

Understanding of Professionalism Elements among Nursing Students at the Ministry of Health Training Institute, Malaysia

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Abstract

This study examines nursing students understanding of professionalism at the Ministry of Health Malaysia Training Institute (ILKKM). Professionalism is a cornerstone in developing competent nurses, encompassing values, attitudes, and professional behaviours such as patient respect, adherence to care standards, accountability, advocacy, and teamwork. A quantitative survey was conducted among 277 final-year nursing students using a combined instrument adapted from Hall's Professionalism Scale, the Nurses Professional Values Scale-3, and a professional communication assessment tool. Descriptive analysis revealed a high overall understanding score (mean = 4.51, SD = 0.42), with teamwork scoring the highest (mean = 4.68). These findings suggest that ILKKM's curriculum and training effectively foster strong professionalism awareness. The study recommends continuous enhancement through integrating professionalism modules into all clinical courses, applying case-based simulations, implementing mentor-mentee programs, and providing mental health support to address burnout challenges.

Keywords: Nursing Professionalism, Student Understanding, Care Standards, Advocacy, Teamwork

Introduction

Professionalism is a crucial concept in the field of nursing, encompassing the attitudes, values, and behaviours expected of a professional nurse. It is not solely determined by clinical knowledge and technical skills, but also involves work ethics, effective communication, responsibility, and respect for patients and colleagues (Maymoun & Sohail, 2020). In today's increasingly complex healthcare environment, nurses are required to uphold the highest standards of professionalism to ensure the quality of care provided is optimal. Therefore, an understanding of professionalism must be instilled as early as the training phase so that nursing students are well-prepared to face the challenges of real-world clinical practice. Professionalism is a core component of nursing education and practice. It reflects integrity,

commitment to quality care, and adherence to high ethical standards. According to Dubey (2024), professionalism is a principle that all nurses must practice, including adherence to codes of ethics, prioritising patient safety, and maintaining evidence-based care standards (Lockhart, 2017). Globally, nurses face new challenges such as the rise of chronic illnesses, the use of digital health technologies, and the shift towards patient-centred care models (WHO, 2025). These changes demand nurses who are not only technically competent but also consistently able to embody professional values. In Malaysia, the Nursing Board of Malaysia emphasises that elements such as respect for patients, accountability, advocacy, adherence to care standards, and teamwork should be embedded from the very beginning of training. Hence, assessing students' understanding of these elements is vital to evaluate the effectiveness of the nursing curriculum and to identify areas for improvement. The objective of this study is therefore to determine the level of nursing students' understanding

Literature Review

Professionalism in nursing refers to the values, attitudes, and behaviours that reflect integrity, commitment to quality care, and adherence to high ethical standards (Kumari et al., 2024). Nurses are encouraged to integrate professionalism values grounded in ethics, holistic care, and accountability throughout all patient care processes. Recent studies reveal that nurses frequently encounter ethical dilemmas in their daily clinical practice (Wong, 2025), while an idealistic ethical ideology is positively correlated with professional values and documentation responsibilities (Hussein & Abou Hashish, 2024). In addition, a study conducted in Ethiopia found that the practice of holistic care remains low (21%) and is influenced by education level, continuous training, nurse–patient relationships, and holistic knowledge (Ambushe et al., 2023). Thus, systematic training interventions and professional assessment frameworks are necessary (He, 2024; Alnasser, 2025) to prepare nursing students for complex professional roles in an ethical and effective manner (Wynne et al., 2024). According to Ab Latif and Mat Nor (2019), understanding professionalism must be instilled early in training so that nursing students can develop a strong professional identity. Hussein et al. (2017) found that trainees tend to better understand values such as patient respect and teamwork because these are often demonstrated by senior nurses during clinical training. Conversely, elements such as advocacy and accountability require courage and a deeper understanding of professional responsibilities. A study by Abdul Rahman, Ahmad, and Mohd Nor (2021) revealed that the overall level of professionalism among Malaysian nursing students is satisfactory. However, accountability and advocacy remain areas that require greater attention within both the nursing curriculum and clinical training. Simulation-based training and case discussions have been recommended to strengthen understanding in these dimensions. Professionalism in nursing has been widely studied, with multiple definitions and frameworks proposed. Five key constructs are often used as the basis for assessment: care standards, respect for patients, accountability, advocacy, and teamwork.

Care Standards

Care standards are defined as structured guidelines and best practices designed to guarantee the safety, consistency, and effectiveness of patient care. These standards not only provide a benchmark for clinical practice but also serve as a foundation for professional accountability in nursing. Aciksoz et al. (2022) emphasised that adherence to care standards requires the integration of theoretical knowledge, technical skills, and professional judgment to ensure that clinical procedures are conducted safely and effectively. Similarly, Smith et al. (2020)

demonstrated that nursing students who develop an early appreciation for care standards are more likely to maintain high levels of care quality and patient safety in their practice. This highlights the importance of embedding discussions on care standards in nursing curricula, as they serve as the cornerstone for cultivating professional attitudes and ensuring that nurses consistently align their practice with evidence-based guidelines.

Respect for Patients

Respect for patients is widely recognised as a fundamental pillar of nursing professionalism, encompassing respect for patient dignity, autonomy, rights, preferences, and confidentiality. As Slattery (2019) argued, patient respect reflects the moral and ethical values of the nursing profession and contributes directly to improved patient satisfaction, trust, and recovery outcomes. In practice, however, nursing students often face challenges in applying these principles in complex clinical environments. Hussein et al. (2019) revealed that nursing students frequently require structured guidance, role modelling, and mentorship to foster communication strategies that promote respect and empathy in patient interactions. Furthermore, cultural and institutional differences may influence how respect is perceived and enacted in clinical contexts. Thus, respect for patients must not only be taught theoretically but also reinforced through experiential learning, clinical simulations, and reflective practice to ensure that students internalise these values as part of their professional identity.

Accountability and Advocacy

Accountability and advocacy represent advanced dimensions of nursing professionalism that are crucial for safeguarding patient safety and promoting ethical care. Accountability refers to the willingness and capacity of nurses to assume responsibility for their decisions, actions, and professional outcomes. According to Aljaberi (2018), accountability is closely associated with self-confidence, integrity, and reflective practice, all of which are vital for clinical decision-making. However, a study by Ho et al. (2013) found that Malaysian nursing students still exhibited limited understanding of accountability when faced with independent clinical decisions, suggesting the need for more targeted training in this area.

Advocacy, on the other hand, reflects a more proactive and courageous form of professionalism, requiring nurses to act as the voice of patients, particularly in safeguarding their rights within healthcare systems. Black (2019) highlighted that advocacy demands both courage and empathy, as nurses are often required to challenge established hierarchies or clinical decisions to protect patient interests. Nonetheless, Jokar et al. (2025) observed that many nursing students hesitate to perform advocacy roles due to hierarchical barriers, fear of conflict, or lack of confidence in their professional authority. These findings underscore the need for structured training interventions, such as case-based simulations, ethical discussions, and mentorship, which can gradually strengthen students' ability to engage in advocacy while maintaining professionalism in hierarchical clinical environments.

Teamwork

Teamwork is an essential aspect of modern healthcare systems, as it involves collaboration and coordination among diverse healthcare professionals including nurses, doctors, pharmacists, therapists, and support staff. Effective teamwork is widely recognised as a determinant of both patient outcomes and workplace well-being. The WHO (2025) stressed

that strong interprofessional teamwork not only improves the quality of care but also reduces workplace stress and prevents burnout among healthcare providers. For nursing students, teamwork requires the development of communication, negotiation, and conflict-resolution skills to ensure constructive collaboration.

Kurniasih et al. (2024) found that training focused on interprofessional communication and continuous feedback significantly enhances teamwork among nursing students, enabling them to work more confidently within multidisciplinary teams. Moreover, teamwork fosters mutual respect, shared decision-making, and collective accountability, which are critical in managing complex healthcare situations. By cultivating teamwork skills during the training phase, nursing institutions can better prepare students for the realities of healthcare practice, where collaboration across disciplines is indispensable for ensuring holistic, patient-centred care.

Methodology

This study employed a quantitative research design using a cross-sectional survey approach to examine the level of understanding of professionalism among nursing trainees. A total of 277 respondents were purposively selected from the population of third-year, second-semester nursing students at the Ministry of Health Malaysia Training Institute (ILKMM). The choice of purposive sampling was based on the rationale that final-year students possess sufficient exposure to both theoretical learning and clinical practice, making them appropriate participants for assessing the integration of professionalism into training.

Three established instruments were adapted and translated into Malay for this study: (1) Hall's Professionalism Scale (Snizek, 1972); (2) the Nurses Professional Values Scale-3 (Weis & Schank, 2017); and (3) a Self-Assessment Tool of Communication Skills and Professionalism in Residents (Symons et al., 2009). The instruments were reviewed by subject-matter experts to ensure content validity, cultural relevance, and linguistic clarity. A pilot study was conducted with 30 nursing students from a comparable cohort, which confirmed clarity and appropriateness of the instruments. The Cronbach's alpha coefficient for the professionalism questionnaire was 0.986, indicating excellent reliability.

Data were collected through self-administered questionnaires during scheduled academic sessions. Prior to participation, students were briefed on the purpose of the study and informed consent was obtained. Anonymity and confidentiality were assured, with participation being voluntary. Ethical clearance was obtained from the ILKMM research committee and the Ministry of Health Training Division.

The data were analysed using both descriptive and inferential statistics. Descriptive statistics included frequencies, percentages, means, and standard deviations to summarise the level of understanding. Inferential analysis was employed to validate findings. The Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) version 26.0 was used for data management and computation.

Findings

The study aimed to assess the level of understanding of professionalism among nursing trainees at the Ministry of Health Malaysia Training Institute (ILKMM). Overall, the results revealed that respondents demonstrated a high level of understanding across all

professionalism constructs measured. Table 1 presents the descriptive statistics for each construct.

Table 1

level of understanding of professionalism elements among nursing students

Construct	Mean	Standard Deviation	Level
Respect for Patients	4.57	0.44	High
Care Standards	4.54	0.44	High
Accountability	4.30	0.63	High
Advocacy	4.48	0.63	High
teamwork	4.68	0.49	High
Overall	4.51	0.42	High

The results indicate that teamwork achieved the highest mean score ($M = 4.68$, $SD = 0.49$), suggesting that nursing students place strong emphasis on collaboration and interprofessional engagement. This aligns with the increasing recognition of teamwork as a critical determinant of patient safety and effective healthcare delivery (WHO, 2025).

The second-highest construct was respect for patients ($M = 4.57$, $SD = 0.44$), reflecting the consistent integration of ethical values, empathy, and patient-centred care principles into nursing education. This finding resonates with Hussein et al. (2019), who reported that patient respect remains one of the most frequently demonstrated professional values in clinical training.

Care standards were also rated highly ($M = 4.54$, $SD = 0.44$), reinforcing the importance of adherence to evidence-based practices and protocols in ensuring safe and effective patient care. The strong scores in this domain highlight the effectiveness of ILKKM's structured clinical training, which integrates theory with practice.

Conversely, advocacy ($M = 4.48$, $SD = 0.63$) and accountability ($M = 4.30$, $SD = 0.63$) scored comparatively lower than other constructs, though both were still within the "high" category. These results suggest that while students understand the significance of speaking up for patient rights and taking responsibility for clinical decisions, they may lack confidence in applying these elements in practice. This finding is consistent with Jokar et al. (2025), who found that hierarchical dynamics in clinical environments often inhibit nursing students from exercising advocacy. Similarly, Ho et al. (2013) noted that accountability in clinical decision-making remains an area of weakness among Malaysian nursing students.

Overall Interpretation

The overall mean score ($M = 4.51$, $SD = 0.42$) confirms that nursing trainees at ILKKM demonstrate a strong understanding of professionalism elements. The findings highlight the effectiveness of ILKKM's curriculum and training strategies in fostering professional values. Nevertheless, the relatively lower scores in accountability and advocacy suggest that further

emphasis is needed in these areas to ensure that nursing students are fully prepared to transition into professional roles with confidence and ethical responsibility

Discussion

The findings of this study confirm that nursing trainees at ILKKM possess a high overall understanding of professionalism, with particularly strong emphasis on teamwork, respect for patients, and adherence to care standards. These results reflect positively on the curriculum and training strategies implemented at ILKKM, which appear effective in fostering professional values among nursing students.

The prominence of teamwork as the highest-rated construct supports the argument that interprofessional collaboration is increasingly recognised as a cornerstone of modern healthcare. The World Health Organization (2025) highlights teamwork as essential for improving patient safety and reducing workplace stress. Similar results were reported by Kurniasih et al. (2024), who emphasised the role of structured communication training and feedback in enhancing collaborative skills among nursing students. This suggests that ILKKM's emphasis on group-based learning and clinical collaboration has successfully cultivated a strong sense of teamwork among its trainees.

The high rating for respect for patients indicates that ethical and patient-centred values are effectively embedded in the training environment. This aligns with Hussein et al. (2019), who found that respect and empathy are values frequently modelled by senior nurses during clinical practice. Such exposure likely reinforces the adoption of respect as a natural component of professionalism for students.

However, the relatively lower scores for advocacy and accountability highlight persistent challenges. Advocacy, which requires students to act as patient representatives and defend patient rights, is often hindered by hierarchical barriers in clinical settings. Jokar et al. (2025) noted that nursing students often feel reluctant to challenge authority figures, even when patient welfare is at stake. Similarly, accountability, which involves taking ownership of clinical decisions, has been found to be an underdeveloped competency among Malaysian nursing students (Ho et al., 2013). These findings suggest that while theoretical knowledge of advocacy and accountability exists, students may require greater confidence, empowerment, and experiential training to apply these principles effectively in practice.

The results are consistent with Benner's Novice to Expert model (1982, 1984), which proposes that nursing students progress through developmental stages from novice to expert. The high scores across professionalism constructs suggest that ILKKM trainees are transitioning from "advanced beginner" to "competent" levels, where they begin to understand the clinical context, apply theoretical knowledge, and develop professional judgment. Nonetheless, the weaker performance in accountability and advocacy indicates that these domains may require more targeted interventions to accelerate the transition towards higher competency levels.

In addition, the findings resonate with Miller's Wheel of Professionalism in Nursing (1984), which outlines key components of professionalism including ethics, professional responsibility, knowledge, autonomy, and advocacy. While ILKKM trainees demonstrated

strong understanding of ethics, respect, and teamwork, the relatively lower confidence in accountability and advocacy underscores the need for deliberate integration of these components into both the theoretical and clinical aspects of training.

Practical Implication

The study's findings have several implications for nursing education and practice:

1. Curriculum Integration – Professionalism modules should not be taught as standalone subjects but embedded across all theoretical and clinical courses to ensure consistent reinforcement of values.
2. Simulation-Based Training – Case-based simulations and problem-based learning should be expanded to strengthen students' advocacy skills and ethical decision-making in controlled environments.
3. Mentorship Programmes – Structured mentor–mentee systems pairing students with senior nurses can provide role modelling, guidance, and confidence-building opportunities.
4. Mental Health Support – Integrating stress management and mental health support within the nursing curriculum may reduce burnout and foster resilience, enabling students to uphold professionalism even in high-pressure environments.
5. Ethical Use of Technology – With the rise of digital health systems, students should be trained to apply professionalism in contexts involving electronic health records, patient confidentiality, and digital communication

Conclusion

This study reaffirms that nursing trainees at ILKKM demonstrate a high level of understanding of professionalism, particularly in teamwork, patient respect, and adherence to care standards. These findings reflect the effectiveness of ILKKM's current curriculum and training strategies in fostering professional values among future nurses. Nevertheless, the relatively lower scores in accountability and advocacy indicate areas that require greater emphasis in both classroom and clinical settings. Addressing these gaps through integrated professionalism modules, experiential learning, and mentorship could further enhance students' readiness to assume professional responsibilities upon graduation. In conclusion, professionalism is not merely an academic concept but a lived practice that requires continuous reinforcement throughout nursing education. By embedding professionalism across all dimensions of the nursing curriculum, ILKKM can ensure that its graduates are not only clinically competent but also ethically grounded, accountable, and empowered to advocate for patient welfare. Such efforts will ultimately contribute to the production of competent, resilient, and globally competitive nurses who uphold the integrity of the profession and deliver high-quality patient care.

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