RESEARCH PAPER

Perceptions of Graduating Nursing Students Regarding Preparedness for Role Transition to Nurse Intern: A Descriptive Exploratory Study

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ABSTRACT

Background:
The period of transition from student to intern is a challenging period in the career of a nurse. Structured internship programs are designed to support new graduates in transitioning from student to nursing intern. The nursing interns are often struggling to cope with challenges like reality shock, increased workload, insufficient mentorship and role ambiguity. If an effective support system is provided, interns are better able to cope with the challenges of the internship period.

Objective:
This study aims to explore the perceptions of graduating nursing students regarding preparedness for role transition to nurse intern.

Methodology:
A qualitative, descriptive exploratory study design was conducted from March 2024 to April 2025. Purposive sampling technique was employed to carry out the focus group discussion. The focus group discussion was conducted with eighth-semester Bachelor of Science in Nursing students from Ziauddin College of Nursing, Karachi, Pakistan. Four focus group discussions were conducted which comprised of 6–9 participants per group. A total of 28 students participated, which comprised of 20 male and 8 female students. Braun and Clarke's thematic analysis was applied. The transcribed data were systematically coded, and then codes were organized into categories, from which themes and subthemes emerged.

Findings:
Students perceived a wide range of emotions. They expressed enthusiasm about entering professional life and anxiety regarding their ability to handle clinical responsibilities. As they view internship as a challenging phase, they stated coping with shifting duties and fast-paced hospital environment would be difficult for them. They verbalized that effective mentorship, teamwork, sufficient incentives, and access to medical facilities would build their confidence. They also thought that professionalism and leadership skills were essential for a successful transition.

Conclusion:
The transition from nursing student to intern is marked by enthusiasm along with significant challenges, including workload stress and limited support. Structured mentorship, clear role definitions, and supportive workplace benefits are essential to build confident and competent nurse interns.

Keywords: Nursing students; Role transition; Nurse intern; Preparedness; Mentorship; Reality shock; Qualitative study

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Background

Nurses are vital members of the healthcare system, contributing significantly to patient outcomes through competent, evidence-based care. Despite its importance, the nursing profession faces global challenges, including a significant workforce shortage (Perkins, 2021). According to the World Health Organization (WHO), the shortage of nurses may reach 12.9 million by 2035, with high-income countries like the United States reporting a deficit of 340,000 registered nurses by 2020 (WHO, 2018). Pakistan faces a critical shortage of nurses, with government reports indicating a need for approximately 60,000 additional nursing staff to meet current healthcare demands. However, the deficit could be as high as one million nurses (Dawn, 2023). One of the reasons is high levels of physical and mental burnout in the profession which contribute to high turnover rates (Ahmad, Ali, & Shaheen, 2023).

New nursing graduates are essential contributors to the healthcare workforce, particularly in addressing the persistent nursing shortages worldwide (Perkins, 2021). Following their four-year of nursing education, these graduates enter internship programs aimed at refining their clinical skills and transitioning them toward practice. A study of Peshawar, Pakistan proves that the internship phase is often the most demanding period in their professional journey. The challenges, such as, increased clinical responsibilities, unclear role expectations, and complex interpersonal dynamics can hinder the intern's adjustment (Ahmad et al., 2022).

However, the transition from nursing student to professional practice is a significant milestone in the career of a nurse. It is a period marked by both opportunity and challenge, requiring the integration of theoretical knowledge into clinical practice. The Pakistan Nursing Council (PNC) mandates a one-year internship program as part of the nursing training. It is designed to bridge the gap between academia and practice, offering students opportunities to build essential clinical skills (PNC, 2019). However, this period often demands significant adaptation, as new graduates face increased responsibilities, reality shock, and role ambiguity (Hallaran, Edge, Almost, & Tregunno, 2023). On the other hand, this transition plays a pivotal role in shaping professional identity, competence and confidence, but the absence of adequate support systems often exacerbates the stress and anxiety associated with the process (Whitehead, 2020).

The transition from student to nurse intern often brings with a phenomenon known as *"reality shock".* Reality shock is the emotional and psychological stress experienced by newly graduated nurses when they transit from the student to professional practice. Marlene Kramer initially developed this idea in 1974 in her book *Reality Shock: Why Nurses Leave Nursing.* It refers to the discrepancy between the expectations established during nursing education and the clinical reality. Reality shock progress through four stages. First, interns feel excitement and enthusiasm as they start their profession with idealized notions of their job and work environment is called honeymoon phase. As they face the realities of practical experience they transit into a shock phase, which characterized by frustrations stress, and feelings of inadequacy. With the time, they settle and learn to cope, and gain confidence in their abilities. Lastly, they arrive at a resolution phase, where they either accept their position or get disillusioned, occasionally resulting in career or job changes (Kim, 2020). In internship period mentorship play a dynamic role, as mentors facilitate their understanding of clinical environments; develop their skills for decision-making; act as role models; and boost their self-confidence (Bagnasco, Timmins, & McCabe, 2021). Furthermore, structured programs that attend to the technical and emotional components of this transition can mitigate stress around role adjustment, and move students through the levels of competence. (Doody, Tuohy & Deasy, 2020)

This study explore valuable insights about readiness of future nurses as they transit from their role of student to nurse intern, as in Pakistan most of the literature focuses on the "novice nurses" or "nursing interns" experiences after beginning their clinical practice. However, there are few studies conducted on soon-to-be graduating nursing students' expectations and feelings about their preparedness for role transition as a nursing intern (Kanjiani, 2023). This study sheds light on their expectations, concerns, and support that they need during the transition period to

facilitate students to adjust to a new role. Similarly, it informs about the factors which will impact their clinical practice and patient safety outcomes. It will bridge the gaps enabling healthcare organizations to implement targeted support programs that will enhance the transition experience, facilitate in alleviating frustration among nursing interns' and ultimately reducing turnover. This research will also identify the areas of improvements and enhancements needed in nursing education. Additionally, briefs about the need to review workforce policies and regulations that have implications for nursing. (Aghaei, Babamohamadi, Asgari & Dehghan-Nayeri, 2021).

Methodology

Study Design:

This study employed a descriptive exploratory design to provide a comprehensive understanding of graduating student nurses preparedness for transition into nursing interns. The descriptive component quantified the level of preparedness across key competency domains, while the exploratory component captured graduating nurses' perceptions regarding transition of their role.

Study Duration:

The study was conducted over a period of thirteen months, from March 2024 to April 2025. Major phases of the research included obtaining necessary approvals between March and August 2024, data collection from September to October 2024, and data analysis in November 2024, followed by thesis writing and submission from December 2024 to April 2025.

Study Setting:

The study was conducted at Ziauddin Faculty of Nursing and Midwifery, Karachi, Pakistan. Students do their internship of 12 months at Ziauddin Hospital, the teaching hospital affiliated with Ziauddin University, having campuses in Clifton, North Nazimabad, Kemari and Sukkur.

Study Population:

The participants chosen were Bachelor of Science in nursing students enrolled in the final eighth semester who will be soon graduating from Ziauddin Faculty of Nursing and Midwifery, Karachi.

Sampling Strategy:

A purposive sampling technique was applied in which the semester eight (final year) nursing students were selected, aiming to explore insights into their preparedness for role transition as nursing intern. The students who wanted to participate voluntary were selected.

Sample Size:

A total of twenty-eight students participated in the focus group interviews. Each focus group discussion (FGD) consisted of 6 to 9 participants. Data saturation, was achieved after four FGDs when no new information were identified.

Eligibility Criteria:

- ***Inclusion:*** Students enrolled in the eighth semester of the Bachelor of Science in Nursing (BSN) program and those students who voluntarily agree to participate in the study.
- ***Exclusion:*** Students who have already started their internship.

Data Collection Procedure:

Focus group interviews were selected as the qualitative data collection method because they facilitate interaction between participants, allowing for the generation of rich, in-depth data through discussion and exchange of experiences. Focus group discussions were moderated by principal investigator. Data was collected between September and October 2024 at Ziauddin Faculty of Nursing and Midwifery. To ensure control and relevance of the focus group discussions, the researcher established clear ground rules and actively facilitated turn-taking. This approach prevented domination of individual participants, encouraged equal participation, and kept the conversation aligned with the study's objectives. A semi-structured guide, with probing questions was used. The duration of each focus group discussion ranged from 45 to 50 minutes. These discussions were audio recorded in Urdu according to participant's comfort and then subsequently transcribed into English for analysis. Participants' confidentiality was maintained by obtaining written informed consent. The study objectives were clearly explained to the participants, along with clarification that there would be no monetary benefits for participation. They were also informed of their right to withdraw from study at any time without any consequences.

Data Analysis:

Thematic analysis using the Braun and Clarke's framework approach was employed to analyze the qualitative data. Audio recordings of the focus group discussions were transcribed verbatim. Discussions were conducted in Urdu and subsequently translated into English. To ensure translation accuracy, the audio files were replayed multiple times while cross-checking the transcripts. Before transcription, a numerical code was assigned to each participant (e.g., P1, P2) to maintain anonymity. Once transcripts were finalized, the principal investigator read them repeatedly at least twice to gain a deep understanding of the participants' perspectives. A line-by-line manual coding process

was then applied, assigning codes to segments of text that represented meaningful units. Similar codes were grouped into categories, which were subsequently refined into themes and subthemes. Themes were clearly supported with participants' own words to ensure that findings reflected the genuine perspectives of the graduating nurses. This iterative process allowed for continuous refinement of themes until they accurately represented the data. Data analysis continued alongside data collection, and saturation was confirmed when no new themes emerged in the focus group discussion.

Rigor:

To enhance the credibility of the data, multiple validation steps were taken throughout the research process. A pilot interview was conducted with students in a different setting to identify potential issues with the interview questions, ensuring clarity and assessing the effectiveness of the interview guide. Member checking was carried out after the analysis, the data was summarizes to emerge the themes. Triangulation was achieved by comparing the focus group discussion with the available literature to strengthen the result interpretation. The transcripts were reviewed by the study participants to verify their accuracy and identify any discrepancies, thereby confirming that the data written reflected their true experiences. The researcher repeatedly cross-checked the data under the guidance of the supervising team before finalizing the codes, categories, subthemes, and themes. A reflective journal was maintained throughout the process in which documentation of personal reflection, assumption and decision making process, researcher's supervisor reviewed those journal entries to minimizing personal bias. Additionally, raw data, coding notes and theme development notes were kept which allow others to trace how the finding emerged. It was addressed by providing the detailed accounts of the participants' perception were included to give readers a clear understanding of the circumstances under which the data were collected. Data were reviewed thoroughly by repeatedly reading transcripts and listening to recordings.

Ethical Considerations:

This study was reviewed and approved by multiple review bodies including the Internal Review Committee (IRC), Department Research Committee (DRC), Ethical Review Committee (ERC) and Board of Advanced Studies and Research (BASR) of Ziauddin University. Before the interviews written informed consent was obtained from all participants. The participants were assured of confidentiality regarding their identities. The purpose of the study was clearly explained, and participants were informed that their involvement was voluntary. They were further assured that their participation would not impact their professional life and they could withdraw from the study at any time without any consequences. The data was securely stored in the drive and also backup files were created to maintain the data integrity.

Findings

The transcribed data were systematically coded, and then codes were organized into categories, from which themes and subthemes were subsequently emerged. The four themes were extracted under which many subthemes were identified. The findings of the study are described and supported through participants' verbatim. The themes and subthemes of study are:

Mentally and Physically Gearing Up for Internship Journey:

In the first subtheme students expressed the complexity of emotions before starting their internship. Student described mix emotions of expectations, excitement and apprehension about stepping into the professional life. In the second subtheme students talk about mental resilience, skill competence and confidence are required to adjust in the internship role. Despite initial anxiety, they viewed internship is valuable learning phase

- ***Mix Emotions Related to New Role:***

Nursing students expressed a mix of excitement and apprehension as they prepared for their internship. Many looked forward to beginning their professional journey, as one student stated *"I'm excited to start my professional life—it's something I've been waiting for four years. I'm very happy, but with happiness, I'm also very much worried about how we will manage things"*(P: 01). However, they were also concerned about their ability to handle responsibilities in a hospital setting. The uncertainty of adapting to a new environment, interacting with staff, and managing patient care contributed to feelings of ambiguity and stress. As another participant shared, *"How will we cope with the hospital environment? The staff will be new for us—will they cooperate with us or not? That is causing uncertainty in my mind"* (P: 01). Some students highlighted their awareness of the accountability involved in patient care, expressing fears of making mistakes that could have serious consequences. One student commented, *"I do feel prepared, but there's also fear, knowing we're responsible for people's lives. Any mistake can lead to the death of a patient"* (P: 18). Despite these concerns, optimism was also present, with students believing that with time and experience, they would overcome their initial struggles. A participant shared *"We are optimistic, and the staff will support us, which is quite familiar to us. This is the way through which we can overcome uncertainty"*(P: 19). These reflections highlight the emotional complexity of transitioning from student life to professional practice, balancing confidence with the weight of responsibility.

- ***Psychological Preparedness and Skill Readiness:***

In this subtheme students emphasized the importance of mental preparedness in managing workload and stress. A student stated, *"If you are mentally strong, then you can easily manage the workload. Mental strength helps in handling stress, and it all depends on our mindset"* (P: 08). They acknowledge that while theoretical knowledge was covered in their studies, applying it in a real-world clinical setting would be a challenging. Another student shared, *"The theory is different from the practical. According to theory, we are fully prepared, but we feel pressure about how we will apply that knowledge in the hospital setting."* (P: 25). Many students recognized the need to enhance their practical skills, especially in performing critical procedures. One participant stated, *"I don't think I can handle five patients at a time because I don't have such skills. I have performed basic skills, so before the internship, I decided to go somewhere to practice more."* (P: 10). Some planned to take extra steps, such as seeking additional practice opportunities before their internship, to boost their confidence. Another student explained, *"Maybe I would struggle with certain critical skills, like CVP (central venous pressure) line care, which I have never performed. I will try to work competently during my internship to improve those skills"* (P: 11).

Despite concerns about handling multiple patients, students viewed the internship as a crucial learning period. One participant expressed confidence, stating, *"I think the internship is a learning period, and whatever we have learned in student life, I believe I will be able to handle patients on my own"* (P: 12). Others believed that through practice and mentorship, they would gradually become more competent in their roles. As one student optimistically remarked, *"At first, I may face complications, but over time, I will improve and perform better"*(P: 10). These reflections illustrate the students' awareness of the challenges ahead and their determination to develop the necessary skills to succeed in their new roles.

Perceptions of Challenges during the Internship Experience:

According to participants they think they will face challenges during internship period. These problems were shifting duties, managing patient workload and clinical placements were the subthemes identified under this theme. Students significantly anticipated internship challenges, like shifting, double duties and heavy workload will lead to health issues which ultimately comprise the quality of care. Secondly, concern was raised about placement decision, especially at Sukkur campus. They think that it is difficult to manage there and also they think they will get less learning opportunities due to small setup of Sukkur campus.

- ***Challenges of Shifting Duties:***

One of the most significant challenges faced by nursing interns was the difficulty in managing daily routines due to shifting duties. Students expressed concerns about how rotating between morning, evening, and night shifts disrupted their sleep patterns, daily schedules, and overall well-being. One participant shared, *"Shift work will disrupt my routine. We have to do different duties, and my sleep pattern will be disturbed. How we will manage it would be difficult for us because our whole routine will change" (P: 02).* Students also highlighted the additional burden of double shifts, which led to increased fatigue and mental exhaustion. Another student remarked*, "Double duties would be difficult, sometimes we have to do morning and evening shifts back-to-back, or evening and night shifts. Our sleep will be totally disturbed." (P: 03)*

Night shifts were particularly problematic, as they not only disrupted circadian rhythms but also impacted diet and overall health. Several students suggested that a more structured and balanced rotational duty system, similar to that of Aga Khan University Hospital, could help alleviate some of these challenges. They proposed a schedule of two morning shifts, two evening shifts, two-night shifts, followed by two days off, to provide adequate rest.

- ***Managing Heavy Workload:***

Another major obstacle that participants described was overwhelming workload and the challenge of handling multiple patient assignments. Many students felt that they will be given more responsibility than they could manage, leading to increased pressure and stress. Participant stated, *"At present, when I talk about myself, I'm feeling a huge pressure of this new role and responsibility"*(P: 24). Interns also struggled with adjusting to the hospital's staffing ratio, where a single nurse was responsible for five to six patients at a time. A participant expressed concern, saying, *"If they assign six patients to us, we say no because we don't have the capability to take care of them. Our health will be compromised, and so will patient safety" (P: 26).* Additionally, students noted that their lack of prior exposure to handling critical patients added to their stress. One shared, *"Maybe I would struggle with certain critical skills, like CVP line care, which I have never performed before. I will try to work competently during my internship to improve those skills" (P: 11).* To address these challenges, some students suggested better workload distribution based on experience level. One student proposed, *"If it's a senior staff member, they should be given critical patients, and if it's a junior intern, they should be assigned stable patients" (P: 07).*

- ***Concerns Regarding Clinical Placements and Adjustments:***

Students raised concerns about the allocation of clinical placements, particularly regarding assignments to distant locations such as the newly established Sukkur Campus**.** Previously, nursing interns were placed at Clifton, North Nazimabad, and Kemari campuses of Ziauddin Hospital Karachi, Pakistan. With the expansion of the Sukkur Campus, nursing interns are now also being assigned there for clinical training. While this development provides broader clinical exposure, many students felt that their preferences were not considered and that placements were assigned randomly. One participant stated: *"They ask for two choices for placement, but in the end, they assign students according to their own decision. Our preference does not matter"*(P: 17). Students expressed concerns about relocating to an unfamiliar environment, away from their families and support systems. This was particularly challenging for female students, who worried about safety and social adjustments in a new city. One participant shared*: "If they send us to Sukkur, they should send us in groups with our friends so that we feel comfortable. As a female, if I'm sent alone, I won't be able to do anything over there"* (P: 16).

Additionally, some students highlighted differences in patient exposure between campuses. They believed that the Sukkur Campus, being newly formed, had a lower patient influx compared to Karachi-based hospitals**,** which could limit their learning opportunities. A participant explained: *"In Sukkur, the patient ratio is low. If we rotate in Karachi campuses, we will get enough exposure to different diagnoses and medical cases, which will help us learn more"* (P: 24). To enhance the internship experience**,** students suggested a structured rotation system across multiple campuses, ensuring well-rounded clinical exposure while also considering individual preferences and circumstances. Participant stated *"The better solution of that thing if the internship period is 12 months so each student should be rotated to each campus for 2-3 months like have to give 3 months in Kemari, 3 months in Clifton, 3 months in Sukkur and 3 months in North then our 12 months rotation will be completed"* (P:20).

Extrinsic Motivational Factors:

Three subthemes were identified under this theme like competitive incentive, access to medical facilities and other facilities, and strong mentorship. Students reported low incentive, lack of medical benefit and high cost of meal can reduce their motivational level. They recommended incentive should be according to HEC policy, subsidized meals should be offer and lastly free health services should be given to interns.

- ***Competitive Incentive:***

Many students expressed dissatisfaction with their internship incentive, which they felt was not proportional to their workload. One of participant stated, *"If I'm doing a 12-hour shift or even an 8-hour shift, at the end of the month, I'm only getting 25,000 rupees. It's not motivating"* (P: 05). Students also pointed out that the incentive offered at their hospital was lower than the Higher Education Commission (HEC) recommendations. A student complained *"Two months ago, HEC passed a policy that internship incentive should be 30,000 rupees, but our hospital doesn't follow that. Other hospitals like Aga Khan are paying 45,000 to their interns"(P: 14).* To address these concerns, students recommended increasing the incentive to at least 35,000 rupees, ensuring medical benefits, and improving meal provisions to support interns in managing their expenses.

- ***Medical or Other Facilities:***

A significant concern among nursing interns was the lack of medical and other essential services provided to them during their internship. Many students expressed frustration over the fact that they were not entitled to free medical check-ups or healthcare benefits, despite working in a hospital setting. One participant shared, *"We don't get any medical facilities. If we fall sick, we have to pay for everything ourselves, just like any regular patient"(P: 12).* Some students reported that even minor medical concerns required them to follow the standard hospital procedures, making access to healthcare both inconvenient and expensive. A student recounted, *"I had a minor skin infection and needed antibiotics, but when I went to the pharmacy, they asked for a prescription. When I approached the doctor, they told me to first pay the consultation fee, which was 2,500 rupees. How can we afford this?" (P: 16).* Additionally, students pointed out that bonded students (those committed to working for a set number of years after graduation) received some benefits, but self-sponsored students were excluded. A participant said, *"Only bonded students get certain facilities like free lab tests, but the rest of us have to pay for everything"*(P: 17).The interns also highlighted disparities in meal provisions, with many feelings that the available food options were inadequate and costly. One student stated*, "In other hospitals like Aga Khan, staff meals are subsidized at 50 rupees, but here, a single meal costs 300 to 400 rupees. With our low incentive, it is difficult to afford proper food" (P: 16).* To address these issues, students suggested that medical services be made available to all interns, not just bonded students. They also recommended implementing subsidized meal plans to help them manage their expenses more effectively.

- ***Effective Teamwork and Mentorship:***

Teamwork and mentorship were identified as crucial factors in easing the transition from student life to professional practice. Many students emphasized that having a supportive work environment, where seniors and staff guided

them, made a significant difference in their confidence and ability to manage responsibilities. One participant noted, *"Our seniors are very helpful. Since they have been through the same phase, they don't want us to struggle the way they did. They guide us on how to handle patients and manage workload" (P: 14).* However, some students pointed out that while mentorship existed, collaboration among staff was not always effective. A student shared, *"There is no proper teamwork in some wards. If a senior nurse is on duty, they often just tell us to work faster instead of guiding us properly" (P: 01).* The lack of teamwork and communication among staff sometimes led to an increased burden on interns. One intern suggested *"When the workload is high, if we don't help each other, things become chaotic. I believe that if all staff members, including interns, work together, it will ease the burden for everyone" (P: 09)*. Despite these challenges, students remained optimistic that with proper mentorship and collaborative teamwork, they could adapt and perform better in their roles. One participant expressed, *"At first, managing multiple patients seemed impossible, but with the help of senior staff, we learned how to prioritize tasks and became more confident"(P: 03).* To improve teamwork and mentorship, students suggested structured orientation programs, buddy systems with experienced nurses, and a more supportive approach from senior staff to help new interns integrate smoothly into the hospital environment.

Intrinsic Motivational Factors:

Intrinsic motivation plays a crucial role in helping nursing students transition into their professional roles with confidence and dedication. The students emphasized the importance of developing professionalism, leadership and effective communication skill will help to succeed in their internship. They believed that personal growth, responsibility and a sense of accomplishment were key factors that kept them motivated despite the challenges they faced.

- ***Developing Professionalism and Leadership:***

Students recognized that professionalism and leadership qualities were essential for effective nursing practice. They acknowledged that beyond technical skills, their attitude, behavior, and ability to manage responsibilities were equally important. One student stated, *"After entering the profession, I realized that professionalism is a major component that is often lacking in nurses. We have been taught about therapeutic communication, but in practice, it is rarely seen" (P: 05).* Another student highlighted the importance of prioritization and decision-making, saying, *"Leadership is about taking responsibility and knowing how to assign tasks. If we develop strong leadership skills, we can manage workload more efficiently"(P: 03).* Students mentioned they had studied leadership and management; they found it challenging to implement these concepts in a fast-paced hospital environment. One participant remarked, *"It's not just about having skills; it's about knowing how to handle situations under pressure. Leadership and professionalism must be developed within ourselves" (P: 05).*

- ***Enhancing Communication and Management Skills:***

Effective communication and time management were identified as key factors in ensuring high-quality patient care and reducing stress. Many students acknowledged that strong communication skills could improve patient interactions and teamwork within the hospital setting. A student noted, *"If a doctor communicates politely, half of the patient's worries disappear. Similarly, as nurses, we need to develop strong communication skills to reassure and support our patients" (P: 11).* Managing multiple patients at a time was also a challenge that required effective time management. One participant explained, *"If I am assigned five or six patients, I need to know how to prioritize. Critical patients should be attended to first, while stable patients can be managed accordingly. This requires leadership, critical thinking, and time management skills" (P: 12).*

- ***Adapting Responsibilities and Workload:***

Students expressed that taking responsibility for patient care was both challenging and rewarding. Initially, many felt overwhelmed by the workload, but over time, they adapted and gained confidence. One student reflected, *"During our clinical rotations, we had limited exposure, but now, with full patient responsibility, we will learn how to manage real-life situations" (P: 20).* Despite the initial pressure, students viewed their internship as an opportunity for growth. One participant optimistically stated, *"At first, I might struggle, but over time, I will learn, improve, and perform better. This internship is a learning period, and I am ready to take on the challenge" (P: 10).* Moreover, some students highlighted the difference between theoretical learning and practical application in clinical environment. While they felt academically prepared, they acknowledged the challenges of applying knowledge in real patient care scenarios. One participant said: "*The theory is different from the practical. According to theory, we are fully ready, but it depends that how we will apply that knowledge in the hospital setting"*(P: 25).

Discussion

The transition from student to nursing intern is an important phase in a nurse's professional development. The study investigated graduating nursing students' perceptions on preparedness for this transition and their challenges,

facilitators, and suggestions for improvement for the internship experience. The results reveal both excitement and optimism on the part of students despite serious concerns around workload, role expectations, and support systems.

Findings highlight that nursing students have mixed feelings regarding their transition to the nurse intern role. Although many students described being excited to pursue professional practice, they also expressed anxiety and uncertainty regarding their ability to provide patient care. It is not uncommon to read such findings based on literature reviews that discuss how "transition shock," which is typified by levels of stress and self-doubt, are often experienced by these newly graduated nurses (Kim & Shin, 2021). Benner's (2021) Novice to Expert Theory suggests that new graduates are novice; they depend on guidelines because of their limited practical experience. This is one of the reasons why participants in this study expressed concerns regarding their clinical skills and decision-making abilities.

Additionally, psychological preparedness was the major factor affecting students' transition experience. Similarly, the need for emotional resilience in coping with stress and workload emerged as a common theme, reiterating previous studies that shown they play a significant role in adapting to their roles (Duchscher, 2019). In the interest of greater preparedness, nursing schools should integrate stress management and resilience education into the curricula to better immerse students into ways to navigate the rigidities of professional practice.

Participants had high patient workload management as a major concern. Many students reported feeling unprepared to care for multiple patients at once, especially in higher-acuity environments and the feeling of being overwhelmed by tasks is consistent with other studies indicating that high workloads increase rates of burnout and turnover among newly graduated nurses (Laschinger et al., 2020). In fact, the actual situation of exhausted and understaffed hospitals is used to put even more pressure on interns and force them to perform even under highly stressful conditions.

Another challenge that emerged was role ambiguity experienced by new interns. Many participants described uncertainty around their roles and their supervisors' expectations. This was confirmed also by previous studies which showed that vague definition regarding circulation contributes to poor satisfaction at the workplace and anxiety concerns related to job among the nursing interns (Edwards et al., 2020). Proper orientation programs and informing them about their responsibilities will help to tackle many of these challenges ensuring a seamless transition.

The presence of mentorship was also common elements found as decisive influences on student transitional experiences. Supportive senior staffs were highlighted by participants as being crucial to alleviating their anxiety and guiding them through complex clinical situations. Research has consistently pinpointed how helpful a mentorship program can be to the confidence and skill level of new nurses (Ortiz, 2019; Bagnasco et al., 2021). Interns benefit from preceptors who give them constructive feedback and create a nurturing learning environment, and such preceptors can help enhance interns' preparedness and eventual job satisfaction.

However, some participants raised the issue of teamwork and guidance in certain hospital wards as a common complaint. For example, unhelpful senior staff were barriers to effective learning, reflecting findings from previous studies. Previous studies identify workplace incivility as a problem for new nurses (Smith et al., 2021). Tackling these challenges is not easy and necessitates a culture change in the healthcare facilities, with significant emphasis on creating a healthy and appreciating workplace that promotes collaboration, learning and sharing.

Participants expressed a lot of concern about financial compensation, workplace benefits. While not a universal sentiment, many felt underappreciated, especially in regards to their intern incentive, given the higher ones offered at other hospitals. Harney and Marchington (2021) note that literature indicates poor remuneration as a precursor to work dissatisfaction and its influence surrounds nurse retention rates (Spector et al., 2020). A solution to this insecurity can be made by addressing this concern and aligning internship incentive with the HEC, (2021), of Pakistan recommended incentive which can cater to their motivation and ultimately their job satisfaction.

Also, one of the biggest challenges that was raised was the need for affordable medical benefits and affordable meal plans. According to participants, bonded students enjoyed some privileges but others had to cover the medical expenses on their own. Research shows workplace healthcare access and meal subsidies are shown to increase work happiness and decrease financial stress for interns (Plante, 2024). All interns should be given medical benefits, subsidized meals and other considerations which can be extended by hospitals so that we are all valued equally including the interns who provide all this support and care.

Intrinsically, authors identified the imperative to foster professionalism, leadership, and communication skills, all deemed vital for elevating patient care quality and improving workplace challenges. Professionalism includes principles such as ethical decision making, accountability, and maintenance of nursing standards which ultimately make up the nurse's ability to retain patient trust and provide safe, competent care (Smith et al., 2021). Contrary to this, leadership plays a pivotal role in directing patient care, advocating for best practices, and creating a collaborative work environment (Brown & Johnson, 2020).

While prior research findings have highlighted the importance of teaching leadership to newly appointed nurses to equip them with the complex care demands and team skills necessary to thrive in inter-professional teamwork (Chau et al., 2022; Kim & Park, 2021), Nurses with strong leadership skills make informed decisions, delegate effectively, and adapt to changing healthcare environments (Gillespie et al., 2019). And it has been shown that a critical skill to promote patient safety, minimize errors and improve team work is effective communication (O'Connor et al., 2020). Lack of structured communication can result in negative patient outcomes and workplace violence (Leonard et al., 2018).

Integrating leadership development and communication training into nursing internship programs could go a long way to counteract these issues and improve the preparedness of graduates for their roles. Structured mentorship programs, simulation-based training, and leadership workshops were found to bridge the gap between theory and practice, promoting confidence and competence in new nurses (Brennan et al., 2021). This, in turn, can facilitate the refinement and practices of healthcare institutions, ultimately benefiting large populations of patients throughout the healthcare system.

Conclusion:

The study's findings provide insight into the complexity of challenges that accompany the transformation from graduating nursing student to nurse intern. Students report high levels of enthusiasm and motivation, but in turn significant concerns about work overloads, unclear role definitions and inadequate support systems. These challenges highlight the critical need for endowed institutions to create and establish solid support systems. Structured mentorship programs for their staff can serve to instill improved role clarity, as well as strengthen the learning environment for clinical and interpersonal learning.

Furthermore, the study proposes that tackling these issues is critical to developing a workforce that is capable and confident of navigating the intricacies of contemporary healthcare environments. Employers can also extend practical workplace benefits, such as flexible schedules, fair incentive, medical benefits, stress management resources and regular performance feedback to bolster these expectations and create a supportive environment for new interns. By implementing these strategies, we can help build a stronger and more fulfilling nursing workforce. More studies need to be longitudinal to examine the long-term impact of these interventions in future.

A major strength of the study is that it is highly relevant to nursing education, providing information that will help nursing educators, hospital administration and policy makers to structure curricula and internship programs. Furthermore, employing a qualitative, exploratory methodology via focus group discussions enables a rich, detailed comprehension of the emotions, concerns, and expectations of students, revealing finely nuanced differences that might be missed in quantitative studies. Also, by successfully pinpointing significant barriers like role ambiguity, workload, little mentorship, and financial pressures, it is incredibly useful to design targeted interventions.

This study also has limitations that need to be recognized and the research was conducted amongst a limited number of nursing students in one institution, so transferability of findings within schools of nurse and healthcare settings may be restricted. Another issue is the gender imbalance, with more males than females in the sample, and this may have impacted the results. The possibility of response bias, since the data were collected through focus group discussions, where the participants may have been influenced by the presence of peers and social desirability (e.g. leading to more socially acceptable response). Additionally, the study only gauges students' perceptions before their internship without tracking their experiences during or after the transition, leaving limited insight into whether their expectations and perceived challenges match actual practice. HEC of Pakistan has made a curriculum for nursing institutions; however the curriculum may have been interpreted and practiced differently by different universities. Hence, although aligned with the HEC curriculum, this study represents the unique experiences of students from one institution and cannot be considered reflective of the variety of experiences across nursing institutions.

Recommendations:

The study highlights critical areas for improvement in education, institutional support, and policy; the following recommendations are intended to address these identified gaps.

- ***Structured Orientation Programs*** – Hospitals should implement standardized orientation programs that clearly define interns' roles, responsibilities, and expectations.
- ***Enhanced Mentorship Opportunities*** – Institutions should establish formal mentorship programs where experienced nurses guide and support interns during their transition period.
- ***Workload Management Strategies*** – Hospitals should consider allocating patient assignments based on interns' skill levels and experience to prevent overwhelming workloads.
- ***Mental Health Support***– Providing stress management workshops, peer support groups, and resilience training can help nursing students navigate transition challenges more effectively.

- ***Financial and Workplace Benefits*** – Increasing internship incentive according to HEC guidelines, providing basic medical benefits and offering subsidized meals can boost nursing interns' motivation and satisfaction.

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