

## Assessment of Graduate Entry Nursing Students, Recommendations for Best Practice

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### Abstract

*Assessment of graduate entry nursing (GEN) students must be recognised as distinct. Programmes of study for graduate entry nurses are compressed and the students possess knowledge and skills that are unique, as such, the assessment strategy utilised must recognise these unique characteristics. A subgroup the GEN network, six members from four international higher education institutions, was established to explore the assessment of graduate entry nurses. Five meetings were conducted between February and July 2024 from which endorsements for assessment were collaboratively evaluated and agreed. Through collaboration, subgroup members have made recommendations for best practice for the assessment of GEN students to have the greatest potential of supporting student learning and stakeholder expectations. Assessments should be sufficiently academically challenging to enable students to demonstrate higher level thinking alongside the application of new and evolving knowledge and skill to meet pre-registration nursing standards in a condensed timescale.*

**Keywords:** Graduate assessment, Nursing, Nursing Students, Best practice

### Introduction

This paper focusses on the specific nature of Graduate Entry Nursing (GEN) programme design, identifies the challenges faced in the assessment of GEN students and proposes a set of best practice principles for GEN assessment.

Globally, health care systems require a supply of nurses which for decades has been insufficient to meet demand (West et al., 2007), which the International Council of Nurses (ICN) (2023) warn, without intervention, will worsen. The World Health Organisation (WHO, 2020) predicts a global nursing workforce shortage of 5.7 million by 2030, urging governments and relevant stakeholders to invest in international collaborations exploring nursing education to address the global and domestic demand for nurses.

During this period of nursing shortage and increasing complexity of healthcare systems, there has been a general global trend for nursing to become an all-graduate profession. Many nursing programmes are therefore delivered by universities and subject to their academic quality assurance processes (Neill, 2012), each country having their own higher education qualification framework. In nursing, there is an added differentiation of assessment

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components, the assessment of theoretical knowledge and the assessment of competence in practice. As well as meeting the criteria for academic award, nursing curricula must balance theoretical and practice assessments to meet the standards for professional registration, which are set out by the applicable national regulatory body.

The accelerated GEN pathway was instigated in response to the persistent global nursing shortage, enabling a route into a professional nursing career for graduates, recognising the motivation for, and barriers to returning to study (Macdiarmid et al., 2021; Raines 2010). GEN programmes are delivered in the UK, Australia and New Zealand and meet the relevant national standards for national professional nurse registration through an accelerated two-year pathway. These programmes, attract a new cohort of potential nurses who have depth and breadth of prior personal, professional, and experiential knowledge (Neill, 2012).

GEN programmes are crucial for contributing to the international healthcare workforce by addressing core needs: Increasing capacity, by reducing the timeframe to become a registered nurse, GEN programmes help to alleviate shortages for the many countries facing nursing shortages; Enhancing diversity, by attracting individuals from various disciplines, and backgrounds, graduate students bring prior education and professional experiences, translating into advanced critical thinking and higher level problem-solving skills.

A group of 38 like-minded nursing academics, representing nineteen academic institutions, from three continents, form the International GEN network to share good practice and undertake collaborative international GEN related research projects. Together, GEN network members research the impact of GEN programmes, to influence workforce planning and professional regulation at a strategic level.

## **Methods**

A subgroup of the GEN network was established to explore the evidence that existed around best practice for the assessment of graduate entry nurses, based on those members who self-nominated to have a special interest in nursing programme assessment. The group consisted of six members representing four international higher education institutions. Five meetings were conducted between February and July 2024 in which group objectives were explored, developed, collaboratively evaluated, and agreed.

Literature searches were conducted to answer the question of 'what evidence is available to underpin the specific assessment requirements of graduate entry nurses'. Using the five-stage integrative review approach of Whittemore and Knafl (2005), the steps of (1) problem identification, (2) literature search, (3) data evaluation, (4) data analysis, and (5) presentation, were followed. The review involved searches of academic data bases including CINAHL, Medline and Psych Info using keywords and synonyms of assessment and graduate entry nursing. Parameters of the search strategy included a 15-year date restriction and research written in English. Reference lists provided further sources of information through cited articles. Findings from the located literature were reached through analysis, collective evaluation and agreement.

## **Results**

The subgroup members were able to present recommendations for best practice for the assessment of GEN students, concluding that assessments need to be inclusive, authentic,



efficient, as well as sufficiently academically challenging to enable students to demonstrate higher level thinking alongside the application of new and evolving knowledge and skill to meet pre-registration nursing standards in a condensed timescale.

Broadly, it was observed that assessments within GEN need to consider several factors to best facilitate student success. Distinct features of GEN programmes include the accelerated nature of the programme, pre-requisite skills at entry, the need to be employment ready on completion, the requirement to study, and be assessed, at level seven for the duration of the course. These factors combined require a distinct assessment approach for GEN programmes. Furthermore, mapping these core features against a successful pedagogy dictates that assessments must be authentic, inclusive, and efficient, which has the objective of best supporting student learning, the needs of the nursing profession and stakeholder resources and expectations.

GEN programmes attract self-motivated, mature graduates with a propensity for ownership over their learning experience (Pellico et al., 2012; Neill 2012). Students attracted to GEN programmes are often very invested in the learning environment, and commonly characterised by their academic capacity and determination to succeed (Stacey et al., 2016), culminating in their high level of ability to demonstrate competence within shorter timeframes (Pellico, et al., 2012). Stacey et al (2016) suggest that GEN student capabilities, experiences, and perspectives can be framed as attributes of “graduateness”, which reportedly comprises a tendency towards resilience during the initial academic transition (Meyer & Shatto, 2018), and an understanding of personal learning style preferences (McKenna & Brooks, 2018), which it is suggested can result in better preparedness for the practice and academic experiences (Cangelosi, 2007).

Studies demonstrates that higher levels of nursing education, particularly at masters level, are linked to enhanced higher-order thinking and clinical decision-making (Drennan 2010). An apparent connection between nursing education and decision-making is supported by the works by Tanner (2006), which emphasize the role of education in fostering these critical skills. Nurses with advanced education develop stronger critical thinking, clinical judgment, and problem-solving skills, which are essential for making informed decisions in complex patient care scenarios (Aiken et al 2014). Studies indicate that graduate nurses are better equipped to apply evidence-based practices and engage in advanced clinical reasoning, leading to improved patient outcomes (Aiken et al 2014).

Graduate entry nursing courses are a uniquely challenging undertaking for students. Graduates from a wide range of disciplines can study masters level pre-registration programmes building on their proven graduate skills. This often means that they are unfamiliar with the nuances of studying a health-related discipline, or the highly structured conventions of health literature and research. Nursing courses also include a substantial proportion of “tightly coupled” work-integrated learning (Boud et al. 2022), which is often a new learning and assessment experience for graduate entry nursing students who have studied non-clinical disciplines. Unfamiliarity, or lack of practice, in health-related disciplines pose significant challenges in relation to assessment strategy (Hanesworth, 2019); rendering assessment and feedback design a critical part of the development and implementation of graduate entry nursing courses.

## Discussion

The design of the assessment strategy in nursing curricula requires careful consideration to meet both academic and professional regulatory requirements (Hanesworth, 2019), as well as stakeholder expectations. From an international perspective, students must demonstrate knowledge of theoretical concepts, such as the social sciences, evidence-based practice, nursing processes and healthcare policy, and demonstrate that they uphold professional values (NMC, 2018) in the application of that knowledge. Consequently, nurse educators often contextualise assessments using practice-based scenarios, and strategically augment conventional assessment types, such as essays, exams, and dissertations with authentic assessments, as defined by Swaffield (2011). These can include reflective accounts, case studies, presentations, practical exams, and professional conversations. GEN programmes offer an accelerated route to nursing registration. Alongside assessment design, the provision of feedback is a critical part of learning that can become a secondary consideration in assessment design (Winstone & Boud, 2020).

The intention of this contemporary commentary of GEN programmes is to provide a guide to help educators improve student success, experience, and satisfaction of assessment within GEN programmes. The following principles for GEN assessments were co-constructed and agreed by consensus, by the GEN subgroup, and have been adopted by the GEN network to help guide the design and implementation of assessments. The recommendations coalesced around three core themes of authentic, inclusive, and efficient assessments:

### Authentic assessments

GEN students are undertaking a professional course incorporating all domains of learning: factual, conceptual, procedural, and metacognitive in a condensed timeframe (Anderson and Krathwohl, 2001). It is important that assessments reflect real world scenarios to optimally prepare them for life as a registrant. Consideration should be given to preparedness of GEN students for the future application of skills and knowledge, by:

- ensuring assessments are aligned to professional regulatory body and academic standards and developed from external consultation with relevant stakeholders to ensure transferable skills and knowledge are achieved and applied.
- constructing synchronous assessments to enhance assessment integrity and authenticity, such as through the strategic use of Objective Structured Clinical Examinations (OSCE), clinically applicable presentations, clinical focused voice viva exams, and exploratory case-based discussion.

Best Practice Examples:

- Objective Structured Clinical Examinations (OSCEs) simulate acute and community settings with standardised patients, incorporating real-time decision-making and communication challenges. Practicing nurses can contribute to scenario development to ensure clinical relevance.
- Voice-recorded viva presentations on simulated cases have been used to assess metacognitive reasoning and clinical prioritization. Students will develop confidence in articulating clinical decisions in multidisciplinary contexts.



- Co-designed assessments with clinical partners, including simulations on Indigenous cultural safety, to promote culturally responsive care. Students will value the authenticity and experience enhanced readiness for diverse clinical environments.

Stakeholder perspectives:

- Students feel prepared for the reality of work.
- Clinical staff feel involved in the design and delivery of assessments, adding credibility.
- Experts by experience feel included in nurse education, offering real world insights.

### **Inclusive assessment**

Where students have not studied a health-related discipline, there is a very steep learning curve to acclimatise to the terminology, culture and ethical sensitivities required of health-related study. The assessment activities for GEN students' needs to be inclusive, accessible, and easily understood (Tai et al., 2023); GEN programmes should seek to encourage practices, which consider diverse student need and ability, to enhance student achievement, by:

- designing learning outcomes and assessment criteria which adhere to inclusivity guidance on language and representation, provided in all module outlines, with detail of how feedback will be delivered to promote inclusivity.
- ensuring that module outlines detail assessment modifications promoting wider accessibility of information and skills to promote inclusivity.
- providing a choice of assessment, which may vary from assignment title, an ability for a student to select a case study, or an alternative method of assessment.

Best Practice Examples:

- Incorporate universal design principles into assessment briefs, offering multimodal assessment options (e.g., written essay, recorded podcast, infographic) to allow students to demonstrate understanding in ways aligned to their strengths.
- Assessments are scaffolded with interactive glossaries and collaborative study groups. Students can choose between writing on a provided clinical case or one from their personal or volunteer experience, promoting personal relevance and equity.
- Peer-marked formative assessments where students can choose case scenarios from global or local settings, acknowledging the diverse cultural perspectives within the cohort.

Stakeholder perspectives:

- Regardless of their experiences and background, students enjoy choice of assessment to remain engaged in study.
- Clinical scenarios can be utilised effectively in assessment.
- Experts by experience can be involved in assessment inclusivity design assurance.

## Efficient assessment

The accelerated nature of GEN programmes means that there are fewer assessment opportunities than in a standard undergraduate degree. With less time available for formative assessments, GEN students do not have time to unpick complex multifaceted summative assessment instructions. The condensed format of delivery of GEN programmes requires that assessment activity of efficient of student time. The GEN academic assessment level is at a demanding level of masters level delivery throughout, although all pre-registration nursing programmes, regardless of academic level need to meet the pre-registration standards. GEN programmes encourage practices, that embrace the need for clear and proportionate assessment activity, by:

- aligning well-constructed GEN assessments with programme and module learning outcomes.
- sharing understanding of the GEN assessment and feedback, with clear assessment briefs mapped against core assessment criteria.
- seeking GEN student feedback on assessments, collaborating to inform assessment developments.
- assessment activity should provide opportunity for GEN student peer and self-assessment, when possible, to enhance academic and assessment literacy.
- digital assessment delivery and feedback should be embraced, when possible, to enhance both assessment and feedback objectivity, student and staff efficiencies, as well as familiarising GEN students with advancing technologies.

### Best Practice Examples:

- Assessment briefs are shared as visual flowcharts aligned with module outcomes, reducing cognitive overload and improving student understanding. Feedback from previous cohorts can inform the redesign of these materials.
- Use of an integrated digital platform where assessments, rubrics, and feedback are streamlined. The use of feedback studios and AI-supported peer feedback tools can improve student engagement with feedback.
- Peer-review and self-assessment are integrated into clinical logbooks. This approach can help students critically reflect on their practice and improved formative feedback loops.

### Stakeholder Perspectives:

- Students time is used effectively.
- Clinical domains are embracing technological advancements, all such developments are perceived as consistent.
- Experts by experience can be involved in assessment design.

## Conclusion

By incorporating diverse examples and stakeholder voices, this commentary reflects a shared commitment to assessment practices that are **realistic, fair, and manageable** within the intense structure of GEN programmes. As GEN education continues to evolve, stakeholder





collaboration and student-centred innovation remain essential to meaningful assessment reform.

The assessment strategy for GEN programme requires a heightened level of sophistication. GEN assessments, at master's level, should be sufficiently academically challenging to enable students to demonstrate higher level thinking. GEN students need to be assessed in an authentic manner to support the application of new and evolving knowledge and skill to meet pre-registration nursing standards in a condensed timescale. Coming from diverse setting and with a range of abilities, GEN assessments must be inclusive in design. To be efficient, assessment must be integrated into the students learning journey without overburdening them, whilst maintaining the required level of academic scrutiny. Lastly, assessments need to be sufficiently academically challenging to enable students to demonstrate higher level skills alongside the application of their relatively new knowledge, which many students report as a somewhat challenging paradox.

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