

Teaching Nursing in the 21st Century: Between Transitions, Challenges, and Hopes

Ensinar Enfermagem no Século XXI: Entre Transições, Desafios e Esperanças

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We are living in a time marked by profound transitions. Nursing education now faces challenges that extend beyond the disciplinary domain, calling into question the organization of schools and universities themselves. Teaching nursing requires preparing professionals and citizens who can provide care in a digital, unequal, and interdependent world that demands not only scientific competence, but also ethical sensitivity and a commitment to social responsibility.

The major sociodemographic, environmental, and technological transitions of the 21st century are transforming the way we live, care for one another, learn, and conduct research. Population aging, social inequalities, cultural diversity, and concern for human and planetary well-being are placing new demands on healthcare systems. The climate crisis highlights the interconnectedness of planetary and human health, while the digital revolution requires the integration of artificial intelligence, robotics, and data science without compromising person-centered care. Therefore, nursing, as both a scientific discipline and a clinical practice, is called upon to respond to these changes through critical thinking, research, and a capacity for innovation (World Health Organization, 2020).

When considering the future of nursing education at all levels, it is important to reflect on how to prepare professionals to navigate these transitions with resilience, critical thinking, and ethical awareness. Education should foster adaptive competencies, promote interdisciplinary thinking, and cultivate an institutional culture of well-being and inclusion, which are foundational for schools and faculties of nursing (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development [OECD], 2025b). Educational institutions must be open, transformative, and supportive (European University Association, 2021), ensuring equitable access, inclusion, high pedagogical quality, and the social relevance of the education they provide. To achieve these goals, institutions must diversify their student populations, promote academic success, revise curricula to support flexible learning pathways in response to student heterogeneity, strengthen academic support mechanisms, and foster collaborative, inclusive, and intellectually stimulating learning environments. These environments should adopt student-centered pedagogical models and be supported by evidence-based teaching practices that promote design capacity, creativity, communication skill development, ecological awareness, compassion, and an ethical commitment to ensuring universal access to healthcare (Meleis, 2025).

Teaching for the future, therefore, implies reconfiguring pedagogical models and redefining the very concept of teaching quality. The report *Unlocking High-Quality Teaching* (OECD, 2025d) offers a particularly relevant conceptual framework in this regard, identifying five high-quality teaching goals: cognitive engagement, quality subject content, social-emotional support, high-quality classroom interaction, and formative assessment and feedback. This framework reinforces the importance of fostering institutional ecosystems that support faculty collaboration, pedagogical innovation, and the continuous professional development of teachers. The quality of higher education is a shared responsibility, sustained by pedagogical leadership, a culture of reflection, and policies that value teaching as much as research.

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Nursing education must effectively integrate teaching, research, and clinical practice to promote problem-based learning, learning through research, and ethical reflection on technology and care (Vergara Palma, 2023; Masters, 2023). It should prepare nurses to critically engage with the complexity of healthcare systems, work in interprofessional teams, and engage in lifelong learning within rapidly changing contexts (Frenk et al., 2010; O'Keefe, Forman, Moran, & Steketee, 2020; Balasooriya et al., 2024).

Integrating teaching, research, and clinical practice requires academic structures and institutional policies that provide faculty with the time, recognition, and conditions necessary to fully exercise the educational, scientific, and clinical dimensions of the profession (Bento, 2025). At the same time, internationalization represents a critical challenge and a prerequisite for scientific advancement and educational quality. As OECD reports (2025a; 2025b) have highlighted, academic and scientific cooperation networks are fundamental to research development, knowledge production and sharing, mobility, and innovation. Therefore, schools and faculties of nursing must position themselves as communities of practice and knowledge committed to pedagogical quality, impactful research, and social responsibility.

As Nóvoa (2009) reminds us, universities fulfill their missions by educating students to think freely and critically. Human and planetary sustainability must also become central to nursing education. The concept of planetary health (WHO, 2020) broadens the scope of the discipline by urging professionals to act locally while maintaining a global perspective. Educating for sustainability, equity, and inclusion is now a prerequisite for academic excellence and social relevance.

The future of nursing education depends on the collective capacity of institutions to learn from transitions, innovate without losing sight of the human essence of care, and cultivate hope—the quiet force that transforms education into commitment and care into a political act. Teaching nursing affirms the value of science and ethics at the heart of the university. It prepares citizens and professionals to lead processes of change with clarity, solidarity, and hope.

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