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Blog: Nursing in Belgium: leading from the bedside

Why Clinical Leadership matters for the nurse of tomorrow

Healthcare is changing at lightning speed. New technologies, complex care needs and multidisciplinary collaboration demand nurses who are not only highly skilled but also capable of demonstrating leadership at the patient's bedside. In Belgium, this is taking shape through recent reforms in nursing education and through growing recognition of clinical leadership (CL) as a core competence.

What do we mean by Clinical Leadership?

Although no universally accepted definition exists, the literature points to a clear profile: a clinical leader is a nurse with expertise who inspires others to continuously improve care through communication, collaboration and role modelling. It is not about holding a formal hierarchical position, but rather about influencing from within clinical practice, guided by values such as integrity, engagement and patient-centeredness.

The working definition, developed based on literature review and stakeholder input, frames clinical leadership as a professional competence that is visible in daily nursing practice. It enables nurses to influence quality of care, teamwork and innovation without holding a formal leadership position.

Key findings from the literature review

The literature revealed four central themes:

1. CL is described in multiple ways, but always with emphasis on behavior, values and informal influence.
2. CL is rooted in personal and professional values such as respect, empathy and responsibility.
3. CL contributes to improved patient outcomes, higher satisfaction and stronger team cohesion.
4. There is a need for the structured development of CL competences in nursing curricula.

The Belgian context: reforms and new roles

Recent legislative changes in Belgium introduced two new professional titles:

- Registered nurse: Graduates of the HBO5 program, responsible for non-complex care and working under supervision in complex situations.
- Nurse Responsible for General Care (VVAZ): Bachelor-level nurses who can work autonomously in all care settings.

These reforms are aligned with European directives and emphasize competences such as clinical reasoning, problem-solving and leadership. The Bachelor of Nursing 2030 (BN2030) profile highlights clinical leadership as essential for preparing students for a complex, multidisciplinary healthcare landscape.

What do students, educators and professionals say?

Students, educators and healthcare professionals recognize clinical leadership in nurses who are engaged, communicative and competent. They value nurses who take initiative, collaborate and make a difference in care delivery. Clinical leadership is perceived as a strength that emerges at the patient's bedside, through professional presence and exemplary conduct.

Educational needs and feedback on the Framework

The clinical leadership competence framework is seen as valuable and relevant. However, stakeholders express the wish to make the framework more practical and accessible so that it connects more closely with educational reality. Educators emphasize the importance of early and visible integration of clinical leadership into the curriculum, ensuring that every student develops these essential skills through practice-oriented and reflective learning experiences.

How UCLL integrates Clinical Leadership into the curriculum

Within the nursing program at UCLL, we observe that elements of clinical leadership are already present, for example in clinical reasoning, simulation-based education, clinical placements and projects such as Challenge Your Talents and Challenge your care. Until now, however, this has not always been explicitly identified as clinical leadership. With this project, we aim to anchor this competence more strongly and visibly into the curriculum, so that clinical leadership becomes a recognizable and integral part of the program and students learn to explicitly develop and apply it from the very start through to their final placements.

Why invest in Clinical Leadership?

In Belgium, as in other countries, a significant number of young nurses leave the profession within the first few years. Clinical leadership may help counter this by contributing to job satisfaction, professional autonomy and quality of care. It acts as a lever for high-quality, future-oriented and patient-centered healthcare.

What lies ahead?

The current reforms in Belgian nursing education present a unique opportunity to anchor clinical leadership structurally in both education and practice. The findings of this project highlight the need for a clear, practical and inspiring framework that supports nurses in becoming confident, competent leaders at the patient's bedside and beyond.

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