

## ACADÊMICOS DE ENFERMAGEM E O DESENVOLVIMENTO DA LIDERANÇA: DESAFIOS ENFRENTADOS NO ESTÁGIO CURRICULAR

## NURSING STUDENTS AND LEADERSHIP DEVELOPMENT: CHALLENGES FACING IN THE CURRICULUM INTERNSHIP

## ESTUDIANTES DE ENFERMERÍA Y DESARROLLO DE LIDERAZGO: DESAFÍOS QUE ENFRENTAN EL CURRÍCULO DE LA ESCENA

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### RESUMO

**Objetivo:** compreender a percepção do acadêmico de enfermagem sobre o exercício da liderança nas atividades do estágio curricular. **Método:** utilizou-se abordagem qualitativa do tipo descritiva através de entrevistas com 12 acadêmicos de uma Faculdade de Enfermagem no Município de Juiz de Fora-Minas Gerais. A análise dos dados amparou-se na análise temática. **Resultados:** emergiram três categorias: a liderança em enfermagem; o cotidiano do desenvolvimento da liderança; reflexo da liderança no processo de trabalho da equipe de enfermagem. A formação do enfermeiro permanece pautada no aprimoramento das técnicas/procedimentos e o desenvolvimento de habilidades e competências que o auxiliem a liderar acabam sendo afastadas do processo de aprendizagem. Os desafios que implicam no desenvolvimento da liderança durante o estágio relacionam-se à aceitação por parte da equipe e questões de relacionamento interpessoal na equipe. Sobre os reflexos da sua liderança apontam a confiança, a autonomia, o intercâmbio de saberes e a inserção de trabalho da equipe. **Conclusão:** verificou-se que a liderança de enfermagem é entendida como uma competência essencial para o trabalho do enfermeiro. A abordagem do tema liderança na graduação é imprescindível e um grande desafio, o qual deve ser constituído não somente na parte teórica, mas sua aplicabilidade na prática.

**Descritores:** Enfermagem; Liderança; Educação em enfermagem; Estudantes de enfermagem.

### ABSTRACT

**Objective:** To know the understanding of nursing student on the exercise of leadership in the activities of the curriculum internship. **Method:** we used a qualitative approach, descriptive, semi-structured interviews were conducted with 12 students of a nursing college in the city of Juiz de Fora-Minas Gerais. Data analysis was based on thematic analysis. **Results:** three categories emerged: leadership in nursing; the daily development of leadership; reflecting the leadership in the work process of the nursing team. The internship of nurses remains based on the improvement of the techniques/procedures and the development of skills and competences that help them to lead are away from the learning process. The challenges involved in developing leadership during the internship are related to team acceptance and interpersonal relationship issues. The reflexes of his leadership point to confidence, autonomy, exchange of knowledge and the insertion into the team work. **Conclusion:** It was verified that the nursing leadership is understood as an essential competency for the work of the nurse. The approach to the subject of leadership in graduation is essential and a great challenge, which should be constituted not only in the theoretical part, but its applicability in practice.

**Descriptors:** Nursing; Leadership; Nursing education; Nursing students.

### RESUMEN

**Objetivo:** Comprender la percepción de los estudiantes de enfermería en el ejercicio del liderazgo en las actividades del periodo de prácticas. **Método:** se utilizó el enfoque cualitativo, descriptivo, a través de entrevistas con 12 estudiantes de una escuela de enfermería en la ciudad de Juiz de Fora-Minas Gerais. Análisis de los datos se estabilizó en el análisis temático. **Resultados:** surgieron tres categorías: el liderazgo en la enfermería; el desarrollo de liderazgo todos los días; reflejo del liderazgo en el proceso de trabajo del equipo de enfermería. La educación de enfermería sigue siendo guiado en la mejora de las técnicas / procedimientos y el desarrollo de habilidades y competencias que ayuden a llevar a terminar siendo lejos del proceso de aprendizaje. Los retos implicados en el desarrollo de liderazgo durante la etapa conexo a la aceptación por el equipo y los problemas interpersonales en el equipo. Sobre las consecuencias de su punto de liderazgo a la confianza, la autonomía, el intercambio de conocimientos y la inserción equipo de trabajo. **Conclusión:** se encontró que la dirección de la enfermería es visto como un factor clave para el trabajo de enfermería. El enfoque de la dirección en el tema de grado es esencial y un gran desafío, que debe hacerse no sólo en la parte teórica, pero su aplicabilidad en la práctica.

**Descritores:** Enfermería; Liderazgo; Educación em enfermería; Estudiantes de enfermería.

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#### How to cite this article

Knop ALK, Gama BMBM, Sanhudo NF. Nursing Students and Leadership Development: Challenges Facing in the Curriculum Internship. Revista de Enfermagem do Centro-Oeste Mineiro. 2017;7:e1204. [Access\_\_\_\_\_]; Available in:\_\_\_\_\_.Doi: <http://dx.doi.org/10.19175/recom.v7i0.1378>

## INTRODUCTION

In the Law on the Professional Exercise of Nursing (LEPE), regulated by Law N<sup>o</sup>. 7,498/86, nursing duties are indicated, among which are the direction and coordination of the members that make up a nursing team in the health services, as particular functions of the nurse<sup>(1)</sup>. Leadership is considered to be an inseparable competence of a professional, since it is a definition of National Curricular Guidelines for Undergraduate Nursing Education (NCD), when it addresses the skills and abilities that nurses must acquire in their academic internship<sup>(2)</sup>.

It is understood that nursing leadership is a fundamental competency for teamwork, constituting a necessary requirement for nursing students during their professional internship process<sup>(3)</sup>. Leadership is a competence that nurses need to develop in a team to coordinate, to manage conflicts, to plan actions, to make decisions, to supervise, and other skills required in the management of the work process. The importance of the development of the leadership ability during a nursing graduation is sedimented in studies about the leadership, since the competency stands out in the professional work of the nurse<sup>(4-7)</sup>.

During the undergraduate course, nursing students assume or can be led to assume a passive attitude waiting for teachers or even health professionals to direct their actions<sup>(3)</sup>. This behavior may contribute to the fact that newly graduated nurses, regardless of their area of work, find difficulties in managerial activities and leadership difficulties when assuming their role and starting their activities as professionals<sup>(4)</sup>.

In Brazil, the teaching of nursing leadership is incipient, requiring the creation and evaluation of teaching strategies to strengthen the recognition of undergraduate education as a basis for competent professional practice<sup>(5)</sup>. Given its relevance, new approaches to discussion are always necessary, since the exercise of leadership by the nursing trainee will favor their training by learning to mobilize and to articulate the knowledge and skills to integrate their actions.

In the activities of the curricular internship, the leadership exercised by the nursing student is a great challenge, a situation that is associated to multiple intervening factors in this process.

Among these challenges, emphasis should be placed on distance learning from the development of skills and competencies that help the student to lead, emphasizing the teaching-learning process in technical terms, distancing from managerial activities, adherence of professors to practices that do not favor the construction of the student's criticality and lack of problematization of the syllabus curriculum content<sup>(7)</sup>.

Facing the challenges in the teaching-learning process, in order to promote conditions for nursing students to exercise leadership in the curricular training, may positively influence the development of future nurse leaders<sup>(6, 7)</sup>. The development of leadership in the academic world is influenced by the integration between the professors and the nurses of the health services. When this relationship occurs in a fragile way, it is difficult to exercise, which emphasizes the dissociation of the theoretical framework from leadership to practice, that is, the distancing of what is studied from what is practiced is perpetuated<sup>(4)</sup>.

It is understood that the academic conception about leadership is one of the factors that can influence in its teaching-learning process, implying how it will be exercised in the activities of the curricular internship. In view of this, the question is asked about: What is the nursing student's perception on the exercise of leadership during the activities of the curricular internship?

Thus, this study aims to understand the nursing student's perception about the exercise of leadership in the activities of the curricular internship.

## METHOD

It is a qualitative study, in the descriptive type, since it allows the free expression of information, practices and experiences of nursing students, favoring the analysis of the object of the study proposed and the achievement of the objectives, since the theme does not allow its quantification<sup>(8)</sup>.

The study scenario was a Nursing School in Juiz de Fora/MG. The data were obtained from January to July 2014 with nursing students who met the following inclusion criterion: to be enrolled in the 9<sup>th</sup> period attending the

Supervised Curricular Internship II (ECSII), who have already attended the Supervised Curricular Internship (I). No exclusion criteria were stipulated.

Semi-structured interviews were conducted through a script that combined open and closed questions about the nursing student's perception of leadership and their impressions about the development of this competency during the curricular internship. At the data collection period, there were 27 students enrolled in the ECSII, from these ones 12 were part of the study, since, during the interviews, the speeches started to repeat, thus obtaining data saturation. The students interviewed were randomly chosen to the extent that they agreed to participate in the study.

The data collection instrument was evaluated through a pre-test, carried out with a nursing student, to observe the clarity of the questions formulated. The answers to this interview were not included in the data analysis. The instrument was maintained because of the satisfactory result of this verification.

The interviews were previously scheduled, recorded in audio and later transcribed. In order to maintain the anonymity of the interviewees, a symbology was used, being called all participants of "E", followed by the number corresponding to the interview script.

The data analysis was based on the thematic analysis of the interviews in order to extract the sense nuclei, which allowed the organization of the content of the lines in thematic axes for the categorization of the data<sup>(8)</sup>. From the data, which was obtained from the speeches of the participants, they were organized with highlight to the important findings for the study.

The aspects related to Resolution N<sup>o</sup> 466/2012, of the National Health Council, which regulates research involving human beings, were respected<sup>(9)</sup>. After explaining to the participants about the objectives of the study, they signed the Free and Informed Consent Term (TCLE) in two ways. The study was approved by the Research Ethics Committee (CEP) of the Federal University of Juiz de Fora (UFJF), under Support N<sup>o</sup> 522,739.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

In relation to the profile of the participants, it was observed that 11 are women, whose age ranged from 22 to 28 years-old. As for admission to the nursing course, 11 students entered in

2010, and 03 interviewees had a nursing technician course, in which they had a supervised curricular internship. Only 02 interviewees had not participated in extracurricular projects, among them, extension, research and monitoring that allow experiences in new fields, even during graduation.

From the analysis of the collected data emerged three categories: Leadership in nursing; the daily development of leadership; reflection of leadership in the work process of the nursing team.

### The Leadership in Nursing

Regarding the subjects' 'understanding of nursing leadership and its meaning in nurses' training process, the academics reported the dissociation of leadership, authoritarian boss and hierarchy, which is evidenced in the speeches:

"(...) nursing leadership is when you coordinate a team without being authoritative." (E1)

"First, leadership in nursing is different from bossing. It's different that when we have a professional who is the boss, at the top, and have the rest of the professionals as if he was bossing."(E12)

It is believed that in the nursing work process, leadership represents an essential management competency for the nurse's role, since it is closely linked to the process of coordinating a work team, as well as contributing to an ethical and more committed work with the purpose of the institution by the team members<sup>(7, 10)</sup>. Thus, the rest of the team expect the "boss" to be frank, to value the professionals, to be impartial in the resolution of conflicts, among other characteristics, providing the integration of the team and coordinating the activities<sup>(11)</sup>.

It is understood that the administering process is a private activity of the nurse, which among other purposes it is aimed at nursing care management<sup>(1)</sup>. Leadership is a primary competence to manage nursing care, but when the nurse develops management oriented to the needs of the service, aiming at compliance with regulations, norms and tasks reproducing what is recommended by the institution and other professionals, leads to not-meeting the needs of the patients and dissatisfaction in the members of the nursing team<sup>(3)</sup>.

In this study, it was verified that the students' perception about nursing leadership is in line with management models that promote

the participation and appreciation of the team members to reach objectives. In such a way, communication, motivation, interaction and teamwork should be promoted; these characteristics of a leader were more pointed out by the interviewees. This is demonstrated in the fragments of the lines:

"Leadership in nursing for me is to know how to coordinate a team, to work as a team above all else and to help this team, do not maintain a position of authority, to be inserted into the team as a member of such and not as superior." (E1)

"(...) the characteristic of a good leader is when you are considerate, know how to charge, but also offer subsidies to achieve the objectives of the institution, the employees and is to know how to work in a team, mainly." (E10)

As exposed in the reports, a good leader must be consistent in communication so that team members are clear of the messages received and have the ability to influence the other, which will depend on numerous factors such as the work group and the institution. This situation implies the development of great challenges for the leader to promote a motivating environment and to raise awareness among individuals, thus achieving the objectives of the service<sup>(12)</sup>. It is considered that these characteristics are very important for the current leader, therefore, so that the academic is able to lead a team, it becomes necessary the development of these, as well as other characteristics during the academic formation.

The interviewees acknowledge that the improvement of the capacity to lead favors the development of the private activities for nurses, provided for in Law 7,498 of 1986 <sup>(1)</sup>, and that such competence should be developed during graduation, which can be proven in the following speech:

"So as it is based on the Law of Exercise, the law that governs our profession, which there are only assistants and technicians where there are nurses. So I think the nurse is inherent in their role as a leader. So you cannot see the role of the nurse without seeing their leadership role. (...) We cannot dissociate leadership from the role of the nurse." (E9)

Thus, it is considered that for the professional practice of nurses, the development of the competency to lead becomes paramount, since the leader has characteristics that facilitate their performance in front of a team, which are

indispensable for the fulfillment of the competences foreseen by the Law 7498 of 1986, which establishes the direction, planning, organization, coordination, execution and evaluation, among others, as private activities of the nurse<sup>(1)</sup>.

The National Curricular Guidelines for the Nursing Undergraduate Course also establish leadership among the skills and abilities to be achieved by the future nurse, which reinforces the idea that leadership should be incorporated into the whole teaching-learning process during graduation, a leadership, responsibility, empathy, ability to make decisions, communicate and manage effectively and effectively<sup>(2)</sup>.

The importance of the training of nurses to lead a team brings the need to improve this capacity even during graduation, since the leadership, as already expressed in the interviewees' speeches, is an inherent competence of nurses. However, the training of nurses remains based on the improvement of the techniques/procedures and that the development of skills and competencies that help them to lead ends up being removed from the learning process<sup>(7)</sup>.

Coordination, planning, decision making, supervision, and other skills are present in the interviewees' speeches when they refer to the nurse's leadership process. Such abilities can be seen in the following passages of speech:

"A good leader is not one who delegates functions but knows how to do them competently. (...) Then it would revolve around this concept of coordination, organization, and implementation of patient care." (E2)

"(...) Leadership in nursing is paramount because the nurse as a team supervisor has to be the leader of his team; he has to be an example to be followed." (E3)

Faced with this, being a leader is not just adopting a leadership posture, it also requires the acceptance of that leadership style by team members. Therefore, the leader must not have his own style, he needs to be adapted to the environment and the work team, developing the necessary skills to respect the individualities of the professionals and the reality of the service<sup>(13)</sup>.

It is understood that being a leader involves the process of choosing, so leadership is also considered a decision-making process, which can be learned in the activities developed in the curricular stage. The follow-up of the health service nurse allows trainees to understand how

the professional acts so that they can feel safe in the development of watching, managing, educating and researching activities in various work settings<sup>(14)</sup>.

### **The Daily Life of Leadership Development**

In order to develop the leadership, the academics reported to begin their insertion in the field with accompaniment of the nurse responsible for the sector/unit, from the identification of the unit of internship, to know and to achieve a relationship with each professional and to develop autonomy and credibility in front of the team, this strategy is clear from the following statements:

"I had nurses who helped me a lot, both in the 8<sup>th</sup> period, and in the 9<sup>th</sup>, they gave me credibility, accompanied me and over time the team saw me as a leader until adopting me as a reference."(E4)

In this perspective, it is observed that the curricular stage contributes to the formation of a critical view regarding the care provided and the reality of the nursing actuation scenario, allowing the association of theory and practice, both of which influence the formation of their identity<sup>(15)</sup>, which reveals the importance of the work team in which the trainee will be inserted, an objective of the curricular stage, which is a key part of the professional training process, since it contributes to greater or lesser use of the activities of the training<sup>(6)</sup>.

Some interviewees point out as facilitating characteristics for the development of the leadership in the stage the receptivity of the work team, the capacity to assume responsibilities, to share the knowledge, to have the skills for the decision making. Another motivating factor is the leadership development during the internship which is established as one of the performance evaluation criteria, as it can be seen in the following statements:

"At the internship I see my leadership because we are still in training, so one of the evaluation criteria also tells how it is to be a leader. So how do I do this? When I go to the technicians to ask if everything is okay, to talk to them: if there is any problem you can come to me. If you need any help, you may come and ask me."(E2)

"(...) being communicative, trying to have a quick and timely decision making, having attitude and skills at the same time." (E7)

It is noteworthy that the receptivity of the nursing team becomes essential for the trainee's development of activities, in which the support and reception of the health team are among the expectations of the students when they begin the internship. However, reception does not always take place as expected and academics are faced with situations that generate a contradiction between theory and practice, such as difficulty in relationship with the team, which may jeopardize the development of the curricular internship<sup>(16)</sup>.

When questioned about the difficulties encountered during the internship, the interviewees pointed out the problems of acceptance by the team, related to being a young and new member in the service, who have not completed their training yet, as well as issues of interpersonal relationship in the team, which delayed the process of insertion in the field and the development of leadership, what is clear in the speech fragment:

"Both the facilities and the difficulties will be in relation to the team because I find difficulties on the part of some nursing technicians in exercising this leadership because I think there is still a prejudice because you have not been trained yet." (E4)

It is understood that, based on the practical activities of the nursing undergraduate course, the academic students exercise their nursing skills through the contact with the reality of nursing practice, so they get confidence to adopt a professional attitude<sup>(17)</sup>. The internship becomes an indispensable bridge for professional training, integrating theoretical knowledge with practice, presenting to the experience of the future professional situations that they would only face at work<sup>(18)</sup>.

When describing the difficulties encountered during the internship, interviewees also put some strategies used to overcome such obstacles, for example, improving communication with the team, treating team members with greater respect, and substantiating their questions in order to multiply and to complement the knowledge. These strategies are described in the following speech:

"(...) I do not know the team, I do not know the personality of each one, but I can communicate well with people, so I think it can help me, it can make me easier in this leadership process. I can listen to people very well and to be quiet when I need to, but I can also speak when I

need to and I think this is a characteristic that a leader needs to have." (E1)

As it can be seen, the curricular internship of nursing graduation is essential for the academic and technical development of the academic students, which comes to collaborate with professional maturity, what can be hampered by the lack of opportunities during this period. This is related to the fact that in many situations the trainee is not included in the service as an integral part of the work team <sup>(4)</sup>. In order to face this situation, the participants of this study emphasized the need for the academic to be interested and with initiative so that the team can accept it, facilitating its insertion in the reality of nursing work and favoring the development of leadership.

Only one interviewee stated that they were unable to develop leadership during the internship due to the relationship difficulties between the nurse and staff members and they had not graduated. As you can see in the following speech:

"Unfortunately, at the internship, I think it is very difficult to develop leadership because before there was already much difficulty in developing leadership with the nurse and the instructors. A difficulty of relationship that the technicians had with the nurse and how I was a trainee nurse also there was some difficulty in my relationship with them. And now, we do not have autonomy because of the nurse, they cannot believe we can do that, of course we have a responsibility, but they do not give us the freedom to work in the sector. So I cannot develop that leadership in the sector."(E11)

The strategies used by early-career nurses to adopt a posture that shows dedication, creativity, curiosity, self-development, humility, daily activities development, the search for the help of more experienced professionals and the ability to seek information that clarify the team's inquiries<sup>(4,18)</sup>. However, in certain situations, the academic cannot effectively sensitize team members, even though resources and strategies are used to strengthen interpersonal relationships. It is inferred that this can be explained by relationship problems already existing in the service or due to the lack of maturity to deal with this situation, either for the short time that remains in the field or even for the non-acceptance of the employees of the presence service of the trainee.

### **Leadership Reflexes in the Nursing Team Work Process**

Confidence, autonomy, the exchange of knowledge and the insertion of the trainee in the service to the point that in certain situations this is the interlocutor between the technicians/assistants and the nurse, are among the trainees' perceptions of the reflexes of their leadership in the process of the team. Such perceptions are evident in the fragments of the lines:

"You notice this when the team gives you a return, that is, it starts to look for you, it starts to ask questions, seeing that you are not there as an enemy, that is to be working as a team, that is, the team is always resorting to you, showing interest, treating well, respecting you."(E6)

"I think now they are already inserting themselves in their context, they only asked me things, they already call me to help in some things. I believe I'm already being inserted into their work process."(E8)

When interviewees were asked if they wanted to add something more about the research topic, some students highlighted as a reflection of the leadership exercise the improvement in the quality of the assistance provided from a motivating environment and on the need for the theme to be transversal to the Nursing course, being worked throughout the development of the training, which can be perceived in the speeches of the interviewees:

"I think you as a leader are more than your job to stimulate people, to stimulate the team to rescue the will to be there. And for the patient even more: they are treating me well. They are taking good care of me; I see the quality of this service. So that will reflect a lot on the leader and in their role in knowing how to coordinate for everybody to leave satisfied by the service and to fulfill the objectives."(E2)

"It's a very relevant subject and I think it should be discussed more during graduation, not only in the disciplines of management, but that we see leadership in all disciplines." (E8)

The participants understand that the approach to the topic of leadership in graduation is essential and a great challenge, which should be constituted not only in the theoretical part, but its applicability in practice. It should be emphasized that there are still teachers who view the learner as devoid of any knowledge baggage, which makes the exercise of leadership even more difficult to develop during the training

period, since it disfavors the improvement of essential skills for a leader, such as communication, listening and to be listened, the ability to influence people, managing conflicts, making decisions, empathy, being an example, being at the front of a team, motivating, among others<sup>(7)</sup>.

Only the nursing curriculum internship is not able to form a professional who faces the demands of the current job market, newly formed nurses cannot be considered a ready and finished product, they need training, encouragement and participation to perform their job properly at work<sup>(18,19)</sup>. In the the job market, the newly formed nurse faces the urgent need to assume the leadership of the nursing team, thus the importance of leadership to be a cross-cutting topic in the undergraduate course and not treated as an isolated theme only in the subjects of Administration in Nursing.

After analyzing the participants' speeches, it can be inferred that nursing trainees can develop leadership, strengthening trust, autonomy and the exchange of knowledge, among other desirable behaviors to be included as part of the service team. It is expected that a leader will be able to bond with his or her team, be empathetic, be able to provoke inquiries and discussions about the work process, provide a more harmonious working environment, be able to manage the conflicts and that the decisions taken are in agreement with the team<sup>(19,20)</sup>.

In order to form the nurse with this profile, the professor assumes the role of facilitator, who needs to be sensitive to provoke in the student an awakening to the outcry of skills that favor the development of the competency to lead<sup>(6)</sup>. In this view, the formation of nurse-leaders depends on an education that fosters the teaching of leadership transversally in the curriculum, aiming at the development of a critical and reflective view of reality with beneficial changes to improve the current scenario<sup>(7)</sup>.

## FINAL THOUGHTS

The analysis of the study pointed out that the nursing students, participants of the study, have a perception about the exercise of leadership consistent with a competence essential to the nurse's role in their work process for valuing people.

It is noted that the intervening factors in the activities of curricular internship related to the leadership process are mainly related to the

problems of acceptance by the team, as well as interpersonal relationship issues, which delay the process of insertion in the field and the development of leadership. In everyday life, even if it is still incipient, academic students highlight the existence of reflections of their leadership in the team work process, since they serve as an example to the leaders, when they show responsibility and ethical commitment. These values guide their actions to promote quality care not only to patients, but also to the approach of the team.

Developing leadership is an increasingly important requirement for nurses, since in the labor market they will act in varied scenarios and assume the lead of a team for which they will respond. Thus, the nursing leader will work permanently with diversity and adversity, since people imprint individuality on what they do, thus giving rise to the first difficulties of leadership and ratifying their meaning when people are the focus of actions.

The present study presented results consistent with the nursing academicians' understanding of leadership as an inherent competence in the nurses' work process. The teaching of leadership in graduation is a challenge, since it must be constituted not only in the theoretical approach, but also with practical exercise.

We suggest studies that strengthen participatory teaching, in which the professor considers the student as endowed with knowledge and experiences that can aid in their learning for the development and improvement of leadership. It is necessary to apply this study to different types of educational institutions, since there may be a difference in the opinion of the academics, as well as the need to investigate the professor's view of leadership teaching, what are the challenges faced to assist the academic and rethink teaching strategies to develop the skills to exercise this competence.

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**Note:** Monograph to finish the course.

**Received in:** 16/04/2016

**Final version resubmitted on:** 25/04/2016

**Approved in:** 02/05/2017

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