COMMENTARY

Education for Excellence or Experience for Efficiency? A Policy Dilemma in Service Structure of Nurses for Promotion?

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Keywords: Education,experience,policy

Received : 27-6-2026 Accepted : 20-09-2026 Published: 01-11-2026

Nurses are the backbone of our healthcare system. Yet in Pakistan, their career progression has often been constrained by outdated or unfair service structures, limited higher-grade posts, and promotion criteria that inadequately balance education and experience. These issues not only demotivate nurses, but risk undermining the quality of patient care, as experienced staff stagnate while less-experienced but more academically qualified nurses advance [1]. The nursing service structure in Pakistan, particularly in Khyber Pukhtankhwa (KP), has been widely criticized for offering limited opportunities for career advancement despite nurses' essential role in providing front-line care across the province. Many nurses in KP report that the current promotion system is opaque, inequitable, and overly restrictive [2].

The Khyber Pukhtankhwa (KP) Health Department proposed a five-tier restructuring of the nurses in 2018, service framework in response to longstanding grievances, aiming to reduce stagnation in the base grade (BPS-16) and increase opportunities for higher-grade positions: BPS-16 (50%), BPS-17 (30%), BPS-18 (15%), BPS-19 (4.8%), and BPS-20 (0.2%) as the existing system allowed little upward mobility and left many BPS-16 nurses retiring without ever receiving a promotion due to the scarcity of higher-grade posts [3]. A major area of contention has been the balance between education and seniority; new service rules that placed greater emphasis on academic qualifications for advancement—such as for promotion to BPS-17 (Head Nurse)—were rejected by many nurses, who argued that senior staff with extensive experience were being unfairly overlooked [4].

Experienced nurses contribute essential tacit knowledge—such as clinical judgment, leadership, and the ability to manage complex situations—yet promotion systems that overemphasize academic qualifications risk undervaluing this on-the-job expertise. At the same time, higher education remains vital because formal training in management, research, and patient safety strengthens competence, and studies have shown that satisfaction with educational preparation correlates with overall job satisfaction among nurses [5].

To enhance career progression for nurses in Pakistan, a standardized promotions policy is necessary, emphasizing a balance between education and experience within a seniority-cum-fitness model. This policy should involve nursing associations and staff in its development to ensure legitimacy. Increasing higher-grade positions through workforce planning is critical, alongside transparent promotion mechanisms that include accessible criteria and nursing representation. Continuing education support via scholarships and certifications fosters professional growth, while an accountability framework ensures compliance with service rules. Reforming promotion standards is essential for retaining experienced nurses, promoting lifelong learning, and improving patient care, thus enhancing the nursing profession and healthcare capacity. To achieve genuine progress, KP must adopt fair, transparent, and balanced promotion criteria that value both experience and academic qualifications.

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