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Thompson, D. R., & McKenna, H. P. (2024). Is the PhD in nursing advancing or in retreat? *International Journal of Nursing Studies*, Article 104915. Advance online publication. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ijnurstu.2024.104915>

Published in:
International Journal of Nursing Studies

Document Version:
Peer reviewed version

Queen's University Belfast - Research Portal:
[Link to publication record in Queen's University Belfast Research Portal](#)

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GUEST EDITORIAL

Is the PhD in nursing advancing or in retreat?

David R. Thompson, Hugh P. McKenna

In this journal we recently expressed concern about nursing research being on the brink of a slippery slope (McKenna & Thompson, 2024). For some time, we (Kim et al., 2022; Kirkman et al., 2007; Ryder et al., 2022; Watson et al., 2011) and others (Cashion et al., 2019; Clarke, 2024, Lee et al., 2023; Snethen, 2023; Stanfill et al., 2019; Watson et al., 2021) have also expressed concerns about the role, value and viability of the PhD in nursing. In this editorial, we aim to make a general argument that the PhD in nursing is in retreat, whilst acknowledging that the context varies widely across the world. We highlight this variation by offering examples of different scenarios from the UK, Europe and the USA of PhD study, including information from eleven countries within the six World Health Organisation regions (Kim et al., 2022).

The PhD in nursing is fundamental to the research training and development of a nurse scientist and to ensuring that nurses and nursing are able to participate fully in the science and scholarship arenas, particularly with regards to contributing to the design, conduct and reporting of research that aims to tackle major health challenges, including health inequities. The main objectives of PhD programmes are to prepare and mentor the next generation of nurse academics who will push forward the boundaries of knowledge in their discipline. There is consensus that this qualification is fundamental to the research training and development of nurse scientists. This is particularly the case when it comes to independently designing, conducting and reporting research that aims to tackle major health challenges.

At its best, a PhD education provides nurses with a clear sense of purpose and a lifetime love for expanding their intellectual and clinical horizons. It enables them to recognise themselves as emergent research leaders and appreciate the significance of the development of scholarly endeavours. Furthermore, it instils in them the ability to think critically, identify the gaps in knowledge, search for truth without prejudice, take risks with ideas, be creative and imaginative in solving problems and to communicate clearly and effectively (McKenna, 2018). With these skills, they can meet the social responsibility of enhancing the health of people and communities through the discovery, dissemination and implementation of knowledge. However, there is evidence that we are beginning to fall short of achieving these objectives in some countries.

Reasons for PhDs in nursing being in retreat

In their study of six WHO regions, Kim and colleagues found that most of the eleven countries had an absence of available doctoral fellowships and a scarcity of supervisory capacity. Also, many nurses were self-funding and undertaking their PhD part-time (Kim et al., 2022). Previously, Ellenbecker et al. (2017) found that only 1% of the five million nurses in the USA had a PhD and there is every indication that it is much lower in other countries. In addition, Ellenbecker and colleagues estimated that nurses are aged 48.5 years, on average, when they earn a PhD, much older than PhD graduates in other disciplines. The age of PhD graduates in nursing has also been an issue identified in other countries (McKenna, 2018). For this reason, the time they have to construct a research profile, join or assemble a research team and develop a research career is limited. Added to this, Lisaerde (2022) found that in general only 15% of PhD students in Norway completed their doctorate on time. Again, this is not uncommon. It could be argued that due to personal circumstances

such as part-time working, family and caring responsibilities, three years full-time is not long enough to complete a doctorate. One of the biggest barriers to completion on time or at all is the financial pressures on PhD students.

Financial disincentives

The current cost of living crisis and inflation rises in countries such as the UK has devalued the PhD stipend (e.g. less than £16,000 per year in the UK). One indication of this is the trend for UK universities to extend their hardship funds to PhD students, who are struggling to make ends meet (Inge, 2022). This is especially the case with self-funded PhD students, especially international ones, who have witnessed tuition fee increases alongside rises in energy and accommodation costs. PhD students may have to choose between attending a really important seminar or going to a part-time job to pay their bills.

PhD students are an essential element of the university landscape, conducting quality research and teaching: indeed, in many countries PhD students are employed as research assistants. Despite this, most universities do not see PhD study as work, simply regarding them as students. This means that they do not get a national minimum wage nor any employment benefits and in the UK are not eligible for tax free childcare, which costs on average £14,000 per year. As well as adding to the financial burden, this can also have a negative impact on diversity and inclusion, compounding existing gender, ethnic and social class inequalities found in many universities. Furthermore, low-income levels are associated with mental health problems.

It is no surprise that many rely on savings, part-time work or parental support to complete their PhD. Without these buffers, individuals from more deprived backgrounds and less advantaged groups are effectively locked out of PhD study. A

survey of 568 PhD students from 53 nursing schools in the USA found that financial challenges posed a major barrier in their programme (Lee et al, 2023). These issues are not unique to nursing; PhD students in other disciplines in the UK, France, Germany, Switzerland and the Netherlands have similar problems leading to reduced numbers undertaking and completing PhDs (Magee, 2024).

Many of the PhD fellowships allocated to nursing are not taken up in some UK universities due to the low level of the stipends compared to clinical salaries. However, these are very attractive for graduates in disciplines such as psychology and sociology who may be unable to get a postgraduate grant in their own discipline or secure jobs following their primary degrees. But once they graduate with their nursing-funded PhD, they have difficulty getting employment in schools of nursing because they cannot teach clinical skills or support students on placements. Furthermore, their PhD theses may contribute more to psychology or sociology than they do to nursing's knowledge base.

An obvious question is why in the current fiscal crisis would a nurse give up a reasonable paid clinical position to undertake a PhD with much less remuneration. Furthermore, once graduated, university career prospects are bleak in countries such as the UK, USA and the Netherlands considering that academic jobs are less well paid than advanced clinical roles, and the precarity of post-doctoral researchers is well documented internationally (McKenna, 2021). More recent research showed that doctoral graduates will only start to benefit financially from their PhD more than 30 years after embarking on their studies (Grove, 2023). This is the result of the costs of doctoral fees, the years of lost income and the loss of accrued employment experience. There is also the danger that schools of nursing will face a diminished pool of PhD prepared staff in the future, and this could put at risk nursing's stature

and survival as a university discipline (Kim, 2024).

McKenna (2023) highlighted the toxic research cultures in which some PhD students are exposed. This included everything from bullying, sexual harassment, hypercompetition, heavy workloads, a lack of support, and pressure to agree guest authorship to more powerful senior researchers who did not contribute significantly to a publication.

To compound such toxicity, in the USA, doctoral education in nursing is being undermined in States such as California where legislation has been passed against doctoral-prepared nurses calling themselves 'doctor'. Other States such as Georgia and Florida are in the process of designing similar legislation (Taylor, 2023). One nurse, Sarah Erny, who earned a doctorate at Vanderbilt University, accepted a court settlement requiring her to pay \$19,750 (£15,700) after local prosecutors accused her of illegally implying that she was a medical doctor by publicly calling herself 'Doctor'.

Quality gurus such as Edward Deming (2000) stressed that positive change in any system needs data. He is credited with the statements "In God we trust, all others must bring data" and "Without data, you are just another person with an opinion". However, there is a dearth of data available on the number of PhD prepared nurses there are in any country, with the possible exception of the USA, regarding how many were self-funded, what age were they when they started and finished, how long did it take, what their study topics were, what or whether they published, what impact their research has had, whether they pursued a career in academia, clinical practice or elsewhere, or whether they studied part-time or full-time. This lack of information is complicated by the fact that many nurses undertake their PhD in other disciplines. This absence of data is disappointing considering that

nursing is the largest health profession with the most contact with patients and families and PhD prepared nurses are key to developing its evidence.

Advancing PhD study in nursing

While there is an urgent need to fill the data void alluded to above, nursing's stature and survival as a recognised and respected university discipline is at risk unless urgent attention is given to improving PhD student enrolments, completions and career development. Various solutions for addressing this have been proposed over the past decade (Dickson, 2024; Lee et al, 2023; Rosa et al., 2022; Snethen, 2023; Stanfill et al., 2019). These include addressing the type and duration of the curriculum, and forming partnerships with interdisciplinary teams.

PhD supervision has a key role to play in enhancing successful and timely completions. Universities should offer mentoring, seminars and collegial feedback to supervisors. This should go alongside supervisor networks and peer-to-peer forums where PhD supervisors can obtain support, while maintaining confidentiality in the supervisor-student relationship. With the increasing emphasis on research impact, supervision should be broader, and team based and why not have a non-academic such as a clinician on the supervisory team who can help map out the pathways to impact.

To help address the toxic research culture in nursing research labs and institutes, Science Europe (2022) published a set of values that it maintained contribute to a positive research culture. These included autonomy and freedom; care and collegiality; collaboration; equality, diversity and inclusion; integrity and ethics; and openness and transparency. Added to these should be zero tolerance of inappropriate behaviour, a safe and supportive research environment, fair opportunities for career advancement, and common courtesy and kindness

(McKenna, 2023).

In Denmark, Lisaerde (2023) identified five themes that are considered central to PhD students' wellbeing. These included, institutional support for good PhD supervision, an inclusive organisation, visible and well-established support for wellbeing, strengthening PhD students' project-management skills, and monitoring work-life balance and subsequent careers for PhD students. We would add to this a culture of equality, diversity and inclusion where bullying, racism and intimidation are resigned to history.

Following research which showed the lack of standardisation in the quality of nurse doctoral education, Kim et al. (2020) provided a model for ensuring that this was addressed. Their work resulted in beneficial effects on reputation and standing of the programmes and influenced PhD student decisions on conducting and completing their research. The model included criteria such as infrastructure, curriculum, mentorship, leadership, and faculty scholarship. When such cultural factors are in place recruiting and retaining PhD students is easier.

We recommend there should, at least in the UK, be an increase in the minimum stipend for PhD students and, more radically, consideration should be given to recognising them as employees with secure status and the 'living wage' pay and conditions that accompany such status. This is already the case in the Netherlands. There should also be an end to unpaid teaching and better career development. Furthermore, the designation 'doctoral researcher' should be used instead of 'PhD student' to illustrate their identity as professionals and researchers.

PhD study can be a solitary experience, especially when conducted part-time and when contact with supervisors is episodic. At their best, Doctoral Colleges are university centres where there is an active, diverse postgraduate research

community, and where PhD nursing students can share space with postgraduates from other disciplines, where diverse methodologies, ideas, and problems can be debated and explored and where mutual support is endemic.

In the USA, a recent report on the future of nursing reinforces the importance of nurses and the value of nursing science in achieving the goal of health equity (National Academies of Science, Engineering and Medicine, 2021). Notably, the report called for research and evidence describing the impact of nursing interventions, including interdisciplinary collaborations, on social determinants of health, environmental health, health equity, and nurses' health and wellbeing.

Similarly, the National Institute of Nursing Research 2022-2026 strategic plan reflects support for strong, high-impact science that optimises health and advances health equity (National Institute of Nursing Research, 2022). Both documents acknowledge the crucial role that PhD-prepared nurses make in solving the most pressing and persistent global health challenges. They have led the development and testing of innovative models of care that have improved when, how and where patients, often when they are at their most vulnerable, are cared for. Moreover, nursing science has been at the forefront of addressing structural and social determinants of health (Rice, 2023), and nurse scientists can advance health equity through innovative research strategies and adaptive real-world approaches (Dickson, 2024).

In order to ensure that PhD prepared nurses continue to play a major role in our profession, there is a pressing need to invest in nursing research. We believe the best way to accomplish this is through the sound and thorough training and education in research that a PhD in nursing programme can offer.

Funding

The authors received no funding for this article.

Declaration of Competing Interest

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

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