

March 19, 2020

NECBC Position on Practice Education during the COVID-19 Pandemic

The Nursing Education Council of British Columbia (NECBC), representing senior nursing leadership of all nursing education programs in the Province (both college and university) identifies the need for principles and guidelines to guide complex decisions about nursing practice education in the context of the COVID-19 Pandemic. NECBC held teleconferences on March 16 and 18 to review program responses and changes to how students were engaging in practice settings around the province within the various postsecondary institutions and health authorities.

We are committed to working collaboratively with the Ministry of Advanced Education Skills and Training (MAEST), Ministry of Health (MOH), British Columbia College of Nursing Professionals (BCCNP), Post-Secondary Institutions (PSIs), and Health Authorities to determine the best course of action in the current context. NECBC proposes the following rationale, principles and recommendations for practice education in LPN, RPN, BSN and graduate programs including Nurse Practitioner programs.

Current Situation

The COVID-19 pandemic presents nursing education programs with unprecedented challenges and opportunities in the preparation of an essential and highly competent nursing workforce. NECBC contends that practice education for nurses in all programs must be sustained and strengthened as a critical resource. At this time there are complex determinations of how to ensure the continuity of practice education and the preparation of an essential nursing workforce while addressing issues involving student and public risk and safety.

NECBC understands that there will be diversity of policies and decisions across post-secondary institutions and health authorities as responses to the pandemic evolve. However, NECBC also recognizes that the unprecedented and rapid nature of the challenges that characterize this crisis, including the anxiety surrounding risk and uncertainty among students and faculty, will be well served by some commonly agreed upon principles and recommendations.

Students in nursing practice courses are required to meet practice competencies in order to progress in the program and graduate. The provision of high quality health care at all times, including during a pandemic, is dependent on a continuous supply of nursing graduates. In support of nursing education's social mandate to prepare a high quality nursing workforce, NECBC has identified the following principles and recommendations to guide planning and implementation of essential practice education.

***NECBC Mission:** to represent and speak for nursing education in the Province
and act to promote nursing education that is responsive to the changing needs of society*

Principles

- Schools of Nursing have a social mandate to prepare the nursing workforce and ensure a continuous supply of competent graduates. This mandate is more critical and immediate during a global health challenge posed by a pandemic.
- NECBC recognizes the ethical and moral commitment of nursing faculty and students to balance duty to care and perceived or actual risks to their own health during a pandemic¹
- Practice education is delivered within a competency based approach that allows flexibility in determining the range of experiences, settings, and amount of time required to achieve competence in particular courses. Emerging public health needs associated with the pandemic present opportunities to develop essential competencies.
- The preparation of students to engage in practice education in various settings varies with the level of student and the type of program. Novice students in all programs will be more limited in the range of practice experiences available to them in the context of a pandemic while students nearing graduation will be expected to have competencies that allow them to engage in a variety of settings including those competencies that enable them to practice safely with acutely ill patients or vulnerable populations.
- Access to practice settings for all students can be facilitated through timely identification of emerging community needs and intentional collaboration between postsecondary and health care and community organizations. Students and faculty members are essential members of the health care teams.
- Collaboration among Post Secondary Institutions, Health Authorities and BCCNP is needed at all levels and should be facilitated and centrally supported and coordinated on a provincial basis.
- Graduate students who are RNs are well positioned to continue in practice settings and can be a considerable resource in meeting needs as they arise. Practice for NP students and other graduate students including those in advanced nursing practice programs should only be cancelled under rare and exceptional circumstances, such as the absence of appropriate personal protective equipment and supplies for infection control.
- Nursing programs are committed to identifying the synergies between emerging community health needs in all practice settings and practice education requirements. A collaborative approach between Post-secondary institutions and Health Authorities will facilitate identification of new practice opportunities where students can develop competencies appropriate to the level and nature of the practice course requirements.
- It is an urgent priority that students who are nearing the end of their programs are able to access those practice experiences required for them to graduate and make the essential contributions as members of the healthcare workforce.

• ¹ (<https://www.cna-aiic.ca/~media/cna/page-content/pdf-en/code-of-ethics-2017-edition-secure-interactive>)

Recommendations

- We call on Schools of Nursing, through NECBC and the Canadian Association of Schools of Nursing (CASN), to adopt a publicized position on the social and ethical mandate of nursing education programs, including the duty to provide care in extraordinary times with appropriate safety precautions. We acknowledge we must ethically balance instructors' and students' individual circumstances and our commitment to caring for those who are vulnerable through our expertise in nursing knowledge and provision of evidence-informed care.
- We recommend that the Ministry of Health, Ministry of Advanced Education, Skills & Training, the BC College of Nurse Professionals, and Health Authorities affirm the critical importance of sustaining practice education in nursing programs as a whole, and support continuous collaboration across the province.
- We recommend that nursing program leads, practice placement coordinators, and health authorities should engage in a supported and intentional planning process to identify existing and emerging opportunities for practice education for different levels of students and programs.
- We recommend post-secondary institutions recognize that safe and competent health professional education will require clinical practice courses, and that these also support the current health workforce during pandemics. Academic leaders should generate policies and messages that differentiate the nature of health professional practice courses from other courses that lend themselves to alternate delivery modes or from public health emergency measures that help nursing students acquire the practice competencies they need now and in the future.