

THEMATIC ANALYSIS – SUMMARY

Review reports Bachelor of Nursing

Introduction

In the academic year 2021-2022, the Bachelor of Nursing programmes of twelve Flemish higher education institutions went through a review procedure as part of their accreditation process. The programme reviews involved different external panels of independent experts. Each of the twelve review reports reflected the panels' findings, judgements and recommendations regarding the quality of the visited programmes. VLUHR QA coordinated the programme reviews and acted as secretary to the panels.

Based on a comparative analysis of the reports, VLUHR QA provides an overall picture of the quality of the nursing programmes. The comparison also resulted in the identification of seven themes that recurred in the different review reports, and to which the programmes responded to varying degrees. These themes were further analysed in terms of content. Their results can stimulate further quality development of the Bachelor of Nursing programmes in Flanders.

Below is a summary of the analysis of each theme. For the detailed discussion, please consult the [full report](#) (in Dutch).

Analysis 1: A broad Bachelor of Nursing graduate profile

Recent reforms in the Bachelor of Nursing - which were required for the programmes to meet European and Flemish regulations - have brought about a shift in the position and profile of the programmes.¹ In accordance with the regulations, the programmes have evolved into **generic programmes**, educating students to become 'Nurse Responsible for General Care' who can be broadly deployed in the seven care domains mentioned in the regulations.

The professional field shows a strong appreciation for the alumni of these reformed programmes because of their broad employability, their technical skills in performing healthcare practices and their well-developed soft skills. The programmes have taken advantage of the extended study duration to also put more emphasis on **clinical reasoning and evidence-based practice**. The professional field is benefiting from this, describing the recent graduates as innovative, critical, and improvement-oriented reflective practitioners who work evidence-based. Finally, several programmes explicitly emphasise collaboration between different disciplines and professions. The panels perceive initiatives by programmes to teach students how to be more **interdisciplinary and interprofessional** as positive, but they still see several opportunities for growth in this area.

In general, the graduate profile of the programmes mirrors the **prevailing vision on healthcare**. However, there is room for improvement regarding the role and involvement of care recipients, the diversification of care contexts, the (increasing) complexity of different care contexts, and a stronger emphasis on the concept of positive health(care).

The **learning outcomes** reflect the broad profile of graduates and include the competences as expected by the professional field, the discipline, and the regulations. The learning outcomes are clearly translated into the curricula of the programmes at each institution. The programmes use international frameworks such as the CanMEDs² and the 'Dutch Bachelor of Nursing 2020 profile' as the basis for their learning outcomes, which is recognised as good practice.

¹ In response to European Directive 2005/36/EC-2013/55/EU on regulated professions, it was decided by the Flemish government in September 2015 to reshape the Bachelor of Nursing at all Flemish universities of applied sciences and arts from a three-year programme (180 credits) to a generic four-year programme (240 credits). More specifically, students in the reformed nursing programmes must acquire eight competences and complete a minimum of 2,300 hours of clinical education in all seven care domains, in accordance with the European directive.

² Canadian Medical Educational Directions for Specialists

Analysis 2: Perception of the nursing profession

There is an acute **shortage of nurses** in Flanders. Based on the review reports, three remarkable issues can be noted in this regard. First, a **wrong and/or negative image of the profession** is a possible reason why potential students do not choose to study nursing. Next, enrolled students show an **imbalanced interest in the seven care domains**. Lastly, a significant percentage of Bachelor of Nursing graduates choose to pursue **additional studies** and further specialise and/or advance to the Master of Nursing programme. The panels strongly recommend that programmes work closely with the field to improve the image of the profession and undervalued care domains. The panels also stress the importance of ensuring that enough bachelor's graduates enter the professional field, as there are also several opportunities for specialisation in the field itself.

Analysis 3: Strong emphasis on practice

A striking observation is the strong emphasis on practice in all nursing programmes. The review reports show that **work-based learning** - in the form of internships - occupies a prominent place in the education of nursing students and in the programme's curricula, and that the programmes comply with European and Flemish regulations in this respect. In the regular tracks, internships are spread over the four years of training within all care domains. The curricula of the bridging programmes also include a high number of internships and, moreover, cover all care domains through these internships and/or alternative assignments. Besides work-based learning, the programmes have implemented **simulation-based learning** to a greater or lesser extent. In the reports, panels identify several critical success factors, such as learning activities based on authentic cases, the professionalisation of teachers, the integration of interprofessional and/or interdisciplinary cooperation, the active involvement of the professional field, and the investment in high-tech infrastructure. Other ways in which the programmes increase **authenticity** and their **focus on practice** include teaching hands-on classes and skills labs in well-equipped practical classrooms, providing practice materials, using authentic case studies, adding a practice component to the final thesis, recruiting teaching staff with field expertise and/or involving external practitioners as guest speakers. Nursing programmes at two institutions go even a step further in authentic learning, as their educational concept relies either partly or completely on problem-based learning.

Analysis 4: Addressing diversity

Nursing programmes bring together students with **diverse personal, educational, and professional backgrounds** (such as first-time students or working students) and **interests**. The bridging programmes are open to students who have completed a two-year associate degree programme in nursing. The abovementioned diversity is accompanied by certain challenges, which the programmes respond to by providing strong, tailor-made study guidance aimed at intake, progression and outflow. Several programmes offer students curriculum choices to suit their interests.

Analysis 5: Research

The reformed programmes place a stronger emphasis on research and evidence-based practice. **Research competences** are structurally embedded in the curricula through explicit learning paths. The final assessment of students' research competences takes place in the bachelor's thesis, the format of which varies from programme to programme. In a number of review reports, the panels recommend making the thesis even more practice-oriented, involving the professional field more, and clearly communicating the outcomes of the theses to the professional field. Moreover, students should demonstrate their evidence-based practice during the internship periods. In the programmes that rely on the concept of problem-based learning, the acquisition of evidence-based research skills is inherent in the educational approach.

The programmes also conduct their own (practice-oriented) **research**. The panels believe that this allows the programmes to play an important role in professionalising the field and serve as a catalyst for innovation. Therefore, the panels strongly recommend that programmes clearly communicate the results of their research to external parties and make further efforts to valorise the research conducted.

Analysis 6: Workload and studyload

The **workload** among teaching staff and the studyload of the programmes are a major concern, especially given the increasing demands on students and programmes in a changing educational and healthcare landscape. The programmes point to several reasons for the high workload of their teaching staff. However, teachers also identify the good cooperation within their teams and the autonomy they are given as factors that make the workload somewhat manageable. The panels conclude that programmes must figure out how to work more efficiently while maintaining the educational quality achieved. The **studyload** of the programmes - as perceived by students - is also noteworthy. In two-thirds of the review reports, the panels mention that student workload is high and/or the programme is considered to be intensive for a variety of reasons.

Analysis 7: Quality culture

The review reports contain several pieces of evidence of the presence of a **quality culture** in the programmes visited. Stakeholder involvement, the use of qualitative and quantitative data, the systematic completion of the PDCA cycle, and the collaboration among (teaching) staff members are mentioned as essential elements in this perspective. First, the panels saw strong **stakeholder involvement** in the programmes. The partners in the field and students in particular gave a lot of input to the programmes through formal and informal channels. However, keeping in touch with alumni poses a challenge in several programmes. These programmes are making various efforts in this area, but need to take additional steps to strengthen and structurally embed their interaction with alumni. Next, the panels consider the collection and analysis of **quantitative and qualitative data** as the basis of a data-driven improvement policy. Third, going through the **PDCA cycle** allows focus and transparency, according to the panels, but it is also important that programmes find a good balance between a policy-based approach and resolving situations that arise ad hoc. Last, close **cooperation between the programme's teaching staff members** ensures that knowledge exchange takes place, that team members help and support each other when necessary, and that teaching staff are on the same page at all times.

Opportunities for the future

The review reports show that the nursing programmes have taken advantage of the reform and the lengthened study duration to strengthen and improve their quality. However, in an ever-changing society and a changing educational and healthcare landscape, it is important that programmes dare to constantly question themselves and seize all opportunities to innovate. Only in this way will the programmes succeed in their aim to be future-proof and prepare students for future challenges. The programmes should join forces and form a community with their stakeholders - the professional field, students, and alumni - to promote lifelong learning and foster a positive image of the nursing profession. More attention should also be paid to the interaction between education, practice-based research and in what ways programmes intend to contribute to society. In other words, how do the programmes intend to concretise the interwovenness of the three pillars in their programme and how do they involve the professional field in this narrative.