

## RESEARCH ARTICLE (ORIGINAL) 8

## Undergraduate Nursing Degree: Overview of leadership education in Portugal

*Curso de Licenciatura em Enfermagem: Panorama do ensino de liderança em Portugal*

*Grado en Enfermería: Descripción general de la enseñanza del liderazgo en Portugal*

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### Abstract

**Background:** Effective leadership in nursing practice is associated with students' preparation during their academic training.

**Objective:** To identify leadership content in Portuguese undergraduate nursing programs.

**Methodology:** Online consultation of course unit syllabuses of 17 undergraduate nursing programs from 39 higher education institutions, whose content was available, conducted between - December September-December 2018. Data were organized using *Excel* software to characterize the course units, and content analysis was performed using *IRAMUTEQ 0.6 alpha 3* software.

**Results:** Leadership content was identified in course units that present the terms "management" and/or "administration," associated with "nursing" and/or "health," and other related terms, particularly "health care organization."

**Conclusion:** Leadership education is present as content in all programs, although it is not taught as a specific course unit in any undergraduate nursing degrees studied. Leadership education is recognized as essential for developing students' abilities and skills. No links between leadership education and clinical practice were found in the course units.

**Keywords:** nursing; students; nursing; education, higher; leadership; competency-based education

### Resumo

**Enquadramento:** A liderança eficaz na prática de enfermagem relaciona-se com a preparação dos estudantes durante a formação académica.

**Objetivo:** Identificar conteúdos sobre liderança nos programas do Curso de Licenciatura em Enfermagem em Portugal.

**Metodologia:** Consulta *online* dos programas das unidades curriculares de 17 cursos com conteúdos acessíveis, de 39 instituições de ensino superior que lecionam enfermagem, em setembro-dezembro de 2018. Dados organizados com o *software Excel* para caracterização das unidades curriculares e análise de conteúdo com *software IRAMUTEQ 0.6 alpha 3*.

**Resultados:** Identificados conteúdos sobre liderança em unidades curriculares que apresentavam os termos "gestão" e/ou "administração", associados com "enfermagem" e/ou "saúde", e outros termos associados, salientando-se "organização dos cuidados de saúde".

**Conclusão:** O ensino da liderança está presente como conteúdo programático em todos os currículos, embora não seja lecionada como disciplina própria em nenhum dos Cursos de Licenciatura. Reconhece-se ser fundamental o ensino da liderança para o desenvolvimento de habilidades e competências dos estudantes. Não foram encontradas nas unidades curriculares dos cursos ligações do ensino da liderança à prática clínica.

**Palavras-chave:** enfermagem; estudantes de enfermagem; educação superior; liderança; educação baseada em competências

### Resumen

**Marco contextual:** El liderazgo eficaz en la práctica de la enfermería se relaciona con la preparación de los estudiantes durante la formación académica.

**Objetivo:** Identificar los contenidos sobre liderazgo en los planes de estudio del Grado de Enfermería en Portugal.

**Metodología:** Consulta *online* de los programas de las unidades curriculares de 17 grados con contenidos accesibles de 39 instituciones de educación superior que imparten enfermería, en septiembre-diciembre de 2018. Datos organizados con el *software Excel* para caracterizar las unidades del grado y análisis de contenido con el *software IRAMUTEQ 0.6 alpha 3*.

**Resultados:** Identificados los contenidos sobre liderazgo en las unidades del grado que presentaban los términos "gestión" y/o "administración", asociados con "enfermería" y/o "salud", y otros términos asociados, entre los que destaca "organización de la atención sanitaria".

**Conclusión:** La enseñanza del liderazgo está presente como contenido programático en todos los planes de estudio, aunque no se imparta como asignatura en ninguno de los grados. Se reconoce que la enseñanza del liderazgo es esencial para el desarrollo de las habilidades y competencias de los estudiantes. No se encontraron vínculos entre la enseñanza del liderazgo y la práctica clínica en las unidades curriculares de los grados.

**Palabras clave:** enfermería; estudiantes de enfermería; educación superior; liderazgo; educación basada en competencias

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## Introduction

Supported by several theoretical frameworks, leadership has been the object of multiple definitions, approaches, and perspectives. Despite its antiquity, the concept of leadership became relevant with the development of the Human Relations Theory (Thompson et al., 2017).

Initially more associated with the corporate and business world, leadership has broadened its field of action and is now the object of study of different areas of knowledge, including education, health care, and nursing. Leadership has stood out in nursing as an instrument for the nursing work process, contributing to team management, decision-making, and conflict resolution (Fischer, 2016). Considering the relevance of leadership in the nursing work process and as starting points for desk research, the following three questions were formulated: Which Portuguese higher education institutions (HEIs) offering undergraduate nursing education have information about their course units' (UCs) syllabuses available online? Does the available information allow identifying and selecting leadership-related content? Which UCs tend to include leadership-related content? Thus, the study aimed to identify specific leadership contents in undergraduate nursing programs in Portugal.

## Background

The current reality of society and health organizations (characterized by cost containment and overextended staff) demands nurses to be agile, self-aware, and agents of change and improvement of health outcomes (Waite & Brooks, 2014). Qualities that demand broad leadership skills. The World Health Organization (WHO) has already mentioned this aspect, stating that leadership is key for a healthy work environment and supporting the idea that it should exist at all levels of nursing services (Duygulu & Kublay, 2011).

Nurses working in multiprofessional teams must possess the knowledge to deliver adequate health care and accept the responsibilities of professional management and leadership (Ebrahim, 2018; Smith et al., 2018). They also need to play a supportive and coordinating role, ensuring care continuity and making a difference in the health care delivery (Duygulu & Kublay, 2011).

Overall, leadership skills allow nurses to expand their thinking skills, have more initiative, and act and make decisions autonomously, seeking better practices and new strategies for patient care (Laut et al., 2018). In nursing education, this includes teaching theoretical frameworks to nursing students and applying them in clinical settings. There is international concern about the quality of leadership in nursing practice and its link to the preparation of nursing students during their education. Strategic leadership is one of the four goals of the ICN Strategic Plan 2019-2023 (ICN, 2019) to address current and future health care needs. However, it has been suggested that newly registered nurses are not always prepared for leadership roles (Scammell et al., 2020).

One of the functions of HEIs is to provide students with the instruments to develop their competencies continuously throughout their professional pathways. Among these competencies, leadership is key (Peres et al., 2018). Students must understand the relationship between local and global health challenges and strive to design and implement solutions to these challenges. Nursing faculty should also create the right conditions for students to learn how to work with different populations to prepare them to reflect and intervene in the different health or disease contexts, improving the quality of life of populations and society in general, and contributing to changing populations' health realities (Peres et al., 2018; Waite & Brooks, 2014).

In nursing education, it is essential to adopt basic definitions of leadership that include designing or finding solutions to the problems identified; creating a vision and inspiring staff to follow it; promoting staff's development of skills, adapted to the work contexts; and influencing others to work towards commonly identified goals (Parmenter, 2013). This way, it is possible to create conditions for students to exercise professional leadership to improve and intervene in systems where there are health injustices or disparities (Waite & Brooks, 2014).

Although leadership skills are required at all levels of the profession, from academic training to throughout the professional pathway, programs focused on leadership development are scarce in undergraduate nursing education, post-graduate degrees, and continuing education at work (Peres et al., 2018).

## Research questions

Which Portuguese HEIs offering undergraduate nursing education have online information on UCs' syllabuses? Does the available information allow for identifying and selecting leadership-related content? Which UCs tend to include leadership-related content?

## Methodology

This study is a descriptive desk research with a mostly qualitative approach to data analysis.

The study's first phase included the identification of all Portuguese HEIs offering undergraduate nursing education.

The second phase searched and analyzed the information available online. Only free access data available on the websites of the Directorate-General for Higher Education (DGES) and the Nursing Schools/ Schools of Health were used. The data were collected from September to December 2018. Since these are public data, no research authorization was requested, nor was it submitted to any Committee. Considering this research is developed with public domain contents and does not interact directly with human beings, the resolutions regulating research ethics do not apply to this study.

After identifying the HEIs, their websites were accessed



to identify the leadership contents included in the undergraduate nursing programs.

The data collected were organized in an analysis matrix using *Excel* software to characterize the HEIs and their nursing programs. The descriptions of UCs including leadership-related contents were sorted and submitted to content analysis. Finally, using the Brazilian version of *IRAMUTEQ* (Interface de R pour les Analyses Multidimensionnelles de Textes et de Questionnaires) 0.6 *alpha 3* software, statistical analyses were carried out on the text segments and words, with a maximum similarity tree presenting the correlation between “leadership” and other management themes, according to their presence in the UCs’ description.

## Results

Thirty-nine Portuguese nursing education institutions were identified, 22 public and 17 private. The undergraduate nursing programs offer from 25 to 320 vacancies per academic year, with 16 programs offering between 60 and 85 vacancies and only three with more than 250 vacancies.

Seven programs have leadership-related UCs during the 3<sup>rd</sup> semester and two in the 2<sup>nd</sup> year of training, but without specifying the period. In seven undergraduate programs, the teaching of leadership contents occurs in the 3<sup>rd</sup> year of training, in the 5<sup>th</sup> semester in four programs, and in the 6<sup>th</sup> semester in the other three programs. Most programs include leadership-related content in the 4<sup>th</sup> year, namely 16 programs in the 7<sup>th</sup> semester and three in the 8<sup>th</sup> semester. Four programs did not provide information on the institution’s website about when the UC takes place. Only 17 higher education institutions of the total pro-

grams identified had detailed UC information available online.

The specific contents on leadership in student education were identified in UCs that present, in their designation, the terms “management” and/or “administration.” These terms appear associated with the word “nursing” in 22 UCs and “health” in the other ten UCs. In two UCs, the designations contain both “nursing” and “health.” The term “entrepreneurship” is present in two UCs. The terms “care organization,” “clinical supervision,” and “professional development” appear only in one UC. All the identified UCs have their workload distributed between theoretical and theoretical-practical classes.

The study observed that the theme “leadership” is not taught as a specific UC in any of the HEIs in the sample, and it is present as programmatic content in seven UCs. In three of them, leadership appears associated with the ability to delegate. As a programmatic content, leadership is also related to conflict resolution, skill development, leadership skills, and leadership theories.

The textual corpus, framing leadership education from a thematic point of view, allows identifying the relationship between the themes. Similarity analysis was conducted to establish the connection between the evoked elements and sort the data under analysis in a systematized and hierarchical structure, as observed in Figure 1.

The similarity tree presents the word “health” at its core, as it establishes the largest number of connections, as observed by its first-plan position in the lexical hierarchy process. Its association with the words “management”, “nursing,” and “organization” is observed in the second plan, defining the basic and main structure of the maximum tree. “Leadership,” the core theme of this research, appears in the next level, establishing a direct connection to the core word (health), but with few derived connections.





expected outcomes and being expressed in the comparison between real and ideal. In this sense, a satisfactory supervision evaluation can be carried out by considering any perceived benefits. Therefore, nurse leaders' education must include nursing students' training and empowerment in supervision and evaluation.

In the word connections that emerged with "organization," such as "conflict" or "delegation," it was observed that they were clearly related to leadership skills. A perception based on the Regulation of the Profile of Competencies for the General Care Nurse of the Nursing Regulator (*Ordem dos Enfermeiros*, 2015). This Regulation's 96 competencies do not specifically mention the term "leadership," although a highlight is given to the competency "(to) delegate and supervise tasks."

This competency considers that nurses assess the needs and type of care delivered to patients. In addition, by prioritizing it, they delegate tasks and supervise the professionals who functionally depend on them, thus becoming responsible for the overall care delivered to patients.

When leading, nurses can organize the available resources to ensure quality and continuity in care management, as shown by the connections between the terms "health," "organization," and "care." "Organization" occurs on several levels, from human resources in nursing and their allocation to the various sectors of a unit, to nursing equipment, their distribution for use and replacement control, and the sorting of the data collected in the elaboration of nursing records. Thus, "organization" is an essential competency for nurses when exercising their administrative and care functions, directly impacting care delivery.

According to Scammel et al. (2020), observing leadership roles in practice is a key objective of nursing students' clinical internships to integrate leadership theory with practice. Moreover, learning from experienced nurses can be useful for nursing students to favor future positive leadership behaviors. However, this study established no connections between "leadership" and terms related to clinical teaching, with only one UC mentioning the term "clinical supervision."

On the other hand, the same authors advocate that leadership theory and skill should be introduced as soon as possible and reviewed throughout the program. In seven of the 17 Portuguese undergraduate nursing programs studied, some leadership-related programmatic contents are introduced in an early training period (2<sup>nd</sup> year). Still, most programs choose to address leadership-related issues later, in the 4<sup>th</sup> year of the degree.

All the UCs analyzed in the sample offered theoretical and theoretical-practical classes. Thus, it was possible to observe an approach to leadership within a broader perspective, although it was absent from clinical teachings. This absence limits the opportunities to 'learn to lead' and encourage students to test leadership behaviors. Nevertheless, simulated experiences in theoretical-practical contexts may provide alternative learning experiences to promote leadership skills.

Considering the increasing difficulties faced in clinical settings, it becomes more and more necessary to develop

strategies in the classrooms that allow students to practice leadership roles, problem-solving, delegation, and supervision, among others (Dyess & Sherman, 2011; Maughan et al., 2016; Park & Kim, 2017). These experiences may occur in theoretical-practical classes. The skills to develop transformative leadership behaviors that support change in clinical settings are not easily acquired, but they can be developed. New registered nurses' potential must not be ignored (Dyess & Sherman, 2011; Abelha et al., 2018).

## Conclusion

Considering the outcomes obtained in the sample under study, it is observed that leadership education is present more or less directly in all the HEIs' available curricula as leadership-related topics included in the UCs' syllabuses. Leadership education in nursing education is key to developing skills and competencies that empower students and future nurses to make decisions, solve problems, negotiate, guide teams, and deliver quality care. However, it is still not a core concept in word similarity analyses. Due to the cross-cutting nature and importance of the topic, there is the hope that leadership content will be addressed in the different UCs, even if it is not expressed in their syllabuses.

Current research and evidence-based practice have demonstrated the need to develop leadership skills in nursing students and clinical practice nurses. However, the studies and knowledge about leadership skills in nurses without management positions are scarce.

Despite these limitations, this study can become a starting point for academic exchange and dissemination to ensure the dialogue and collaboration between faculty on leadership education in nursing education. This exchange can include the discussion of strategies, definition of programmatic contents, exchange of information and training material, organization of faculty meetings, and the possibility of establishing inter-institutional working groups.

## Authors contribution

Conceptualization: Ferreira, M. M., Bueno, A. A., Lomba, M. L.

Data curation: Bueno, A. A., Ferreira, M. M.

Methodology: Ferreira, M. M., Bueno, A. A.

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