



NURSE LEADERS' PERCEPTIONS OF LEADERSHIP DEVELOPMENT NEEDS FOR STRENGTHENING THE NURSING WORKFORCE: A SOUTH AFRICAN PILOT STUDY

BRICS + CONFERENCE
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BACKGROUND



- Nurses are central to South Africa's healthcare system, yet the sector continues to face challenges, including workforce shortages, heavy workloads, limited career progression, and inadequate institutional support.
- These issues are compounded by the absence of a structured leadership development framework.
- In response, the National Department of Health, through the South African Nursing Leadership Initiative, launched a pilot study to explore nurse leaders' perceptions of their leadership development needs before developing a national Nursing Leadership Competency Framework.

OBJECTIVES



- To explore nurse leaders' perceptions of the leadership capacity required to strengthen the nursing workforce and support national health priorities.
- To identify key themes, challenges, and priorities as expressed by nurse leaders, with the aim of informing the design and methodology of a forthcoming, larger national study.

METHODOLOGY



- **Study design:** A qualitative, exploratory study was conducted.
- **Setting:** Four of South Africa's nine provinces: Eastern Cape, Free State, KwaZulu-Natal, and North West.
- **Participants:** 153 purposively selected nurse leaders from purposively selected provinces.
- **Data** were collected through structured group narrative sessions between May and July 2024, using semi-structured questionnaires aligned with global frameworks.
- **A deductive thematic narrative analysis :** Guided by Braun and Clarke's six-phase framework (2006) was employed to identify themes.
- **Reflexivity and positionality:** Team members engaged in ongoing critical reflection through debriefing sessions, peer validation and interpretive dialogue to ensure that findings authentically represented participant experiences.
- **Ethical Considerations:** Ethical certificate obtained from the Walter Sisulu University Health Sciences Research Ethics Committee

FINDINGS



THEMES	SUBTHEMES
Workforce planning and Career Path Development	-Persistent Nursing shortages -Limited opportunities for career progression
Capacity building through Continuing Professional Development	-Inadequate access to in-service training and leadership training
Organisational Support and leadership for retention	-High workloads and role strain -Lack of institutional support mechanisms



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DISCUSSION



Theme 1: Workforce planning and career pathway development

- q Persistent nursing shortages emerged as a dominant concern among participants.
- q Leaders consistently described chronic understaffing, especially in rural settings, and highlighted the impact of international nurse migration, lack of budget to fill vacant posts, and shortages in specialised cadres.
- q These challenges were especially acute in rural and under-resourced settings.

Theme 2: Capacity building through continuing professional development

- q Leadership development through CPD emerged as a central concern.
- q Participants cited the absence of standardised in-service leadership programmes and uneven access to CPD, particularly in rural contexts.
- q This finding aligns with global evidence advocating structured, context-specific CPD frameworks that address evolving healthcare demands and support lifelong learning (World Health Organization, 2021, 2025; Sigma Theta Tau International, 2023).

DISCUSSION



Theme 3: Organisational support and leadership for retention

- q Participants identified high workloads, poor infrastructure and fragmented wellness systems as key impediments to nurse well-being.
- q These systemic issues, compounded by the absence of psychological safety and enabling work environments, contribute to burnout and attrition—echoing prior global findings (Aiken et al., 2012; Manley & Jackson, 2020).
- q Participants reported that political interference often undermines strategic leadership and nurse autonomy.
- q Thus, political astuteness among nurse leaders was identified as an urgent area for development.

ACTIONS



- Developing and institutionalising a national framework for nursing leadership competencies in South Africa.
- The framework must prioritise leadership development in strategic planning, political astuteness, digital health, gender equity and workforce well-being.
- Develop provincial national nursing leadership competency framework implementation plans.
- Inclusion of leadership competencies in continuing professional development programmes and provincial skills development plans.

Conclusion



- The pilot study provides contextual insights into the leadership development needs of a limited group of nurse leaders, which will inform the refinement of data collection tools and the design of a larger, national study.
- The findings are not generalisable but offer valuable direction for developing a contextually grounded Nursing Leadership Competency Framework and supporting strategic leadership capacity-building aligned with South Africa's health system strengthening goals.

Conclusion



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