

Knowledge of Ethical Principles among Student Nurses at Rivers State University: A Cross-Sectional Analysis

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ABSTRACT

Received: 03 Mar 2026

Accepted: 27 Mar 2026

Published: 06 Apr 2026

Ethical competence is a fundamental requirement in professional nursing practice, as it guides decision-making, promotes patient safety, and ensures adherence to professional standards in healthcare delivery. This study assessed the knowledge of ethical principles among student nurses in the Department of Nursing Science, Rivers State University. A descriptive cross-sectional research design was adopted for the study. The population comprised 410 undergraduate nursing students in Year 2, Year 3, and Year 4, from which a sample size of 202 respondents was determined using the Taro Yamane formula at a 0.05 margin of error. A convenience sampling technique was used to select the participants.

Data were collected using a researcher-designed electronic questionnaire, and reliability of the instrument was established using Cronbach's Alpha coefficient with a value of 0.68. A total of 202 questionnaires were distributed, out of which 191 were properly completed and returned, representing a response rate of 95.6%. Data obtained were analysed using the Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) version 27, employing descriptive statistics such as frequency, percentage, mean, and standard deviation.

Findings revealed that 49.2% of the respondents were below 20 years of age, while 67.5% were female. The assessment of students' knowledge of ethical principles showed mean scores ranging from 3.22 to 3.85, with a grand mean score of 3.39 (SD = 0.74), indicating a high level of knowledge of ethical principles among the respondents.

The study concluded that student nurses at Rivers State University possess adequate knowledge of ethical principles necessary for professional nursing practice in line with the standards of the Nursing and Midwifery Council of Nigeria. Continuous reinforcement of ethics education through academic and clinical training is recommended to enhance the application of ethical knowledge in clinical settings.

How to cite this article

Giadom, B. G., Orukwou, U., Oji, A. L., Obele, R. O., & George, B. I. (2026). Knowledge of ethical principles among student nurses at Rivers State University: A cross-sectional analysis. *International Journal of Global Health and Epidemiology*, 3(1), 56–62. <https://doi.org/10.54117/edx5yv71>

Keywords: Ethical principles, Nursing students, Knowledge, Professional ethics, Nursing practice.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Ethics is a fundamental component of professional nursing practice, guiding nurses in making sound decisions that promote patient welfare, dignity, respect, and justice (Varkey, 2021). The nursing profession, rooted in care, compassion, empathy, and advocacy, demands strict adherence to clearly defined ethical standards that regulate professional conduct, ensure accountability, and uphold patient-centered care in healthcare delivery (American Nurses Association, 2025). These ethical standards are essential in maintaining trust between healthcare providers and patients while also safeguarding the rights and well-being of individuals receiving care across diverse clinical settings. The core ethical principles in nursing—autonomy (respecting patients' right to self-determination), beneficence (acting in the patient's best interest), non-maleficence (avoiding harm), and justice (ensuring fairness and equitable distribution of healthcare resources)—form the foundation of ethical nursing practice (Beauchamp & Childress, 2019; Varkey, 2021). These principles guide nurses in making morally sound clinical judgments, especially when faced with challenging healthcare decisions that may affect patient outcomes. Additional ethical principles such as veracity (truth-telling), fidelity (keeping promises), and accountability further support nurses in navigating complex clinical situations, protecting patients' rights, and maintaining professional integrity within healthcare systems (Danaci et al., 2025; Wong et al., 2025). Together, these ethical values contribute to the delivery of safe, effective, and compassionate care.

In contemporary healthcare environments characterized by rapid technological advancement and increasing complexity of medical care, nurses frequently encounter ethical dilemmas related to informed consent, confidentiality, end-of-life decisions, allocation of limited healthcare resources, cultural sensitivity, and balancing patient autonomy with family or institutional pressures (Alanazi et al., 2024; Ibrahim et al., 2024; Udeh et al., 2025). These dilemmas often require nurses to make difficult decisions that involve weighing competing interests and moral obligations. Consequently, the need for robust ethical competence has become increasingly important to enable nurses respond appropriately to such challenges while upholding patients' rights and professional standards of practice (Wong et al., 2025).

The level of ethical knowledge and training acquired during professional education significantly influences nurses' ability to recognize and address ethical dilemmas effectively in clinical practice (Wen et al., 2025). Adequate ethical preparation equips nursing students with both theoretical understanding and practical skills necessary for responsible decision-making and

professional conduct (Cannaerts et al., 2014; Abuadas et al., 2025). It also enhances their capacity to apply ethical principles in real-life healthcare situations, thereby fostering critical thinking and moral reasoning that are essential for quality patient care. Nursing education institutions bear a critical responsibility in fostering ethical awareness and professional values among students through structured coursework, clinical exposure, mentorship, and the integration of ethical frameworks into teaching and learning processes (Robichaux et al., 2022; Baykara et al., 2015). In Nigeria, nursing education and practice are regulated by the Nursing and Midwifery Council of Nigeria, which provides a code of professional conduct that emphasizes patient-centered care, accountability, confidentiality, and adherence to ethical standards beginning from undergraduate training (Nursing and Midwifery Council of Nigeria, current). This regulatory framework ensures that nursing graduates are equipped with the moral and professional competencies required for effective healthcare delivery.

Despite ethics being embedded in nursing curricula, variations persist in students' understanding, internalization, and application of these principles in clinical practice. Factors including academic level, clinical exposure, teaching methods, personal values, and the existing gap between theoretical instruction and practical experience may significantly influence ethical knowledge and decision-making among nursing students (Alnajjar & Abou Hashish, 2021; Dosumu et al., 2024; Cho & Hwang, 2019). As a result, students may demonstrate adequate theoretical knowledge but encounter difficulties in applying ethical concepts effectively in real-life healthcare situations. At Rivers State University, the Department of Nursing Science offers a comprehensive five-year programme that integrates ethical training aligned with national standards to prepare students for professional nursing practice. However, empirical assessment of students' knowledge of ethical principles remains essential to evaluate the effectiveness of these educational objectives and identify potential areas for improvement within the training programme (Ko et al., 2024).

Strong ethical competence among nurses—who constitute a major segment of the healthcare workforce and are often at the forefront of patient care—directly impacts patient satisfaction, safety, quality of care, trust in healthcare providers, and reduction of professional misconduct. Therefore, assessing ethical knowledge among student nurses is vital in ensuring that future practitioners are adequately prepared to meet the ethical demands of clinical practice.

This study assesses the knowledge of ethical principles among student nurses at Rivers State University. By examining students' understanding of key ethical concepts, it aims to contribute to strengthening ethics education in nursing programmes, offering valuable insights for educators, administrators, and policymakers in preparing future nurses to meet the moral and professional demands of the nursing profession (Dosumu et al., 2024).

In summary, ethical knowledge remains indispensable in nursing practice as healthcare systems continue to evolve in complexity. Evaluating ethical awareness among nursing students is therefore essential for promoting professionalism, safeguarding patients' rights, and improving the overall quality of healthcare delivery.

2. METHODOLOGY

2.1 Research Design

A descriptive cross-sectional research design was adopted for this study. This design was considered appropriate because it allowed the researcher to assess and describe the knowledge of nursing ethics among student nurses at a specific point in time.

2.2 Area of Study

The study was conducted at the Department of Nursing Science, Rivers State University, Rivers State, Nigeria. The university offers a comprehensive five-year nursing programme aimed at equipping students with the necessary knowledge and clinical skills required for professional nursing practice. The Department of Nursing Science provides quality education through experienced faculty members and adequate learning facilities including classrooms, library services, hostels, and demonstration rooms. The programme aligns with the professional standards established by the Nursing and Midwifery Council of Nigeria.

2.3 Population of the Study

The study population comprised undergraduate nursing students in Year 2, Year 3, and Year 4 of the Department of Nursing Science. The population distribution included:

- Year 2: 125 students
- Year 3: 123 students
- Year 4: 109 students

This resulted in a total population of **410 students**.

2.4 Sample Size Determination

The sample size was determined using the Taro Yamane (1967) formula:

$$n = \frac{N}{1 + N(e)^2}$$

Where:

n = Sample size

N = Population size (410)

e = Margin of error (0.05)

$$n = \frac{410}{1 + 410(0.05)^2}$$

$$n = \frac{410}{1 + 410(0.0025)}$$

$$n = \frac{410}{1 + 1.025}$$

$$n = \frac{410}{2.025}$$

$$n = 202$$

Therefore, the calculated sample size for the study was **202 respondents**.

2.5 Sampling Technique

A convenience sampling technique was used to select 202 respondents from the total population of undergraduate nursing students. This technique was adopted due to its practicality in selecting participants who were readily available and willing to participate in the study.

2.6 Instrument for Data Collection

Data were collected using a researcher-designed electronic questionnaire developed based on relevant literature in line with the objectives of the study.

2.7 Validity of Instrument

The questionnaire was subjected to face and content validity by the research supervisor to ensure clarity, relevance, and appropriateness of the instrument in measuring the study variables.

2.8 Reliability of Instrument

The reliability of the instrument was determined using Cronbach's Alpha coefficient to assess internal consistency. A reliability coefficient of **0.68** was obtained, indicating that the instrument was reasonably reliable.

2.9 Method of Data Collection

A total of 202 electronic questionnaires were distributed to the selected respondents over a period of seven days. Clear instructions were provided, and the researcher supervised the process to ensure a high response rate.

2.10 Method of Data Analysis

Data obtained from the administered questionnaires were analysed using the Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) version 27. Descriptive statistics such as frequency distribution, percentages, mean scores, and standard deviations were used to analyse the data.

2.11 Ethical Considerations

Ethical approval was obtained from the Head of the Department of Nursing Science, Rivers State University. Participation in the study was voluntary, and informed consent was obtained from all respondents. Confidentiality and anonymity of participants were maintained throughout the study. Data collected were used strictly for academic purposes.

3. RESULTS

3.1 Data Presentation

The data and results for this study are analysed and reported in this chapter. This section of the study addressed the report on the field outcome of the investigation – entailing the distribution, retrieval, cleaning and coding of the data for the study. Drawing from the established sample of 202 level 200, 300, 400 and 500 Nursing Science Students in the Rivers State University, 202 electronic questionnaires were distributed accordingly and in proportion to their identified unit samples. Distribution and completion of questionnaire was budgeted for 7 days.

Out of the 202 expected respondents, only 191 finally participated in the exercise. This 191 responses of our digital questionnaires were collated and coded into the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) version 27. The distribution for the report is illustrated on table 1.

Table 1: Field Report

| S/No | Questionnaire Administration | Frequency | Percentage (%) |
|------|------------------------------|-----------|----------------|
| 1 | Number administered | 202 | 100 |
| 2 | Number that responded | 191 | 95.6 |
| 3 | Number of no response | 11 | 5.4 |

Source: Field Data, 2024.

4.2 Demographic Data Analysis

The analysis on the demographic data detailed the assessment of distributions using frequency and percentage tools. This builds on the categorical nature of the items and the nature of the data (discrete) examined. Items such as age, gender, current level and marital status. Tables and Charts were adopted for illustrations.

Age of Respondents

The distribution for the age of the participants as shown on table 2 and figure 1 indicates that there is a higher proportion of students whose age is below 20 years (49.2%) and this was followed by students whose age is between 20 years and 25 years (39.8%). The least group were students that were above 20 years of age (3.7%).

Table 2: Age of Respondents

| | | Age of Respondent | | | Cumulative Percent |
|-------|----------|-------------------|---------|---------------|--------------------|
| | | Frequency | Percent | Valid Percent | |
| Valid | Below 20 | 94 | 49.2 | 49.2 | 49.2 |
| | 20 – 25 | 76 | 39.8 | 39.8 | 89.0 |
| | 26 – 30 | 14 | 7.3 | 7.3 | 96.3 |
| | Above 30 | 7 | 3.7 | 3.7 | 100 |
| | Total | 191 | 100.0 | 100.0 | |

Source: SPSS Output, 2024

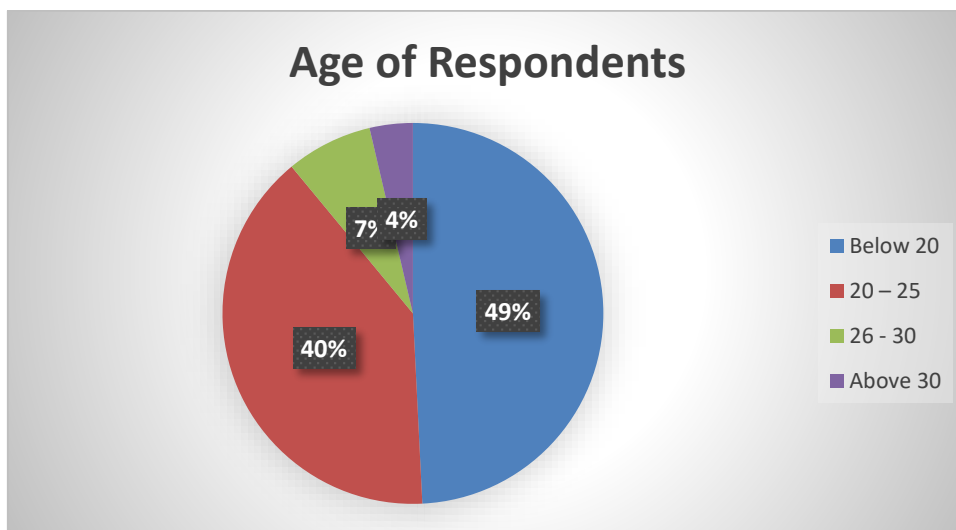


Figure 1 Age of respondents

Source: SPSS Output, 2024

Gender of participants

The distribution for the gender of the participants as shown on table 3 and figure 2 indicates that there is a higher proportion of female respondents (67.5%) compared to the proportion of male respondents (32.5%) at the Nursing Department, Rivers State University Port Harcourt. The percentage difference between the categories is about 35% and it suggest a substantial interest in female students in nursing science.

Table 3 Gender of the respondents

| | | Gender of Respondent | | | Cumulative Percent |
|-------|--------|----------------------|---------|---------------|--------------------|
| | | Frequency | Percent | Valid Percent | |
| Valid | Male | 62 | 32.5 | 32.5 | 32.5 |
| | Female | 129 | 67.5 | 67.5 | 100.0 |
| | Total | 191 | 100.0 | 100.0 | |

Source: SPSS Output, 2024

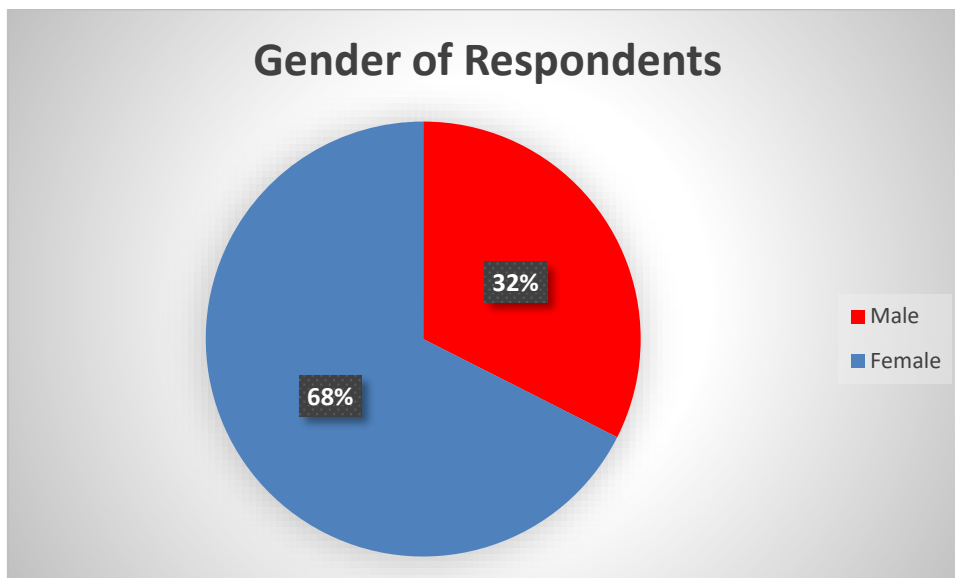


Figure 2 Gender of the participants

Source: SPSS Output, 2024

Nurses' knowledge of ethical principles in Rivers State University

Table 4 illustrates the response rates and frequency on the level of nurses' knowledge of ethical principles in Rivers State University measured on a 11-items instrument and scaled on a 4-point Likert scale where ten research statements were stated in the questionnaire. It also represented the accumulated sum from the respondents indicating the mean score and standard deviation. The items were to ascertain the level of nurses' knowledge of ethical principles in Rivers State University the results showed a mean score (\bar{x}) of 3.22, 3.32, 3.34, 3.35, 3.43, 3.22, 3.37, 3.85, 3.38, 3.34 respectively and Std. Dev. of 0.89, 0.77, 0.86, 0.63, 0.68, 0.84, 0.76, 0.55, 0.69 and 0.74 respectively, which shows a strong response rate level of nurses' knowledge of ethical principles in Rivers State University.

Table 4: Mean and Standard Deviation of Nurses' knowledge of ethical principles in Rivers State University

| S/NO | ITEMS | SA | A | DA | SDA | \bar{X} | Std. |
|------|---|-----|-----|----|-----|-------------|-------------|
| 1. | I am familiar with the ethical principles relevant to nursing practice | 87 | 73 | 17 | 14 | 3.22 | 0.89 |
| 2. | I can identify and define key ethical principles in nursing | 91 | 78 | 21 | 7 | 3.32 | 0.77 |
| 3. | Ethical principles are based on the human principles of right or wrong | 101 | 65 | 13 | 12 | 3.34 | 0.86 |
| 4. | Ethics are moral principles that control or influence a person's behavior | 79 | 102 | 7 | 3 | 3.35 | 0.63 |
| 5. | Autonomy allow patients to make their own decision to reject or accept | 100 | 77 | 11 | 3 | 3.43 | 0.68 |
| 6. | Beneficence is doing good and right to your patient | 83 | 77 | 21 | 10 | 3.22 | 0.84 |
| 7. | Non-maleficence is doing no harm to your patient | 102 | 60 | 27 | 2 | 3.37 | 0.76 |
| 8. | Justice means being fair when caring for your patient | 99 | 81 | 8 | 3 | 3.85 | 0.55 |
| 9. | Veracity is the act of telling patient the truth | 75 | 100 | 11 | 5 | 3.38 | 0.69 |
| 10. | Fidelity is the act of being faithful to your professional practice | 89 | 85 | 10 | 7 | 3.34 | 0.74 |
| | Grand Mean/SD | | | | | 3.39 | 0.74 |

Source: Field Survey Data, 2024

4. DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

The discussion section of this study, which assessed the knowledge of ethical principles among undergraduate nursing students at Rivers State University, reveals a commendable level of understanding, as evidenced by the grand mean score of 3.39 (SD = 0.74) on a 4-point Likert scale across the 10-item instrument. This score, falling in the "agree" to "strongly agree" range, indicates that the majority of respondents possessed a solid theoretical grasp of core ethical principles, including autonomy (M = 3.43), beneficence (M = 3.22), non-maleficence (M = 3.37), justice (M = 3.85), veracity (M = 3.38), and fidelity (M = 3.34). The highest mean for justice (3.85, SD = 0.55) underscores a particularly strong recognition of fairness in patient care, reflecting an appreciation for equitable treatment irrespective of patients' backgrounds. These findings suggest that the nursing curriculum at Rivers State University effectively integrates ethical education, aligning with the regulatory mandates of the Nursing and Midwifery Council of Nigeria (NMCN), which emphasizes ethical conduct from undergraduate training onward.

This high level of ethical knowledge is consistent with several recent studies on nursing students' ethical awareness. For instance, in a cross-sectional study of undergraduate nursing students in a private Nigerian university, moderate academic ethical awareness was reported with a mean score of 3.68 (SD = 0.81) on a similar Likert scale, particularly strong in areas like confidentiality and patient respect (Dosumu et al., 2024). Similarly, international research has shown mean scores in the moderate to high range for ethical principles and moral sensitivity among nursing students, often attributed to structured ethics training (Danacı et al., 2025; Alnajjar & Abou Hashish, 2021). The grand mean of 3.39 in the present study compares favorably, indicating that public university students in Nigeria, like their private counterparts, benefit from curriculum-embedded ethics content. However, variations in specific principles—such as the relatively lower score for beneficence (3.22)—may highlight areas where students prioritize "doing no harm" and fairness over proactive "doing good," a pattern observed in other contexts where students demonstrate stronger awareness of protective principles (non-maleficence and justice) than interventional ones (beneficence) (Varkey, 2021).

The demographic profile further contextualizes these results. With 67.5% female respondents and 49.2% under 20 years old (plus 39.8% aged 20–25), the sample mirrors the female-dominated and youthful composition typical of nursing education globally and in Nigeria (Dosumu et al., 2024). Younger students, often in formative academic stages, may exhibit heightened receptivity to ethics instruction through classroom lectures, clinical simulations, and mentorship. This aligns with evidence that early and continuous exposure to ethical frameworks during undergraduate training enhances moral reasoning and knowledge retention (Baykara et al., 2015; Cannaerts et al., 2014). The predominance of females may also contribute, as some studies suggest gender influences ethical sensitivity, with females occasionally scoring higher in relational aspects like veracity and fidelity (Cho & Hwang, 2019).

Despite the positive findings, the results must be interpreted cautiously. While theoretical knowledge appears robust, the gap between knowing ethical principles and applying them in practice remains a concern in nursing education. Factors such as clinical workload, inadequate supervision, resource constraints, and real-world pressures can hinder translation of knowledge into action (Ochasi et al., 2025). In Nigerian contexts, studies have identified gaps in applying ethical knowledge during clinical placements, where students encounter dilemmas like informed consent and resource allocation (Dosumu et al., 2024; Ochasi et al., 2025). The high response rate (95.6%) and low non-response (5.4%) strengthen the reliability of these findings, but the reliance on self-reported Likert-scale data introduces potential social desirability bias, where students may overstate their knowledge to align with expected professional norms.

These results have broad implications for nursing education and practice in Nigeria. Strong ethical knowledge equips future nurses—who often serve as frontline caregivers—to navigate complex dilemmas, uphold patient rights, and foster trust in healthcare systems. However, to bridge the theory-practice divide, curricula should incorporate more experiential methods, such as case-based discussions, role-playing simulations, and reflective journaling, which have been shown to boost ethical sensitivity and application (Wen et al., 2025; Robichaux et al., 2022). Institutions like Rivers State University could enhance ethics training by integrating NMCN code of conduct scenarios into clinical rotations and providing ongoing mentorship to reinforce principles like autonomy and justice in real settings.

Moreover, the findings highlight the need for targeted interventions in weaker areas (e.g., beneficence) and ongoing assessment to monitor knowledge retention across academic levels. Factors influencing ethical awareness—such as teaching methods, clinical exposure, and personal values—warrant further exploration, as they moderate the transition from knowledge to competent practice (Alnajjar & Abou Hashish, 2021). Strengthening ethics education ultimately reduces misconduct risks, improves patient safety, and elevates care quality in Nigeria's evolving healthcare landscape.

In conclusion, student nurses at Rivers State University exhibit a high level of knowledge of ethical principles, reflecting effective curriculum design and alignment with national standards. This positions graduates well for ethical professional practice, though sustained efforts in experiential learning and bridging theoretical-practical gaps are essential to fully realize these competencies. Future research could employ longitudinal designs or observational methods to evaluate application in clinical environments, contributing to evidence-based enhancements in nursing ethics education.

Overall Interpretation of Findings

Overall, the findings of this study indicate that student nurses at Rivers State University possess a commendable level of knowledge regarding ethical principles in nursing practice. This reflects the effectiveness of the nursing education programme in preparing students to meet professional ethical standards in clinical practice as stipulated by the Nursing and Midwifery Council of Nigeria. Strengthening the translation of ethical knowledge into practice will ultimately enhance professional accountability, improve patient outcomes, and promote quality healthcare delivery within the healthcare system.

5. CONCLUSION

This study examined the knowledge of ethical principles among student nurses in the Department of Nursing Science, Rivers State University. Based on the findings obtained from the data analysis, it can be concluded that undergraduate nursing students demonstrated a high level of knowledge of fundamental ethical principles guiding professional nursing practice.

The respondents showed adequate understanding of key ethical concepts such as autonomy, beneficence, non-maleficence, justice, veracity, and fidelity, which are essential in promoting quality patient care and maintaining professional standards in healthcare delivery. This outcome reflects the effectiveness of the nursing education curriculum in exposing students to ethical

guidelines necessary for responsible clinical practice in line with the regulatory standards of the Nursing and Midwifery Council of Nigeria.

Ethical competence is a vital component of nursing professionalism, as it enhances decision-making, accountability, and respect for patients' rights. The findings of this study therefore suggest that student nurses at Rivers State University are being adequately prepared to uphold ethical standards in their future professional roles.

Nevertheless, continuous reinforcement of ethical training through academic instruction and clinical mentorship remains necessary to ensure that ethical knowledge is translated into appropriate professional conduct in real-life healthcare settings. Strengthening ethics education will ultimately contribute to improved patient outcomes, professional integrity, and quality healthcare service delivery.

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