

# Choosing Nursing as a Career at a University in the Western Cape

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## Abstract

**Background:** To achieve universal health coverage, there is a need to strengthen nursing education to attract nursing students to the profession. Understanding the factors that influence choosing nursing as a career is key to recruitment and retention in nursing programs.

**Aims and objectives:** The aim of the study was to investigate the reasons for choosing nursing as a career and the intrinsic and extrinsic factors which influenced this career choice in first year nursing students at a selected school of nursing at a university in the Western Cape.

**Methodology.** A descriptive survey with a self-administered questionnaire was conducted with 279 first-year nursing students. The questionnaire had 42 items and was based on a literature review of factors influencing nursing choice. Data was collected after class time, captured and analysed in SPSSv28. Descriptive statistics were used to describe the reasons for choosing nursing as a career and the factors influencing this choice. Chi-square and Mann-Whitney U tests were conducted to test the hypothesis of the association between gender and prior exposure on choices.

**Results.** The study found that altruism was the main reason that first year students chose nursing as a career. Males, however, rated job stability before altruism. Prior exposure also to nursing had a positive impact on choosing nursing as a career.

**Conclusion.** Findings support the importance of recruiting new nursing students with core values of altruism and the desire to help others.

**Keywords:** Career choice; first-year nursing students; prior exposure; nursing education; recruitment; attrition in nursing; image of nursing



## 1. Introduction and background

There is continued pressure to recruit new nursing students globally due to the ongoing shortage of nurses and the growing demand for nurses across the world (Messineo et al., 2019). However, recruitment needs to align with the goals of access to higher education of good quality, participation, equity, quality and efficiency (Matlakala, 2017; Rispel, 2015). Nurses are the first contact for patient care, and they require a mix of higher order thinking skills, empathy and caring for their patients. It is therefore important to have compassionate nurse graduates, and this highlights the need to recruit students suited to the nursing profession.

Many intrinsic and extrinsic factors may influence the choice of nursing as a career. Intrinsic reasons for choosing nursing as a career include the desire to care for or help others (altruism or selfless desire) (van der Wath & van Wyk, 2020), self-sacrifice to the human service, acquiring knowledge of nursing, love of nursing and work associated motives (Jirwe & Rudman, 2012; Messineo et al., 2019; Price et al., 2013; Ten Hoeve et al., 2017; Ten Hoeve et al., 2018).

Extrinsic factors can either encourage or deter the choice to do nursing. Firstly, previous experience with nursing can both discourage and encourage choosing nursing (Haron et al., 2014). The positive portrayal of nursing during the global Covid-19 pandemic attracted more people to nursing (Reed et al., 2022), while the reports of high burnout and concerns for safety risks acted as a deterrent (Bai et al., 2021; Bolarinwa et al., 2023). Other prior exposures to nursing include experiences of caring for an ill person such as a relative (Wu et al., 2015), exposure to a nurse (as a role model) when one was ill, and work experience in a hospital prior to enrolling in a nursing programme (Eick et al., 2012; Kukkonen et al., 2016; Ten Hoeve et al., 2017).

Secondly, the extrinsic influence of a relative on the student's career choice can be positive through encouragement (Natan & Meir Oren, 2011) or being a role model (Ten Hoeve et al., 2017), which results in family members wanting to follow in their footsteps (Kabanya & Mwaniki, 2016). Historically, however, parents have tended not be supportive of their children's decision to choose nursing (Price et al., 2013). In particular, reports suggest that fathers of male children have traditionally been opposed to their sons pursuing nursing as a career (Pham, 2011). These attitudes may have changed over time.

The third extrinsic factor is the image or reputation of nursing may influence the ability of nursing education institutions to attract and retain school leavers suitable for nursing (Godsey et al., 2020). An example in South Africa is the lack of financial recognition of nursing as a profession. Nurses receive lower remuneration compared to other health professionals (Mumbauer et al., 2021), which diminishes the image of nursing and its appeal as a career choice.

## 2. Aim and objectives

The aim of the study was to investigate the reasons for choosing nursing as a career at a selected school of nursing at a university in the Western Cape. The objectives were to describe the intrinsic and extrinsic factors which influenced this career choice in first year nursing students and to identify the main reason given by male and female first year students for choosing nursing.

## 3. Research method and design

### **Setting**

The research setting, a nursing school at a university in the Western Cape Province of South Africa, was chosen as it was the largest nursing school in the province at the time. The university offers a Bachelor of Nursing degree and is one of three universities in the Western Cape that offer an undergraduate Bachelor of Nursing degree programme.

### **Design**

A quantitative survey was conducted using a self-administered questionnaire.

### **Population and Sample**

The study population was first-year nursing students admitted in the year 2017 (n=279). Inclusion criteria were first time first year students. First year students were deliberately selected to avoid bias from any potential memory influence from being a nursing student. Total sampling was done as all first-year students were approached to participate in the study.

### **Instrument**

A questionnaire was developed to determine the reasons and the factors influencing the choice of nursing as a career. The questionnaire development was based on a literature review on the factors that influence students' choice to pursue a career in nursing (Cowan & Johnson, 2011; Dunnion et al., 2010; Natan & Becker, 2010).

The questionnaire comprised 42 Likert scale questions (1=Strongly disagree, 2=Disagree, 3= Neutral, 4= Agree, 5=Strongly Agree) in five sections:

1. Demographic information.
2. Assessment of students' prior exposure to nursing.
3. Intrinsic factors that could influence first-year nursing students to choose nursing as a career.
4. extrinsic factors influencing nursing students to choose nursing as a career.
5. Ranking three reasons according to their importance for their choice of nursing as a career.

Face validity was established through consultation with nursing experts. Content validity was established against the literature. Reliability scale analysis was conducted and a pretest with 10 students were done to finalise the wording of the questionnaire, and they were excluded from the study.

### **Data collection**

Ethics approval was obtained from the university research ethics committee and permission to conduct the study was obtained from the School of Nursing and the university registrar. Data were collected by the first author, a staff member at the time, but not teaching in the first year. Informed consent was obtained from the respondents after an explanation of the study. Anonymity and voluntary participation were explained and assured. With the permission of the first-year lecturers, data were collected from all students present in the teaching venue at the end of the lecture periods.

### **Data analysis**

The Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) version 28 was used for data capture and analysis. A simple descriptive statistics method was used to describe and summarize the demographics and the ranking of reasons for choosing nursing. Prior exposure to nursing and internal and external factors were reported, using frequencies and percentages of the agreement with different statements. After initial analysis, the Likert scale was recoded into a dichotomous scale of agree (containing both agree, and strongly agree) and disagree (a combination of strongly disagree, disagree and neutral) to enable frequencies of factors to be reported. Chi-square Independent Samples tests and Mann-Whitney U tests were conducted to test the associations between gender and prior exposure and reasons for choosing nursing. In testing the reliability, the Cronbach  $\alpha$  for intrinsic factors was  $>.80$  which is statistically acceptable, and for the extrinsic factors the range was from  $.60$  to  $.70$  which was deemed an adequate reliability (Pallant, 2013).

## **4. Ethical approval**

Ethical approval of the study was obtained from the Human Social Science Ethics Committee of the university (Ethical Clearance number: HS 17/5/13).

## **5. Results**

### **Sample realization**

All 279 first year nursing students were invited to participate in the study. At the time of data collection, 52 students were not present; 227 questionnaires were distributed, and 224 questionnaires were returned. On cleaning, six (6) questionnaires were incomplete and excluded in the final analysis, resulting in a total of 218 questionnaires (total response rate = 78.19%) included for analysis.

## Demographics

Most of the respondents were female (179, 82.1%), with only 39 male respondents (17.9%). Nearly all respondents were younger than 21 years of age with an average age of 20.5 years ( $\pm 3.9$ ). The age range was from 18 to 44 years. The male respondents were slightly younger than the female respondents (19.9,  $\pm 1.5$  compared to 20.6,  $\pm 4.3$ ), but none of the demographic data differed significantly by gender. Most were single (211, 96.8%), with only seven partnered respondents (7, 3.2%). Most of the respondents were South African (200, 91.7%), with 18 (8.3%) international students. Just over half of the respondents were from the Western Cape (128, 58.7%), followed by respondents from the Eastern Cape (52, 23.9%), Gauteng (16, 7.3%), and 18 (8.3%) from the rest of the provinces. Most of the respondents (136, 62.4%) were first time entry students, with 36 (16.5%) reporting that they were previously working. Eighteen (18, 8.3%) of respondents had engaged in other tertiary studies before entering the nursing programme (Table 1).

**Table 1:** Demographics

Demographics	Total (n=218)	Male (n=39) (17.9%)	Female (n=179) (82.1%)	Test ( $\chi^2$ )	p-value
<b>Marital status</b>					
Single	211(96.8%)	39(100%)	172(81.4%)	1.809	.405
Partnered	7(3.2%)	0(0.0%)	7(3.9%)		
<b>Nationality</b>					
South African	200(91.7%)	37(94.9%)	163(91.1%)	0.614%	.433
Other	18(8.3%)	2(5.1%)	16(8.9%)		
<b>Province of origin</b>					
Western Cape	128(58.7%)	18(46.2%)	110(83.8%)	13.602	.090
Eastern Cape	52(23.9%)	16(41.0%)	36(21.8%)		
Gauteng	16(7.3%)	1(2.5%)	15(8.4%)		
Other or not stated	22(10.1%)	4(10.2%)	18(10.1%)		
<b>First entry</b>	136(63.8%)	25(64.1%)	111(62.0%)	9.309	.930
<b>Activity prior to nursing</b>					
School	136(63.8%)	25(64.1%)	111(62.0%)	2.391	.793
Working	36(16.5%)	5(12.8%)	31(17.3%)		
Tertiary study	18(8.2%)	2(5.1%)	16(8.9%)		
Other	22(10.1%)	6(15.4%)	16(8.9%)		

*Chi-square Independent Samples test (Fisher Exact Tests where appropriate) ( $\chi^2$ ). Significant at  $p < .05$*

## Prior exposure to nursing

To assess the possible influence of prior exposure to nursing, respondents were asked to identify their exposure to nursing before commencing the nursing programme, with reference to prior work in health care and family in the nursing field (Table 2). Most respondents reported that they knew someone who was working as a nurse (192, 88.1%). There were differences in prior exposure to nursing between the gender groups, with a

significantly higher percentage of female than male respondents having had prior exposure to healthcare training (44, 24.6% vs. 4, 10.3%,  $X^2=3.8$ ,  $p=.05$ ). Only female respondents reported previous employment in the healthcare system ( $X^2=5.3$ ,  $p=.017$ ).

Of the 192 respondents who knew someone working in nursing prior to choosing to study nursing, most reported that they had a family member in the profession (with 54(28.1%), followed by a friend (34,15.6%), a father (3,1.4%) or an uncle (2, 0.9%). Male and female respondents reported that the person in nursing to whom they were most exposed was an aunt [male 10(25%).

**Table 2: Nursing students' prior exposure to nursing**

Prior exposure to nursing	Total (n=218)	Male (n=39)	Female (n=179)	Test ( $X^2$ )	p-value
Prior healthcare training	48 (22.0%)	4 (10.3%)	44 (24.6%)	3.8	.050*
Prior employment in healthcare	22 (10.1%)	0(0.0%)	22 (12.3%)	5.3	.017*
Prior experience of being looked after by a nurse when you were sick or ill	130 (59.6%)	26 (66.7%)	104 (58.1%)	1.0	.323
Prior experience of being looked after a relative or a friend who was sick	178 (81.7%)	32 (82.1%)	146 (81.6%)	0.005	.943
Knowing a person who is working in the healthcare system as a nurse?	192 (88.1%)	34 (87.2%)	158 (88.3%)	0.04	.790

*Chi-square Independent Samples test (Fisher Exact Tests where appropriate) ( $X^2$ ). \*Significant at  $p<.05$*

### The main reason for choosing nursing as career

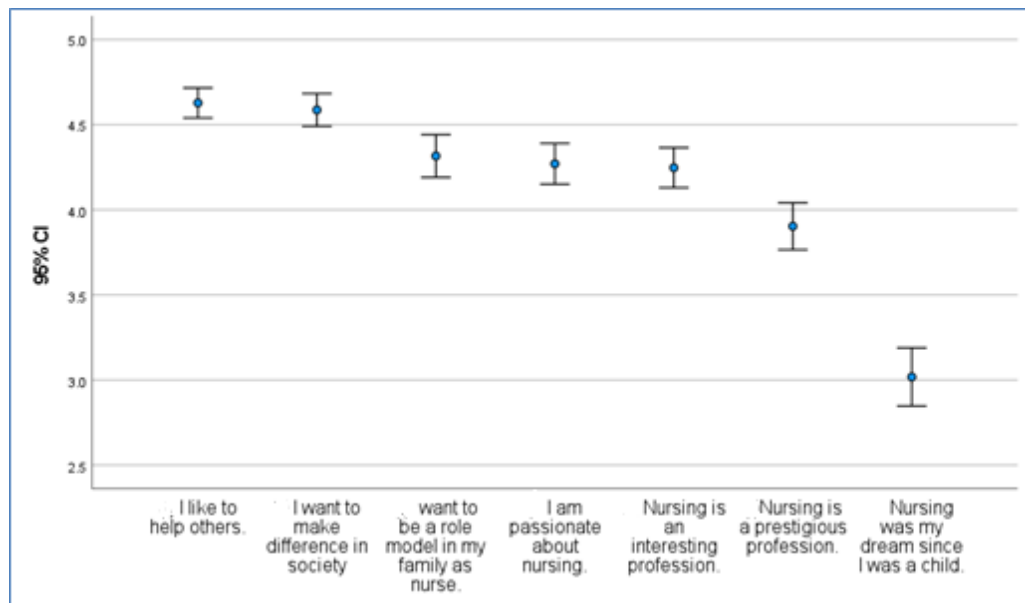
The respondents were asked to rank the three main reasons out of a total of 14 possible reasons that influenced their decision to enter nursing as a career in order of importance (1=most important), (2=second most important) and 3=third most important). Overall, "I have a passion for nursing" (71, 32.6%) and "I like to help others" (38, 17.4%) were ranked as the first and second reasons for choosing nursing as a career (Table 2). However, there was a significant difference in the ranking of "I have passion for nursing" between male and female respondents, with fewer male than female respondents ranking this as the first reason for choosing nursing (28% vs 62.7%,  $X^2=13.8$ ,  $p<.001$ ). The reason for choosing nursing ranked third was "Nursing is a stable job" (27, 12.4%), with male respondents ranking this significantly higher than female respondents (55.5% vs 29.8%,  $X^2=7.2$ ,  $p=.027$ ) (Table 3).

**Table 3: Main reasons for choosing nursing as a career**

Reason for choosing nursing as a career (n=218)	1 <sup>st</sup>	2 <sup>nd</sup>	3 <sup>rd</sup>	Total (%)
Passion for nursing	71 (32.6%)	34 (15.6%)	22 (10.1%)	127 (58.0%)
Helping others	38 (17.4%)	39 (17.9%)	31 (14.2%)	108 (49.6%)
Nursing as a stable job	27 (12.4%)	26 (11.9%)	22 (10.1%)	75 (34.4%)
Nursing as a steppingstone	15 (6.9%)	10 (4.6%)	16 (7.3%)	41 (18.9%)
Making a difference in society	14 (6.4%)	34 (15.6%)	17 (7.8%)	65 (29.9%)
Opportunities in the nursing field	6 (2.8%)	27 (12.4%)	25 (11.5%)	58 (26.7%)

**Factors influencing reasons for choosing nursing.***Intrinsic factors*

Respondents were asked to rate their level of agreement with several intrinsic factors identified in the literature that could influence choosing nursing as a career choice. “I like to help others” and “I like to make a difference in society” had significantly higher level of agreements than the rest of the statements (Figure 1) and “Nursing was a dream since they were a child” had a significantly lower rating (Figure 1),

**Figure 1: Intrinsic factors**

Female respondents had significantly higher level of agreement than male respondents with all the statements, except for “Nursing as a dream since childhood”, which did not reach significance (Table 4).

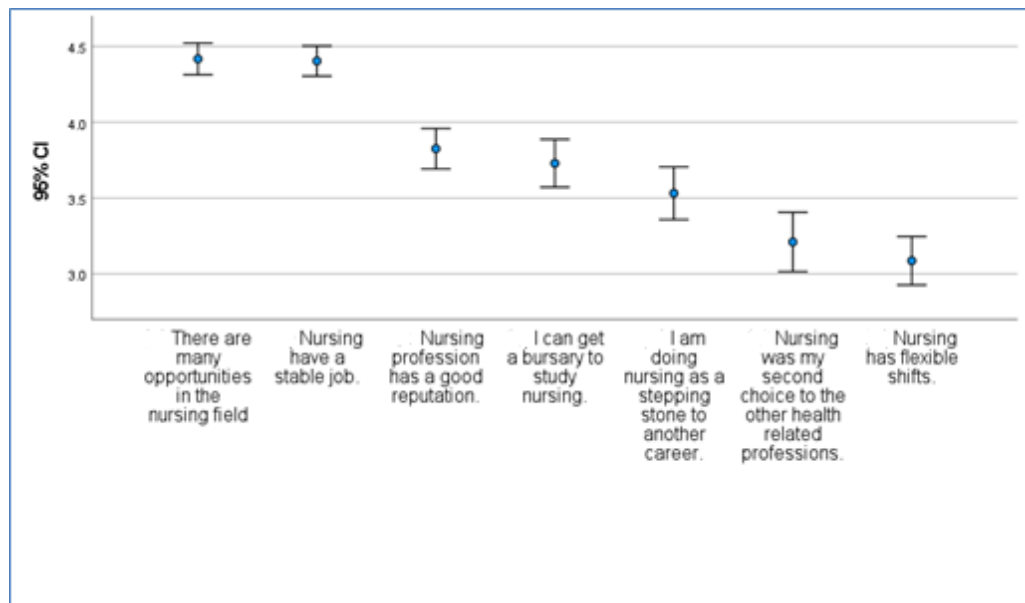
**Table 4: Intrinsic factors importance in choosing nursing**

Internal factors	All (n=218)	Male (n=39)	Female (n=179)	Test (U)	p-value
Helping others	4.63 (0.66)	4.28 (0.86)	4.70 (0.59)	3.7	<.001*
Making a difference in society	4.59 (0.72)	4.28 (0.97)	4.65 (0.64)	2.8	.004*
Being a role model in my family as nurse	4.32 (0.94)	4.05 (0.89)	4.37 (0.94)	2.5	.011*
Passionate about nursing	4.27 (0.90)	3.69 (1.08)	4.40 (0.8)	4.2	<.001*
Nursing is an interesting profession	4.25 (0.88)	3.82 (1)	4.34 (0.83)	3.33	<.001*
Nursing is a prestigious profession	3.90 (1.03)	3.67 (0.96)	3.96 (1.04)	2.1	.040*
Nursing as a dream since childhood	3.02 (1.28)	2.77 (1.33)	3.07 (1.27)	1.51	.131

Mann Whitney U test (U). \*Significant at  $p < .05$

### Extrinsic factors

Respondents were asked to rate their level of agreement with several extrinsic factors identified in the literature that could influence choosing nursing as a career choice. These factors had generally lower levels of agreement than the intrinsic factors. “There are many opportunities in the nursing field” and “Nursing provides a stable job” had significantly higher levels of agreement than the other factors (Figure 2) with “Nursing has flexible shifts” having significantly lower levels of agreement (Figure 2).

**Figure 2: Extrinsic factors**

The only significant differences between male and female respondents' levels of agreement with extrinsic factors were that male respondents rated “Nursing was my



second choice to other health related professions” significantly higher than female respondents (3.67 (1.34) vs 3.11 (1.47),  $U=2.24$ ,  $p=.026$ ) (Table 5).

**Table 5:** Extrinsic factors

Extrinsic factors	All (n=218)	Male (n=39)	Female (n=179)	Test (U)	p-value
Opportunities in the nursing field	4.42 (0.78)	4.54 (0.72)	4.39 (0.79)	1.12	.264
Nursing provides stable jobs	4.40 (0.75)	4.36 (0.67)	4.42 (0.76)	0.78	.435
The nursing profession has a good reputation	3.83 (1.00)	3.82 (0.94)	3.83 (1.01)	0.23	.815
Bursaries to study nursing	3.73 (1.18)	3.69 (1.12)	3.74 (1.19)	0.40	.687
Nursing as a stepping stone to another career	3.53 (1.30)	3.85 (1.18)	3.46 (1.31)	1.16	.103
Nursing as s second choice to the other health related professions	3.21 (1.46)	3.67 (1.34)	3.11 (1.47)	2.24	.026*
Nursing has flexible shifts	3.09 (1.19)	3.15 (1.16)	3.07 (1.20)	0.33	.742

*Mann Whitney U test (U). \*Significant at  $p < .05$*

## 6. Discussion

One of the most important intrinsic reasons for choosing to study nursing is the desire to care for or help others (Geok Lim & Bin Muhtar, 2016; Jirwe & Rudman, 2012; van der Wath & van Wyk, 2020). Our study found that altruism or the desire to help others was rated as most important as a motivation for choosing nursing, although were differences between the male and female respondents. This was followed by being “passionate about nursing and liking to help others”. Other studies have also reported that this factor has been a major reason for choosing nursing. A study with first year Swedish nursing students reported that “Genuine interest” ranked highest (Jirwe & Rudman, 2012) and in Malaysia the ability to help others was the main reason for choosing nursing (Geok Lim & Bin Muhtar, 2016). A more recent in a study in Indonesia found that students were primarily influenced by a desire to serve others, the impact on others and a personal calling to nursing (McKenna et al., 2023). A study in South Africa with male nursing students found that male students also rated making a difference in society and a desire to help people as the most important reasons for their choice of nursing as a career (Noordien et al., 2020).

“Nursing being considered a stable job” was ranked by respondents as the third main reason influencing their career choice in nursing, especially among male respondents, with many opportunities in nursing identified. Noordien et al. (2020), in a South African study with male nursing students, found that the highest scoring extrinsic motivating factor was “wanting a stable career.” Other studies conducted in South Africa have reported that nursing students were mainly attracted by the availability of tuition bursaries and that the economic situation in the country influenced the choice of nursing (Cupido, 2017; Noordien et al., 2020; Roos et al., 2016). South Africa’s high rate of unemployment and economic instability, with a youth unemployment rate of 27.1% in

2018 (Stats SA, 2018), may draw school leavers to a career where there is a strong chance of obtaining employment. Factors that influenced male nurses' choice of profession in Korea included flexible hours, regular salary, future earning potential, opportunity for advancement, autonomy, flexibility to leave and return to the workforce, employment security and travel opportunities (Kim et al., 2024). In this study "nursing as a second choice to the other health related professions" was rated significantly higher by male respondents. Similar findings were noted by Teresa-Morales et al. (2023) in Spain. In their study 68% of males compared to 78% of females chose nursing as a first career choice, and where students had not selected nursing as their first choice (23.6%), most had had selected medicine.

The extrinsic factor of the reputation or image of nursing has historically been a problem for recruitment (Godsey et al., 2020). Although nearly two thirds of the respondents (64.7%) agreed that nursing has a good reputation, this extrinsic factor was not ranked as an important reason for respondents choosing nursing as a career (37.8%). Similar findings reported in earlier studies in South Africa on the reputation of nursing and its image showed that respondents did not regard nursing as prestigious (Meiring & Van Wyk, 2013; Van Zyl, 2011). The profession is still perceived to have low status and prestige, which has negatively affected nursing as a career choice (Mulaudzi et al., 2022; Wu et al., 2015).

Prior exposure to nursing, whether in the form of knowing a nurse, looking after a person who is ill or prior work experience in health may have a significant influence on career choice of female respondents (Lai et al., 2008; Liaw et al., 2017; Liaw et al., 2016). In this study, more than 75% of the respondents had a relative working in nursing, most often an aunt, who might have positively influenced them to make nursing their career choice. This is consistent with the findings of previous researchers who noted the importance of relatives in the students' immediate environment to shape their decision to nurse (Kabanya & Mwaniki, 2016; McKenna et al., 2023; Natan & Meir Oren, 2011; Ten Hoeve et al., 2018).

## 7. Conclusion

Overall, in this study, altruism has been and has remained the main reason to choose nursing as a career for male and female first year nursing students. The difference in motivation between male and female respondents, with more males chose nursing as a stable job, should be noted by those concerned with the recruitment of nurses.

## 8. Implications

The implications of the study are important in the considerations of the impact of the shortage of nurses globally, and the need to attract new recruits to nursing who can uphold the ethical values of nursing. It is recommended that promotion of nursing as a career should highlight these values as important in considering nursing. Further

recommendations include a targeted focus on the promotion of nursing to males and positive prior experiences of nursing to possible applicants who may consider nursing as a career.

## 9. Strengths and limitations

The study provides useful information to assist in the recruitment of young people for future nursing study. The study has some limitations in that it only focused on first year students. Further exploration in this topic to be considered are a separate study on male nursing students and on students who exit the programme.

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