

# Comparative Study of Professional Ethics Curriculum of Undergraduate Nursing Programs in Ten Selected Nursing Schools (2016)

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## Abstract

**Background:** Extensive and rapid changes due to the emergence of new needs in healthcare centers have made nurses face a variety of ethical issues everyday. Nursing undergraduate graduates are expected to revise nursing care in the health system in accordance with ethical principles with their vision and ability. Obviously, the nursing education system plays a key role in shaping this process. One of the requirements of ethical skills training is the presence of a coherent and up-to-date curriculum in professional nursing ethics. The aim of this study was comparing the curriculums of professional ethics in the nursing undergraduate program in the top ten nursing schools of the world and Iran and providing suggested strategies for improving professional ethics in nursing based on community culture.

**Methods:** This study was conducted with the help of Bereday's four-step method of comparative analysis (description – interpretation – juxtaposition – comparison). The QS World University Rankings by Subject 2016 was employed to identify and select the top 10 nursing schools. The data collection tool was a researcher-made framework based on the curriculum components that was prepared and reviewed with the help of the supervisor and counselor professors. Content validity method was used to determine the validity of the data collection tool in this study

**Results:** According to the findings, the educational strategies used to support learner's experience of learning in the selected premier nursing schools were integration (9 faculties), student-centered (2 faculties), community-centered (7 faculties), outcome-based, problem solving, and learning methods based on the needs of the community. In addition to assessing the knowledge of students through multiple-choice and written tests, their skills were also assessed by essay writing, practical work in the lab, case study, poster presentation, reflection, portfolio, continuous examination of practical skills, classroom activities, and objective structured clinical examination (OSCE).

**Conclusion:** According to the results of this study, it is recommended to determine appropriate educational outcomes of the professional ethics curriculum according to the professional values, Islamic teachings and culture, and community needs; and to revise and tailor the content, manner of presentation, and method of education and assessment according to the identified outcomes.

**Keywords:** COMPARATIVE STUDY, BEREDAY MODEL, CURRICULUM, PROFESSIONAL ETHICS, NURSING

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## Introduction

Today, health care environments are changing rapidly. Such changes, especially those that

arise with a faster pace due to the emergence of new needs, have expanded the range of nurses' performance and made them face ethical issues in their own practice everyday. Obviously, these widespread changes entail increased knowledge and skills and, ultimately, the acquisition of competence by taking into account the complex ethical aspects (1). Increasingly changing trends, including the use of advanced technologies, changing disease patterns, increased life expectancy, increased general public awareness and differences in type and volume of health-related demands, creation of new areas such as new methods of pregnancy and organ transplants, and the like make the need for an ethical approach to medical-related professions an indispensable necessity (2). These conditions have led nurses to spend a lot of time to resolve ethical dilemmas at work. The emergence of multiple ethical questions is one of the many challenges that highlight the need for the availability of professional nurses that are more capable of answering these questions (3). The results of a study by Grundstein, entitled "*Ethical decision-making processes used by health care providers*" indicated nurses' inability to make ethical decisions and failure to follow a coherent model. Grundstein considered this due to the lack of necessary training in ethical issues (4). One of the strategies for training nurses with professional ethics competency is preparing a proper curriculum (5). Borhani et al. considered inadequacy of curriculum, application of inappropriate methods in ethics education, lack of skilled lecturers, and ethical morale evaluation problems as barriers to increasing the professional ethics competency in nurses (6). According to Kusserow et al., nursing professors in the US believed that education had the greatest impact on the ethical and spiritual development of nursing students, and nursing schools had an important role in shaping the ethical framework of students (7). Regarding the fact that nurses frequently face ethical dilemmas in clinical settings, they must be able to identify ethical issues and consider

ethical principles in their care. This ability is created in the event that they have learned theoretical concepts related to ethics during their education (8).

There is no doubt that nursing schools have an important role in developing the competence of students as future nurses in terms of professional ethics. The question that the nursing education system faces, however, is how they can obtain the best outcomes in education of professional ethics (9). Therefore, the professional ethics courses in educational programs of nursing students and training them to acquire necessary skills needs special attention in order to be able to meet the challenges of the clinical settings (10). Related studies in Iran have examined the professional ethics or its challenges from the perspective of students or faculty members. However, there has been no comparative study in nursing with the model used in the present study (11). Therefore, it appeared necessary to conduct a comparative study and use the experiences of other countries for the success of nursing graduates in Iran. The present comparative study was hence conducted in this field to provide practical recommendations for improving the educational status of the professional ethics curriculum in Iran.

## Methods

This was a descriptive study based on a comparative approach conducted in 2016.

The study examined the status of professional ethics course of nursing programs in selected countries based on the Bereday model (12). The Bereday model consists of four steps: description, interpretation, juxtaposition, and comparison. In the description step, the research phenomena are noted based on evidence and information, and prepared for review and critique in the next step. In the interpretation step, the information described in the first step is examined and then explained and analyzed based on the curriculum components. In the juxtaposition

step, the information prepared in the two previous steps is classified and put together to create a framework for comparing similarities and differences. In the comparison step, the research problem is examined with respect to the details of similarities and differences and answering the research questions.

The present study compared the professional ethics curriculum for undergraduate nursing programs in the top ten nursing schools of the world in terms of overall structure, educational program objectives, educational strategies, educational content, and evaluation method. The 2016 world nursing schools ranking was used to identify and select the nursing schools. It should be noted that these schools were ranked according to the QS international ranking system. The ranking indices in this system include: University credentials, research citations of each paper, employee credentials and the h-index, which indicates the effectiveness of faculty members quantitatively (13).

In order to collect the data, the researcher searched and extracted the necessary information related to the subject by visiting the websites of the selected nursing schools. In cases where information was not available on the websites, the information was gathered through correspondence. Information was compiled based on a researcher-made framework based on the curriculum components including curriculum focus, objectives, content, and methods of teaching, learning and evaluation. Content validity method was used to determine the validity of the data collection tool in this study. For this purpose, the data collection framework was prepared on the basis of the curriculum components and then was judged and commented on by the supervisor and counselor professors. The necessary corrections were made, then. The Inter-rated reliability was used to determine the scientific credibility of the data collection tool. That is, in the first three cases of information search, in addition to collecting data from the websites of the selected nursing schools by the

researcher and recording them the researcher-made framework, the information was also extracted and recorded by the consultant professor. Then they were compared with each other to increase the accuracy of the information extracted and to obtain a proper scientific credibility. Ethical considerations in this study included obtaining the necessary permissions to conduct the research and not applying personal opinions and judgments during the study.

## Results

In the first step, detailed information on nursing ethics curriculum in the undergraduate programs was collected and written based on the data collection tool from the top 10 nursing schools of the world in 2016. In the second step, the information was interpreted and in the third step, it was entered in the table for comparison of similarities and differences. The results of these three steps are presented in Tables 1 and 2. In the fourth step, the information was compared to answer the research question and provide solutions for improving the curriculum of professional nursing ethics.

## Discussion

Based on the findings of this study, a wide range of educational objectives was identified in various areas of professional ethics in nursing in the selected schools. An overview of the objectives of the professional ethics course of the selected schools in the cognitive, attitudinal and skills domains showed that the objectives were focused on the learning outcome of what the learner would be able to do at the end of the program. That is because the outcomes bring a more practical and realistic perspective based on what the student should ultimately achieve in their actual working environment. Outcomes are the actions and practices that reflect the learners' ability to successfully use content, knowledge, beliefs, and tools (14). For example, at the University

**Table 1:** Comparison of professional nursing ethics curriculums

Nursing school	Professional nursing ethics curriculum.
Pennsylvania	<b>Curriculum type:</b> integrated-conventional; <b>Program length:</b> four years; <b>Course schedule:</b> third year, first or second semester; <b>Content:</b> ethical issues, professional issues; <b>Teaching method:</b> online; <b>Evaluation method:</b> continuous multiple choice quizzes, a final exam with essay writing questions based on presented conferences and texts.
Toronto	<b>Curriculum type:</b> Integration of theory, research, and practice - community-based; <b>Program length:</b> two years; <b>Course schedule:</b> first and second year; <b>Content:</b> rules, ethical issues, professional issues; <b>Teaching method:</b> problem-based; <b>Evaluation method:</b> final exam.
Manchester	<b>Curriculum type:</b> Integrated - student-centered; <b>Program length:</b> three years; <b>Course schedule:</b> first semester of first year <b>Content:</b> rules, ethical issues, professional issues; <b>Teaching method:</b> theoretical and practical, student-centered, participating in problem- and computer-based labs, conventional conferences; <b>Evaluation method:</b> essay writing exam, multiple-choice exam, paper, case study, poster presentation, practical work, laboratory skills test, practical assessment of skills, by the instructor in a clinical environment
Pittsburgh	<b>Curriculum type:</b> integrated, community-centered; <b>Program length:</b> four years; <b>Course schedule:</b> third year, second semester; <b>Content:</b> rules, ethical issues, professional issues; <b>Teaching method:</b> evidence-based; <b>Evaluation method:</b> final exam.
Sydney	<b>Curriculum type:</b> integration of theory and clinical issues, community-based; <b>Program length:</b> three years; <b>Course schedule:</b> first and second semesters of third year; <b>Content:</b> rules, ethical issues, professional issues; <b>Teaching method:</b> conference, tutorial, lab and clinical centers; <b>Evaluation method:</b> Continuous tests, written assignment 30%, written reflection 30%, exam 40%
Southampton	<b>Curriculum type:</b> integration of theory and practice; <b>Program length:</b> three years; <b>Course schedule:</b> first year; <b>Content:</b> ethical issues, professional issues; <b>Teaching method:</b> conferences, value-based research, independent guided reading, independent reflection, learning through technology; <b>Evaluation method:</b> Writing papers
Technology Sydney	<b>Curriculum type:</b> integration of theory and practice, community-based; <b>Program length:</b> three years; <b>Course schedule:</b> first and third years; <b>Content:</b> rules, ethical issues, professional issues; <b>Teaching method:</b> case scenarios, conferences / online learning, portfolio learning, individual learning plans, oral seminars and presentations, online discussions; <b>Evaluation method:</b> online evaluation, case study, reflection, e-portfolio 60%, online discussion 10%, case study (15 minutes per group) 30%
Edinburgh	<b>Curriculum type:</b> integrated, community-centered, student-centered; <b>Program length:</b> four years; <b>Course schedule:</b> first, second, third, and fourth years; <b>Content:</b> rules, ethical issues, professional issues; <b>Teaching method:</b> conference, supervised practical work, workshop, studio, program-based teaching and learning, guided learning, independent learning, seminar, tutorial, constructive assessment, studying abroad; <b>Evaluation method:</b> Developmental assessment method with feedback, exam review sessions, class discussion, essay writing, presentation of short homework, tutorial, taking a test in the tenth week, and final evaluation method including: written test with short answer questions, paper presentation, peer review, and portfolio.
Nottingham	<b>Curriculum type:</b> integration of theory and practice, community-based; <b>Program length:</b> three years; <b>Course schedule:</b> first, second and third years; <b>Content:</b> rules, ethical issues, professional issues; <b>Teaching method:</b> conference, experimental demonstration and small group projects, tutorial, workshop, seminars and simulated skill lessons; <b>Evaluation method:</b> paper writing, papers, journals, lectures, written examinations, clinical trials, portfolios, case studies, dissertations, tests and ongoing review of practical skills to meet the required standards.
South Australia	<b>Curriculum type:</b> based on need assessment, community-centered, <b>Program length:</b> three years; <b>Course schedule:</b> first and second year; <b>Content:</b> rules, ethical issues, professional issues; <b>Teaching method:</b> conference, online conference, tutorial, workshop; <b>Evaluation method:</b> 1000-Word homework 15%, 2000-word homework 20%, OSCE for one hour 20%, written test for three hours 45%.

**Table 2:** Comparison of the objectives of nursing professional ethics course

Schools	Objectives
Pennsylvania	<b>Cognitive domain:</b> insight into the views of others and communication, interpretation and analysis; medical dilemmas assessment. <b>Attitudinal and skills domains:</b> applying ethical theories and observing ethical principles in clinical settings, addressing health issues from different perspectives, accepting controversial challenges and defending one's own rational arguments.
Toronto	<b>Cognitive, attitudinal, and skills domains:</b> complexities of nursing practice, employing political and leadership skills in practice
Manchester	<b>Cognitive domain:</b> Familiarity with core values; codes of ethics; history and nature of nursing; ethical theories; ethical principles; ethical, legal and professional strategies; justice and fair distribution of services; participation of nurses in unethical activities, professional self-regulation, cultural competency and anti-discrimination activities, a critique of nursing care. <b>Attitudinal and skills domains:</b> professional commitment, care for vulnerable patients in accordance with ethical principles.
Pittsburgh	<b>Cognitive, attitudinal, and skills domains:</b> addressing ethical challenges in nursing care, cultural differences, relevant laws and regulations, political and religious discussions, economic limitations, and professional commitment related to the resolution of ethical dilemmas.
Sydney	<b>Cognitive domain:</b> familiarity with professional standards including professional codes of conduct and ethics, RN standards, statutory rules and frameworks for professional performance, decision making, and critical thinking.
Southampton	<b>Cognitive domain:</b> awareness of key values of nursing careers, reflection on ethical challenges; identifying evidence of ethics-centered care; communication skills; identifying legal, professional and ethical issues; and patient safety.
Technology Sydney	<b>Cognitive domain:</b> guarantee of professional status committed to equality, justice, and stability; communication and cooperation with different groups, a critical search of evidence, application of knowledge and skills to ensure effective and safe nursing performance.
Edinburgh	<b>Cognitive, attitudinal, and skills domains:</b> Year 1: professional nursing characteristics, ethical principles, and legal frameworks. Year 2: group work, communication skills, application of protocols, and safe care standards. Year 3: focus on clinical decision making and professional judgment. Year 4: focus on leadership roles.
Nottingham	<b>Cognitive domain:</b> Understanding nursing roles and responsibilities
South Australia	<b>Cognitive domain:</b> Development of knowledge and understanding of students about professional care and nursing professionalism framework.

of Pennsylvania School of Nursing, the objectives of the professional ethics course focuses on employing various ethical theories and observing ethical principles in the clinical setting; examining treatment contradictions based on the cultural and historical situation; addressing individual and international health issues from different perspectives; and accepting controversial challenges. One of the objectives of the professional ethics course at the Department of Nursing at Manchester Metropolitan University is how to defend patients' rights and empower the clients in defending their health rights. The focus of the professional ethics course during the four consecutive academic years in the Edinburgh Nursing School gradually changes from the

acquisition of professional ethics skills based on the legal principles and frameworks in the first year; to the importance of group work and communication for effective care, the application of the protocol and standards of safe practice, and the use of information technology in the health care in the second year; to clinical decision-making and professional judgment in the third year; to achieving leadership roles in complex organizations in high-quality care in the fourth year. Therefore, considering the many ethical challenges faced by nurses in clinical settings, the objectives of professional nursing ethics can be tailored to the learning outcomes of professional ethics (15, 16). The results showed that the goal of teaching professional ethics in nursing in these nursing

schools was to equip students with a set of analytical, reasoning, ethical decision making and solving ethical challenges skills. Several studies have emphasized the provision of a set of skills to deal with ethical bottlenecks in the teaching objectives of professional ethics (17, 18). Therefore, Iranian nursing schools should also seek to better set the main objectives and experiences required by nursing students in learning professional ethics.

This study showed that the focus of the professional ethics curriculums in the world's premier nursing schools was mostly on integration (9 nursing schools out of 10). The studied schools considered the theoretic approach in professional ethics education inadequate and emphasized on practical approaches. In this area, the Department of Nursing at Manchester Metropolitan University offers a theoretical and practical professional ethics course, and the students participate in seminars and laboratory of problem-based learning skills. In support of the collaborative approach, Lawlor (2007) suggested that theoretical presentation of moral theories be minimized, and the issues should be discussed if the theoretical presentation was needed (19). Integrating or mixing the subjects is one of the most challenging ways of curriculum design (20). A study in Australia showed that vertical integration in the educational system will have many benefits, such as creating an interesting learning environment for the teacher and students, and will lead to satisfaction and personal development of the staff (21). A similar study in Isfahan University of Medical Sciences in Iran showed that the integration of basic and practical subjects in a course of bacteriology led to a change in students' attitude toward this course as a useful and practical course, and students understood the need to learn this course (22). Another research on collaborative clinical education in nursing students led to the improvement of nursing students' attitude toward patients (23). In the integrated approach, the grounds for a closer relationship between theoretical issues related

to ethics and nursing subjects are laid, the ability to analyze ethical issues is provided, and help is given to the students to have a broader view of ethical issues. Therefore, the need to change the professional ethics curriculum in nursing, both in terms of content and in terms of organizing, is felt more than ever (24).

The findings of the study showed that the curriculum of seven of the premier nursing schools focused on community-based learning, in which skills and experience are acquired in health centers or other community centers. In this regard, Toronto School of Nursing offers practical activities in community centers to the students in addition to a hospital. One of the problems encountered in teaching medical sciences is that, in the hospital-centered approach, students are less familiar with their future work environment, i.e. the community. Increasing emphasis on specialization in many countries has led to a decline in first-level care in the health care system. In traditional education, education is mainly carried out in hospitals and focuses on patient treatment in a hospital. While these centers, accept patients referred from other health centers in the community (25). Accordingly, the Association of American Medical Colleges believes that learning in a community-based academic system provides valuable and significant experiences for medical students (26).

Based on the findings of this study, the focus of the curriculum of three of the ten countries was student-centered, and they used active learning, participatory learning, and problem-based learning methods. In these methods, the responsibility for organizing what must be learned is delegated to the students and they directly involve the students in intellectual activities and problem-solving around the ethical challenges that may be encountered in the clinic. In the Southampton School, learning methods through technology, independent reflection, independent guided reading, and value-based research are used in this regard. In a student-based approach, the emphasis is placed on students' participation in education,

interactive lectures, group discussions, role play, and critical thinking. Other studies have also emphasized the student-centered approach to professional ethics education (27, 28). Smith et al. (2004) argued that student-centered approaches lead to a greater success in teaching medical ethics and lead to ethical development in students (29). Davies (1996) also stated that the teaching of ethics in all practical and theoretical aspects should not be limited to a few lectures, and emphasized the active methods of teaching and learning (30). The findings of this study on how to organize the professional nursing ethics curriculum showed that according to the type of curriculum that was mostly collaborative, this course was presented during several academic years, especially in the final years of studies in most of the schools. However, the professional ethics course was presented in the first year of the nursing program in Manchester and Southampton. The main reason for the presentation of the course during the last years of the program is the need for clinical exposure and students' participation in practical activities and ethical debates. In line with this study, in the examination of moral judgment of nursing students in the first and last years of nursing program in Finland, and the effect of teaching ethics on their moral judgment ability, Auvinen (2004) concluded that the senior students who have practically faced ethical dilemmas had better judgment abilities than those who have not faced these dilemmas. Their result emphasized the effectiveness of the practical teaching of ethics on students' moral judgment (31). A study by Mozafari showed that nursing students considered the best time to have the ethics course was in the sixth semester before entering the clinical field (32). A study by Amir Dibayi et al. (2009) showed that most medical students and graduates considered the appropriate time to have the medical ethics course was during internship, and none of them considered basic science and physiopathology as a good time for this course (33).

As mentioned before, how to organize a professional ethics curriculum in an undergraduate nursing program in some of the examined premier nursing schools was in form of a longitudinal theme and the course was presented over two, three years or four years. According to the findings, students in Toronto, Edinburgh, and Nottingham studied professional ethics in form of rules, ethics, and profession during the whole program. One of the challenges that currently exist in professional ethics curriculum is the inappropriateness of the current organization of the curriculum and the independent presentation of ethical issues (34). That is while it is better to organize the topics of medical ethics interlinked with each other and in interdisciplinary conjunction with other clinical courses and activities. Integrating an ethics course in the curriculum helps with a better understanding of the students, in-depth learning, and practicality of ethical issues. For this purpose, a vertical and horizontal organization can be used together so that the ethics training program is continuously offered at all stages of education. In a review of medical ethics studies, Goldienv et al. concluded that ethics education should be integrated into the curriculums and be considered as a continuous process of ethics training (35).

Their findings of this study on the content of nursing professional ethics course in the world's premier schools showed that the content of this course is taught as legal, ethical and professional parameters, such as laws and regulations, codes of ethics, political and religious discussions, cultural differences, etc. The first step in achieving objectives is to select the appropriate and comprehensive educational content. Given the importance of content and the decisions related to it in the curricula, specific criteria are necessary to select the appropriate content according to them (36, 37). Khaghanizadeh et al. indicated imbalance and incoherence in the contents and weaknesses in their proportionality with the needs of the society (38). In relation to the necessity of considering cultural and

religious factors in every country in designing the curriculum of ethics, Rameshkumar (2009) and Pinazar et al. (2004) stated that an identical design cannot be used for ethics training in the medical universities of different countries, especially in non-western developed countries with their own cultural, religious, and professional qualities; and it should be considered in designing the ethics curriculum content (28, 39).

The findings of this study on the educational method of professional ethics in nursing showed that the methods used in premier nursing schools were not limited to the theory presentation and conferences, and different educational methods were used. These educational methods were mostly student-centered and in most schools, self-directed learning methods were used to learn through technology and workshops. Cannaerts et al. acknowledged that simulated classes and laboratories, as a safe and strategic environment, increase the ethical capability of nursing students to identify ethical issues of everyday life (40). Findings from a research on ways to enhance professional ethics in nursing education revealed that offering professional ethics training increased the perception of students and teachers in terms of ethical perspective, better care, decision-making skills, and competence and competency in various ways (41). The findings of this study, based on the methodology of assessing the professional ethics in nursing showed that the examined premier nursing schools used a variety of performance evaluation methods with an objective structure such as poster presentation, classroom activities, and OSCE to evaluate students. In line with this study, Calman and Downie, in developing practical ethical plans, concluded that the use of different assessment methods or exams was needed to gain credibility in ethics curricula (42). Borhani et al. indicated the lack of objective tools for evaluation and ignoring ethical attributes in evaluation as the problems in ethical competence evaluation (6). Therefore, ethics evaluation, in addition to covering three domains of knowledge, attitude,

and skill, should be conducted throughout the educational course, along with other tests; in other words, a comprehensive evaluation system is recommended (43).

## Conclusion

Based on the results of this comparative study, the outcome-based definition of modifications in professional nursing ethics curriculum is recommended. To this end, it is necessary to first define objectives that are appropriate to the ethical frameworks of the nursing profession. The SPICES strategies are recommended to be used in the professional ethics curriculum. The content of the professional ethics curriculum should be revised and tailored to the culture and needs of the community.

In terms of content organization, it is better to define nursing professional ethics course with a longitudinal theme in the nursing curriculum. Depending on the objectives and educational outcomes of the professional ethics curriculum, active and proportional educational methods, as well as methods with an objective structure, are recommended to be used to evaluate students in different domains of knowledge, attitude, and skill in order to enhance the professional nursing ethics curriculum in Iran.

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## Conflict of Interest

The author declares no conflict of interest.

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