

A Descriptive Study to Assess the impact of Early Experience to Clinical Settings on Student Learning, Attitude and Performance

Ashley Fernandis¹

¹Assistant Professor, MES College of Nursing, Ghanekhunt-Lote.

Corresponding Author :

Ashley Fernandis

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Abstract:

Introduction: Early clinical exposure (ECE) is a key educational strategy in nursing that introduces first-year B.Sc. Nursing students to real patient care and clinical settings from the beginning of their training. By linking theoretical knowledge with practical experience, ECE enhances understanding, builds confidence, improves communication skills, and fosters professional competence.

Aim: This study aimed to assess first-year B.Sc. Nursing students' perceptions of early clinical exposure and its impact on their learning, attitude, and professional development.

Methodology: A descriptive survey design was employed at MES College of Nursing, Ghanekhunt-Lote. A total of 102 first-year B.Sc. Nursing students were selected using convenient sampling. Data were collected using a structured 15-item questionnaire on a two-point Likert scale (Agree/Disagree), which also included demographic information. Responses were analyzed using descriptive statistics, including frequency, percentage, mean, and standard deviation, to understand students' perceptions and identify areas of strong and moderate agreement.

Results: The study revealed a highly positive perception of ECE among participants. Four questionnaire items reflected good perception ($\geq 90\%$ agreement), while eleven items indicated average perception (80–89%). The mean perception score was 90.4 (SD = 4.07), demonstrating consistent positivity across students. Participants reported that observing real patient care strengthened their theoretical knowledge, enhanced clinical skills, improved interactions with patients and healthcare staff, and reduced anxiety in clinical settings.

Conclusion: Early clinical exposure is an effective educational intervention that supports first-year B.Sc. Nursing students in bridging the gap between theory and practice. Structured and supervised ECE not only improves learning outcomes and clinical confidence but also fosters professional socialization, motivation, and a patient-centered approach. Systematic integration of ECE into nursing curricula is recommended to ensure holistic professional development and readiness for real-world clinical responsibilities.

Keywords: Early Clinical Exposure, Nursing Students, Perception, Professional Competence, Clinical Learning, B. Sc Nursing

Introduction:

Nursing education is designed to equip students with essential knowledge, practical skills, and professional attitudes necessary to provide safe, competent, and holistic patient care⁽¹⁾. Clinical experience is an integral part of nursing training, enabling students to apply theoretical knowledge in real-world settings while developing competence, confidence, and professional identity⁽²⁾. Traditionally, clinical exposure occurs later in the nursing curriculum; however, structured early clinical exposure (ECE) has emerged as an effective pedagogical approach for first-year students⁽³⁾. ECE allows students to observe and participate in patient care early, bridging the gap between classroom instruction and practical application⁽⁴⁾.

Early clinical exposure enhances communication skills, practical competencies, and critical thinking⁽⁵⁾. Students who engage in ECE report increased understanding of clinical procedures and improved ability to interact with patients and healthcare staff⁽⁶⁾. By introducing students to patient care in a structured manner, ECE promotes professional socialization, helping students internalize professional norms, ethical responsibilities, and teamwork⁽⁷⁾. Studies indicate that early exposure also reduces anxiety related to hospital environments, allowing students to participate confidently in clinical tasks⁽⁸⁾.

Students' perceptions of early clinical experiences play a crucial role in shaping learning outcomes and professional development⁽⁹⁾. Positive perceptions are associated with

active engagement in clinical activities, improved retention of theoretical knowledge, and enhanced self-confidence, whereas insufficient or poorly structured exposure may hinder learning and reduce motivation⁽¹⁰⁾. Understanding these perceptions is essential for designing structured early clinical programs that maximize educational benefits and foster professional growth.

ECE further supports the development of empathy, adaptability, and problem-solving skills, which are critical for competent nursing practice⁽¹⁾. By engaging with patients early, students gain insight into the psychosocial, emotional, and ethical aspects of care, fostering a well-rounded professional identity⁽²⁾. Reflection during early exposure encourages self-directed learning, promoting lifelong learning habits⁽³⁾. Despite the proven benefits, limited research has systematically assessed students' perceptions of ECE in local nursing colleges or categorized perception levels to inform program improvement⁽⁴⁾.

This study aims to evaluate the perceptions of first-year B.Sc. Nursing students regarding ECE, identify areas of strong and moderate perception, and provide recommendations for enhancing early clinical programs. Understanding students' perspectives enables educators to design structured, meaningful, and effective clinical experiences that prepare students to deliver safe, competent, and compassionate patient care⁽⁵⁾. By integrating ECE systematically into nursing curricula, educators can bridge the theory-practice gap, enhance professional competence, and ensure readiness for clinical responsibilities⁽⁶⁾.

Research Gaps:

While existing literature highlights the benefits of early clinical exposure, few studies have evaluated perception-based outcomes in local nursing institutions. Furthermore, limited research categorizes student perceptions and provides guidance for refining structured clinical programs.

Objectives:

1. To assess the perception of early clinical experience among first-year B.Sc. Nursing students.

- 2. To identify areas of good, average, and poor perception.
- 3. To suggest improvements for early clinical exposure.

Hypothesis:

H1: First-year B.Sc. Nursing students have a significant positive perception of early clinical experience.

Methodology:

Research Approach: Quantitative.

Research Design: Descriptive survey.

Sample and Sampling Technique: A total of 102 first-year B.Sc. Nursing students were selected using convenient sampling.

Tools Used in the Study: Data were collected using a structured 15-item questionnaire based on a two-point Likert scale (Agree/Disagree), along with demographic information.

Intervention: Students were provided supervised early clinical exposure in hospital and clinical areas.

Methods of Data Collection and Analysis: Questionnaires were distributed after obtaining informed consent. Responses were analyzed using descriptive statistics, including frequency, percentage, mean, and standard deviation.

Results/Findings:

The study revealed a predominantly positive perception of early clinical exposure among first-year B.Sc. Nursing students. Out of the 15 questionnaire items, four items demonstrated good perception ($\geq 90\%$ agreement), while eleven items reflected average perception (80–89% agreement). No items were rated as poor perception ($<80\%$). The mean perception score was 90.4 (SD = 4.07), indicating consistent positive responses across the sample.

Students reported that early clinical exposure enhanced their theoretical understanding, improved clinical skills, strengthened communication, and increased confidence in patient care. Specifically, 92% of students felt that observing real patient care improved their comprehension of nursing procedures, 88% indicated better communication with patients and staff, and 85% experienced reduced anxiety in clinical settings.

Demographic Variables

Variable	Frequency (n=102)	Percentage (%)
Gender		
Female	86	84.3
Male	16	15.7
Age		
18–20 years	54	52.9
21–23 years	48	47.1
Program		
B. Sc Nursing	102	100

Perception Levels

Perception Level	Number of Items	Percentage of Items (%)
Good ($\geq 90\%$)	4	26.7
Average (80–89%)	11	73.3
Poor ($< 80\%$)	0	0

Overall, these findings suggest that early clinical exposure effectively bridges theory and practice, enhances skill development, and promotes positive attitudes toward professional nursing roles.

Discussion:

The findings of this study indicate that early clinical exposure (ECE) has a significant positive impact on first-year B.Sc. Nursing students, consistent with prior research. Students reported that engaging in clinical activities early enhanced their theoretical understanding, strengthened practical skills, improved communication with patients and staff, and increased confidence in performing nursing procedures. These results align with studies demonstrating that structured ECE promotes professional socialization, reduces anxiety, and fosters active participation in clinical tasks.

Furthermore, ECE appears to cultivate essential professional attributes such as empathy, adaptability, and problem-solving abilities, which are critical for holistic nursing practice. The demographic analysis revealed that most students were young and predominantly female, suggesting that early exposure is particularly beneficial in easing the transition from classroom to clinical settings. Positive perceptions reported by students reflect the value of supervised and structured clinical programs in motivating learning and reinforcing professional identity.

Conclusion:

Early clinical exposure (ECE) significantly enhances the learning, professional competence, and confidence of first-year B.Sc. Nursing students. The study demonstrates that structured ECE strengthens theoretical understanding, improves clinical skills, fosters effective communication, and promotes professional socialization. Positive student perceptions indicate that early engagement in clinical settings reduces anxiety and motivates active participation in patient care. Integrating ECE systematically into nursing curricula bridges the gap between theory and practice, prepares students for real-world clinical responsibilities, and supports holistic professional development. Continuous evaluation and guided supervision are recommended to optimize the benefits of early clinical programs.

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Conflict of Interest:

The author declares no conflict of interest.

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