Chapter 3: Advanced Practice Nurses' Core Competencies

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Introduction

Various competency models address APNs' competencies. Conceptual competency frameworks or models provide guidance to nursing educators in designing curricula and identifying the knowledge and skills required of APNs. This chapter provides an overview of the core competencies of APNs, emphasizing the integration of clinical expertise, leadership, research, and collaborative practice as essential elements of APN roles.

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The Concept and Types of Competence

Competence refers to the combination of knowledge, skills, and attitudes necessary for effective and efficient functioning in everyday life and in the work environment (World Health Organization, 2024; Fukada, 2018). Competencies are categorised as follows:

- **General Competencies:** Also known as transferable or common competencies, encompass knowledge, skills, and attitudes that have broad applicability and are not confined to any particular profession or industry. Individuals possessing general competencies can adapt to different and evolving environments, regardless of the specific field or context in which they operate. (Chan et al., 2017; OECD, 2021.)
- **Profession-Specific Competencies:** Field-specific or field-functional competencies are tailored to a particular profession, industry, or field of expertise. They encompass the knowledge, skills, and attitudes directly relevant to tasks and requirements within that specific domain. (World Health Organization, 2024.)
- **Core Competencies:** Represent a fusion of general and profession-specific competencies. They are central and indispensable capabilities required for effectively and efficiently performing tasks within a specific profession or area of expertise. Core competencies often serve as the foundation for an individual's professional expertise. These competencies are vital for achieving excellence in one's professional role. (Fukada, 2018.)

Advanced Practice Nurses' core competencies

Hamric's Integrative Model of Advanced Practice Nursing (Tracy et al., 2023) is among the most widely recognized APN competency frameworks worldwide, serving as the basis for many international APN competency frameworks and shaping standards for education and practice. Hamric's model is a comprehensive framework that describes the core competencies of APNs and the elements affecting advanced practice nursing. The model depicts the APN role as an integrated professional practice, with direct clinical practice as the central competence and five core competencies that support it. The characteristics of advanced practice are shaped by the context in which nurses are credentialed to practice. The APN's practice of direct care as an expert in clinical work is characterised, according to Tracy & O'Grady (2023), by six features: (1) use of a holistic perspective, (2) formation of therapeutic partnerships with patients, (3) expert clinical performance, (4) use of reflective practice, (5) use of evidence as a guide to practice and (6) use of diverse approaches to health and illness management. In addition to providing individualized care, APNs promote the health of their patient population in their specialty and improve the quality of care.

Description of core competencies that support direct clinical practice in Hamric's Integrative Model:

- **Guidance and Coaching:** APNs provide expert advice, guidance, and coaching to patients, families, and other health professionals, often in complex and specialized care areas, to help them change their behavior. This competency requires in-depth knowledge, skills, and experience in the field. In addition, it includes both the general theoretical principles of professional communication and the specific communication of coaching and therapeutic techniques. APNs educate, facilitate, support, promote, and encourage the health and well-being of populations, groups, families, and individuals. They effectively use a range of communication skills to advocate for and represent patients and colleagues;
- **Evidence-Based Practice:** APNs are expected to integrate the best current evidence into their practice to ensure the highest quality of care. They use quality standards and relevant theories in evidence-based practice to support decision-making. APNs demonstrate the impact of patient-centered research and evidence-based practice in developing holistic patient-centered healthcare. APNs should critically evaluate contemporary evidence-based knowledge and develop and maintain cognitive competencies relevant to their specialty. They critically examine, evaluate, interpret, and synthesize complex information and data sources to facilitate nursing practice and clinical decision-making. Their efficient and optimal use of modern medical equipment and technology is noteworthy, as is their ability to assess and critique the use of technological applications, both in communication and in diagnostic and therapeutic procedures;
- **Leadership:** APNs promote and lead development-oriented change and engage in debate on developments in their sector in different healthcare and policy areas. APNs contribute to development in the broader health sector and policy

arena by explaining, justifying, and advocating for innovations in the field; using appropriate leadership styles and models; and demonstrating proficiency in strategic planning and change management to facilitate effective transitions. APNs can act as consultants and mentors, offering their expertise to other health professionals to improve patient care and outcomes. They can communicate and engage in clear and effective dialogue on complex professional and academic nursing and nursing science issues with professionals, colleagues from other disciplines, and the general public;

- **Collaboration:** APNs work collaboratively with patients, families, other healthcare professionals, and healthcare providers to ensure comprehensive, integrated patient care. APNs plan, deliver, and evaluate patient-centered care with patients, carers, families, and other health and social care professionals, communicating unambiguously about complex professional and academic nursing and nursing science issues with other professionals and colleagues from other disciplines. This includes thorough documentation for reporting and referral treatment in an interdisciplinary context. It is essential to understand organizational structures, communication processes, conflict resolution, and negotiation skills;
- **Ethical practice**: APNs act as role models in making ethical decisions in complex practice situations, which require solid ethical principles and decision-making skills. APNs face complex ethical decisions in their practice, so it is essential that they receive orientation on professional, ethical, regulatory, and legal standards to enable them to resolve moral and ethical dilemmas in both daily practice and the public space. They act professionally in a holistic, tolerant, non-judgmental, caring, and sensitive manner, ensuring that the rights, beliefs, and wishes of individuals and groups are not harmed. They demonstrate leadership in ethical deliberation and decision-making processes. APNs take responsibility for their own professional development and support colleagues' development to improve the quality of care and patient outcomes.

The *Guidelines on Advanced Practice Nursing 2020* (International Council of Nursing, 2020) define APNs as professionals who demonstrate advanced clinical expertise, complex decision-making skills, and expanded competencies that extend beyond basic nursing preparation. The ICN emphasizes that APN roles are grounded in master 's-level education and are shaped by each country's healthcare needs, regulatory frameworks, and health system structures. APN competencies encompass advanced clinical practice, including expert assessment, diagnosis, and management of health conditions, as well as prescribing and therapeutic interventions where authorised. They also involve leadership in practice development, with a focus on improving quality and safety and contributing to innovation within health systems. Central to the role is integrating evidence-based practice and research, including applying research findings, evaluating outcomes, and contributing to the development of professional knowledge. In addition, APNs play a key role in education and mentorship by supporting patients, families, and healthcare professionals, thereby contributing to workforce development. Their practice is characterised by both autonomy and collaboration, as they work

independently while engaging in interprofessional teamwork to optimize patient outcomes.

The *European Federation of Nurses Associations* (EFN, 2023) APN implementation toolkit provides a complementary, implementation-oriented perspective on advanced practice nursing in Europe. Unlike competency-based models that primarily define domains of practice, the EFN framework explicitly integrates competencies with system-level requirements, including education, regulation, and role recognition. The EFN identifies core competency areas such as advanced clinical expertise, autonomous practice, clinical decision-making, leadership, research and quality improvement, health promotion, and mentoring. In addition, the framework explicitly incorporates competencies related to digital health and nursing informatics, reflecting the increasing importance of technology in contemporary healthcare systems. A distinguishing feature of the EFN approach is its emphasis on autonomy and advanced clinical responsibility. APNs are expected to operate as clinical experts with authority in complex decision-making, including assessment, diagnosis, and care planning, supported by master's-level education and continuous professional development. The EFN framework positions competencies within a broader implementation model. It emphasizes that the development of advanced practice nursing depends on interconnected system-level factors, including educational standards, regulatory frameworks, policy recognition, and organizational support. These elements are conceptualized as mutually reinforcing components necessary for the effective implementation and sustainability of APN roles across healthcare systems.

Several competency frameworks complement Hamric's Integrative Model by expanding the scope of advanced practice beyond direct clinical care. The Strong Model of Advanced Practice (Ackerman et al., 1996) emphasises system-level impact, education, research, and professional leadership as integral components of APN roles. Similarly, the ICN Guidelines (2020) define APN competencies through advanced clinical expertise, leadership, evidence-based practice, education, collaboration, and professional accountability within regulatory frameworks. European perspectives further extend these models. The Belgian CanMEDS-based framework (Van Hecke et al., 2024) operationalises competencies through seven professional roles, highlighting clinical expertise, leadership, collaboration, and health promotion. In parallel, comparative analysis across multiple countries (Wit et al., 2023) demonstrates convergence toward a set of generic competency domains, while also identifying emerging areas such as digital health and patient empowerment. The EFN (2023) framework adds an implementation-oriented dimension by explicitly linking competencies with system-level enablers, including regulation, education, and organizational support. This perspective shifts the focus from defining competencies alone to understanding the conditions required for their effective application in practice.

The comparison of competency frameworks (Table 1) demonstrates that, despite structural differences, a consistent set of universal competencies can be identified

across all models. These include advanced clinical expertise, evidence-based practice, leadership, interprofessional collaboration, education, and ethical responsibility. These domains form the foundational core of advanced practice nursing and are largely independent of national or regulatory context.

Table 1. Comparison of Major Advanced Practice Nursing Competency Frameworks

Competency Domain	Hamric Model	Strong Model	ICN (2020)	CanMEDS-based (Belgium)	Wit et al. (2023) synthesis	EFN (2023)
Central focus	Expert direct clinical practice	Role-based practice across domains	Advanced clinical practice	Clinical expert	Clinical care in practice	Implementation of advanced practice roles
Leadership	Clinical and professional leadership	System and professional leadership	Leadership for system improvement	Clinical and professional leadership	Organisational leadership	Policy and system-level leadership
Research / Evidence-based practice	Integration of evidence into practice	Research and knowledge dissemination	Evidence-based decision-making and evaluation	Research and evidence integration	Scientific research and evidence use	Research, quality improvement, and evidence use
Education	Patient and staff coaching	Education and training roles	Education and mentorship	Communication and professional development	Teaching and continuing education	Advanced education and mentoring
Collaboration	Interprofessional collaboration	Coordination within systems	Interprofessional collaboration	Team-based collaboration	Communication and collaboration	Interprofessional collaboration
Ethics/ professionalism	Ethical decision-making in practice	Embedded professional responsibility	Ethical and professional accountability	Professional role and responsibility	Professional attitude and reflection	Professional accountability and regulation
System/ policy impact	Indirect influence through practice	Strong system-level influence	Contribution to health system development	Innovation and care organisation	Organisation of care and policy	Regulatory framework and system development
Health promotion	Integrated into clinical practice	Not explicitly defined	Health promotion and prevention	Health promotion	Public health focus	Population health and prevention
Technology/ e-health	Not explicitly addressed	Not explicitly addressed	Not explicitly addressed	Not explicitly addressed	Digital health and e-health	Digital health and informatics

Note. APN = Advanced Practice Nurse; ICN = International Council of Nurses; EFN = European Federation of Nurses Associations. The table synthesises key competency domains across major international frameworks (Ackerman et al., 1996; ICN, 2020; Tracy et al., 2023; Van Hecke et al., 2024; Wit et al., 2023; EFN, 2023)

In contrast, several competencies are more context-specific and vary depending on healthcare system characteristics, regulatory frameworks, and role maturity. These include professional autonomy (e.g., prescribing authority, independent practice), system-level influence (e.g., policy engagement, organizational leadership), and the integration of digital health competencies. For example, the EFN framework explicitly emphasizes regulatory and implementation dimensions, while the Strong Model places greater weight on system impact and scholarly dissemination.

For practitioners, this distinction clarifies which competencies are expected regardless of setting and which require adaptation to local regulatory and organizational conditions. Universal competencies define the minimum standard for safe and effective APN practice, whereas context-specific competencies determine the scope and depth of role enactment in a given healthcare system.

For curriculum developers, the findings indicate that educational programmes should be structured around universal competency domains while allowing flexibility to incorporate context-specific elements such as legal scope of practice, health system organization, and digital health requirements. This approach supports both international comparability of APN roles and local relevance.

Conclusion

Although international APN competency frameworks emphasize somewhat different roles and perspectives, their core principles are largely similar. APN practice is grounded in advanced clinical expertise supported by evidence-based decision-making, leadership, interprofessional collaboration, education and research, and ethical responsibility. In these frameworks, direct clinical practice forms the core of the APN role, while the other competencies enable APNs to influence patient outcomes, contribute to the development of healthcare systems, and advance the nursing profession more broadly.

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