Developing and Implementing Policies for the HESI™ Exit Exam: A Qualitative Study

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**Background:** Schools of nursing use standardized exit examinations as a means of testing student readiness for the National Council Licensure Examination for Registered Nurses (NCLEX-RN). There is little congruency between program policies that govern these exams. A phenomenological study explored policy creation and implementation practices utilized for the Elsevier HESI™ Exit Examination (E²).

**Method:** Snowballing and purposive sampling was implemented for recruitment of nurse educators. The Elsevier national database (N=600) nursing programs that used the E² was employed for initial recruitment. The final sample was comprised of 15 deans, program directors, and faculty from nine different states.

**Results:** The primary reason schools made exit exam policy changes were NCLEX-RN passing scores. In this study E² was a graduation criterion at 13% (n=2) of the schools. Most schools used a benchmark of 850 for success (n=10) and followed testing with remediation. One essential component of success for the E² was seen when value was given to the exam. At many schools, policy changes are initiated at the faculty level, unless a higher policy making body hands down a decision.

**Conclusion:** As new polices were written and student success increased, faculty and students alike were found to be accepting of policy changes.

### Abstract
National Standardized Tests prior licensure are implemented to inform faculty
- Predict licensure or certification exam passage
- Determine student progression and remediation
- Evaluation of curriculum

Testing policy impacts students, faculty and universities
- Reputation and accreditation
- Ethical and legal ramifications
- Schools of Nursing policy varies across the U.S.

Background
A phenomenological study explored policy creation and implementation practices utilized for the Elsevier HESI™ RN Exit Exam (E²).

What are baccalaureate (BSN) and associate degree nursing (ADN) program practices regarding exit exam policy creation, implementation, and remediation?
• Following IRB approval
• Email invitation to participate
• Informed consent obtained
• Demographic data collected
• Semi-structured telephone interview
• Recording transcription by Adept Word Management
Methods

• Elsevier HESI™ database
  • Purposeful sample of exam users for fiscal year 2010
    - Size, location and program type
  • Electronic invitation for participation was sent by the test producer to 48 Deans/Directors of BSN or ADN programs
• Purposeful sampling
  - Nine participants responded within the timeframe
• Snowballing sampling
  - Eight schools contacted and 6 schools participated
• Telephone interviews continued until saturation (N=15)
• Digital recording and Transcription by professional company
Instruments

Demographic data
- Job title
- Number of years in position
- Program design
- Program funding
- Number of students
- Age Range
- Gender
- Ethnicity

Semi-structured interview guide
- Tell me about the exit exam policy at your school of nursing
- How is the exit exam policy implemented?
- Tell me about your remediation methods.
Demographic data sheet – Descriptive statistics

- Students
  Number in program, age range, gender, ethnicity

- Faculty
  Job title, years as in this position, type of school/program, funding source
• Analyzed using Giorgi’s method (1985)
  • Read each transcript completely
    • Get a sense of the whole
  • Re-read transcripts often
    • “meaningful units”
  • Grouped important terms / common themes
  • Identified common patterns
  • Examples documented using direct quotes
• Diversity of sample: 9 states nationwide
• Gender
  Female 85% (n=11); Male 20-35% (n=4)
• Ethnicity:
  Caucasian 59%, mixed diversity 41%
  • 1 school African American 90% (average 17-37%)
  • 1 school Hispanic 48% (average 11-19%)
  • 1 school Asian 21% (average 3-17%)

Student Characteristics
School Characteristics

- Schools
  - BSN ($n=9$, 60%)
  - AD ($n=6$, 40%)
- Funding
  - Public 73% ($n=11$)
  - Private 27% ($n=4$)
- Program size
  - $>350$ students 46% ($n=7$)
  - $<350$ students 53% ($n=8$)
Major Themes

- Triggers for Change
  - NCLEX-RN® Scores
  - Faculty/Student Concerns
  - Policymaker Influence

- Policy Modification
  - Test Timing
  - Benchmarking/Penalties
  - Remediation
  - Giving it Value

- Reactions to Change
  - Student Resistance
  - Faculty Resistance
  - Acceptance
• NCLEX-RN Scores
  “...E²...one of the ways they [the faculty] decided they would try. And clearly the NCLEX scores have improved considerably.”

• Student/Faculty Concerns
  “...a B in the class from all the class grades and yet they are failing because they could not pass the E².”
  Nine (60%) schools discussed cheating as an issue "...that the faculty has to address on an ongoing basis".

• Policymakers
  “The board [BON] doesn't ever mandate anything, but they make very strong suggestions.”

• Modify the Policy
  “Once we attached the [course] grade to it, you know, there was no more discussion”.

Triggers for Change
• Timing of Testing
  ...early in the semester...have the entire semester to coach.
  ...end of the course was always a way to see whether or not the students were being adequately prepared.

• Benchmarking and Penalties
  66% (n=10) 850 HESI score, 27% (n=4) 900, 7% (n=1) 800

• Remediation
  100% remediation, 93% (n=14) Evolve program, 47% (n=7) added reviews

• Making the E² Count
  “...if it doesn’t count for something for students they’re like, ‘Okay, well I’m not going to do that’.”

Policy Modification
• Resistance of students
  "Well most of the students are a bit resentful for having to take it [E²]."

• Resistance of faculty
  "I think the biggest issue you run into is any time you try to change something somebody is not going to like it."

• Acceptance
  "... we find that it [E² exam] gives them a feeling of, ‘... I can do this NCLEX. I can pass this test’. So they’re glad after the fact.”

Reaction to Change
• 13% require passing HESI™ to graduate
  - 44.74% require passing HESI™ to graduate (Langford & Young, 2013)

• 100% require remediation
  - 57% require remediation (Young & Willson, 2012)

• 100% give HESI™ during senior year
  - 100% give HESI™ during senior year (Sifford & McDaniel, 2007)

• 66% use 850 Benchmark
  - 72% use 850 Benchmark (Langford & Young, 2013)

• 60% discussed cheating
  - 75% provide information defining cheating (McCabe, 2009)

• HESI™ grade value was 20-30% course grade
  - Placing value on HESI™ important. (Lauer & Yoho, 2013)

Discussion
• Policy making about Exit Exam testing is cyclical process initiated by negative triggers, followed by policy development, and ultimately implementation.

• Policy development dependent on needs of institutions related to issues determined by stakeholders and policymakers.

• Remediation important means of preparing for NCLEX-RN.

Conclusions
• Measuring student readiness to take NCLEX-RN important.

• Students must understand value of taking $E^2$.

• Deans/Directors should encourage faculty input as program policies are being crafted and implemented.

Implications
• Research regarding effectiveness of nursing program’s specific testing and remediation policies to foster NCLEX-RN success.

• Evaluation of types of faculty mentoring and individual student remediation for best practices.

• Comparison of mandatory and non-mandatory remediation programs and their relationship to NCLEX-RN success.

Recommendations


**References**
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Questions