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"...*instead of spending two hours in books, I'm discussing with my guy...*": Students' perspectives on their academic performance in a Ugandan nursing school.

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Abstract

Background
Nurses and midwives constitute 50% of the global health workforce, yet critical shortages, especially in sub-Saharan Africa, limit healthcare delivery. Uganda reports one of the lowest staffing levels globally, with rural districts like Pallisa severely affected. While several educational enablers and barriers have been documented elsewhere, limited evidence exists locally. This study aimed to explore nursing and midwifery students' perceptions of factors influencing their academic performance in Pallisa.

Methods
This was a qualitative, explorative study that employed focus group discussions (FGDs) with 28 certificate-level nursing and midwifery students at AAMSNM, stratified by year of study. Four FGDs were conducted, and data were collected using a semi-structured interview guide. Audio recordings were transcribed, coded, and analyzed thematically to identify institutional, teacher-related, and student-related factors influencing academic performance.

Results
Students identified a range of barriers to academic performance, including limited access to skills labs, power outages, strict institutional policies, and overlapping academic schedules. Teacher-related challenges such as fast-paced instruction, incomplete syllabus coverage, and lack of guidance were commonly reported. Personal factors like poor time management, exam-related stress, smartphone and romantic distractions, and inadequate preparation also emerged as critical issues. Positive contributors to academic success included peer group discussions, tutor engagement via WhatsApp, clinical exposure, and supportive administrative adjustments such as flexible exam policies and access to Wi-Fi.

Conclusion
Academic performance among nursing students is shaped by multifactorial challenges, many of which are modifiable. Addressing institutional constraints, enhancing teacher-student interaction, and promoting student-centered academic support systems can significantly improve student outcomes. Peer collaboration, structured exam preparation, and emotional support mechanisms are also vital in fostering success.

Recommendations
Academic institutions need to invest in mentorship, digital learning tools, and flexible academic structures to support students' academic and emotional well-being.

Keywords: *Academic performance, Nursing education, Student perspectives, Institutional barriers*
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Background

Nurses and midwives comprise half (50%) of the global health workforce and play a critical role in primary and maternal health care. However, a significant shortfall of nearly 5 million globally threatens service delivery [1]. In Africa, especially sub-Saharan and East Africa, the shortage is alarming, with about 1 nurse/midwife per 1,000 people compared to 3 globally; the region accounts for over half the global deficit [2]. Uganda faces some of the lowest staffing levels worldwide, with ratios showing 1 per 36,800, amidst urban-rural disparities [3]. While there's no recent data for Pallisa district, rural shortages suggest staffing levels are likely below national averages, exacerbating healthcare access challenges.

Recent studies have highlighted key enhancers of nursing and midwifery education. Adequate funding was found to support infrastructure and learning resources, improving the overall training environment [4]. Competency-based curricula were reported to enhance clinical readiness and align with global standards [5]. Faculty development, including continuing professional development programs, was shown to improve teaching quality and educator motivation [4]. Access to diverse clinical placements and strong preceptorship reportedly increased student confidence and practical skills [6], and the integration of simulation and e-learning helped bridge gaps in real-world clinical exposure [7]. Together, these factors create a strong foundation for producing a competent nursing and midwifery workforce.

Several studies have identified key barriers that hinder nursing and midwifery education, particularly in low-resource settings. Short and fragmented clinical rotations were reported to limit students' ability to gain practical competence during placements, especially in Morocco [8]. High workloads, inadequate clinical equipment, and a lack of supervisors were cited as significant barriers to effective clinical instruction across sub-Saharan Africa [9]. In Ethiopia, it was found that overcrowded hospitals and the absence of professional role models discouraged student engagement and confidence in clinical learning [10]. Poor infrastructure, insufficient classroom space, and weak leadership in training institutions were also noted to compromise the learning environment in Nigeria and Somalia [11]. In Ghana, newly appointed nurse educators were found to struggle with limited teaching skills, inadequate mentorship, and unclear job expectations, affecting the quality of education delivered [12]. A review across sub-Saharan Africa further reported that outdated curricula, underfunded institutions, and a lack of faculty development constrained both the quality and expansion of nursing programs [13]. Lastly, inconsistencies in student performance were linked to the absence of standardized clinical teaching and evaluation frameworks across nursing schools [14].

Regardless of the several interventions put in place and known barriers in other countries and regions, there is limited data on the perceptions of students towards their performance in Pallisa, and hence, the study aimed to explore them.

Methods and materials

The study design

This was a descriptive qualitative study.

Study approach

It followed a qualitative study approach, which sought in-depth information about the subject.

Study area

This study was carried out at AAMSNM, located along the Pallisa- Kumi highway, in Pallisa district, Eastern region, Uganda.

Study population

This study was done among the certificate students at AAMSNM.

Inclusion criteria

All the students enrolled to study at AAMSNM.

Exclusion criteria

Students in year one, semester one.

Potential bias

Selection bias may have occurred as all participants were from a single institution, limiting the generalizability of findings. While stratification by year captured varied perspectives, including multiple schools in future research would provide broader insights.

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Social desirability bias was possible since participants discussed sensitive topics in group settings, which may have influenced responses. This was minimized by ensuring anonymity and using open-ended questions, though individual interviews could offer more candid views.

Researcher bias may have affected data interpretation due to the researchers' affiliation with the institution. To reduce this, transcripts were cross-checked by multiple reviewers, and independent analysts were involved to ensure objectivity.

Sampling method

The participants in this study were enrolled by a stratified sampling technique whereby a small group of 6-8 participants was selected from each set.

Data collection method

Focused group discussions: This involved a group of 6-8 participants interacting with the interviewer about the topic under study. In this study, a total of four FGDs were conducted using participants from the same year of study per FGD. The participants included both male and female nursing students in each group. It was also guided by a series of questions which were also open-ended ended and their voice recordings were captured.

Ethical consideration

A proposal was presented to the research committee at AAMSNM for approval, and thereafter, the participants were asked to sign an informed consent form to promote autonomy, and they were also assured of the freedom to exit the study. Participants were also assured of their privacy and confidentiality during the study period and even after the study. Participant privacy was ensured by avoiding the use of their names, but they were given numbers that were matched with the voice recordings. Before the participant's voice is recorded, the researcher obtains permission from the participant to avoid suspicion of their information being shared with others.

Data analysis

After collecting the data from this study, a step-by-step process was applied to create meaning from the results obtained. The audio recordings were listened to several times to get familiar with the data collected, then the data was transcribed in English, and organized depending on the opinions. After it was coded, analyzed, and then reported.

Results

Demographic data

Data was collected from certificate students except those in year one, semester one. Data collection involved 28 participants.

Table 1: Demographic data

Year of study	Gender		Total
	Male	Female	
Year one, semester two	02	06	08
Year two semester one	03	04	07
Year two semester two	01	05	06
Year three semester one	04	03	07
Total	10	18	28

Coding tables

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Table 2: showing institutional factors influencing academic performance

Main Category	Theme	Subtheme	Code	Quote
Institutional	Factors for Poor Performance	Inadequate Resources	Limited lab access	*"Every time we go to the lab, we find other sets, and we end up missing our practicals."*
			Skills lab access, limited resources, timetable conflicts	
		Inadequate facilities	Power interruptions	"The generator was on and off, and electricity cuts made it hard to prepare for discussions or exercises."
			Overcrowded classes	"Since there are many in class... It's hard to analyze which student is missing, a slow learner, or needs help."
			Limited access to necessities	"No water in the showers…teacher says come for the lecture. Do you think I'll come to the lecture? No, I'll stay in my bed."
			Food and accommodation issues	"The school must provide students with meals during clinical attachment. If not, let them camp at Butebu for one month."
		Policies and Rules	Strict rules, late fee deadlines, lack of flexibility	"The strict rules that are put in the school...are leading to my poor performance." "They send us home during exam time for fees...and it's hard to get the money and also come back and concentrate."
		Overlapping Tasks	Misaligned Schedules	"They take students… coming back for internal assessments. What are they going to answer?" "By the time I come back from Ongino… it will get me when I am just exhausted."
		Disorganized seminar schedules	Seminars held late	"We have seminars two weeks before exams, which is too late to identify and correct our mistakes."
		Seminar Organization	Poor planning, mismatched content, inconsistent tutor involvement	"During seminars, some students are benefiting while others are just sitting idle." "Tutors appear for a few minutes and then leave, making it hard for us to get proper guidance."
	Factors for Good Performance	Improved infrastructure	Standby power supply	"At least there is a standby power supply that can facilitate our discussions and preparation for exercises."
			Library usage	"Last semester our library was open, so we as students used to go there to do some research."
		Supportive administration	Allowing exam sitting	"Nowadays, they let students sit for exams even if they have outstanding payments, which reduces stress."
			Attendance lists	"The registrar made sure that he provided attendance lists... but it came up because dodging was too much."
			Wi-Fi access for research	"We also thank them for the Wi-Fi. It has helped some of us... People go to research on the internet."

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Table 3 shows teacher-related factors influencing academic performance

Main Category	Theme	Subtheme	Code	Quote
Teachers	Factors for Poor Performance	Ineffective teaching methods	Fast-paced teaching	"The tutors are too fast, and slow learners cannot follow."
			Research without guidance, an incomplete syllabus	"They tell us to research but don't provide proper guidance...you might end up spotting and getting incomplete information." "Endeavour to finish the syllabus instead of leaving gaps for us to figure out."
		Poor guidance for research	Lack of research direction	"We don't have a guideline on researching. You just go to the library and research randomly."
			Lack of encouragement or career guidance	"Tutors should start by explaining the positive side of our program to motivate students." "They should guide and counsel students who have personal issues like family problems or sickness."
		Tutor Absenteeism	Lack of Commitment by Tutors	"A tutor may even appear once a week… and even when they come, they come at the wrong hour."
		Lack of structured teaching	Incomplete coverage	"They summarize two to three topics in one lesson without ensuring students have complete notes."
	Factors for Good Performance	Improved tutor engagement	Joining student WhatsApp groups	"Some tutors have joined WhatsApp discussion groups, making it easier for students to access information and clarify doubts."
			Structured question approach	"They would bring questions like how you are supposed to attempt... it helped some of us do well in particular course units."
		Encouraging independent learning	Early research tasks	"The tutors encourage us to research before they teach, which helps us build prior knowledge."
		Regular attendance	Attendance tracking	"The registrar introduced attendance lists... at least it made people attend class more regularly."

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Table 4 shows student-related factors for poor academic performance

Main Category	Theme	Subtheme	Code	Quote
Students	Factors for Poor Performance	Poor preparation	Spot reading for exams	"We try spot reading based on past papers, and sometimes we end up off-topic or missing crucial content."
			Poor attendance	"Since there are many in class, a tutor would not say, This is a missing student... Most of the time, they are in hostels, especially boys."
			Inadequate guidance on the question approach	"We are not oriented about the question approach. We are dying alone as students."
		Stress during exams	Stress from practical sessions	"During practicals, someone stresses you by making you redo tasks, and it can make someone lose hope even if they were prepared."
			Tuition-related stress	"Tutors sending us for tuition…spend much time at home because the parent is not depositing money."
			Personal Loss	"Maybe I receive bad news like I have lost my parent… You will be tortured psychologically."
		Poo Time mismanagement	Inconsistent lab practice	"We access the lab only during exam preparation, so we end up cramming instead of understanding the skills."
			Smartphone misuse	"People are too much on TikTok, going to YouTube... instead of doing research work."
			Family conflicts, financial difficulties, health challenges	"When I'm sent home for fees, I sometimes stay for two or three weeks...it's hard to concentrate after coming back." "Family wrangles or sickness can distract me from focusing on my studies."
		Distractions	Lack of focus on academics	"A lot of students spend more time doing what's not supposed to, like unproductive stuff, instead of concentrating... The most common thing here is coupling."
			Romantic Distractions	"Instead of spending two hours in books, I'm discussing with my guy…leaving you with the mood, already stimulated."
				"People want to leave this school early when they have wives and husbands. They have forgotten the reason why they are here."
				"A boy is dating more than one girl... Instead of concentrating on books, that competition takes over."
			Lack of focus on expected questions	"What you expect is not what you get…we don't know even which one is the specific nursing care."
			Poor attendance	"Tutors teach based on the course outline, but they add something extra... students who missed class miss this additional input."

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				"Girls dodge lectures. Boys dodge lectures. Students even cheat by signing attendance for others."
			Neglect of academics	"Most failed because they gave more time to one activity compared to why they were here."
		Misinterpretation of questions	Misunderstanding Exam Questions	"Since a student has seen abortion… You just rush directly and give maybe causes of abortion… yet the question was saying differentiate."
		Student differences	Gender differences in practicals	"Girls do better in practicals compared to the boys because most of them dodge."
			Bragging Among Students	"Bragging during discussions…you feel yourself, and it discourages others."
			Gender stereotypes	"This anatomy is meant for boys… first aid is for girls."
			Tribalism	"The Gishus are discussing alone. The Gweres are discussing alone. Tribalism is causing disunity in discussions."

Table 5 shows student-related factors for good performance

Main Category	Theme	Subtheme	Code	Quote
Students	Factors for Good Performance	Peer collaboration	Group discussions	"Group discussions have helped us a lot, especially when we work together to tackle questions and learn from each other."
				"Discussions, I personally, I benefit more in discussions... plus the contribution of the tutors."
			Peer discussions and seminars	"Set xxx, we tried our best, we discussed…These questions are very good and they helped us."
		Positive reinforcement	Improved tutor support	"Nowadays, tutors are showing us how to answer questions, which is helping us prepare better for exams."
		Recreational Activities	Sports and cultural events	"We had inter-class games, CU handover, cultural party…these activities are helping, refreshing, and we are interacting with others."
		shopping	For example us ladies, we ladies don't have ready sanitary towels, bags, lotions, and they are not there at the canteen, so sometimes they should allow us out.	"We also thank them for the Wi-Fi. It has helped some of us... People go to research on the internet."

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		Practical Experience	Clinical exposure	"Paying attention to these patients…we used those patients when it's time for answering a paper."

The performance of nursing and midwifery students is shaped by a variety of factors that influence their academic achievements, both positively and negatively. These factors encompass institutional resources, teaching methods, and student behaviors. Institutional factors, such as inadequate resources and strict rules, create significant barriers to student success. Teaching methods and tutor engagement also play critical roles in shaping student learning outcomes. On the other hand, students' factors, such as poor preparation, time mismanagement, and personal distractions, can hinder their academic progress. However, positive influences, including peer collaboration, supportive tutors, and practical experience, have also been identified as key contributors to success. This narrative explores these factors in depth, highlighting student quotes to illustrate the challenges and opportunities that influence their educational experience.

Institutional factors for poor performance

Institutional shortcomings are a significant contributor to poor performance among students. These challenges span inadequate resources, insufficient facilities, and strict policies that limit students' ability to perform to their potential.

Inadequate resources

A major issue reported by students is the lack of access to the skills lab, a critical resource for nursing and midwifery training. One student lamented, *"We don't have access to that skills lab... Whenever we go there, there is another group."* However, the lack of structure in lab management results in students frequently missing practical sessions. As one student noted, *"Every time we go to the lab, we find other sets, and we end up missing our practicals."*

Inadequate facilities

The school's facilities also pose challenges, particularly in terms of power reliability and classroom space. Frequent power interruptions hinder preparation and discussions. One student shared, *"The generator was on and off, and electricity cuts made it hard to prepare for discussions or exercises."* Additionally, overcrowded classrooms limit tutors' ability to provide individualized attention, with one respondent stating, *"Since there are many in class... It's hard to analyze which student is missing, a slow learner, or needs help."*

Necessities such as water and food are also insufficiently provided. This discourages students from attending lectures, as one student explained: *"No water in the showers…teacher says come for the lecture. Do you think I'll come to the lecture? No, I'll stay in my bed."* The lack of meals during clinical attachments further compounds this issue, prompting one student to propose, *"The school must provide students with meals during clinical attachment. If not, let them camp at Butebo for one month."*

Policies and rules

Strict rules and inflexible policies have a detrimental impact on student performance. Students are often sent home during exams due to unpaid fees, disrupting their focus and learning. A respondent remarked, *"The strict rules that are put in the school... are leading to my poor performance."* Another shared their frustration: "*They send us home during exam time for fees... and it's hard to get the money and also come back and concentrate*."

Overlapping tasks and misaligned schedules

Students also struggle with overlapping tasks and poorly aligned schedules, particularly when clinical attachments conflict with internal assessments. One student noted, *"They take students… coming back for internal assessments. What are they going to answer?"* This exhaustion from back-to-back responsibilities hampers academic performance, as highlighted by another student: *"By the time I come back from Ongino… it will get me when I am just exhausted."*

Institutional factors for good performance

Despite the challenges, the institution has implemented several positive measures that support student performance. These include infrastructure improvements, enhanced resource access, and flexible administrative practices.

Improved infrastructure

The availability of a standby power supply is a notable improvement, enabling uninterrupted learning. One

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respondent acknowledged, *"At least there is a standby power supply that can facilitate our discussions and preparation for exercises."* Similarly, the functional library has become a valuable resource for research, as shared by a student: *"Last semester our library was open, so we as students used to go there to do some research."*

Supportive administration

Administrative flexibility in allowing students with outstanding fees to sit for exams has reduced stress and improved focus. A respondent appreciated this change, saying, *"Nowadays, they let students sit for exams even if they have outstanding payments, which reduces stress."* Efforts to ensure class attendance, such as maintaining attendance lists, have also had a positive impact. One student noted, *"The registrar made sure he provided attendance lists... but it came up because dodging was too much."*

Access to technology

The introduction of Wi-Fi has significantly enhanced students' ability to conduct research. One student expressed gratitude: *"We also thank them for the Wi-Fi. It has helped some of us... People go to research on the internet."*

Seminar organization

While seminars remain a challenge when scheduled too close to exams, they offer opportunities for improvement. One respondent commented, *"We have seminars two weeks before exams, which is too late to identify and correct our mistakes."* Addressing these scheduling issues could enhance their effectiveness

Teachers as contributors to poor performance

The teaching practices at the school present several obstacles to effective learning, which negatively impact student performance. These issues include ineffective teaching methods, poor guidance for research, lack of encouragement, absenteeism, and a lack of structured teaching.

Ineffective teaching methods

Many students struggle to keep up with the pace at which tutors deliver content. One student voiced frustration, saying, *"The tutors are too fast, and slow learners cannot follow*." This hurried approach leaves slower learners at a disadvantage, preventing them from fully understanding the material. Moreover, the lack of complete syllabus coverage exacerbates the issue. A student lamented, *"Endeavour to finish the syllabus instead of leaving gaps for us to figure out."*

Tutors often assign research tasks without adequate guidance, leading to confusion and incomplete understanding. As one student explained, *"They tell us to research but don't provide proper guidance... You might end up spotting and getting incomplete information."* This lack of direction hampers students' ability to develop a thorough grasp of critical concepts.

Poor guidance for research

The absence of structured guidelines for research further compounds students' challenges. One student remarked, *"We don't have a guideline on researching. You just go to the library and research randomly."* This unstructured approach results in inefficiencies and gaps in knowledge, leaving students ill-prepared for examinations and practical tasks.

Lack of encouragement and career guidance

Tutors often fail to motivate students or provide career-oriented guidance. One student emphasized the need for positive reinforcement: *"Tutors should start by explaining the positive side of our program to motivate students."* Personal issues such as family problems and illnesses also go unaddressed, which affects students' academic focus. As another student suggested, *"They should guide and counsel students who have personal issues like family problems or sickness."*

Tutor absenteeism

Inconsistent attendance by tutors significantly undermines students' learning experiences. One student pointed out, *"A tutor may even appear once a week… and even when they come, they come at the wrong hour."* This lack of commitment results in missed opportunities for interaction and clarification of doubts, leaving students feeling unsupported.

Lack of structured teaching

The delivery of content is often disorganized, with tutors summarizing multiple topics in one session without ensuring

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students have comprehensive notes. One student explained, *"They summarize two to three topics in one lesson without ensuring students have complete notes."* This approach creates gaps in knowledge, forcing students to rely on self-study to fill in the blanks.

Teachers as enablers of good performance

While there are challenges, some tutors employ practices that foster better academic outcomes. These include improved engagement, structured question approaches, encouragement of independent learning, and consistent attendance monitoring.

Improved tutor engagement

Some tutors have taken proactive steps to enhance engagement by joining student-led WhatsApp groups. This initiative makes it easier for students to access information and seek clarification. As one student shared, *"Some tutors have joined WhatsApp discussion groups, making it easier for students to access information and clarify doubts."* This form of digital engagement fosters closer interaction between students and tutors.

Structured question approach

The introduction of structured approaches to answering questions has significantly improved students' academic performance. One student reflected on this positive change: *"They would bring questions like how you are supposed to attempt... it helped some of us do well in particular course units."* Such practices equip students with the skills to tackle exams confidently.

Encouraging independent learning

Encouraging students to research topics before they are taught in class fosters a culture of independent learning and critical thinking. A student appreciated this method, stating, *"The tutors encourage us to research before they teach, which helps us build prior knowledge."* This approach not only enhances understanding but also prepares students for active participation in class discussions.

Regular attendance monitoring

The introduction of attendance lists by the registrar has positively influenced classroom participation. One student noted, *"The registrar introduced attendance lists... at least it made people attend class more regularly."* By ensuring that students are present in class, this practice promotes a consistent learning environment.

Students' factors for poor performance

Poor preparation: A key obstacle
One of the most significant barriers to academic success is poor preparation. Students often resort to "spot reading" based on past papers, an approach that often leads to missing essential content. As one student reflected, *"We try spot reading based on past papers, and sometimes we end up off-topic or missing crucial content."* This highlights a critical flaw in the study habits that many students adopt, emphasizing a reactive rather than proactive approach to learning.
Additionally, poor attendance exacerbates the issue. Students in large classes find it difficult for tutors to keep track of absentees, and many students, particularly boys, tend to miss classes for various reasons. A student shared, *"Since there are many in class, a tutor would not be like, this is a missing student... Most of the time, they are in hostels, especially boys."* This lack of consistent attendance further hampers their ability to stay engaged with the curriculum, contributing to academic struggles.

Inadequate guidance on the question approach

Another challenge is the lack of guidance on how to approach exam questions. Many students feel unprepared to tackle questions effectively, leading to stress and confusion during exams. A student expressed, "*We are not oriented about the question approach. We are dying alone as students."* This lack of direction can leave students struggling to understand what is expected of them in exams, contributing to poor performance.

Stress during exams and practical sessions

Stress is a recurring theme in the lives of students, especially during exams and practical sessions. During practicals, the pressure to redo tasks can overwhelm students, even those who are well-prepared. "*During practicals, someone stresses you by making you redo tasks, and it can make someone lose hope even if they were prepared,"* one student noted. This indicates how the emotional toll of practical sessions can diminish a student's confidence and hinder their academic performance.

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Tuition-related stress is another concern. A student shared their experience of financial difficulty: *"Tutors sending us for tuition… spend much time at home because the parent is not depositing money."* The pressure to manage academic responsibilities alongside financial constraints significantly impacts a student's ability to focus on studies.

Personal loss, such as the death of a family member, can also take a toll on a student's mental health, compounding academic stress. As one student put it, *"Maybe I receive bad news like I have lost my parent… You will be tortured psychologically."* This quote underscores the profound emotional distress that such personal events can cause, making it difficult for students to concentrate on their studies.

Time mismanagement and distractions

Effective time management is crucial for academic success, but many students struggle with this. Inconsistent lab practice is one example of poor time management, with students accessing the lab only during exam preparation. As one student explained, "*We access the lab only during exam preparation, so we end up cramming instead of understanding the skills."* This short-term, last-minute approach to studying and practical work leaves little room for thorough learning and mastery of skills.

Smartphone misuse is another significant distraction. Students find themselves spending more time on social media platforms like TikTok and YouTube rather than focusing on research or coursework. *"People are too much on TikTok, going to YouTube... instead of doing research work,"* one student pointed out. This addiction to digital distractions significantly hinders students' ability to concentrate on their studies.

Family conflicts, financial difficulties, and health challenges also contribute to poor academic performance. As one student shared, "*When I'm sent home for fees, I sometimes stay for two or three weeks... It's hard to concentrate after coming back."* Family issues, whether financial or relational, can deeply affect a student's mental state, leading to prolonged periods of distraction and a lack of focus. These personal struggles often translate into academic struggles, as students find it difficult to regain focus after such setbacks.

Romantic distractions

Another form of distraction, particularly among young students, is romantic involvement. The impact of romantic relationships on academic performance is evident in many cases. One student shared, *"Instead of spending two hours in books, I'm discussing with my guy… leaving you with the mood, already stimulated."* This demonstrates how emotional and physical energy spent on romantic distractions can take a toll on academic performance.

Students often prioritize personal relationships over their education, which leads to neglecting their studies. "*People want to leave this school early when they have wives and husbands. They have forgotten the reason why they are here,"* said one student. This shift in focus can have long-term consequences on academic success, as students become less engaged in their coursework.

In some cases, students are involved in multiple romantic relationships, which further diverts their attention from their studies. *"A boy is dating more than one girl... Instead of concentrating on books, that competition takes over,"* one student explained. This form of distraction can create emotional turmoil and take away time that could be better spent on academic activities.

Misinterpretation of exam questions

Misunderstanding exam questions is another significant challenge that affects student performance. For instance, a student might misinterpret a question and answer in a way that is not aligned with what was asked. One student described, *"Since a student has seen abortion… You just rush directly and give maybe causes of abortion… yet the question was saying differentiate."* This type of misunderstanding can significantly impact the quality of responses and, in turn, affect the overall exam performance.

Student differences: gender and tribalism

Gender differences also play a role in student performance, particularly in practical sessions. As one student pointed out, *"Girls do better in practicals compared to the boys because most of them dodge."* This suggests that gender dynamics may affect student participation and performance in practical aspects of their education, with boys tending to avoid such sessions more than girls.

Tribalism is another issue that affects student collaboration and performance. A student commented, "The Gishus are discussing alone. The Gwerises are discussing alone. Tribalism is causing disunity in discussions." This division based on tribal lines undermines the effectiveness of group discussions, preventing students from working together cohesively and sharing knowledge freely.

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Factors contributing to good performance

Despite these challenges, there are several factors that contribute to good performance among students. Peer collaboration, for instance, has been identified as a crucial component of academic success. Group discussions allow students to tackle questions together, share knowledge, and learn from one another. One student explained, *"Group discussions have helped us a lot, especially when we work together to tackle questions and learn from each other."*

Peer discussions and seminars also provide opportunities for students to refine their understanding of course material. *"Set X, we tried our best, we discussed… These questions are very good and they helped us,"* one student shared. The collective effort of students, along with the guidance from tutors, can make a significant difference in exam preparation.

Positive reinforcement and improved tutor support are other factors that contribute to better academic outcomes. *"Nowadays, tutors are showing us how to answer questions, which is helping us prepare better for exams,"* a student noted. This type of guidance helps students develop the skills necessary to succeed in exams.

Recreational activities and practical experience

Recreational activities also play a vital role in student well-being and academic performance. Sports and cultural events provide students with opportunities to relax, refresh, and interact with their peers. One student highlighted, *"We had inter-class games, CU handover, culture party… these activities are helping, refreshing, and we are interacting with others.*" These events help alleviate the stress of academic life, providing students with a much-needed break and fostering a sense of community.

Finally, practical experience through clinical exposure is another key factor that supports student success. *"Paying attention to these patients… we used those patients when it's time for answering a paper,"* one student explained. Clinical practice allows students to apply their theoretical knowledge in real-world settings, reinforcing their learning and preparing them for professional practice.

Discussion

The factors influencing the academic performance of nursing and midwifery students are many, encompassing institutional, teaching, and student-related elements. These factors interact in complex ways to either hinder or promote academic success. The following discussion explains and explores these factors in greater detail, drawing connections to relevant literature.

Institutional Factors

Institutional factors play a significant role in shaping the academic environment and directly impacting student performance. Inadequate resources, such as limited access to skills labs, overcrowded classrooms, and power interruptions, were prominent barriers. Studies have shown that inadequate infrastructure can severely hinder the learning experience of students [15]. For instance, students in this study expressed frustration with the lack of access to essential learning resources, including practical training spaces. This was reflected in many reflects a broader issue in many educational institutions, particularly in low-resource settings, where students struggle to access essential materials and facilities, making it difficult to achieve practical competence [16].

Power interruptions, specifically, have been shown to negatively impact both theoretical and practical learning, as students are unable to engage fully in discussions or exercises. This was also evident in a study about barriers to e-learning, as power was a major factor in learning [17]. This limitation affects not only learning but also the mental well-being of students, who face increased stress when their study environments are unstable. Additionally, overcrowded classes contribute to reduced individualized attention for students, making it harder to identify and address specific learning needs by teachers, as also highlighted in a study by [18].

The issue of strict institutional policies and overlapping tasks also emerged as a critical stressor. Rigid fee deadlines and late examination schedules, especially in cases of financial distress, significantly affect students' ability to focus on academics, which is consistent with findings by [19], who noted that financial stress is a major contributor to academic challenges.

Teaching factors

Ineffective teaching methods are another significant factor impacting student performance. As noted in the findings, tutors who use fast-paced teaching methods make it difficult for students to follow along, particularly for those who are slow learners. This observation aligns with previous research by [20], which suggests that teaching methods that fail to cater to diverse learning styles often lead to poor academic performance. In particular, the reliance on spot reading for exams, a strategy some students resort to, tends to be insufficient, as it does not provide a holistic

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understanding of the material and often results in students missing crucial information [21].

Additionally, the lack of guidance in research and exam question approach is another critical issue. Many students feel that they are left to figure things out on their own, which can lead to confusion and improper preparation. This highlights the importance of structured teaching and clear guidance from tutors in helping students prepare effectively for exams [22]. Tutors' inconsistent attendance and incomplete syllabus coverage further complicate matters, with students often feeling abandoned or misled in their educational journey, which was consistent in a study done in central Uganda about the impact of absenteeism of teachers on academic performance [23].

While ineffective teaching methods contribute to poor performance, improved tutor engagement, such as joining student WhatsApp groups or offering structured question approaches, has been shown to enhance academic outcomes. Studies have found that students who engage in regular, structured communication with their tutors perform better in assessments [24, 25]. Such methods foster a more supportive learning environment, where students can access help and clarification in real-time, thereby reducing the uncertainty and stress that many experience during exams.

Student factors

Student-related factors are often the most variable and complex contributors to academic performance. Poor preparation, as seen in the widespread reliance on spot reading for exams, is a significant barrier. Research has consistently shown that inadequate preparation is one of the leading causes of poor academic performance, particularly in nursing and medical programs where a deep understanding is essential [26].

In addition to inadequate preparation, poor attendance, and mismanagement of study time were identified as key issues. Students who do not attend classes regularly miss valuable in-class instruction, as tutors often add unlisted content that is not covered in the written syllabus. This resonates with findings by [27] who found that regular attendance was a strong predictor of academic success, as it ensures students are present for key lessons and discussions.

Students also face a range of personal challenges that affect their academic performance. Stress, particularly during exams, can be exacerbated by factors such as family problems, financial issues, and health challenges. The experience of losing a family member, for example, can be psychologically devastating and disrupt focus on studies. Similarly, financial difficulties, as reflected in students' comments about tuition-related stress, hinder their academic progress and increase anxiety, as also highlighted in the previous studies [28].

Distractions, both social and academic, also pose significant challenges. Romantic relationships, smartphone misuse, and lack of focus on academic tasks are frequently cited as reasons for poor performance among students. Studies have shown that social distractions and technology misuse are increasingly common issues that affect students' ability to concentrate and perform well academically [29].

Additionally, gender differences and tribalism were also noted, with some students feeling discouraged by the behaviors of their peers. This was also reflected as social dynamics in educational institutions, where social divisions that exist can affect collaboration and teamwork among students [30].

Factors for good performance

Despite the numerous challenges, several factors contribute positively to student performance. Peer collaboration, particularly through group discussions and seminars, was identified as a key factor for academic success. Group discussions allow students to engage with the material collaboratively, learn from each other, and clarify doubts. Research has shown that peer collaboration significantly enhances learning outcomes, particularly in complex subjects like nursing and midwifery [31].

Additionally, positive reinforcement from tutors, such as providing clear exam guidelines and supporting independent learning, helps students feel more prepared and confident in their studies. Encouraging students to research before lessons aids in building prior knowledge, making it easier to understand new material during class [32]. Moreover, recreational activities, such as sports and cultural events, provide a much-needed balance to students' academic lives. These activities not only serve as stress relievers but also foster interaction and community building, which can enhance overall student well-being and academic engagement, as evidenced in a study done at the University of Health and Allied Sciences [33].

Practical experience, especially through clinical exposure, was also highlighted as a critical factor for good performance. Students who engage in hands-on learning with patients are better able to integrate theoretical knowledge with practical skills, which is essential for nursing and midwifery students. Clinical exposure provides an invaluable opportunity to prepare for real-world scenarios, strengthening students' confidence and competence in applying their learning in practice. This also rhymes with a study conducted in the Philippines, where

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clinical exposure ensured students' acquisition of clinical skills [34].

Generalizability

While the findings provide valuable insights into the factors affecting academic performance, they may not be fully applicable to other institutions with different contexts, resources, and challenges.

Conclusion

Academic performance among nursing and midwifery students is influenced by a complex interplay of institutional, instructional, and personal factors. Challenges such as inadequate learning resources, strict policies, ineffective teaching methods, and emotional stressors hinder student success. At the same time, positive influences like peer collaboration, supportive tutor engagement, and meaningful clinical exposure play a vital role in promoting academic achievement. Addressing these barriers while reinforcing the enablers can foster a more supportive and effective learning environment. Collaborative efforts among educators, administrators, and students are essential to creating systems that not only improve academic outcomes but also promote student well-being and professional growth.

Limitations of the study

The study relied heavily on self-reported data from students, which may have introduced biases such as exaggeration or underreporting of issues. Additionally, some respondents may have hesitated to fully express their concerns due to fear of repercussions, despite assurances of confidentiality.

The timing of data collection posed another challenge, as some interviews coincided with examination periods and practical sessions, potentially limiting student participation and the comprehensiveness of their responses. Similarly, access to some respondents was restricted due to their clinical placements or personal commitments, resulting in a few missed perspectives.

Lastly, the study faced constraints related to resources and time. Limited availability of funds restricted the researchers' ability to conduct extensive follow-up interviews or implement broader data collection tools, such as surveys involving larger sample sizes. Time constraints further limited the opportunity for more detailed exploration of certain themes that emerged during the research process.
Despite these limitations, the study offers valuable insights into the factors influencing student performance and provides a basis for recommendations to improve academic outcomes at AAMSNM. Future research should address these limitations to provide an even more comprehensive understanding of the issues explored.

Recommendations

To address the factors influencing academic performance among nursing and midwifery students, several key recommendations can be made for institutions, teachers, and students themselves.
First, institutions should prioritize improving resources and facilities. This includes ensuring consistent planned access to skills labs, adequate power supply, and eliminating issues like overcrowded classrooms. Investments in infrastructure, such as reliable power and internet access, are crucial for creating an environment conducive to learning. A more balanced student-to-teacher ratio can also facilitate better individualized attention, allowing tutors to better support students, especially those struggling with specific challenges. Institutions should also consider revising policies, particularly concerning fees and attendance, commitment letters, to reduce the stress that financial constraints impose on students and allow them to focus more on their studies. Inter-institutional seminars with sister institutions should be implemented. Sports galas, parties, national seminars, and study tours will promote better refreshment for students to reduce stress. Furthermore, Pinning of notices for fees will promote better learning for the students as they will be stress-free from fee issues.
Teachers, on the other hand, must adopt more inclusive and flexible teaching methods. They should strive to accommodate different learning speeds and provide structured, clear guidance on research, exam preparation, and practical skills. Teachers could also benefit from joining online platforms like WhatsApp discussion groups, where they can interact with students outside the classroom and clarify doubts in real-time. Additionally, more emphasis should be placed on completing the syllabus comprehensively and offering support for students who may struggle with specific topics. Regular attendance by tutors and better planning of seminars and workshops would help ensure that students receive timely and effective academic support.
For students, effective time management and active class participation are essential for academic success. Students should aim to avoid the trap of spot reading and instead

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focus on consistent study habits that ensure a deeper understanding of the material. Collaborative learning, through group discussions and peer-led seminars, has proven effective and should be encouraged further. Students must also manage distractions, particularly those stemming from social media and personal relationships, which can divert attention from academic tasks. Additionally, seeking guidance and support from tutors for career counseling or personal issues can help students cope with external challenges, improving their overall well-being and academic performance.

Lastly, regular assessment and feedback from students on teaching and institutional practices would help identify areas of improvement. This feedback loop will foster a more responsive educational environment, where both faculty and administration can make necessary adjustments based on student needs. By addressing these factors holistically, the academic performance of nursing and midwifery students can be significantly improved, ensuring that they are well-prepared for their professional roles.

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Abbreviations

AAMSNM Alice Anume Memorial School of Nursing and Midwifery

Statement of no conflicting interests

The authors of this study declare that they have no conflicts of interest that could have influenced the outcomes, interpretation, or conclusions of this research. The study was conducted solely for academic and institutional purposes, to improve academic performance and institutional processes at AAMSNM and other institutions.

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