



Nursing students' experiences of assessment by the Swedish National Clinical Final Examination

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SUMMARY

The Swedish National Clinical Final Examination (NCFE) was established in 2007 in order to examine nursing students' clinical competence upon completing their Bachelor's degree in nursing. The NCFE constitutes an innovative method of examination, divided into two parts: a written and bedside test. The aim of this study was to evaluate nursing students' experiences of being assessed by means of the NCFE, in order to obtain information that could be used to improve the examination. A survey was conducted using a questionnaire with open-ended questions concerning the written and the bedside part of the NCFE. The answers from 577 third-year nursing students were analysed using content analysis. The nursing students regarded the NCFE as promoting further learning and as an important means of quality assurance. Its comprehensive nature was perceived to tie the education together and contributed to the students' awareness of their own clinical competence. The strengths of the NCFE especially highlighted were its high degree of objectivity and the fact that it took place in a natural setting. However, the students felt that the NCFE did not cover the entire nursing programme and that it caused stress. It thus appears to be important to reconsider the written theoretical part of the examination and to standardise the bedside part.

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Introduction

Specialised healthcare and the assurance of patient safety place high demands on Swedish nursing education today. Bachelor's degrees in nursing are offered by 25 universities in Sweden, and is regulated by the Higher Education Ordinance. However, there is variation regarding their organisation, content and quality (Schuldt Haard et al., 2008). There is also considerable variation in the total time allotted to clinical placement between the different universities (Warne et al., 2010; Ohlen et al., 2011).

Various means of assessing the clinical competence of nursing students have been developed (Bourbonnais, et al., 2008), including portfolios or diaries (McMullan et al., 2003), simulations (Rushforth, 2007), objective structured clinical examination (Boursicot and Roberts, 2005), rating scales (Meretoja et al., 2004) and performance assessment (Schoessler, et al., 2008). However, it has been found that

many of them fail to grasp the complexity of nursing, while also lacking validity and reliability (Redfern et al., 2002). In their review, Redfern et al. came to the conclusion that multi-method and reflective approaches, which integrate theory with practice, ensure comprehensive assessment of the complex skills required of a nursing student. They concluded that combining methods enhances validity and that carrying out assessments in natural settings is preferable, underlining the importance of assessing the interplay between interpersonal and technical skills with critical thinking and decision making (Boursicot et al., 2011).

A method of assessment, the National Clinical Final Examination (NCFE), has been developed in Sweden to assess nursing students' performance and clinical competence in regard to their future professional role. The purpose of this examination is also to satisfy the requirements of healthcare authorities concerning the level of skill of newly registered nurses (Athlin et al., 2011). A model for the NCFE was introduced in 2003. A board was established in 2007 and charged with the further development and quality assurance of the NCFE. At the present time, 2011, over half of the Swedish universities offering Bachelor's degrees in nursing use the NCFE.

The aim of the NCFE is to assess the clinical competence of nursing students by means of a comprehensive examination covering

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knowledge gained from both theoretical and practical studies. The students' knowledge, skills, capacity for critical thinking, problem solving, ethical reasoning, independence and readiness to act are included in a two-part examination: a written theoretical test and a practical bedside test. Having passed this final examination, the students are considered sufficiently competent to enter the nursing profession.

The Model on which the NCFE is Based

The NCFE is divided into two parts, as mentioned above, and described in greater detail below. The grades awarded are pass or fail. The students take the NCFE at the end of their final semester. Written instructions and routines describing the performance of the examination and the criteria used for assessment have been developed by the NCFE board. The students are given verbal information on the examination by teaching staff at each university. For a detailed description, see [Athlin et al. \(2011\)](#).

The Written Test

The theoretical examination is taken at the same time by all students at the participating universities, and the time available is four hours. The written test is problem-solving in character and consists of two patient cases describing realistic care situations, in which the patient is followed throughout the care trajectory. As the examination proceeds, the situation and the conditions change and new information on the patient is provided. In order to ensure fairness and uniformity in the marking of the test, a template providing criteria for each question is provided by the board. The written examination is marked by experienced lecturers, highly conversant with both clinical nursing care and the degree programme in nursing.

The Bedside Test

The bedside test is performed after the written examination, and lasts four hours. Each student is examined separately. During their annual clinical placement, the students take care of one patient in need of comprehensive medical and nursing care. This may take the form of inpatient care (hospital care) or outpatient care (community care). During the bedside test, the student is observed by a nurse called the 'observing nurse', who is guided by a structured assessment tool that reflects the areas of competence required of a registered nurse, namely: I) the assessment of the patient's needs and problems, analyses and planning, II) implementation and evaluation of nursing activities and, III) reflections and final judgement. In the third step, the student reflects on steps I and II together with the observing nurse and a clinical lecturer. The choice of patient is made by the observing nurse together with a clinical lecturer. The patient is required to give his or her informed consent. The clinical lecturer responsible for the examination decides whether the student has passed or failed based on the scores in the assessment tool and the observing nurse's oral report. For a detailed description, see [Athlin et al. \(2011\)](#).

In an earlier study, we described the role of the NCFE in assessing the student's ability to assimilate this complex education in nursing ([Lilja Andersson, 2007](#)). The aim of the present study was to describe how students studying for a Bachelor's degree in nursing experienced being assessed by means of the NCFE.

Methods

Project Design

A survey study was carried out, descriptive in design, using a questionnaire. As the aim was to gain a deeper understanding of the students' experiences of the strengths and weaknesses of the NCFE, open-ended questions were deemed to be the most suitable method ([Lincoln and Guba, 1985](#)).

Sample

Data were collected from April to May 2010, at 10 Swedish universities geographically dispersed throughout Sweden. These ten universities had applied the NCFE for at least two semesters. The sample consisted of third-year nursing students enrolled in Bachelor of Nursing programmes. A total of 694 students were asked to participate and 577 returned the questionnaire (response rate 83%). The students were 94% women, and the median age was 26 years (range 20–52).

Data Collection

The NCFE board appointed a research group to develop a specific questionnaire containing open-ended questions asking the students to describe their experiences of the written and bedside parts of the NCFE, and to give their views on the strengths and weaknesses of the NCFE. The questionnaire also included questions concerning the NCFE's validity as a tool for assessing the clinical competence required by the Swedish Agency for Higher Education. These results will be presented separately.

The questionnaire was given to the students directly after the bedside test. The questionnaires were filled in anonymously. The completed forms were collected by each university and returned to the research group in a sealed envelope.

Data Analysis

The responses to the questions were subjected to qualitative content analysis ([Graneheim and Lundman, 2004](#)). This analysis was carried out by the first and last authors (PLA and KZ) in several steps, starting with a naïve reading of the text to acquire an overall understanding and to identify any essential features. An inductive approach was adopted in this phase, with the authors striving to be open to the message in the text. The text was then read and re-read, and sentences describing the students' experiences of participating in the NCFE and their views regarding its strengths and weaknesses were marked. Single words or short sentences were used for the coding of vignettes. Codes with a similar content were grouped together and categories were formulated. The categorisation of the text was continuously discussed by these two authors until no new categories emerged. Following this, the whole research group met in order to validate the analysis by reading the quotations in relation to the categories. The analysis resulted in seven categories, four concerning the written part, and three concerning the bedside part.

Ethical Considerations

The guiding ethical principles laid down in the World Medical Association's [Helsinki Declaration \(1964\)](#) were followed. The participants were fully informed about the voluntary nature of participation, and the fact that their views would be treated confidentially. Informed written consent was obtained from all participants.

Results

The Written Test

Four of the seven categories identified were found to be related to the written test. These are described and illustrated below.

Ensures a National Level of Knowledge

The students expressed the conviction that all nursing students in Sweden should be required to pass this examination. The students also stated that the format of the test, i.e. having the same rules and conditions, placing the same demands on all students, and taking

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