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Featured Article

# Objective Structured Clinical Examination: An Assessment Method for Academic-Practice Partnerships

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## KEYWORDS

OSCE;  
simulation;  
patient safety;  
evidence-based  
practice;  
academic-practice  
partnerships;  
mentors;  
clinical performance;  
assessment

## Abstract

**Background:** Objective structured clinical examination (OSCE) can help mentors, clinical lecturers, and academic lecturers assess students with borderline performance.

**Methods:** Cohort study in 120 fourth-year Nursing students (Bachelor's degree). OSCE stations, designed to evaluate cumulative content and skills, were assessed jointly by academic and clinical lecturers. Scores were compared with other summative assessments.

**Results:** Mean OSCE score was  $5.6 \pm 1.2$  (10-point scale); 7.5% failed. Final clinical practice score  $8.4 \pm 0.6$ , no students failed; content knowledge,  $7.7 \pm 0.5$ , 12.3% failed. OSCE and practicum scores were strongly correlated in students who failed OSCE ( $r = 0.68$ ).

**Conclusions:** OSCE appropriately identified risk of poor performance in clinical practice.

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## Introduction

Nursing students are continually assessed throughout their academic programmes by scores on written examinations, graded portfolios, and evaluation at clinical sites. Often these assessments are completed by different types of

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instructional faculty (academic lecturers, clinical lecturers, and staff nurse preceptors), yielding vastly different grades in one setting compared with another. A student who is successful in the classroom setting may struggle in the clinical setting, but still receive a passing grade from the preceptor. Anecdotal evidence in our setting suggested that this may be due to uncertainty about how to appropriately assess the students or to concerns that a failing clinical grade could reflect badly on the preceptor or would not be supported by the lecturers. After ascertaining that clinical practice scores were often higher than expected for students whose academic scores were less stellar, the instructional team saw the need for an objective way of assessing student performance in clinical settings. In the present study, nursing students participated in an objective structured clinical examination (OSCE) that was specifically developed to assess their clinical abilities.

Duffy (2003) described students with poor performance in a clinical workplace environment who received a passing grade as “failing to fail,” meaning that these students may receive satisfactory clinical practice assessments even when mentors detect problems such as lack of interest,

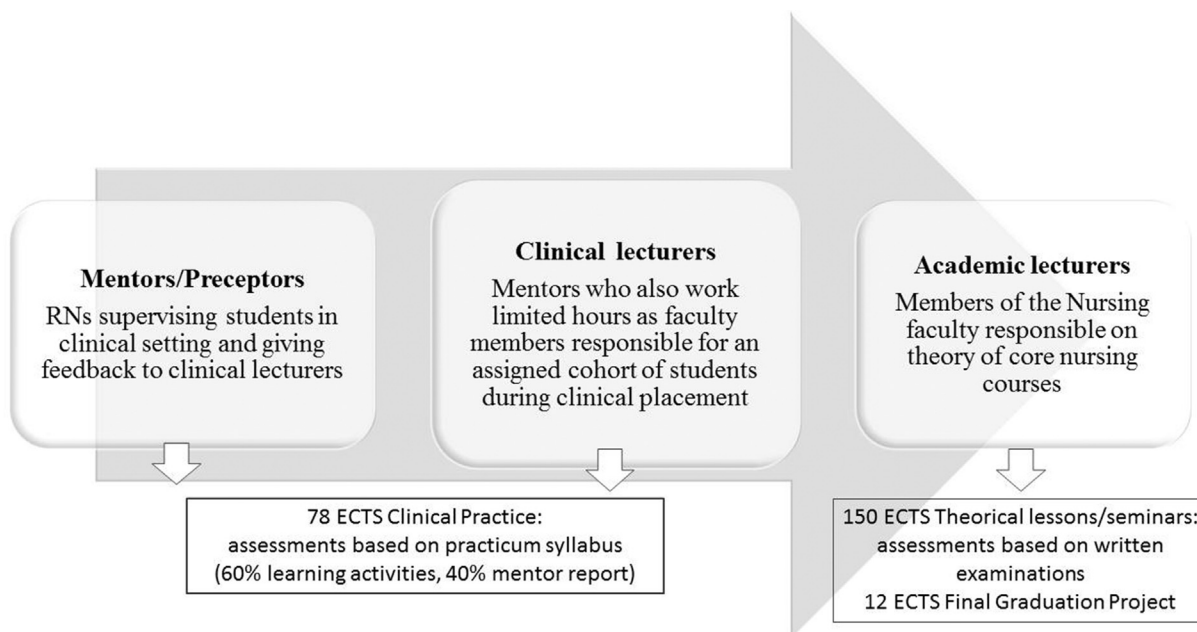
knowledge, and communication or psychomotor skills early in the clinical practice setting, when remedial action could be taken.

When 2,000 nurse mentors in Britain were asked why they gave these underprepared students a passing grade, 40% indicated they could not provide the evidence to back up their concerns and nearly one third said they assumed the university would just overturn a failing grade (Gainsbury, 2010). Another British study found evidence that students who fail to demonstrate competence but still pass clinical assessments can subsequently be deemed fit to register as nurses (Jervis & Tilki, 2011). A recent systematic integrative review identified 20 studies that analyzed “failure to fail” in undergraduate nursing students (Hughes, Mitchell, & Johnston, 2016). As a limitation of the study, the authors pointed out that all but two of the studies reviewed were carried out in United States, United Kingdom, or Canada (the exceptions were from Malawi and Indonesia), and further research was needed to investigate whether failure to fail is common in other parts of the world, including Asia and Europe.

Three groups of professionals are usually involved in the training and assessment of undergraduate nursing students in Europe: staff nurses, clinical lecturers, and academic lecturers (Figure 1). Staff nurses who provide direct patient care serve as mentors or preceptors for nursing students, providing training, supervision, and formative assessment. Clinical lecturers decide whether a student has passed or failed the practicum, based on learning outcomes stated in the practicum syllabus and the mentor’s report, and administer the final clinical examination. Although academic lecturers have incorporated classroom strategies such as student portfolios, measurable scales, and a clear

### Key Points

- None of the students who failed the OSCE also failed clinical practice.
- For students who failed OSCE, the OSCE-practicum correlation was strong.
- OSCE allows the student to identify knowledge and skills gaps.



**Figure 1** Diagram of the course structure for the bachelor’s degree in nursing (240 European Credit Transfer and Accumulation System, ECTS).

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