all selected excerpts, and these were verified by the team members and a certified translator.

Trustworthiness

Dependability and confirmability in this study can be achieved via an audit trail (Korstjen & Moser, 2017). An audit trail was kept to maintain track of the steps and/or changes throughout the processes of data collection, analysis, interpretation, and writing up the findings and discussion. Moreover, discussion with the team members as peer reviewers and examining the process of the research, as well as the data analysis, indirectly improved the rigour of the study. Transferability in qualitative research refers to the extent to which the findings can be applied or generalised to other contexts beyond the specific study setting, in which Lincoln and Guba (1985) emphasised the importance of applicability.

In this study, achieving transferability was facilitated by providing a detailed description of various aspects, such as the study setting, sample size, inclusion and exclusion criteria, and interview procedures. By offering this rich contextual information, readers can better assess the relevance and potential applicability of the study findings to their contexts or similar settings. Another aspect of trustworthiness is credibility, i.e., confidence in the truth or validity of the research findings (Rebar et al., 2011). The audit trail is the record that includes the changes that happened during the study process. An audit trail was used to ensure the credibility of the study. Meanwhile, field notes are applied, in which the researcher notes the conversations and behaviours of the participants that are observed while conducting the study. Moreover, discussion with team members, who are the experts in qualitative research offered valuable insights that improved the credibility of this study.

RESULTS

Nine participants were involved in the study throughout data collection. The background of the participants is summarised in Table 1.

Table 1: Demographic characteristics of the participants

Variable	n	
Age (years)	32-47 (Mean: 37.4)	
Race	Iban	2
	Bidayuh	1
	Malay	4
	Indian	2
Gender	Male	3
	Female	6
Working experience (year)	10 – 22 (Mean: 14.7)	

Two themes were identified related to the nurses’ perceptions of continuing higher education: 1) personal achievement, and 2) professional competence in nursing.

Theme 1: Personal Achievement

This theme emphasises how pursuing further education boosts participants’ satisfaction, confidence, and reputation, contributing to personal growth and opening diverse career pathways. Three sub-themes have emerged from the first theme; self-satisfaction and improvement, reputation and career pathway.

Sub-Theme 1: Self-satisfaction and improvement

Some participants expressed satisfaction and an increase in confidence as a result of their pursuit of study. They also expressed the desire to empower their subordinates and pursue their own personal and professional development.

"...for self-satisfaction because when we have extra knowledge, we will feel satisfied and we can improve ourselves and become more confident." (P1)

"...to become another level for the nursing as well as it is easier for us to empower our subordinates." (P2)

"I can improve my life, myself, and my career pathway." (P9)

Sub-Theme 2: Reputation

All participants emphasised the positive impact of their professional reputation from the perspectives of their co-workers.

"If there are many of us who have a master's [and] PhD in Malaysia, it is true that even the subordinates will automatically feel that we are strong. Our image will rise, our standards will rise, and nursing will become a career that everyone wants...we will do more and the latest research, so if a doctor queries, for example, we use a form for a dressing, we will say that there is research and there are data findings, so he will negotiate with us as a professional." (P2)

"Colleagues or superiors will know that we have a degree so they see us having a certain quality, so that people will look up to us and their expectations for us are higher and they will expect us to have zero medication error, zero documentation error, things like that." (P7)

"But if I have a degree, I will be even stronger, like we do evidence-based research. On the other hand, experience with a qualification is regarded more highly respected by our professionals, a very high trust with us, raises our standards from a nurse to a higher level." (P8)

Sub-Theme 2: Career Pathway

Two participants agreed that pursuing higher education opens up various career pathways for nurses.

"Because I've attended interviews to go overseas, one of the requirements they want the most is to have a degree; if you don't have a degree, it's fine, but if you have a degree, it's more important, and the income is really big." (P3)

"It will take time waiting for time base, so, if already have a degree, it's easy for us to apply for promotions. There are many carrier pathways for example, to open a nursing home or we call it [a] nursing care business." (P9).

"In Malaysia, if a nurse has a degree or master's, they are often moved into an administration or management position." (P5)

Theme 2: Professional Competence in Nursing

This theme highlights the role of higher education in deepening nursing knowledge, enhancing patient care, and positions the bachelors' nurses as trusted sources of reference and mentors. Under Theme 2, 3 sub-themes emerged; Expanding Nursing Knowledge, Expand Nursing Knowledge and Sources of Reference

Sub-Theme 1: Expanding Nursing Knowledge

Some participants agreed that pursuing higher education would broaden their nursing knowledge.

"We will have more, deeper knowledge ... there are also new skills that I know now compared to a basic level which is diploma last time." (P1)

"Our knowledge about the patients and their diseases will be more, and deeper." (P4)

"I would like to advance my knowledge in nursing." (P2)

Sub-Theme 2: Self-Improvement in Patient Care

Two participants felt that they could improve themselves to provide better care to the patients.

“It is very important for us to level up our education level because if we have this degree level, like for me now (doing degree), I can really improve the care for patients” (P1).

“Our knowledge about patients will be more and deeper, and I can give better care.” (P4).

“For myself, I would have more confidence in providing better care for my patients if I had a higher educational qualification.” (P7)

Sub-Theme 3: Sources of Reference

Participants mentioned that they can be a source of reference by having higher education in order to disseminate information to patients or their juniors.

“I can also be a good mentor to my juniors and guide them with my knowledge” (P7).

“With a master’s or degree our skills will be improved then at that particular time, with our skills, we can influence and support our subordinates.” (P9)

“We will be a reference centre; we will be a place for people to get a lot of information so we can teach patients and families about treatment because sometimes they will have some kind of doubt [whether to] ask or not, but when they know we qualify, such as [a] degree, they would have [the] confidence to refer to us.” (P8)

DISCUSSION

The findings of this study provide a comprehensive understanding of the perceptions of diploma-holding nurses in Malaysia regarding continuing higher education. It is evident from the results that pursuing higher education is perceived as crucial for both personal and professional development.

Personal achievement emerged as an important motivator for nurses considering higher education. Many participants expressed that obtaining a degree or higher qualification would provide personal satisfaction and improve self-confidence. This aligns with existing literature that highlights how educational advancement fosters self-improvement and personal growth (Deng & Wang, 2022). Altmann (2012) reported that nurses with higher educational attainment often exhibited elevated levels of motivation compared to those with lower levels of education. The study further highlighted that individuals pursuing advanced degrees, such as a master’s or bachelor’s, articulated a sense of enhanced confidence and personal quality, which they associated with their educational experiences. This perceived personal growth enabled these nurses to envision a transition from clinical practice to other professional areas, particularly within academia or administration (Altmann, 2012).

Similarly, Harrison et al. (2019) explored the impact of educational levels among nurses on patient outcomes. Their findings revealed that hospitals employing a greater proportion of nurses with bachelor’s degrees, coupled with reduced nurse workloads, were associated with improved patient survival rates and favourable cerebral outcomes following in-hospital cardiac arrests. These insights suggest that healthcare systems might benefit from prioritising the recruitment of bachelor’s-prepared nurses and adopting evidence-based staffing strategies, which could also serve to elevate the professional status of these nurses. Additionally, Smith and Turkel (2012) highlighted the growing importance of recognising and respecting the professional dignity of nurses, noting how these factors contribute to shaping public perception and the overall reputation of the healthcare sector.

The participants expressed that their pursuit of higher education was not solely for personal advancement but also for enhancing their reputation among colleagues and superiors, which is critical in a profession where respect and credibility are paramount. This finding is consistent with the work of Courtenay (2018), who argued that the

evolving view of nursing as a dynamic and autonomous profession is partly driven by the advanced educational qualifications of its practitioners. Participants also noted that higher education would enhance their interactions with other healthcare professionals, particularly in demonstrating their expertise and professionalism in the face of scrutiny from doctors and other colleagues. Gorczyca's (2013) findings resonate with this view, indicating that the motivation to engage in continuing education is deeply rooted in a desire to be intellectually and professionally challenged, thereby fulfilling personal learning goals and opening new avenues for professional growth. Additionally, participants articulated that through higher education, they gained the ability to serve as effective mentors to junior colleagues, fostering an environment of continuous learning. They believed that acquiring additional knowledge would elevate the standards of nursing practice and indirectly influence both subordinates and superiors to regard them with greater respect. For those who felt marginalised by their superiors, higher education was seen as a pathway to earning the respect they felt was lacking. This sentiment is confirmed by Nashwan et al. (2022), who suggested that the enthusiasm and willingness to pursue higher education not only enhance the nursing profession but also contribute to nurses receiving the respect they deserve.

Participants expressed that pursuing higher education opened up a range of career pathways, providing them with a broader scope of practice that is pivotal in encouraging nurses to remain in the profession. They emphasised that having a well-defined pathway for professional growth and advancement was crucial in sustaining their commitment to nursing (Msuya et al., 2017). The participants associated opportunities for career development with higher levels of job satisfaction, echoing findings from Wang et al. (2014) that link career progression with increased employee contentment. Moreover, they noted that career development not only enhances their self-esteem and self-efficacy but also refines their skills and deepens their commitment to remaining in the clinical environment (Schoessler & Farish, 2007). Participants also highlighted that higher education accelerates opportunities for promotion, and some envisioned leveraging their advanced knowledge to establish businesses related to nursing home care services. This entrepreneurial aspiration is consistent with Tiliander et al. (2022), who found that nurses are motivated to enhance their skills to transition into roles in research or academia.

The study also found that higher education is perceived as enhancing nurses' professional competence, which is vital in the evolving healthcare landscape. Participants emphasised that pursuing further education would deepen their nursing knowledge. This finding supports previous research by Sibandze and Scafide (2017), who noted that nurses with higher education levels are more likely to accept professional values and are better equipped to provide high-quality care.

Interestingly, participants shared a common goal regarding the expansion of nursing knowledge, expressing a collective desire to pursue higher education as a means to enhance patient care. They emphasised that gaining additional knowledge through higher education positively impacts their ability to provide better care for patients. This sentiment aligns with findings from Nashwan et al. (2022) and Mbombi and Mothiba (2020), who reported that many nurses seek higher education to improve the quality and continuity of care for patients. Participants observed noticeable improvements in the quality of care they were able to provide after furthering their education, as reflected in the study by Agyepong and Okyere (2018). Research consistently supports the link between higher educational attainment among nurses and improved patient outcomes. For instance, Choi et al. (2021) found that a greater proportion of nurses with bachelor's degrees correlates with a reduction in pressure ulcer incidences. Similarly, a higher proportion of nurses with bachelor's degrees is associated lower odds of patient mortality (Haegdorens et al., 2019; Lasater et al., 2021), decreased readmission rates (Lasater et al., 2021; Wiczorek-Wójcik et al., 2022), shorter hospital stays (Lasater et al., 2021), and reduced healthcare costs (Wiczorek-Wójcik et al., 2022). Further supporting these outcomes, Aiken et al. (2014) demonstrated that a 10% increase in the proportion of nurses holding bachelor's degrees was linked to a 7% reduction in patient mortality, emphasising the critical relationship between nurses' educational qualifications and patient outcomes.

Participants expressed a vision of transforming their centre into a reference hub, where both patients and their families could access abundant information, with the goal of educating and addressing any doubts or questions regarding treatments (Mbombi & Mothiba, 2020). This aspiration reflects a commitment to enhancing patient

education and support. However, Aiga and Kuroiwa (2006) caution that without opportunities for ongoing learning and skill development, nurses may experience a decline in knowledge, skills, and overall professional satisfaction. This stagnation can result in low morale, disillusionment, decreased commitment, and a diminishing interest in their work, highlighting the critical importance of continuous professional development to maintain high standards of care and job satisfaction (Aiga & Kuroiwa, 2006).

CONCLUSION

In summary, the participants expressed their desire to have a higher education qualification of at least a bachelor's degree. Most anticipate improving themselves to provide better care for patients and are motivated to be knowledgeable in the nursing profession. Moreover, there is a notable emphasis on improving the public perception and reputation of nurses, underscoring the importance of professional dignity and respect in healthcare. As such, the way nurses are perceived and treated by the public can significantly impact their morale, job satisfaction, and, ultimately, their ability to provide high-quality care. Participants also express a determination to engage in research activities, highlighting the value they place on evidence-based practice and its critical role in informing patient care. Collaboration with other healthcare professionals is seen as essential for fostering a multidisciplinary approach to healthcare, aiming to optimise patient outcomes through shared expertise and knowledge.

LIMITATIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS OF THE STUDY

This study is limited to the nurses who are working in the government hospitals. Thus, future studies should include nurses working in private hospitals and other community healthcare settings. Moreover, none of the participants are new to the profession, i.e., have less than ten years of working experience. Therefore, future studies should aim to incorporate perspectives from nurses who are new to the profession and who have just started working. Examining the views and ambitions of early-career nurses could offer valuable insights into the evolving educational needs and professional challenges faced by the next generation of nursing professionals. This expansion would provide a more comprehensive understanding of the educational aspirations and professional development needs across the broader nursing workforce. Future studies should further explore the barriers and challenges among nurses for not continuing higher education.

IMPLICATION OF STUDY

The findings from this study offer valuable insights into the motivations and perceived benefits of pursuing higher education among nurses. These insights have significant implications for policy and practice in nursing education, professional development, and healthcare delivery. Healthcare regulatory bodies and government agencies should establish policies that recognise and reward nurses with advanced degrees, including offering incentives, such as salary enhancements, career advancement opportunities, and leadership positions for nurses with higher education qualifications (Smith & Turkel, 2012). Moreover, healthcare organisations should foster a culture of lifelong learning and professional development among their nursing staff through the provision of learning resources, mentorship programmes, and opportunities for interdisciplinary collaboration (Smith & Turkel, 2012).

AUTHOR CONTRIBUTION

The authors confirm contribution to the paper as follows: WHWM & MA - study conception & design, KA - data collection & draft manuscript preparation, WHWM & AA - analysis and interpretation of results. All authors reviewed the results and approved the final version of the manuscript.

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CONFLICT OF INTEREST STATEMENT

We declare no conflict of interest. All co-authors have reviewed and approved the manuscript, and there are no financial interests to disclose.

DECLARATION OF STATEMENT

The authors confirm that this study provides an honest, accurate, and transparent account of the reported study. No crucial aspects of the study have been omitted, and nor are there any discrepancies from the original plan.

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