



Self-Perceived Professional Preparedness of Final-Year Nursing Students for Entering the Profession

¹Katarina Fofić

^{2,3}Vesna Konjevoda

³Marta Čivljak

³Ivica Matić

¹University Hospital Centre Zagreb, Zagreb, Croatia

²University Hospital Sveti Duh, Zagreb, Croatia

³Catholic University of Croatia, Zagreb, Croatia

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Author for correspondence:

Vesna Konjevoda

University Hospital Sveti Duh, Zagreb, Croatia

E-mail: vesna.konjevoda@unicath.hr

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Abstract

Introduction. Nursing students' preparedness for entering their professional careers is crucial for ensuring quality healthcare.

Aim. To evaluate the self-perceived preparedness of final-year nursing students as they transition into the nursing profession focusing on clinical competencies, evidence-based practice, administrative skills, and patient-centered care.

Methods. A cross-sectional observational study was conducted among 200 final-year nursing students from the Catholic University of Croatia and the University of Applied Health Sciences. Data were collected using the Professional Preparedness of Nursing Students (PPNS) questionnaire.

Results. Most respondents rated their readiness as excellent. This perception was more prevalent among graduate students (54.2%) compared to undergraduate students (44.4%). Part-time students reported significantly higher levels of perceived readiness compared to full-time students (77.94 vs. 71.50).

Conclusion. Final-year nursing students feel adequately prepared to enter the nursing profession and commence their professional practice. These findings highlight the importance of recognizing diverse student experiences and needs in designing educational programs to enhance professional competence.

Introduction

Globally, healthcare systems are navigating unprecedented challenges in delivering effective care. Changes in healthcare have created demanding working conditions that strain the continuity and quality of services (1). At the same time, the need to provide high-quality, evidence-based care to protect public health has become more urgent (2). These shifts affect all stakeholders in healthcare, from management and frontline staff to students and auxiliary personnel.

Nursing students, who spend a substantial portion of their training in clinical settings, are highly exposed to these pressures. Educators tasked with preparing future nurses recognize the complexities of clinical environments and their influence on student development (3). Clinical practice provides students with essential exposure to patient care realities. However, ensuring that students are adequately prepared for these experiences is becoming increasingly challenging, undermining the ability to maintain high standards of care and patient safety (4, 5).

Nursing education integrates theoretical knowledge with clinical training, aiming to develop students with critical skills and foster clinical reasoning. Clinical placements are pivotal, offering students opportunities to develop hands-on experience and problem-solving capabilities at the bedside (6). The effective evaluation and ongoing enhancement of clinical education are essential to bridge existing gaps and attain educational objectives, particularly in the training of competent healthcare providers (7). One significant approach to this process is self-assessment, which allows students to critically evaluate their own clinical performance. This method has been recognized as a valuable tool for improving learning outcomes (8). Furthermore, understanding students' perspectives on their training experiences offers critical insights that can inform the refinement of educational programs (9).

Despite the emphasis on clinical education, research indicates that many students fail to acquire sufficient clinical experience. For instance, studies in Shiraz and Tehran reported inadequate clinical environments and a lack of essential skills for safe practice among nursing students (10, 11). Similar findings

in Kurdistan and Shahroud revealed gaps in competencies and clinical skills, respectively (12, 13). The transition from student to practicing nurse presents additional challenges.

Newly graduated nurses often face a steep learning curve as they adapt to organizational protocols, policies, and tools unfamiliar from their training (14). Duchscher describes this transition as a process of professional socialization, characterized by learning the skills, knowledge, and values of nursing culture (15). New graduates often report difficulties with prioritization and fulfilling their roles, leading to frustration and a sense of being ill-prepared (16). The transition from nursing education to professional practice is further complicated by organizational challenges and the high expectations placed upon newly graduated nurses by senior colleagues. This dynamic often leads to culture shock and contributes to increased turnover rates within healthcare settings. Despite the critical role that newly graduated nurses play in healthcare systems, their level of preparedness for the demands of the profession remains a significant concern (17, 18). While newly graduated nurses are essential to healthcare systems, their preparedness remains a concern. According to Benner's novice-to-expert framework, these nurses often lack the technical skills and clinical experience required for independent practice (16). Transitional programs have been implemented in many institutions to address these gaps, focusing on skill development and role adaptation during the first year of employment. Such programs, while beneficial, are often stressful for participants, highlighting the need for enhanced preparatory training before employment.

Aim

The primary aim of this study is to assess the self-perceived readiness of final-year nursing students as they prepare to transition into professional practice and compare the perceptions of preparedness between full-time and part-time nursing students. The investigation is grounded in the complexities inherent in nursing education and the dynamics of the transition process. Two primary hypotheses guide

this research. First, we hypothesize that more than half of the final-year nursing students will perceive themselves as adequately prepared for clinical practice. This expectation is based on the structured design of nursing curricula, which effectively integrates theoretical knowledge with practical training experiences (19). Second, we propose that part-time students will report higher levels of preparedness compared to their full-time peers. This hypothesis is informed by the additional practical exposure and clinical experience that part-time students typically acquire through concurrent employment in healthcare settings. Such dual engagement in both work and academic environments may enhance their confidence and overall preparedness to meet the demands of professional nursing practice (20).

Methods

This cross-sectional study was conducted in January 2024 to assess the preparedness of final-year nursing students for entering the profession. The study utilized a questionnaire-based approach. Participants were recruited through a link disseminated via email and WhatsApp groups, ensuring a broad outreach to potential respondents. The study emphasized voluntary participation and maintained the anonymity of all respondents throughout the data collection process. The target population comprised full-time and part-time final-year nursing students from the Catholic University of Croatia and the University of Applied Health Sciences. Inclusion criteria required participants to be enrolled in the current academic year, while exclusion criteria eliminated students not enrolled or those participating in international mobility programs. A total of 200 nursing students participated in the study. Of these, 117 were undergraduate students, including 61 full-time and 56 part-time students. Additionally, 83 graduate students took part, with 37 full-time and 46 part-time students.

The survey instrument utilized in this study consisted of two distinct sections designed to gather comprehensive data on the participants. The first section focused on sociodemographic information. This foundational information was essential for understanding

the demographic context of the participants and for analyzing potential correlations with the perceived professional preparedness outcomes. The second section of the survey employed the Perceived Professional Preparedness of Nursing Students (PPPNS) questionnaire, a validated instrument specifically designed to assess nursing students' perceptions of their readiness to enter professional practice (21). Prior to its implementation, permission to use the PPPNS questionnaire was obtained from the original authors. The questionnaire was subsequently translated into Croatian, adhering to standardized translation and adaptation protocols to ensure linguistic and conceptual equivalence. The PPPNS questionnaire comprises 19 items rated on a five-point Likert scale, where participants indicate their level of agreement with each statement, ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). The items are categorized into four domains that reflect critical aspects of professional preparedness: **Clinical Competence:** Evaluates preparation for administering therapy, measuring vital signs, diagnosing, and managing a range of conditions encountered in healthcare settings. **Evidence-Based Nursing:** Focuses on graduate-level skills, including personal education, patient education, and mentoring colleagues. **Respect for Patients:** Addresses ethical considerations, patient rights, and interpersonal relationships. **Professional Collaboration:** Evaluates respect for colleagues, teamwork, and holistic care approaches. Students rated each item on a scale from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree), indicating the extent to which the statements applied to them. The questionnaire's raw scores are transformed to scores in the range of 0-100 by subtracting the lowest possible raw score from the obtained raw score, then dividing this difference by the range of possible scores (i.e., the highest possible raw score minus the lowest possible raw score) and finally multiplying the result by 100. Scores below 25% indicate weak perceived preparedness; scores of 25-50%, 50-75%, and above 75% imply medium, good, and excellent perceived preparedness, respectively. The results can be analyzed at the level of the overall scale or domains.

Prior to performing data analysis, the distribution of the results from the PPPNS questionnaire, along with its four subscales, was evaluated for normality using the Kolmogorov-Smirnov test. Therefore, parametric procedures were used for data analysis. Continuous variables were reported as mean \pm standard deviation

The sample was predominantly female. The average age of respondents was 26.38 years (SD=7.64), reflecting a diverse age range. Regarding academic level, 59% (N=117) were enrolled in undergraduate programs, while 41% (N=83) were in graduate programs. Additionally, 49% (N=98) were full-time students, and 51% (N=102) were part-time students (Table 1).

The results indicate a generally high level of self-perceived professional preparedness among final-year nursing students. Among the four domains, Patient-Centered Care stands out as the strongest area. Clinical Competency emerges as the relatively weakest domain, suggesting a potential need for further practical training and experience before transitioning into professional practice (table 2).

Characteristics of study participants and PPPNS domain scores

Characteristics	N	%
Gender		
Male	20	10
Female	180	90
Study program		
Undergraduate	117	59
Graduate	83	41
Student status		
Full-time	98	49
Part-time	102	51
Age (M, SD)	26.38	7.64

The comparison of self-perceived preparedness between undergraduate and graduate nursing students shows no statistically significant difference ($p=0.176$). Both groups generally assess their preparedness as high, with graduate students reporting slightly higher self-perceived readiness compared to undergraduate students (table 3).

Domain of professional preparedness*	M	SD	Minimum.	Maximum.
Clinical competency	75.82	10.74	44	100
Evidence-based practice (EBP)	82.40	12.05	36	100
Framework-oriented performance	77.12	12.81	40	100
Patient-centered care	88.18	9.26	32	100

*Preparedness < 25% = poor, 25-50% = average, 50-75% = good, > 75% = excellent

Study Level	N	M	SD	t	df	p
Undergraduate	117	74.58	11.99	-1.359	198	0.176
Graduate	83	76.90	11.76			

*Preparedness < 25% = poor, 25-50% = average, 50-75% = good, > 75% = excellent

Preparedness of undergraduate students

The t-test showed a statistically significant difference in self-perceived preparedness between full-time and part-time undergraduate nursing students ($p=0.003$). Part-time students report a higher level of preparedness, while full-time students perceive their readiness as somewhat lower. According to the pre-defined classification, part-time students fall within the "excellent" category, while full-time students are closer to the upper range of the "good" category" (table 4).

Preparedness of graduate students

The t-test showed a statistically significant difference in self-perceived preparedness between full-time and part-time graduate nursing students ($p=0.012$). Similar to the findings among undergraduate students, part-time graduate students report a higher level of preparedness compared to their full-time counterparts (table 5).

evaluated students' agreement with statements related to clinical competencies, evidence-based practice, administration, and patient-centered care. Furthermore, a comparative analysis between full-time and part-time students revealed that part-time students exhibited a higher level of readiness for the labor market.

This research addresses a critical gap by exploring the practical knowledge and clinical competencies of final-year nursing students, areas often overlooked in favor of psychological preparedness. By providing insights into students' actual abilities and confidence levels, the study contributes to understanding the impact of different educational pathways and highlights the need for targeted support to facilitate their transition into professional practice. Clinical competence is broadly defined as the application of knowledge in decision-making, psychomotor skills, and interpersonal communication aligned with nursing role expectations. The work of Fallatah and Laschinger (22) indicates that supportive professional practice environments are crucial for new graduate nurses, as they enable the application of clinical knowledge and skills in real-world settings.

The results of the study reveal that students exhibit the highest levels of confidence in the Patient-Centered Care domain. This reflects a robust understanding of the significance of individualized care, adherence to ethical principles, and the ability to identify changes in patients' physical and psychological conditions. Such findings suggest that the educational framework effectively fosters the competencies required for delivering patient-oriented nursing care. Conversely, the Clinical Competency domain received the lowest scores, indicating a degree of uncertainty

Discussion

The study confirmed the hypothesis that more than 50% of nursing students feel prepared to transition into the nursing profession, with findings indicating that all participants expressed readiness to commence their professional practice. The assessment

Table 4. **Preparedness of undergraduate students**

Study Level	N	M	SD	t	df	p
Full-time	61	71.50	9.91	-3.002	115	0.003
Part-time	56	77.94	13.19			

*Preparedness < 25% = poor, 25–50% = average, 50–75% = good, > 75% = excellent

Table 5. **Preparedness of graduate students**

Study Level	N	M	SD	t	df	p
Full-time	37	73.33	10.99	-2.565	81	0.012
Part-time	46	79.78	11.68			

*Preparedness < 25% = poor, 25–50% = average, 50–75% = good, > 75% = excellent

among students regarding the practical application of theoretical knowledge, clinical decision-making, and the execution of therapeutic procedures accurately. This underscores the necessity for enhanced practical training and a stronger focus on clinical skills within the nursing curriculum.

In this study, students self-assessed their ability to create nursing care plans tailored to patients' cultural and spiritual needs, apply evidence-based nursing practices, and evaluate their preparedness and knowledge regarding care planning and implementation. While clinical competence is fundamental to nursing practice, concerns persist about the readiness of new graduates, both at the bachelor's and master's levels, to meet these expectations (23). Research suggests that improving nursing education programs to enhance clinical competencies is critical for ensuring high-quality care and patient safety (23, 24). Evidence-Based Practice (EBP) emerged as another key factor in this study's assessment criteria. EBP bridges the gap between available evidence and current nursing practices by combining the best research with clinical expertise and patient preferences (24). Studies indicate that positive attitudes towards EBP among nurses correlate with higher implementation rates in clinical settings (25, 26). However, barriers such as lack of support and opportunities often hinder nurses from applying EBP in daily practice (26).

The results of a study conducted in Iran highlight the issue of isolation measures and behavior under different circumstances, suggesting that isolation precautions are mainly applied in departments dealing with infectious diseases or conditions linked to weakened immune systems. However, due to short stays in such departments and rapid rotations, students lack familiarity with the concept of isolation (27). Safe execution of medical procedures, including knowledge of legal frameworks and administrative tasks, was rated significantly below the top score of four.

Patient-centered care was identified as a crucial element for professional development among new nurses (28). A positive perception of patient-centered care in nursing would aid nurses in implementing such care approaches in clinical settings (29). This aligns with the findings of this study, where the first hypothesis – that more than 50% of students are ready to transition into professional practice – was confirmed. While self-assessment results indicated

that students feel prepared, previous studies have reported that many nursing students feel inadequately prepared for the responsibilities and roles of nursing professionals (30).

Analysis of student readiness for the labor market revealed differences based on the level of study (undergraduate vs. graduate). Most participants rated their readiness as good. Part-time students, often with prior clinical experience, displayed greater readiness compared to full-time students. This aligns with Benner's "From Novice to Expert" theory, which suggests that nurses progress through five stages of competence: novice, advanced beginner, competent, proficient, and expert. Upon entering the profession, nurses generally possess limited practical experience but have theoretical knowledge gained during education. Therefore, ongoing support and mentorship programs are crucial to ensuring the effective application of theoretical knowledge in practice. Research also emphasizes the importance of continuous education and professional development for maintaining and enhancing nursing competencies throughout their careers (16). Previous studies have highlighted that nurses often require additional clinical exposure to develop practical skills and gain real-life experiences that can later be integrated into their roles (31). Some studies have also reported dissatisfaction with educational programs, citing inadequate coverage of pharmacology, pathophysiology, electronic skills, leadership, and management competencies necessary for nursing practice (31). These challenges can lead to frustration and even prompt new nurses to leave the profession.

One of the earliest studies conducted in the UK on nursing students' readiness for the workforce found that only 52% of respondents felt prepared for their roles post-graduation, and only 63% believed they possessed sufficient competencies and knowledge (32). Similar findings emerged in a 2002 study, where students self-reported inadequate preparation for the responsibilities of nursing professionals, indicating gaps in the skills and knowledge necessary for the job (33).

The results of this study suggest that students' self-assessments of their skills and knowledge indicate that nursing curricula are effectively meeting their educational goals. However, it is important to acknowledge that during clinical practice, students operate under supervision and are not fully accountable for the duties they will undertake as employed

nurses. Previous research has demonstrated that the responsibilities of student nurses and those of employed graduates differ significantly, often resulting in students overestimating their competencies (34).

Limitations

This study included a sample of only 200 nursing students from two institutions, which may limit the generalizability of the findings. Additionally, the localized sample, as both institutions are based in Zagreb, restricts the broader applicability of the results. Another limitation is the reliance on self-assessment, which may introduce subjective biases, including overestimation or underestimation of personal abilities.

Future studies should involve larger and more diverse samples from various institutions to allow for broader comparisons. Despite these limitations, the questionnaire used in this study offers practical benefits. It can help students identify potential fears and weaknesses, encouraging them to improve during their education. Furthermore, the questionnaire could be a valuable tool for evaluating nursing curricula and informing employment planning. Achieving favorable outcomes on the questionnaire may enhance professional confidence and help individuals address areas for improvement, ultimately supporting their transition into the workforce.

Conclusion

The findings of this study underscore the essential importance of comprehensive education and preparation in facilitating a smooth transition for nursing students into professional roles, thereby minimizing the risk of transitional shock. By enhancing nursing curricula to prioritize practical skills and clinical competencies, educational institutions can significantly improve students' readiness to meet the demands of the workplace. Additionally, the implementation of supplementary support programs – such as workshops, mentoring schemes, and hands-on experiences – can further facilitate this transition, ensuring that teaching methods are aligned with student needs and enhancing their preparedness for professional practice. For healthcare institutions, the results emphasize the critical importance of structured internship and mentorship programs designed to assist new nurses in adapting to their roles while developing essential skills. Well-prepared nursing graduates are better positioned to deliver high-quality care, which can lead to improved patient outcomes and increased job satisfaction among healthcare professionals. Furthermore, this preparedness can contribute to reducing staff turnover and the associated costs of recruitment and training.

Author contributions

Conceptualization (FK, MI, ČM); Data Curation (VK, FK); Data Analysis (FK, KV, ČM), Writing – Original Draft (FK, MI).

Conflict of interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

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