

Pacific Heads of Nursing & Midwifery Meeting

Réunion des directeurs des soins infirmiers et obstétricaux du Pacifique

ONLINE NURSING EDUCATION - LESSONS LEARNT

Background: The COVID-19 pandemic closed international borders and opened virtual pathways to specialty education for nurses based in Pacific Islands Countries and Territories (PICTs). Nurses from PICTs were selected locally for a fully funded place in the Australian College of Nursing's (ACN) Graduate Certificate in Perioperative Nursing (GCPN) program. This project was conceived by the Pacific Community (SPC), delivered with the support and cooperation of ACN and co-funded by the Royal Australasian College of Surgeons (RACS) and SPC.

Progress and achievements: Funding was provided for 36 enrolments from 13 PICTs. Education commenced in January 2021 and was delivered online by ACN staff over an 18-month period. External education consultants provided additional academic support and weekly group coaching, during one-hour webinars facilitated from Australia. One third of the cohort progressed successfully to the final GC subjects. Final academic results were not available at time of writing.

Challenges: The program ran during outbreaks of COVID-19, extreme weather and natural disasters. Some nurses without the prerequisite specialty experience or academic skills were selected. Many nurses contended with poor infrastructure, lacked the IT access or equipment required for online learning or experienced study shock from un-anticipated workloads and pre-existing commitments.

Future Directions: Celebrate students' achievements. Evaluate students' experiences. Identify graduates with leadership skills to mentor future students. Review selection criteria and consider a centralised selection process. Ensure local facilities have the infrastructure to support students in online education and monitor student progress to resolve issues with local IT equipment and logistics promptly. The cohort's progress is described herein using Tuckman's four stages of group development: forming, storming, norming and performing. (Tuckman & Jenson, 1977). Adjourning, which is Tuckman's fifth and final stage, had not commenced at time of writing.

1. BACKGROUND

The COVID-19 pandemic closed international borders during the early months of 2020. The subsequent shift to online communication platforms not only kept communities connected, but also opened new, virtual pathways to education. One such pathway is delivering graduate-level perioperative education for nurses based in Pacific Islands Countries and Territories (PICTs). The Pacific Community (SPC) initially conceived the pathway with the Australian College of Nurses (ACN) to meet the educational needs of nurses in PICTs caring for patients critically ill with COVID-19. It was delivered in partnership with ACN and the Royal Australasian College of Surgeons (RACS). The pathway for PICT nurses' access to ACN's Graduate Certificate in Critical Care Nursing was expanded to include Perioperative Nursing. Strong local leadership and weekly group coaching webinars to supplement course content were key components that supported the first cohort of PICT perioperative nurses on this innovative pathway.

2. PROGRESS AND ACHIEVEMENTS

2.1 Forming - Late 2020

- Nurses from 13 PICTs were selected by local health leaders for one of 36 funded places in ACN's Graduate Certificate in Perioperative Nursing (GCPN).
- Education consultants familiar with nursing practices in PICTs, with expertise in perioperative nursing functioned as external coaches and were appointed as ACN Tutors for the cohort's first terms.
- Nurses were allocated to common regional cohorts with the same study sequence, allowing internal group dynamics to develop and minimising differences in time zones. The external coaches were thus able to respond to the PICT nurses' unique logistic, cultural and academic needs in a timely manner and provide consistently appropriate academic advice.

2.2 Storming and norming - 2021

- RACS provided access to Zoom and the external coaches delivered weekly coaching webinars throughout each term. A briefing session was held one week before Term 1. This introduced key contacts and timelines, set expectation for communication lines and frequency, and provided an open forum for questions.
- Nurses' engagement with weekly coaching webinars was mixed and mirrored academic progress. Those from PICTs with proactive local managers or with multiple enrolments were the more active participants in the group with the largest online footprints. This underlines the benefits of in-country recognition and peer support.

- There was a high frequency of requests for short extensions. ACN granted periods of extended leave and enrolments were held open for nurses affected by COVID-19 outbreaks (either due to personal or family illness, surging workloads or re-deployments), as well as extreme weather and natural disasters.
- RACS facilitated paid annual subscriptions to a virtual bookshelf where the nurses could read and download some of the ACN prescribed textbooks and required readings.

2.3 Norming and performing 2022

- Weekly webinars continued throughout each term. RACS provided email links to the recordings for those unable to attend live sessions and enabled repeat viewings. The webinars also empowered nurses' peer support. Motivational messages appeared in the chat function whenever challenges were identified or when study fatigue emerged. The brief "Cameras ON" segments at the end of the webinars grew longer as the cohort's bond became stronger, with some webinars running towards 90 minutes.
- Academic results in the first year included credits and passes, as well as re-submissions. Reasons for nurse attrition included subject failures and course withdrawals.
- One third of the original cohort progressed successfully to the final GC subject. Final academic results are not available at time of writing.

3. CHALLENGES

3.1 Student selection and enrolment

Early student attrition was high and may have been related to local selection processes.

- Some of the selected nurses worked in specialties other than perioperative nursing and did not meet ACN selection criteria.
- Some of the selected nurses were ill-prepared for the unexpected opportunity having pre-existing workloads or family commitments that were incompatible with the demands of graduate-level study.
- Some of the selected nurses worked in remote locations without the required IT equipment, or telecommunications infrastructure, nor a suitable place to study at the hospital or home.

3.2 Academic timelines

The timelines for the first two GC subjects were not achievable for this cohort.

- The standard ACN GC program typically takes 12 months full-time, comprising four terms each of 10-week duration.

- Term 1 was due to commence in late January 2021. There was little time to communicate with local health leaders and their selected nurses (spread across five time zones including the international date line) to prepare them for the challenges of online graduate-level study with an Australian educational institution or to brief them on their additional commitments as full-time students.
- The nurses did not have online access to the prescribed textbooks for the first subject.

3.3 Telecommunications and IT infrastructure

The GCPN course content is delivered and coordinated by ACN staff through an online platform requiring daily internet access.

- Unreliable internet and limited access to computers and disrupted communication with PICTs prevented some nurses from enrolling or logging on to access the ACN student orientation material before the first subject commenced.
- ACN staff responded with adjustments and the first two GC subjects were extended from 10-week to 16-week terms delivered over one year instead of six months. The final two subjects were delivered unchanged in the second year, with the PICT nurses in mixed cohorts with Australian nurses.

3.4 Personal challenges

Nurses in this cohort experienced many personal challenges, affecting their progress and results.

- Outbreaks of COVID-19 in some PICTs required new work allocations, periods of isolation following exposure, as well as periods of personal or family ill-health.
- Extreme weather events and natural disasters (earthquake and tsunami) occurred in PICTs during 2021-2022.
- Other challenges included study shock, time zone differences and time pressures from competing commitments (family, workplace and study) as well as lack of suitable study environments with access to computers, printers and a professional library or electronic storage and IT support.

4. FUTURE DIRECTIONS

Historically, the critical care and perioperative nursing programs have been part of ACN's large suite of graduate certificates, servicing the specialty education needs of nurses employed within Australia. The pandemic provided both the stimulus and the opportunity for nurses employed in PICTs to access ACN's graduate certificate programs.

4.1 Recommendations for governments:

1. Celebrate and promote students' achievements. Identify opportunities for local graduation ceremonies. Use social media and invite local news media to profile nurses within local communities.
2. In the short term, provide funding so that similar graduate-level programs continue to be offered to nurses in PICTs.
3. In the medium term, provide the incentive and means for PICT-based education providers to develop graduate-level programs of similar quality which are fit for purpose and meet local population needs.

4.2 Recommendations for development partners:

1. Evaluate students' experiences and identify areas for improvement for subsequent cohorts.
2. Identify graduates with leadership skills to mentor future students.
3. Explore opportunities for a cohort to undertake the GCPN specialising in anaesthesia and recovery nursing.
4. Review the selection criteria and local processes to ensure agreement by all parties on candidate suitability.
5. Explore the potential to adopt a centralised selection process led by a PICT representative group with educational expertise.
6. Develop processes to ensure that local facilities have the capacity and infrastructure to support PICT nurses' enrolment in online education programs. This includes telecommunications and IT infrastructure as well as graduate-level educational support, suitable study environments and access to professional libraries. This might also include weekly periods of protected study time within the rosters of nurses undertaking graduate-level programs.
7. Engage stakeholders with regular meetings during the academic year to monitor student progress and resolve students' issues with communication, IT equipment and logistics promptly.