EXPERIENCING TRANSITION OF NOVICE ACADEMIC NURSE INTO HEAD OF DEPARTMENT: REFLECTIVE ACCOUNT

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ABSTRACT

Academic nurses appointed to leadership roles without preparation. Therefore, novice academic departments heads face a challenging environment. This paper reports and reflects on experiences of novice nursing academic heads from Jordan. In this study qualitative design using structured interviews with eight academic heads of nursing departments in Jordan was used. This study reports three issues: the role definition for an academic head, the required attributes for those heads and the important points to consider when starting the position. Based on results it recommends for the institutions to consider transitional period for the academics who will take administrative positions for the first time.

Keywords: Jordan, academic department management, nursing leadership, nursing education, career transition.

INTRODUCTION

Academic department chairs in nursing schools have a challenging role (The University of Sheffield, 2014). Many newly appointed chairpersons find the prior competencies they acquire in academia and service have little contribution in preparing them for their new role and duties (McDermid *et al*., 2013). In the higher education institutions, it's common practice to promote nurses educators to management based on educational qualifications and clinical capability instead of leadership skills (O'Connor and Yanni, 2012). The academic nurse in these positions hit in the middle of transitioning from a nurse educator to a manager. Rarely, the position transition is planned over a period of time, but more commonly it's not, and may be a surprise for staff including the person getting promoted. When novice manager appointed, it is challenging to describe adequately the conflicting feelings going amongst staff and department chairperson. This conflict typically leads to communication challenges that directly impact the effectiveness of chairs leadership skills. The academic chairpersons have enough obstacles to face without adding more fuel to the fire. Prepare the novice chairperson for both the expected and unexpected responses of peers, so he or she can expend more energy on other aspects of the transition.

Nursing department chairpersons have a challenging role in the framework of the universities and groups served by their programs. Nevertheless, many new academic heads realize that the competencies they gain while progressing to the ranks of academia or service do not adequately prepare them for their new responsibilities (McDermid *et al*., 2013). Although some of them served in department different committees and as academics; where they deal with d a small group of faculty and class rooms, takeover the chair entails a wide range of issues and actions. Prior to this they handle individual projects, and now they supervise and take responsibility for a department curriculum and schedule as well as peers promotion and research folder. They carry responsibility for directing relationships with in-house team and outdoor stakeholders, plus training settings, other university departments, and the health care system. This is in contrast to small scale relationships that rise from leading faculty committee of a small group of colleagues for a limited time. The academic chairperson has a responsibility to recruit and manage the educational programs of the academic department; and to coordinate with the wider university (Mintz-Binder, 2014; The University of Sheffield, 2014). The chairperson must advocate the interests of the nursing school among a university's middle level leadership, training settings, and other stakeholders to accumulate resources for sustaining programs or building up new ones (McDermid *et al*., 2013). Therefore, previous nursing service competencies may not effectively prepare a takeover-chair to successfully recruit faculty or manage change in an academic setting.

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Novice academic chairperson put feet in a challenging environment (Hull, 2012; Sebastian *et al.*, 2004). A worldwide financial crisis led to cut down recruitment budgets for nursing graduates regardless of shortage this influenced students enrolment in the nursing programs at most schools. Expanding nursing schools in Jordan and the Arab Gulf States (AGSs) undermine the running nursing programs, employers demand on a higher standard of talents. Moreover, referee and accreditation bodies are radically adding pressure on schools' rankings, the number of students enrolment, and their profits. All these challenges demanding to understand how new academic chairpersons can formulate and carry out immediate reactions. In this paper reporting the experiences of nursing department academic head based on personal interviews with eight colleagues from Jordan.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

Design and Sample
A qualitative design was used adopting semi structured personal interview to understand the experiences of new academic heads (Booth *et al.*, 2014). All those who assigned as heads of departments in five public universities in Jordan for the year 2013-14 were invited to participate. Eight of the 16 who were invited agreed to take part. Four of them were in that position for nine months and the others were almost 20 months. All who took part were assistant professors. Three of them were less than two years experience as academics and two had three years while the rest have four years or more.

Ethics
Participants were sent invitation letter with information sheet explain the purpose of the study. Upon conduction of semi structured in-depth interview; consent form obtained and assured the confidentiality and anonymity of the data they give out. The study was approved in accordance to the Research Ethics Committee in one of the Jordanian universities (FoNREC).

Data Collection
Data collected using semi structured interview, and written notes taken. Following interview guide to explore the transition experiences with three main topic questions and probing. The topics include prior experience, transition period and the ongoing experiences and adaptation reflections. The schedule was piloted in English with one of the colleagues in a private university and the data was used only to enhance the flow of the interview and the questions. The researcher personally summarized every interview by hand writing. Interview conducted in the participants offices individually.

Data Analysis
All data transcribed as notes on word processor software. Three printed copies of each transcript used for data analysis and the softcopy retained as backup. The data and the notes analyzed thematically by hand (Booth *et al.*, 2014; Vaismoradi *et al.*, 2013). A single transcript first coded by the researcher and another independent academic. Findings of this coding indicated similarity between both. Then the researcher listened to each interview recording at least once and read the transcript. This resulted in coding of the other seven transcripts. All codes were categorized by the researcher and the same independent academic independently and both reached to almost similar themes. Two main themes identified and further analysis applied on the notes after that.

RESULTS

This study reports key findings from the interviews and experiences on the position transitions and nursing academic department strategy. The two themes reported here are: First; the role definition for an academic head, and the required features for those heads. Second; the important points to consider when starting the position.

ROLE DEFINED

When academic nurses start the position of department chairperson, they come across several incongruent challenges. Some participants declared the peers ventilate a certain percent decline in acceptance of their succession to the appointment. They said, 'when they were appointed as chairperson, the department work environment and climate were slipping'. Their actions to handle this during their transition included:

- In advance schedule time to meet for a few minutes with some of new peers and seek a mentor for their transition.
- Convey to all the academics and clinical staff their personal views on being fair and honest as a leader. A participant told what worked with him was statements such as:
  "Probably some of you will disagree with some of my decisions, but I do expect everyone to respect them."
- Address issues with their work friends and clarify their new role.
- Have a meeting with their staff in particular those who were their friends and prepare copies of their job descriptions, along with their own new job description. After giving each person a few minutes to review both job descriptions, they followed up with a statement that very clearly defines their position as well as his or her expectation of them. A participant clarified:
  "Because our duties and responsibilities are changed, our connections as friends will be changed. My anticipation is that you'll meet your duties and accomplish your responsibilities, and the expectation of this university is that I'll meet mine."

- Send out their new duties and responsibilities so that all peers and staff members have an opportunity to review it.
- Convey to the academic staff the reasons of withdrawing from most of social activities with them. A participant stated:
  "Yes, we've always time to socialize and criticize the school which not taken seriously and formally, but in my new responsibility every word is considered officially and this requires always verbally support the efforts of the university. This implies taking part in discussions of issues at hand that doesn't comply with the university strategy would be considered inappropriate from my side."
- Handle conflict early and directly. Some of them suffered when they turn away to conflicts; some of their staff tested their level of courage to deal with conflict. One of the participants did not turn away and reported; as time passes, 'I was amazed how these steps can make a difference in my ability to effectively lead the department'. He added: 'even if my transition was before 8 months, 1 year, or even before 2 years, it's never too late to take action to best position myself to lead'.

By defining their role, the academic nurse chairpersons described the main features in the following. This subtheme reports that the participant experiences as academic chairpersons in transition play four distinct roles within their programs:

Operator
The participants clarified their role includes all the functional actions that support the daily running of education to students. Some participants listed for instance, academic heads are in charge for the staffing of faculty, scheduling of classes, and daily running of classes by peers. Others listed; they were liable for overseeing educational and training efforts to current students and ensuring compliance of peers with the curriculum plan of the school. Academic heads have to check that the department has complied with accreditation percentage of full time staff and part time lecturers to teach the students effectively and sustain the department budget. Most nursing chairpersons coordinate with the dean, the deputy dean and the assistants for assigning clinical instructors and the clinical setting preceptors. Few of them mentioned they ensure the right order and use of teaching media and other systems the class rooms and administrative staff offices.

Supervisor
Academic heads reported they were in charge for sustaining their department resources. This is not limited to tangibles such as property, monetary, accreditation and policies; but also intangibles such as the department

standing and creative ideas of the faculty. Moreover, they make sure their department conforms to the system that directs them.

Change agent
The participants reported acting as change agents who motivate their peers and administrative staff and convince them of their vision and strategy by assuring trust and gaining their consent. However, in a department where more senior academics and several committees and school board the issue is challenging. Meanwhile, the chairpersons have usually one year assignment; therefore, they have to achieve the planned change within this period.

Contributor to strategy
Academic chairpersons assured their responsibility for aligning their departments with the overall university strategy and ensuring effective use of resources, such as teaching staff, students, money and class rooms and laboratories. Moreover, improving the value and relevance of the education and training offered to students is the responsibility of nursing education programs; while they implement their competition strategy to stay in the market.

IMPORTANT POINTS TO GET GOING
Appointed academic chairpersons understand not only the university's president expectations from them, but also the vice president and the school dean in relation to school growth and contributions to the broader university. Therefore, the following points have been reported by the participants as strategies they applied to prepare themselves before taking the role:

Listen
Good listening is highlighted as significant by the most academic heads I interviewed.

Always available and communicating to colleagues
Some participants explained 'every person involved with the academic process have the right to understand the priorities and change agendas in the department'. A participant added; 'this exceeds the personal relationships with me as a chairperson and brings visibility to me'.

Supervise the academic schedule
Most participants assured the management of the schedule in the nursing program is important issue they handle to use time effectively. The transform initiatives need careful consideration for the timing; in order to correspond with every semester issues. They explained there is a consequence for this; 'academic schedule and calendar should address the program changes to current and future students in advance'. However, they encounter some challenges related to the institution management. For example, 'as they stated'; some institutions do not

follow formalized and simplified instructions for preparing the classes timetable. They confirm this has implications to inform the faculty about their duties early enough, which they need to plan and get ready for their classes.

DISCUSSION

Academic heads cannot complete the diverse aspects of their roles if they are performing without help. Presidents, Vice presidents and deans look for department heads who can stabilize a department even during challenges and unstable periods. Academic heads have to use their time effectively to the roles of implementer for operations and strategy and carry responsibilities of supervising and change mediator. This is requiring them to support an excellent academics and clinical training staff who carry out responsibilities of teaching and training.

Before the novice nurse chairpersons get too discouraged, they nneed to realize that some behaviors from their colleagues are normal responses when people are promoted from within the department. The change affects everyone on the team. Whether or not academic staff members agree with the promotion they received is irrelevant. Upon succession to the appointment it is the time to position them in a way that defines the new role and their ownership of all that comes with it.

Today, nursing departments are challenged to produce competent nurses able to work internationally, familiar with information patterns in the health systems, and renovate curriculum that bridges the broader discipline and the specific nursing competencies. Nursing graduates should be equipped to satisfy the changing requirements of the health care employers for which every nursing program is striving.

Thee strategies mentioned by the participants imply some of the challenges waiting chairpersons as well as the academic and administrative staff members and other departments chairpersons. These challenges demonstrate the issues that can encounter a takeover position. Moreover, many academic chairpersons start their new assignment without precision about the responsibility they are overtaken, and they lack competencies that are essential to their accomplishment.

Academic chairs experiences in transition imply that nursing department heads, resembling similar other middle manager positions in health service. Nursing academic chairpersons are middle managers who supervise all resources and mediate the educational programs and the demand on nursing workforce. Therefore, they have to maintain their department reputation through solving problems and taking corrective actions.

Academic nursing chairpersons encounter a changing health care system, economic, demographic, and political environments; therefore the chairpersons have to cope with it. This implies more than following the school strategy and implementing the plan. Therefore, chairpersons have to lead change by persuading others rather than enforcing them to accept their agenda. Trustworthiness or achievability of planned change in academic department is parallel to careful consideration for the short time frame and resistance to change. If strategies to manage resistance not considered and all parties not supporting the agenda; change will not happen and the chairperson becomes incredible.

In parallel to any new position, it is essential to plan for the position before becoming involved. Faculty members know the department's culture and prospects to advance the education conducted to students; therefore the only way to understand this is by listening to them (Blauvelt and Spath, 2008). To encourage relationships with all parties including students and the colleagues; appointed heads are required to spend time to establish a physical presence, communicate with all stakeholders of the education process. Communication is essential to influence persons and activate every department member to follow the new chairperson agenda (Blauvelt and Spath, 2008; Clark and Springer, 2010).

The transition to the new role influences the faculty members and may add to some of them anger, anxiety, guilt, and situational depression. Uncertainty should be reduced when achievable by eliminating fear of the unknown and minimizing anxiety. Every issue can be addressed and reiterated in different outline several times; to overcome selectivity of listening for some members and calm their experience of loss and grieving. Addressing the correct information to all members would eradicate rumors (Thompson *et al*., 2012).

The novice academic heads may fear losing control of their new role, besides having panic from anticipations of their superiors regarding faculty workloads (Thompson *et al*., 2012). The new heads of departments are concerned also about the policies that guides assigning academic into the new role, clinical training follow up, course development, and teaching (Glasgow *et el*., 2009). These policies should be simplified, and highlights incentives for quality in teaching. Implementation of these policies is not carried exclusively by the chairperson, therefore; course coordinator and the dean have to cooperate in order to support constant information. This is required because all the administrative team members should be unified and take decisions based on same information. Same reference for information and open communication are good means to supply reliable information.

Some novice academic heads panic when peers do not value their competencies in managing the department (McNamara, 2009; Moody *et al*., 2007). Those can achieve self-confidence by encouraging participative management through department academics input on all decisions related to course schedule, teaching strategies, course development, clinical training follow up, and evaluation process. Adopting team work may help the chairperson to identify worries, determine the actual from questionable, assess if they are avoidable, and give a moment to come up with ideas to overcome unwanted consequences (Wolf *et al*., 2006). Informal meetings and networking are practical for sharing information and to hold up. However, decision making and actions require formal meetings and official task force teams.

The novice academic heads may suffer of lowered self esteem and experience guilty, if they do not handle their new responsibilities and carry it with full confidence (Blass, 2012). Those usually show signs of avoidance, withdrawal, blaming others, and focusing on the negative. To overcome this situation; the new academic heads need support from others to set priorities, plan practical objectives, avoid personalities and focus on problems, and make rational decisions. Every situation has positive and negative aspects; someone should help the novice academic head to recognize both sides and the superiors have to show respect for their work.

Study Limitations
A limitation for findings of this study is similar to qualitative research in general. The researcher conducted the interviews and analyzed them. He was chair for an academic nursing department this may influence the perceptions of the interviewees and his own interpretation of the data from one side. However, this also helped in understanding the data exclusively and gave it richness and in depth query. The attributes of the participants may also limited transferability to wider international group. This is because all participants are Jordanians and represents probably different education system. Although in the analysis independent academic checked the codes, it would be good practice to check it with each participant. A good point have been done is the help in reviewing the first draft of this paper by two of the participants who agreed with its findings.

CONCLUSION

The generation of future competent nurses is produced by nursing academic departments. Those departments are managed by academic chairpersons who sometimes new to the role; which considered for them exceptional opportunity. The emerging health care settings demand on nurse graduates is changing always not in terms of quantity but also the quality. However, nursing schools to supply this demand cannot maintain status quo.

Chairpersons will have to work as operational managers, supervisors, demonstrators for institutional strategies and change agents with their School Deans and faculty members. This is to adapt nursing schools to the changing demands from recruiters for internationally competent nurses, specialization for specific competencies, health care service, the needs for continuous education and emerging profession systems. Taking into consideration the current and future nursing career and health care settings is a challenge for planning curriculum and programs offered by nursing schools. The management competencies and techniques reported in this paper may help the novice academic chairpersons in their transition to the role and make their experience exciting and rewarding. It is recommended for the institutions to consider transitional period for the academics who will take chairs for the first time probably by assigning them 6 months in advance without formal responsibility (Blauvelt and Spath, 2008; Thompson *et al*., 2012). During this they may take gradual responsibility. This will ensure mentoring from the actual head and confirm understanding of the new role.

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