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SUMMATIVE ASSESSMENTS AND CLINICAL PLACEMENT READINESS FOR YEAR ONE BACHELOR OF NURSING STUDENTS

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Michelle Miller

INTRODUCTION

Clinical placement is a crucial part of a student nurse's learning journey. In the clinical environment, students develop their dexterity with clinical equipment, strengthen their critical thinking skills, and apply theoretical knowledge to practice in a supportive learning environment (Levett-Jones et al., 2015). The clinical domain is at the intersection of theory and application. Therefore, it is essential that students are well prepared so they can take advantage of the learning experience, become safe practitioners, and achieve the expected learning outcomes.

Many nursing and health industry education providers use practical summative assessments to determine a student's ability to apply theoretical learning to practice and to assess practical skills to ensure they have achieved the required level of competence for clinical placement (Arrogante et al., 2021; Miller, 2023). What evidence is there that practical assessments can sufficiently evaluate a student's preparedness for this stage?

This literature review summarises a body of research on whether preclinical summative assessments effectively determine if a baccalaureate student nurse is work-ready for clinical placement. Its aim is to apply the insights gained to the specific context of the Southern Institute of Technology (SIT) Passport to Practice summative assessment, to determine if it serves its intended purpose.

BACKGROUND

Preparing students for clinical placement is essential, enabling them to have a positive experience and develop their nursing skills and knowledge. Cant et al. (2021) found that a lack of preparation hindered student learning, and that students need to be prepared so clinical learning can occur. A study by Levett-Jones et al. (2015) of first-year nursing students found that many reported feeling unprepared for clinical placement.

Southern Institute of Technology year one Bachelor of Nursing (BN) students are required to complete a summative practical assessment, called Passport to Practice (P2P) to proceed to clinical placement. During this assessment, students must demonstrate developing professional conduct, reflective practice, and competence in selected nursing procedures. The assessment is undertaken within a simulated clinical scenario, assessed by a nurse educator, and evaluated using the SIT Clinical Progression Rubric. The rubric aligns closely with the Nursing Council of

New Zealand Standards of Competence (NCNZ, 2025), which outline the knowledge, skills, and professional behaviours necessary for culturally safe and effective nursing practice, thereby providing a framework for assessing students' readiness for clinical practice.

The foundational work of Benner (1982, 1984) uses the Dreyfus Model of Skill Acquisition (Dreyfus & Dreyfus, 1980) to explain how nurses develop clinical expertise incrementally through education and experience. According to the Dreyfus model, a student nurse begins at the novice stage and, as knowledge and experience increase, progresses to advanced beginner, then develops competence. With further development, the nurse becomes proficient and ultimately may reach the level of an expert. This progression from novice to expert is also applicable to student nurses as their skills and knowledge evolve throughout their education. The achievement of proficiency reflects the student's ability to integrate theoretical knowledge with experience to develop competence and expertise (Benner, 1982).

Students need to be taught how to perform skills and practice them to gain competence (Benner, 1982). At the beginning of their nursing journey, students may have little theoretical knowledge, have had limited exposure to medical equipment, or be unable to apply critical thinking in a nursing context. Benner (1982) describes these students as "Novice" nurses who have no previous experience and may lack the ability to use discretionary judgment. Novice students require substantial guidance as they acquire and develop their knowledge and skills. Within the SIT Clinical Progression Rubric, the first level is described as "Dependent." At the Dependent level, students may not yet demonstrate appropriate professional behaviour or knowledge and are dependent on the nurse educator for guidance.

Throughout the year, students gain theoretical knowledge in the classroom and learn a vast range of fundamental practical nursing skills, such as taking vital signs and administering medications. Students are also able to develop empathy and professionalism through reflective practice and critical thinking. Students spend substantial time preparing themselves for the P2P assessment to practice and refine their psychomotor skills and muscle memory.

By the time students are ready to attempt P2P, they should be at a "Guided" level on the Clinical Progression Rubric, described as requiring frequent supportive cues. For Benner (1982), this is the level designated as "Advanced Beginner," where students have some clinical exposure and are developing critical thinking. Benner (1982) describes the advanced beginner as being capable of "marginally acceptable performance" (p. 403). At this stage, students have gained some experience they can draw on and apply to theoretical concepts. They should be well-prepared to pass the P2P assessment and to build a solid foundation of clinical skills and knowledge that will benefit them throughout their nursing journey.

METHODOLOGY

A literature review was conducted to identify and analyse themes related to the effectiveness of practical summative assessments in determining nursing students' readiness for clinical placement and highlighting gaps in knowledge and skills.

A comprehensive literature search was conducted between July and September 2023. The electronic databases CINAHL, PubMed, and Google Scholar were searched using combinations of the following keywords: "predictive value of practical summative assessments"; "preparedness of

student nurses for clinical placement"; "objective structural clinical examination", and "pre-clinical summative assessments." Boolean operators (AND, OR) were applied to refine the search. The reference lists of included articles were also scanned to identify additional sources.

To be included, articles were required to be peer-reviewed, published in English between 2013 and September 2023, and discuss summative assessments for health industry students. Any grey literature or conference abstracts were excluded. Sixteen articles were selected that met the inclusion criteria. The key concepts from each article regarding the value of summative pre-clinical assessments, which included the study design, the type of health education provider, the type of preclinical assessment conducted, and the predictive value of preparedness, were extracted. Common findings and patterns were then identified in the literature under the following themes.

THEMES

Value of summative assessments

Summative assessments measure student learning after specific theory and clinical instruction (Arrogante et al., 2021; Ha & Lim, 2023; Kassabry, 2023; Kibble, 2017). According to Burgess and Mellis (2015), these assessments can be used to measure students' progress towards achieving learning outcomes and to determine whether their knowledge and clinical skills are consistent with the expectations of their current stage of learning. Ashcraft et al. (2013) report that well-planned clinical scenarios provide an opportunity for nurse educators to evaluate a student's psychomotor skills, clinical decision making, and reflective thinking. For Arrogante et al. (2021), simulation-based learning increases the fusion of theoretical knowledge and clinical practice. They further observe that summative clinical examinations are commonly used to evaluate a student's knowledge and application in clinical practice. Ashcraft et al. (2013) concur that simulated assessments are an effective evaluation tool yet caution that a robust rubric is needed to assess competency. Rosy et al. (2022) and Mohammed and Amer (2018) found that practical assessment aided students in making connections between theoretical knowledge and clinical skills.

Rosy et al. (2022) reported that students felt practical assessments were fair in assessing their clinical knowledge and skills. Both students and nurse educators acknowledged that clinical skills-based assessments are a reliable method for evaluating clinical skills as they are impartial, valid, and reliable (Ha & Lim, 2023; Kassabry, 2023). The use of this type of assessment fosters self-confidence as the students practice in a safe, supported learning environment (Ashcraft et al., 2013; Ha & Lim, 2023). The preparation students complete for assessments facilitates the connection between theory and practical skills applied within the clinical environment (Ha & Lim, 2023; Kassabry, 2023; Rosy et al., 2022). A significant correlation was found between practical assessments and clinical performance, suggesting that assessments such as the P2P can identify borderline performance by students who may need additional support during clinical placement (Terry et al., 2017).

The value of clinical placement

Clinical placement ought to be a safe environment for student nurses, where they feel welcomed (Cooper et al., 2015). Clinical placement is described by Ama Amoo et al. (2022) as a place for teaching and learning. Splitgerber et al. (2021) agree, then add that clinical placement is the preferred environment for students to learn practical skills, develop clinical reasoning, and critical thinking skills. According to Jafarian-Amiri et al. (2020), the clinical environment provides an

opportunity to "transform conceptual knowledge into psychomotor skills and apply them to patient care" (p. 1). Levett-Jones et al. (2015) describe a student nurse's first clinical placement as a significant time for growth, during which attitudes and values are developed and challenged. Clinical placement is a "juncture in their educational and professional journey" and an "authentic context for nursing students to develop knowledge, skills, attitudes and values as a registered nurse" (Levett-Jones et al., 2015, p. 308).

Preparing students for clinical placement is essential, enabling them to have a positive experience and develop their nursing skills and knowledge. Cant et al. (2021) found that a lack of preparation hindered student learning, and that adequate preparation is essential for students to engage in effective clinical learning. As noted above, a study by Levett-Jones et al. (2015) of first-year nursing students found that many felt unprepared for clinical placement. The combination of theoretical and practical skills classes aims to prepare students for this step. In the clinical environment, students can further develop dexterity with clinical equipment, mature their critical thinking skills, and apply theoretical knowledge to clinical practice in a supportive environment.

Self confidence

Students are initially instructed in the best evidence-based practice guidelines and the correct procedural sequencing required for the effective use of clinical equipment. Subsequently, they are provided with opportunities to replicate and refine these skills through structured practice sessions. The deliberate and repetitive practice undertaken in preparation for summative assessment has been shown to foster students' self-confidence and enhance their readiness for clinical performance (Ha & Lim, 2023; Kassabry, 2023). Consistent and purposeful engagement in skill-based practice is therefore fundamental to the development of clinical competence and professional confidence.

Making connections

Simulation is often used in the classroom to provide students with an opportunity to practice their skills in a safe environment. According to Ashcraft et al. (2013), feedback is essential for students to advance their clinical skills and critical thinking. Nurse educators must engage in ethical and robust discussions that help students make connections between the theory learned and the application of skills and critical thinking; in other words, reducing the theory-practice gap. Concurrently, simulation enables students to amalgamate theoretical knowledge into clinical practice (Ashcraft et al., 2013).

Fair assessment

Both students and nurse educators consistently comment that practical summative assessments are a fair way to assess clinical skills (Ho et al., 2015; Mohammed & Amer, 2018; Rosy et al., 2022). For Ashcraft et al. (2013), it is imperative to have a "well-constructed" rubric when evaluating students during a summative assessment.

The SIT P2P is a subjective assessment in which nurse educators assess students against the robust Clinical Progression Rubric, aligned with the NCNZ Standards for Registered Nurses. Students are provided with a copy of the marking rubric in advance, which outlines what assessors are examining during the assessment. There should be no surprises regarding what the student should expect during the assessment.

CONCLUSION

Southern Institute of Technology endeavours to graduate professional, competent, and confident graduates. Graduates of the Bachelor of Nursing are expected to deploy critical thinking, theoretical knowledge, and clinical judgment to make nursing decisions for the people they work in partnership with, including colleagues, health consumers, and their families. Clinical placement provides nursing students with the opportunity to integrate theoretical knowledge with clinical practice in a supportive 'real life' clinical environment. Working with other healthcare workers and health consumers also provides students with the opportunity to observe clinical practice and develop their own values, beliefs, and attitudes as nurses. This type of learning cannot be realistically replicated in the classroom.

The clinical environment provides students with a multiplicity of learning experiences and opportunities to develop their knowledge and skills. It is also acknowledged that students should not be 'set up to fail.' All students entering the clinical domain should have successfully achieved a set of competencies, and the literature supports the use of summative assessments such as the P2P to ensure students are ready for this step. Therefore, it is recommended that SIT continue with the P2P, as the requirement to pass the assessment compels students to develop their clinical skills through practice, thus developing their dexterity with equipment, assessment skills, and critical thinking. It also allows those who might not be prepared to be provided with additional support.

The P2P allows SIT nurse educators to feel confident that their students will thrive in the clinical environment as they develop their nursing skills because the students entering those domains will have demonstrated their competence.

Michelle Miller is a nurse educator at the Southern Institute of Technology in Invercargill, New Zealand. Her research examines preclinical assessments that prepare learners for clinical placement. Her whakapapa is to Ngāi Tahu and Muaūpoko, grounding her scholarly work in culturally informed, equity-focused nursing education.

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