



## Nursing student profiles and occurrence of early academic failure: Findings from an explorative European study



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### SUMMARY

**Background:** In the European context regulated by the Bologna Process principles, there is little evidence to date on the different profiles, if any, of nursing students enrolled in the 1st academic year and their academic outcomes.

**Aims:** To describe and compare the nursing student profiles and their academic outcomes at the end of the 1st year across European Bachelor of Nursing Science (BNS) courses.

**Design:** An exploratory multicentre cohort study involving five countries: Nursing students who were enrolled in nursing programmes for the academic year 2011/2012 in the participating BNS courses, willing to participate and regularly admitted to the 2nd academic year, were included in this study undertaken in 2013. Individual and faculty level variables were collected after having ensured the validity of the tools developed in English and then appropriately translated into the language of each participating country.

**Findings:** A total of 378/710 (53.2%) students participated in the study. They attended from 390 to 810 h of lessons, while clinical experience ranged from 162 to 536 h. The students reported a mean average age of 21.4 (Confidence of Interval [CI] 95%, 21.0–22.3) and foreign students were limited in number (on average 3.7%). The students reported adopting mainly individual learning strategies (92.9%), duplicating notes or lecture notes prepared by professors (74.4%), and concentrating their study before exams (74.6%). The majority reported experiencing learning difficulties (49.7%) and a lack of academic support (84.9%). Around 33.2% reported economic difficulties and the need to work while studying nursing on average for 24 h/week. Personal expectations regarding the nursing role were different (45.6%) than the role encountered during the 1st year, as learning workloads were higher (57.2%) with regard to expectations. Around one-third of students reported the intention to leave nursing education while the proportion of those reporting early academic failure was on average 5.6%.

**Conclusions:** More strategies aimed at harmonising nursing education across Europe, at supporting nursing students' learning processes during 1st year, and identifying factors influencing their intention to leave and their academic failure, are recommended.

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## Introduction

Nursing students enrolled in a Bachelor of Nursing Science degree course (BNSc) may report two academic trajectories: academic success (Cameron et al., 2011a) or failure (Cameron et al., 2011b). These two academic outcomes are considered as two sides of the same coin; however, their definitions vary across studies and countries (Dante et al., 2013a). Academic success or failure has been defined as the nursing students' capability (or not) to graduate within the expected duration of the nursing degree programme (Dante et al., 2011; Lancia et al., 2013; Pryjmachuk et al., 2009; Salamonson et al., 2011; Salamonson et al., 2014; Seago et al., 2012). Academic success has also been defined as the nursing students' capability to independently achieve graduation by accumulating the university credits needed in the time required from enrolment to graduation (Jeffreys, 2007; Mulholland et al., 2008; Pryjmachuk et al., 2009; Sadler, 2003). Other researchers have also considered academic failure as withdrawal from the course (Deary et al., 2003; Destrebecq et al., 2008; Loberto et al., 2012).

Academic failure can occur early, during 1st year, or late, after 1st year (Andrew et al., 2008; Salamonson et al., 2011) and may impact negatively in the short-term on both students (Pryjmachuk et al., 2009; Waters, 2006) and faculties (Cameron et al., 2011a) and on long-term nursing workforce availability (Cameron et al., 2011b; Gaynor et al., 2006). Therefore, BNSc academic failure has become a global concern for its impact on nursing shortages (Cameron et al., 2011a, 2011b; Eick et al., 2012; Gaynor et al., 2006) and efforts to discover effective strategies to prevent the avoidable failure and maximise the retention of students are recommended.

Multiple factors influence academic failure (Cameron et al., 2011a, 2011b; Dante et al., 2009; Gaynor et al., 2006) thus reflecting the complex interaction between nursing students and BNSc course level factors (Urwin et al., 2010). A recent systematic review (Dante et al., 2013a) has highlighted the different roles of individual factors on academic failure in various educational contexts with different organisational features in BNSc course design (Urwin et al., 2010). In particular, given the higher proportion of students failing during the 1st year (Destrebecq et al., 2008; Eick et al., 2012), some authors have focussed their attention on the role of individual factors mainly using monocentric study designs (Andrew et al., 2008; Wray et al., 2012). Developing knowledge on predictors is still recommended, aiming at accumulating evidence on early failure (Salamonson et al., 2011; Andrew et al., 2008; Mashaba and Mhlongo, 1995).

In the European (EU) context, which is regulated by the Bologna process principles (Palese et al., 2014a), no studies based on international collaboration have been published to date with regard to the comparison of nursing student profiles enrolled in the 1st academic year and their academic outcomes. Moreover, enrolment trends in numerous countries predict a more academically diverse, older, and/or ethnically diverse (non-traditional) nursing student population (Jeffreys, 2007), suggesting greater international collaboration research among countries and nursing programmes.

Therefore, the aim of this study was to describe and compare the nursing student profiles and their academic outcomes at the end of the 1st academic year across European BNSc courses.

## Methods

### Study Design and Settings

An exploratory multicentre cohort study (RAFENS study, Risk of Academic Failure among European Nursing Students) was undertaken. Initially, an international European network aiming at researching nursing students' academic failure/success was established (2012, by the Universities of Udine and Trieste, which coordinated the study) involving seven participating European BNS degree courses (BNSc), two Italian, two Czech, one Portuguese, one Slovak and one Slovenian.

## Participants

Nursing students who were enrolled in the academic year 2011/2012 were eligible. Those students willing to participate and: a) regularly admitted to the 2nd academic year, b) discontinuous as those who had not been awarded the required credits for entry to the 2nd year but would continue their Bachelor's degrees, and c) dropouts, meaning those who had formally abandoned the BNS course, were enrolled. Nursing students who in the academic year 2011/2012 were: a) registered for the second time in the 1st year of a course, due to previous academic failure in a different discipline than nursing; and b) transferred from or to another university/degree, were excluded.

Given the exploratory nature of the study, no power analysis and sample size calculation was performed in a preliminary fashion.

### Variables, Instruments and Data Collection Process

Early academic failure was defined as 1st year nursing students' failure to achieve the 2nd year in the required time for various reasons such as exam failure(s), personal choice or dropout (voluntary withdrawal from the BNS course).

Nursing students' individual variables and their academic success/failure were collected through a web-version structured questionnaire validated in previous studies (Dante et al., 2011) while BNSc level variables were collected through a semi-structured questionnaire designed on the basis of the available literature (Cameron et al., 2011a, 2011b; Urwin et al., 2010) (Table 1).

After having illustrated the study aims to the students, local leaders (those who coordinate the RAFENS Project for each participating BNSc course, see authors) asked the eligible students for their consent to participate and provided a list of those students agreeing to participate to the network coordinators. Those discontinuous students or dropouts were contacted via email by the local leaders.

Subsequently, each enrolled student received an e-mail containing the link to the web-questionnaire and the instructions for its completion.

Aiming at describing the BNSc level variables as features of nursing education pathways offered to 1st year students, each local leader completed a standard semi-structured questionnaire, based on preliminary validation, and then sent it to the network coordinators.

Both individual and BNSc level variables were collected between May and June 2013.

### Rigour

In order to avoid information bias (Jekel et al., 2009) the same conceptual definition of the variables under study as well as the same data collection instrument developed in the English language was agreed upon by the members of the RAFENS network (Table 1). Aiming at ensuring consistency in the data collection process, the English versions of the students' and BNSc level questionnaires were submitted to the RAFENS network members to assess their content and face validity (Polit and Tatano-Beck, 2014). Then, student questionnaires were translated into the official language of each BNS course by the local leader, ensuring cultural sensitivity (Im et al., 2004). The translated questionnaire version was subjected to a pilot test involving a group of local students not involved in the research process.

In those countries where two BNSc courses were participating (Czech Republic, Italy) the same questionnaire form was used; the features of the BNSc courses were homogeneous while students were considered as a whole group avoiding sub-group analysis, in accordance with the explorative intent of the study. Therefore, data collection was undertaken simultaneously in the participating BNSc courses.

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