

Reducing the Learning Recognition Gap for Internationally Educated Nurses (IENs): Leading Change through Prior Learning Assessment and Recognition (PLAR)

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The Case for Assessing IEN Preparation

Recent studies warn that Canada will face a critical shortage of as many as 113,000 registered nurses by 2016, in part due to retirement projections in the profession and the downsizing of educational programs and cutbacks in employment opportunities for registered nurses over the past decade. At the same time, health care workers with skills and experience such as nurses with international credentials are seeking pathways that would help them to prepare for registered nursing practice in Canada and Alberta.

Addressing the issue of nursing shortages and easing the pathway for individuals to achieve the requirements for Registered Nurse practice in Canada is an important goal for both the Canadian government and the professional nursing community. The Government of Canada has identified the need to develop and employ people more fully in Canada as a means to build a strong skilled workforce. Concurrently, internationally educated nurses (IENs) who have made the move to Canada are seeking programs that would prepare them for registered nursing practice in Canada but currently receive little or no recognition for prior education and experience. Prior Learning Assessment and Recognition (PLAR) has been suggested as a means to reduce the learning recognition gap that exists in Canada and meet the shortage of skilled workers.

Mount Royal Researches PLAR for IEN's

Prior Learning Assessment and Recognition (PLAR) has been acknowledged as a key educational innovation that helps to facilitate the progression of candidates in their learning, meet urgent and relevant labour market demands and enhance efficiencies in teaching, learning and administration of educational programming. A report by Bloom & Grant (2001) for The Conference Board of Canada suggests that there are economic benefits from recognizing prior learning in Canada for immigrants who have gained prior learning through their previous training and work. A review of the benefits of prior learning recognition strongly suggests that recognition of learning is an important strategy for developing and employing people fully and that, if ignored, the "learning recognition gap" results in significant economic and social costs and consequences.

PLAR is a key innovation to facilitate the advancement of nurses from diverse backgrounds and levels of academic preparation. PLAR is a process for assessing an individual's abilities, skills, and knowledge acquired through life and work experiences as well as formal learning experiences. It is an important strategy for understanding individual needs in areas such as professional disciplines where there is considerable diversity. Mount Royal College in Calgary, Alberta recently conducted a research study to demonstrate the impact of a comprehensive, systematic method of PLAR to accelerate the preparation and employment of IENs into the labour force. Mount Royal College led the PLAR Research Project, funded by Human Resources Skills Development Canada (HRSDC), working with selected nursing schools and professional associations across the country on the design, development, and implementation of innovative PLAR tools and strategies for assessing professional nursing practice. Results of this project have national implications. Reports are available at (<http://www.acad.mtroyal.ca/plarproject/en/plar/reports.php>).

Results of the research suggest:

IENs share common barriers in seeking registered nursing licensure. IENs are presented with a complicated system of attaining the information they need to determine how to proceed to licensure. It takes too long and too much money to acquire the necessary language, skill and knowledge and IENs are frustrated by the limited recognition they receive for prior education and experience (McGuire, 2003; McGuire & Murphy, 2005).

Assessment strategies must be comprehensive. IENs demonstrate great variability in knowledge and skills due to differences in basic education and scope of practice. Individualized PLAR processes consume time and expensive faculty resources. However, the research determines that, despite its cost, individualized assessment is essential. Our best information came from an analysis of a totality of measures which provided a comprehensive picture of the IENs skill, knowledge and abilities. The assessments progress from language assessment, to a series of preliminary diagnostic tests of nursing knowledge, to assessment of “real-world” nursing competency by way of clinical lab assessment, using complex case management and modified OSCE (objective simulated clinical exam) testing.

Lack of language and communication fluency limit accuracy of assessments. Without first ensuring language fluency it is impossible for a system of PLAR to detect whether ‘deficiencies’ in candidates are due to actual nursing knowledge and skill deficits or to insufficient language skills. The language training typically offered to new immigrants to Canada provides general, not discipline-specific language, and offers only basic language skills (typically levels 1 to 4 on the Canadian Language Benchmark scale of 1 to 12), which is insufficient for the complex demands of nursing practice. For most candidates, it is necessary to provide nursing-specific language upgrading before they are ready to undergo an assessment process of their skills and knowledge that could be said to have any measure of reliability.

Recognition and funding of PLAR processes is necessary. Recognition for PLAR itself continues to be a challenge due to the ‘system’ difficulties such as acknowledging PLAR credits on transcripts and in convincing accreditation and program approval boards to recognize, fund and simplify processes that incorporate prior learning recognition.

Personal resources of IEN candidates are often limited. Financial, family and other concerns often present sources of considerable stress for candidates as they make the transition to new communities and the expectations of practice in a new country. Personal support and case management approaches might include the offer of peer learning opportunities, workshops and professional development, study groups, examination preparation, mentoring, family and financial support, and employment readiness skills. Financing assessment, language and professional upgrading can represent significant barriers to IENs.

Liaison with regulatory and employing bodies is essential. Working closely with the professional association for nursing in Alberta and with the Calgary Health Region nursing management was essential to the success of the project in meeting legislative requirements and gaining support for the referral, assessment, reporting outcomes and determining remediation necessary.
<http://www.acad.mtroyal.ca/plarproject/en/plar/reports.php>

Research Outcomes: IEN Assessment Service and Bridging Education Program

Outcomes of the PLAR research and demonstration project (2003 – 2006) at Mount Royal College were twofold: first, the development of an IEN Assessment Centre and second, the development of the Bridge to Canadian Nursing (BCN) education program. The Assessment Centre provides a service to the College and Association of Registered Nurses of Alberta (CARNA), to assess the substantial equivalent competencies (SEC) of IENs who have applied to the profession for licensure in preparation for entry into nursing practice in Alberta. The BCN Program is built to recognize the need for a flexible education program that can be tailored to meet the varied knowledge and skill gaps of IENs. Funding for these projects was obtained from provincial sources.

The Assessment Centre is closely affiliated with the provincial nursing regulatory body (CARNA), the undergraduate nursing program at Mount Royal College and the Chief Nursing Office of the Calgary Health Region (CHR) to ensure that nursing practice and the related assessments remain current and conform to the expectations of candidates entering practice in nursing.

The Assessment Centre and its system of assessment:

- Facilitates assessment of IEN candidates against language standards and assess national nursing competencies and determine each nurse's preparedness to provide safe, ethical and competent nursing care according to the standards of Canadian practice.
- Enables candidates to gain recognition for knowledge and skills they have already acquired.
- Determines the kind of preparation that will best enable a candidate to make the transition into the roles and expectations of Canadian nursing practice.
- Determines and communicates the IEN competencies to the provincial association who in turn recommend remediation if necessary.

Description of the Assessment Process

The competency assessment consists of a number of elements:

- a. English language fluency assessment of nursing-specific language skills
- b. Preliminary diagnostic assessment of general nursing knowledge
- c. On-line competency self-assessment
- d. Objective Structured Clinical Exam (OSCE)
- e. Critical thinking competency
- f. Triple Jump examinations
- g. Clinical assessments

Level One Assessment: Assessment of Language Fluency in the Nursing Domain

The assessment process: The first component of the assessment process addresses language skills. A comprehensive assessment process has been developed based on a process developed and refined at Algonquin College in Ottawa and benchmarked to the Canadian Language Benchmark levels. The assessment process itself is designed to evaluate candidates for significant English language gaps in areas of reading, writing, speaking and listening, as well gaps in "nursing-specific" language skills that would make it problematic for them to function safely in clinical nursing practice in Canada. Decisions then would be made with the candidate regarding recommendations for placement in further language courses, if required, to upgrade their 'Nursing-English' skills. These remediation courses have been developed at Mount Royal College, using nursing faculty from the Undergraduate Nursing Program and instructional personnel from the Languages Institute. Once candidates are sufficiently prepared for evaluation of their communicative fluency, they are tested. Language testing necessitates the partnership of the program with tests sites for the Canadian English Language Benchmark Assessment for Nurses (CELBAN) or the Canadian Languages Benchmark (CLB) examination.

Level Two Assessment: Assessment of Nursing Knowledge and Skills

The assessment process: A prior learning assessment (PLA) of nursing theory and experiential knowledge is conducted by way of a set of preliminary diagnostic exams. This initial diagnostic process allows for the assessment and 'diagnosis' of candidates to identify areas of strength and, most importantly, areas of deficit. Assessments focus on identifying strengths and limitations in the depth or breadth of pharmacology and pharmacology /math knowledge, knowledge of health assessment expected of nurses practicing in Canada, basic medical-surgical nursing knowledge, nursing practice standards, ethics and scope of practice, communication skills, knowledge of safety with regard to basic and advanced technical skills and use of health-related technology, and use of the basic nursing process. It is intended to provide direction to the assessor and the candidate as to general, foundational knowledge of the candidate as well as information about significant knowledge gaps.

Level Three Assessment: Assessment of Nursing Competencies

The assessment process: This level assesses the readiness of candidates to write the Canadian Registered Nurse Examination (CRNE) and to be evaluated against the standards of safe practice for nurses practicing in Canada. The entry-to-practice competencies of the CRNE and the College and Association of Registered Nurses of Alberta's are used as a benchmark for assessment (see List of Competencies for the 2005-2009 CRNE, November 2004). This series of assessments includes critical thinking and nursing judgment scenarios and modified Objective Structured Clinical Examinations (OSCE). Once candidates feel confident of their knowledge and skills, they are assessed for readiness to practice, by way of a series of clinical 'case management'-based assessment processes. This assessment process uses the modified OSCE format as well as clinical judgment and decision-making assessments and allows for 'triangulated' valid and reliable evaluations of skills, knowledge, critical thinking and professional practice decisions. Once the candidate has been assessed as safe and, further, is eligible for temporary licence, the option exists for a final assessment of their competency to practice to be conducted in a "real-world" clinical practice setting. Again the partnership with the Calgary Health Region provides access to expert clinical examiners and the potential for clinical placement sites and supervision.

Candidates are provided with a number of practice opportunities to self-assess their knowledge and skills with regard to the competencies using on-line content and case studies that allow for the integration of more complex problem-solving and decision-making. On-line self-assessments and further information regarding the competencies can also be accessed by participants to help them to ready themselves to write the national RN licensure examination.

Addressing the Knowledge Recognition Gap

Generally, the benefits of both the Assessment service and the BCN program have begun to address the knowledge recognition gap for IENs. Studies indicate that there are increasing numbers of qualified immigrants with a professional nursing credential already resident in Alberta who require programs that assist them to meet Canadian professional qualifications. It is widely known that the projected need for qualified nurses is a concern to health regions across the province, including the Calgary region (Nursing Advisory Council of Alberta and Alberta Workforce Planning, 2004). Indicators from CARNA suggest that the majority of "international" nurses exploring the credentialing process and nursing licensure in Alberta are resident in the Calgary region. The Calgary Health Region (Chief Nursing Office) and CARNA work in a "collaborative partnership" with Mount Royal College on the project to offer expert guidance in the identification of substantial equivalent competency (SEC) requirements, and the proffering and monitoring of appropriate clinical placement sites for evaluation of candidates. The participation of these two organizations helps to draw together the employment experience of the region and the licensing function of the professional association.

Mount Royal College's program of assessment and preparation for nursing employment is congruent with the "human capital" mandates of all levels of governments as it recognizes and builds on the skills and experiences of professionals with international credentials, supporting them to integrate into the Canadian health care setting, preparing them to contribute to the professions in which they've been trained, and better integrating them into our workplaces and communities. Both the IEN Assessment Service and the Bridging Education Program have been built on the extensive research base developed through the Prior Learning Assessment and Recognition Research Project, a 1.5 million dollar project, funded by HRSDC between 2003 and 2006. The goal of the research project was to create and evaluate a system of PLAR that enabled candidates to gain recognition for their previous learning and work experience and reduce the length of time required for professional preparation and secondly, develop a set of best PLAR practices in the field of professional nursing that would serve as a resource or prototype for institutions and jurisdictions across Canada. Mount Royal College has proposed a second project to support and extend the work that has already been done in Alberta to build capacity in other jurisdictions of Canada.

PLAR Facilitates Movement to Substantial Equivalent Competency Assessments

Mount Royal College has been working closely with the College and Association of Registered Nurses of Alberta (CARNA) as well as the Department of Public Policy of the Canadian Nurses Association (CNA) to develop a program of assessment of the internationally educated nurse that has applicability to the current nursing workforce planning and licensing initiatives at both provincial and national levels.

Changes to provincial legislation and licensing practices of health professionals, including Registered Nurses, mean that the review of applications for registration will increasingly focus on substantial equivalent competencies (SEC) of the applicant in the practice of the profession instead of past practice of assessment of equivalence related to educational credentials. In order to accommodate the move to SEC as a marker for the licensing process, the CNA has recommended a regulatory framework to the jurisdictions based on an assessment of both credentials and competencies; this would include, in their words, an “assessment of the capacity to practice nursing” (CNA, 2005). At the jurisdictional level in Alberta, just as one example, the new Health Professions Act legislation indicates that an applicant may demonstrate competence in the practice of the profession by “satisfying the registrar, the registration committee, or competence committee, of having, as determined in accordance with the regulations, a combination of education, experience, practice or other qualifications, that demonstrates the competence required for registration as a regulated member “ (Government of Alberta, 2007) A Prior Learning Assessment and Recognition (PLAR) process provides a method by which applicants can be reliably assessed for nursing competence. At both provincial and national nursing levels, this project is being recognized for its outcomes and its potential contribution to the issue of licensing internationally educated nurses.

Building Capacity in Western and Northern Canada

Recently, Mount Royal College was invited to lead a million dollar, three-year collaborative project, funded by Health Canada to build the capacity of other jurisdictions in Canada (Manitoba, Saskatchewan, British Columbia, Yukon, Northwest Territories and Nunavut) in three areas: IEN orientation information, assessment services and essential remediation programs. As well the Nova Scotia provincial health ministry is exploring the option of brokering Mount Royal College’s assessment service and BCN program. The need to fill our labour shortage in nursing requires us to develop systems that facilitate the journey of IENs to RN licensure. Providing a reliable and valid assessment service that recognizes competencies and identifies gaps will reduce the knowledge recognition gap for IENs in Canada. Moreover, offering a flexible education program that is tailored to individual remediation needs will reduce costs and time for the IENs to fulfill their career goals. Incorporating more competent IENs into the Canadian Health Care system will have multiple benefits for all.

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