

Integration of Soft Skills in Nursing Clinical Evaluation: A Narrative Analysis

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ABSTRACT

Introduction: Integration of soft skills components in clinical evaluation is essential for undergraduate nursing students. However, soft skills are a prerequisite for increasing confidence in providing services to patients. As future health professionals, these students must develop a complete set of competencies that go beyond technical competence. This paper is a report of a review conducted to identify, critically analyse and synthesize the integration of soft skills components in clinical evaluation for undergraduate nursing students

Methods: A comprehensive literature search was carried out using databases EBSCO, ProQuest Dissertation and Theses, ProQuest Nursing Journal. An inclusion and exclusion criterion were identified. A narrative review of evidence- and non-evidence-based papers was conducted, using a relevant methodological framework with additional scrutiny of secondary data sources in the latter.

Results: A total of 787 papers were identified, with 43 fully sourced and 17 included in the final review. There are three themes, which also provide a comprehensive understanding of the definition of soft skills component, the importance of soft skills among nursing students, and the outcomes and implications of soft skills in clinical assessment.

Conclusion: Soft skills need to be incorporated into the nursing curriculum. The integration of soft skills elements in clinical skills assessment can improve the quality of nursing graduates and improve the quality of care and safety for patients.

Keywords: Soft skills; Clinical evaluation; Nursing students.

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INTRODUCTION

In the 21st century, the challenges of nursing education in the globalization era necessitate the integration of soft skills alongside hard skills. Soft skills, encompassing communication, empathy, teamwork, professionalism, cultural competence, and ethical decision-making, are vital for providing holistic and patient-centred care. While nursing education emphasizes hard skills, there is a growing realization of the importance of soft skills in nursing practice.

The integration of soft skills in clinical assessment is gaining attention in healthcare education and professional practice. Traditional clinical assessments have focused mainly on technical competencies, but the significance of soft skills in facilitating effective communication, collaboration, and compassionate care is now widely acknowledged. Research has shown that robust soft skills positively impact patient satisfaction, health outcomes, and the overall quality of care. Therefore, incorporating soft skills in clinical assessments is crucial to ensure healthcare professionals possess essential interpersonal and communication skills alongside technical expertise.

Soft skills encompass personal characteristics and behaviors that enhance interpersonal relationships and form the foundation for nursing interactions. They are also referred to as people's skills and are defined as interpersonal and personal qualities in the study "Soft Skills or Hard Cash" (1). Soft skills play a vital role in both education and practice, functioning as behavioral attributes or characteristics that leaders employ to attain desired results (2). These qualities provide nurses with the essential abilities to provide exceptional care and effectively address the intricate demands of the healthcare setting. Soft skills are crucial for overcoming team-related obstacles and have been suggested as a means to enhance the competence, patient care, and practice standards of nursing students (3). Integrating the soft skills component within clinical skills evaluation is critical for undergraduate nursing students. These students must acquire a broad range of abilities beyond technical proficiency, as they will be future healthcare providers. Delivering patient-centred care and building fruitful therapy connections require soft skills, which include effective communication, empathy, teamwork, cultural competency, professionalism, and ethical decision-making.

The importance of soft skills in the formation of capable and compassionate nurses has become increasingly apparent in nursing education in recent years. Clinical evaluation is an important platform for assessing students' technical and soft skills competencies. Nursing educators hope to ensure that undergraduate nursing students are adequately equipped to meet the complex demands of clinical practice by adding the soft skills component into clinical evaluation. This paper aims to conduct a narrative review that focuses on the incorporation of soft skills components in the clinical evaluation of undergraduate nursing students. The researcher hopes to evaluate existing practices, problems, and outcomes linked to the integration of soft skills evaluation in the clinical teaching of undergraduate nursing students through this review. This study will begin by offering a thorough overview of the many soft skills associated with the nursing profession and clinical evaluation. It will emphasize the significance of each skill and its relevance in improving the overall quality of care provided by nursing students.

METHOD

Identification

This review is in line with the Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses (PRISMA) guidelines. The literature search was conducted on the academic nursing health care search for linked and similar terms based on soft skills, non-technical skills, clinical evaluation, and nursing students. Therefore, after all the relevant keywords were decided, a search string on the Scopus, WOS, and PubMed databases was created. In the first step of the systematic review process, this research work managed to get 787 papers from both databases.

A collection of research items that may be relevant is checked for the corresponding content. Research questions that have been fixed during the inspection step. Content-related criteria that are often used in the screening phase include the selection of research items based on soft skills into clinical examinations. In this step, all duplicates of the paper will be removed from the list of sought-after papers.

The literature search was conducted on the academic nursing health care search engines

CINAHL, with the keywords include ‘soft skill’, ‘OSCE’, and ‘nursing students’ in various key databases”, but very small of the articles yielded referenced soft skill in Malaysian nursing education.

Screening

The inclusion and exclusion criteria were applied to narrow the search and ensure its relevance to the aims of the review. The key screening of eligible articles consists of reviewing the titles and abstracts to identify articles that have the following inclusion characteristics, namely (1) studies published from 2016 to 2022, (2) studies including only undergraduate nursing students, (3) studies in the English language and published in scientific journals, and (4) studies that explored soft skill and OSCE for undergraduate nursing student. Exclusion criteria include: (1) Published

combinations with Boolean Operators in three

earlier than 2016, and (2) any study that does not match the inclusion criteria. For the third step, known as qualification, a total of 43 articles were prepared.

Eligibility

For the third step, known as eligibility, a total of 44 articles have been prepared. All articles’ titles and key content were thoroughly reviewed at this stage to ensure that the inclusion requirements were fulfilled and fit into the present study with the current research aims. Therefore, 27 reports were omitted because they were due to the out of field, title not significantly, and abstract not related to the objective of the study. Finally, 17 articles were selected for review.

Table 1: The selection criterion is searching.

Criterion	Inclusion	Exclusion
Language	English	Non-English
Timeline	2017 - 2022	< 2016
Types of literature	Journal (Article)	Conferences, Books, Revisions
Publishing Position	Final	In Press
Subject Area	Nursing	non- nursing

Data Abstraction and Analysis

Integrative analysis has been carried out in this study, which is one of the examination techniques used to analyse and synthesize different research designs (qualitative, quantitative, and mixed methods). Specialist research is centred on developing appropriate topics and sub-topics. The first step in theme development is the data collection phase. The researchers have carefully reviewed a group of 17 working papers for statements or information addressing questions from current research. In the second step, the researcher and supervisor then analyse the importance of the soft skills component in clinical assessment for undergraduate nursing students. The three main themes that emerge from that approach are

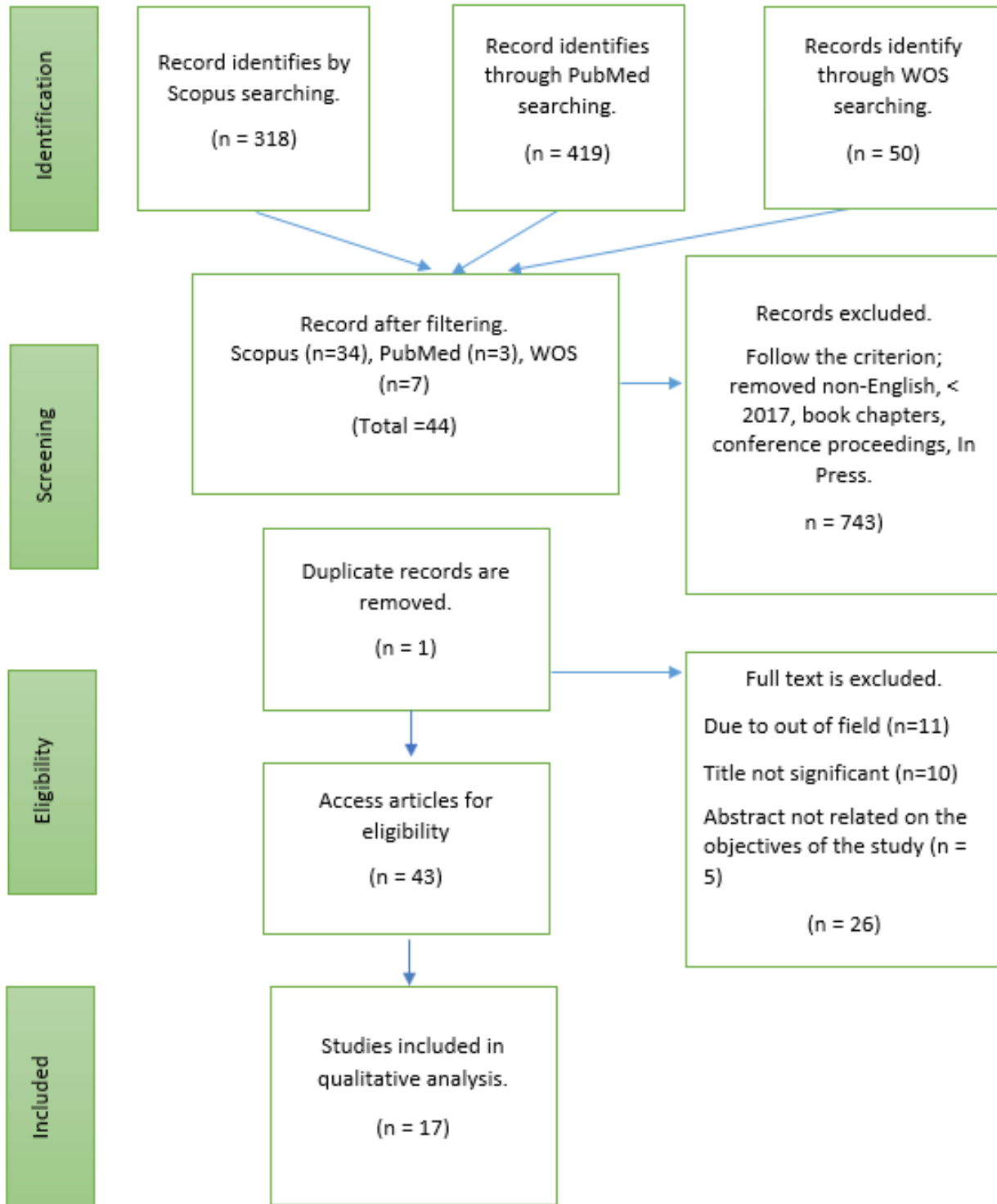
awareness and understanding, perception of the soft skills integration into OSCE and challenges and recommendations for soft skills development. The researcher resumes every theme developed from here, including any theme, concept, or idea that has any connection. Within the framework of this study, the corresponding researchers worked with a supervisor team to establish a theme based on the findings. Here, logs are maintained during the data analysis process to document any analysis, opinions, puzzles, or other ideas related to the interpretation of the data. The researchers also compare the findings to resolve any discrepancies in the theme-creation process. Note that if any inconsistencies on the theme arise, the researcher addresses them.

RESULT

A total of 17 articles were selected between 2017 to 2022 and analysed using a systematic search approach. These papers were categorized into

three overarching themes: the definition of component soft skills, the importance of soft skills in nursing practice, and the implications of nursing assessments on soft skills in clinical evaluation.

Table 2: PRISMA Flow diagram



Definition and Components of Soft Skills

The exploration of soft skills within the nursing profession has revealed a multitude of interpretations, enriching our understanding of their multifaceted role in this field. These interpretations encompass a diverse array of meanings ascribed to soft skills, such as non-technical skills (NTS), caring skills, and various forms of knowledge, including intuition, tacit knowledge, effective communication skills, the art of nursing, and team-building skills (4). Notably, the concept of non-technical skills (NTS) originated in the aviation sector, where it played a pivotal role in simulation-based training programs for safety, such as crew resource management. These programs were developed to educate pilots and their crews about human performance limitations, cognitive errors, behavioural analysis, communication, conflict resolution, and decision-making (5). The significance of soft skills, particularly NTS, extends beyond aviation, finding relevance and importance among healthcare professionals as essential prerequisites for safe and proficient practice. Furthermore, the nursing profession grapples with significant challenges concerning health promotion, establishment, and maintenance (6).

In the scope of healthcare, soft skills encompass a rich spectrum of cognitive, social, and interpersonal competencies that complement the technical expertise of healthcare practitioners. A deficiency in these skills, such as those related to teamwork, decision-making, and leadership, has been associated with adverse events in healthcare settings (4). These soft skills encompass cognitive aspects, including the capacity for effective decision-making and situational awareness, as well as social proficiencies, encompassing effective communication, teamwork, and leadership. Furthermore, personal resources, like the ability to manage stress and cope with fatigue, play a pivotal role in ensuring the safety and efficacy of healthcare practice. The emphasis on inculcating soft skills in healthcare professionals has been steadily growing, supported by empirical evidence highlighting their positive impact on patient outcomes. However, it is essential to acknowledge that certain critical soft skills, such as leadership, communication, nursing informatics, technology, and professionalism, may occasionally be overshadowed by the pursuit of scientific knowledge (3). Communication assumes paramount importance in the provision of healthcare, as it predominantly involves interpersonal interactions, encompassing dialogues

with family members and the reassurance of patients (7).

Nurses also are expected to exhibit proficiency in various vital domains, including critical reasoning, clinical judgment, communication, critical decision-making, collaboration, conflict resolution, negotiation, and teamwork (8). The curriculum of the Bachelor of Science in Nursing (BSN) program intentionally emphasizes the cultivation of students' professional communication skills, with performance outcomes reflecting this emphasis. However, the assessment of these proficiencies remains somewhat limited, as clinical evaluation tools offer only brief prompts addressing communication. Unfortunately, these assessments constitute a relatively modest fraction of the overall course grading scheme. Empirical research highlights the pivotal role of proficient communication in enhancing patient outcomes and fostering patient satisfaction (9). The roles undertaken by healthcare providers, including nurses and nursing students, come with high expectations. These individuals are anticipated to embody attributes such as creativity, self-direction, and critical thinking, which are essential for making sound decisions and addressing the clinical challenges they encounter (10). Critical thinking, in this context, denotes the deliberate application of advanced cognitive processes to understand a client's predicaments, assess the applicability of evidence-based practices in patient care, and make prudent choices in care delivery. It encompasses the ability to distinguish between factual assertions, evaluative judgments, and subjective opinions. Critical thinking obliges nurses to engage in creative thinking, introspection, and analytical reasoning (11).

Furthermore, the landscape of nursing education and healthcare employment has evolved, leading to changes in hiring criteria. In many developed countries, there is a growing recognition of the inclusion of soft skills in university curricula, signalling a shift away from an exclusive focus on academic grades. Both government and private hospitals now place increased emphasis on experience as the primary criterion for hiring new nurses. This shift underscores the importance of nurses acquiring essential characteristics and behaviours related to soft skills (12). In the context of nursing, soft skills encompass a broad spectrum of intrapersonal, interpersonal, emotional, and

social competencies. These skills are of paramount importance, not only for individual engagement and organizational effectiveness but also for personal development (12). Often referred to as transferable skills, they are noted for their applicability across diverse contexts. A significant portion of these soft skills pertains to personal attributes and interpersonal proficiencies, positioning students to achieve employability while equipping them with aptitudes for ongoing educational growth.

The domain of nursing places particular emphasis on the significance of soft skills, viewing these attributes as integral to the art of nursing itself. Research also emphasizes the dynamic and often unpredictable nature of healthcare teams. Competent individual professionals, when not functioning as a cohesive team, can inadvertently contribute to inefficient outcomes (8). Teamwork within healthcare is further complicated by the potential absence of prior working relationships among team members. Effective collaboration within this complex and dynamic clinical environment necessitates the cultivation of soft skills. This includes not only a willingness to embrace the ideas and perspectives of others but also the skilful utilization of these perspectives as valuable resources (8).

The Importance of Soft Skills in Clinical Practice

In the current educational landscape, it is crucial for faculties of nursing and higher educational institutions to prioritize the development and enhancement of their students' soft skills. This emphasis is necessary to ensure that graduates not only meet but also exceed the demands of the competitive job market. Soft skills encompass a range of behaviors and attributes, including decision-making, effective communication, trustworthiness, time management, teamwork, integrity, self-confidence, critical thinking, problem-solving, leadership, and various other employability skills. These skills are fundamental for achieving success in any profession (13). A review of the literature reveals that Emotional Intelligence is considered a crucial characteristic of nurses, with significant implications for the quality of their work, including clinical decision-making, critical thinking, evidence utilization, and knowledge application in practice. Moreover, the value of critical thinking in their service delivery is a fundamental component in ensuring safe and effective service, thereby enhancing the overall quality of care (14). Another study also emphasizes

the importance of non-technical skills (NTS) in achieving excellence and improved patient safety, even though there have been limited systematic attempts to integrate these skills into anesthesia nursing education (15).

Furthermore, it also asserts that as healthcare education evolves, progressive institutions are increasingly incorporating soft skills into their core curriculum (16). It is essential for nurses to be equipped with transferable skills that encompass critical thinking, problem-solving, and decision-making to make them effective and productive contributors to the nursing profession in the future. Additionally, producing graduates who are well-versed in both technical and non-technical skills is equally important for preparing them as valuable human resources in the workforce (16). It is also worth noting that this approach enhances career progression. A study reported that 89% of their survey respondents strongly agreed that the acquisition of soft skills can make or break a career (17). The students interviewed in their study contend that soft skills are essential for the nursing profession and should be an integral part of the training that student nurses receive during their professional education. The research demonstrates the need for nursing students to be educated in soft skills to enhance their job performance in clinical settings and improve their communication with clients (18).

Soft skills offer numerous benefits in the workplace, including facilitating effective communication, fostering enthusiasm, promoting a positive attitude, enhancing teamwork, networking, problem-solving, critical thinking, and professionalism (8). These skills also contribute to the development of self-confidence among students. Those who engage with virtual patients to develop soft skills report increased confidence in their abilities to respond to and manage various practice situations. It was also reported a significant improvement in the performance, confidence, and self-efficacy of nursing students as soft skills were developed (5). They emphasize that soft skills add value to students' ability to adapt to the complex clinical context, ultimately contributing to patient safety and well-being. Furthermore, enhancing these skills is becoming a strategic priority in healthcare institutions at the international level (5). Recognized as important tools for success in the workplace, soft skills play a pivotal role in improving the care rendered to clients. Their

participants perceived soft skills training as an impetus for nursing staff (18).

In another study, it was found that learning non-technical skills plays a crucial role in enhancing patient safety. The study aimed to synthesize the available evidence regarding non-technical skills training to improve patient safety in undergraduate nursing education. The researcher identified the following important categories of non-technical skills: communication, situational awareness, teamwork, decision-making, and leadership (19). Likewise, a study emphasize the growing recognition of the importance of non-technical skills in patient outcomes (10). Similarly, the study notes that global changes in healthcare require nurses with critical thinking skills who can effectively handle complex clinical situations (10). In the United States, nursing education guidelines place a strong emphasis on the need for critical thinking, with the AACN considering it an essential outcome of nursing education (10). Soft skills training, particularly in communication, teamwork, leadership, decision-making, and situational awareness, has been shown to enhance professionals' performance, with numerous healthcare courses and programs recognizing their importance in increasing patient safety and achieving successful clinical outcomes. It is now widely acknowledged that soft skills are essential competencies for various healthcare professionals (5).

Outcome and Implications of Soft Skills in Clinical Evaluation

Some of the study findings (17) (18) strongly advocate for the integration of soft skills into the evaluation of clinical skills in undergraduate nursing curricula, particularly through the Objective Structured Clinical Examination (OSCE). This approach has been shown to confirm the validity of the OSCE method, which ensures equitable and objective assessment of communication skills among a large population of nursing students throughout the examination period. OSCE examinations are conducted in settings equipped to realistically measure various clinical skills through simulated scenarios involving standardized patients. While the assessment of non-technical skills has been a topic of debate, this study's data revealed a high level of agreement between OSCE scores assigned by two examiners, particularly concerning communicative skills. Similar results were observed in the assessment of individual student performances (9).

The incorporation of soft skills into nursing education holds the promise of enhancing nursing practice. Continuous exposure to soft skills throughout formal education programs demonstrates the strengthening of these essential attributes. Nursing proficiency and the certification of registered nurses (RNs) have a direct impact on patient safety. Nursing competence encompasses the ability to effectively engage with patients, master the latest knowledge, understand one's limitations in patient care, and maintain a high level of professionalism. As reported, the educational curriculum should explicitly include a soft skills module and provide practical evaluation before students are allowed to practice, given the crucial role of soft skills in recognizing and addressing patients' health needs (17). Therefore, integrating soft skills into nursing education should be a deliberate and prominent aspect rather than an incidental one.

In addition to imparting technical knowledge and competencies, nursing curricula should include a more explicit focus on soft skills to enhance care standards (3). The primary objective of undergraduate nursing education programs is to equip entry-level graduates with the knowledge, skills, and abilities necessary for delivering high-quality, safe, effective, and patient-centred care (17) (18). These competencies enable graduates to think critically, problem-solve, and make essential clinical decisions. OSCE has intrinsic advantages as a reliable and valid method for assessing clinical skills. Another assessment method for clinical practice is high-fidelity simulation (HFS), which has been employed in nursing education for over two decades. The literature has documented the benefits of using high-fidelity simulation in nursing education. Moreover, there is early evidence that soft skills acquired in high-fidelity simulation environments are transferable to clinical settings and may lead to improved patient care. Consequently, utilizing high-fidelity simulation as a learning approach for soft skills can potentially enhance patient safety and the quality of care delivery, offering students a low-risk environment to practice complex skills (5). In a study conducted in the United States, explored another method for evaluating nursing students' soft skills through educational escape rooms (8). While escape rooms have been proven to improve students' content knowledge, research on the

development of other skills during escape rooms remains limited. Developing tools for measuring soft skills, Morrell's study suggests that soft skills should be integrated into both undergraduate and postgraduate training curricula, as they are essential to meet the needs and improve healthcare. Soft skills, in the context of patient safety, are viewed positively by undergraduate nursing students, and their inclusion in the curriculum should be given high priority (15).

DISCUSSION

The analysis found there are gaps in the integration of soft skills into clinical examinations, particularly the Objective Structured Clinical Examination (OSCE), among undergraduate nursing students. It was found that no studies have been conducted in Malaysia regarding soft skills assessment in nursing students. Existing research from Australia, the United States, Spain, Norway, and Africa provided limited insights into this topic. Additionally, three themes were identified; definition of soft skills component, the importance of soft skills among nursing students, and the outcomes and implications of soft skills in clinical assessment. Soft skills were considered vital but often neglected in nursing education. The review emphasized the sacrifice of the art of nursing for the scientific aspect, leading to a detrimental impact on care skills, communication skills, leadership, and overall nursing practice.

At the international level, there is limited research conducted on the assessment of soft skills in nursing education. Moreover, at the national level, particularly in Malaysia, no studies have been undertaken on this specific topic. The relevance of soft skills in nursing was demonstrated through various terms used to describe them, such as caring in nursing, cognitive brain of nursing, effective communication, essential leadership traits, and interpersonal teamwork. The lack of soft skills was associated with difficulties in conveying patient changes and negatively impacted the quality of nursing care. Patients emphasized the importance of empathy and human connection in their evaluation of nursing services.

Most of the reviewed papers recommended the integration of soft skills in undergraduate nursing education, recognizing that nursing requires more than just technical skills. However, the focus of the nursing curriculum has traditionally been on scientific aspects and procedures, neglecting the

development of soft skills. Considering the gaps identified in the literature, including the limited research from Malaysia, the lack of focus on specific OSCE assessment, and the predominance of qualitative studies.

CONCLUSION

In summary, the nursing faculty recognizes the significance of soft skills and embraces their role in imparting them. The study, comprising 17 articles, underscores the necessity of integrating soft skills into clinical skills assessment to ensure students' readiness for success in their future workplaces. The key themes revealed in this review encompass the significance of realism and high-fidelity simulation, the thoughtful allocation of simulation resources, the creation of diverse simulation scenarios, the utilization of simulations for clinical preparedness, and the challenges encountered by students during these simulations.

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AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS

WUKWI: drafted the manuscript and contributes to the concept development and design of the article through data collection, analysis and data interpretation for the article.

NA: revised the manuscript critically with intellectual contents and approved the final version of the manuscript.

HHMM: revised the manuscript critically for important intellectual content.

MSN: revised the manuscript critically for important intellectual content.

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