



## Review

## Nursing philosophy: A review of current pre registration curricula in the UK



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## SUMMARY

**Background:** Nursing in the UK has been subject to criticism for failing to provide care and compassion in practice, with a series of reports highlighting inadequacies in care. This scrutiny provides nursing with an ideal opportunity to evaluate the underpinning philosophy of nursing practice, and for nurse educators to use this philosophy as the basis for programmes which can inculcate neophyte student nurses with a fundamental understanding of the profession, whilst providing other health care professionals and service users with a clear representation of professional nursing practice.

**Design:** The key word philosophy was used in a systematic stepwise descriptive content analysis of the programme specifications of 33 current undergraduate programme documents, leading to an undergraduate award and professional registration as a nurse.

**Results:** The word philosophy featured minimally in programme specification documents, with 12 (36%) documents including it. Its use was superficial in 3 documents and focused on educational philosophy in a further 3 documents. 2 programme specifications identified their philosophy as the NMC (2010) standards for pre-registration nurse education. 2 programme specifications articulated a philosophy specific to that programme and HEI, focusing on caring, and 2 made reference to underpinning philosophies present in nursing literature; the Relationship Centred Care Approach, and The Humanising Care Philosophy.

**Conclusion:** The philosophy of nursing practice is not clearly articulated in pre-registration curricula. This failure to identify the fundamental nature of nursing is detrimental to the development of the profession, and given this lack of direction it is not surprising that some commentators feel nursing has lost its way. Nurse educators must review their current curricula to ensure that there is clear articulation of nursing's professional philosophical stance, and use this as the framework for pre-registration curricula to support the development of neophyte nursing students towards a clear and focused understanding of what nursing practice is.

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## Introduction

Nursing in the UK has been subject to a great deal of recent criticism following the publication of a number of reports investigating poor clinical practice (Francis, 2010, 2013; Department of Health, 2012). Findings from these reports have identified a lack of care and compassion in the treatment of patients by registered and non-registered nursing staff, leading to negligent care, cultures where poor standards were tolerated and in some instances unnecessary suffering and deaths. Nurse education within the UK has to some extent remained outside the scope of these investigations which have focused on practising clinicians, and specific recommendations for pre-registration nurse education have been limited in number. However in response the nursing profession represented by the Nursing and Midwifery Council (NMC), The Royal College of Nursing (RCN) and Health Education England (HEE) commissioned two reports focusing on pre-registration nurse education and the unregistered nursing work force (Willis, 2012, 2015) to

offer guidance and recommendations for improvements in the future direction of nurse education in the UK.

This background of scrutiny and criticism has enhanced an ongoing feeling within the profession that both nursing and nurse education may have lost their way (Draper, 2006; Darbyshire and McKenna, 2013). This paper argues that if further incidences of poor care are to be avoided, nursing needs to take the lead in shaping and defining what good nursing practice is by the development of a robust and clearly articulated common philosophy of nursing practice. Nursing educators play a vital role in establishing this philosophy to ensure that neophyte nurses are inculcated with this clear understanding of the beliefs and values which make up high quality nursing practice, as well as representing the purpose of nursing to fellow health care professionals and service users. This paper reports on a review of the underpinning philosophy articulated in 33 undergraduate pre-registration nursing programmes currently run by Higher Education Institutes (HEIs) in the UK, and raises a number of questions about the adequacy of current philosophies to support the necessary advancement of the nursing profession and current standards of clinical practice.

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## Literature Review

The idea of the nursing profession sharing a common underpinning philosophy is not new. Since Florence Nightingale first introduced formal nurse education in the UK with the foundation of St Thomas School of Nursing in London in 1860, she sought to define what nursing was and was not as part of the move to recognise nursing as a new and worthwhile profession, and position it within the spectrum of other health care workers, most notably at that time medical staff (Nightingale, 1859). The need to define and clarify what nursing is and is not has been ongoing since that point, most predominately in the latter half of the twentieth century when nurse education first started to move away from the apprenticeship model towards a higher education base. This led to nurse educators developing and publishing a number of competing models of nursing, with popular ones such as Orem (1971), Watson (1988, 1989) and Leininger (1995) being subject to considerable academic scrutiny. However few of these models translated into clinical practice and they were only minimally known outside the profession.

Since the high point of nursing model development, focus amongst nurse educators has largely moved away from the development of nursing models and bespoke theories, however arguments for the need for an underpinning nursing philosophy have not disappeared. Griffin (1980) highlighted the importance of philosophy to bring together and unite the differing elements of the profession, and more recent academics continue to propose differing theories and models of practice with examples including; Finfgeld-Connett (2008) proposing the need for a much clearer definition of what is the “art” of nursing to provide a foundation for education and practice, Sawatzky et al (2009) introducing a framework for excellence in caring, which links both nursing philosophy and educational philosophy and Meehan (2012) suggesting that a philosophical approach identified as “Careful Nursing” could be the way forward for both education and the profession.

Additionally there has been proliferation of approaches supporting individual nurses or groups of nurses to develop their own nursing philosophy (Denehy, 2001; RCN, 2003; Hemingway, 2013), as well as numerous websites allowing nurses to propose and publicise their own personal philosophies of practice (allnurses, 2015; MeganMcGahan, 2015).

Against the current background of poor standards of nursing care, and diminishing resources there is a danger that the need for an underpinning philosophy will be lost, as Rolfe and Gardner (2006) argue there are growing pressures for nurse education to focus on through put of students as opposed to the development of the profession. Whilst Darbyshire and McKenna (2013) strongly argue, nurse education and educationalists are responsible for this loss of way through failures to identify the fundamental purpose of nursing and a failure to focus on service user needs as opposed to the perceived needs of “academic” nursing. This review of UK based nurse education curriculum documents aims to clarify some of these issues, through consideration of what philosophies nurse educators are currently using to support their undergraduate pre-registration programmes.

## Design

This review took place in May 2015, and adopted a systematic step wise approach to descriptive content analysis. The first step consisted of searching for all available published undergraduate pre-registration nursing curricula from the UK which were in the public domain. The NMC provides information about approved programme providers and from this 68 approved HEIs which offer full time undergraduate pre-registration adult nursing programmes in the UK were identified; 2 in Northern Ireland, 10 in Scotland, 5 in Wales and the remainder in England.

A Google search was then carried out for each of the NMC approved HEIs linked to the key words; nursing, adult and pre-registration. A

further search was then carried out on each HEI's own website using their own site search tool. At this stage a further key search term, programme specification was added and used in combination with the key terms above. At total of 33 documents labelled programme specifications were retrieved or 51% of the total available.

Ethical guidance on the use of information posted on the World Wide Web is difficult to find, but guidelines from the British Psychological Society (2013) suggest that providing the key principles of; respect for individuals and their dignity, scientific value, social responsibility and minimal harm are adhered to, information which is clearly within the public domain can be used for research purposes without the requirement of consent. In order to minimise harm in this paper, no individual HEI or programme is identified.

Equivalence in documentation is difficult to determine as all HEIs published differently structured documents, however for the purpose of this study all documents labelled programme specifications were included in the review. Programme specifications demonstrated considerable variation in length; from 8 pages to 157 pages, all programmes were currently approved by the NMC and from available information on each HEI website, actively running and continuing to recruit students.

Each document was then systematically searched using a two stage process. An initial computerised search took place using the “find” command for both Word and Adobe Acrobat Documents (no other document format was found) using the word philosophy, and information from this entered into a database. A further hand search of each document then took place to allow more indepth descriptive content analysis to take place. Although the data does not directly fit into the qualitative data model of thematic analysis more commonly identified in the methodological literature (Grove et al, 2014; Clarke and Braun, 2013), a modified version of Braun and Clarke (2006) stages of thematic content analysis was used;

1. familiarisation with the data,
2. coding,
3. searching for themes,
4. reviewing themes,
5. defining and naming themes
6. writing up.

The key modification being the use of one pre determined search term, rather than developing this through familiarisation and coding. However stages 4 and 5 allow for the search term to be reviewed and redefined, and at this stage the search term and its results were scrutinised to ensure that it remained fit for purpose and fully captured the intention of the review. Basic quantitative data was also taken from the data base to support the descriptive content analysis.

For the purpose of this review a definition of philosophy as provided by the Oxford Dictionaries (2015) was used which identifies it as, “The study of the fundamental nature of knowledge, reality, and existence, especially when considered as an academic discipline,” and this emphasis on the fundamental nature of knowledge as applied to nursing was used to direct the qualitative hand search of all documentation.

## Findings

From an initial computerised search of the 33 programme specifications as detailed above, only 12 (36%) contained the use of the word philosophy, 10 of these used the word once, one used the word 3 times (twice in the main body, and once in reference to the NHS Education for Scotland [2007] Core Curriculum Framework) and one used the word 5 times (once in the main body and in 4 separate module descriptors). All of the documentation contained sections on programme aims and learning outcomes and it was anticipated that this might be the natural place to highlight any underpinning philosophy for the programmes, however close scrutiny of these sections in all 33 documents failed to identify any further references to an overarching

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