

The Canadian Nursing Students' Association and its Advocacy for a Culturally Competent Entry-to-Practice Exam

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Abstract

The Canadian Nursing Students' Association (CNSA) is the national voice of Canadian nursing students. Its goal is to increase the legal, ethical, professional and educational aspects of nursing, which are an integral part of the profession. The association is actively dedicated to the positive promotion of nurses and nursing as a whole. Since the implementation of the NCLEX-RN, CNSA has worked extensively to support nursing students as they write this entry-to-practice examination. On national and provincial platforms, CNSA has implored stakeholders to engage in an inclusive dialogue that results in increased support for nursing students with regard to the NCLEX-RN.

Overview

In 2011, Canada's provincial nursing regulatory bodies, grouped under the Canadian Council of Registered Nurse Regulators (CCRN), announced that they had signed a contract with the National Council of State Boards of Nursing (NCSBN) to use the American NCLEX-RN as Canada's entry-to-practice exam (except for Quebec and Yukon). As of January 2015, the NCLEX-RN has replaced the long-standing Canadian Registered Nurse Examination (CRNE) as the official entry-to-practice nursing examination for nursing graduates. Well-founded concerns from Canadian stakeholders regarding the use of the NCLEX-RN in Canada are related to the following national elements: (a) appropriate reflection of Canadian healthcare system values; (b) consideration of cultural competence with respect to Canada's First Nations, Inuit, and Métis populations; (c) proper

reflection of Canadian nursing programs; and (d) representation of Canada's two official languages.

Despite these concerns from stakeholders, the NCLEX-RN was officially implemented in Canada, resulting in less than desirable outcomes for students. Nationally, 4,701 nursing students wrote the NCLEX-RN between January and June of 2015. The pass rate for candidates during this period was 69.7% (CNA 2016), which is lower than the American pass rate of 87.5% (NCSBN 2015). This means that nearly one in three students (approximately 3,300) were not successful in the exam despite successfully completing a four-year nursing baccalaureate program. Canada has always been recognized worldwide for its high-quality nursing education, which is why these 2015 full-year results for first-time writers raise questions about the licensing exam itself, not students' knowledge or the quality of nursing education available in Canada.

The impact of the NCLEX-RN caused major waves in the nursing community, and Canadian nursing students rose to its challenges in several ways. The Canadian Nursing Students' Association (CNSA) has worked extensively to support nursing students as they write this entry-to-practice examination. On national and provincial platforms, CNSA has implored stakeholders to engage in an inclusive dialogue that results in increased support for nursing students concerning the NCLEX-RN. The association reached out to current and past members to identify the key concerns for nursing students to best advocate on the most pressing matters related to the NCLEX-RN, both long term and short term. CNSA Executive Committee members are active participants in advocating for students in relation to the NCLEX-RN as voting members on the boards of the Canadian Nurses Association (CNA) and the Canadian Association of Schools of Nursing, and CNSA is an associate member organization on the board of the Canadian Federation of Nurses Unions.

Given the concerns over the preliminary results and the outcry from CNSA members and stakeholders, CNSA wrote a press release in October 2015 asking for immediate action to (a) address translation issues and the lack of French resources for francophone students; (b) increase the number of attempts to write the exam available to students while issues about the NCLEX-RN are being addressed; and (c) urge all educational institutions to incorporate study guides and preparation support for the NCLEX-RN into their curriculum to ensure that they are using current practices that best support students (CNSA 2015b).

CNSA continues to engage in discussion, research and advocacy work regarding the NCLEX-RN and its evolution in Canada. CNSA has released position statements outlining its stance and representing the national voice of nursing students

(CNSA 2019). In one of the earliest publications regarding these concerns, the association highlighted a lack of consideration for the unique factors that characterize the Canadian healthcare system, including the Canadian Indigenous population and the many francophone students (Pekalski 2015). In a position statement, CNSA confirmed its commitment to building partnerships with identified key stakeholders to enable Canadian nursing students to have a voice at the forefront of decision making. Months later, the first round of results revealed a 10% decrease in the NCLEX-RN's passing rates when compared to its Canadian counterpart, the CRNE (CNSA 2015a). This motivated CNSA to publish an additional position statement identifying the need to address student exam preparedness, particularly in bilingual students (CNSA 2015a). Since 2013, CNSA has continuously developed resolution statements that call for urgent attention to the recommended changes, including the construction and delivery of culturally appropriate exam content (CNSA 2019). Through those statements, CNSA consistently reiterated its desire to work collaboratively with CNA, legislative bodies and nursing students across the country to ensure that meaningful changes are made (CNSA 2019).

CNSA and other stakeholders have issued press releases and movement letters expressing the urgency to resolve the exclusion of Canadian competencies. In CNSA's most recent press release, a call to action was issued regarding the need to support francophone writers through improving exam translation and the availability of French preparatory resources (Marchand 2019). CNSA identified its continuous efforts in partnering with governing bodies to enact change that addresses concerns at the national level. Movement letters have been addressed to Canadian jurisdictional nursing regulators targeting concerns such as francophone student success rates, changes in nursing school curriculum and the exclusion of Canadian contexts (CNSA 2017a). In addition to this, CNSA has created an online collection of NCLEX-RN writing resources, including an online petition with over 1,000 supporters (CNSA 2017b). The association has also brought these concerns to the attention of the media through features in local radio stations and broadcasting outlets, such as the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation (CBC) (CNSA 2017a). Finally, CNSA has enacted social media awareness campaigns through NCLEX-RN-themed question-and-answer periods on Facebook Live (CNSA 2017a).

CNSA has made great efforts to continuously express the need and urgency to address the cultural competency insufficiencies within the current NCLEX-RN. These insufficiencies directly impact the success of the profession through an ineffective transition and progression of nursing students as they begin their careers. These issues, however, do not necessarily indicate that the NCLEX-RN needs to be abandoned for the sake of a Canadian exam. Several countries have already

adopted the NCLEX-RN as their licensing exam or are heading in that direction. But these inconsistencies strongly indicate that some serious changes need to be implemented in order for this entry-to-practice exam to be a fair representation of the Canadian healthcare system and to do right by Canadian nursing students. Changing the curriculum to suit the NCLEX-RN does not set up future novice nurses for success in their careers; rather, it puts them at a disadvantage because their education would not be congruent with the healthcare system in which they are going to be immersed.

Concerns of Francophone Students

CNSA has increased its focus on the issues and concerns of francophone students. The pass rate for students who take the exam in French is extremely alarming (29.7% in 2017) (CCRN 2018). This is an issue for francophone students across Canada, and it is their right to be able to write their licensure exam in their primary language without jeopardizing their success. The 2018 CCRNR report states that the exam success rate rose significantly to 61.4%, but the number of exam takers in French had plunged by more than half, from 145 in 2015 to 57 in 2018 (CCRN 2018). Resolution and position statements on NCLEX-RN advocacy were passed at the 2013, 2015 and 2017 CNSA national conferences, clearly demonstrating that students are concerned about and highly engaged in the conversation surrounding this entry-to-practice examination. CNSA has spent a significant amount of time, energy and resources investigating the gaps in the NCLEX-RN that discriminate against non-English speakers. Students have raised their voices and made it clear that the lack of support for francophone students is unacceptable.

CNSA has also made several attempts to communicate its concerns to regulatory bodies. A CNSA press release in October of 2015 asked for immediate action to (a) address translation issues and the lack of French resources for francophone students; (b) increase the number of attempts available to students while the issues pertaining to the NCLEX-RN are being addressed; and (c) urge all educational institutions to incorporate study guides and preparation support for the NCLEX-RN into their curriculum to ensure that they are using current practices that best support Canadian nursing students (CNSA 2015b). CNSA still awaits a response from these regulatory bodies to address its concerns.

Although some progress has been made, CNSA recognizes that work still needs to be done to address its concerns that the NCLEX-RN needs to (a) better reflect Canadian healthcare system values; (b) include consideration of cultural competence for Canada's First Nations, Inuit, and Métis populations; (c) properly reflect the focus of Canadian nursing programs; and (d) represent Canada's two official languages. Eradicating these concerns will ensure that nursing students across

Canada write an entry-to-practice exam that is contextually appropriate within their professional setting and relevant to the aims and delivery of their academic teachings. Through this, newly licensed nurses will be better equipped to provide culturally competent care that strongly represents the nature and values of the Canadian healthcare system.

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