

## Sociodemographic and academic profile of nursing students from four brazilian institutions



*Perfil sociodemográfico e acadêmico de discentes de enfermagem de quatro instituições brasileiras*

*Perfil sociodemográfico académicos y alumnos de enfermería brasileña cuatro instituciones*

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### ABSTRACT

This study aimed to describe the sociodemographic and academic characteristics of nursing students from four Brazilian Educational Institutions. It is a prospective cross-sectional study. The data were collected between April 2011 and March 2012, through a survey form with questions about sociodemographic and academic characteristics of the students. The participants were graduate students enrolled in the nursing course, aged 18 years or older. 705 students participated, and these were mostly women, single, childless, who lived with their families, did not take part in sport activities and performed leisure activities. Also, most students do not participate in research groups, were not granted scholarships, are not employed, are satisfied with the course and do not intend to leave it. This study may become an important tool for the development of strategies that address the needs of students and also improve the quality of the teaching and learning process, reducing dropout rates.

**Keywords:** Nursing. Nursing students. Higher education institutions. Education, higher.

### RESUMO

Objetivou-se descrever as características sociodemográficas e acadêmicas de discentes de Enfermagem de quatro Instituições de Ensino Superior brasileiras. Trata-se de um estudo transversal, prospectivo. Os dados foram coletados entre abril de 2011 a março de 2012, por meio de um formulário para caracterização sócio-demográfica e acadêmica dos discentes. Incluíram-se alunos matriculados no curso de Enfermagem, com idade igual ou superior a 18 anos. Participaram 705 acadêmicos, com predomínio do sexo feminino, solteiros, sem filhos, os quais residem com familiares, não praticam esportes e possuem atividade de lazer. Ainda, a maioria dos discentes não participa de grupo de pesquisa, não recebe bolsa acadêmica, não possui vínculo empregatício, estão satisfeitos com o curso e não pensaram em desistir do mesmo. Este estudo poderá tornar-se uma importante ferramenta na elaboração de estratégias que contemplem as demandas dos estudantes e, ainda, melhore a qualidade do processo ensino aprendizagem e diminua o índice de evasão.

**Palavras-chave:** Enfermagem. Estudantes de enfermagem. Instituições de ensino superior. Educação superior.

### RESUMEN

Objetivo describir las características demográficas y académicas de los estudiantes de enfermería de cuatro instituciones de educación superior de Brasil. Estudio transversal, prospectivo. Los datos se recogieron entre abril de 2011 y marzo de 2012, mediante un formulario de las características sociodemográficas y académicas de los estudiantes. Incluía a los estudiantes matriculados en programa de enfermería, con edades superiores a los 18 años. 705 estudiantes participaron, en su mayoría mujeres, solteros, sin hijos, que residen con su familia, no hacer deporte y tienen actividad de ocio. La mayoría no participa en el grupo de investigación, no recibe becas académicas, no tiene empleo, están satisfechos con el curso y no están pensando en abandonarlo. Este estudio podría convertirse en una herramienta importante en el desarrollo de estrategias que aborden las necesidades de los estudiantes y también mejorar la calidad del proceso de enseñanza-aprendizaje y disminuir la tasa de deserción escolar.

**Palabras clave:** Enfermería. Estudiantes de enfermería. Instituciones de enseñanza superior. Educación superior.

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## ■ INTRODUCTION

Latin American countries have made significant advances toward the creation of new opportunities for the professional training of their citizens. Graduate vacancies have almost doubled over the past decades and are still growing. Also, more opportunities to access different higher education courses are being offered<sup>(1)</sup>.

This growth trend has also occurred in Brazil, with the creation of programs and policies that encourage the expansion of higher education, as well as the democratization and universal access to these institutions. Among these, it is worth mentioning the *Programa Universidade para Todos (PROUNI)* – the University-for-all Program, the largest scholarship program in Brazil, in which free places are provided to students in private higher education institutions<sup>(2)</sup>. In July 2007, the *Programa de Reestruturação e Expansão das Universidades Federais (REUNI)* – program for Expansion and Restructuring of Federal Universities was launched, whose main purpose is to increase access to higher institutions and improve retention of students<sup>(3)</sup>. There is also Law no 12.711 of August 29, 2012 (Law of Social Quotas), which requires public universities in Brazil to reserve part of their enrollment spots for public school students, especially black and indigenous people, with the purpose of reducing racial income inequality in access to public universities<sup>(4)</sup>.

Therefore, according to the *Instituto Nacional de Estudos e Pesquisas Educacionais* – INEP – (National Institute of Educational Studies and Research), in the 2005-2010 period there was an increase of 28% in the number of places available in Brazilian higher education institutions<sup>(5)</sup>. This expansion resulted in the increase in the number of nursing courses in the country, from 106, in 1991, to 799, in 2011, which represented a rise of 754% in 20 years<sup>(6)</sup>.

The expansion of the Brazilian higher educational system, as well as the increase in the number of nursing courses, has made it possible for a larger segment of the population to have access to higher education courses. So, knowledge of the sociodemographic and academic profile of students may become a valuable tool for the development of strategies that contemplate their demands, and also improve the quality of the teaching and learning process, reducing dropout rates.

Thus, the present study aimed to obtain information on the profile of nursing students in order to describe the sociodemographic and academic characteristics of nursing students from four Brazilian higher education institutions.

## ■ METHOD

This is a descriptive, cross-sectional study, developed in four Brazilian institutions of higher education: three of

them public and one private. One institution is located in the southern region and three are in the southeastern region of Brazil.

The study included students regularly enrolled in any semester of the course (from the first to the last semester) of the Graduate Nursing Course, aged 18 or older. Students not enrolled in subjects of the professional cycle (nursing specific subjects); in exchange activities; who participated as researchers in this study and those unable to complete the course because they would exceed the time frame of each institution.

At the time of data collection there were 958 students enrolled in the assessed institutions. Of these, 156 students were excluded: four were under 18; 14 were not enrolled in subjects of the professional cycle; 15 were in exchange activities; three would not complete the course within the maximum time frame of the institution; 12 students participated in the project as researchers and 108 students were not included in data collection. Thus, 802 nursing students were eligible for participation in the study. However, 52 refused to participate and 45 did not return the research instruments.

Data collection was performed by researchers from each institution, and was conducted in classrooms, at times previously scheduled by students and professors and with the consent of the coordination of the Nursing Course of each institution. Data was collected from April 2011 to March 2012, according to the schedule of each institution, through the use of a Form composed of sociodemographic and academic characteristics of the nursing students, elaborated by the researchers.

The following quantitative variables were addressed: date of birth, number of children, number of subjects in the semester, biannual course load and time spent to go from home to the university. The qualitative variables addressed here were: gender, marital status, persons who live with the student, current semester, practice of sport, leisure activity, participation in research group, academic scholarship, type of scholarship, graduation in another course, work and degree of satisfaction with the course.

After data collection, a database was constructed using a Microsoft Excel's spreadsheet and the referred data were analyzed by a statistician who used the *software Statistical Analysis System (SAS - version 9.02)* and *Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS - version 16)*. The qualitative variables were presented in simple (n) and relative (%) frequencies. The quantitative variables were expressed as measures of central tendency (minimum value, maximum value and mean) and measures of dispersion (standard deviation).

Regarding the Guidelines and Regulations of Research Involving Humans (Resolution 196/1996), participants were informed on the nature of the research and signed an informed consent form<sup>(7)</sup>.

This study is a subproject of the project Stress, Coping, Burnout, Depressive Symptoms and Hardiness in Nursing Students, approved by the Research Ethics Research Committee of, Universidade Federal de Santa Maria, under CAAE no 0380.0.243.000-10. Moreover, it should be mentioned that the article originated from the dissertation titled "Stress in nursing students from four Brazilian institutions", submitted to the Postgraduate Program in Nursing of Universidade Federal de Santa Maria (UFSM)<sup>(8)</sup>.

This study did not intend to name/identify the involved higher education institutions, nor to make a detailed analysis of each institution. The purpose here was to make a general analysis of the profile of the nursing students of the four assessed institutions. Therefore, it is not necessary to describe the peculiarities of each institution.

## ■ RESULTS

The research comprised 705 nursing students, which represented 87.9% of the study population. The representativeness of nursing students of private institutions was 51.6%, and of public institutions was 48.4%. Although the study was performed in three public institutions and one private institution, the percentages were similar for both institutions.

Regarding the sociodemographic characteristics of nursing students, Table 1 shows the prevalence of female (84.5%), in the age range between 20 and 24 years (50%), single (76.9%) and childless (83.1%). Of the nursing students with children, most had one child (58.8%). Concerning housing, 76.4% lived with their families.

It was found that 75.6% of the students did not practice sports and 60.5% performed leisure activities. Regarding the distribution of nursing students per year of course, it was found that 30.8% were enrolled in the first year, 24.3% in the second year, 22.1% in the third year and 22.8% in the fourth year.

It can be seen in Table 2 that most students take 21 to 40 minutes to arrive in the teaching institution (30.6%), do not participate in research/study groups (71.7%) and have no scholarships (72.4%). However, of those who receive financial aid in the form of scholarships, 194 students (100%), the predominant form of scholarship is for healthcare (45.1%), that is, the one in which students develop healthcare activities in a teaching hospital under the supervision of the local nurses.

**Table 1.** Distribution of frequency of nursing students according to sociodemographic characterization. RS, 2014.

Variable	N (%)
<b>Gender</b>	
Female	596 (84.5)
Male	109 (15.5)
<b>Total*</b>	<b>705 (100)</b>
<b>Age Range</b>	
< 20	134 (19.1)
20 to 24	351 (50.0)
25 to 29	94 (13.4)
> 29	123 (17.5)
<b>Total*</b>	<b>702 (100)</b>
<b>Marital status</b>	
Married	116 (16.5)
Single	542 (76.9)
Widowed	3 (0.4)
Other	44 (6.2)
<b>Total*</b>	<b>705 (100)</b>
<b>Children</b>	
Yes	119 (16.9)
No	586 (83.1)
<b>Total*</b>	<b>705 (100)</b>
<b>Number of children</b>	
1	70 (58.8)
2	39 (32.8)
3	9 (7.6)
4	1 (0.8)
<b>Total*</b>	<b>119 (100)</b>
<b>Lives with</b>	
Family	538 (76.4)
Friend-classmate	116 (16.5)
Alone	50 (7.1)
<b>Total*</b>	<b>704 (100)</b>

Source: Research data, 2014.

\*Total students who answered the item.

Table 3 shows the distribution of nursing students regarding other labor activities, other graduation courses and degree of satisfaction with the course.

According to Table 3, most students were not employed (74.2%), and had not graduated from another course (96.9%). Regarding the degree of satisfaction with the course, 89.8% were satisfied and 36.8% have already thought of giving up the course.

The quantitative variables of the population, with minimum and maximum values, mean and standard deviation, are described in Table 4.

**Table 2.** Distribution of nursing students regarding the time spent to arrive in the institution, participation in research/ study groups, academic scholarship and type of scholarship. RS, 2014.

Variable	N (%)
<b>Time spent to go to the institution</b>	
< 20 min	180 (26.3)
21 to 40 min	209 (30.6)
41 to 80 min	201 (29.4)
> 81 min	94 (13,)
<b>Total*</b>	<b>648 (100)</b>
<b>Participant of the Research Group</b>	
Yes	199 (28.3)
No	505 (71,7)
<b>Total*</b>	<b>704 (100)</b>
<b>Academic Scholarship</b>	
Yes	194 (27.6)
No	509 (72.4)
<b>Total*</b>	<b>703 (100)</b>
<b>Type of scholarship</b>	
Assistance	87 (45.1)
Research	39 (20.2)
Extension	36 ( 18.6)
Tutorial Education Program (TEP)	31 (16.1)
<b>Total*</b>	<b>193 (100)</b>

Source: Research data, 2014.

\* Total number of students who answered the item

**Table 3.** Distribution of students regarding being employed, has graduated from another course, satisfaction with the course and having considered giving up the nursing course. RS, 2014.

Variable	N (%)
<b>Works</b>	
Yes	181 (25.8)
No	522 (74.2)
<b>Total*</b>	<b>703 (100)</b>
<b>Has graduated from another course</b>	
Yes	22 (3.1)
No	682 (96.9)
<b>Total*</b>	<b>704 (100)</b>
<b>Satisfied with the course</b>	
Yes	628 (98.8)
No	71 (10.2)
<b>Total*</b>	<b>699 (100)</b>
<b>Has thought of giving up the nursing course</b>	
Yes	259 (36.8)
No	445 (63.2)
<b>Total*</b>	<b>704 (100)</b>

Source: Research data, 2014.

\* Total students who answered the item.

**Table 4.** Descriptive measures for the number of subjects the students are enrolled in by semester, biannual course load, number of hours of daily study and time devoted to the research group/study per week. RS, 2014.

Variable	Minimum	Maximum	Mean ± Standard deviation
Number of subjects	1	11	6.7 ± 2.9
Course load	150	657	487.2 ± 77.0
Hours of daily study	0	10	2.1 ± 1.4
Time devoted to the research group/study per week	0	20	5.7 ± 4.9

Source: Research data, 2014.

Table 4 shows the minimum and maximum values of the nursing students, as well as their mean and standard deviation. As it can be seen, the students are enrolled in average in 6.7 subjects, with a course load of 487.2 hours, study in average 2.1 hours per day and devote, in average, 5.7 hours per week to the study group.

## ■ DISCUSSION

A predominance of female students (84.5%) was reported. This result is consistent with other studies in which the percentage of women was higher than 84%<sup>(9-10)</sup>. Nursing is characterized as a female profession, as most care giving tasks are historically performed by women. However, there has been a gradual increase in the number of male nursing students. It can be inferred that Nursing courses are undergoing changes, ceasing to be an exclusively female profession, though still predominantly represented by women<sup>(9)</sup>.

Most nursing students were young, aged 20-24 years (50%), with a mean age of 24.21 years. This age range was predominant in the institutions assessed in this study, though the average age ranged from 22 in public institutions to 26.27 in private institutions. A similar finding was obtained in a study with nursing students from Belo Horizonte, where most students were aged 20-24 years<sup>(9)</sup>. The presence of young graduate students in nursing courses can be related to the incentive of the Brazilian government to access to higher education. Nevertheless, since most professionals are young, they may lack the necessary maturity to make sound decision, which may lead to higher dropout rates during the course<sup>(11)</sup>.

Most nursing students were single (76.9%) and childless (83.1%), which is consistent with other studies<sup>(9,12)</sup>. Of the 119 students who had children, 105 were enrolled in private institutions and 14 in public institutions. The prevalence of single and childless individuals is consistent with the young population of the study. The young have become more concerned with seeking independence and financial

stability before marrying or having a stable relationship, which usually occurs at the completion of the studies.<sup>(12)</sup>

Regarding housing, 76.4% of the students lived with their families. Students who live with their families and have a good relationship with get along well with them, find it easier to adapt to the changes that occur when they go to university. Moreover, the families provide social support and help the young people in their decision making, which can be interpreted as something positive at this stage of life<sup>(13)</sup>. Also, the decentralization of public and private higher education institutions made it possible for students to attend classes near their homes, thus, allowing them to be in touch with their families.

Although there is greater awareness of the benefits of practicing sports, it was found that 75.6% of the students in this study did not practice sports, though 60.5% performed some sort of physical activity during their leisure time. Participation in physical activities decreases with aging, especially among teenagers who enter adulthood. In addition, a sedentary lifestyle is associated with technology, since the more sophisticated technology becomes, the less time people have to devote to health maintenance<sup>(14)</sup>.

Concerning the distribution of nursing students per year/semester of course, it was found that 30.8% were enrolled in the first year, 24.3% in the second year, 22.1% in the third year and 22.8% in the fourth year. The percentage of nursing students decrease over the past two years. Evasion can be related to lack of maturity in decision making, lack of information on the course, difficulty in adjusting to the academic environment, financial or family problems, dissatisfaction with the teaching system, or else dissatisfaction with the profession chosen<sup>(15)</sup>.

Moreover, the higher percentage of nursing students in the early years can be related to the Program for Expansion and Restructuring of Federal Universities (REUNI), launched in July 2007 and that counts on government incentives. The main purpose of REUNI is to increase access to higher education institutions and improve retention of students,

which can be related to the higher percentage of students in the earlier years of the course, since the institutions are contemplated by this program.

It was found that 71.7% of nursing students did not participate in research/study groups, but those who did it devoted in average 5.7 hours of study per week to the group. Therefore, a study aimed to identify the areas of interest of nursing students after graduation found that 5.7% wished to work in research, while 52.7% intended to work in healthcare activities<sup>(10)</sup>.

Nevertheless, the study and research groups provided a stronger link between teaching and the reality experienced, in addition to seeking the scientific character of the actions performed and encouraging more in-depth reading on the theme, which may constitute an advantage for the future professional. Besides, the insertion in groups can be a valuable tool for the development of creativeness, because solutions are sought to the problems detected in real life<sup>(16)</sup>.

It was found that 72.4% of the nursing students who participated in this study did not receive financial aid in the form of scholarship, research, extension or from Tutorial Education Programs (TEPs). A similar result was obtained in a study conducted with students from a university of São Paulo, in which 26.1% were granted scholarships<sup>(17)</sup>.

However, considering the 194 fellows (100%), the predominant type of scholarship was for healthcare (45.1%), that is, the one in which the nursing student develops health care activities in a teaching hospital, under the supervision of the local nurses. The exercise of the healthcare scholarship can be interpreted as one more type of student learning, for they have the opportunity for inter-relating theory and practice, establishing links with professionals, becoming aware of the healthcare status, as well as obtaining greater autonomy.

When they experience reality, the students also experience the conflicts that pervade the relationships developed in their everyday life, which can be assessed as a stressor by the nursing student. Thus, the scholarship period can be considered a significant pre-professional experience<sup>(18)</sup>.

It was observed that 74.2% of the nursing students were not employed. This finding diverges from the results of study with students from a private school in Curitiba where 70.2% had professional activities<sup>(10)</sup>.

It should be stressed that the average of nursing students from public institutions who were not employed was 89.1%. These institutions offer full-time courses, and, so, it may be difficult for the students to conciliate the course with a professional activity. However, in the comparison with private institutions that offer part-time courses (in the

morning or night shifts), the percentage of students who had no employment was lower (60.3%). Such data corroborate the findings of a study with students of a public and a private institution, where the higher percentages of employed students were enrolled in the private institution<sup>(19)</sup>.

It was found that 96.9% of the nursing students had not graduated from another course, which can be related to the fact that the population was young. The percentage of students who had previously graduated from another course is similar to the one reported in a study conducted in Belo Horizonte, in which 4% of the nursing students had graduated from another course<sup>(9,20)</sup>.

Regarding satisfaction with the course, 89.9% of the participants expressed their satisfaction with the course. The motivation of the students is an important aspect, since it has a direct influence the student's interest and learning ability, besides impacting the assessment of stressors. Thus, the satisfaction of the students can be associated to the satisfaction of being college students, who perceive themselves of part of a special group of students, with a promising future, and also the applicability of the contents developed during the course.

However, 36.8% of the nursing students in this study have already thought of giving up the course, which can be related to their age range, most of them young people who are not always ready to make sound decisions regarding their professional future<sup>(11)</sup>.

Knowledge of the sociodemographic and academic characteristics of graduate students in nursing may help in the continuous process of curricular evaluation, contributing to the development of strategies that contemplate the demands of the students.

## ■ CONCLUSIONS

One limitation of this study is that no studies were conducted on the profile of nursing students after the consistent expansion of higher education in Brazil, which included nursing courses, and, thus, comparison was not possible. Another limitation is that the present findings cannot be generalized because the study was restricted to two regions of the country.

Therefore, this study identified the following socio-demographic profile of nursing students: they are predominantly young, female, single, childless, living with their families. Most do not practice sports, but perform leisure activities. Regarding academic activities, most students did not participate in study/research groups, did not obtain financial aid in the form of scholarships and were not employed. Also, they reported being satisfied with the course,

which impacts the quality of teaching and the development of the student. Still, 36.79% had already thought of giving up the course.

The present study can be an important tool for nursing coordinators and professors during the teaching-learning process, as it provides information on the characteristics of nursing students.

Moreover, knowledge of the sociodemographic and academic profile of nursing students may guide new educational policies, as well as changes in the Political and Pedagogical Projects, allowing more effective predictions of the performance of nursing graduates in the labor market. Also, a better understanding of the context of the training process of nursing students may help proposing measures aimed to meet the students' needs, reducing their levels of stress during graduation, so that these professionals may feel greater satisfaction and pleasure in their entry to the labor market.

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