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Appropriate Assessment Strategy for Student Nurses: Practice and Theory?

Nicola Morrell* and Maryam Herin**

***Abstract** The study examines student nurse attainment of pass grades at both theoretical and practical level. The rationale for the importance of this research is that it would provide an insight into whether the levels of assessment in the first year are appropriate. This research may also demonstrate whether students are more likely to pass practical assessments assessed by mentors in practice or theoretical assessments marked by academic staff in universities. It is pertinent to re-examine the curriculum and type of assessments that pre-registration student nurses undertake, in light of the recent drive for adding in care and compassion into the nursing curriculum following the Mid-Staffordshire enquiry and the subsequent Frances report. There is evidence which has demonstrated that mentors out in practice rarely fail students in their practical assessments.*

Keywords: nursing, assessment, practice, theory,

1. Introduction

The study examines student nurse attainment of pass grades at both theoretical and practical level. The rationale for the importance of this research is that it aims to provide an insight into whether the levels of assessment at 1st year, particularly 1st semester, are appropriate for the group of students. This may then shine a light as to whether there are particular areas that need to be focused upon from a teaching and learning point of view for the lecturers.

This research study may also demonstrate if students are more likely to pass in their practical assessments, which are assessed by mentors in practice, compared to theoretical assessments, which are marked by academic staff. At the present time it may also be pertinent to re-examine the curriculum and assessments that pre-registration student nurses undertake, in light of the recent drive for adding in care and compassion into the nursing curriculum following the Mid-Staffordshire enquiry and the subsequent Frances report. There is evidence which has demonstrated that mentors out in practice very rarely fail students in their practical assessments.

2. Literature Review

Assessment of pre-registration student nurses is extremely important in the current healthcare climate due to many questions being asked around the competence of registered nurses. Within all practice based professions assessment of competence is extremely important (Whiteford, 2007). Questions were already being asked regarding whether the assessment of student nurses is appropriate following a significant study by Duffy (2003). This displayed how the quality of student nurse education was substandard against the level that it should be; and now following the Mid-Staffordshire enquiry and subsequent Frances report this has brought the claims made by Duffy (2003) into particular context and bears resonance with all nurse educators.

It has been suggested by Duffy (2003) and Luhanga et al (2008) that student nurses have higher pass rates in practical assessments compared to theoretical assessments. One suggestion for this

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disparity between pass grades in practical and theoretical work has been that mentors in practice do not like to fail student nurses for fear of upsetting them, and that mentors will often question themselves and give the students the benefit of doubt. However, this has significant consequences for nursing and healthcare as a whole as if students are being passed practically when they shouldn't be then the competence of nurses is compromised and patient care will inevitably suffer.

3. Research Methodology

This piece of research will be quantitative, Roberts and Priest (2006) describe that quantitative research is the undertaking of investigations which primarily use numerical methods. For this piece of research this would be the most appropriate method. Cresswell (2009) advocates the use of quantitative research in gaining this type of data due to it being numerically stored by universities.

Data Collection

The research project will take place at a medium sized university within the North West of England. The process for sample selection will be non-probability sampling. The process of consecutive sampling was chosen, Polit and Beck (2010) advocate the use of consecutive sampling in gaining information with regards to all the people within a population who meet the eligibility criteria for the research. The sample size that will be selected will be three years of full cohorts of 1st semester 1st year students, who have undertaken the amended assessments for the new programme of study. This size sample will be examined as it will provide an accurate demonstration as to provide results, Gorard (2001), and Saks and Allsop (2011) suggest that larger sample sizes are preferable as this will minimise data being lost.

The data to be collected will be secondary data; Blaikie (2003) described secondary data as data that has already been collected by somebody, usually for an official purpose. The data in question for this piece of research has been collected as part of the administrative task for the programme and student records, this data was readily available. It would not have been time efficient to collect primary data when the existing data was available. Gorard (2001) advocates the use of secondary data, particularly for new researchers of which I am, as he believes that for many reasons particularly from a speed and cost perspective it is an appropriate source of data.

Data analysis

The method of data analysis used was univariate descriptive analysis. Blaikie (2003) asserted that this method of data analysis can be used to demonstrate relevant characteristics of a social phenomenon, this links in well with this research project of examining the relationships between pass and fail in academic and practical assessments.

4. Main Findings

The data analysed were pre-registration student nurses 1st semester 1st year theoretical and practical assessment results, the data consisted of 3 years of data, to ascertain if there was a difference between the different year's cohorts.

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	Practical Assessment		Theoretical Assessment	
Cohort A-Pass/Fail (n=196)	190/6	97%/3%	150/46	78%/22%
Cohort B-Pass/Fail (n=189)	178/11	94%/6%	182/7	96%/4%
Cohort C-Pass/Fail (n=185)	165/20	89%/11%	100/85	54%/46%

Figure 1- a table demonstrating the raw data.

In answer to the research question, in general over the three cohorts of students results explored more students do pass the practical component of the assessment rather than the theoretical assessment.

- The total number of students to pass the practical assessment was 533 out of a total number of 570.
- The percentage of students who passed the practical assessment was 94%.
- The total number of students to pass the theoretical assessment was 432 out of a total number of 570.
- The percentage of students to pass the theoretical assessment was 76%.
- The percentage of students to fail the practical assessment was 6%, and 24% failed the theoretical assessment.

These figures are over a 3 year period. This demonstrates that although some cohorts had higher pass and fail rates there was a general trend between pass in practical assessments and fail in theoretical assessments. The relevance of these results may demonstrate that mentors out in practice who assess student nurses on their practical work generally pass students. This could add support to the results found by Duffy (2003) who believed that mentors in practice are unwilling to fail student nurses, whereas this research study also examines the pass rates of theoretical assessments and demonstrates that academic staff will fail students.

The data will be presented in a bar chart for the nominal data demonstrating comparison between the different groups of data.

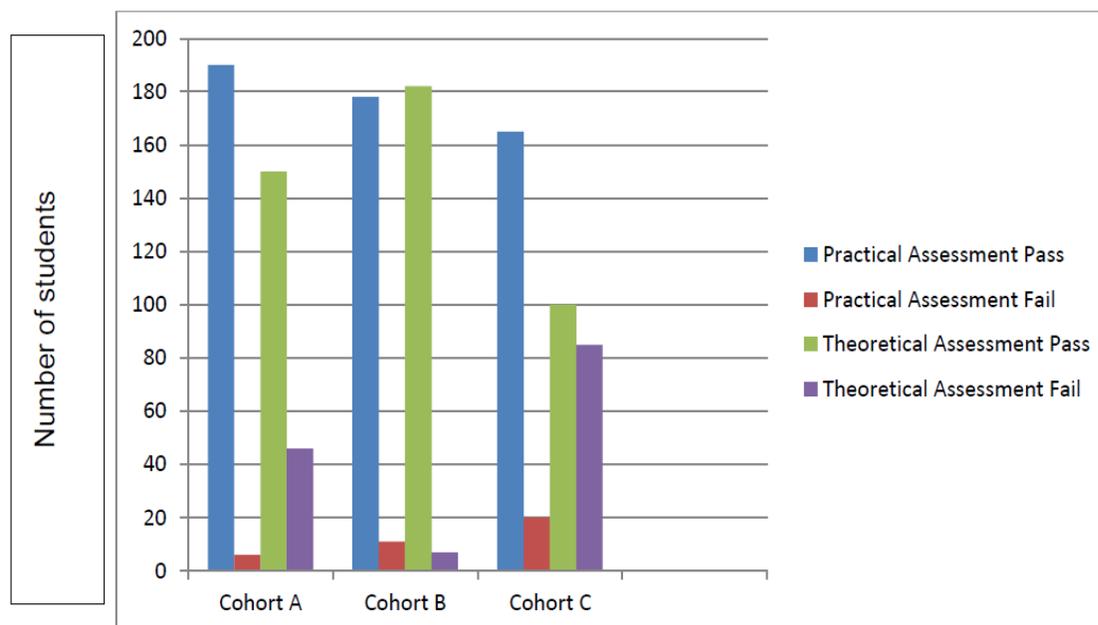


Figure 2- Bar chart representation of results.

Both figures 1 and 2 demonstrate that the majority of pre-registration student nurses passed both assessments, and that a smaller number comparatively failed. This may demonstrate that the assessments are at the correct level for the students. The results of this study leave more questions than answers, although the original research question has been answered.

It would be interesting to explore if any students failed both assessment and also what component of each assessment was passed and failed.

5. Conclusions

The implications of what the data displays demonstrate that the majority of students have passed both assessments, and that more students passed the practical assessment rather than the theoretical assessment. What should be examined further is what parts of both assessments have been failed and if there is anything in particular that the students have all excelled at or failed. It is essential to have an awareness that this is a small scale and exploratory study which should be kept in mind when assessing the data analysis as an element of generalizability would need to be applied. This study has only looked at 3 cohorts of students and it would be worthwhile to examine other points of assessment i.e. 2nd year or 3rd year and different semesters, to ascertain if the data is similar or different.

In terms of the sample this piece of research has validity as it does explore the whole cohort of students and not just a small sample. The comparative nature of the study strengthens the results and validity also. Although to be more valid the study could be completed subsequently over a few different points in the programme of study and, possibly over different universities, to ensure that the claims made are accurate. Nonetheless this is a small scale project and this must be remembered.

In order to expand upon and take this research further it may be appropriate to complete a further study which would examine the data in more depth and allow for exploration between different years of assessments in order to assess if the findings from this have any longevity. If the research were to be completed again it may be appropriate to complete a parallel qualitative phenomenological study to gather the student's feelings on what they found easy and difficult. This could be completed through students completing focus groups, questionnaires or maintaining diaries, although maintaining diaries for a whole cohort would be problematic and time consuming for the researcher when analysing the data. Another possible follow on study could be to complete an ethnographic study examining the perceptions of programme leaders and academic staff, through completing semi structured interviews in order to discover what their perceptions of the pass fail rates are between theoretical and practical work.

On reflection the strengths of completing this method of quantitative research are that it is a relatively simple form of gaining research data as the data was previously present and this reduces the need for data collection. Completing this method of research has provided an insight into the simplicity of completing quantitative research, even though this was a very small scale and uncomplicated study. The weaknesses of completing this piece of quantitative research may be that the research study was in itself very simple. The results are very generalizable due to not being in any depth. Future studies could examine the data in more depth by looking at more factors and also by potentially conducting interviews or questionnaires of either the students or the academic staff to triangulate the data and gather perceptions and insights into what this may mean.

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