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### Assessing competence during professional experience placements for undergraduate nursing students: a systematic review

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# Assessing competence during professional experience placements for undergraduate nursing students: a systematic review

## Abstract

**Review Objectives** To identify and synthesise the best available evidence about the meaningfulness of assessments of competence during the professional experience placement for undergraduate nursing students, with the overarching aim to make recommendations concerning strategies and initiatives that support assessment of competence for undergraduate nursing programs.

**Review Questions** What are undergraduate nurses' experiences of the clinical assessment of competence? What are registered nurses'/health care professionals experiences of the clinical assessment of competence?

## Keywords

systematic, students, nursing, competence, undergraduate, placements, review, experience, assessing, professional, during

## Disciplines

Medicine and Health Sciences | Social and Behavioral Sciences

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# **Assessing competence during professional experience placements for undergraduate nursing students: A systematic review**

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## Review Objectives

To identify and synthesise the best available evidence about the meaningfulness of assessments of competence during the professional experience placement for undergraduate nursing students, with the overarching aim to make recommendations concerning strategies and initiatives that support assessment of competence for undergraduate nursing programs.

## Review Questions

What are undergraduate nurses' experiences of the clinical assessment of competence?

What are registered nurses'/health care professionals' experiences of the clinical assessment of competence?

## Background

Registering authorities for health practitioner courses prescribe principal standards for determining competence as an outcome for the undergraduate nursing student. These standards reflect the requirement that society determines as safe according to enacted legislation for public safety <sup>1</sup>. The standards are the expected level of entry to practice in a health profession <sup>2</sup>. Standards for competence address what nurses must do and achieve in their programme <sup>3-5</sup>.

Competence has been interpreted in the literature as an assessment of performance and as an assessment of capability <sup>6</sup>. While Benner believes that competence is about gaining experience in the same context over a period of time, the registering authorities have defined competence broadly to be inclusive of the profession that is, "the combination of knowledge, skills, attitudes, values and abilities that underpin effective performance in a profession"<sup>3</sup>. Competence statements are presented as standards <sup>3-5</sup>. Standards of competence provide a way of distinguishing between the variations in scopes of practice of nurses <sup>5</sup>. An early integrative literature review and meta-analyses conducted in 2002 reveals that competence lacked a clear definition at that time concluded that competence remained a poorly defined term and that assessment of competence remains problematic <sup>7</sup>. Also that there was limited research focused in nursing to inform knowledge development <sup>7</sup>. Since this time the nursing profession has progressed its interpretation and understanding of competence to the point whereby a similar definition of competence has been adopted internationally; for example, the standards for competence in the UK have adapted their definition of competence from the Queensland Nursing Council<sup>4</sup>.

Nursing as a regulated profession "has as its principal purpose 'to protect the health and safety of members of the public by providing for mechanisms to ensure that health practitioners are competent and fit to practice in their professions' (HPCA Act, 2003, s1)" <sup>5</sup>. Regulatory authorities are accountable for the national standards that assure competence of practitioners thereby meeting societal expectations of safe practice from the nursing profession.

Currently, in assessing nursing students the registered nurse makes a judgement of the student based on a set of standards as to whether the student has achieved competence. Evident in the literature is the variability and reliability of this assessment <sup>7, 8</sup>. The amount of time that the student works with the RN, the personal characteristics of both the assessor and the student and the context of the assessment all impact on the final outcome of assessment<sup>9</sup>. In the interest of patient safety, Searle <sup>8</sup> indicate that "how the practitioner is deemed competent should be documented, accountable and defensible." However,

methods for documenting student performance of competence in the professional experience placements vary. This raises the question about the types of tools and the experiences associated with judgements about competence. Professional experience placements are planned curricula placements in healthcare agencies where undergraduate nursing students are allocated and supervised by the registered nurse in order to gain practical nursing experience. Meaningfulness of undergraduate nursing student experiences are presented in the literature as being generated from a range of techniques, for example, focus groups, critical incident techniques, student experience questionnaires and student satisfaction session. Meaningfulness is defined in this systematic review as the experiences as reported and documented in the literature from the perspective of the student and the registered nurses responsible for assessing the undergraduate nursing student on professional experience placement.

Curriculum statements, often arising from academic institutions or schools of nursing, are used to interpret health practitioner competence standards and to prescribe methods of assessment within a given range of professional practice<sup>10</sup>. Various curriculum approaches prescribe the required assessment of competence. Assessment of competence is impacted by the student scope of practice and is influenced by the variable time spent on placement within a complex nursing practice environment<sup>3-5</sup>. Given this variability there is a need to identify strategies and initiatives that support assessing competence for undergraduate nursing programmes.

To the reviewers' knowledge, no other comprehensive systematic review exists on the meaningfulness and feasibility of assessing competence of undergraduate nursing students during the professional experience placement. An integrated literature review<sup>7</sup> exists where the authors have identified that confusion remains about the definition of clinical competence and methods of measuring competence have minimally been addressed. This current systematic review is being undertaken in a dynamic period of healthcare change influenced by tertiary education for nurses, the broader nursing shortage, and a focus on clinical governance.

## Definitions

For the purposes of this review:

Clinical competence is defined as the "combination of knowledge, skills, attitudes, values and abilities that underpin effective performance in a profession"<sup>3</sup> on the professional experience placement.

## Inclusion criteria

### *Types of participants*

The review will consider studies where the focus is the undergraduate nursing student and their assessors of clinical practice in the professional experience placement. The range of participants includes both the Registered Nurse responsible for assessing student nurses in the professional experience placement and the undergraduate nursing student.

The review will also consider faculty, health professionals, accrediting bodies involved in commenting on competence of nursing student performance in the professional experience placement, where appropriate.

### ***Phenomena of interest***

The phenomenon of interest is the experiences of assessing clinical competence of undergraduate nursing students on the professional experience placement by an approved assessor, i.e., the registered nurse.

This review will consider studies that include the experience, thoughts, feelings and opinions of the student nurse, clinical assessor, consumers, health professionals, accrediting bodies and faculty related competency based assessment.

### ***Types of outcomes***

The outcomes of this review will include the:

- identification of the experiences or experiential accounts of both the assessors and the student nurses as related to competency based assessment of professional experience placements.
- expert opinion and perhaps also experiences of the clinical assessor, consumers, health professionals, accrediting bodies and faculty as related to competency based assessment of professional experience placements.

### ***Types of studies***

This review will consider any interpretive studies including but not limited to designs such as phenomenology, grounded theory and ethnography. In addition other non-research text such as opinion papers, reports, and the use of tools for assessment will be considered.

### ***Search strategy***

The search strategy aims to find both published and unpublished studies. A three-step search strategy will be utilised in each component of this review. An initial limited search of MEDLINE and CINAHL (including Pre-CINAHL) will be undertaken followed by an analysis of the text words contained in the title and abstract and of the index terms used to describe the article. A second search using all identified keywords and index terms will then be undertaken across all included databases. Thirdly; the reference list of all identified reports and articles will be searched for additional studies.

The databases to be searched include:

PubMed

CINAHL

ERIC

BioMed Central

DARE

PsycINFO

Science Direct

SCIRUS

Sociological Abstracts

TRIP (Turning Research into Practice)

Web of Science

The search for unpublished studies will include:

Mednar

Digital Dissertation

Conference Proceedings

PsychEXTRA

AHRQ (Agency for Healthcare Research and Quality)

NurseScribe

Index to Theses

The Qualitative Report

The search will be limited to English language reports (1970 -2011). As the MeSH heading qualitative research was only introduced to MEDLINE in 1993 this term will not be used for pre-1993 searching and citations. A review of all abstracts will be undertaken to establish if studies meet the study inclusion criteria.

Initial keywords to be used will be:

nursing

students, baccalaureate, undergraduate

education

acculturation

profession, professional

clinical

placement, practice

assessment

measurement

performance

supervision

competent, competence, competencies, competency

standards

tools, frameworks, guide, guidelines

### **Assessment of methodological quality**

Qualitative papers selected for retrieval will be assessed by two independent reviewers for methodological validity prior to inclusion in the review using standardised critical appraisal instruments from the Joanna Briggs Institute Qualitative Assessment and Review Instrument (JBI-QARI) (Appendix I).

In addition to research studies, textual and opinion papers selected for retrieval will be assessed by two independent reviewers for authenticity prior to inclusion in the review using standardized critical appraisal instruments from the Joanna Briggs Institute Narrative, Opinion and Text Assessment and Review Instrument (JBI-NOTARI) (Appendix II).

Any disagreements that arise between the reviewers will be resolved through discussion, or with a third reviewer.

### **Data collection**

Qualitative data will be extracted from papers included in the review using the standardised data extraction tool from the JBI-QARI (Appendix III).

Textual and opinion data will be extracted from papers included in the review using the standardised data extraction tool from JBI-NOTARI (Appendix IV).

### **Data synthesis**

Qualitative research findings will, where possible be pooled using the Qualitative Assessment and Review Instrument (JBI-QARI). This will involve the aggregation or synthesis of findings to generate a set of statements that represent that aggregation, through assembling the findings (Level 1 findings) rated according to their quality, and categorising these findings on the basis of similarity in meaning (Level 2 findings). These categories are then subjected to a meta aggregation in order to produce a single comprehensive set of aggregated findings (Level 3 findings) that can be used as a basis for evidence-based practice. Where textual pooling is not possible the findings will be presented in narrative form

Textual and opinion papers will, where possible be synthesised using JBI-NOTARI.

Where pooling is not possible the findings will be presented in narrative form.

### **Conflicts of interest**

The lead reviewer is involved in the national survey: "Clinical experience of nursing students" located at the University of Western Sydney. Both reviewers are academic staff in the Faculty of Health, University of Canberra, involved in undergraduate nursing education.



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## Appendix I JBI-Qari Critical Appraisal Instrument

### JBI QARI Critical Appraisal Checklist for Interpretive & Critical Research

Reviewer \_\_\_\_\_ Date \_\_\_\_\_  
Author \_\_\_\_\_ Year \_\_\_\_\_ Record Number \_\_\_\_\_

	Yes	No	Unclear
1. Is there congruity between the stated philosophical perspective and the research methodology?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
2. Is there congruity between the research methodology and the research question or objectives?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
3. Is there congruity between the research methodology and the methods used to collect data?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
4. Is there congruity between the research methodology and the representation and analysis of data?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
5. Is there congruity between the research methodology and the interpretation of results?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
6. Is there a statement locating the researcher culturally or theoretically?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
7. Is the influence of the researcher on the research, and vice-versa, addressed?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
8. Are participants, and their voices, adequately represented?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
9. Is the research ethical according to current criteria or, for recent studies, and is there evidence of ethical approval by an appropriate body?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
10. Do the conclusions drawn in the research report flow from the analysis, or interpretation, of the data?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

Overall appraisal: Include ☐ Exclude ☐ Seek further info. ☐

Comments (Including reasons for exclusion)

## Appendix II      JBI-Notari Critical Appraisal Instrument

### JBI Critical Appraisal Checklist for Narrative, Expert opinion & text

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Reviewer \_\_\_\_\_ Date \_\_\_\_\_  
Author \_\_\_\_\_ Year \_\_\_\_\_ Record Number \_\_\_\_\_

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Yes    No    Unclear

1. Is the source of the opinion clearly identified?
2. Does the source of the opinion have standing in the field of expertise?
3. Are the interests of patients/clients the central focus of the opinion?
4. Is the opinion's basis in logic/experience clearly argued?
5. Is the argument developed analytical?
6. Is there reference to the extant literature/evidence and any incongruency with it logically defended?
7. Is the opinion supported by peers?

---

Overall appraisal:    Include            Exclude            Seek further info

Comments (Including reason for exclusion)

## Appendix III      JBI-Qari Data Extraction Instrument

### JBI QARI Data Extraction Form for Interpretive & Critical Research

Reviewer \_\_\_\_\_ Date \_\_\_\_\_  
Author \_\_\_\_\_ Year \_\_\_\_\_  
Journal \_\_\_\_\_ Record Number \_\_\_\_\_

#### Study Description

Methodology \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

Intervention \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

Setting \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

Geographical \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

Cultural \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

Participants \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

Data analysis \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

#### Authors Conclusions

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

#### Comments

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

Findings	Illustration from Publication (page number)	Evidence		
		Unequivocal	Credible	Unsupported

Extraction of findings complete    YES

## Appendix IV      JBI-Notari Data Extraction Instrument

### JBI Data Extraction for Narrative, Expert opinion & text

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Reviewer \_\_\_\_\_ Date \_\_\_\_\_  
Author \_\_\_\_\_ Year \_\_\_\_\_ Record Number \_\_\_\_\_

---

#### Study Description

Type of Text:

---

---

Those Represented:

---

---

Stated Allegiance/  
Position:

---

---

Setting:

---

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Geographical:

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---

Cultural:

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Logic of Argument:

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Authors Conclusion:

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Reviewers Comments:

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Conclusions	Illustration from Publication (page number)	Evidence		
		Unequivocal	Credible	Unsupported

Extraction of findings complete    YES