



## Swedish nursing students' experience of aspects important for their learning process and their ability to handle the complexity of the nursing degree program

Petra Lilja Andersson <sup>a</sup>, Anna-Karin Edberg <sup>b,\*</sup>

<sup>a</sup> Department of Health Sciences, Lund University, Sweden

<sup>b</sup> Kristianstad University and the Swedish Institute for Health Sciences, Lund University, Sweden

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### SUMMARY

The aim of the study was to explore nursing students' experiences of aspects important for their learning process and their ability to handle the complexity of the nursing degree program. The study was longitudinal and qualitative based on interviews with nursing students, six women and two men aged 20–36, during their three years of education.

In all, seven patterns were found embracing aspects of importance for the students' learning: Having a clear goal, being able to re-evaluate one's ideas, being acknowledged, when the abstract becomes tangible, using one's own experiences as a tool for learning, hovering between closeness and distance regarding one's future profession and handling theory and practice in relation to one another. The results show the importance of providing clinical courses, strongly connected to the theoretical parts of the program and to use reflection and experience-based learning in the nursing program.

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### Introduction

Swedish nursing degree education encompasses a variety of parts and perspectives; practice and theory and in addition to the main subject nursing, various other subjects such as medical science together with the professional and the academic perspectives. Academic demands emphasise critical thinking skills and a scientific approach (Higher Education Act, 1992) while clinical practice emphasises nursing, practical technical skills and medical knowledge (National Board of Health and Welfare, 2005). These sometimes contradictory perspectives, focuses and demands have to be dealt with by the teachers as well as the students, and thus important questions arise; what aspects do the students think are important for their learning process and their ability to handle the complexity in the nursing degree program.

Earlier research has shown that the fact that the nursing program awards dual qualifications, an academic BSc degree, and professional authorisation as a registered nurse, is problematic for the students. For example, the theoretical nursing science courses are experienced as having limited application to the students' clinical practice, leading to the creation of a gap between theory and practice (Jorfeldt, 2004). One reason for this might be insufficient integration of those courses into the program as a whole (Corlett, 2000). Holmström and Larsson (2005) showed that the students valued holistic nursing care more than the 'academic' parts, such as nursing research. Similar findings

were also reported by Ax and Kincade (2001) in a study from the UK, showing that not only students, but also registered nurses in clinical practice, were resistant towards nursing research. The students said that they were dissatisfied with the academic parts of the program as it was difficult to transfer this content into practice. It is, however, also important to remember that students' prior knowledge seems to increase their ability to transfer nursing knowledge from theory to clinical practice (Tsai and Tsai, 2005). Thus, even if the students' individual prerequisites are important for their learning, the organisation of the program could either support or counteract the transfer of knowledge.

Several studies show that clinical practice during the program is of great importance for the students' learning process (Papp et al., 2003; Seacomb, 2008). Holmström and Larsson (2005) conclude that even if 40% of the program consisted of clinical practice, the nursing students would still want fewer theoretical courses and more practical training. A recent European study by Warne et al. (2010), involving nine countries, shows that nursing students were generally satisfied with their clinical placements, related mainly to the quality of mentorship and length of clinical placement. Findings by Levett-Jones and Lathlean (2009) also show that a wide range of individual, interpersonal, contextual and organisational factors are important. Several studies also highlight the importance of the final clinical placement as a bridge to becoming a 'real nurse'. For example, Anderson and Kiger (2008) show that this placement was important in helping prepare students for their role as registered practitioners, for example in learning to manage care, developing knowledge and gaining insights. There is, however, little knowledge available concerning other aspects of the students' learning process in relation

\* Corresponding author at: Swedish Institute for Health Sciences, Lund University, P.O. Box 187, SE 221 00 Lund, Sweden. Tel.: +46 46 222 1980.

E-mail address: [anna-karin.edberg@med.lu.se](mailto:anna-karin.edberg@med.lu.se) (A.-K. Edberg).

to the program as a whole. The majority of available research is focused on either clinical practice or learning styles and not on the complexity in the nursing program, itself.

### Aim

The aim of the study was to explore nursing students' experience of aspects of the program that were important for their learning process and their ability to handle the complexity in the nursing degree program.

### Methods

The study was a descriptive, longitudinal and qualitative study based on interviews with eight nursing students.

### Context

The study was carried out at a University College in a medium-sized southern Swedish town.

The nursing degree program complied with the national guidelines, lasting 3 years (180 credits according to the European Credit Transfer and Accumulation System, ECTS), with theoretical courses and clinical practice accounting for approximately half the time and credits each. The main subject, nursing science, corresponded to 115 ECTS credits, medical science to 50 ECTS credits and public health care to 15 ECTS credits. For an overview of the nursing program, see Fig. 1.

### Sample

Eight students, six women and two men, aged 20 to 36 years, (median 25 years) participated in the data collection. Six of them had previously worked in the care and service sector, one came directly from senior high school and one from work in the retail market.

### Interviews

As the intention was to follow the students' learning process, they were interviewed once each semester (see Fig. 1) during their three years of education; in all 6 interviews with each student. The interviews lasted for between 45 and 90 min. The first interview took place about 10 weeks after the start of the program with the aim of establishing a relationship for future interviews and in order to build trust (cf. Goodson and Sikes, 2001), but also to discover their first experiences and impressions of the program. During the subsequent interviews, the nursing students were asked to describe how they had experienced the program so far and their views about the future. The interviews employed a narrative approach (Mishler, 1986) starting with the question: *Could you please tell me about your present life and study situation?* with probing follow-up questions such as: *Could you tell me more...?* During the interviews follow-up questions from the previous interview were discussed. The interviews were tape-recorded and transcribed verbatim.

### Analysis

The texts were analysed using qualitative content analysis (cf. Graneheim and Lundman, 2004). The analysis was performed in several steps starting with a naive reading of the text to gain an overall understanding. The text was then read several times and recurrent patterns related to the aim of the study, were noted and grouped. These readings were performed using an inductive approach, where the authors strove to be open to the message in the text. The categorisation of the text was continuously discussed between the two authors until no new patterns were found.

### Ethical considerations

The study was performed in line with the ethical guidelines as described in the Helsinki Declaration (1964). As the study did not fall

YEAR 1		Interview 1		Interview 2	
Nursing science	Medical Science	Clinical nursing and medical science	Theory and methods in nursing research	Nursing science	Clinical practice in nursing (also including medical science)
7.5 ECTS	15 ECTS	7.5 ECTS	7.5 ECTS	7.5 ECTS	15 ECTS
YEAR 2		Interview 3		Interview 4	
Nursing science	Theory and methods in nursing research	Public health	Clinical nursing and medical science	Clinical practice in nursing (also including medical science)	Clinical practice in nursing (also including medical science)
7.5 ECTS	7.5 ECTS	7.5 ECTS	7.5 ECTS	15 ECTS	15 ECTS
YEAR 3		Interview 5		Interview 6	
Theory and methods in nursing research	BSc Essay in Nursing	Clinical nursing and medical science	Clinical practice in nursing (also including medical science)	Clinical practice in nursing (also including medical science)	Clinical practice in nursing (also including medical science)
7.5 ECTS	15 ECTS	7.5 ECTS	15 ECTS	15 ECTS	15 ECTS

Fig. 1. Overview of the nursing programme at the university college.

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