

The NCLEX-RN as an Entry-to-Practice Exam in New Brunswick: The Rocky Road Story of Francophone Candidates to the Nursing Profession

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Abstract

This article describes the experience of adopting the NCLEX-RN as an entry-to-practice exam among francophone baccalaureate nursing students in New Brunswick, Canada. The journey between 2012 and now has been difficult, and nursing leadership was necessary to inform key stakeholders regarding the inequities faced by francophone nursing students and to bring about change. Here is a description of the arduous work done by a group of concerned nurses (active and retired) to advocate for the rights of francophone nursing students.

Worrisome Start: Not Knowing What to Expect

The Nurses Association of New Brunswick (NANB) joined all the other nursing regulators of the country in adopting the NCLEX-RN, with the exception of Quebec, which continues to maintain its own exam. It is important to note that there are francophone students in other provinces/jurisdictions, but because the vast majority are in New Brunswick (NB), the work undertaken focused on NB. After five years, we now realize that the NANB's decision to adopt the NCLEX-RN as the entry-to-practice exam for nursing graduates has left a lasting impact on graduates, nurses, employers, educators and the population of the province.

Nursing educators from the Maritime provinces attended a meeting in Moncton in the fall of 2012, the purpose of which was to learn more about the NCLEX-RN. Representatives, psychometricians and spokespersons from the US National Council of State Boards of Nursing (NCSBN) provided an informational session. Many questions and issues were raised at this session, one of which being the translation and adaptation of the exam in French for francophone graduates. Resources were not yet available in French; however, anglophone students had access to a plethora of resources including NCSBN and commercial preparatory material. The Université de Moncton's (UdeM) School of Nursing was told that the NCSBN would provide a translated exam in French, that the linguistic rights of francophones would be respected and that the exam would have no impact on current nursing curricula (we did not have to teach to the test). Many advantages were mentioned, such as the exam would be psychometrically sound, would use computerized adaptive testing, would reduce the waiting time for graduates and employers to receive test results and succeeding at the exam meant you could easily work throughout North America. Despite being offered only three times per year in NB, graduates wishing to write the exam outside of these timelines could travel to out-of-province permanent centers (most often Halifax, Nova Scotia). Faculty members left the information session with few answers to their questions and a vague message that some details still needed to be worked out.

Tumultuous Middle: Rolling Up Our Sleeves and Getting to Work

Knowing that francophone students were left with no resources to help them prepare for the exam aside from the translated NCSBN Test Plan, UdeM faculty set out to rectify the inequities their students faced when preparing for the new exam. In early 2013, the faculty attended webinars and workshops to learn more about the exam so that they could provide sessions to familiarize students with the NCLEX-RN environment. One campus created summer jobs for two consecutive years, hiring bilingual students to translate and adapt NCLEX type of questions into French from an established test bank with the permission of the publisher Wolters Kluwer. Two faculty members were responsible to review all translated material for accuracy of translation and content. Approximately 900 questions with answers and referenced rationales were made available to all students via the Desire2Learn educational platform with funds provided by the Langue Officielle en Enseignement program. In addition, UdeM partnered with two other francophone schools of nursing (Université d'Ottawa and Université Laurentienne) to develop preparatory modules with funds provided by the Consortium National de Formation en Santé. However, these efforts were not enough when compared to the realm of resources in English. Students often preferred purchasing the English commercial products, some believing these would help them better prepare for and pass the NCLEX-RN.

These tumultuous years were marked with few highs and many lows. It is important to note that 2014 saw the first UdeM graduates from an entirely redesigned and modified baccalaureate of nursing curriculum using a competency-based approach. The success rate on the Canadian Registered Nurses Exam for francophone graduates from the three campuses of the School of Nursing was 91% in June that year (*Investigation Report – Office of the COLNB: Office of the Commissioner of Official Languages for New Brunswick 2018, Table A, page 10*). This program later received national accreditation and provincial approval. The following spring, for the same program, but a different exam, the results were devastating for all graduates in NB, but more so for French-speaking candidates when the success rate dropped to 32%. Although the success rate on the first attempt has improved for francophone writers between 2015 and 2019, the fact is that the rate remains low, as shown in Table 1. More and more francophone students purchase English preparatory tools and, as a result, more and more of them are writing the exam in English, placing them in an unfavourable situation, as described in the following text.

Table 1. NCLEX-RN success rates for UdeM nursing students

	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019*
Success rate (first attempt) (written in English and in French)	32%	39%	40%	64%	68%
Success rate (first attempt) (written in French)	26%	37%	31%	63%	48%
Number of students and percentage (first attempt; written in French)	80/96 (83.3%)	70/113 (61.9%)	45/96 (46.88%)	46/78 (58.97%)	23/46 (50%)

NANB NCLEX-RN – Results in quarterly reports (NANB 2014)

* Quarter 2 report (July–September 2019)

Tumultuous Times, Distressing Results, Courageous Actions

Francophone students feel compelled to choose English preparatory tools and an English exam thinking this will enhance their chance to succeed. Actually, this places them at a disadvantage and violates their rights as francophones living in NB. Students, graduates, parents, nurses and francophone organizations have voiced and continue to voice their dissatisfaction and frustrations through various forums since the first results in 2015. Their concerns were directed to NANB and to the government regarding the choice of the exam and the impact it has on the nursing resources. With the growing groundswell of criticism logged against the NANB from within its membership and outside by members of the francophone community, a group of nurses concerned with the status quo formed an advocacy group, which has grown over the past years and perseveres today. These nurses are motivated by their professional responsibilities and their sense of accountability as members of a self-regulated profession. Furthermore, they are acting on what is perceived to be a lived experience of social injustice.

Tumultuous Middle: A Provincial Context That Should Protect, Not Deter

Although people sometimes refer to Maritime provinces as “have not provinces,” when it comes to respecting linguistic rights, NB is considered a “have province” that francophone minorities in other provinces often envy. Here are a few reasons why:

- The *Official Languages Act* in April 1969 recognizes the fundamental right of all New Brunswickers to receive services in both official languages.
- The *Act Recognizing the Equality of the Two Official Linguistic Communities in New Brunswick* adopted in 1981 with Bill 88 affirms equal rights and privileges for both linguistic communities.
- The Commissioner of Official Languages for New Brunswick position created in 2013 and revision of the *Official Languages Act* to include Bill 72, which indicates that associations established by acts of the legislative assembly to regulate professions are subject to the *Official Languages Act*.

Bill 72 is key for the advocacy group of nurses concerned about having the NCLEX-RN as an entry-to-practice requirement in NB. Consequently, the NANB must not only act in the public interest but also follow provincial law, including the *Official Languages Act*. Thus, Section 41.1(3) of the Act states the following: “No person shall be placed at a disadvantage by reason of exercising his or her right to choose an official language in which to fulfill requirements imposed by a professional association.”

As a result, the Commissioner of Official Languages in New Brunswick received complaints in 2016 from francophone graduates alleging that their linguistic rights were violated by the NANB with the adoption of the NCLEX-RN. The Investigation Report published in May 2018 concluded that the complaints were founded and that the NANB violated Subsection 41.1 (3) of the *Official Languages Act* (Investigation Report – Office of the COLNB: Office of the Commissioner of Official Languages for New Brunswick 2018). The NANB responded to the report, stating inaccuracies and justifying their decisions and their actions (AIINB 2019).

Uncertain End: One Step Forward, Three Steps Back

The inability of the NANB and the providers of the NCLEX-RN to provide a suitable remedy is unacceptable. This advocacy group aims to address this injustice. They want the professional body to act responsibly, to respect the laws of the province of NB and to treat all its members with respect, dignity and equity by meeting the requirements of both linguistic communities in the province, a right that has been grounded by New Brunswick's *Official Languages Act* since 1969.

The advocacy group has written numerous letters, drafted press releases, held a press conference, presented briefs to the government, held meetings with ministers and government representatives along with meetings with officials of the NANB and members of the board of directors and organized an important presence at the NANB Annual General Meeting in the hopes of expressing, yet again, their concerns regarding the exam. The advocacy work has become more pressing because the NANB, like other regulators across Canada, are due to renew their contracts with the NCSBN.

New graduates from UdeM continue to struggle. Their pass rates are still below the national average, and there are no comparable francophone resources available. Members of the advocacy group have seen first-hand how the NANB's decision has shattered dreams, broken career paths, indebted students and caused anxiety and a loss of confidence. In addition, many faculty at UdeM's School of Nursing felt their reputation was affected because the NANB has publicly stated

more than once that the low pass rate is in part the responsibility of the nursing program, the faculty's competencies and the university's lower selection criteria.

Although efforts were made by the NCSBN to have a mock exam translated, the francophone version does not include the answers or the rationales for the correct or incorrect answers, whereas Anglophone students receive additional information letting them know where to focus their efforts. Francophones were and continue to be disadvantaged.

We are in the midst of a countrywide nursing shortage, and this compounded with the NCLEX-RN decision has created a negative impact on the vital capacity of NB to produce the number of graduates needed to provide services for the population. In a 2019 report, detailing its nursing resource strategy, the Government of NB cites several reasons for the nursing shortage in the province, one of them being the low pass rate on the current NCLEX-RN (Government of New Brunswick 2019).

Meanwhile, in 2017, the Canadian Association of Schools of Nursing (CASN) started to develop an exam for baccalaureate graduates. They recently released the Canadian Examination for Baccalaureate Nursing (CEBN), a bilingual, voluntary national certification exam. This exam assesses graduates' mastery of the components of baccalaureate-level education and professional nursing in the Canadian healthcare system (Canadian Association of Schools of Nursing 2018). At the time of writing this article, the NANB has yet to acknowledge this exam as a viable alternative to the current exam.

The advocacy group continues to work tirelessly to encourage their professional body to reconsider their partnership with the NCSBN and to do the right thing for all NB nursing graduates. The advocacy group believes that although it will require courageous leadership to correct the current regulatory quagmire, it can be done. It must be done.

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