

Original Article

Experiences of Prometric Endeavor Nurses in Pakistan; A Qualitative Descriptive Study

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ABSTRACT

Background: The landscape of global health professional certification is increasingly dominated by computer-based testing (CBT), such as the Prometric exams, which assess the competencies of nursing candidates for international practice. These exams are pivotal for nurses in Pakistan aiming for employment abroad, presenting unique challenges and opportunities that reflect both the individual and systemic dimensions of professional certification.

Objective: This study aimed to explore the experiences of nurses in Pakistan who have undertaken Prometric exams, focusing on the challenges faced, strategies employed for preparation, and the motivational factors influencing their journey. It sought to provide insights into the complexities of navigating international nursing certification processes.

Methods: A qualitative descriptive study design was implemented from May to October 2023, involving semi-structured interviews with 13 nursing graduates in Peshawar, Pakistan, who had participated in Prometric exams. Participants were selected using non-probability purposive sampling. Data analysis was conducted using a modified thematic analysis of Braun and Clarke's framework, allowing for the identification of themes, sub-themes, and codes related to exam experiences.

Results: The study's demographic analysis revealed a predominance of male participants (76.92%) with the majority holding a Bachelor of Science in Nursing (84.61%). Five main themes were identified: Challenges Faced, Strategies Followed, Insight into Prometric Exams, Suggestions for Future Nurses, and Inspiration Figure. These themes encompassed a range of sub-themes including test center allocation limitations, effective preparation methods, understanding exam patterns, and the crucial role of personal and professional support networks. Notably, challenges such as content preparation, language barriers, and socioeconomic factors were highlighted, alongside strategies for overcoming these hurdles.

Conclusion: Nurses in Pakistan facing Prometric exams encounter a spectrum of challenges that require multifaceted strategies and support systems for successful navigation. The study underscores the importance of comprehensive preparation, informed decision-making regarding exam and country selection, and the cultivation of resilience and motivation. Future research should expand to include a broader range of health professionals and adopt mixed-methods approaches to deepen the understanding of international certification processes.

Keywords: Prometric exams, Nursing, Pakistan, Qualitative study, International certification, Computer-based testing, Challenges, Strategies, Motivation.

INTRODUCTION

In the realm of global health professional licensing and certification, Prometric stands out as a pivotal entity, offering services to academic institutions, hospitals, and government agencies worldwide. Its exams, catering to the Dubai Health Authority (DHA), Health Authority Abu Dhabi (HAAD), Ministry of Health (MOH), Saudi Nursing Licensing Exam (SNLE), among others, have transitioned from the traditional paper-based tests to computer-based testing (CBT), utilizing modern technologies for evaluation, certification, and licensing (1, 2). This approach, characterized by multiple-choice questions and results disclosed on applicants' accounts, represents a significant shift in how health professionals are assessed and certified (3). The Canadian health authority's adoption of the NCLEX in 2015, with a success rate of 69.7% (4), alongside the United States' preparatory Health Education System Incorporated (HESI) exam for the NCLEX licensing exam, underscores a broader move towards Computer Adaptive Testing (CAT) (5,

6). CBT offers numerous benefits, including immediate feedback, reduced scoring errors, efficient management of extensive question banks, time savings, and enhanced performance analysis (7). Nonetheless, this transition faces challenges such as language barriers, computer literacy, scenario-based question comprehension (8), heightened anxiety levels, and complexities in grading long-answer questions (9). Particularly in Pakistan, a significant nurse migration rate of 24% since 2010 has been noted, with many leaving the country unaware of these hurdles (10).

This study delves into the experiences of Prometric endeavor nurses in Pakistan through a qualitative descriptive analysis, aiming to explore and synthesize the current knowledge base. A descriptive qualitative study conducted in 2020 via purposive sampling unearthed issues of immediacy, self-distrust, and the daunting navigation through new and high-stakes environments among nursing students (7). The study brought to light various sub-themes, such as the ephemeral nature of test centers, perceptions of American educational and exam content, the challenges of language translation (notably French), communication hurdles, interactions with regulatory bodies, and the incurred financial and reputational costs within the Canadian nursing context (4). Data from Newfoundland and Labrador revealed an upward trend in pass ratios, from 69.7% in 2015 to 82.1% in 2017 (11), indicating an improvement in exam preparation and testing methodologies. Moreover, a mixed-method study conducted in the USA prior to CBT exams reported that 82% of students found Exam Soft to be an effective testing system (9), highlighting themes such as computer usage frequency, test familiarity, internet stability, and preparation strategies, which contribute to the expansion of a computerized workforce countrywide (12). Initiatives like Saudi Vision 2030, aimed at encouraging male participation in nursing to achieve professional balance (13), and the Ministry of Health Statistics of Oman for 2017, showing a near-equal split between Omani nurses and those internationally recruited (8), reflect the diverse and international nature of the nursing workforce, underscoring the global impact of Prometric exams and the ongoing shifts in healthcare certification and licensing practices.

MATERIAL AND METHODS

A qualitative descriptive study was conducted from May to October 2023 in Peshawar, Pakistan, targeting nurses who had undertaken Prometric exams, with the aim of exploring the challenges they faced. This research was initiated following the approval from the institutional ethical review committee of Prime Foundation Pakistan, ensuring adherence to ethical guidelines in line with the Declaration of Helsinki. The study focused on nursing graduates across various levels of education (diploma, BSN, MSN, Ph.D.) who had participated in at least one Prometric exam, irrespective of their success in the examination. A prerequisite for participation was possession of a Pakistan Nursing Council (PNC) card. Individuals excluded from the study were registered nurses who had never attempted a Prometric exam or were unwilling to participate in the study. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews, conducted both face-to-face and online, following a set of pre-established guidelines. These interviews were designed to gather comprehensive insights into the participants' experiences. Utilizing a non-probability purposive sampling technique, a sample size of 13 participants was determined to be sufficient for the study, with an additional interview conducted post-data saturation to validate the thoroughness and reliability of the findings.

The methodological framework employed for data analysis was based on the modified thematic analysis approach as outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006) and later refined by Sage (2022), comprising six distinct steps. This rigorous analytical process facilitated the extraction of codes, the identification of sub-themes, and the eventual categorization into overarching themes. The experiences of the nurses were meticulously documented in statement form, embodying the essence of their narratives. To enhance the validity and reliability of the thematic analysis, several strategies were employed. These included the use of an applied codebook thematic analysis, pilot coding as a preliminary coding exercise to test the feasibility of the coding scheme, and the calculation of percentage agreements. The latter was particularly crucial for identifying recurring themes, sub-themes, and codes within the interview responses, which were evaluated by multiple coders to ensure consistency and accuracy in the thematic interpretation. This methodological approach underscored the study's commitment to a comprehensive and ethically sound investigation into the challenges faced by Prometric endeavor nurses in Pakistan, contributing valuable insights to the body of knowledge on this subject.

RESULTS

Table 1: Demographic characteristics

Variables	Categories	Frequency	Percentages
Gender	Males	10	76.92%
	Females	3	23.07%
Professional Status	DHA	4	30.78%
	MOH	3	23.07%

Variables	Categories	Frequency	Percentages
	SNLE	2	15.38%
	NCLEX	1	7.69%
	OET	2	15.38%
	HAAD	1	7.69%
Educational Levels	BSN	11	84.61%
	Post-RN	1	7.69%
	MSN	1	7.69%

The thematic analysis of the qualitative study on Prometric endeavor nurses in Pakistan unveiled a multifaceted array of challenges, encapsulated within several sub-themes. The initial sub-theme, titled "Emotive-Academic Struggles," illuminated the perpetual difficulties participants faced, beginning with the daunting task of content preparation. Many expressed concerns over identifying reliable sources for exam preparation, a dilemma succinctly captured by one participant's reflection on the constant battle with content: "... the big one is content that from where I prepared myself for the exam." This academic turmoil was further compounded by psychological repercussions, as participants reported experiencing anxiety and depression. The profound impact on mental well-being was encapsulated by the admission that "Time management, Stress, anxiety, and pressure were also big challenges." Codes emerging from this discourse included time management issues, computer unfamiliarity, heightened anxiety, content preparation woes, the complexity of scenario-based MCQs, and the pressures of material overload, alongside job dissatisfaction and the rigors of balancing dual employment.

The second sub-theme, "Pressure Abroad," delved into the challenges faced in international nursing roles, such as patient care difficulties, anxiety in clinical settings, and the struggle to adapt to multicultural environments. Highlighted codes comprised the strain of securing Saudi licenses, the risk of deportation upon exam failure, and the intensified workload for international nurses.

"Exam Center Allocation Limitation" constituted the third sub-theme, identifying logistical hurdles in accessing Prometric testing facilities within Pakistan. Participants pointed out the scarcity of exam centers, confined to major cities like Islamabad, Lahore, and Karachi, with a notable absence of an NCLEX center in Pakistan, leading to extended verification procedures and the necessity of traveling abroad for exams. This was poignantly summarized by a participant's statement: "...NCLEX is not in Pakistan so I took the test in the Philippines nearby."

The fourth sub-theme, "Socioeconomic and Mental Challenges," explored the intersection of social, economic, and psychological obstacles. Financial constraints, the emotional toll of exam failure, and the daunting cost of testing were underscored, alongside the stress of juggling employment and familial duties. Misleading advertisements and the geographical remoteness of testing locations further exacerbated these challenges, with one individual remarking, "...it is an expensive process. These people send advertisements, but they don't mention that Prometric is mandatory...."

In "Ministerial Barriers," the fifth sub-theme, participants voiced frustrations with bureaucratic inefficiencies, policy conflicts, and the scarcity of resources within government departments, particularly when obtaining necessary clearances from the KPK Ministry of Health. The arduous process was encapsulated by one participant: "...The most challenging phase in my whole journey was receiving NOC from the Ministry of Health from KPK Gove..."

The sixth sub-theme, "Poor English Communication," highlighted the deficiency in English language skills among nurses, attributed to inadequate instruction during their education. This barrier was succinctly described: "... I had faced weak interpersonal skills, especially English-related."

"Saudi Strict Cultural Constraints," the seventh sub-theme, shed light on the unique cultural and religious challenges encountered in Saudi Arabia, particularly affecting male nurses in their professional duties.

Lastly, "Nursing Team and Unequal Wages" revealed disparities in compensation within international nursing contexts, spotlighting the pay inequity between Asian nurses and their Western counterparts, irrespective of experience or educational level.

Within the thematic exploration of the strategies adopted by Prometric endeavor nurses in Pakistan to enhance their chances of success, a comprehensive array of sub-themes emerged, each shedding light on the various tactics and approaches utilized.

The initial sub-theme, "Crucial Role of Indian Academy," underscored the vital support provided by the Indian Academy in Dubai for candidates preparing for Prometric examinations. Participants highlighted the assistance received in obtaining visiting visas for Dubai, the academy's role in facilitating guidance, aiding in data verification, and providing comprehensive exam preparation support.

"Self-discipline with Willpower" emerged as the second sub-theme, capturing the essence of personal accountability and resolve in the face of challenging preparation. This included strategies such as hope and determination, focusing on smart study methods,

adhering to a strict study timetable, utilizing resources like YouTube and Google for studying, and engaging in Istehara prayer for spiritual guidance.

The third sub-theme, "Expenses Management," identified the pragmatic approaches adopted by candidates to manage their financial resources efficiently. This involved preserving funds, minimizing unnecessary expenditures, and undertaking additional working hours to support their exam preparation financially.

In "Effective Preparation Ways," the fourth sub-theme, diverse strategies were elucidated, ranging from planning during internships, engaging in self-assessment, forming NCLEX study groups, to collaborating with successful individuals for financial and moral support. Highlighted were innovative approaches, such as the incorporation of a variety of content sources for preparation and the importance of gaining confidence through regular practice of MCQs. Participants shared valuable insights, with one noting, "The strategy I follow during my exam is to prepare myself completely from different contents like NCLEX and others. I practiced regularly and repeated multiple-choice questions again and again." This sub-theme also revealed the positive impact of encouragement from seniors and teachers, and the sharing of useful materials and strategies among peers.

"More Theory Knowledge OET" constituted the fifth sub-theme, focusing on the importance of a balanced approach to theoretical and practical knowledge in the preparation for exams like the OET. Emphasis was placed on the necessity of regular practice to eliminate mistakes and the application of theoretical knowledge to practical scenarios, particularly vital sign-based MCQs.

The role of previous exam papers in preparation was highlighted in the sixth sub-theme, "Role of Previous Papers," where studying past papers and understanding question formats were identified as key strategies.

Lastly, "Exam Timing and Anxiety Tactics" detailed the methods employed by candidates to manage time and reduce anxiety during exams. Techniques included prioritizing more challenging questions, marking difficult questions for review, and adopting strategies to overcome initial stress and anxiety to maintain focus throughout the examination process.

The thematic analysis of participants' insights into Prometric exams reveals an in-depth understanding of their structure, the psychological aspects of exam preparation, and the procedural nuances associated with various licensing exams. These insights are delineated through a series of sub-themes, each providing a nuanced exploration of the Prometric exam experience.

The first sub-theme, "Gulf Countries Exam Pattern," details the structural composition of these exams, particularly in the context of the Gulf region. Participants described the exams as being divided into two sections, each containing 105 multiple-choice questions (MCQs) and offering a 2-hour break in between. The questions, carrying almost two marks each, cover vital signs and medication-related topics in the first section, with the second section focusing on critical thinking and scenario-based MCQs, which was perceived as more challenging. A total score of 800 marks was mentioned, with a 60% passing criterion. Furthermore, it was noted that only upon successful data flow do candidates receive job offers and an eligibility number.

"Actual Exam vs. Perceived Pressure," the second sub-theme, contrasts the real challenges presented by the exams against the subjective pressures perceived by candidates. This segment emphasizes the significance of personal interest and the opportunities these exams represent for future nurses, while also acknowledging the common misperceptions regarding the difficulty and stress associated with the exams.

The journey toward taking the NCLEX exam is encapsulated in the third sub-theme, "Stepping Towards NCLEX Exam." This outlines the distinctive process and progression towards the NCLEX, including interactions with online platforms like Facebook for initial assessments, the engagement with clinical bedside nursing queries, and the procurement of authorization to test (ATT) documents.

The fourth sub-theme, "Technological-based Experiences," explores the digital nature of Prometric exams. Participants highlighted the transition from traditional paper-based tests to computer-based testing, noting the modern and comfortable environment of the exam centers.

"Safety and Security System," the fifth sub-theme, delves into the protocols established to ensure the integrity and fairness of the exams. Descriptions of the screening process, the prohibition of electronic devices, and the roles of investigators and passport verification were provided to underline the thoroughness of the security measures.

The sixth sub-theme was 'Saudi Hospital vs. clinical merit demerit'. Codes derived were comparing hospital work and clinic, 21 days in clinic only, more vacations for hospital nurses, tough duties but more opportunities "hospital work", free medical checkup benefits "hospital work", and incremental benefits "hospital work". The seventh sub-theme was 'Criteria'. The criteria or documentation process may vary for each of the prometric exams and the organization conducting these exams but generally, it includes registration, payment of fees, valid identification, scheduling the test, and adherence to exam policies. Codes derived were degree of graduation, transcript, diploma but consider a non-specialist nurse in SNLE, PNC card, valid passport, internship compulsory, no experience required in DHA and OET, one-year post internship experience in SNLE, and MOH, 2 years post-internship experience in HAAD, and one-year post internship experienced in NCLEX but optional somewhere. The eighth sub-theme was 'Anatomy of data flow'. It refers to the details structure and mechanisms involved in the movement and transformation of data within the process. Codes evolved

were data flow equal to verification of credentials online, DHA, and MOH need no data flow initially, IBCC and concern board attestation at first, embassy or MOFA verification, expenditures and duration vary, documents included degree, PNC card, experienced certificate, and payment, third party verification, registration to Mumaris certification in Saudi's only, eligibility letter last step, applicability for hospitals and companies afterward letter, MOH carried out re-verification from the Saudi embassy, Pakistan 'interviews jobs available', and Jobs search with a visit visa.

In addressing the guidance provided for future nurses contemplating Prometric exams, participants offered a wealth of recommendations encapsulated within distinct sub-themes, each aiming to facilitate the preparation and decision-making process for aspiring exam candidates.

The foremost advice under the sub-theme "Choose Country Wisely" revolves around the strategic selection of a destination for nursing careers. Participants advocate for prioritizing countries with favorable conditions for nurses, suggesting European nations, particularly the UK, as top choices due to better work environments and considerations like climate, exam requirements (OET, NCLEX, IELTS), and financial implications. A notable emphasis was placed on the HAAD license's value and the Gulf countries' recognition of its worth, suggesting a deliberate approach to choosing a work destination. As one participant advised, "I would suggest to the future nurses that whoever wants to go abroad should put British country first, and join an academy for OET or NCLEX, Middle East country on second."

Thematic Analysis



Figure 1 Thematic Analysis

Under "Successive Clinical Tips (DHA)," the emphasis was on deepening one's understanding of anatomy, physiology, and clinical contexts, especially within specialized areas like the ICU and Emergency departments. The acquisition of valuable certifications such as BLS and ACLS was recommended to enhance clinical skills and knowledge.

"A Holistic Approach to Nursing Excellence (OET)" highlighted the importance of a comprehensive preparation strategy that encompasses multiple skills, including knowledge, communication, and critical thinking. Detailed insights into the OET's reading, writing, listening, and speaking sections were provided, illustrating the exam's structure and the criteria for success. Participants stressed the significance of a strong academic foundation, the utilization of diverse resources for English language improvement, and the strategic approach to handling the exam's various segments.

One participant mentioned, "reading was comprised of three parts where part A accounted for 20 marks, part B accounted for 6 marks and part C accounted for 16 marks and passing criteria was 30 out of 42 questions." Writing were assessing for six criteria such as purpose, contents, genre and style, conciseness and clarity, organization and layout and language. One participant verbalized, "there were three types of letters possible to come i.e. referral letter/ discharge letter/ transfer letter in 45 minutes where passing marks 27 out of 38 total marks." One said about the speaking segment, "there was warm up conversation with interlocutor initially and then 3 mints preparation for role play and 5 minutes to performed it and afterward another role play with a total of 2 role play that finished within 15 to 20 minutes." One participant expressed, "listening skills consisted of three parts such as A, B, C where A accounted for 24 marks, B accounted for 6 marks, and C accounted for 12 marks and passing marks were 30 out of 42 questions." One another participant verbalized, "OET grading score lunched from Sept 2018 where each section graded 0 to 500 and most organization required 350 or above.

The "Recommended Subjects (SNLE)" sub-theme suggests focusing on NCLEX books and topics such as gynecology and neonatology, particularly for male candidates, given the substantial coverage of these areas in the exam.

"Benefits of the OET Exam" elaborated on the advantages of pursuing the OET, noting its high acceptance globally and its pathway to opportunities in countries like the UK, where significant salary increases and professional growth are possible. The OET's applicability across various health professions and its facilitation of opportunities for health professional couples were also highlighted.

In "Planning Abroad in an Internship," the guidance centered on leveraging internship periods for exam preparation, suggesting that early engagement with study materials and tests, such as the IELTS and OET, could significantly benefit aspiring nurses' careers.

Lastly, "Empowering Self-reliance to Divine Partnership" reflected on the intrinsic value and nobility of the nursing profession, encouraging future nurses to embrace their roles with dedication and love, recognizing the profound impact of their work on patients' lives.

DISCUSSION

In the realm of Prometric examinations, a comprehensive analysis reveals a multifaceted landscape of challenges, strategies, and motivational factors shaping the experiences of nursing candidates in Pakistan. This study resonates with previous research indicating that candidates face significant hurdles, such as content relevance, language barriers, financial burdens, and logistical issues concerning test center locations (4, 14). Similar to findings reported in the literature, this investigation highlights the daunting nature of the NCLEX, difficulties associated with scenario-based MCQs, and the critical challenge of English proficiency among candidates. Furthermore, the study aligns with observations of socio-economic and mental challenges, ministerial barriers, and misleading advertisements, underscoring the need for swift and strategic responses to these impediments (7, 15-17).

Echoing the thematic findings of a 2018 study, this research also delves into the realm of technological adaptation, preparation methodologies, and the balance between theoretical knowledge and clinical application, elucidating the parallel challenges and strategies inherent in the exam preparation process (12). The global composition of the nursing workforce, as noted in prior studies, further contextualizes the experiences of participants in this study, particularly in the Saudi healthcare setting, highlighting the diverse and international nature of nursing teams (8, 18). However, contrary to suggestions that the Saudi government's encouragement of male nurses might ameliorate staffing challenges, this study reveals a nuanced perspective, cautioning against Gulf countries' employment due to cultural constraints, climatic conditions, and compensation disparities (13, 19, 20).

The study's limitations, including its sole focus on nursing professionals, constrained resources, and the absence of a mixed-methods approach, underscore the necessity for broader, more inclusive research. This calls for future studies to extend beyond nursing to encompass all health professionals, incorporating mixed-methods to enrich the data and offer comprehensive insights. Moreover, there is a pressing need for government initiatives to support Prometric aspirants, addressing both preparatory challenges and the broader professional landscape.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, this study contributes significantly to the understanding of Prometric exam preparation among nurses in Pakistan, elucidating a complex array of challenges, strategies, and inspirations. By weaving together the lived experiences of candidates with the broader context of global nursing standards and professional aspirations, the findings illuminate both the hurdles and the pathways to success in Prometric exams. Crucially, the study not only adds to the existing body of knowledge but also offers practical guidance for future candidates and stakeholders, advocating for informed preparation, strategic planning, and supportive policies to navigate the demanding landscape of international nursing certification.

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