



ALBERTA NETWORK OF IMMIGRANT WOMEN

**ACCESS TO LICENSURE FOR
INTERNATIONALLY EDUCATED NURSES**

FOLLOW-UP STUDY

May – August 2005

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Access to Licensure for Internationally Educated Nurses - Follow-Up Study

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Executive Summary

In 2002, the Alberta Network of Immigrant Women completed a research project that identified issues surrounding “Access to Licensure for Foreign Qualified Nurses” and made recommendations to address potential barriers. In May 2005 a follow-up study has been conducted to determine what progress has been made on the 2002 recommendations.

The follow-up study found a strong commitment among stakeholder groups to address identified barriers to licensure access. A broad range of targeted actions and initiatives have been undertaken over the past two years. Some of the most significant changes and improvements include:

Canadian English Language Benchmark Assessment for Nurses (CELBAN): Introduction of a new English language assessment for nurses that is specifically targeted to language requirements in the health care system. CELBAN includes a free online self-assessment to support nurses who are preparing for the examination.

AARN Application Package Review: undertaken in collaboration with the Alberta Network of Immigrant Women and with the Filipino Nurses Association in Alberta, to make the licensing application package more user-friendly for Internationally Educated Nurses.

Health Professions Act: It is anticipated that this new act will positively impact the nurse licensure application process.

Nursing Refresher Program: Enhancements and additions to the program specifically address some of the challenges faced by Internationally Educated Nurses. Some of the changes include enhanced language/communication components, additional courses targeted to the Internationally Educated Nurse and a new approach to practice placements.

Prior Learning Assessment and Recognition research project: The objective of this research project is to establish reliable and valid assessment tools to assist in evaluating the readiness of applicants educated outside of Canada to practice as a Registered Nurse in Canada.

Canadian Registered Nurses Examination (CRNE) enhancements: The Canadian Nurses Association has developed several enhancements to support nurses in successfully completing the CRNE. These include the inclusion of both short answer and multiple choice questions on the examination, the CRNE Prep Guide available in both print and CD-ROM format, and the LeaRN CRNE Readiness Test available online.

Canadian Nursing Association National Study: Human Resources and Skills Development Canada has provided funding to the Canadian Nurses Association to lead

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the diagnostic phase of the Internationally Educated Nurses Project, a Canada wide study intended to improve credentials assessment and recognition processes for Internationally Educated Nurses. The first phase of the study has resulted in a report titled “Navigating to Become a Nurse in Canada” which identifies the challenges and barriers in the nurse licensure process in Canada.

Immigrant Access Fund: In Calgary, the Alberta Network of Immigrant Women has founded a new loans program for Internationally Educated Immigrants. The program is structured such that the Calgary Foundation receives donor funds and the Mennonite Central Committee Employment Development administers the loans program.

Conclusions

Key informants generally agreed that it is too early to determine the impact of the changes, improvements and special projects described in this report. Overall, the licensure process remains complex and expensive. Although the systemic changes made over the last two years are positive, they do not appear to have significantly streamlined the RN licensing process for Internationally Educated Nurses.

Ongoing collaborative participation and commitment of key stakeholders at the local, provincial and national level is required in order to continue to improve access to licensure for Internationally Educated Nurses.

As access to licensure improves, next steps might include more research into the licensed Internationally Educated Nurse’s successful transition to employment. ANIW is committed to continuing its work with stakeholders to ensure that Internationally Educated Nurses are well positioned to contribute their expertise within the Canadian health care system.

Recommendations

1. Continue stakeholder networking and collaboration in addressing the issues and barriers facing Internationally Educated Nurses.
2. Increase dissemination of information on program enhancements and changes that support and improve access to licensure for Internationally Educated Nurses.
3. Conduct follow-up research to assess the impact of the program enhancements and changes made to improve access to licensure for Internationally Educated Nurses. For example, programs might conduct follow-up research to track the longer term success of their graduating students (i.e. # enrolling in programs, # who receive their registration, # successfully employed as RNs).
4. Work with nursing education and upgrading programs to ensure that nurse educators are well prepared to understand and support Internationally Educated Nurses.

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5. Conduct research into effective transition to employment for Internationally Educated Nurses, and develop appropriate strategies to support the IEN and the employer in this transition.

1.0 Introduction

Canada's nursing shortage is progressing to a point where there will be projected shortfall of 78,000 registered nurses by 2011. Within 15 years, 50 percent of employed nurses will be retiring. Annual graduation levels from Canadian nursing programs are one third of the required 18,000 graduates each year needed to meet the projected demand for services in 2011 and beyond.¹

Although many new Canadians have skills and knowledge that are valuable, their skills are often underused and undervalued because these individuals lack formal recognition by employers or educational institutions.

In 2002, the Alberta Network of Immigrant Women completed a research project to explore the issues surrounding "Access to Licensure for Foreign Qualified Nurses".² The purpose of the project was to "address the needs of both unlicensed foreign qualified nurses and the larger community by identifying the challenges and solutions that would allow them to successfully attain licensure as nursing professionals in Alberta.

The Access to Licensure for Foreign Qualified Nurses report identified a number of specific challenges around the following five themes:

- 1) Application Process
- 2) English Language Assessment
- 3) Knowledge of the Role of the Nurse in the Canadian Health Care System
- 4) Financial Impact
- 5) Personal Impact

Follow-up round table discussions were held in November 2002 in order to discuss the identified challenges and brainstorm possible actions that would be helpful in improving the overall situation.

In May 2005 a follow up study was conducted to determine what actions have been taken, what progress made and what potential impact there has been over the past two years in resolving some of the licensure access challenges, and/or improving the licensure process for Internationally Educated Nurses.

1.1 Study Methods

The 2005 follow up study was based on a focus group with Internationally Educated Nurses who are in the process of getting licensed, and a series of telephone and in person interviews with key informants identified by the Alberta Network of Immigrant Women

¹ HRDC News Release. Retrieved June 2005 from www.hrsdc.gc.ca/en/cs/comm/news/2003/030311.shtml

² Osborne, M. Oct. 2002. Access to Licensure for Foreign Qualified Nurses

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(ANIW) project steering committee. In total, 19 individuals were interviewed from 10 different organizations directly involved or affected by nursing licensure issues. About half of the individuals interviewed had been active participants in the 2002 round table discussions. A number of individuals who were approached for interviews declined.

Not all interviewees were able to comment on all challenges. Each organization has taken action on different aspects of the overall problem, and have different perspectives to offer.

Seven Internationally Educated Nurses were interviewed by phone as part of the study. Five survey participants were selected by ANIW based on their previous involvement with the project and two were selected based on their participation in the Prior Learning Assessment and Recognition (PLAR) research project.

The following report describes actions taken since the November 2002 round table discussions. Progress has been made in some areas and ongoing challenges identified in other areas. Overall there appears to be a strong commitment to improve access to licensure for the Internationally Educated Nurse.

2.0 Application Process

2.1 Challenges

- 1) *Information provided to the applicant was not always understood and was impacted by language, geography and cultural differences*
- 2) *Information of the total process needed to be sought from a variety of sources*

Both Alberta Human Resources & Employment and the health care recruitment officers suggest that Internationally Educated Nurses need to be knowledgeable about the assessment and evaluation process in order to make an informed choice about working in Canada. There are significant co-ordination complexities with differing mandates and agenda's at the federal, provincial and local levels. The application and licensure process is lengthy and expensive.

Research conducted by the Calgary Immigrant Educational Society agrees. A discussion paper on maximizing settlement states that "the majority of the people who can afford to emigrate and are qualified to come to Canada are well educated and well settled professionals who believe they will improve their standard of living in their new home. . . Immigrants must know the truth about the situation before they decide to come here. They should be able to consult foreign embassies, the Internet, the media and all other pathways to learn what steps they will need to take in order to practice their profession here. Immigrants should be aware of credential assessment and how to go about establishing equivalencies for these credentials within the Canadian system. They must know about the professional licensing required for them to be able to enter a regulated profession such as nursing. They should be engaged in this integration process before they come to Canada. If they are aware of all the requirements needed to practice their

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profession, they can initiate credential assessment as well as begin second-language education. This process could continue when they arrive in Canada.”³

Over the past two years a number of improvements have been made to help facilitate the licensing application process for Internationally Educated Nurses coming to Alberta.

2.2 Improved Access to Employment Information for Immigrants

Direction for Immigrants in Trades and Professional Careers - Alberta Human Resources and Employment has contracted with Bow Valley College to provide accurate information to immigrants in trades and professional careers, including Internationally Educated Nurses. A new information website at www.ditpc.ca has been active since April 1, 2004.

Bow Valley College support includes:

- opportunity for people to drop in and use the website,
- workshops, and
- one on one counselling.

An independent review of this project is planned for fall 2005 to assess effectiveness.

Labour Market Partnership – Alberta Human Resources and Employment are currently engaged in a study to identify how best to support immigrants who are underemployed or facing employment barriers. One possible outcome could be a one stop shop with multiple employment services for immigrants.

Going to Canada - At the national level, Citizenship and Immigration Canada offer the “Going to Canada: Immigration Portal” website described as a one-stop on-line information for potential immigrants and newcomers to Canada.⁴ Through this portal, Internationally Educated Nurses can access general information on nursing profession requirements and direct links to the Canadian Nursing Association and Alberta Association of Registered Nurses websites.

2.3 Nursing Application Package Review

In 2004 the AARN conducted a cultural diversity awareness project to review the application package to improve cultural sensitivity and ease of use. The Filipino Nurses Association in Alberta and ANIW worked closely with the AARN to improve the application package, providing input and recommendations for improvement of the current folder that is given to Internationally Educated Nurses when they apply. Recommendations included making the package simpler and easier to understand, including more specific information on how to access language testing.

³ Sindhu, M. Salim. (Oct. 2003). Discussion Paper - Maximizing Settlement. Calgary Immigrant Educational Society.

⁴ Citizenship and Immigration Canada. (2005). Going to Canada: Immigration Portal. Retrieved July 2005 at <http://integration-net.cic.gc.ca/inet/english/canada/index.htm>

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The AARN website includes a two page flow chart summary of the registration process for Internationally Educated Nurses.⁵

2.4 Health Professions Act

Two key informants identified the new Health Professions Act (HPA) legislation (fall 2005) as having the potential to positively impact the nurse licensure application process.

Currently the Alberta Association of Registered Nurses (AARN) assesses the Internationally Educated Nurse's (IEN) qualifications by examining the nurse's education compared to a cohort of their peers in Alberta. After the introduction of the HPA, the AARN will be assessing the substantial equivalence of the IEN's competency including the assessment of education, experience, and practice.

The Health Professions Act will eventually regulate all 30+ self-governing health professions in Alberta. The HPA requires all health professional colleges to follow common rules associated with registration, continuing competence and discipline.⁶

The AARN is waiting for proclamation of the Health Professions Act for RNs prior to releasing an updated nurse licensure application package.

2.5 Equivalency Assessment

Nurse education and qualifications vary in different countries, and even within countries depending on where the nurse trained. Sometimes applicants qualified as nurses in their home country do not meet the established standard set for a Registered Nurse in Canada.

One of the concerns expressed regarding current AARN assessment of IENs is the heavy reliance on assessment of qualifications by document assessment. Some suggest that a more comprehensive approach to assessment would provide a more accurate gauge of the nurse's current competence. The recent report, "Navigating to Become a Nurse in Canada" (2005) states that "assessment for eligibility to write the nurses' examination is not a measure of individual clinical competence. The assessment of competencies only by a written test is open to challenge."⁷ The AARN is examining new ways of assessing competency in keeping with the Health Professions Act.

Another concern identified both locally and at the national level is the lack of national standards for determining education equivalency. The practices and final adjudication of the IEN can differ significantly across provincial jurisdictions. There have been "many

⁵ AARN. Registration Process for Nurses Educated Outside Canada. Retrieved July 2005 at www.nurses.ab.ca/pdf/Applic%20never%20reg%20in%20Canada%20fchart%20lge.pdf

⁶ <http://www.health.gov.ab.ca/professionals/healthcarepro.html>

⁷ Association Strategy Group. (May 2005). Navigating to Become A Nurse In Canada. p. 44. Retrieved July 2005 from http://cna-aicc.ca/CNA/documents/pdf/publications/IEN_Technical_Report_e.pdf

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examples of nurses not being eligible according to one provincial regulatory body but ultimately being licensed by a similar regulatory body in another province.”⁸

Through the Prior Learning Assessment and Recognition (PLAR) pilot project at Mount Royal College (MRC), a new method for more comprehensive assessment of competence is being tested. Internationally Educated Nurses currently can access the Prior Learning Assessment research project free of charge in order to identify any gaps in their education, nursing practice or readiness for the RN exam. As the research project comes to completion there will be a charge for this assessment service. This competence assessment allows the IEN to identify specific competence gaps and plan targeted upgrading goals. The AARN and ANIW are involved with Mount Royal College on this research project.

2.6 Support for Application Process

Grant MacEwan College provides support to all Internationally Educated Nurses referred to their Nursing Refresher Programs across Alberta. They provide:

- 1) one on one support and explanation about the application process
- 2) free monthly orientation (two hour group sessions)
- 3) program website information

At the Calgary Campus, Grant MacEwan College instructors are planning to develop a “flow sheet” or learning contract with specific timelines for the IEN around how to manage the steps in the registration/learning process.

The Filipino Nurses Association in Alberta provides individual support to Internationally Educated Nurses regardless of their country of origin.

AARN provides information presentations to IENs through Bredin Institute and Bow Valley College. They are working to strengthen relationships with stakeholders in this area.

AARN will continue to work with the Canadian Nurses Association to use information gathered in Phase I of the study “Navigating to Become a Nurse in Canada”, and move forward into Phase II where the focus will be to work towards solutions at a National level and provide consistency across jurisdictions (respecting the various legislation differences).⁹

⁸ Association Strategy Group. (May 2005). Navigating to Become A Nurse In Canada. p. 46. Retrieved July 2005 from http://cna-aiic.ca/CNA/documents/pdf/publications/IEN_Technical_Report_e.pdf

⁹ Canadian Nurses Association. (2005). Navigating to Become a Nurse in Canada, Assessment of International Nurse Applicants. Prepared by Dr. Mary Ellen Jeans, Fran Hadley, Jill Green and Christine Da Prat. Retrieved May 19, 2005 from Canadian Nurses Association: <http://www.cna-nurses.ca>

3.0 English Language Assessment

3.1 Challenges

- *English language proficiency assessment delayed the process and presented a financial burden.*

Language assessment was identified as a significant challenge for applicants within the licensure process. Several interviewees noted that some Internationally Educated Nurses who appear fluent in English in an interview setting, still encounter difficulty in passing the TOEFL. This raises questions about the effectiveness of the particular testing method.

The health care managers and educators interviewed for this study were in agreement that proficiency in the English language is one of the most important indicators for successful licensing, education and employment.

The AARN notes that language competency is the most important preparation issue and the biggest barrier to registration. The AARN needs to ensure that registered nurses will provide safe, competent and ethical care. It is very difficult to assess competency until there is language fluency. Language difficulties can often “blur and hide” competency issues.

Grant MacEwan Calgary Campus notes that the Internationally Educated Nurse needs to be successful in English language testing before entering the Nursing Refresher program. Although difficulty passing the English language assessment creates a barrier for those trying to access the Nursing Refresher program, experience shows that when language skills are weak the IEN does not do well in the refresher program. “Those who enter at a higher level of English proficiency are more successful.”

Language proficiency requirements within the work setting go well beyond the minimum benchmark level required by the AARN. Fluency in English does not necessarily mean fluency within the health care setting. Internationally Educated Nurses need access to conversational language programs. Just taking the test without further language skills education does not address issues of comprehension and communication within the health care setting. It is the oral communication issues (accent and pronunciation) that can prevent the Internationally Educated Nurse from being hired. Specialized ESL classes such as a sector-specific English course for nurses like the one currently offered through PLAR have demonstrated successful outcomes.

As noted by Norquest College, “demonstrated relational communication is key to success in our health care.” The difficulty with communication has several complexities such as: 1) cultural differences; 2) pronunciation; 3) critical thinking; 4) assertive/proactive communication; 5) relating in a team environment; and 6) knowledge transfer.

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3.2 English Language Assessments

Historically the AARN have accepted many English language assessments. Currently they accept six different assessments including the TOEFL, TSE, IELTS; CAEL; TOEIC; MLELB; and the new CELBAN. For those Internationally Educated Nurses who are currently in the application process, their ESL tests are good for two years within the application process. In addition, the AARN has updated the number of countries that would be considered English speaking.

Canadian English Language Benchmarks Assessment for Nurses (CELBAN)¹⁰ is a new language assessment specifically designed to test language skills within a health context. Alberta Advanced Education has contributed funds to pilot CELBAN at Grant MacEwan College. CELBAN language assessment scenarios use language related to the health care setting. There is a free CELBAN Readiness Tool available on the website that nurses can use as a self-assessment prior to registering for the test. For a fee, the IEN can have their writing skills evaluated by a CELBAN assessor.

Candidates must achieve specific benchmark levels in each of the four skill areas (Listening: CLB 9; Reading: CLB 8; Writing CLB 7; Speaking: CLB 8) in order to meet the requirements of the nursing licensing bodies. At the present time (2005), candidates are only allowed to take CELBAN twice, and must wait at least 6 months from the first administration date to take it for the second time.¹¹

Although still in the pilot phase, most interviewees agree that CELBAN is showing good potential for improved language assessment for nurses.

Grant MacEwan College has a language assessment centre for CAEL, TOEFL and CELBAN. Following is a brief comparison of experiences with the three language assessments offered at Grant MacEwan.

- Canadian Academic English Language Assessment (CAEL): language more applicable; results in 2 weeks; cost \$70
- Test of English as a Foreign Language (TOEFL): wait a long time for results; writing conditions are poor; cost high \$300
- Canadian English Language Benchmark Assessment for Nurses (CELBAN): not much experience with this yet as only 1 writing to date; another writing early June 2005; cost \$300

Anticipated benefits to CELBAN:

- the test is situated in the health care context; asks about nursing;

¹⁰ Canadian English Language Benchmark Assessment. (2005). Canadian Language Benchmark Assessment for Nurses. Retrieved May 19, 2005 from CELBAN: <http://www.celban.org>

¹¹ Overview of CELBAN. (2005). Retrieved Aug 18, 2005 from <http://celban.learnflex.net/evaluator/evaluatorweb/user/Custom/Overview.aspx>

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- may take the stress away from the testing;
- the spoken component of the test is an interview vs tape recording which will help address issues of poor tape quality of other tests and allow clarification during the interview.

Current Limitations to CELBAN:

- currently available in Edmonton only through Grant MacEwan College.
- During the pilot phase, the test is being offered at six month intervals only, so if the nurse fails the test, they must wait six months to try again.

AARN is advocating with the government to expand availability to Calgary. Additional assessment sites should be available by the Spring of 2006. The Canadian Nurses Association (CNA) report “Navigating to Become A Nurse in Canada” also makes a recommendation to “accelerate CELBAN’s recognition, implementation and accessibility nationally and internationally.”

AARN is notifying all Internationally Educated Nurses currently awaiting registration (in their system) of the CELBAN option.

3.3 English Language Upgrading

Enhanced ESL communication education for Internationally Trained Nurses has been identified as an important component for success. Most often the difficulties experienced by IENs within nursing refresher programs are related to language (e.g. taking too long to communicate; not hearing what the instructor is saying; instructors having preconceived assumptions about this students due to past experiences).

Both the Grant MacEwan College Nursing Refresher Program and Mount Royal College Prior Learning Assessment and Recognition (PLAR) have introduced enhanced ESL components within their education programs. Mount Royal College reports excellent success in this area, with PLAR students advancing their English language skills by an average of one benchmark level. Grant MacEwan College has found that Internationally Educated Nurses are more successful in their Nursing Refresher Programs when they have increased English proficiency when entering the program.

3.4 Additional Ideas for Action

Some interviewees suggested additional enhancements that could support English language upgrading for Internationally Educated Nurses. For example:

- Students should have access to ESL instructors as well as the clinical instructors (for debriefing, pronunciation and to support the regular clinical instructor)
- A pronunciation lab should be integrated into the curriculum – more English courses do not always help

4.0 Role of the Nurse in the Canadian Health Care System

4.1 Challenges

- *Programs do not exist that are tailored to the needs of internationally educated nurses (e.g. Nursing Refresher program, preparation for the RN examination and transition to the Canadian Health Care system)*

The role of the nurse in the Canadian Health Care System is rooted in the complex area of culture. In our Canadian context nurses are expected to advocate for the patients; question orders of physicians (for safety), and not be afraid to question authority if required. In other cultures the role/expectations of women in society may be different in that they do not question, and are not expected to be assertive. Introducing the Internationally Educated Nurse to the Canadian health care system goes beyond simply understanding and acquiring knowledge of the role of the nurse. There is a broader cultural context to influence (values, attitudes, and behaviour). Some IENs come from a uni-cultural country so there may also be a need to learn cultural competency around the multicultural nature of Canada.

4.2 Prior Learning Assessment and Recognition

In 2003 Human Resources Development Canada provided three year funding to Mount Royal College Calgary for the Prior Learning Assessment and Recognition (PLAR) research project.

The project's objective is to establish reliable and valid assessment tools to assist in evaluating the readiness of applicants, who are educated outside of Canada, to practice as a Registered Nurse in Canada. Mount Royal College is undertaking this unique project in partnership with Ryerson University and New Brunswick Community College. The development of practical models for assessing the prior learning of students will make it easier for IENs to make appropriate program choices and to identify remedial education needs.¹²

PLAR assessment includes:

- ESL fluency assessment
- series of examinations to assess general nursing knowledge. The nurse can then focus on upgrading learning.

PLAR upgrading components include:

- ESL for nurses with language content specific to the health care setting. All PLAR students have taken this ESL course. A nurse instructor teaches the theory and an ESL instructor works with the students on language.
- A course on the Health Care System within the Canadian Context

¹²-----, Oct 2004. AARN Setting Multiple Strategies in Action to Improve Licensure Process for Internationally Educated Nurses. Alberta RN

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- adult medical surgical theory courses
- a practical component with a dedicated clinical supervisor for each group of students placed

During the three year pilot, PLAR has served three cohorts of approximately 15 students per class (1st class completed; 2nd class completing over summer; 3rd class to complete in fall 2005). Within the groups of internationally educated nurses, there have been between 11 and 15 countries represented. Approximately one third to one half of students assessed through PLAR require the Nursing Refresher Program. The remainder of the students have needed specific clinical upgrading only. Some candidates are planning to write the Canadian Registered Nurses examination this summer.

PLAR Limitations: Although PLAR has been offered free of charge during the demonstration project, actually program costs are approximately \$2,100 per student. In future the program may prove too expensive for Internationally Educated Nurses. Current project funding for PLAR ends in December 2005. Mount Royal College has submitted two proposals for funding to Alberta Advanced Education.

4.3 Nursing Refresher Programs

The Grant MacEwan College Nursing Refresher Program is offered in Edmonton and Calgary and is brokered in Red Deer, Lethbridge, Grand Prairie, and Wetaskawin. The program is also offered on-line for distance learning.

Alberta Advanced Education has provided funds to Grant MacEwan College to pilot a Nurse Credentialing Project. The purpose of the project is to address some of the barriers identified in the process of licensure for Internationally Educated Nurses. These barriers included: understanding the Canadian Health Care System; communication; preparation for writing the RN examination; complexities of clinical practice placements for IENs.

Grant MacEwan College is currently piloting the Nurse Credentialing Project in both Edmonton and Calgary. The cost for the program is \$3,000 (for the Nursing Refresher Program) and an additional \$600 for the enhanced program components.

Grant MacEwan College has made two significant program enhancements to support Internationally Educated Nurses. The first change is an enhancement to the clinical practice placement (160 hours). A nursing skill lab has been added prior to the actual clinical placement. The skill lab includes a graded component that must be passed prior to placement, ensuring that IENs are better prepared going into their clinical placement.

The practice placement is now supported by an instructor who provides direct clinical supervision of the IENs based on a ratio of 1 supervisor for 6 students. In Calgary the instructors are nurses from the hospital unit who are contracted by Grant MacEwan College to provide direct clinical supervision and support. This additional support has had a significant positive impact on IEN learning and adaptation to the Canadian health care system. Following a group practice placement of 20 to 25 eight-hour shifts, the IENs

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are placed with a 1:1 preceptor for an additional 20 to 25 shifts. The Calgary Health Region has worked with approximately six instructor-supported groups of IENs over the past year. This new model ensures that IENs are supported in their learning without placing additional pressure on unit staff.

The second change is the addition of a special evening course (6 hours per week for a total of 180 hours) and three daytime workshops. The special course and workshop additions cost \$600. This course is designed to support the IEN's transition to the Canadian health care system; and improves communication skills around nursing knowledge requirements. Interviewees indicate that this enhancement has improved the success of IENs in getting their Canadian nursing registration and has improved their ability to access employment in the field of nursing.

Other Nursing Refresher Programs (e.g. Grande Prairie Regional College; NorQuest College) have tried to support Internationally Educated Nurses within the parameters of their generic program. For example, Grande Prairie Regional College will provide more guidance from the tutor, extend clinical placement hours if more practice time is needed, and select clinical placements for IENs that are slower paced and less acute, such as long term care or rural settings.

NorQuest College has applied for an ESL Bridge program with face to face instruction that is sector specific. They already provide distance learning via internet, with a medical terminology and pronunciation enrichment component. NorQuest College also provides assistance with ESL, and an examination preparation guide to help IENs to challenge the LPN examination.

Internationally Educated Nurses account for about 60% of the students registered in Nursing Refresher Programs.

Total Number of Internationally Educated Nurses Enrolled in Nursing Refresher Programs At All Locations in Alberta By Year ¹³	
2001	51 students
2002	43 students
2003	43 students
2004	50 students
2005 (first five months only)	32 students

The AARN is currently lobbying the government to continue funding support for nursing refresher education specifically designed for IENs.

¹³ Data provided by Dean of Health & Community Studies, Grant MacEwan College, May 26, 2005.

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4.4 Canadian Registered Nurses Examination

The Canadian Nurses Association (CNA) have made some changes to their Registered Nurses examination over the past two years. For example, the Canadian Registered Nurse Exam (CRNE) has been changed to include both short answer and multiple choice questions.

The Canadian Nurses Association offers two official tools to assist candidates studying for the Canadian Registered Nurses Examination. These two tools, the *Canadian Registered Nurse Exam Prep Guide* and the *LeaRN™ CRNE Readiness Test*, complement each other to help candidates prepare for the CRNE.

Canadian Registered Nurse Exam (CRNE) Prep Guide is a study guide in print format with an accompanying CD-ROM. Available in either English or French, the prep guide offers close to 300 practice questions, including over 75 questions in the new short answer format. The guide also provides answers and explanations, a performance profile to identify strengths and weaknesses, and valuable test-taking strategies and study tips.

LeaRN CRNE Readiness Test is an online simulated CRNE in a shortened format. The test offers 100 multiple-choice and short answer questions from former CRNEs that are completely different from those in the prep guide. The test gives instant overall results as well as four sub-scores based on the CRNE competency categories to help focus study. For internationally educated nurses, the readiness test may be particularly helpful as it is accessible from all over the world and can be taken before coming to Canada.

The following table illustrates the number of IENs who have successfully become registered in Alberta over the past three years. This is a process that in some cases may have taken several years to complete.

Total Number of Internationally Educated Nurses Who Passed CRN Examination and Completed All AARN Requirements for Registration By Year ¹⁴	
2002	238
2003	206
2004	164

4.5 Facilitating Transition to the Work Environment

¹⁴ Data provided by AARN, May 25, 2005.

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Internationally Educated Nurses hired into the Calgary Health Region (CHR) system get a standard orientation from CHR.

Over that past four years the CHR has been offering an acute care course at the Foothills Hospital due to the shortage of experienced nurses in this area. This acute medical nursing program includes five to six weeks with a preceptor as well as classroom instruction. The program is very popular with newly graduated nurses. For those nurses hired to surgery or renal units, the CHR provides a few extra days of orientation and education. These programs are available to all nurses and are not specific to Internationally Educated Nurses.

5.0 Financial Impact

5.1 Challenges

- *Costs associated with the licensure process may eliminate some Internationally Educated Nurses.*

Licensure is a lengthy and expensive process for the Internationally Educated Nurse, with no guarantee of a job at the end. Overall costs for language testing, refresher courses, RN examination, application for licensure, and RN registration can add up to \$3,000 or more. In addition, students must bear the cost of transportation, child care, books, etc. Many students must continue to work to support their families while attempting to complete the Nursing Refresher Program or other upgrading courses.

It appears that little progress has been made in improving availability of financial support for Internationally Educated Nurses engaged in the licensure process. In fact, the addition of specialized components in the Nursing Refresher Program will actually increase both the cost and time required to complete licensure requirements. Prior Learning Assessment and Recognition processes are also very costly. Perhaps the additional cost will be offset by nurses who are better prepared to write the CRN exam, more success in passing the exam and quicker access to employment.

Currently the Internationally Educated Nurse can access a number of generic financial programs if they qualify for assistance. Those with no means of support may qualify for Student Finance in which case there may be assistance available for tuition and books. However, there is a means test and residency requirement to qualify.

Alberta Learning suggests that some students may be eligible to go to the Student Finance Board. The Student Loans Act has a residency requirement that means immigrants often have to wait at least a year before they are eligible to apply for a loan.

Internationally Educated Nurses planning to immigrate to Canada can do much of their application process from their home country. However, they must be in Canada to write the RN exam. If all of the application and AARN requirements are in place, and the IEN is simply waiting to write the RN exam, the IEN can apply for a temporary work permit

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for six months (to work as a graduate nurse) and can renew this temporary permit up to three times.

The AARN would like to see federal funds to assist with bridging programs, for profession-specific English language upgrading and practice placements. The AARN has advocated for IEN financial support to the House of Commons Standing Committee on Recognition of Foreign Credentials (April 2005) but are still waiting to see changes.

The Canadian Nurses Association report “Navigating to Become A Nurse in Canada” recognizes financial impact as a key issue. One of the report’s recommendations to the Government of Canada’s Foreign Credential Recognition Program is to “develop strategies to address the financial challenges incurred by IENs who enroll in bridging programs.”¹⁵

5.2 Financial Support Strategies

Grant MacEwan College uses a number of strategies to minimize costs of the Nursing Refresher Course. For example, students only have to buy one textbook and this is offered at a reduced rate, the college lending library is free and nursing students are allowed to wear any uniforms.

Grande Prairie Regional College reports that at least one northern health region has at times paid the nursing student’s tuition in return for a specified service commitment.

At Mount Royal College, the PLAR program has been offered free of charge during the pilot phase. However, in future the college may have to charge in the range of \$300 per course. This will create an additional cost burden for the International Educated Nurse. If MRC can get approval from Alberta Advanced Education for a “Bridge to Canadian Nursing” certificate program then IEN students would be eligible to apply for student loans.

5.3 Immigrant Access Fund

In Calgary, the Alberta Network of Immigrant Women has founded a new loans program for Internationally Educated Immigrants. The program is structured such that the Calgary Foundation receives donor funds and the Mennonite Central Committee Employment Development administers the loans program.

6.0 Personal Impact

6.1 Challenges

- *Applicants experience personal stress while engaging in the process*

¹⁵ Associate Strategy Group. (May 2005). Navigating to Become A Nurse in Canada. p. 7. Retrieved July 2005 from http://cna-aiic.ca/CNA/documents/pdf/publications/IEN_Technical_Report_e.pdf

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- *Applicants require coaching, advocacy, family and peer support.*

Grant MacEwan College reports seeing first hand the personal stresses experienced by Internationally Educated Nurses. The IEN faces significant challenges as they often need to work to support their family. The needs of children and family come first, so they could be in Canada two to five years before getting around to their own educational needs.

Some IEN's begin working in Canada as nannies or long term care providers. They are often committed to their employment for a two year period, and it is not uncommon to see this extended for an additional two years. The longer the IEN is away from their nursing practice, the more difficult it becomes to re-enter the health care system.

The Nursing Refresher program involves a heavy workload and IENs who are working outside the home may not have the time to commit themselves fully to their studies. The enhanced program has even more requirements (i.e. transition courses 3 hours twice a week) which can create an additional time burden. The program coordinator often provides individual support and counselling, or refers the IEN for counselling support available through other community service providers.

The AARN keeps the IEN's file open for six years. For a number of personal reasons (e.g. work, family, finances) the IEN's file may lay dormant for extended periods. Requirements can change over the years from when the file is first opened. English language assessments must be current (within past 2 years). The IEN may need to take a Nursing Refresher Program if they do not meet the required 1125 practice hours within the current 5 years. The AARN sends the IEN a letter to let them know if changes in requirements become necessary, so they are not surprised.

Within the health care system, unit managers who hire Internationally Educated Nurses try to support them, but the rest of nursing team may not be as supportive. Members of the nursing team may already feel burdened by their own workloads and believe that all team members should be able to carry their own load.

6.2 Personal Support Strategies

The Filipino Nurses Association in Alberta has been providing personal support and advocacy to Internationally Educated Nurses for many years.

Mount Royal College PLAR project coordinator reports that when the IENs progress as a cohort they are better able to provide peer support and help one another. To increase personal support, especially for those students who may be struggling, project staff introduce new students to those who have already completed the program. Early success with this informal support suggests that a more formal peer mentorship program could be even more helpful.

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The AARN suggests that journalling and storytelling may have the potential to decrease stress. “It helps them to describe their emotions, and see the competence they are gaining.” They are considering compiling some of these stories for an article in the Canadian Nurse Journal to help sensitize Canadian RNs to the challenges faced by IENs in Canada.

7.0 Other Issues

The issue of discrimination was discussed by a number of interviewees. There are two points of view. Those organizations who are trying to support the Internationally Educated Nurse to enter the Canadian health care system voiced their concerns about perceived prejudice and systemic discrimination. Those organizations who are either preparing nurses for the health care systems or regulating practice standards believe the issue to be less about intentional discrimination and more about ensuring IENs are well prepared for the complexity involved in nursing in the Canadian health care setting. The issue is about recognizing the challenges faced by the IEN and putting in place concrete strategies to move forward in addressing these. It is about nursing competency and finding ways to ensure that IENs become successful.

However, even when the IEN does successfully navigate the licensing process and become an RN in Alberta, they may still face challenges in accessing employment. Currently, nurses are entering a very competitive labour market. When recruitment officers forward a list of qualified candidates to a health care unit manager, the Internationally Educated Nurse is competing with qualified Canadian nurses, newly graduated nurses and other IENs from English speaking countries.

8.0 Feedback from Internationally Educated Nurses

Seven IENs were interviewed as part of this study. Three were already working as RNs, two were working as graduate nurses and two were working in other health care related jobs.

The IENs interviewed as part of the study were generally not familiar with the licensure systemic changes that have occurred during the past two years. Interviewees said they were happy to hear about the changes and suggested that it would be helpful to ensure that information regarding the changes is more widely distributed. Three of the IENs had experienced the new modules added to the Nursing Refresher Program and found these components helpful. One IEN interviewee commented that she “enjoyed the clinical placements. The instructor really understood foreign nurses.”

One concern about the Nursing Refresher Program is the high cost of each course component. Another concern is that the additional courses could make it more difficult and time consuming to complete requirements for the AARN application.

Three IENs commented on the PLAR program and all agreed that it was very helpful. In particular they mentioned the personal support received from colleagues and instructors. One PLAR graduate was pleased to pass her English requirements and is scheduled to write her Canadian Registered Nurses Exam in October. Another PLAR graduate said the PLAR program had helped her improve her English and pass the language requirements. However, while participating in PLAR her nursing time has expired and she must now take the Nursing Refresher Program. As a result, this IEN has been unable to move ahead with her RN licensure.

Some of the issues described by the IENs have remained unchanged. Ongoing issues include the cost of completing requirements; the time needed to complete requirements; the need to work to support families while also trying to complete licensure requirements; difficulty meeting the language requirements; difficulty competing the requirements in the time allowed (i.e. application requirements change over time as nursing hours or language tests expire). At least three of the seven nurses interviewed had appealed AARN decisions related to their licensing requirements.

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9.0 Conclusions

There have been important changes and ongoing commitment to improve the licensure process for Internationally Educated Nurses over the past two years since the Alberta Network of Immigrant Women completed their study and round table discussions. Excellent collaboration and networking among stakeholder groups has resulted in a strong positive systemic response to addressing licensure issues for Internationally Educated Nurses.

Following is a summary of some of the actions and initiatives undertaken.

- Canadian English Language Benchmark Assessment for Nurses
- AARN Application Package Review
- Health Professions Act
- Nursing Refresher Program additions – Grant McEwan College
- Prior Learning Assessment and Recognition research project – Mount Royal College
- Canadian Registered Nurses Examination
 - CRNE Prep Guide and online LeARN CRNE Readiness Test
- Canadian Nursing Association National Study
 - Navigating to Become a Nurse in Canada
- Immigrant Access Fund – Calgary

From a broader perspective, Human Resources and Skills Development Canada (HRSDC) has provided funding to the Canadian Nurses Association to lead the diagnostic phase of the Internationally Educated Nurses Project. “HRSDC hopes that improvements made to credentials assessment and recognition processes within the Internationally Educated Nurses Project will contribute to the development of a pan-Canadian model for international credentials recognition.”¹⁶

Key informants generally agreed that it is too early to determine the impact of the changes, improvements and special projects described in this report. Overall, the licensure process remains complex and expensive. Although the systemic changes made over the last two years are positive, they do not appear to have significantly streamlined the RN licensing process for Internationally Educated Nurses.

Ongoing collaborative participation and commitment of key stakeholders at both the provincial and national level is required in order to continue to improve access to licensure for Internationally Educated Nurses.

As access to licensure improves, next steps might include more research into the licensed Internationally Educated Nurse’s successful transition to employment. ANIW is committed to continuing its work with stakeholders to ensure that Internationally

¹⁶ AARN. (Oct. 2004). AARN Setting Multiple Strategies in Action to Improve Licensure Process for Internationally Educated Nurses. Alberta RN. Retrieved July 2005 from AARN website: <http://www.nurses.ab.ca/registration/Educated%20outside%20Canada.html>

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Educated Nurses are well positioned to contribute their expertise within the Canadian health care system.

“The Internationally Educated Nurses are committed and motivated, bringing a wealth of knowledge. They need the additional support in their Nursing Refresher program but once they have this, they can succeed and provide qualified nurses to the workforce. They are our workforce of the future.” Program Coordinator GMC

“Having Internationally Educated Nurses who are licensed in the health care system is an advantage because they can work with patients or clients from other cultures. They can speak the same language and understand the cultural context for health and healing. There are many hurdles in licensing the IEN but once this happens, the outcome is positive.” Community Health Nurse Capital Health Region

10.0 Recommendations

- 5.1 Continue stakeholder networking and collaboration in addressing the issues and barriers facing Internationally Educated Nurses.
- 5.2 Increase dissemination of information on program enhancements and changes that support and improve access to licensure for Internationally Educated Nurses.
- 5.3 Conduct follow-up research to assess the impact of the program enhancements and changes made to improve access to licensure for Internationally Educated Nurses. For example, programs might conduct follow-up research to track the longer term success of their graduating students (i.e. # enrolling in programs, # who receive their registration, # successfully employed as RNs).
- 5.4 Work with nursing education and upgrading programs to ensure that nurse educators are well prepared to understand and support Internationally Educated Nurses.
- 5.5 Conduct research into effective transition to employment for Internationally Educated Nurses, and develop appropriate strategies to support the IEN and the employer in this transition.

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11.0 Appendix

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