A Sustainable Dietetics Bridging Program:
Development and Implementation in Atlantic Canada

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ABSTRACT

A provincial focus on immigration and improved foreign credential recognition has led to an investigation of best practices and subsequent recommendations for the development and implementation of a sustainable university-based bridging program for internationally educated dietitians in Atlantic Canada. Data were collected from various sources and used to inform program decisions and direction. An advisory framework was established through a core group representing dietetics education and regulation and internationalization. Subsequently, a key stakeholder group was formed. As a result of this collaboration and research, a dietetics bridging framework was developed and a program pilot tested. Lessons learned may inform similar endeavours and highlight the importance of collaborative leadership and collaboration among multiple stakeholders, and of creatively addressing program sustainability issues while keeping learners (internationally educated dietitians) at the centre.

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RÉSUMÉ

L'intérêt à l'échelle de la province pour l'immigration et l'amélioration de la reconnaissance des titres de compétences étrangers a mené à la recherche des meilleures pratiques puis à des recommandations pour la mise au point et l'implantation au Canada atlantique d'un programme de transition universitaire durable à l'intention des diététistes formés à l'étranger. Des données ont été recueillies de diverses sources et ont été utilisées afin d'orienter le programme et les décisions y étant associées. Un cadre consultatif a été établi et rassemblait des intervenants des milieux de l'enseignement et de la réglementation de la diététique, et de l'internationalisation. Subséquemment, un groupe d'intervenants clés a été formé. À la suite de cette collaboration et de cette recherche, un cadre de transition pour la diététique a été mis au point, et un programme pilote a été testé. Les leçons qui en ont été tirées pourraient donner le ton à des projets similaires et mettent en évidence l'importance du leadership collaboratif et de la collaboration entre les divers intervenants. Elles soulignent de plus qu'il est primordial de s'attaquer de manière créative aux problèmes de durabilité du programme, tout en gardant les apprenants (les diététistes formés à l'étranger) au cœur de la démarche.

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INTRODUCTION

"Bridging" is a term associated with addressing gaps in training that may exist from one system of education and practice to another. A bridging program therefore comprises resources and training that assist professionals in meeting entry standards for a profession (1). The conditions that follow have led to an investigation of best practices (2) and subsequent recommendations for the development and implementation of a sustainable university-based bridging program for internationally educated dietitians in Atlantic Canada. The Nova Scotia immigration strategy created a focus on increased recruitment and retention of newcomers and reduced barriers to credential recognition (3). Other professional groups have developed formalized bridging programs (4-6). The Fair Access to Regulated Professions Act (7) has drawn attention to the need for assurance of fair, transparent, and objective registration processes, and also to the need to prevent unnecessary barriers to licensure. In addition, between 2007 and 2009, Canada as a whole saw a 6.5% rise in immigration, and between 2000 and 2009, Nova Scotia experienced a 50.7% increase (8,9) with subsequent increases in internationally educated dietitians interested in professional licensure.

An internationally educated dietitian may need to upgrade training to attain currency, or to address specific gaps in education (including practical professional experience) based upon professional competencies to meet entry-level competencies. The need to attain competencies related to the Canadian cultural context of dietetics is most often a requirement for any internationally educated dietitian when differences exist between cultures.

PURPOSE

While no obligation exists under the Fair Access to Regulated Professions Act for provision of bridging opportunities, bridging program development is the outcome of partners' social responsibility to provide opportunities for bridging in Atlantic Canada. An investigation of current bridging practices was undertaken by Mount Saint Vincent University and the Nova Scotia Dietetic Association in order to determine foundational program requirements for a proposed Atlantic Canada bridging program to meet emerging needs.

METHODS

A program assistant was hired through a provincial grant and worked under the direction of a core group of experts. Referred to as the program advisory team executive, this group brought expertise from three areas: dietetic education, professional regulation, and internationalization. The program assistant collected data to inform program decisions and direction from several sources, guided by the question "What are the best practices in bridging?"

A literature review permitted identification of current and best practices in bridging programs for internationally educated professionals, integration of such professionals into the Canadian workforce, and barriers to bridging. Grey literature included reports from regulatory bodies and government agencies, program brochures, newsletters, and conference proceedings. Twenty-eight sources were identified through an online Google Scholar search of the phrases "bridging international health professionals," "bridging internationally educated," "bridging programs," "international health care professionals," and "public policy and bridging immigrants." Relevant data were extracted and themed according to the research question (10). Six articles reviewed were excluded because they did not contribute to the research objective.

A review of relevant organizations' websites was completed. To be included in the review, organizations must have met three of six key bridging components (see Lum (11)). Data gleaned from websites were used to gain insight into program structure and requirements, and the identification of potential interviewees to provide additional program information not found on the websites. Websites were identified through a general Google search of bridging programs and from program advisory team executive recommendations. Fourteen websites were reviewed and nine met the inclusion criteria (11).

Semi-structured interviews (face to face and via telephone) were conducted at nine of 15 potential interview sites (again based on Lum's (11) criteria). These individuals were identified through the literature and web reviews, program advisory team executive recommendations, or names shared by other interviewees. Data collected illuminated the development and implementation of the organizations' bridging process, and what had been learned about best practices and program challenges.

Consultations were held with a stakeholder group. Referred to as the program advisory team, it comprised dietitians and non-dietitians, including an interprofessional practice coordinator, an internationally educated dietitian, a preceptor of internationally educated dietitians, and representatives from Dietitians of Canada Professional Affairs and Professional Standards, Atlantic dietetic regulatory bodies, an immigrant settlement agency (Immigrant Settlement & Integration Services [ISIS]), and the Department of Labour and Advanced Education. These representatives brought expertise from their various sectors.

RESULTS

Collaboration, sustainability, and learners' needs

Ten common best practices bridging themes emerged (Table 1) (12-17). Our investigation illustrated that, despite best practices, each program was influenced by its individual circumstances. The goal established for the Atlantic Canada bridging program was the development of a sustainable program to meet the needs of internationally educated dietitians seeking provincial licensure. As such, while informed by the best practices themes, the bridging program core recommendations (Table 2) were guided by this unique goal. Decision-making was ongoing throughout program development and was based upon three intersecting interests: creating and building relevant collaborations, creating a basic program that could be sustained, and keeping learners and their competency attainment at the centre.

Pilot program

A pilot bridging program was implemented to test recommendations 1 through 4 and 7 (Table 2). Recommendations 5 and 6 (Table 2) will be piloted in the future. All Atlantic Canada internationally educated dietitians interested in the program were accepted into the pilot program. Only one met the minimum language requirement. The core modules were composed of predetermined objectives and spanned two academic terms (Table 2). Two internationally educated dietitians attended module 1. Because of low numbers and in order to create a sustainable class dynamic, the module was made available to undergraduate and graduate international dietetic students, despite different needs and assets; one undergraduate and 13 graduate students attended. Three internationally educated dietitians and three undergraduate students attended module 2. In each instance, the program was offered face to face and online. All internationally educated dietitians attended by distance because of their geographic location (18,19). Blackboard Collaborate, an online software collaborative program, was used to facilitate participation. Any activities that posed challenges to online learning were modified (e.g., role playing was facilitated by web cameras) (20). A course management system known as Moodle (Modular Object-Oriented Dynamic Learning Environment) was used to communicate with all students (19). The program coordinator/module facilitator was a dietitian, had experience in adult education, and had researched best practices in bridging. Participant education for both modules was based upon pre-class readings, in-class activities, and discussion and assignments including case studies, reflection exercises, and role playing. Whenever possible, the module facilitator created opportunities to connect previous learning with new learning. Although a predetermined

Table 1
Best practices bridging themes[a]

1. Establish minimum language proficiency. Consultation with stakeholders, with support from the literature, suggests problematic integration of internationally educated professionals, which results from communication difficulties that include the ability to document clearly, confidence in speaking, and the cultural nuances of professional communication (12). A focus on language preempts other bridging objectives (13).
2. Conduct readiness-for-success assessments in bridging assessments. Preadmission assessments clarify individual readiness (13) and can identify individual learning styles (11). Preadmission assessments also identify which supports (language, financial) must be put in place.
3. Provide an orientation. Interviews and the literature support the importance of program orientation. Higginbottom (14) suggests one that includes both social and economic dimensions of enculturation is important.
4. Address potential academic voids with mainstream academic courses. An academic void represents a knowledge gap. Interviews illuminated common academic voids, including management principles, critical thinking, and profession-specific communication. While specific gap training can address these deficiencies, so can participation in existing coursework. Care must be taken to ensure such general course applications can meet the specific needs of the internationally educated professional.
5. Incorporate gap training modules. Linguistic and sociocultural dimensions of communication have been cited as the top persistent issues for employers, credentials agencies, and internationally educated professionals (in this case, nurses) (12). Common themes covered in gap training modules included professional communication, clinical knowledge, skills enhancement, and orientation to Canadian practice. The proliferation of language and communication difficulties warrants the dedication of a course specific to communications (15).
6. Include practical training and experiential learning approaches. Work placements and internships were considered appropriate experiences as opportunities to apply knowledge, skills, behaviours, and judgment appropriately (13). Johnson and Israel reported that the seven programs they surveyed supported the application and integration of knowledge through experiential learning (1). Interview data suggest practical experiences are routinely incorporated into programs. Additionally, programs utilize case studies, role playing, and lab simulation opportunities.
7. Create accessible support systems. All the programs reviewed have formalized support systems in place, including supplementary learning plans (e.g., case studies, extra assignments, tutorials), workshops (e.g., licensure exam preparation), networking opportunities (e.g., face-to-face class time), language support (e.g., language clubs, English courses), employment support (e.g., a career access fund, unpaid work placements), and financial support (e.g., employment and financial counselling/advisement). Support systems were both organization and person specific (13). Access was important; feedback indicated that a process for matching students to supports was necessary.
8. Provide feedback mechanisms for participants. Ongoing structured opportunities for feedback are important (15). Outcomes include confidence building for both bridging participants and leaders, and more successful practice integration (16). Feedback incorporated both regular interaction with all bridging sponsors and coaching sessions.
9. Create program flexibility. The notion of delivery modality flexibility as a method of addressing the diverse needs of bridging programs was important (16,17). Incorporating distance education is an example of program flexibility. Equally important is the recognition that few internationally educated dietitians have similar learning needs.
10. Provide ongoing program evaluation. All the organizations reviewed indicated routine self-evaluation of the bridging program. Contrary to this finding, the literature suggests many programs lack well-defined indicators that could be attributable to program success, in particular, if participants are employed within their field (13).

[a] Themes are presented in no particular order of importance.

Table 2
Atlantic Canada dietetics bridging program: recommended core elements[a]

1. Minimum English proficiency level of 6.5 (International English Language Testing System), to coincide with university regulations (17) A level of 6 is considered good and 7 is considered competent on a scale of 1 to 9, with 1 described as a nonuser (no ability) and 9 as an expert user (fully operational command of the language). **Purpose:** To position participants for success in the bridging program and subsequent workforce integration. **Note:** Internationally educated dietitians wishing to participate in the bridging program will previously have been assessed by the regulatory body, which will have determined through credential/competency assessment if academic and practical upgrading is required. English proficiency for the university may be lower than that required by a regulatory body. The internationally educated dietitian is responsible for meeting the language requirements of the various constituents.
2. Orientation to the bridging program **Purpose:** To build confidence and establish a consistent foundation upon which to start the program. Includes an introduction to program components and supports and the opportunity to interact with other students and faculty. Length will be 1.5 days at the beginning of each module.
3. Ongoing support to participants **Purpose:** To provide participants with required supports that can positively address common personal and systemic bridging challenges. Supports include community supports (e.g., immigrant settlement agencies for employment counselling and micro loans), access to existing university supports (e.g., tutoring, a learning strategist), and feedback and coaching provided by university mentors (e.g., program instructors and university faculty).
4. Two core gap training modules, each approximately three hours a week over 13 weeks **Purpose:** To provide theoretical and practical learning experiences with a focus on themes of culture-based language and communication as they relate to building entry-level dietetic competence. **Module 1 (fall academic term)—introduction to cultural competence and the context of dietetics in Canada:** Examples of topics include an introduction to professional practice, production, regulation, and management of foods in Canada, methods of communication and education, the culture of food, and an introduction to health systems. Critical thinking, communication, language, and reflective practice skills are developed. **Module 2 (winter academic term)—preparation for practical dietetics training in Canada:** Examples of topics include professional practice, nutrition care, client-centred care, charting, workplace culture, interprofessional practice. Self-directed learning and critical analysis skills are developed. Module content is standardized; however, the individual learning needs of internationally educated dietitians are addressed through learning supports and instructor interaction. **Assessment:** Grades are based on assignments and participation. Examples of assignments include case studies, food record analysis, a competency journal, goal setting, and oral presentations. A passing module grade is 75% (under review).
5. Practical training experiences **Purpose:** To provide participants with supervised workplace placements to enable them to acquire and demonstrate required practical experience and entry-level competence. These are incremental experiences (e.g., observerships, culminating with a formalized practicum component in module 3). **Eligibility for the formalized practicum component:** Successful completion of modules 1 and 2 is required, along with a prepracticum assessment that includes a face-to-face evaluation of acquired competence evaluated through interviews, simulations, role playing, and case studies. The practicum component is customized according to the individual student's learning needs.
6. Supplemental training modules **Purpose:** To provide structured education in key areas identified as challenging. Initial supplemental training focuses on a national examination preparation module and a workforce integration module.
7. Engagement in ongoing evaluation (participants and program) **Purpose:** To identify participants' evolving learning needs and modify the bridging plan, as required; to ensure participants are prepared to begin the practicum portion of the program; to routinely monitor and make adjustments to maintain a quality bridging program.

[a] Occurring sequentially and, at times, concurrently.

course outline was followed, opportunities during and outside class (through email and Moodle discussion) provided some individualization based on student need. Through ongoing feedback and observations, the facilitator made changes to the curriculum when these were required (i.e., provided additional review of material or additional examples).

Lessons learned

Collaboration was identified early as a key underpinning of the planning and implementation of the bridging program (21,22). Effective collaboration has been linked to program success (23,24) and the achievement of program goals (25,26). The establishment of the program advisory team executive, which included a regulatory body member who provided immediate feedback and identified implications related to registration, was critical to program success. Decisions occurred simultaneously, rather than over time and through layers of approval. Program advisory team members provided key collaborations. Members brought a variety of perspectives to discussions and helpful expertise in terms of processes and applicable resources that could support and advance the program. This result supports previous work highlighting the benefits of collaboration (24,25).

Grant money ($63,000) was used to develop the program infrastructure. Sustainability meant ensuring all core components could be managed with the available resources and the program could be offered yearly. Sustainability emerged as an issue as the numbers of registered internationally educated dietitians were small. For the bridging program to be sustained with three or fewer students, the students would have to bear a significant financial burden. Such a situation may be a barrier to those considering bridging.

Justifying the sustainability of the program at the university level would also be difficult. The pilot was offered free of charge in 2012 to 2013. How could a program attracting one to three internationally educated dietitians a year be continued? In iteration 2 (2013 to 2014), which is still under grant funding, a nominal amount ($300) is being charged to support program activities. The course instructor is paid through the infrastructure grant. In the subsequent program iteration (2014 to 2015), each core module will be offered and charged as a formal university course.

Existing research suggests sustainable programs are embedded within an institution and tied to the existing infrastructure (27). Bridging should not be positioned as a "one-off service provided at a specific point in time" (27, p. 2). So that a viable course can be offered each year, the two modules (without the formalized practicum component) will become mandatory for all international graduate students who are admitted to a university program and identified as potentially benefiting from such support. This decision was supported by informal feedback and facilitator observations; these indicated benefits to students who were not internationally educated dietitians but participated in the modules, gained exposure to relevant course content, and received feedback on assignments. The program advisory team executive concluded that, in these cases, the bridging program could serve multiple audiences and purposes. Including students who were not internationally educated dietitians created financial stability and exposed that group to a curriculum that could increase their Canadian cultural competence. In addition to permitting the program to be offered on an ongoing basis, the inclusion of students benefits internationally educated dietitians because they are exposed to a larger class cohort and therefore more opportunities exist for dialogue and interaction (28). A forthcoming formal program evaluation will articulate outcomes (29).

Experience with modules 1 and 2 informed the development of module 3, the formalized practicum component for internationally educated dietitians. Module 3 will be managed through collaboration with ISIS, which has an established health professions placement infrastructure. A dietitian mentor recruited by the program advisory team executive will follow a mentorship manual developed as part of the infrastructure grant. The mentor will interact with onsite preceptors who provide practical experiences at their organizations (29), which are aimed at fulfilling the profession's integrated competencies.

In maintaining a learner-centred approach, we learned that while the program was originally designed for face-to-face learning, participants and their families had settled in various locations and could not physically attend the program. The use of Moodle and Collaborate, established university systems, provided a cost-efficient and effective way for learners to participate without the need to relocate. These resources enabled us to maintain collaborative interaction and dialogue, engage students in problem-solving, and provide ready access to online resources shown to contribute to a learner-centred approach (28,30,31). A community of learners was created by merging clear course objectives with learners' unique needs through attention to language, and by connecting Canadian concepts with what students already knew. Continuous oral and written facilitator feedback far exceeded what we had anticipated, but was critical to support students in their practice and application of knowledge, skills, and understanding (32). Learners entered the pilot program at various stages of language competence. The two internationally educated dietitians who were not assessed for language skills were more challenged by the course content and required significant facilitator support. This finding reinforces research findings that show language is the most significant difficulty for students (29,33). Future program iterations will require internationally trained dietitians to meet minimum language scores in order to participate.

RELEVANCE TO PRACTICE

Others who face the opportunities and challenges of bridging programs for internationally educated dietitians can consider the lessons we learned from experiences with the current program. A university with a dietetics program and an international department can provide the necessary framework for establishment of a bridging program. Sustainability can be created by tapping into existing university and community resources and considering broader uses for the program. International under-

graduate and graduate students benefit from exposure to the bridging program curriculum, and in the pilot program, they provided the critical mass required to run the module. Recognition of the importance of ongoing collaboration with experts and stakeholders in the field can preempt potential problems for the program and participants.

Participant language ability emerged as an issue. More research is needed to establish the impact that language ability, even for those meeting the minimum university requirement, may have on successful module completion and for candidates moving to module 3.

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