

What We Learn from Each Other: Filipino and Finnish Nursing Education

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Internationally educated nurses, including many from the Philippines, come to Finland through SEAMK's TopUp programme. SEAMK and Bicol University began collaborating in autumn 2023. The cooperation has highlighted how important it is to understand the educational traditions that shape students' nursing competence.

Finland needs nurses, and the same challenge is visible internationally. Population ageing and growing care needs increase the demand for nursing professionals (World Health Organization [WHO], 2025; Yle, 2025). International education and recruitment can be part of the solution, but they must be implemented responsibly (WHO, 2010, 2023).

Filipino nurses do not arrive in Finland as beginners. They bring professional knowledge, clinical experience and competencies shaped by another healthcare system and educational tradition (Cubelo, 2025). At the same time, studying and working in Finland requires them to adapt their existing competencies to a new professional, linguistic and cultural environment.

Understanding these educational backgrounds is therefore important. In this article, we examine nursing education in the Philippines and Finland, with a particular focus on Bicol University and SEAMK. By looking at the two systems side by side, we can identify their differences and shared strengths and consider what these mean for students, educators and healthcare employers.

Nursing Education in Finland

Nursing is a regulated profession in Finland. The Bachelor of Health Care, Nursing degree comprises 210 ECTS credits and normally takes 3.5 years to complete (SEAMK, n.d.). Nursing education is regulated by the EU Professional Qualifications Directive and its amendments, which define minimum requirements for theoretical and clinical education (European Union, 2005, 2013, 2024).

The directive requires nursing education to include at least 4,600 hours of theoretical and clinical training, with clinical training accounting for at least half of the minimum duration of the education. The requirements cover areas such as nursing and its principles, professional ethics, medical and biological sciences and pharmacology. The 2024 amendment also reflects developments in contemporary healthcare by including areas such as person-centred care, evidence-based practice, eHealth and technological innovations in healthcare and nursing (European Union, 2005, 2024).

Nursing Education at SEAMK

At SEAMK, nursing studies combine theoretical studies, skills laboratory training, simulation and supervised clinical practice. The programme prepares students to work as Registered Nurses in a wide range of healthcare settings (SEAMK, n.d.).

A distinctive feature of the programme is its bilingual approach. Students study in English and Finnish, and Finnish language learning is integrated into professional nursing studies through Content and Language Integrated Learning, or CLIL (SEAMK, n.d.).

Language competence is particularly important during clinical practice, where students communicate with Finnish-speaking patients, families and healthcare professionals. Understanding patients' symptoms, medication and care needs is closely connected to safe nursing practice. Language learning is therefore not separate from developing professional nursing competence.

Nursing Education in the Philippines

In the Philippines, nursing education and professional practice are regulated by Republic Act No. 9173, the Philippine Nursing Act of 2002. Nursing programmes are supervised by the Commission on Higher Education (CHED), while professional regulation is overseen by the Professional Regulation Commission and the Board of Nursing (Republic of the Philippines, 2002; Commission on Higher Education, 2017).

The Bachelor of Science in Nursing is a four-year programme. Nursing education follows an outcomes-based approach and combines general education, nursing and health sciences, theoretical instruction, skills laboratory learning and extensive Related Learning Experiences, or RLE (Commission on Higher Education, 2017).

Nursing Education at Bicol University

At Bicol University College of Nursing, the Bachelor of Science in Nursing programme prepares students for professional nursing practice, leadership, research and community service. The curriculum combines nursing theory and health sciences with extensive practical learning (Bicol University College of Nursing, n.d.).

Related Learning Experiences take place in skills laboratories, hospitals and community settings. Students progressively develop their clinical competence from foundational nursing skills towards more complex patient care. Teaching approaches include simulation, problem-based learning, case analysis, collaborative learning, reflective practice, community immersion and competency-based clinical instruction (Commission on Higher Education, 2017; Bicol University College of Nursing, n.d.).

The educational orientation also emphasizes holistic, evidence-based and community-oriented nursing. Bicol University's values of Scholarship, Leadership, Character and Service support the development of nurses who are clinically competent, compassionate and socially responsive (Bicol University College of Nursing, n.d.).

Different Systems, Shared Goals

Looking at the two nursing education systems side by side makes both their differences and shared strengths visible. This comparison is particularly relevant for TopUp education because students move from one educational context to another. Understanding what students have already studied, how their clinical learning has been organized and what has been expected of them provides a stronger basis for recognizing prior learning and planning further education.

Table 1 summarizes some of the key characteristics of nursing education at Bicol University and SEAMK. The purpose is not to rank the two systems, but to make their different structures and educational approaches visible.

Table 1. Comparison of Nursing Education at Bicol University and SEAMK.

Aspect	Philippines: Bicol University	Finland: SEAMK
Regulatory framework	Republic Act No. 9173, Philippine Nursing Act of 2002; Professional Regulation Commission (PRC); Board of Nursing; Commission on Higher Education (CHED)	EU Professional Qualifications Directive 2005/36/EC and amendments 2013/55/EU and 2024/782/EU
Credit system and workload	CHED credit unit system; academic units and Related Learning Experience (RLE) units	ECTS system; 1 ECTS corresponds to approximately 27 hours of student work
Programme duration	4 years	3.5 years; 210 ECTS
Clinical learning	Extensive RLE in skills laboratories, hospitals and community settings throughout the four-year programme	Clinical placements integrated throughout the programme
Key pedagogical approaches	Outcomes-Based Education (OBE), simulation-based learning, problem-based learning, community immersion and competency-based clinical instruction	Bilingual learning, Content and Language Integrated Learning (CLIL), simulation-based learning and evidence-based learning
Language	English as the primary language of instruction; Filipino and local languages may be used in patient and community interaction	English and Finnish; Finnish language learning is integrated into professional nursing studies
Student role in practice	Supervised student nurse progressively developing clinical competence, professional accountability, leadership and decision-making	Supervised learner with progressively increasing autonomy, professional responsibility and critical reflection
Core orientation	Holistic, evidence-based and community-oriented care; Scholarship, Leadership, Character and Service (SLCS)	Evidence-based and person-centred nursing, patient autonomy and professional responsibility

RLE = Related Learning Experience; ECTS = European Credit Transfer and Accumulation System; OBE = Outcomes-Based Education; CLIL = Content and Language Integrated Learning. The Philippine credit unit system and the European ECTS system use different definitions of workload and should not be interpreted as directly equivalent.

Although the two systems differ in their structure, regulation, credit systems and language environments, they also share important educational goals. Both emphasize the integration of theoretical knowledge and clinical practice, ethical and evidence-based nursing, and the progressive development of professional competence.

The comparison also highlights why credit systems or clinical learning cannot be compared only by looking at numbers. The Philippine credit unit system and the European ECTS system are based on different definitions of workload. Similarly, clinical learning is organized and described differently in the two systems. Understanding these differences is essential when previous nursing education and competencies are assessed in TopUp education.

Most importantly, the comparison shifts the focus from what internationally educated nurses may be missing to what they already bring with them. Filipino students entering TopUp education have an existing professional and educational foundation. The role of Finnish higher education is to recognize this competence and support students in connecting it with Finnish legislation, clinical practices, language requirements and professional expectations.

What Does This Mean in Practice?

For educators, comparing curricula and educational practices provides a practical way to identify existing competence and genuine learning needs. Recognition of prior learning becomes more meaningful when another educational system is understood rather than evaluated only from the perspective of the receiving country (Cubelo et al., 2024).

For students, understanding the similarities and differences between the two systems can make their previous competence more visible. They enter Finnish nursing education with knowledge, skills and professional experiences that provide a foundation for further learning.

For healthcare employers, understanding nurses' educational backgrounds can support better orientation, mentoring and workplace integration. Language support and clinical supervision are more effective when they build on existing competence. Adequate support, recognition, mentorship and opportunities for professional development are also important for retaining internationally qualified nurses (Ram et al., 2025).

Learning from Each Other

The collaboration between SEAMK and Bicol University shows that international nursing education is not only about students adapting to a new system. It also gives educational institutions an opportunity to examine their own practices through another perspective.

For SEAMK, understanding Filipino nursing education supports the recognition of students' previous learning and helps educators provide more targeted support. For Bicol University, the collaboration strengthens international dialogue and connections with European higher education. Most importantly, the cooperation benefits students by helping educators and employers understand what they already know and where additional support is needed.

When we understand where students come from educationally, we can support them more effectively. Sustainable international nursing education is built on mutual understanding, recognition of existing expertise and genuine collaboration.

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Terhi Voltti, Marjut Asunmaa, and Katja Valkama are members of the research team in the *Integration of TopUp Nursing Students in South Ostrobothnia* project. The project aims to identify key factors influencing Filipino nursing students' interest in coming to Finland and applying to SEAMK's TopUp nursing programme. It also aims to strengthen research collaboration between SEAMK and Bicol University. The project is funded by Töysän Säästöpankkisäätiö.

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