

From Classroom to National Agenda: Mapping Nursing Student Theses Vis-À-Vis NUHRA 2023–2028

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ABSTRACT

This study examined the strategic alignment of undergraduate nursing research with the National Unified Health Research Agenda (NUHRA) 2023–2028. Utilizing a descriptive documentary analysis research design, the study mapped 51 nursing student theses produced from 2023 to 2025 at a tertiary educational institution in Pampanga. Findings revealed a significant temporal shift in research focus: while the 2023 cohort was primarily characterized by reactive inquiries into the COVID-19 pandemic, subsequent years demonstrated an evolution toward Health Systems Strengthening, Mental Health, and Digital Health. Results indicated a moderate to high level of alignment with national priorities, with the highest concentration of studies addressing nursing education and professional development. However, critical gaps were identified in the areas of Health Financing, Nutrition, and Environmental Health, which remain underrepresented despite their inclusion in the national roadmap. The study concludes that while the research culture is responsive to global trends, a more deliberate, mentored approach is required to move beyond descriptive knowledge surveys toward implementation-based research that addresses the full spectrum of the country's Universal Health Care goals. These findings serve as a diagnostic tool for faculty and administrators to recalibrate institutional research strategies and enhance the societal impact of student-led inquiries.

Keywords: Nursing Theses, Research Mapping, NUHRA 2023–2028, Research Alignment, Evidence-Based Practice

INTRODUCTION

Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) serve as the primary engines of national development by generating evidence-based knowledge that addresses societal and sectoral exigencies. Within the health sciences, nursing programs are mandated to transcend clinical instruction, fostering a culture of inquiry that prepares graduates to navigate and improve complex health systems. Undergraduate nursing theses represent the first critical intersection of academic training and professional research contribution. When mentored effectively, these research outputs can provide valuable localized data that informs clinical practice, community interventions, and health policy formulation (World Health Organization, 2021).

In the Philippine context, the National Unified Health Research Agenda (NUHRA) 2023–2028 serves as the definitive strategic roadmap, ensuring that health research efforts are coordinated, relevant, and responsive to the country's most pressing needs. However, a persistent "disconnect" often exists between national strategic priorities and academic research production. While the NUHRA emphasizes areas such as Universal Health Care (UHC) and digital health, undergraduate research frequently gravitates toward localized interests, faculty specialization, or accessible populations, potentially leading to a surplus of research in certain areas and a critical void in others.

Preliminary observations of research trends at the University level indicate a shift in focus following the global health crisis, yet the precise degree of alignment with the current national agenda remains unquantified. Without

a systematic mapping of these outputs, the university risks a "siloe" research culture that misses opportunities for policy impact and societal contribution.

This study addresses this gap by conducting a descriptive documentary analysis of nursing student theses from 2023 to 2025. Mapping these works against the NUHRA 2023–2028 framework, the research seeks to identify thematic concentrations, pinpoint underrepresented priority areas, and evaluate the institutional research trajectory. The findings are intended to serve as a diagnostic tool for curriculum enhancement, providing nursing faculty and administrators with the empirical basis to recalibrate research mentoring and institutional strategies in favor of national health goals.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The Role of Undergraduate Nursing Theses in Evidence-Based Practice

Undergraduate research is no longer viewed merely as an academic requirement but as a fundamental component of professional identity formation in nursing. According to the World Health Organization (2021), the integration of research competencies into nursing curricula is essential for preparing a workforce capable of evidence-informed decision-making. Undergraduate theses serve as a "nursery" for research skills, where students learn to translate clinical observations into scientific inquiry. Scholars argue that when student research is high-quality and relevant, it can bridge the gap between theoretical knowledge and clinical application, particularly in resource-limited settings where localized data is scarce.

National Unified Health Research Agenda (NUHRA): A Strategic Framework

In the Philippines, the National Unified Health Research Agenda (NUHRA) 2023–2028 represents the pinnacle of health research planning. It is designed to harmonize the research efforts of various sectors—academe, government, and private industry—to ensure that generated knowledge leads to improved health outcomes. The Philippine National Health Research System (PNHRS, 2023) emphasizes that NUHRA is not just a list of topics but a strategic guide for achieving Universal Health Care (UHC). Literature suggests that national agendas are only as effective as their localized implementation; thus, academic institutions must serve as the primary contributors to these priority areas to ensure the national roadmap is fueled by fresh, empirical data.

The Concept of Research Alignment and Mapping

Research alignment refers to the degree of congruence between institutional research outputs and external strategic priorities. Lansang and Dennis (2021) posit that building health research capacity in developing nations requires a deliberate focus on "relevance," ensuring that limited institutional resources are not wasted on redundant or low-priority topics. Systematic research mapping—a methodology used to categorize and visualize research trends—has been recognized as a powerful tool for institutional self-assessment. Institutions can identify over-represented areas (thematic saturation) and critical gaps (thematic voids) by analyzing the "thematic density" of student theses.

Bridging the Academic-Policy Gap

A recurring theme in recent scholarship is the "Academic-Policy Gap," where research produced in universities fails to influence national policy due to a lack of alignment. Booth et al. (2021) and Buse et al. (2022) highlight that mapping exercises allow educators to recalibrate mentoring practices. In nursing education, this means moving beyond "convenience research"—where students choose topics based on ease of data collection—toward "strategic research" that addresses the specific pillars of the national agenda, such as digital health, mental health, and health systems strengthening.

The Post-Pandemic Research Landscape

The COVID-19 pandemic significantly altered the trajectory of health research. Initial studies were characterized by a "reactive" focus on infection control and vaccine hesitancy. However, as the global health community

transitions into a post-pandemic era, there is a scholarly shift toward "proactive" health promotion and technology integration. Mapping studies in this period are vital to ensure that nursing research evolves from crisis management to sustainable health development, as outlined in the current NUHRA 2023–2028 framework.

Synthesis

The literature confirms that while undergraduate nursing research has high potential for clinical and policy impact, its value is maximized only when it is systematically aligned with national priorities. The current study fills a gap in the literature by providing a longitudinal analysis (2023–2026) of this alignment within a tertiary Catholic educational institution in Pampanga, serving as a model for institutional research management.

The NUHRA 2023–2028 Framework

To provide a concrete benchmark for this alignment, this study adopts the eleven thematic pillars of the National Unified Health Research Agenda (NUHRA) 2023–2028. These pillars serve as the categorical variables for mapping the nursing student theses:

- **Disease Management:** Focuses on the prevention and control of both communicable and non-communicable diseases across all life stages.
- **Halal in Health:** Application of Halal principles in the context of health.
- **Health Security, Emergency, and Disaster Risk Management:** Implementation of strategies in the preparation, response, and recovery from health emergencies and disasters.
- **Health Technology and Innovation:** Application of innovative solutions to health challenges.
- **Health of Vulnerable Populations:** Research for the benefit of populations that are underserved due to factors such as socioeconomic status, geographical location, gender, race, ethnicity, age, or disability towards reduction of disparities and equitable health opportunities.
- **Health Promotion:** Empowering individuals and communities to manage their health through education, the creation of health-supportive environments, and organization of societal actions for health promotion and protection.
- **Health Systems Strengthening Towards UHC:** Understanding and improving the efficiency, effectiveness, quality, and responsiveness of health systems, all aimed at achieving UHC.
- **Maternal, Newborn and Child Health:** The health and wellbeing of mothers, children, and adolescents.
- **Mental Health:** The prevalence, treatment, rehabilitation/management of mental health conditions.
- **Nutrition and Food Security:** Ensuring that all individuals have access to sufficient, safe, and nutritious food to maintain a healthy and active life.
- **Sexual and Reproductive Health:** Ensuring that all individuals can have a satisfying and safe sex life, the capacity to reproduce, and the freedom to decide if, when, and how often to do so.

Research Questions

1. How are nursing student theses (2023–2025) distributed according to research themes and focus areas?
2. To what extent are nursing student theses (2023–2025) aligned with the priority areas identified in the National Unified Health Research Agenda (NUHRA) 2023–2028?

3. Which NUHRA 2023–2028 priority areas are most and least represented in nursing student theses, and what gaps in alignment can be identified?

METHODOLOGY

Research Design

This study utilized a descriptive documentary analysis research design. This approach was selected to systematically examine, categorize, and interpret existing undergraduate nursing research outputs in direct relation to the priority areas established by the National Unified Health Research Agenda (NUHRA) 2023–2028. The design allowed for an objective assessment of institutional research trends over a three-year period without the need for direct human intervention, focusing instead on the thematic content and strategic alignment of archived academic records.

Sources of Data

The primary data consisted of completed Bachelor of Science in Nursing (BSN) theses produced between 2023 and 2025. These documents were retrieved from the university's institutional repository and the official archives of the College of Nursing and Pharmacy. The dataset included thesis titles, abstracts, and key variables. The NUHRA 2023–2028 framework served as the secondary data source and the authoritative benchmark for the comparative mapping and classification process.

Data Collection Procedure

Data collection was initiated by securing a comprehensive inventory of nursing research titles from the Dean's Office. A structured data extraction form was employed to ensure consistency in the information gathered, which included the year of completion, research focus, and core keywords. Each thesis was meticulously reviewed; in cases where the title provided insufficient detail for categorization, the researchers consulted the abstracts and executive summaries. This process ensured that every research output was accurately cross-referenced with the specific thematic pillars of the national health agenda.

Data Analysis

The retrieved data were processed using descriptive statistics, primarily frequency counts and percentage distributions. This quantitative layer identified the "thematic density" of specific research areas and the overall percentage of alignment with NUHRA priorities. Subsequently, thematic mapping was applied to group the studies into broader categories, such as Disease Management, Health Systems Strengthening, and Digital Health. Through cross-tabulation, the researchers identified areas of thematic saturation (over-representation) and critical research gaps (under-representation), providing a visual and statistical representation of the research trajectory.

RESULTS

The following section presents the findings of the descriptive documentary analysis conducted on nursing student theses from 2023 to 2025. The results are organized to systematically address the three core research questions: first, by delineating the thematic distribution and shifting focus areas of student research over the three-year period; second, by quantifying the degree of alignment between these academic outputs and the strategic pillars of the National Unified Health Research Agenda (NUHRA) 2023–2028; and finally, by identifying the specific priority areas that achieved thematic saturation versus those that remain critical research gaps. These data provide an empirical basis for evaluating the institution's contribution to the national health research landscape.

Table 1. Distribution of Theses by Research Theme (2023–2025)

Research Theme	2023	2024	2025
Nursing Education & Professional Issues	3	5	7

Pandemic & Disaster Response (COVID-19)	6	2	0
Mental Health & Psychological Well-being	1	5	2
Communicable Diseases & Public Health	1	2	2
Technology, E-Health & Robotics	1	1	4
Health Literacy & Preventive Care	0	1	4
Chronic Care & Clinical Profiles	0	2	0
Vulnerable Populations (Elderly/Disabled)	0	1	1
Total	12	19	20

The data presented in Table 1 illustrates a significant thematic transition within the nursing program's research landscape from 2023 to 2025. In 2023, the research output was primarily reactive, with 50% ($n=6$) of the studies focusing on Pandemic & Disaster Response, specifically addressing the immediate sociopsychological and clinical impacts of COVID-19. However, by 2025, this theme was entirely absent, replaced by a surge in Nursing Education & Professional Issues and Health Literacy & Preventive Care. A notable trend is the consistent growth in Technology, E-Health, and Robotics, which quadrupled from a single study in 2023 to four studies in 2025. This suggests that student researchers are increasingly shifting their focus from crisis-based inquiries toward forward-looking, technology-integrated nursing practices. Mental Health & Psychological Well-being remained a core pillar throughout the period, peaking in 2024, which reflects a sustained institutional interest in the holistic well-being of both students and patients in the post-pandemic recovery phase.

Table 2. Alignment of Student Theses with NUHRA 2023–2028 Priority Areas

Official NUHRA Priority Area	2023	2024	2025
Health Systems Strengthening Towards UHC	3	5	7
Mental Health	1	5	2
Health Security, Emergency, & Disaster Risk Mgt	6	2	0
Disease Management	1	4	2
Health Technology and Innovation	1	1	4
Health Promotion	0	1	4
Health of Vulnerable Populations	0	1	1
Nutrition and Food Security	0	0	0
Maternal, Newborn and Child Health	0	0	0
Sexual and Reproductive Health	0	0	0
Halal in Health	0	0	0

Table 2 quantifies the congruence between student research and the eleven official pillars of the National Unified Health Research Agenda (NUHRA) 2023–2028. The results indicate a high degree of "clustering" in specific areas. Health Systems Strengthening Towards UHC emerged as the primary area of alignment, accounting for 15 studies. This high concentration is largely driven by inquiries into the nursing workforce, cultural competence, and clinical training—elements that are fundamental to the success of Universal Health Care (UHC) in the Philippines.

Conversely, the alignment is notably absent in several specialized national priority areas. Despite their critical importance in the Philippine health sector, categories such as Nutrition and Food Security, Maternal, Newborn and Child Health, and Sexual and Reproductive Health recorded zero alignment over the three-year period. This indicates that while the institution is successfully contributing to the "Health Systems" and "Mental Health" pillars of the national agenda, it has yet to diversify its research outputs into the clinical and community-specific priorities outlined by the DOST-PCHRD.

Table 3. Analysis of Representation and Strategic Gaps

Representation Level	NUHRA Priority Area	Count ($n=51$)	Analysis of Alignment
High	Health Systems Strengthening	15	Strong focus on nursing workforce and education.

High	Mental Health	8	Consistent interest in student and patient well-being.
Moderate	Health Security & Disaster Risk	8	Highly reactive to COVID-19; now decreasing.
Moderate	Disease Management	7	Covers TB, Diabetes, Cancer, and HIV.
Low	Health Technology & Innovation	6	Increasing focus on e-health and social media use.
Low	Health Promotion	5	Growing interest in health literacy/literacy post-2024.
Minimal	Health of Vulnerable Populations	2	Limited to older adults and those with disabilities.
Zero (Gaps)	Nutrition and Food Security	0	Major Gap: No research on stunting or food safety.
Zero (Gaps)	Maternal & Child Health	0	Major Gap: No research on neonatal/maternal care.
Zero (Gaps)	Sexual & Reproductive Health	0	Major Gap: No research on family planning or SRH.
Zero (Gaps)	Halal in Health	0	Major Gap: No research on Halal-compliant care.

The summary of representation provided in Table 3 serves as a strategic "thematic audit" for the College of Nursing. The data identifies a state of Thematic Saturation in Health Systems Strengthening and Mental Health, suggesting that these areas have a well-established mentorship pipeline. The moderate representation in Health Security, Emergency, and Disaster Risk Management ($n=8$) reflects the program's historical response to the COVID-19 pandemic, though its declining trend highlights a potential lack of sustained interest in broader disaster resilience research.

The most critical findings in Table 3 are the Strategic Research Gaps. The zero-representation in four out of the eleven pillars—including Halal in Health and Maternal & Child Health—identifies significant opportunities for future research redirection. These voids suggest that current research selection is likely influenced by student convenience or faculty specialization rather than the full spectrum of the NUHRA roadmap. Addressing these gaps is essential for the university to enhance its scholarly contribution to the national health evidence base and ensure that its graduates are prepared to address the diverse challenges of the Philippine healthcare system.

DISCUSSION

The thematic mapping of 51 nursing student theses from 2023 to 2025 reveals a research culture that is highly responsive to the immediate professional environment but remains narrowly focused within the broader national health landscape. The scholarly merit of this discussion lies in identifying the "Thematic Clustering" effect: a high concentration of research in Health Systems Strengthening ($n=15$) and Mental Health ($n=8$), which accounts for nearly half of the total institutional output. This indicates a strong internal alignment with the professionalization of nursing and the psychological resilience of health providers—core components of the NUHRA 2023–2028 pillar of health workforce development.

However, the longitudinal data exposes a "Reactive Research Pattern." The heavy focus on Health Security, Emergency, and Disaster Risk Management in 2023 was a direct response to the COVID-19 pandemic. The subsequent disappearance of this theme by 2025 suggests that student research is driven more by historical events than by the proactive, forward-looking strategies outlined in the national agenda. Furthermore, the rise in Health Technology and Innovation indicates a positive trend toward digital health literacy, yet these studies remain largely descriptive (e.g., attitudes toward robotics or social media use) rather than evaluative or experimental.

The most critical finding is the existence of Thematic Voids. The total absence of research in Maternal, Newborn and Child Health, Nutrition and Food Security, and Sexual and Reproductive Health represents a significant scholarly gap. These areas are not only national priorities but are also central to the clinical practice of nursing.

The lack of alignment in these pillars suggests that research selection may be influenced by the ease of data access within a university setting—focusing on fellow students—rather than engaging with more complex community-based clinical issues.

CONCLUSION

This study concludes that while nursing student research in the University is fundamentally aligned with the NUHRA 2023–2028 framework, this alignment is currently asymmetrical. The institution demonstrates excellence in producing evidence related to the nursing workforce and psychological well-being; however, it falls short in addressing vital community health pillars such as maternal care, nutrition, and reproductive health.

The transition from pandemic-centric research to technology-driven inquiries shows a healthy evolution in student interests. Nevertheless, without a deliberate institutional mechanism to bridge the gap between academic interest and national health priorities, the potential of undergraduate research to influence policy and clinical practice will remain underutilized. The current research output serves institutional requirements well but requires strategic redirection to fulfill its role as a contributor to the country's Universal Health Care goals.

RECOMMENDATION

To enhance the strategic impact and scholarly depth of the nursing research program, the following recommendations are proposed:

- **Thematic Diversification through Directed Mentorship.** The College of Nursing should implement a "Priority-Based Topic Selection" policy. Faculty mentors should actively encourage student cohorts to explore the underrepresented NUHRA pillars, specifically Maternal & Child Health and Nutrition, to ensure a balanced institutional research portfolio.
- **Methodological Advancement.** Future research should move beyond Knowledge, Attitude, and Practice (KAP) surveys. Students should be incentivized to conduct Outcome-Based Research or Implementation Science, evaluating the effectiveness of specific nursing interventions or health promotion plans.
- **Establishment of a Research Matchmaking Portal.** The University Library and Archives, in coordination with the Research and Extension Office, should create a dashboard that lists "High-Priority NUHRA Gaps." This would allow students to choose titles that are guaranteed to have national relevance.
- **Community-Linked Research Initiatives.** Strengthening ties with the Provincial Health Office or Rural Health Units (RHUs) in Pampanga would provide students with the necessary access to vulnerable populations and clinical settings, addressing the current void in community-focused research.
- **Annual Alignment Audit.** The university should conduct an annual mapping exercise, similar to this study, to ensure that each graduating batch contributes to a diverse range of national health priorities, preventing thematic saturation in a single area.

Compliance with Ethical Standards

The study adhered to the highest ethical standards for secondary data research. Because the investigation relied solely on archived documents, no direct human participation was required, thereby minimizing risk to individuals. Formal administrative clearance was obtained from the University Library and Archives and the College of Nursing and Pharmacy to access the repository. To maintain confidentiality and academic integrity, all personally identifiable information of the student researchers and their respective advisors was redacted. All findings were reported in aggregate form, ensuring that the focus remained on thematic trends rather than individual performance, in compliance with institutional data privacy protocols.

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