ORIGINAL ARTICLE

Nurse students' views of factors that increase or decrease the attractiveness of the nursing profession

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ABSTRACT

Objective: This qualitative study provides up-to-date knowledge about today's nursing students' views and experiences of factors that can increase or decrease the attractiveness of nursing and presents students' ideas for improving the nursing profession.
Methods: Data were collected from 168 nursing students at the University of Applied Sciences in Finland through an online survey in March 2022. Inductive content analysis was used to analyze the data.
Results: According to the students, the attractiveness of nursing is decreased because nursing is not adequately appreciated, the resources and salary do not match the workload, the working atmosphere can be detrimental to psychological well-being, and there is frequently little support from nurse leaders. Factors that could increase the profession's attractiveness involve advancing nursing's role at the level of individuals, organizations, and society; meaningfulness of nursing duties, influencing one's work; better working conditions and well-being at work; development of nursing leadership; and work and career advancement. Students suggest promoting marketing and the appreciation of nursing, developing leadership and the theoretical and practical competence of supervisors, promoting nurses' daily coping and well-being at work, and raising salaries.
Conclusions: The status and image of nursing must be addressed at the level of individuals, organizations, and society, both nationally and internationally. Nurses themselves must appreciate their profession and feel that they have a possibility to advance their careers.

Key Words: Nursing, Attractiveness, Nurse student, Experience, Appreciation of nursing

1. INTRODUCTION

It is time to examine the future of the nursing profession critically. Safe, high-quality nursing is only possible with adequate nurse staffing. Still, due to several factors, nursing professionals are expected to decline globally in the next few years. With the aging population, the need for services is bound to increase, while a significant part of the workforce will retire or leave the profession. The World Health Organization emphasizes the need to invest in the acceleration of nursing education, so that approximately 6 million new nursing jobs could be created globally by 2030. The number of nurse graduates would need to increase by 8% per year on average.[1] In Finland, where this study was conducted, the shortage of nurses (over 8,000 in 2020 in a country with a population of 5.5 million) is expected to deteriorate by 2030. In 2019, there were only 23,700 applicants to nursing programs, compared to the 29,000 applicants three years earlier.[2]

Nursing has become less appealing due to excessive workloads, prolonged shifts, and stress.[3–6] A study in Finland

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revealed that work demands are frequently experienced as overwhelming and the working conditions as poor.[7] According to the Finnish Institute of Occupational Health, the attractiveness of nursing and nurses' well-being at work is impaired by constant changes, insecurity, and lack of influence.[8] The Association of Finnish nurses has called attention to inadequate orientation, nontransparent decision-making, and a lack of systematic plans to increase well-being at work.[9] Nurses are dissatisfied with their salaries and worry about not being able to cope with the challenges of the profession.[7] Dissatisfaction with salary has also been reported in many other countries.[10] The negative impact of a poor work environment has been documented several times over the years.[11] Factors that have been found to decrease commitment and attractiveness of the profession include limited opportunities for professional development,[12] as well as an unhealthy working environment and bullying,[13] and poor management.[10]

It is essential to consider what factors could help attract and retain nursing professionals.[14, 15] The choice to study nursing is universally motivated by the desire to help those who are ill and suffering,[16, 17] according to the core values of nursing, such as altruism, autonomy, human dignity, integrity, honesty, and social justice.[18] A recent study in Germany revealed that enormous wage raises would be needed to yield higher attractiveness gains than the so-called soft factors, or time for patients and atmosphere within the team.[19] Besides these intrinsic factors, extrinsic factors, for example, job security and employment opportunities[20] and contract duration,[19] influence career choice significantly.

A positive correlation has been established between the image of nursing and the decision to choose a nursing career.[21] A discussion paper of ten Hoeve[22] covering 18 studies revealed that the public image of nursing is diverse and incongruous. According to the paper, nurses' self-concept and professional identity are shaped by the public image, work environment, work values, education, and traditional sociocultural values. The author adds that the public image of nursing is partly self-created by nurses due to their invisibility and lack of public discourse.[22] Individuals with earlier nursing experience and clear career plans are more positive toward nursing than their counterparts.[23, 24] It has been suggested that leaders and organizations could recognize and honestly present their mission and values and inform applicants at the entry stage to avoid organization-employee mismatch.[25]

Nurse retention rates and what is publicly communicated about nurses and their job satisfaction are likely to affect the image and attractiveness of the profession in the eyes of potential recruits. A degree of independence, a suitable

range of challenges, and the ability to influence one's work have been cited as important contributors to job satisfaction.[26, 27] Fostering a positive work environment (factors like nurse participation in hospital affairs, nurse foundations for quality care, good leadership and support, staffing and resource adequacy, and collegial nurse-physician relationships) has also been found to enhance job satisfaction.[28] Good orientation[29] and the development of professional profiles, work allocation, and working conditions[30] have been reported to be of importance. A meta-analysis of 31 studies revealed that job satisfaction was most strongly correlated with job stress, followed by nurse-physician collaboration and autonomy.[31] Some recent literature shows psychological empowerment and job satisfaction to be significantly correlated.[32] A sense of empowerment in decision-making has been found to impact nurses' intention to leave or stay in a given job.[33] In addition, a comparative study involving six European countries showed that students with a high self-assessed level of empowerment had no intention to leave the profession, had a higher level of study achievements, and a higher self-assessed generic competence level.[34]

This qualitative study was conducted in Finland. The study purpose was to describe nursing students' views and experiences of factors that can increase or decrease the attractiveness of nursing, and to describe students' ideas for improving the attractiveness of the nursing profession. The study aims at producing knowledge that can help recognize factors that can increase the attractiveness of the profession.

2. METHODS

2.1 Sampling procedures

2.1.1 *Data collection*

The potential participants, 168 nursing students at the University of Applied Sciences in Finland, received a link to a questionnaire and a cover letter explaining the study's purpose and aims in March 2022. An easy-to-use online survey tool called Webropol was used to collect the data. The questionnaire consisted of 3 background questions (age, gender, and education), 12 quantitative items using the Likert rating, and three open questions. The questionnaire was pretested with four nursing students and two teachers, and deemed as appropriate for this study. The response rate was 56% ($n = 94$). This study reports the responses to the open questions.

Research permission was granted by the Research and Development Manager of the University of Applied Sciences. No ethics committee approval was required because the study only involved students, not clients or patients. Students were informed of the voluntary nature of participation and of the possibility to withdraw at any time in the cover letter. One of the researchers was a teacher at the University of Applied

Sciences, the other was employed by another organization. Neither of the researchers taught the participants at the time of the study.

The students responded to the following three open questions:

(1) What factors, in your opinion, increase the attractiveness of nursing?
(2) What factors, in your opinion, can decrease the attractiveness of nursing?
(3) How would you improve the attractiveness of nursing?

2.1.2 *Data analysis*

The data, 37 pages (Times New Roman; spacing 1.5), were rich; 178 responses to the first question, 171 to the second, and 176 to the last. Each response consisted of several clauses and sentences that reflected nursing students' views and experiences of the attractiveness of nursing as a profession.

Inductive content analysis was used to analyze the data.[35] Answers were sought to the three questions everywhere in the data, not just from the responses to each question. The original clauses and sentences were reduced and grouped into sub-categories representing similar contents. These categories were combined into higher-order generic headings. Last, the generic headings were combined into main categories. During the analysis, most of the themes started to recur, which means that the data became saturated.

2.1.3 *Trustworthiness: Credibility, transferability, dependability and confirmability*

The study context was familiar to the researchers through their earlier nursing experience and through continuous contact with clinical practice in their current professional roles. This makes the study more credible. One could say that the participants and researchers shared the same language. The richness of the data and the extensive use of participant quotes also increase the reliability of the study.

The findings of the study are transferable to similar target groups nationally. We believe the findings to be interesting and at least partly transferable to international contexts as well. The nurse staffing crisis is a global phenomenon. To ensure dependability, the study process was described in detail to allow readers to assess if accepted standards for inductive research were followed and if the study could be repeated. The data is available to other researchers in electronic form (in Finnish). The researchers did not have influence on the data collection stage. However, their nursing background may have affected the interpretation of data and the confirmability of the findings to some extent.[36]

3. RESULTS

The results section starts with participant characteristics, followed by students' views of factors that increase or decrease the attractiveness of the profession. The last part of the results section describes students' ideas for improving the attractiveness of nursing. The findings are illustrated in Tables 1-3 and by participant quotes.

3.1 Participant characteristics

The participants were 94 first, second and third-year nursing students of the University of Applied Sciences in Finland. The majority, 91.5%, were women. The age range was 20-60 years (means 28 years, median 25 years). More than one-third had a Bachelor-level education other than nursing, and almost a third had a vocational qualification, including a few participants with a Practical Nurse (Enrolled Nurse) qualification. Another third had only attended general upper secondary education before enrolling in their current Bachelor-level program. Most students had some nursing work experience through practical training periods and summer jobs; the few students with a lower nursing qualification had years of nursing experience.

3.2 Factors increasing the attractiveness of nursing

As shown in Table 1, six generic categories emerged in this study for factors that can increase the attractiveness of the nursing profession. First, most participants in this study stressed the importance of advancing the role of the nursing profession and clinical nursing at all levels – those of the individual, organization, and society. According to the students, nursing appreciation must start from their attitude towards the profession, work, and colleagues. Appreciation from clients, colleagues, supervisors, and society is also essential. A more positive image of nursing as an effective and useful activity could increase its attractiveness. To quote a participant,

"The appreciation of supervisors towards the health care workers. If you get no appreciation from the supervisors, nobody can appreciate their work, even if they like it. You find your work useless; you don't experience success if society and your supervisors don't appreciate it."

Secondly, most participants brought out the importance of meaningful duties in increasing the attractiveness of nursing. For many participants, meaningfulness appeared to refer to a wide range of duties and variability, while for others, it included the possibility of specializing in various areas of nursing. Being able to help people in concrete terms, with quality care without hurry, was considered meaningful. In the students' own words,

"Variability and diversity of duties, different days."

"The importance of the work, the experience of really helping, really being able to help people, your work has some meaning."

Third, being able to exert influence over one's work increases the attractiveness of nursing, according to the participants in this study. In practice, this could refer to a dialogical work culture, where employees can negotiate their working hours and have influence over the working conditions. The currently favorable employment situation might make this easier to accomplish and increase the profession's attractiveness. The students wrote, for example,

"Flexibility, shorter working hours if necessary."

"Possibility to influence your working hours and work."

Table 1. Meaningful work and good leadership, student views

Generic Category	Sub-Category
Advancing the role of nursing at the level of individuals, organizations, and society	• Appreciation and positive image of nursing in society, its usefulness, and effectiveness • Appreciating oneself and one's work • Appreciation from supervisors, clients, and colleagues
Meaningfulness of nursing duties	• Possibility to specialize • Variable job description, a wide range of duties • Experiencing helping people as meaningful • Meaningfulness of duties • Possibility to carry out high-quality nursing without a hurry • Real, concrete help given to people
Influence over one's work	• Good employment opportunities • Possibility to tailor one's work • Flexible working hours • Possibility to influence working conditions • Dialogical work culture
Better working conditions and well-being at work	• Higher nurse density • Commitment through long contracts • Employer attending to a good working atmosphere • Respecting nursing values in daily practice • Collegiality • Attending to employee well-being • Mentoring for new nurses • Employer attending to individual employee life situations and needs • Optimal recruitment • Increasing staff benefits • A reasonable amount of work • Regular updates for staff • A salary that meets the level of responsibility
Development of nursing leadership	• Genuine interest in employees • Appreciative leadership • Supporting employees • A human and compassionate attitude toward employees • Development of human resources management • Flexibility of supervisors
Work and career advancement	• Possibility to learn new things at work • Possibility to continuously develop in the profession, training offered by the employer • High-quality orientation • Employers recognize and promote employee development • Possibility to advance in one's career • Employer support for further studies • Various employment and expert duties • Work meeting one's education

The participants' fourth theme involved better working conditions and well-being at work. As shown in Table 1, terms of employment, such as reasonable salaries and longer work contracts, were among the factors mentioned as significant for the attractiveness of nursing. In addition, the participants stressed the importance of more intangible features, for example respecting nursing values, collegiality, and mentoring at the early stages of the career. As one of the participants put it, it was important to,

"Promote the well-being of employees, invest in factors that affect well-being at work."

According to the nursing students in this study, the fifth factor that can increase the attractiveness of the nursing profession is the development of nursing leadership. In short, the participants found that flexible, appreciative and compassionate leaders make nursing more attractive. They said, for example,

"Supervisors, who are genuinely interested in their workers, instead of bureaucrats."

"A human and kind attitude towards employees, compassion, and encouragement is needed."

Last, the students in this study found that opportunities to learn, develop and advance at work and in one's career make nursing more appealing. It is important that the work corresponds to the employee's education and that they are allocated a wide range of expert duties. Good orientation, training, and support from the employer are essential for the attractiveness of nursing positions. To quote some of the participants,

"Sufficient orientation for new nurses."

"Making continuous learning possible in the workplace."

"Advancement possibilities, Further education, appreciation of further studies and creating a position that corresponds to the person's education."

Table 2. Lack of appreciation, support and resources as factors decreasing the attractiveness of nursing, student views

Generic Category	Sub-Category
Decreased appreciation of nursing within the profession and in society	• Lack and decline in appreciation of nursing • Poor image of nursing and negative attitude towards nursing in society • Lack of appreciation from leaders • Negative attention in the news and social media • Being a target of constant criticism • The poor reputation of workplaces • Nurses communicating about their negative experiences on the social media
Mismatch salary vs. demanding workload and working conditions	• The mismatch between salary and demanding workload/ education • Cancelling and postponing holidays • Temporary contracts of substitute employees • Physically and psychologically demanding work • Poor working conditions • Increasing responsibilities
The mismatch between staff resourcing and workload	• Low nurse density • Lack of nurses • Excessive workload • Constant extra hours • Constant hurry • Feelings of inadequacy due to high patient numbers • Stress due to responsibility for too many critically ill patients • Burnout due to constant lack of staff
Lack of support and encouragement from leaders	• Bureaucratic management • Lack of empathy • Inflexibility of supervisors • Lack of appreciation for substitutes • Distant supervisors • Inexperienced supervisors
Working atmosphere detrimental to psychological well-being	• Lack of collegiality • Dwelling on negative things • Cynicism among staff • Unfair treatment of students • No room for individuality

3.3 Factors decreasing the attractiveness of nursing

Table 2 shows the five generic categories that emerged in this study for factors that can decrease the attractiveness of nursing as a profession. Not surprisingly, these factors mostly seem contrary to those presented as likely to increase the attractiveness of nursing. According to the participants, the poor image and lack of appreciation for nursing are visible among professionals and society. Negative publicity in the media and nurses' own negative contributions in the social media decrease the profession's attractiveness. The students wrote,

"Talking about a miserable salary and poor management in social media."

"Negative news, a totally bad image, a negative attitude towards nurses and nursing in the news."

"The commotion about nurses' salaries, strikes, guilt-tripping nurses."

Secondly, many participants found that nurses' salaries did not reflect their education or the physically and psychologically demanding work. There was no adequate financial compensation for the problems in the working conditions or terms of employment. Third, according to the participants, staff resourcing not being adequate for the workload was bound to decrease the attractiveness of nursing. Working overtime and caring for large numbers of patients or too large numbers of critically ill patients reduced commitment to the organization and resulted in hurry, stress, and feelings of inadequacy.

To quote some participants,

"Poor salary, lack of appreciation, constant struggling at work, extra-long shifts, hard work."

"Increasing workload, no substitute, under-resourced staff, lack of labor force."

"Fear of mistakes, when you are alone responsible for too many critically ill people."

The two last categories of factors that can decrease the attractiveness of nursing were lack of support and encouragement from leaders and a Working atmosphere that was detrimental to psychological well-being. According to the participants, a lack of empathy, appreciation, and flexibility in nurse leaders can decrease the attractiveness of nursing. Inexperienced leaders may also fail to respond to staff needs. In the words of the participants,

"Inflexible supervisor, who is never seen in the ward."

"The supervisor does not know the employees by name and does not appreciate their competence or hard work."

"No attention paid to coping problems; you always have to overextend yourself."

A poor working atmosphere decreases the work motivation and appeal of nursing. It was found to involve a lack of collegiality, for example, jealousy, competition, and criticizing colleagues behind their backs. The habit of dwelling on negative things and cynicism were also examples of a poor working atmosphere. To quote the students,

"Lack of sensitivity, cynicism, indifference towards colleagues and patients, when you get too exhausted."

"Lack of collegiality, jealousy, and competition, bad things that mar your coping, make you enjoy your work less."

3.4 Improving the attractiveness of nursing

Last, the participants' ideas on improving nursing attractiveness are presented under four categories in Table 3. The participants stressed the importance of promoting marketing and the appreciation of nursing and nursing professionals. Nursing should be presented more realistically, as useful and effective activity, for example, through real-life case studies and social media videos targeted at young people. The appreciation of the work needs to be enhanced in workplaces as well, among the nursing professionals and their supervisors. In the participants' own words,

"More positive talk, marketing, real-life stories, and good experiences."

"Giving young people a more positive image of the profession is important and rewarding work."

"Real-life discussions on success situations, for example, podcasts."

According to the study participants, the development of leadership and the theoretical and practical competence of supervisors can also increase the attractiveness of the profession. Leaders' physical presence in the workplace, joint counseling supervision for leaders and staff, and a more compassionate and appreciative leadership through dialogic and empathy training were suggested. In addition, the participants wrote,

"The leaders should join the nursing work to see what nursing is today."

"Teaching compassionate leadership, empathy, emotional intelligence skills and a kind and human attitude towards employees."

Finally, the promotion of nurses' daily coping and well-being at work and a higher salary were suggested to increase nursing attractiveness. A wide range of practical suggestions has been listed in Table 3. They include, for example, good

orientation, higher nurse density, and efforts to improve the working atmosphere and sense of community. A higher salary was mentioned in most responses. To quote some of the students,

"It is important that problems in the working conditions are recognized, developing the conditions, talking about the ele-

phant in the room when necessary."

"Giving long-term substitutes a permanent position, they should not just renew the contract year after year."

"Higher salary, happier people, better commitment to work."

"Extra salary for specialist duties."

Table 3. Nursing students' suggestions for improving the attractiveness of nursing: Improving marketing, leadership, daily coping and pay

Generic Category	Sub-Category
Promoting marketing and the appreciation of nursing and nursing professionals	• Communicating about the effectiveness and usefulness of nursing to clients and society • Using real-life positive client and nurse cases to communicate about nursing • A more realistic image of nursing and videos on daily nursing practice on social media • Marketing targeted at youth • Increasing appreciation of nurses among supervisors • Increasing appreciation of nursing among nursing staff
Developing leadership and the theoretical and practical competence of supervisors	• Enhancing leaders' professional development • Promoting compassionate and appreciative leadership • Creating a more flexible system for planning shifts • The physical presence of leaders • Training for leaders on how to support staff coping and well-being • Training for leaders on dialogic and empathy skills • Development of joint counseling supervision for staff and supervisors
Promoting nurses' daily coping and well-being at work	• Better working conditions • Adequate orientation • Influence over one's shifts • A variety of work opportunities according to workability • Understanding supervisors in stressful situations • Permanent positions for long-term substitutes • Securing adequate staff resources • Higher nurse density • Investing in a better sense of community and working atmosphere • Clearer and more uniform practices • Dialogue on workplace problems • Better staff benefits • Treating nursing students fairly alongside nurses
Optimal salary raise	• Higher salary to match the demanding and responsible work • Extra compensation for further training • Extra compensation for specialist duties • Higher on-call compensation

4. DISCUSSION

This qualitative study in Finland portrays the image of nursing among students who already have some practical nursing experience. According to the results, the nursing profession can be attractive if the work is meaningful and appreciated and the nurses receive fair compensation.

According to the participants, the current lack of appreciation for nursing occurs at many levels; at the levels of society, organizations and individuals. In the student's experience, the public image of nursing in the media still seems relatively negative and unrealistic. It is disturbing that feelings of not being supported or appreciated by supervisors or colleagues

seem so common. Instead of just looking for external culprits, some participants in this study consider the negative attitudes of nurses themselves to be part of the problem. Earlier research confirms the significance of image and general appreciation for the attractiveness of nursing.[21] Some researchers speak of respect – recognizing, appreciating, and conveying the value of a person,[37] which, together with supportive supervisor relations, is positively related to nurse retention.[38] Appreciation has been found to affect well-being at work by increasing work motivation, job satisfaction, and commitment. Central to experiencing appreciation in the work community are mutual respect and trust, acceptance of diversity, and positive feedback.[39] Importantly, there is

some evidence that appreciation is the most important factor influencing job satisfaction[40] and that the team atmosphere and having time for patients may matter more than material rewards.[19]

The students in this study suggest enhancing nursing appreciation in society by increasing realistic information about nursing. For example, this image could be accomplished through informative videos or real-life case studies on social media and by sharing clients' positive experiences of effective nursing care. At the level of organizations, the students emphasize appreciation and support from their colleagues and leaders and suggest psychological training for leaders to increase their interpersonal skills. Research confirms that empowering leadership practices, for example, transformational leadership, can influence nurse retention and work engagement.[6, 41, 42] Some researchers, for example Schuck[43] and de Zulueta,[44] have strongly advocated compassionate leadership, which emphasizes presence and empathy and goes beyond traditional leader-follower roles by seeing leadership as a dynamic shared or distributed process. Last, according to some participants in this study, nurses should consider the impact their negative attitudes have on the image and appreciation of the nursing profession. According to ten Hoeve,[22] nurses should make a greater effort to increase their visibility and communicate their professionalism to the public through social media and by making better use of strategic positions, such as case manager, nurse educator, or clinical nurse specialist. The public needs to be informed of the existence of nursing research and its importance to patient health. Ten Hoeve[22] further suggests interprofessional learning, peer consultation, international collaboration, and active participation in representative bodies and unions.

As in other studies,[16, 17] the desire to help patients was a major factor that made nursing an attractive and meaningful choice. In addition, the participants in this study appreciate a degree of freedom; the possibility to learn more, develop and progress in their careers; the chance to engage in dialogue with leaders and exercise influence over their working conditions. These factors have been associated with the attractiveness of nursing and nurse retention earlier.[28, 31]

As earlier research,[7, 10] this study also highlights the importance of a fair salary to attract a new workforce. The issue of fair compensation concerns many other healthcare professions as well.[45] According to the participants, improvements in resources, working conditions, and practices could also promote nurses' coping and well-being at work, making the profession more appealing to the potential workforce.

Considering the future of the profession, many questions await answers. For example, is there or will there be a universally greater emphasis on professionalism, competencies, and technical skills, and how will this affect the attractiveness of nursing? Recent research shows a shift towards a more professional and technical view of nursing instead of one predominantly based on an altruistic vocation.[23, 24] Secondly, to what extent are the attractiveness of nursing and nurse retention based on the same factors, and how could this information be useful? Third, would it be realistic and helpful to have leaders and organizations openly present their mission and values as suggested in a study[25] and inform the applicants at the entry stage to avoid organization-employee mismatch?

5. CONCLUSIONS

According to nursing students, the attractiveness of nursing can be increased by addressing several factors associated with the profession, education, and healthcare organizations. Students' suggestions include enhancing the appreciation of the profession at the level of individuals, organizations, and society; ensuring the meaningfulness of the duties; increased influence over one's work; better working conditions and well-being at work; developing nursing management/leadership; and improved work and career advancement. Greater effort is required to deal with the decreased appreciation of the nursing profession in society and among professionals. Both national and international action is called for to address the mismatch between the workload and resources and to ensure fair employment conditions and salary.

CONFLICTS OF INTEREST DISCLOSURE
The authors declare they have no conflicts of interest.

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