



Review

Summative assessment of clinical practice of student nurses: A review of the literature



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ABSTRACT

Objectives: To provide an overview of summative assessment of student nurses' practice currently in use.

Design: Narrative review and synthesis of qualitative and quantitative studies.

Data sources: With the support of an information specialist, the data were collected from scientific databases which included CINAHL, PubMed, Medici, ISI Web of Science, Cochrane library and ERIC published from January 2000 to May 2014. Sources used in all of the included studies were also reviewed.

Review methods: 725 articles concerned with student nurse clinical practice assessment were identified. After inclusion and exclusion criteria, 23 articles were selected for critical review.

Results: Findings suggest that the assessment process of student nurses' clinical practice lacks consistency. It is open to the subjective bias of the assessor, and the quality of assessment varies greatly. Student nurses' clinical assessment was divided into 3 themes: acts performed before final assessment, the actual final assessment situation and the acts after the final assessment situation. Mentors and students need teachers to provide them with an orientation to the assessment process and the paperwork. Terminology on evaluation forms is sometimes so difficult to grasp that the mentors did not understand what they mean. There is no consensus about written assignments' ability to describe the students' skills. Mentors have timing problems to ensure relevant assessment of student nurses. At the final interview students normally self-assess their performance; the mentor assesses by interview and by written assignments whether the student has achieved the criteria, and the role of the teacher is to support the mentor and the student in appropriate assessment. The variety of patient treatment environments in which student nurses perform their clinical practice periods is challenging also for the assessment of student nurses' expertise.

Conclusions: Mentors want clinical practice to be a positive experience for student nurses and it might lead mentors to give higher grades than what student nurses in fact deserve. It is very rare that student nurses fail their clinical practice. If the student nurse does not

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achieve the clinical competencies they are allowed to have extra time in clinical areas until they will be assessed as competent.

Further research needs to be carried out to have more knowledge about the final assessment in the end of clinical practice. Through further research it will be possible to have better methods for high quality assessment processes and feedback to student nurses. Quality in assessment improves patient safety.

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What is already known about the topic?

- Nursing students' studies at the EU level comprise clinical practice in at least 50% of their total degree. In the United States the exact requirements of length of clinical practice vary from State to State.
- Relevant assessment is a significant part of professional growth in nursing education.
- Previous reviews of the literature on assessment of clinical practice in nursing education have focused on general training and feedback during their period of practice, rather than the final clinical assessment.

What this paper adds

- The explicit focus of assessment is very important as students tend to concentrate on achieving the required competencies which they are aware will be assessed.
- Assessment is inconsistent and personal characteristics of nursing students, mentors and nursing teachers significantly affect the process.
- In final assessment situations mentors have emotional and educational needs which educators need to be able to support to increase the validity of assessment.

1. Introduction

Clinical practice with appropriate assessment strategies is an important part of the nursing student education process. The purpose of assessment is to describe student nurses' ability to perform the required skills based on the job description, that is, "fitness to practice." Pre-registration education must ensure that student nurses meet standards of quality and safety in patient care ([American Association of Colleges of Nursing, 2012](#); [Willis Commission, 2012](#)).

Student nurses spend variable amounts of the time in their clinical practice with their mentors but university-based teachers often have the responsibility for guiding and evaluating students ([AACN, 2012](#); [Wade and Hayes, 2010](#)). Mentoring involves facilitating students' learning in clinical placements and strengthening students' professionalism ([Jokelainen et al., 2011](#); [Öhring and Hallberg, 2000](#)). There is still confusion about using the terms mentor or preceptor in the context of assessing students. In this review we will use the term 'mentor' to represent a clinical nurse who supervises, teaches and assesses nursing students during their clinical practice.

Formative assessment is an ongoing process and lasts throughout clinical education based on mentors giving feedback; its purpose is to advise the student toward a goal.

Formative assessment prepares students for the summative assessment, which is usually undertaken at the end of the education modules, and if students are unsuccessful this may lead to the clinical practice period being terminated ([Duers and Brown, 2009](#); [Hand, 2006](#); [Wallace, 2003](#)).

The term 'final assessment' can be used both at the end of every nursing student's clinical practice period and at the end of the program of studies before graduating ([NMC, 2008](#)). In this review we will use the term 'final assessment' to represent the assessment of student nurses' clinical performance at the end of each clinical practice period. The mentor is meant to give the relevant evaluation feedback ([Clemow, 2007](#)) to ensure that student nurses have the ability to develop professionally.

It is difficult to reach consensus about what the core competency areas are for nursing, and opinions vary over time ([Berkow et al., 2009](#)). There are many different competency models used to evaluate nursing students ([Karayurt et al., 2008](#)). Carefully prepared evaluation forms make the assessment more objective and clear ([Klein, 2006](#)). Final assessment is an important method to ensure the nursing student has achieved the educational goals and therefore it is important to increase knowledge of final assessment processes in the learning environments.

Previous reviews on this topic of assessment of student nurses have dealt with the matter from a different perspective. For example, [Yanhua and Watson \(2011\)](#) investigated trends in the evaluation of clinical competence in student nurses such as instrument development and approaches to testing competence. Mentoring or student-mentor relationship has also been of interest in reviews (e.g., [Henderson et al., 2012](#); [Jokelainen et al., 2011](#); [Wilkes, 2006](#)). [Chambers \(1998\)](#) and [Priest and Roberts \(1998\)](#) have published reviews of the literature focusing on assessment of student nurses' clinical assessment. These reviews are over fifteen years old and therefore it is important to update the illustration of this phenomenon in this review.

2. Aim of the review

The purpose of this review was to provide an overview of the approaches to the summative assessment of student nurses' practice that are currently in use.

3. Methods

The argumentative nature of a narrative literature review, to aggregate and summarize evidence, has been considered a strength for the method ([Webb and Roe, 2007](#)). The narrative review in this review was carried out systematically and was based on a plan that can be

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