



Original Article



Explore Issues and Barriers to Internship among Graduating Students in Nursing Institutes in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa

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ABSTRACT

Internships are pivotal in shaping the professional course of graduating students, yet newly graduated nurses often confront a lack of confidence and preparedness for clinical roles, posing challenges as they transition from academia to practice. However, nursing students reportedly struggle to achieve the intended objectives of skill development, resulting in insufficient competence. **Objective:** To explore issues and barriers to internship placement among graduating students in nursing institutes in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa. **Methods:** A descriptive phenomenological qualitative design was used to explore participants' experiences. Ethical approval was obtained from the ERB of Khyber Medical University, Peshawar. Data were collected from seven purposively selected students through face-to-face, semi-structured interviews with open-ended questions. Interviews were conducted, recorded, transcribed, translated, and organized between October and December 2023. Colaizzi's seven-step framework guided the thematic content analysis. **Results:** Four main themes emerged from the study: institution-related problems, factors associated with regulatory bodies, issues linked to hospitals, and factors related to effects or outcomes. Nursing students encountered various barriers, including low motivation, inadequate monitoring of learning, lack of knowledge, improper rotation plans, absence of policies, insufficient supervision, inadequate stress-coping support, and challenges in managing time between theory and practical activities during their clinical internships. **Conclusion:** Graduating nursing students in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa face significant institutional, regulatory, and clinical barriers that hinder effective internship placement and skill development.

INTRODUCTION

A crucial component of nursing education is clinical training. Nursing students get the chance to make judgments, apply theories, prioritize interventions, learn to manage time, and put their clinical abilities into practice through clinical practice [1]. A study demonstrating that a structured educational program significantly improved the advanced nursing skills of internship students [2]. One of the key strategies in clinical education to close the knowledge gap between theory and practice is the

internship. The last year of nursing school is when this strategy is applied into practice by offering internship [3]. An internship is a program that hires nursing students and graduates from authorized nursing institutes who practice nursing with a licensed working Registered Nurse (a preceptor) outside of any classes, courses, or curricula at nursing schools [3]. As the last clinical year and a prerequisite for the degree, the nursing internship exposes students to the hands-on practical experience of patient



care in a healthcare context. One of the clinical experiences offered to nursing trainees is a 12-month rotation across several clinical settings [1]. Nursing internship programs reduce burnout and enhance professional commitment among nursing students [4]. A study reported that internship experiences positively impact students' satisfaction with their nursing education [5]. Learning how to give nursing care should not be the only thing interns do to prepare for clinical rotations. These rotations to cover external influences and techniques for handling difficult circumstances [6]. Nurses who have recently graduated from nursing school are in the process of changing from student nurses to registered nurses. They frequently experience what is known as "reality shock" or "transition shock" during this role transition process because of the gaps between what they have learned during nursing academic education and what they encounter in the practical environment, such as occupational stress and adaptation issues, as well as the gap between role expectations and real practice [7]. The relationship between nurse interns' satisfaction with their internship program and their perceived clinical competence, finding a positive correlation [8]. One important part of nursing education is clinical training, which is meant to help nursing interns gain the professional skills and attitudes that will improve the standard of care they provide to patients. The clinical learning environment, the quality of the clinical educator, and the technical proficiency of the nursing staff are all factors that affect clinical preparation. For nursing interns, clinical instruction and the clinical setting can be stressful [9]. For new nursing graduates, the internship experience is a demanding one that leads to anxiety on both an intrapersonal and interpersonal level. Furthermore, the majority of new graduates lack the necessary preparation and knowledge for handling critically ill patients and using contemporary medical technology and different areas of clinical practice [10]. Based on the available literature very few researches have been conducted in KPK about the difficulties nursing students face in getting internship placement after graduation.

Although internship programs are recognized as a crucial bridge between nursing education and professional practice, structured evidence regarding barriers to internship placement in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa remains limited. Existing literature largely focuses on clinical learning challenges during internships rather than systemic issues related to placement, regulatory policies, and institutional coordination. Moreover, few qualitative studies have explored the lived experiences of graduating nursing students within the local context. Addressing this gap is essential to understand context-specific barriers

and inform policy reforms to strengthen internship systems in KPK. This study aimed to explore such issues and barriers to internship placement among graduating nursing students in KPK.

METHODS

This qualitative study employed a descriptive phenomenological design to explore the issues and barriers encountered by graduating nursing students in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa during their internship placements. This approach enabled an in-depth understanding of the students' lived experiences, offering valuable insights into the challenges faced during this critical transition period [1]. This study carried out in selected nursing institute in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa who offer BS Nursing four-degree program. Graduates from three selected nursing colleges in a nursing institute in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa have completed their education are looking for internships at various hospitals, the selected institution: NCS-university system, North-west college of nursing and Farkhanda institute of nursing. Purposive sampling was used to select participants who have recently completed or are in the process of completing their nursing education in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa. Participants were chosen based on their experiences with internship placement to ensure the study's relevance. Purposive sampling aimed to choose a research sample that may give "information-rich cases" so that the study phenomenon's important topics can be explored [1]. The sample size was determined through data saturation, where data collection continues until no new themes or insights emerge from the interviews. 7 participants were anticipated to achieve data saturation. A small number of participants were used in qualitative studies in order to conduct in-depth research. Based on data saturation, the study's sample size was determined. 7 participants from three nursing institutions participated in three focus group interviews, based on the following inclusion requirements: All nursing students were recent bachelor's degree recipients. Any student who had received an internship opportunity was excluded from the study. Semi-structured interviews were served as the primary data collection method in this study. A structured interview guide was adopted to ensure consistency in data from participants. The topic guide included a series of questions with probing questions to reduce the incidence of priming and errors. Interview guide developed, informed by the research questions, to facilitate open-ended discussions with participants. Interviews conducted face-to-face. Prior to each interview, participants provided with an informed consent form outlining the study's purpose, confidentiality assurances, and their rights as participants. Informed consent obtained from all participants before

proceeding with interviews. The interviews were conducted in a quiet room and lasted between 15 and 25 min (mean time: 20 min), with no break. All interviews were conducted by a scholar (The audio recording, transcription and other supporting information were stored electronically on laptop. Thematic analysis was employed to analyze the qualitative data obtained from interviews. The process began with data familiarization, during which transcripts were reviewed multiple times to gain an in-depth understanding. Initial coding followed, with meaningful concepts and phrases assigned as codes. These codes were then grouped to develop potential themes and subthemes reflecting the issues and barriers to internship placement. Subsequently, the themes were reviewed, refined, and validated through collaborative discussions among the researchers. Finally, the findings were presented through narrative descriptions, supported by direct quotations from participants to enhance authenticity and depth. An interview guide was used to explore the views of participants. The guide was composed of 6 main questions. Each question was further explored with probing questions. The interview guide was evaluated by experts before conducting this study. **Rigor:** It was followed throughout conducting this study. Rigors is associated with trustworthiness in process of research and also to judge the value of qualitative studies [2, 3]. The classical criteria for rigor were maintained while handling this study, such as credibility, transferability, dependability, and conformability [4]. **Credibility:** It is the

truthfulness of data after validating and conforming the result to the participants and expert to review that conclusion based on coding¹. Credibility was maintained, check and review with an expert was done side by side while conducting this study. **Transferability:** It is the study outcome applicability and usefulness for other people with different context after providing the description¹. This usefulness of this study is applicable in other context and the applicability is given in detailed later in chapter six of this study. **Dependability:** Also, call auditability, it is the way by which the researcher can follow the actual research and give similar results¹. In other words, study reflection with the same participants in the same context will give same outcome². In this study the aspect of dependability was followed throughout, the responses and experience of most of the individuals were much similar and interrelated. **Conformability:** It is the neutrality and lack of bias in the researcher's point of view. The researcher idea can be identified from proposal¹. In other words, there is no discrepancy between study outcome and conclusion based on information gathered². Upon completion of this study, no contradiction and bias were existed among the outcome, conclusion and information gathered [2]. Ethical considerations were included ensuring informed consent, confidentiality, and the right to withdraw from the study without consequences. A letter was sent to select nursing colleges principal for data collection Ethical approval was sought from the relevant ethical review board.

RESULTS

The findings derived from the thematic analysis of barriers faced by fresh graduate nurses' regarding paid internship", challenges to fresh graduate in internship. The data were thematically analyzed, and key themes emerged, providing insights into the various aspects of internship-related problems faced by the graduating students.

Thematic Analysis

Theme-1

Table 1: Themes, Categories, Codes, and Participant Narrations Highlighting Institutional Challenges to Nursing Internship Placement

Themes	Categories	Codes	Narrations/Verbatim
Institutional Challenges	Hospital associated	Requirements compromises	"Our internship requirement does not meet at the given hospital" (P-7)
		Non-qualified supervision	"LHV are teaching us at the bedside in hospitals" (P-1)
		Non-qualified supervision	"Many of the clinical staff working in the given hospitals are LHV" (P-2)
		Lower standard hospitals	"ICUs are not standard as per requirements" (P-2)
	Rotation plan	Complete rotation plan	"Institute has not made nor shared with us a complete plan for rotation" (P-2)
		No proper orientation	"No proper orientation in the hospital has given us" (P-3)
		Lack of policy implementation	"No proper implementation of existing policy" (P-2)
		Need for Proper orientation	"I would suggest that incoming students can be properly guided first" (P-4)
		No clinical rotations	"There are many colleges who don't give require clinical rotations to their student" (P-2)
	Barriers to objective achievements	Clinical objectives	"Our course objectives could not be achieved at the allocated hospitals" (P-2)
		Lack of internship objectives	"We have no internship objectives, we don't know how well we utilize our time in the hospital" (P-3)

		Need of qualified clinical staff	"We expect qualified preceptors who can guide us in our clinical rotations" (P-2)
		Need of qualified staff	"LHVs should not teach the nursing students in the hospitals" (P-2)
		Knowledge gap	"The hospital staff are not up to the standards who can teach nursing students as many of them are LHVs" (P-2)
		Lack of specialties	"Our hospital has no specific unit for psychiatric patients" (P-2)
		Cannot achieve all clinical objectives	"No proper unit for cardiology patient which can affect our learning" (P-2)
		Knowledge barrier	"Nursing staff are not well qualified and trained to teach nursing internee, many are diploma holders" (P-7)
	Poor Monitoring	No attendance monitoring	"Many students lack attendance during internship but they are not properly monitored" (P-2)
		No check and balance	"Teacher just fine absent student but there is no check and balance" (P-3)

Theme-1: Institutional Issues and Challenges

Participants express frustration over the institute's failure to communicate effectively, particularly regarding hospital allocations for internships. This lack of transparency adds a layer of uncertainty, hindering students' preparedness for their internship experiences. A significant challenge lies in the absence of a well-defined rotation plan. These challenges collectively impede the comprehensive fulfillment of course and internship objectives.

Some of the participants share their experiences, reflecting the pervasive challenges within the institutional framework:

"Our internship requirement does not meet at the given hospital" (Participant-7).

"There was no proper orientation in the hospital given to us" (Participant 3).

"The hospital staff are not up to the standards, many are LHVs" (Participant 2).

Participants' voices shed light on the intricate issues affecting the holistic learning experience within the institution.

Theme 2

Table 2: Themes, Categories, Codes, and Participant Narrations Highlighting Regulatory Body Challenges to Nursing Internship Placement

Themes	Categories	Codes	Narrations/Verbatim
Regulatory bodies problems	Policy	Policy development	"Regulatory bodies should make a complete plan for internship" (P-2)
		Written policy	"Our internship and its placement has verbally communicated with us no documented policy made" (P-7)
		Documented plan	"Regulatory bodies shall provide us a documented internship plan" (P-7)
		Communication of policy with students	"The institute should share the internship policy with the student" (P-7)
		Implementation of policy	"the policy for an internship is made but unfortunately does not implement" (P-2)
		Lack of policy	"University has no proper policy for internship" (P-3) "Our institute has no written proper policy internship" (P-4)
		Role fulfillment	"The council does not properly fulfill their responsibilities regarding internship" (P-2)
		Effect of policy	"The policy can affect the health care system and the care workers" (P-5)
		Existence of policy	"No existence of a clear policy is affecting the health care provider, health care system, and the patient" (P-5)
		Effect of policy on students	"If there is no clear policy and no proper allocation of internship seats, then the student will join nonstandard hospitals just to fulfill formalities their learning will be affected. The regulatory bodies shall increase the number of allocated seats" (P-5)
		Enhancement policy	"The ratio of graduated students and graduated students is greatly different, there is no policy to adjust the extra students" (P-6)
	Focus on policy implementation	"regulatory bodies should strengthen and implement the developed policy" (P-6)	
	Poor Monitoring	Defected Monitoring	"responsible bodies are blaming each other the counsel makes the university responsible and the university makes the institute responsible for internship" (P-6)
		Regular check-in balance	"Regulatory bodies do not instruct the responsible authorities nor the maintain check-in balance" (P-5)
		Need of monitoring	"Only two faculty members run the whole college, they are teachers, clinical instructors, and principals" (P-5)
		Regular visits	"regulatory bodies have made plans only they don't visit physically to see maintain check-in balance" (P-2) "I request PNC to pay regular visits to all registered institutes" (P-1)

		Over affiliations	"more than 150 institutes have granted registration so far, that is a huge problem" (P-1)
		Overproduction	"the institute and graduating students number is very much high" (P-1)
		Limited seats	"There are limited 100 seats available from the university which is very less in comparison to production" (P-1)
	Quality control	Disproportionate	"the graduating students are much more than available seat for internship" (P-2)
		Resources increase	"If I have given authority I will give 1000 seats to university for internship" (P-1)
		Monitor quality regularly	"I request PNC to pay regular visits to these institutes to check the quality" (P-3)
		Quality control	"the regulatory bodies should check who is teaching these students" (P-2)
		Hurdles in quality maintenance	"the big problem is more than 150 institutes are registered, maintaining quality and regulation become harder for regulatory bodies" (P-4)
	Wastage of student time	Timely provision	"they should provide us internship on time" (P-3)
		Wasting of time	"Our three or four months are wasted in each semester every year and some exceed to year" (P-2) "The biggest issue is time. It takes a lot of time to start our internship" (P-3)
		PNC should regulate the timing	"PNC also has a big role in this, so they should see all the colleges, timing, their hospitals, and all the things, and they should inspect it" (P-3)
		Prolong wait	"When we graduate, we wait three to four months for the internship" (P-3)
Wastage of time		"Now they are waiting for the result and after that will wait for the transcript because the KMU takes a lot of time thus our internship starts to be too late" (P-4)	
Lose of opportunities		"We receive our PNC license later than kmu graduates then we can not avail the good opportunities that will come later" (P-3)	

Theme: 2 Regulatory Bodies Problems

The theme revolves around the challenges regarding the regulatory bodies overseeing the internship process. Participants express the need for regulatory bodies to establish a comprehensive and documented plan for internships. The absence of clear, implemented policies is a recurring issue, affecting the learning experience and overall healthcare system. Delays in obtaining licenses and transcripts affect opportunities and contribute to frustration among students.

Some of the participants share their experiences, reflecting the Regulatory Bodies Problems:

- "I request PNC to pay regular visits to all registered institutes"(P-1)
- "The biggest issue is time. It takes a lot of time to start our internship"(P-3)
- "Regulatory bodies shall provide us a documented internship plan"(P-7)
- "The policy for an internship is made but unfortunately does not implement"(P-2)
- "Our institute has no written proper policy internship"(P-4)
- "The policy can affect the health care system and the care workers"(P-5)

These challenges collectively underscore the importance of regulatory bodies in shaping a more effective and streamlined internship process within the healthcare education system.

Theme-3

Table 3: Themes, Categories, Codes, and Participant Narrations Highlighting Hospital-Related Factors Affecting Nursing Internship Experience

Themes	Categories	Codes	Narrations/Verbatim
Hospital factors	Knowledge barrier	Knowledge gap	"LHVs are teaching us who have a big knowledge gap" (P-1)
		Non-qualified hospital staff	"overall hospital staff are not adequately qualified" (P-2)
		Communication barrier	"If we ask a question they reply that they can't answer our question because they do not have that qualification" (P-2)
		Effect of lower standards on learning	"When we saw most of the staff are inadequately qualified our expectations reduced" (P-2)
		Knowledge difference	"hospital is not of our level in knowledge because they are not graduated" (P-2)
		Seniors as guide	"Seniors are mostly cooperative but some seniors are such that they cannot guide us properly" (P-4)
		Low knowledge level of hospital staff supervising internship	"the nurses working in the hospital have low knowledge level" (P-7)
	Facilitating factors	The internship will improve my critical thinking and practical skills	"We can enhance our skill, critical thinking and professional development in the hospitals" (P-7)

		Internship as a route to professionalism	"internship is a stage where we can learn professionalism" (P-7)
		Improves confidence	"with hospital duty, our confidence level will be increased" (P-5)
		Psychomotor development	"we will learn practical skills in the hospital duty and strengthen which we already learned" (P-5)
		Our cooperation and senior support can reduce stress	"we will try by cooperating with our seniors and getting their support, and can cope with these things and relieve our stress" (P-4)
		Improvement of communication skills	"Our communication will improve well" (P-4)
		Exploring the Hidden Capabilities	"we can explore our hidden capabilities in the hospital" (P-2)
		Students have plans already shared	"Our hospital has developed a proper plan that the students are coming and also made a complete rotation plan" (P-2)
		Nursing rounds inward for internees should encouraged	"So there should be proper sessions related to nurses as it is for doctors from the hospital side" (P-4)
		Seniors as guides	"We have senior nurses in the hospital wards who teach us" (P-1)
	Hindering factors	Lack of Availability of equipment for training	"the equipment in the hospital is not according to the need or standard" (P-2)
		Language barrier	"Many supervisors in the hospital cannot speak proper English or Urdu they talk in their mother language which is hard to understand" (P-2)
		Non-availability of all specialties in the hospital	"if we see in our allocated hospital there is no proper ward/unit for psychiatric patient" (P-2)
		Low learning facilitation	"I believe that we will not learn effectively in the hospitals as they not facilitating us" (P-2)
		Non-learning conducive environment	"the environment of the hospital is not learning conducive" (P-2)
		Lack of skills development	"This will affect our clinical skills, but their taught skills are also not up to the standards" (P-2)
		Lack of guidance	"if we got a question or issue in the hospital we search that on YouTube or study through other means" (P-2)
		No proper orientation	"I would suggest that as many incoming students can be properly guided first" (P-3) "There is no proper orientation for us" (P-1)
		Lack of service acknowledgment	"Meaning we go there and we are not getting the importance of the way these students did because they came before us" (P-3)
		Lack of SOP's	"And we expect to see the wards related to all protocols ahead" (P-3)
		Staff shortage	"Hospital is, that they take work from internee as a staff nurse because there is a shortage of staff in the hospital and they don't recruit new staff" (P-3)
Workload effects learning	"the time in which the internee should learn is missed because of work overload" (P-3)		
Night duties may affect the learning	"Apart from this, they also give night shift, a major drawback is that since it is the first exposure of the internet, this problem should also be solved" (P-3)		
Low patient flow affects learning	"North West which has very little patient setup" (P-4)		
Far away internship provision	"The internship placement should not be very far away from home" (P-6)		

Theme 3: Hospital Factors

The theme of hospital factors encompasses various dimensions that significantly impact the internship experience for nursing students.

Participants express concerns about a knowledge gap among hospital staff, including Lady Health Visitors (LHVs), and note that the overall qualification of hospital staff falls short of expectations. Instances of staff being unable to answer questions due to qualifications pose challenges for learning

Some experiences shared by Participants:

"Our communication will improve well" (P-4)

"We can explore our hidden capabilities in the hospital" (P-2)

"We have senior nurses in the hospital wards who teach us" (P-1)

"I would suggest that as many incoming students can be properly guided first" (P-3)

"The internship placement should not be very far away from home" (P-6)

"We will learn practical skills in the hospital duty and strengthen which we already learned" (P-5)

"Internship is a stage where we can learn professionalism" (P-7)

In short, the hospital factors theme encapsulates a complex interplay of challenges and opportunities, highlighting knowledge barriers, facilitating factors for professional growth, and hindering factors that affect the overall learning environment for nursing students during their internships.

Theme-4

Table 4: Themes, Categories, Codes, and Participant Narrations Highlighting Effects and Coping Outcomes of Internship Challenges among Nursing Student

Themes	Categories	Codes	Narrations/Verbatim
Effect / Outcome	Stress	Stress	"The student got stressed due to problems in internship" (P-1)
		Depression	"a student four years in completing his degree and by fifth year if he came to know that there is no hospital allocated to complete his internship and receive the degree, ultimately he will be getting depression" (P-6)
		Novice stress	"The internship is new starting that is why it is very stressful for the students" (P-1)
		Stress of uncertainty	"the student is uncertain about the place they will be getting their internship, it is a tough time for them" (P-2)
		Workload effects learning	"The time in which the internee should learn is missed because of work overload" (P-3)
		Stressor	"if the hospital has a huge work burden the internee will face multiple stressors" (P-3)
		Stress due to no practical exposure	"We have studied only theory has no clinical exposure and the hospital environment is very different for us, which pushes us into stress" (P-4)
		Environment is stressful	"We have the stress of getting an internship as well as the stress of going into practical life and environment will be intolerable for us" (P-4)
	Coping	Need for compromise to cope	"we will have to adjust ourselves with these occurring stressors" (P-2)
		Compromise as a coping strategy	"we should have to cope because there is no way out for us at all" (P-2)
		Self-coping focused	"The internees themselves will try to cope with these hurdles" (P-3)
		Coping by collaboration	"We will be cooperating with our seniors and getting their support, and can cope with these things and relieve our stress" (P-4)
		Reduction of stress	"We expect the hospital will compromise with us and we will be working collaboratively to reduce the hurdle" (P-5)
		Coping strengthening	"if we face challenges now, we will be ready for upcoming challenges and our coping will become stronger" (P-5)
	Exposure therapy	"we will be mentally ready as if we face these challenges in the present we will be ready to tolerate these types of situation in future as well" (P-5)	

Theme 4: Effect/Outcome

The Effect/Outcome theme sheds light on the psychological impact and coping strategies adopted by graduating nursing students in response to challenges and barriers associated with internship placement.

"The student got stressed due to problems in internship" (P-1)

"The time in which the internee should learn is missed because of work overload" (P-3)

"We will have to adjust ourselves with these occurring stressors" (P-2)

"The internees themselves will try to cope with these hurdles" (P-3)

"We will be cooperating with our seniors and getting their support and can cope with these things and relieve our stress" (P-4)

"We expect the hospital will compromise with us and we will be working collaboratively to reduce the hurdle" (P-5)

In short, the Effect/Outcome theme illuminates the stressors experienced by nursing students during the internship phase and the coping mechanisms employed to

navigate these challenges.

In exploring issues and barriers to internship placement among nursing students in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, four prominent themes emerge. Institutional Issues and Challenges highlight communication gaps, unclear rotation plans, and inadequate monitoring, impacting the comprehensive learning experience. Regulatory Bodies Problems shed light on the need for documented internship plans, policy implementation, and increased oversight to ensure quality education and timely internships. Hospital Factors reveal knowledge gaps among staff, hindering clinical skills development, while Effect/Outcome delves into the psychological impact, stress, and coping strategies adopted by students facing challenges. Together, these themes provide a comprehensive understanding of the multifaceted issues within the internship process.

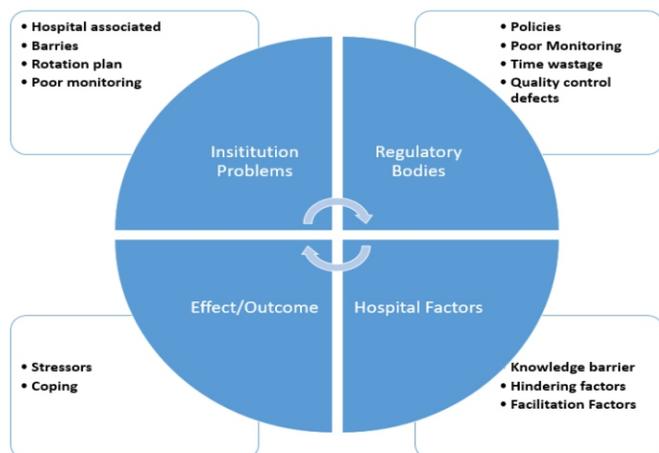


Figure 1: Thematic Representation of Barriers to Nursing Internship Placement among Graduating Students in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa

DISCUSSION

The exploration of issues and barriers to internship placement among graduating students in nursing institutes in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa revealed four main themes. This qualitative study explored into the distinctions of institutional challenges, regulatory body's problems, hospital factors, and the effects/outcomes of the internship. A qualitative study revealing that nursing students in top Ethiopian institutions face significant challenges during internships, including lack of supervision, heavy workload, and resource limitations [11].

Institutional Challenges (Hospital-Associated Challenges): The first theme highlighted institutional challenges faced by graduating nursing students, with hospital-associated issues emerging as a prominent concern. The literature underscores the importance of a conducive clinical learning environment for nursing students [5, 6]. The inadequacy of facilities and a support system identified in this study aligns with findings in other contexts, indicating a global challenge in providing an optimal learning setting for nursing students [11, 7]. **Rotation Plan:** The rotation plan emerged as a critical aspect of institutional challenges. The literature emphasizes the significance of structured internship programs, and the study findings resonate with global concerns about the lack of clarity and support in the rotation plan [8]. Clear guidelines and effective communication channels are essential components that warrant attention in the planning and execution of nursing internships [11, 8]. **Barriers to Objective Achievements:** The barriers to objective achievements identified in this theme parallel the theory-practice divide observed in nursing education globally [2]. The study brings attention to the need for a comprehensive approach to bridge this gap and ensure that graduating nursing students can effectively apply theoretical knowledge in practical

settings[9].

Poor Monitoring: Poor monitoring emerged as a sub-theme, emphasizing the importance of effective oversight during internship programs [10]. Monitoring is crucial for ensuring that nursing graduates meet national standards and develop the necessary competencies for professional practice [10]. **Regulatory Bodies Problems (Policy Issues):** Regulatory bodies play a pivotal role in shaping nursing education policies [11]. The identified policy issues align with existing literature emphasizing the need for robust policies that guide internship programs and ensure their alignment with professional standards. **Quality Control:** Quality control emerged as a significant concern in regulatory bodies' involvement in internship programs. This resonates with the broader discourse on maintaining high standards in nursing education and ensuring that internships contribute to the overall quality of nursing care [11]. **Wastage of Student Time:** The wastage of student time emerged as a critical issue. This finding is consistent with the broader literature highlighting the importance of optimizing learning opportunities during internships to maximize the professional development of nursing graduates [12]. **Hospital Factors (Facilitating Factors):** Facilitating factors identified in the hospital environment are consistent with the literature emphasizing the importance of supportive clinical settings for nursing students [11]. Creating an environment that fosters learning and professional growth is essential for the successful transition of graduates into the healthcare workforce. **Knowledge Barrier:** The knowledge barrier identified in this theme aligns with existing research indicating that insufficient information and skills hinder the learning and patient caregiving processes [2]. Addressing knowledge gaps is crucial for enhancing the confidence and competence of nursing graduates. **Hindering Factors:** Hindering factors in the hospital environment highlight challenges that impede the effective integration of nursing students into the healthcare system. This aligns with broader discussions on the need for proactive measures to address challenges and create a supportive environment for nursing interns [11]. **Effect/Outcome (Coping):** Coping mechanisms were identified as a crucial aspect of the outcomes of internship programs. The stress experienced by nursing students during internships is a common concern [9]. Implementing effective coping strategies is essential to mitigate stress and foster the mental well-being of nursing graduates. **Stress:** Stress emerged as a prominent outcome, emphasizing the need for interventions to address the psychological challenges faced by nursing students during internships. The findings align with global discussions on the mental preparedness required for effective clinical practice [2]. AlThiga et al., highlighted discrepancies between theoretical knowledge and clinical expectations, noting that both interns and

faculty often feel unprepared for practical realities [12]. This mismatch contributes to confusion and anxiety during clinical rotations. Similarly, Bahari *et al.*, identified lack of supervision, poor evaluation mechanisms, and unclear guidance as major barriers to effective internship training [13]. Shahzeydi *et al.*, emphasized the importance of coordination between educational institutions and clinical settings [14]. Misalignment in expectations and communication between stakeholders often leads to disorganized experiences, which was also reflected in this study. During the COVID-19 pandemic, students globally faced restricted clinical exposure and heightened stress, as reported by Ghanbari *et al.*, [15], limiting opportunities to meet clinical learning objectives. Alotaibi *et al.*, examined internship challenges in emergency departments, where resource limitations and inadequate mentorship created suboptimal learning conditions [16]. Similar factors such as lack of access to senior guidance and unclear role expectations—were found to hinder learning outcomes in the current context. According to Al Najjar and Rawas, the quality of clinical training is heavily dependent on structured plans, supervision, and mutual understanding between academia and practice settings [17]. Deficiencies in these areas compromise student learning and preparedness. Albloushi *et al.*, found that many interns lacked confidence in their clinical competence by the end of their training, a concern echoed across similar studies [18]. Aghaei *et al.*, (2021) identified key barriers and facilitators influencing nursing students' adjustment to internships, highlighting issues such as lack of support, role ambiguity, and inadequate clinical preparedness [19]. Furthermore, Jahromi *et al.*, emphasized the critical role of mentorship, feedback, and emotional safety in ensuring that students gain the intended competencies during their internship [20]. Overall, the findings from this study reflect a consistent pattern of challenges documented in diverse settings. Addressing these barriers requires multi-level reforms including standardized internship policies, improved faculty-preceptor coordination, emotional and supervisory support, and the establishment of inclusive learning environments to optimize nursing students' clinical preparedness.

This study was limited by its small sample size and inclusion of participants from selected institutions only, which may affect the transferability of findings to other regions. The qualitative design, while providing depth, does not allow for generalization of results. Future research should incorporate multicenter studies with larger and more diverse samples to validate these findings. Additionally, mixed-method and intervention-based studies are recommended to evaluate policy implementation, improve institutional coordination, and assess strategies aimed at enhancing internship placement processes and student preparedness.

CONCLUSIONS

Hospital factors, institutional obstacles, regulatory body problems, and effect/outcome were the four main topics that emerged from the inquiry. Each of these themes had a number of subcategories that collectively captured the complex issues that nursing students faced during their internships. This study offers insightful information on the problems and obstacles that graduating nursing students faced in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa throughout their internship assignments. The themes and categories that have been established provide a comprehensive knowledge of the difficulties that exist in the institutional, legal, and medical contexts. These findings have implications for the creation of focused interventions, improved policies, and institutional reforms that can enhance nursing students' internship placements. It is critical to address these issues as the healthcare landscape changes in order to protect the competence, confidence, and health of upcoming nursing professionals. The study adds to the continuing conversation on internship programs optimization by setting the stage for more investigation and initiatives targeted at improving the nursing education system in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and elsewhere.

Authors' Contribution

Conceptualization: IA

Methodology: SA¹, SN, SA²

Formal analysis: IA

Writing and Drafting: KA, NA

Review and Editing: KA, IA, NA, SA¹, SN, SA²

All authors approved the final manuscript and take responsibility for the integrity of the work.

Conflicts of Interest

All the authors declare no conflict of interest.

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