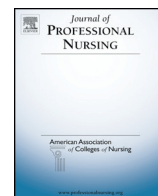




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Nursing students' perception of academic support in the practicum: Development of a reliable and valid measurement instrument

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ABSTRACT

Background: The importance of practicum training in health sciences disciplines places prominence on the academic support received by students in this learning environment, both due to its leverage over their perceived level of satisfaction of academic proficiency as well as its impact on their academic performance.

Aim: The aim of this study was to develop and validate a scale which facilitates the evaluation of academic support perceived by nursing students during their practicum.

Participants: The sample is made up of 710 students from three academic levels of the Bachelor's Degree in Nursing.

Method: An instrument to evaluate the level of academic support perceived by the students was developed and validated. Subsequently, a measurement model of the dimensions which comprise the academic support in the practicum was created.

Results: The Academic Support in the Practicum Scale demonstrated high internal consistency, with a Cronbach's alpha value = 0.913. The validation of the measurement instrument was carried out using confirmatory factor analysis and multi-sample analysis techniques, which presented positive goodness-of-fit indices.

Conclusions: The developed tool has shown sufficient validity and high internal consistency. Its adequate psychometric properties lead to the conclusion that the scale provides a reliable and valid measurement of academic support perceived by students during their placement.

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Introduction

The importance of the practicum within the European Higher Education Area warrants the proposal of a new instrument that rates the academic support perceived by students in professional spaces where they carry out their placements. The practicum is integrated in the set of subjects comprising the curriculum, and it has been established as a focal and integrative component in training projects. Its structure aims to furnish the student with the resources to attain a certain professional, and thus, skilled, profile. This integration allows the practicum to enrich training, complementing academic training with experience in workplaces (Zabalza, 2006). This integrative perspective of training in professional contexts differs from any other approach which contemplates its course syllabus in a fragmentary and individual manner (González & Hevia, 2011; Martínez & Raposo, 2011; Rodicio & Iglesias, 2011; Zabalza, 2011).

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Regarding this, nursing schools have incorporated specific frameworks to the practicum which have been defined as sources of academic support by encouraging adequate curricular development and adapting the student to professional learning environments. Savitz-Romer (2009) proposed that "Academic support typically refers to the formal and informal strategies that build, strengthen, and promote students' mastery of subject matter and skill development through deliberate activities, structures, policies, and expectations" (p. 6).

The level of academic support in the nursing practicum has effects on the students' perception of wellbeing, influences their academic performance, decreases levels of stress in the clinical learning environment (Graham, Lindo, Bryan, & Weaver, 2016) and reduces attrition rates in nursing education (Eick, Williamson, & Heath, 2012; Ujváriné et al., 2011). Therefrom emerges the need for in-depth analysis of the support provided by specific sources of the practicum (peers, preceptors, clinical facilitators and Academic Institution).

This study would help lay the bases for future actions which would improve the efficiency of tutoring and academic organization dynamics, needs shows at studies as Andrews et al. (2006), or reviews as Helminen, Coco, Johnson, Turunen, and Tossavainen (2016).

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Background/literature review

Research development about Academic Support construct has been traditionally vinculated with social support studies at school. This consideration was proposed by Lin, Dean, and Ensel (1986) who defined social support like “the perceived or actual instrumental and/or expressive provisions supplied bit he community, social networks, and confiding partners” (p. 9). Based on this, this definition, social support in the academic sphere would fall within the middle level or the immediate surroundings of the student per Gottlieb’s theory on support networks (Gottlieb, 1981): macro or community level, regarding the community as an entity for integration and participation; *meso* or middle level, which takes account of social networks to which the individual belongs; and micro, which encompasses close relationships. This makes it possible to reflect on its connection with specific social networks in an academic context. Several articles and research projects have looked at the support determinants in the academic context (Arribas, 2013; Jones, 2008; Tao, Dong, Pratt, Hunsberger, & Pancer, 2000; Wilkes & Feldman, 2017). These pieces of research verified the importance students place on factors which determine the perception of support depending on various cultural, socio-economic variables and others inherent to this field such as the educational stage and academic level.

In this matter, Savitz-Romer says: “in practice, however, academic and social supports are interrelated, intertwined, and experienced simultaneously” (p. 9). And he develops an integrated definition of both types of support: “Academic and social support comprises intentional strategies that enable students at all levels to benefit from academically rigorous curricula. These strategies are interrelated, developmentally appropriate, and provide integrated, coordinated, and comprehensive support to improve student achievement” (p. 1).

However, Savitz-Romer proposal ask about the proper essence of Academic Support construct. Mazer and Thompson (2011b), Song, Bong, Lee, and Kim (2015), o Turkpour and Mehdinezhad (2016) shows how social and academic support are similar, but not the same. The Turkpour and Mehdinezhad (2016), study explored the relationships between social support, academic support and adaptation to college, showed discharge support (component of academic support) can predict students' adaptation to university, whereas in any case the components of social support can predict this adaptation. Mazer and Thompson (2011b) in their research about Student Academic Support Scale (SASS; Thompson & Mazer, 2009) validity, concludes: “offer evidence for discriminant validity and suggest that the SASS is distinct from traditional measures of social support. This finding is particularly noteworthy and further distinguishes the operationalization of academic support from traditional forms of social support” (p. 83). Finally, Song et al. (2015) lays out about academic and emotional support provided by parent and teachers although “correlated strongly with each other in his study/...they clearly formed two independent factors, as defined by their respective items” (p. 834). In this last study, Song et al. (2015) define perceived academic support as “the belief that significant others value and encourage student learning and progress by modeling, helping, and providing guidance and information when necessary” (p. 823). This definition allows to categorize academic support in four ranks, proposed by House (1981): a) emotional (offers the individual empathy, trust and affection); b) informative (to provide information to help resolve problems or achieve goals); c) the tangible or instrumental (which provides material or temporary resources or services); and appraisal support (which provides communication or relevant information for the individual for his/her self-assessment).

These two visions of the academic support construct have supposed a development of heterogeneous instruments to evaluate academic support. These vary both in the evaluated support sources as well as in the support type provided, in order to be adapted to the specific characteristics of the academic levels subject of study or to age groups: the Student Perceptions of Classroom Support Scale (SPCS) by O'Rourke and Houghton (2006) measures the perception of students with mild

impairments of social and academic support in the classroom; the Mature Student Social Support Scale (Wong & Kwok, 1997) for adult college students, which includes study area support; the Child and Adolescent Social Support Scale (CASSS; Malecki, Demaray, & Elliott, 2000) focuses on the child and adolescent stages, with five subscales (parent, teacher, friend, classmate and school). These resources include a related academic support items. Finally, one of the instruments specifically used to measure academic support for college students is the SASS (Thompson & Mazer, 2009), evaluation of which concentrates on the frequency and importance of the support received by other college students and the type of support they provide (information, self-esteem, encouragement and expression of feelings).

In the review of the literature, one aspect that has not been assessed thus far is the academic support provided in the specific context of the practicum in health sciences disciplines.

Bearing this in mind, the need to design a reliable and valid measurement instrument to assess the perception of academic support of nursing students on their practicum is addressed. This general aim may be split into the following specific aims: a) explore the dimensionality of Academic Support in the Practicum construct, and b) analyze all possible factors which configure each dimensions of the scale.

The results of this study would create a operative definition about practicum academic support construct and help lay the bases for future actions which would improve the efficiency of tutoring and academic organization dynamics, needs shows at studies as Andrews et al. (2006), o reviews as Helminen et al. (2016).

Method

Participants and procedure

The Academic Support in the Practicum Scale (*Escala de Apoyo Académico en el Prácticum in Spanish*, EAPAP) was conducted on 710 undergraduate nursing students from six Spanish universities during two academic years. The development of the instrument was framed into a wellbeing determinants research in practicum nursing students. This project was presented in informative sessions to students. Online emplacement was showed, where students could answer the project questionnaires' pack. The unique inclusion criteria were that the students were enrolled in practicum subject at their academic level. Participants were done a blind registration process and gave informed consent to include their data into a Hospitare Project file.

Ethical considerations

The study was assessed and approved by the Comillas Pontifical University Ethical Committee. Students voluntarily responded to questions via an online version of the EAPAP (it is offered on the *Proyecto Hospitare* digital portal: www.upcomillas.es/hospitare) after completing their practical training. Data collection gathered from students' replies were anonymous and they are protected under Spanish and European personal data laws.

Table 1
Second-order factor structure of the Academic Support in the Practicum Scale (EAPAP), (N = 710).

Academic support in the practicum	Component
1. Academic institution support	0.771
2. Clinical facilitator support	0.758
3. Peers support	0.564
4. Preceptor support	0.548

Extraction Method: Principal Component Analysis.
Rotation Method: Promax with Kaiser Normalization.
a) 1 component extracted.

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