First-Year Nursing Students' Experiences in the Clinical Area on the First Day of Placement: A Qualitative Study

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ABSTRACT

The first day of clinical placement is a critical milestone in nursing education, marking the transition from classroom-based learning to real-world patient nursing care. For first-year nursing students, this initial exposure to the clinical environment is often emotionally intense and plays a significant role in shaping adaptation to clinical practice, professional identity formation, and perceptions of nursing. Understanding these early experiences is essential for strengthening clinical teaching strategies and improving student transition into practice. This study aimed to explore and describe the experiences of first-year nursing students from the University of Kabianga and Great Lakes University of Kisumu during their first day of clinical placement. A qualitative descriptive design informed by descriptive phenomenology was adopted to capture the lived experiences of the students. The study was conducted among 15 first-year nursing students, comprising eight from the University of Kabianga and seven from Great Lakes University of Kisumu. Participants were purposively selected after completing their first clinical placement experience. Data were collected through face-to-face semi-structured interviews guided by open-ended questions. Each interview lasted between 30–45 minutes, was audio-recorded with consent, and transcribed verbatim. Data were analysed using inductive thematic analysis following six-step framework of Braun and Clarke. Data collection continued until saturation was achieved. Trustworthiness was ensured through credibility, dependability, confirmability, and transferability strategies, including member checking, audit trails, and reflexivity. Six themes emerged: mixed emotional reactions, fear of the unknown, reality shock, importance of clinical support, learning through observation, and development of professional identity alongside communication challenges. Students reported excitement, pride, anxiety, and nervousness as they entered the clinical environment for the very first time. These emotions were influenced by uncertainty, unfamiliarity with clinical routines, and perceived lack of competence. A clear gap between theoretical learning and clinical reality was evident, characterized by busy wards, high patient loads, limited resources, and exposure to critically ill patients, leading to reality shock. Despite these challenges, clinical support from instructors, ward nurses, and peers played a key role in reducing anxiety and facilitating adaptation. Observation was the main learning strategy, enabling students to connect theory with practice while gradually building confidence.

The study concludes that the first day of clinical placement is a transformative yet emotionally complex experience that significantly influences early professional development. Strengthening structured orientation, mentorship, and supportive clinical environments is essential to improve student confidence, competence, and transition into clinical practice.

Keywords: Clinical placement, first-year nursing students, phenomenology, lived experience, clinical learning environment, professional identity, Kenya.

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BACKGROUND

Clinical placement is an integral component of nursing education (Chan, 2002). It provides students with opportunities to apply theoretical knowledge in real-life situations and develop clinical competence, communication skills, confidence, and professional identity (Henderson et al., 2006). The transition from classroom learning to clinical practice is particularly significant for first-year nursing students because it marks their first direct exposure to patient care and professional nursing responsibilities.

The first day of clinical placement is often described as a critical and memorable event in the educational journeys of learners. During this transition, students encounter unfamiliar environments, interact with patients for the first time, and begin to observe professional nursing practice. Although clinical placements provide valuable learning opportunities, they may also generate anxiety, fear, uncertainty, and stress (Melincavage, 2011). Students commonly worry about making mistakes, harming patients, being evaluated by clinical instructors, and meeting professional expectations.

Previous studies have shown that novice nursing students frequently experience mixed emotions during their initial clinical exposure. Feelings of excitement and enthusiasm are often accompanied by apprehension, self-doubt, and fear of failure (Levett et al., 2015). Students must adapt to busy hospital environments, complex patient needs, and professional expectations while simultaneously learning to integrate theoretical knowledge with practical skills. Supportive clinical instructors and positive learning environments have been identified as important factors influencing successful adaptation to clinical practice (Henderson et al., 2006).

Furthermore, early exposure to clinical learning environments contributes significantly to the development of empathy and professional identity among nursing students. Wang et al. (2022) reports that first-year nursing students develop a deeper appreciation of nursing roles and greater professional commitment following their initial clinical experiences.

Despite growing international evidence, limited research has explored the experiences of first-year nursing students in Kenya during their first day of clinical placement. Understanding these experiences is important for informing educational strategies that facilitate their transition into clinical practice and promote positive clinical learning experiences. Therefore, this study sought to explore and describe the experiences of first-year nursing students from the University of Kabianga and Great Lakes University of Kisumu during their first day of clinical placement.

STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

Clinical placements are fundamental in preparing nursing students for professional practice. However, the transition from classroom learning to the clinical environment presents numerous challenges, particularly for first-year nursing students who have limited practical experience. The first day of placement often exposes students to unfamiliar clinical scenarios, patient interactions, professional expectations, and healthcare routines that may influence their learning experiences and professional development.

Evidence from previous studies suggests that nursing students frequently experience anxiety, fear, stress, and uncertainty during their initial clinical exposure. Such experiences may negatively affect confidence, learning outcomes, communication abilities, and overall adaptation to the clinical environment. Inadequate support, lack of role models, limited resources, and differences between classroom teaching and clinical realities may further compound these challenges.

In Kenya, little is known about how first-year nursing students perceive and experience their first day in the clinical area. Understanding these experiences is essential for developing supportive educational interventions, improving clinical orientation programs, and enhancing the quality of clinical learning environments. Therefore, this study sought to explore and describe the experiences of first-year nursing students from the University of Kabianga and Great Lakes University of Kisumu during their first day of clinical placement.

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METHODS

Research Design

A qualitative descriptive design was adopted to explore and describe the experiences of first-year nursing students during their first day of clinical placement. This design was appropriate because it enabled a comprehensive description of the experiences in their natural manner while remaining close to their own accounts. Qualitative descriptive research is particularly suitable for studies that seek to provide straightforward descriptions of events and experiences without imposing highly interpretive theoretical frameworks. The design allowed participants to describe their thoughts, emotions, challenges, and perceptions of their first clinical experience in their own words.

Study Setting and Sampling

The study was conducted among first-year nursing students enrolled at the University of Kabianga (UOK) and Great Lakes University of Kisumu (GLUK). These institutions offer Bachelor of Science in Nursing programs and provide clinical placements in public and faith-based healthcare facilities.

Purposive sampling was employed to recruit participants who had recently completed their first day of clinical placement. Students were selected because they were considered information-rich cases capable of providing detailed descriptions of their own experiences.

A total of fifteen participants were recruited, comprising eight students from UOK and seven students from GLUK. Sampling continued until data saturation was achieved, whereby no new information or themes emerged from subsequent interviews.

Recruitment and Data Collection

Following approval from relevant university authorities, eligible students were approached and provided with information regarding the study objectives and procedures. Those willing to participate provided written informed consent. Data were collected over a three-month period (January to March 2026) through face-to-face semi-structured interviews. Interviews were conducted at a time convenient (mostly afternoon) to participants within the respective institution and lasted approximately 30–45 minutes. All interviews were audio-recorded with permission.

Semi-Structured Interviews

An interview guide containing open-ended questions was used to facilitate discussion. The questions included:

i. Please describe your experience on the first day of clinical placement?

ii. How did you feel when you entered the clinical area for the first time?

iii. What challenges did you encounter during your first day?

iv. What factors helped you adapt to the clinical environment?

v. How did your first clinical experience influence your perception of nursing?

Data Analysis

Audio-recorded interviews were transcribed verbatim immediately after each interview. The transcripts were checked against the audio recordings to ensure accuracy and completeness before analysis. Data were analysed using an inductive thematic analysis approach following the six-phase framework described by Braun and Clarke (2006). An inductive approach was adopted to allow themes to emerge directly from participants' narratives rather than being guided by predetermined theoretical concepts.

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The analysis involved six iterative phases. First, the researchers familiarized themselves with the data by reading and re-reading the transcripts while listening to the audio recordings to gain a comprehensive understanding of the experiences by the participants. Second, meaningful segments of text relevant to the research objective were systematically coded across the dataset. Third, related codes were grouped to identify potential themes and subthemes. Fourth, the preliminary themes were reviewed and refined by comparing them with the original transcripts to ensure they accurately reflected the accounts by participants. Fifth, each theme was clearly defined, named, and interpreted according to its underlying meaning. Finally, the themes were organized into a coherent narrative and supported with representative verbatim quotations from participants to illustrate the findings. Data collection ceased after the fifteenth interview when no new codes or themes emerged, indicating that thematic saturation had been achieved.

Trustworthiness and Credibility

The trustworthiness of the study was established using the criteria proposed by Lincoln and Guba (1985), namely credibility, dependability, confirmability, and transferability.

Credibility

Credibility was enhanced through prolonged engagement with participants during the interviews, member checking to verify the accuracy of views by the participants, and the inclusion of verbatim quotations to ensure that the findings authentically represented their experiences.

Dependability

Dependability was strengthened by maintaining a comprehensive audit trail documenting methodological decisions, interview procedures, coding processes, theme development, and analytical decisions throughout the study. This ensured that the research process was transparent and could be followed by other researchers.

Confirmability

Confirmability was promoted through researcher reflexivity and peer debriefing. The researchers maintained reflexive notes throughout the study to acknowledge personal assumptions and consider how these might influence data collection and interpretation. Regular discussions among the research team were conducted to review coding decisions, resolve differences through consensus, and ensure that the findings were grounded on the narratives by participants rather than researcher perspectives.

Transferability

Transferability was enhanced by providing rich descriptions of the study setting, participant characteristics, data collection procedures, and findings. These detailed descriptions enable readers to determine the applicability of the findings to similar educational and clinical scenario.

ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS

Ethical approval for the study was obtained from the University of Kabianga Institutional Ethics Review Committee, and permission to conduct the study was granted by the two participating universities. Eligible participants received detailed information about the study objectives, procedures, potential benefits, and their rights before participation. Written informed consent was obtained from all participants prior to data collection. Participation was entirely voluntary, and participants were informed of their right to decline participation or withdraw from the study at any stage without any academic or personal consequences. Confidentiality and anonymity were maintained throughout the study by assigning identification codes instead of actual names and securely storing all audio recordings, transcripts, and research documents in password-protected files accessible only to the research team.

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RESULTS

Characteristics of the Respondents

A total of fifteen first-year nursing students participated in the study. Eight participants were from the University of Kabianga (UOK) and seven were from Great Lakes University of Kisumu (GLUK). The participants had recently completed their first day of clinical placement in various healthcare facilities. Both male and female students were represented, with ages ranging from 18 to 24 years.

Theme 1: Mixed Emotional Reactions

Participants described experiencing a combination of excitement, anxiety, nervousness, and curiosity upon entering the clinical environment for the first time. The transition from classroom learning to the clinical setting evoked strong emotional responses, reflecting both anticipation and fear. One participant stated: 'I was excited because I had always wanted to work in a hospital, but when I entered the ward and saw many patients, I became very nervous.' (P3, UOK). Another participant remarked: 'It was my first time wearing a student nurse uniform in the ward. I felt proud but also afraid of making mistakes.' (P11, GLUK). These accounts indicate that the first clinical exposure generates mixed emotional responses that shape the initial adaptation to the clinical environment.

Theme 2: Fear of the Unknown

Participants expressed uncertainty regarding their roles, responsibilities, and interactions within the clinical environment. This uncertainty was associated with fear of making mistakes, harming patients, and being evaluated by clinical staff. One participant explained: 'I feared touching patients because I thought I might do something wrong and worsen their condition.' (P7, UOK). Similarly, another participant noted: 'I did not know what the nurses expected from us. I was afraid they would ask me questions that I could not answer.' (P14, GLUK). These findings reflect the concerns about clinical competence, patient safety, and professional expectations during their initial exposure.

Theme 3: Reality Shock

Participants described a clear mismatch between theoretical knowledge and real clinical practice. The clinical environment was perceived as fast-paced, demanding, and emotionally overwhelming, particularly due to high patient loads and limited staffing. One participant explained: 'What we learned in class looked simple, but in the ward everything was very fast. Nurses were busy and I could not even understand where to start from.' (P2, UOK). Another participant added: 'I expected to see things done step by step like in the laboratory, but in the hospital things were different. Patients were many and nurses were rushing.' (P10, GLUK). Some participants also reported emotional shock after encountering severely ill patients: 'I was not ready to see very sick patients. Some were in pain and I felt helpless because I could not do anything.' (P7, UOK). Overall, this theme reflects the abrupt transition from simulated learning environments to the complexity of real-world clinical practice.

Theme 4: Importance of Clinical Support

Participants strongly emphasized the role of clinical instructors, ward nurses, and peers in shaping their first-day experiences. Supportive interactions were described as essential in reducing anxiety and facilitating adjustment to the clinical environment. One participant stated: 'The nurse in charge took time to show us around the ward. That made me feel less afraid and more welcomed.' (P11, GLUK). Another participant highlighted the role of clinical instructors: 'Our lecturer was present and kept encouraging us. She told us it was normal to feel scared, which made me relax.' (P4, UOK). Peer support also contributed to emotional stability: 'We stayed together as students and supported each other. That helped me not to feel alone.' (P13, GLUK). These findings indicate that structured clinical support enhances confidence and promotes positive adaptation to the clinical learning environment.

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Theme 5: Learning Through Observation

During their first day in the clinical area, participants reported limited hands-on involvement and relied primarily on observation as a learning strategy. Observation enabled students to understand clinical routines, professional behaviour, and patient care processes. One participant noted: 'I mostly observed the nurses giving drugs and talking to patients. That helped me understand what I will be doing in future.' (P6, UOK). Another participant explained: 'Watching how nurses communicated with patients taught me more than what I expected. It showed me how to behave in the ward.' (P12, GLUK). Some students viewed observation as a necessary step before active participation: 'I was not ready to touch patients yet, so I preferred to observe carefully and learn first.' (P1, UOK). This theme highlights observation as a critical bridge between theoretical learning and clinical practice for novice students.

Theme 6: Development of Professional Identity and Communication Challenges

Participants described the first day of clinical placement as a transformative experience that shaped their emerging professional identity. Exposure to the clinical environment increased their sense of belonging to the nursing profession and strengthened motivation to pursue their studies. One participant reflected: 'When I wore the uniform and entered the ward, I started feeling like a real nurse in training. It motivated me.' (P8, UOK). Another participant stated: 'I felt proud because I realized this is what I want to become, even though I still have a long way to go.' (P9, GLUK). However, alongside this emerging professional identity, participants reported significant communication challenges. These included difficulties interacting with patients, relatives, and healthcare professionals due to lack of confidence and unfamiliarity with clinical language. One participant explained: 'I struggled to talk to patients because I was afraid of saying the wrong thing.' (P3, UOK). Another added: 'Some nurses spoke very fast and used medical terms I did not understand, so I kept quiet most of the time.' (P14, GLUK). These findings suggest that while professional identity formation begins early, it is accompanied by communication barriers that require ongoing mentorship and skill development.

DISCUSSION

This study explored the experiences of first-year nursing students from the University of Kabianga and Great Lakes University of Kisumu during their first day of clinical placement. The findings revealed that students experienced a mixture of emotional, professional, and environmental challenges as they transitioned from classroom learning to clinical practice. Six themes emerged, namely mixed emotional reactions, fear of the unknown, reality shock, importance of clinical support, learning through observation, and development of professional identity and communication challenges.

The theme of mixed emotional reactions demonstrates that the first day of clinical placement evokes both positive and negative emotions. Students described feelings of excitement, pride, curiosity, anxiety, and nervousness. These findings are consistent with Melincavage (2011), who reported that anxiety is a common response among nursing students entering clinical environments for the first time. Similarly, Levett et al. (2015) found that anticipation and fear often coexist as students prepare for their initial clinical experiences. The emotional responses observed in the present study reflect the uncertainty associated with entering an unfamiliar professional environment and assuming new responsibilities.

Fear of the unknown emerged as another important finding. Students expressed concerns about harming patients, performing procedures incorrectly, and being evaluated by nurses and clinical instructors. Similar findings have been reported by Sharif and Masoumi (2005), who observed that novice nursing students frequently experience fear related to patient interactions and clinical expectations. These fears may reduce confidence and hinder active participation in learning activities during the initial stages of clinical placement.

The reality shock experienced by participants reflected the discrepancy between theoretical instruction and actual clinical practice. Students reported encountering busy wards, high patient workloads, resource shortages, and critically ill patients. This finding supports Benner's (1984) novice-to-expert theory, which suggests that beginners often struggle to reconcile theoretical knowledge with complex clinical realities. The findings are also consistent with Killam and Heerschap (2013), who identified environmental and organizational challenges as barriers to effective student learning in clinical settings.

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The importance of clinical support was strongly emphasized by participants. Guidance from clinical instructors, ward nurses, and senior students helped reduce anxiety and facilitated adaptation to the clinical environment. These findings are consistent with Henderson et al. (2006), who found that supportive clinical learning environments enhance the confidence, competence, and overall learning experiences of students. The findings further underscore the critical role of mentorship and supervision during the early stages of clinical exposure.

Learning through observation emerged as a significant strategy through which students acquired clinical knowledge and skills. Participants reported observing medication administration, patient assessment, communication techniques, and teamwork among healthcare professionals. Observation enabled students to connect classroom learning with practical nursing activities. Similar findings have been reported by Newton et al. (2009), who found that observation plays a crucial role in helping novice students understand professional expectations and clinical workflows before engaging directly in patient care.

The theme of professional identity development and communication challenges highlights the transformative nature of the first clinical experience. Participants reported increased appreciation of nursing, enhanced motivation to become competent practitioners, and greater understanding of professional roles. These findings support those of Wang et al. (2022), who found that early exposure to clinical learning environments contributes significantly to the development of professional identity and empathy among first-year nursing students. However, participants in the current study also reported communication difficulties when interacting with patients and healthcare professionals. Such challenges are expected among novice students who are still developing confidence and interpersonal skills required for clinical practice.

Overall, the findings suggest that the first day of clinical placement serves as a critical foundation for professional growth. Although students encounter anxiety, uncertainty, and feelings of inadequacy, positive clinical experiences and supportive learning environments facilitate adaptation and foster professional development. Nursing educators and clinical institutions should therefore prioritize structured orientation, mentorship, and supportive supervision to enhance early clinical experiences and improve learning outcomes among students.

LIMITATIONS

The study was conducted among a relatively small sample of first-year nursing students from two universities, namely the University of Kabianga and Great Lakes University of Kisumu. This limited geographical and institutional scope may affect the transferability of the findings to all nursing students in Kenya. Additionally, the experiences reported by participants were based on self-reported and retrospective accounts of their first day in the clinical area. As such, the data may have been influenced by recall bias or selective memory, particularly given the emotional nature of the experience. There is also a possibility of social desirability bias, where participants may have provided responses they perceived as acceptable or favourable to the researchers or their institutions rather than fully disclosing negative experiences. Furthermore, the study captured the experiences of the students at a single point in time, immediately after their initial clinical exposure. This cross-sectional approach limits the ability to explore how perceptions and experiences may evolve over time with continued clinical exposure. Despite these limitations, the study provides valuable insights into the lived experiences of first-year nursing students during a critical transition period in their professional development.

CONCLUSION

The first day of clinical placement is a transformative experience that significantly influences nursing students' perceptions of the profession and their adaptation to clinical practice. Although students experience anxiety, uncertainty, and feelings of incompetence, supportive supervision, effective orientation, and positive learning environments facilitate successful transition into clinical practice. Addressing challenges related to clinical support, role modelling, and resource availability may enhance students' learning experiences and professional development.

RECOMMENDATIONS

1. Nursing schools should strengthen pre-clinical orientation programmes by incorporating hospital familiarization visits, simulation-based learning, and preparatory sessions that reduce the anxiety of their students before their first clinical placement.
2. Clinical placement facilities should establish structured mentorship programmes in which experienced staff nurses are assigned to guide and support first-year nursing students throughout their initial clinical experiences.
3. Clinical instructors should provide continuous supervision, emotional support, and constructive feedback during the first days of placement to facilitate adaptation and confidence.
4. Healthcare professionals, particularly ward nurses, should be encouraged to serve as positive professional role models by fostering welcoming, respectful, and supportive learning environments that promote effective communication and professional identity development.
5. Nursing education institutions and healthcare facilities should strengthen collaboration to ensure better alignment between classroom instruction and clinical practice, thereby reducing the theory-practice gap experienced by novice students.
6. Healthcare institutions should ensure adequate availability of essential clinical equipment, learning resources, and opportunities for supervised observation and participation to enhance meaningful clinical learning experiences.
7. Nursing curricula should incorporate structured communication skills training and reflective learning activities before and during the first clinical placement to improve confidence in interacting with patients, relatives, and healthcare professionals.
8. Future research should employ longitudinal qualitative or mixed-methods designs involving larger and more diverse samples from multiple nursing schools to examine how experiences, confidence, and professional identity of students evolve throughout their clinical education.

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APPENDIX

Appendix I: Semi-Structured Interview Guide

Study Title: *First-Year Nursing Students' Experiences in the Clinical Area on the First Day of Placement: A Qualitative Study*

Introduction

Thank you for agreeing to participate in this interview. We are interested in understanding your experiences during your first day of clinical placement. There are no right or wrong answers. We would like you to speak freely about your experiences. Everything you share will remain confidential. The interview is expected to take approximately 30–45 minutes.

Section A: Demographic Information

1. Age: _____ years
2. Gender: 1. Male 2. Female 3. Prefer not to say
3. University: 1. University of Kabianga 2. Great Lakes University of Kisumu
4. Year of Study: _____
5. Clinical Placement Area: _____
6. Type of Hospital: 1. County Hospital 2. National Referral Hospital 3. Faith-Based Hospital 4. Private Hospital
7. Date of first clinical placement: _____

Section B: Interview Questions

Opening Question

1. Can you describe your first day in the clinical area from the moment you arrived until you left? Probes-What happened first? What stood out most? What do you remember most clearly?

Theme 1: Mixed Emotional Reactions

2. How did you feel when you entered the clinical area for the first time? Probes- Were you excited? Were you anxious or nervous? Did you feel proud? Did your feelings change during the day? Why did you feel that way?

3. What thoughts were going through your mind before and during your first clinical day?

Probes-Expectations, Confidence, Concerns, Anticipation

Theme 2: Fear of the Unknown

4. Did you experience any fears or worries during your first day? Probes- Fear of making mistakes, Fear of harming patients, Fear of talking to nurses, Fear of being assessed, Fear of asking questions

5. What aspects of the clinical environment did you find unfamiliar or intimidating? Probes-Equipment, Hospital routines, Patients, Healthcare workers, Ward organization

Theme 3: Reality Shock

6. Was the clinical environment different from what you expected after learning in class? Probes- Differences between theory and practice, Workload, Staffing, Patient numbers, Hospital routines, Time pressure

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7. Were there any experiences that surprised or shocked you? Probes-Seeing critically ill patients, Death, Pain and suffering, Limited resources, Emergency situations

Theme 4: Clinical Support

8. Who helped you during your first day? Probes-Clinical instructor, Ward nurses, Doctors, Senior students, Fellow classmates

9. In what ways did they support you? Probes-Orientation, Encouragement, Demonstrations, Supervision, Feedback, Emotional support

10. What additional support would have made your first day easier?

Theme 5: Learning Through Observation

11. What did you learn by observing healthcare professionals? Probes-Patient assessment, Medication administration, Communication, Infection prevention, Teamwork, Documentation

12. Were you able to participate in patient care or did you mainly observe? Probes- Why, how did that make you feel?

13. How did observation help you understand nursing practice?

Theme 6: Professional Identity

14. How did your first clinical experience influence the way you see nursing as a profession?

Probes- Pride, Motivation, Career commitment, Responsibility, Confidence

15. Did your first day make you feel like a nurse in training? Probes-Why, what contributed to that feeling?

Theme 7: Communication Challenges

16. How was your communication with patients? Probes- Confidence, Language barriers, introducing yourself, Asking questions

17. How was your communication with nurses and other healthcare professionals? Probes- Were they approachable, did you understand the medical language, Were you comfortable asking questions?

18. What communication challenges did you experience? Probes- Fear, Lack of confidence, Medical terminology, Patient interaction, Team communication

Reflection

19. Looking back, what was the most memorable experience from your first day?

20. If another first-year nursing student were going for clinical placement tomorrow, what advice would you give them?

21. What recommendations would you make to nursing schools to improve students' first clinical experience? Probes- Orientation, Simulation, Mentorship, Clinical teaching, Communication training, Hospital preparation

22. Is there anything else about your first clinical experience that you would like to share which we have not discussed?

Thank you very much for taking part in this interview. Your experiences are valuable and will contribute to improving clinical education for future nursing students.