

A Comparison of Nursing Core Competency Frameworks in ASEAN Countries: A Document Analysis

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ABSTRACT

Background: The nursing profession in Southeast Asia is facing growing complexity due to demographic shifts, changing disease patterns, and rising demands for high-quality care. Regional efforts to enhance workforce mobility and standardize qualifications have led to the development of core competencies in common nursing. However, the national implementation remains inconsistent.

Purpose: This study aimed to compare national nursing competency frameworks across ASEAN countries and to assess their alignment with the ASEAN regional core competency framework.

Methods: Qualitative document analysis was conducted using national nursing competency frameworks, policy reports, and regulatory documents published between 2010 and 2023. Data were analyzed through deductive coding against regional competency domains and inductive identification of structural and thematic variations.

Results: The study reviewed ten national frameworks and found substantial variations in structure and emphasis. Domains related to ethics and clinical practice were commonly addressed, whereas leadership and research were less consistently included. More recent frameworks showed a stronger alignment with regional standards, while older ones reflected a limited competency scope. Key challenges include regulatory fragmentation, inconsistent assessment systems, and gaps in education capacity.

Conclusion: The findings highlight the need for greater regional policy coordination, the development of shared assessment tools, and investment in capacity building. Harmonizing nursing competencies across ASEAN countries is essential for improving educational consistency, patient care quality, and professional mobility.

Keywords: ASEAN, nursing competency, nursing framework, professional mobility, workforce development

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BACKGROUND

The nursing profession in Southeast Asia is facing increasing complexity due to demographic transitions, epidemiological shifts, and the rising burden of chronic diseases. Nurses, the largest component of the health workforce, are essential to achieving universal health coverage (UHC) and delivering high-quality, accessible care across diverse healthcare systems in the region (WHO, 2021; ASEAN Secretariat, 2021).

Recognizing the need to enhance professional mobility and ensure consistency in nursing standards, the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) established the Mutual Recognition Arrangement (MRA) for Nursing Services in 2006. This agreement enables cross-border recognition of nursing qualifications and supports the mobility of registered nurses within ASEAN member states (ASEAN, 2006). To implement the MRA, the ASEAN Joint Coordinating Committee on Nursing (AJCCN) developed the ASEAN Nursing Common Core Competencies (ANCCC) in 2009, comprising five key domains: (1) Ethics and Legal Practice; (2) Professional Nursing Practice; (3) Leadership and Management; (4) Education and Research; and (5) Professional, Personal, and Quality Development (AJCCN, 2009).

These domains served as regional benchmarks to guide the development and evaluation of national nursing competency frameworks. However, despite these efforts, significant variations persist in how countries interpret, structure, and implement these competencies. While some member states have fully adopted the ANCCC within their national systems, others remain in various stages of alignment. Differences in educational capacity, healthcare infrastructure, regulatory frameworks, and language contribute to these disparities (WHO, 2021; Nair et al., 2020).

The establishment of the ASEAN Qualifications Reference Framework (AQRF) further underscores the region's commitment to harmonizing qualifications and promoting learner and labor mobility (ASEAN, 2018). However, the successful implementation of these regional instruments requires a thorough understanding of how existing national nursing frameworks compare their structure and content with ANCCC.

Prior research has primarily focused on the development of national frameworks within individual countries. Few studies have undertaken comprehensive comparative analyses to evaluate the degree of alignment across ASEAN countries. This variation presents a significant problem: without harmonized standards, the region risks inconsistencies in educational outcomes, fragmented regulatory oversight, and barriers to professional mobility under the MRA.

This study addresses this gap by systematically analyzing national nursing competency frameworks across ASEAN member states. It evaluates their alignment with ANCCC and identifies the areas of convergence and divergence. The findings will provide evidence to inform policy harmonization, curriculum development, and the creation of shared competency assessment tools to strengthen nursing practices and workforce integration in Southeast Asia.

OBJECTIVE

This study aimed to compare the structure and content of national nursing competency frameworks across ASEAN member states, with a particular focus on evaluating their alignment with the ASEAN Nursing Common Core Competencies (ANCCC). By identifying areas of congruence and divergence, this study seeks to uncover structural patterns, thematic emphasis, and potential gaps within national frameworks. These findings are intended to inform regional discussions on policy harmonization, support the advancement of

competency-based nursing education, and contribute to the development of a cohesive and mobile nursing workforce within the ASEAN region.

METHODS

Study Design

This study employed a qualitative document analysis methodology to examine professional nursing competency frameworks across ASEAN member states. Document analysis is a systematic procedure for reviewing or evaluating documents to gain an understanding and insight into the subject matter (Bowen, 2009). This approach was chosen to assess how national nursing frameworks align with ASEAN Nursing Common Core Competencies.

Data Collection

The data for this study were collected from publicly available nursing competency framework documents, policy reports, and regulatory guidelines published by the National Nursing Council, the Ministry of Health, and professional nursing associations within ASEAN member states. Additional sources included relevant academic publications and reports from international organizations, such as the World Health Organization (WHO) and the ASEAN Secretariat.

To ensure comprehensiveness, the official websites of nursing regulatory bodies and ministries of health in each ASEAN country were searched. Where documents were unavailable online, direct inquiries were made to the relevant organizations. Only the most current versions of the national competency framework available in English or translated by official agencies were included.

Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria

The following inclusion criteria were applied.

1. Official national nursing competency frameworks applicable to registered nurses.
2. Documents published by national nursing councils, government agencies, or professional associations.
3. Frameworks explicitly addressing competency domains and assessment criteria.
4. Published or updated between 2015 and 2024.

Documents were excluded if they were

1. It focused exclusively on specialized nursing roles (e.g., advanced practice nurses and midwives).
2. Represented institutional-level competency models rather than national frameworks.
3. Official endorsement of a national regulatory body.

Data Analysis

The collected documents were analyzed using qualitative content analysis following a structured coding framework. Data were categorized based on competency domains, assessment criteria, and alignment with ASEAN Nursing Common Core Competencies. A deductive approach was used to compare national frameworks against ASEAN competency domains, whereas an inductive approach allowed for the identification of emerging themes and unique national adaptations.

A two-step validation process was used to enhance the reliability of the findings. First, an independent review of the coded data was performed by two researchers to ensure consistency in interpretation. Second, preliminary findings were shared with nursing education and policy experts from the ASEAN countries for verification and feedback. Discrepancies were resolved through consensus discussion.

Ethical Considerations

Because this study relied exclusively on publicly available documents and did not

involve human subjects, ethical approval was not required. However, care was taken to represent and attribute sources accurately, ensuring transparency and academic integrity in the analysis.

RESULTS

Structural Variations in National Nursing Competency Frameworks

Our analysis revealed substantial variations in the structure and content of nursing competency frameworks across the ASEAN member states. While some countries have adopted domain-based competency models with clear indicators, others have utilized hierarchical frameworks that emphasize different levels of nursing proficiency.

For instance, Singapore, Malaysia, and Brunei Darussalam have competency frameworks that are closely aligned with ASEAN Nursing Common Core Competencies, emphasizing Ethics and Legal Practice, Professional Nursing Practice, and Leadership. In contrast, Vietnam and Cambodia exhibit more simplified competency structures that focus on core clinical nursing skills with limited emphasis on research and leadership development.

Ten national nursing competency frameworks were included in this analysis (Table 1). These frameworks were issued between 2010 and 2023 by national ministries of health, nursing regulatory councils, or professional associations. Notably, more recent frameworks, such as those from Malaysia, Lao P.D.R., Singapore, and Thailand, reflect increased efforts toward updating and aligning with regional standards. In contrast, earlier documents, such as those from Vietnam (2010) and Cambodia (2012), present basic clinical competencies with limited reference to the leadership or research domains. This diversity in publishing institutions and the framework age may indicate differences in policy maturity, regulatory development, and institutional priorities across ASEAN member states.

Table 1. National Nursing Core Competency Frameworks in ASEAN Countries

No	Publisher	Framework (Year)
1	Ministry of Health of Vietnam (MOH Vietnam)	Basic Competency Standard For Vietnamese Nurses (2010)
2	Ministry of Health of Cambodia (MOH Cambodia)	Core Competency Framework For Nurses In The Kingdom Of Cambodia (2012)
3	Professional Regulation Commission of Philippines (PRC)	The 2012 National Nursing Core Competency Standards (2012)
4	Ministry of Health of Brunei Darussalam (MOH Brunei)	Core Competency Standards For Registered Nurses & Midwives In Brunei Darussalam (2013)
5	Indonesian National Nurses Association (INNA)	Indonesian Nursing Competency Standards (2013)
6	Myanmar Nurse and Midwife Council (MNNMC)	Core Competencies For Myanmar Registered Nurses And Midwives (2015)
7	Ministry of Health of Lao P.D.R. (MOH Lao)	National Competencies For Licensed Nurses In Lao P.D.R. (2022)
8	Ministry of Health of Malaysia (MOH Malaysia)	Core Competencies For Nursing In Malaysia (2022)
9	Singapore Nursing Board (SNB)	The Singapore Nursing Board's Core Competencies For The Registered Nurse (2023)
10	Thailand Nursing and Midwifery Council (TNMC)	Competencies Of Registered Nurses In Thailand (2023)

Alignment with ASEAN Nursing Common Core Competencies

Ethics and Legal Practice were the most consistently represented competency domains across ASEAN nursing frameworks, reflecting the emphasis on professional ethics and regulatory compliance in nursing education (ASEAN Secretariat 2021). However, discrepancies emerged in the domain of Leadership and Management, where frameworks in countries such as Thailand and Indonesia placed greater focus on leadership training than others.

Education and Research competencies were found to be less emphasized in frameworks from Lao PDR and Myanmar, possibly because of the limited research infrastructure and training opportunities in these countries. Conversely, Malaysia and the Philippines have incorporated comprehensive R&D competencies, fostering a stronger emphasis on evidence-based practice (WHO, 2021).

Emerging Themes and Challenges

1. **Professional Mobility and Workforce Standardization:** The absence of a unified competency assessment framework across ASEAN presents challenges to professional mobility. Variations in competency expectations and assessment mechanisms create barriers for nursing professionals seeking to practice across borders (ASEAN 2019).
2. **Disparities in Competency Emphasis:** While clinical competencies remain a core focus across all frameworks, some countries place greater importance on advanced competencies, such as digital health literacy and interprofessional collaboration.
3. **Policy and Regulatory Considerations:** Regulatory fragmentation across ASEAN countries hinders efforts to harmonize nursing competencies, necessitating stronger cross-border collaboration and policy alignment to facilitate standardization and mobility (Nair et al., 2020).

These findings highlight the need for a more integrated approach to nursing competency standardization across the ASEAN, ensuring a consistent and high-quality nursing workforce to meet the region's evolving healthcare challenges.

DISCUSSION**Comparative Analysis with Global Nursing Competency Frameworks**

This study addresses the regional gap in comparative research on nursing competencies across the ASEAN countries. The findings are directly aligned with the study's objective of evaluating how national frameworks relate to ASEAN Nursing Common Core Competencies (ANCCC). When compared with international frameworks, such as those developed by the International Council of Nurses (ICN), the American Association of Colleges of Nursing (AACN), and the European Federation of Nurses Associations (EFN), ASEAN frameworks demonstrate both alignment and divergence. While ASEAN countries strongly emphasize Ethics and Legal Practice, Professional Nursing Practice, and Leadership, global frameworks incorporate evidence-based practice, research, and inter-professional collaboration (ICN, 2020; AACN, 2019).

Unlike many global models that increasingly integrate competencies related to digital health, genomics, and health policy advocacy, these domains remain underrepresented in most ASEAN frameworks. This suggests the need for ASEAN to expand competency areas to reflect emerging global health demands.

Implications for Nursing Education and Professional Mobility

Variations in national competency structures influence both consistency of nursing education and cross-border professional mobility. Countries with more comprehensive and updated frameworks, such as Singapore and Malaysia, benefit from clearer educational trajectories and stronger professional development mechanisms. In contrast, countries where

Education and Research or Leadership domains are less developed may face barriers to full participation in regional mobility schemes under the ASEAN Mutual Recognition Arrangement (ASEAN 2006).

Standardized core modules, faculty capacity building, and competency-based curricula tailored to ANCCC domains are essential steps to improve educational alignment and enable mutual recognition.

Challenges in Harmonization and Policy Considerations

Efforts to harmonize nursing competencies across ASEAN countries remain constrained by differences in national regulatory frameworks, educational resources, and health policy priorities (Nair et al., 2020). Countries such as Myanmar and Cambodia continue to face challenges in implementing robust systems for research and professional development owing to limited infrastructure and training programs. These disparities affect workforce readiness, and weaken the potential for cohesive regional integration.

To overcome these challenges, intergovernmental coordination, possibly through ASEAN health education clusters, and region-wide benchmarks for competency assessment are needed. These mechanisms can help standardize minimum competencies while allowing national customization.

Future Directions for Research and Policy

Future research should explore the longitudinal impact of competency alignment on trends in nurse performance, patient safety, and workforce migration. In-depth qualitative studies involving stakeholders, such as nurse educators, regulators, and practicing nurses, could provide insights into the perceived barriers and facilitators of harmonization.

Policy-wise, ASEAN member states should prioritize the development of region-wide tools for competency mapping, continuous professional development (CPD) frameworks, and digital platforms for credential verification and mutual recognition. These actions would support the realization of a more integrated, competent, and mobile nursing workforce across Southeast Asia (WHO 2021).

CONCLUSION

This study highlights substantial variations in national nursing competency frameworks across ASEAN member states and their degree of alignment with ASEAN Nursing Common Core Competencies (ANCCC). Although regional efforts toward standardization have been initiated, disparities persist in structural composition, educational focus, and competency assessment mechanisms. These inconsistencies present significant barriers to professional mobility, regional workforce development, and delivery of high-quality nursing care.

The findings indicate that countries with well-established and regularly updated frameworks, such as Singapore and Malaysia, are more effectively aligned with regional and international competency expectations. By contrast, countries with limited regulatory infrastructure or outdated frameworks require targeted capacity-building initiatives to enhance alignment. Key challenges include fragmented regulatory systems, uneven educational resources, and absence of shared assessment standards.

To address these issues, policymakers should prioritize cross-border collaboration, develop regionally standardized assessment tools, and invest in continuous professional development (CPD) programs. Nursing education institutions must adopt competency-based curricula that reflect both national priorities and ASEAN-wide benchmarks, ensuring that graduates are equipped to meet current and emerging healthcare needs.

Future research should assess the long-term effects of competency harmonization on nursing education, clinical practice, and regional mobility. Comparative studies between the

ASEAN and other international frameworks can also yield valuable insights into effective strategies for competency integration. Strengthening ASEAN-wide policy coordination and fostering shared learning across member states will be vital to advancing the nursing profession and achieving equitable high-quality healthcare in the region.

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CONFLICTS OF INTEREST

The authors declare no conflicts of interest related to the design, conduct, or reporting of this research.

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