

Improving Alberta's Registration Process for Internationally Educated Nurses

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The *Learning from Experience: Improving the Process of Internationally Educated Nurses' Application for Registration* research project, which was led by the College and Association of Registered Nurses of Alberta (CARNA), was the first study to use quantitative data to determine which characteristics of internationally educated nurse (IEN) applicants lead to successful nursing licensure. The analysis from the project led to the development of registration policies and processes that can bridge the gaps between IEN competencies and those competencies required by the licensing body in Alberta, Canada. This article describes those policies and processes—which include an assessment criteria checklist and new timelines for IEN applications—and how they were developed. These changes align with the *Pan-Canadian Framework for the Assessment and Recognition of Foreign Qualifications*.

Keywords: Alberta nurse licensure requirements, internationally educated nurses, nursing policy

Little research evidence is available to inform the licensure and registration process of internationally educated nurses (IEN). Of the research that does exist, much of it focuses on the cultural adaptation of the applicant to their new country, primarily as it relates to employment (Blythe, Baumann, Rhéaume, & McIntosh, 2009; Sherman & Eggenberger, 2008; Spetz, Gates, & Jones, 2014; Walani, 2013; Xu, Zaikina-Montgomery, & Shen, 2010). Several reviews of the policies and practices used by Canadian nursing regulatory bodies that have been published (Jeans, Hadley, Green & Da Prat, 2005; Ogilvie, Leung, Gushuliak, McGuire & Burgess, 2007) revealed major challenges with Canada's capacity to assess and integrate IENs. The issues identified were similar to those recognized by the College and Association of Registered Nurses of Alberta (CARNA); for example, the lengthy and complex processes in most jurisdictions. However, the work did not include a review of the application data itself, or propose specific solutions other than to recommend better communication between stakeholders. Ogilvie and her colleagues recognized the tensions related to IEN licensure and noted some of this is related to key differences among IENs depending on their country of origin. For example, those applicants who speak English and who are from countries where documents such as transcripts are easy to retrieve have some advantage in the process. Overall, the literature does not include analysis of actual application data.

Background of Original Research Project

The *Learning from Experience: Improving the Process of Internationally Educated Nurses' Application for Registration* (LFE) research project,

which was led by CARNA, was the first study to use quantitative data to determine which characteristics of internationally educated nurse (IEN) applicants lead to successful nursing licensure. The complete data analysis findings from the LFE research project are described in detail in a report by CARNA (2015). In that study, a baseline statistical analysis was conducted using data from 3,504 IEN applications received at CARNA between January 1, 2008, and December 31, 2011. Information presented by IENs on the applications was analyzed to determine which characteristics were associated with advancement toward obtaining professional licensure. The analysis also enabled a longitudinal understanding of the timelines of applicant progress throughout the process.

The LFE study found that strong indicators of success in the IEN application process were education in a country where the scope of nursing practice is similar to that in Canada, a degree similar to an Alberta baccalaureate degree, and 1,125 hours of practice or graduation within 5 years of the application (known as "currency of practice"). Data also showed that decisions on applications at the initial stage of assessment were confirmed by a majority pass rate on the national entry-to-practice examination. Another key finding from the LFE study was that applicants proceeded through the IEN application process in 656 days on average (College of Registered Nurses of Alberta, 2015).

The results of the data analysis from the LFE research project led to the development of registration policies and processes that can identify and manage any gaps between IEN competencies and those competencies required by the licensing body in Alberta, Canada. This paper describes those policies and processes—which include an assessment criteria checklist and new timelines for IEN applications—and how they were developed.

Exploring Data Analysis Findings

Stakeholders from CARNA involved in the IEN process, the University of Alberta, and Mount Royal University came together as a research team to determine how the findings from the LFE research project could inform changes to IEN application policies and practices. Participants engaged in 19 sessions facilitated by the research project coordinator, who focused the discussion on developing policy and practice changes. The changes had to be feasible within the study timeframe and with the available resources. External legal counsel reviewed proposed changes to policies and practices before they were finalized.

The IEN Application Process Before the LFE Project

Before the LFE project changes, an IEN applicant applied directly to CARNA by submitting an application form and supporting documents, such as transcripts, documentation of experience, registration verifications, and English language test results. CARNA used the information to complete an initial assessment and make eligibility decisions based on the applicant's education and experience. This initial assessment typically led to one of three outcomes:

- The applicant was deemed temporary permit (TP) eligible—that is, eligible for a TP to practice as a graduate nurse to obtain a satisfactory reference from an Alberta employer based on at least 225 hours of work experience and to write and pass the national entry-to-practice examination, both of which are required to be eligible for an initial RN registration. After successful completion of the examination within the allotted number of attempts and the receipt of a positive employment reference, the applicant could apply for RN registration.
- CARNA required further information about the applicant's competencies, and the applicant was referred to a substantially equivalent competency (SEC) assessment. The SEC assessment determines whether an applicant has the required entry-to-practice competencies to fulfill the roles and responsibilities of RNs in Alberta. Using multiple-choice and short-answer examinations, interview-based case management situations, clinical laboratory role-play situations, and self-assessment, the SEC assessment evaluates professional knowledge, skills, attributes, values, and judgments. It also identifies competency gaps and their extent. If gaps exist, bridging education may be required before the applicant can become TP eligible. IEN applicants can attend one to ten courses offered by a provincial university that include courses aimed at helping students understand the Canadian nursing context, as well as specialty courses (see Table 1). These courses compose a program designed to bridge gaps in nursing competencies.
- The applicant was deemed ineligible to proceed.

New Policy and Practice Changes

Based on the data findings and facilitated sessions, the project research team developed and implemented changes to the IEN application for registration policy. Practice changes for managing bridging education—which are courses required by CARNA designed to bridge gaps in competencies between those acquired by the applicant through experience and education and those required for entry-to-practice in Alberta—initial assessment of applications, and communication documents were also developed.

Bridging Education Option

In addition to the three primary initial assessment outcomes that were used in the pre-LFE IEN application process, the research team developed a fourth outcome, which provides certain applicants with the option to proceed directly to bridging education without having to complete an SEC assessment. This decision was based on the LFE project finding that 72.4% of IEN applicants were referred to an SEC assessment, and 70.8% of those who completed the SEC assessment were consequently required to complete bridging education.

The LFE project analysis also found the time between referral to SEC assessment and the time CARNA received the assessment results was 354 days—one of the longer phases of the process. The research team decided that making the change to offer applicants the option of proceeding to bridging education without the SEC assessment could reduce the overall time from application to registration. Also, providing fewer SEC assessments could reduce the resources required to conduct these expensive assessments. The option also aligns with feedback received from IENs during stakeholder consultations.

Applicants choosing the new fourth option must complete the full bridging program consisting of 10 courses. Applicants who choose to forego this option and who do not successfully complete the SEC assessment may be required to complete certain courses or the full bridging program (See Table 1). Occasionally, an SEC assessment will indicate gaps larger than might be mitigated by bridging education and will be deemed ineligible at this stage.

Before the LFE project, CARNA oversaw an applicant's progression through the bridging education process. After the SEC assessment review, CARNA notified the applicant and educational institution regarding the required courses. The educational institution coordinated and taught the courses and notified CARNA of their completion. If the applicant experienced challenges, such as failing prerequisite courses or having difficulty meeting the English language requirement, possibly indicating wider gaps in competency than previously assessed, CARNA modified the course requirements to address the challenge (for example, requiring additional courses or a more comprehensive course).

Through the facilitated discussions, CARNA acknowledged that education management is not within the scope of

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