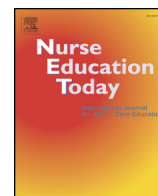




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## A review of the organization, regulation, and financing practices of postgraduate education in clinical nursing in 12 European countries

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### SUMMARY

**Aim:** The aim of this study was to generate information of postgraduate education in clinical nursing in the EU member states.

**Methods:** Data were collected via a structured electronic questionnaire and the questionnaire was sent to the government chief nurses in 26 EU countries in May 2013. Response rate was 46% (n = 12).

**Findings:** In total, 42 domains of specialization were identified. The most common domains were intensive care, mental health, operating room, emergency care, and pediatrics. Specialization programs were organized by university in two of the respondent countries, as residency program in one country, and as a mix of them in four countries. Regulation practices varied remarkably between the countries: scope of practice, subjects, entry requirements, length of education, description of the minimum competence requirements, and education standards related to the specialization programs were most often regulated by act, decree or other regulation. In some of the countries, no registration was required beyond the initial registration, whereas in some others, registration practices varied depending on the specialization program. New information was gathered on the regulation practices of postgraduate education in clinical nursing in the European Region concerning title provision, entry requirements, and financing practices. The awarded title on specialization programs depended on the level of postgraduate education, and the title might vary between the domains. General clinical experience was included in the entry requirements in seven countries. The government was mainly responsible for financing the postgraduate education in four countries, employer in three countries, and in the rest of the countries, there was a combination of different financiers.

**Conclusions:** The importance of knowledge exchange on postgraduate education across the European countries needs to be acknowledged. Information provided by this study on international regulation practices provides useful information for the policy-makers regarding the organization of the postgraduate education in clinical nursing.

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### Introduction

Nurses and midwives are vital resources toward achieving the health policy goals and enhancing the population health. Health 2020, the policy framework of the WHO European Region (WHO, 2013), defines nurses and midwives having increasingly important roles to play in society's efforts to tackle the public health challenges, ensure the continuity of care, and address people's rights and changing health needs. With increasing service demands and an aging population, nurses and midwives are essential to provide safe, high-quality, and efficient health services across the life-course (WHO, 2014).

The WHO Regional Office for Europe has provided a policy framework on strengthening nursing and midwifery (WHO Regional Office for Europe, 2014a) as well as a compendium of good practices (WHO

Regional Office for Europe, 2014b) in nursing and midwifery. These documents were presented during the technical briefing of the Regional Committee for Europe in September 2014. The purpose is to guide member states to strengthen the contribution of nurses and midwives in achieving the Health 2020 goals.

One of the priorities of these WHO documents is focused on strengthening continuous professional development and career development in nursing and midwifery. Both initial and postgraduate education of nurses and midwives are highlighted as crucial means to ensure that the competences of nurses and midwives will be in line with population needs as well as health technology and health care delivery models.

Nursing practice is acknowledged to become more diverse than ever before (Carnwell and Daly, 2003). Recent studies have identified variations across Europe in the education, certification, regulation, and scope of practice for specialist nurses (Dury et al., 2014; Pulcini et al., 2010). Common training frameworks are demanded in order to promote

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lifelong learning and mobility as well as to enhance and develop nursing specialties in line with population needs and health policy goals.

The data for this article were compiled on the basis of the wider entity of materials for a report on developing a national framework for postgraduate education in clinical nursing in Finland (Ministry of Social Affairs and Health, 2014). The report was part of the implementation of the National Development Programme for Social Welfare and Health Care adopted by the government for 2012–2015 (Ministry of Social Affairs and Health, 2012). This article generates information of postgraduate education in clinical nursing in the EU member states.

## Materials and Methods

### Data Collection

The questionnaire was formulated at the Ministry of Social Affairs and Health on the basis of the European strategy for continuing education for nurses and midwives (WHO, 2000; WHO, 2003a; WHO, 2003b; WHO, 2003c; WHO, 2003d; WHO, 2003e; WHO, 2003f; WHO, 2003g; WHO, 2003h; WHO, 2003i). The questionnaire covered the following sections: 1) organization of the postgraduate education, 2) domains of specialization, 3) the amount of ECTS credits, 4) country-specific legislation practices, 5) provision of a new academic title, 6) entry requirements, 7) registration authority, and 8) financiers of the education.

Data were collected via a structured electronic questionnaire, which was first piloted by the government chief nurse (GCN) of Spain and Ireland and adjusted based on their responses. Open-ended questions were included in each section for more detailed information, and contact information of the respondent was asked.

### Participants

The questionnaire was sent to the government chief nurses in 26 EU countries in May 2013. The response rate was 46%. Responses were received from Belgium, Cyprus, Czech Republic, Denmark, Estonia, Ireland, Italy, Poland, Scotland, Slovenia, Spain, and Wales ( $n = 12$ ). A reminder to submit the answers was sent 2 weeks after the initial questionnaire. Contact information was provided for possible further questions.

### Data Analysis

Data were analyzed and classified into tables with Excel's statistical functions. The results were provided as frequencies and percentages based on the sections of the questionnaire. In addition, country-specific information was provided in summary tables and country-specific examples were mentioned in the text. The only missing data concerned the organization of postgraduate education programs, where information concerning Slovenia was missing.

### Ethical Considerations

The purpose of the questionnaire was explained to the respondents: the results of the questionnaire would be used as a part of a national developmental process of postgraduate education in clinical nursing in Finland. The questionnaire was provided as a protected link to the respondents, and submitting replies was optional. In addition, it was mentioned that the findings of the questionnaire might be published as an article.

## Results

### Organizing the Postgraduate Education in Clinical Nursing

The organization of postgraduate education programs in clinical nursing was diverse among the respondent countries, but certain similarities were identified. Table 1 provides detailed information on

identifying how different postgraduate education programs were organized within the respondent countries (Table 1.)

Three main ways for organizing postgraduate education were identified as follows:

- 1.) The university provided the specialization programs in Italy and Wales. In addition, Belgium had specific schools for nurses, which were linked with universities.
- 2.) Residency programs were used in Spain, where all the programs for postgraduate education were provided as residency programs offered by the health services.
- 3.) Different ways to organize postgraduate education between the domains existed in some of the respondent countries. For instance, in Cyprus, Estonia, Ireland, and Scotland, the programs were provided either as university postgraduate programs or residency programs offered by the health services.

In addition, in some of the countries, a range of postgraduate education exists outside the state level coordination. This is the case for instance in Denmark and Wales.

In this study, the respondent countries reported a total of 42 domains of specialization. Most common domains of specialization (see Table 2) were intensive care and mental health (67%), operating room (58%), emergency care and pediatrics (50%). Notable is that the range of specialization domains varied remarkably between the respondent countries. The most extensive selection of domains of specialization was provided in Ireland and Scotland.

### European Credit Transfer and Accumulation System (ECTS)

The amount of ECTS credits in the postgraduate education in clinical nursing varied between the countries as well as within the countries and between the domains of specialization. The range of ECTS credits varied between 15 and 120. The most common amount of ECTS credits was 60.

Notable is that the ECTS credits were not applied in all of the countries and domains of specialization at the time of data collection in 2013. This was the case for instance in Poland and Spain, as well as in Cyprus concerning the midwifery and operating room programs. The country-specific information of the amount of ECTS credits is provided in Table 3.

### Country Example: Scotland

In Scotland, opportunities for specialist post-registration development are available across a very wide range of areas. Postgraduate education may take the form of specific skills development to support practice in a particular setting or the attainment of formal academic qualifications linked to senior-level or advanced-level practice in specialist or general domains e.g. pediatrics, intensive care, mental health or addictions. Therefore, depending on the demand from service, credit bearing educational provision to support career development is available at a range of levels across the domains of specialization. The levels according to the Scottish credit and qualifications framework are (SCQF 9) or Hons Degree Level (SCQF 10) for Practitioner or Senior Practitioner development and at Masters Level (SCQF 11) Advanced Practitioner roles.

## Regulation of Postgraduate Education

### Legislation of Postgraduate Education

Legislation and regulation practices varied remarkably between the countries and domains of specialization. Scope of practice, subjects, entry requirements, length of the postgraduate education, description of the minimum competence requirements from regulatory body, education standards, and requirements and other relevant issues were

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