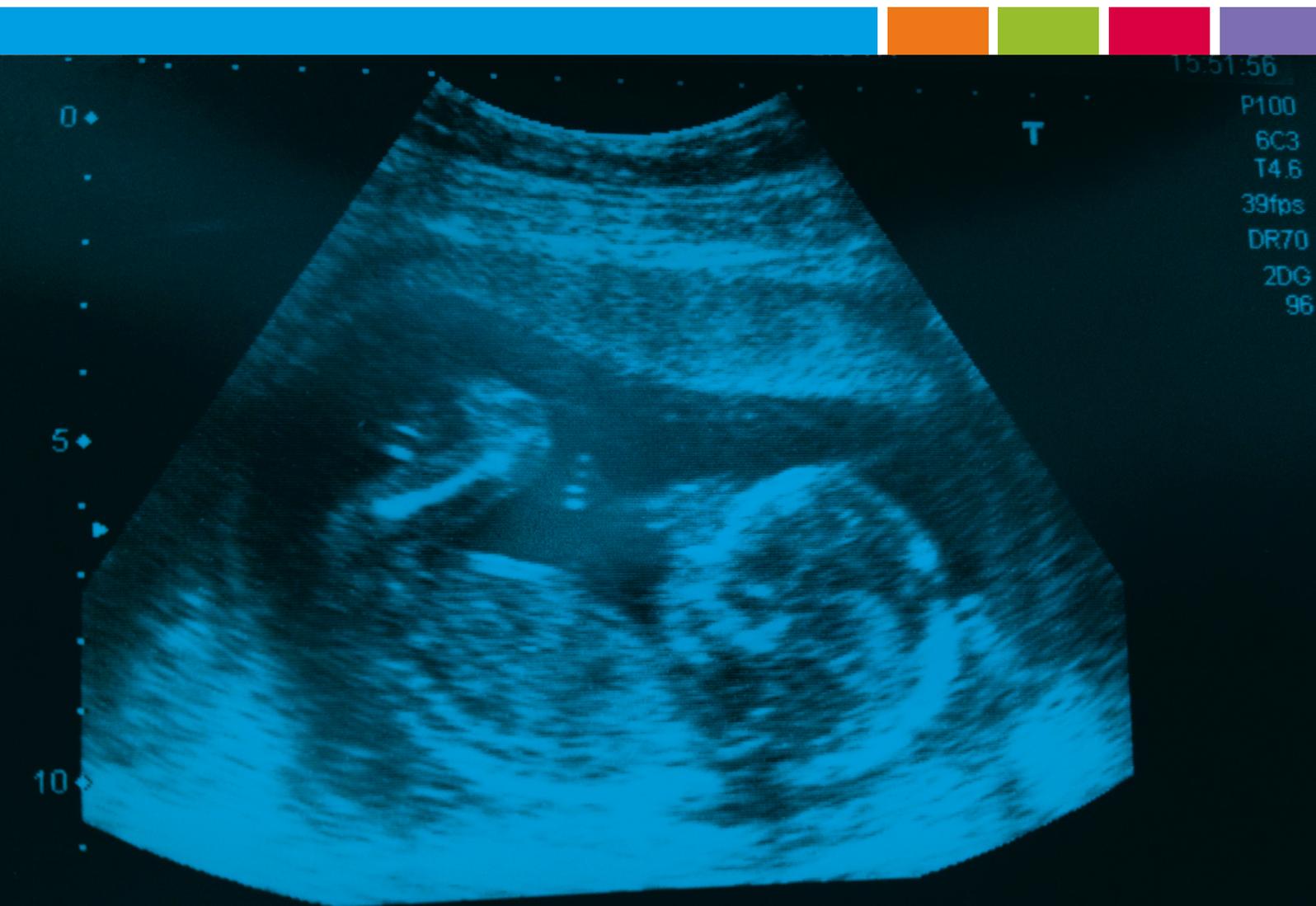


Impact Assessment of the Education and Career Progression Framework for Fertility Nursing



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Notes

It is recognised that services are provided by nurses and midwives in a range of settings. For ease of reading, the generic terms ‘nurse’, ‘nursing’ and ‘nurses’ are used throughout this document.

The RCN recognises and embraces our gender diverse society and encourages this standard to be used by and/or applied to people who identify as non-binary, transgender or gender fluid.

Introduction

The *RCN Education and Career Progression Framework for Fertility Nursing* was published in March 2018. It was intended to enhance career progression and provide standards for clinical practice development.

The framework was produced to raise standards of education within fertility nursing, as well as provide an assessment tool that could be implemented within the clinical environment to ensure that nurses working in fertility care are being assessed to a national standard.

In 2021, the publication was due for review and to assess the value and effectiveness of the framework, the RCN embarked on an impact assessment, in the form of an online survey. This was a collaborative project, including the British Fertility Society (BFS) and Senior Infertility Nurses Network (SING).

This collaboration was also aimed at future national work, to establish a cohesive and collective approach to enabling fertility nurses to enhance their career pathways, both in the NHS and the independent sector (where the majority of fertility services are provided).

Impact assessment process

Three years on from publication, it was important to carry out an impact assessment on the framework, to ascertain how aware nurses are of the document, and how widely it had been used. Anecdotal feedback has been very positive since publication and the intention of the project team was to develop intelligence to help inform the revised edition in 2021.

This took place during the pandemic, and the authors fully acknowledge that whilst it was important to gather information about this publication, the assessment took place in the middle of a very challenging time, both professionally and personally, and this may well have impacted on the results received.

The pandemic also affected the provision of fertility care with services closed/stepped down, and staff redeployments to manage the crisis in the health care system across the UK.

Survey results

The evidence gathering was achieved via an online targeted survey. The survey was created by the project team, tested and distributed online via the RCN Fertility Nursing Forum (FNF), BFS and SING. It is also acknowledged that fertility nursing is a very specialist area of practice, with a small number of practitioners working in fertility care.

The overall total respondents was 86. The information gathered has been outlined below, and has informed the development of a revised framework, published in 2021.

The themes used for analysis are:

1. profile of respondents
2. how the *RCN Education and Career Progression Framework for Fertility Nursing* is being used in practice
3. career support and progression
4. the role of managers

Profile of responders

The survey identified that almost 85% of respondents were working in fertility care, and that 70% of those had worked in this specialist field for more than six years. As with previous work carried out by the FNF, this confirms that once nurses find a career in fertility care they are likely to remain there for some time.

It was encouraging to note that some 66% of respondents felt their career had progressed during that time, however that left almost a third of nurses who did not agree with that sentiment.

75% of respondents only work in fertility care, with the remaining 25 having roles in general gynaecology, outpatient department nurse, endometriosis, surgical ward, education, vaccination centre, early pregnancy clinic sonographer, own business and menopause care. 84% of respondents were registered nurses.

When considered where respondents were employed, Figure 1 below outlines the responses received, demonstrating the majority of respondents were in either acute NHS trust (30%) or the independent sector (36%) providing fertility care services.

Figure 1

Which of the following best describes your employer?				
			Response Percent	Response Total
1	NHS acute		30.14%	22
2	Primary care		0.00%	0
3	Independent/private practice		23.29%	17
4	Licensed fertility centre		36.99%	27
5	Other (please specify): included University and independent sector		9.59%	7

When asked how many hours a week respondents worked a week (Figure 2 below) , somewhat concerning was that over 40% of those who replied said they worked more than 37.5 hours a week. The responses did not provide detail behind these figures but it could be related to contracts being for more than 37.5 hours – many independent sector providers have 40 hour full-time contracts, and it is not clear whether these hours relate to overtime – paid or unpaid.

Figure 2

How many hours do you work in fertility care each week?				
			Response Percent	Response Total
1	0 - 10 hours		5.48%	4
2	11 - 20 hours		13.70%	10
3	21 - 37.5 hours		39.73%	29
4	More than 37.5 hours		41.10%	30

The RCN Education and Career Progression Framework for Fertility Nursing

One of the key aims of the study was to establish how well known the framework was, and how widely it was used in practice.

The survey suggested that about 60% of respondents were familiar with the framework, with about one third confirming that they use it personally, however over 90% had not had any training in its use. This could suggest that it is easy to follow and does not require formal training. The RCN would like to encourage further use, in its belief that it can enable career progression and development. When asked if the framework provided enough guidance in view of the role, 8% of those who replied agreed that it did, however some 50% of all respondents did not respond. Following discussion, the project team has now considered whether the question was fully understood, which may have resulted in the low response rate. This would also suggest a recommendation around how the framework can be better distributed and adopted by those working in this area of practice.

In considering the totality of the document, (using some of the feedback) the following sections/areas were considered to be the most useful:

- use all of it
- as part of new staff induction are introduced to the framework, the beginner to expert information section it is a good place to show them how they will progress and the wheel shows all areas that they could specialise in once the basics were covered in depth
- used for career development
- scanning
- the competencies as they give a benchmark for training and skills development

- they have been adapted for local use
- also used for discussing pay grades
- guidance for health care support worker (HCSWs) competencies/help for new nurses into the field of fertility
- competency guide - beginner/advanced, etc.
- specific standards required for each level of competence and experience
- the assessments.

This suggests that the framework is being used for both the induction of new staff and ongoing career development.

The details of how the framework has been used can be found in Figure 3 and demonstrates that respondents mainly use the document for self-development (75%) and for demonstrating their role in practice (over 50%).

Figure 3

Have you used the framework to: Select all that apply				
			Response Percent	Response Total
1	Demonstrate your role		54.17%	13
2	Enhance your skills		33.33%	8
3	Within your personal development plan		75.00%	18
4	To enhance local services		16.67%	4
5	Other (please specify): Other included:- • As part of the appraisal process for other staff and new starters induction • workforce planning • Support and guide junior staff • Direct nurses to see areas they could develop if they wish		16.67%	4

Career support and progression

When enquiring about annual reviews, 90% of respondents confirmed that they had an annual appraisal, however only 12% agreed that the framework was used as part of that process.

Some of the comments demonstrating how it is used included:

We adapted the framework to work within our centre - it gives all our nurses the opportunity to assess their competency and measure

Annual nurse training based around the framework.

As a manager I gave nurses a copy to read and digest a few weeks before their appraisal so that they could discuss it overall it provides a good discussion point and basis for my own or an NHS trust appraisal form.

To assess my skills and progress in this speciality.

Competency framework used to audit practice and skill set.

I introduced the framework document to my appraisal and tried to structure it around that to show the value of having this document.

I have progressed from having a diploma in general nursing to now doing my master's in advanced fertility. Talking to my managers using the fertility framework as my tool for my education.

The low 12% usage was somewhat disappointing, as part of the original aim was that it would form an integral part of professional development for nurses working in fertility care across the UK. Having said that, further questions in the survey identified that it was being used in other ways, in particular around general staff development, and for new starters both registered nurses, nursing associates and health care support workers.

The survey did inquire as to what, if anything else, is being used, and the replies included:

- NHS generic pathway/trust appraisal tool
- company's own appraisal framework
- personal goals and local management system
- inhouse training plans competencies
- personal goals for role/own experience
- job application
- nothing – this was a common reply
- one respondent did reply that the RCN framework was not implemented but would like to see it used.

Many of these may be generic tools, that serve local employer goals, or company objectives, and may not necessarily relate directly to the clinical skills required by fertility nurses. This may include nurse managers having non-clinical key performance indicators that are directed towards company objectives.

The RCN recommends that the framework could be integrated into generic tools, with a goal towards national usage, or used alongside more generic frameworks. The RCN does recognise that employers will have their own systems in place, however there is a need to find a way to ensure nurses are accessing nationally agreed competencies designed to enhance fertility care, and their career pathways. This would also enable staff movement between public and private health care, and across different organisations and counties/countries. Recommending that it be used by individuals for personal development would also help to achieve this aim.

Continuing professional development (CPD) is critically important for all registrants, to both maintain and enhance their skills and knowledge and to provide the best care possible. It is also a condition of remaining on the professional register.

Only a third of respondents attended a conference in the last year, however some of the feedback suggested that the negative response may be due to whether the conference was interpreted as a face-to-face event? The project team is aware that many conferences were cancelled or converted to online events during the pandemic.

There was some consideration of access to CPD, not least during such difficult times, with a clear increase in the use of hybrid and online learning. Those who did attend, often referred to online events, which have been really useful in enabling nurses to maintain and enhance their CPD. Unfortunately, some reported no access to CPD, and this does cause some concern, as this may have a negative impact on care and on revalidation for some registrants.

One of the challenges outlined about access to CPD is that of costs both in terms of time and funding for courses. It is important to be aware of local as well as national funding opportunities, such as bursaries and legacies. These are often advertised in nursing press and online health care organisations and resources.

Managers should have access to information on how staff can access CPD, and most large organisations will have practice development leads/practice educators who will be able to help. If this does not exist locally then the local higher education institute/university that provides health and social care education, may be able to help.

Using the framework to self-assess skills needs can also demonstrate to management the personal requirement for further skills development when requesting funding or time off for CPD.

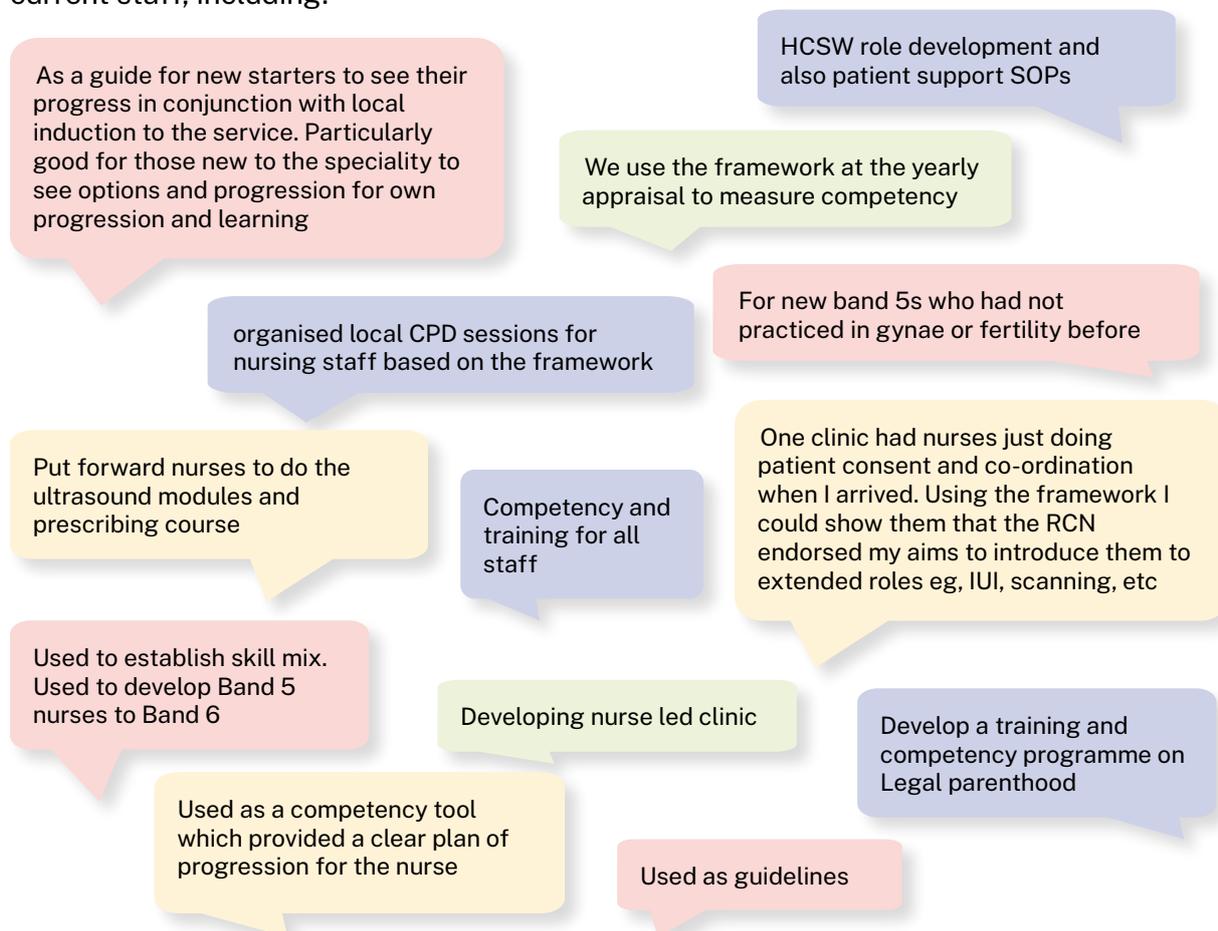
The role of managers

Over 50% of respondents confirmed that they managed staff, and the project team were keen to find out how they used the framework. Figure 4 provides an overview of this. Of those who responded, a large number did not use the framework, despite the positive uses identified previously. This will need consideration for the future, in terms of redistribution of this report and the framework, and how it can become more universally used to enhance nursing careers in fertility care.

Figure 4

Have you used the framework to develop any of the following:				
			Response Percent	Response Total
1	Staff		23.08%	9
2	Service		0.00%	0
3	Staff and service		23.08%	9
4	Neither		53.85%	21

When asked about how it was used for staff development, a range of responses were provided, which focused on induction of staff new to the area, and development of current staff, including:



General comments

Comments collected, which also helped to inform the project team's recommendations and the updated copy of the framework included:



Recommendations and conclusion

The conclusion of this impact assessment has led to some key recommendations published below. The *RCN Education and Career Progression Framework for Fertility Nursing* has been updated to include a quick guide to use, has taken account of the outputs from the survey, and can be found at rcn.org.uk/publications (publication code: 009 926).

Recommendations

1. The RCN Fertility Nursing Forum believes that the *RCN Education and Career Progression Framework for Fertility Nursing*, enables career progression and development and will continue to promote greater use, in the belief that nurses need ongoing opportunities to better understand how to progress their careers.
2. The RCN Fertility Nursing Forum believes that there is a need for improved access for fertility nurses to CPD opportunities, especially that which leads to master's level education, This will include enabling a better understanding of the need for graduate and post graduate education and how that can improve and enhance career progression.
3. The RCN Fertility Nursing Forum recommends that a roundtable discussion be held with key stakeholders led by RCN, to include BFS, SING, HFEA and other relevant organisations, to consider how the framework could be embedded with employers nationally.
4. The RCN Fertility Nursing Forum recommends that the framework should be integrated into or combined with other generic tools, with a goal towards national usage, which could be considered as part of a roundtable discussion on increasing the use of the framework.
5. There is a need for more formal courses in ultrasound training, accredited by the Consortium for the Accreditation of Sonographic Education (CASE), which should include a commitment to access to practice placements for registered nurses.
6. The RCN Fertility Nursing Forum will consider the option of creating the framework as an online interactive tool, which could be used as part of self and service development.

The aim of this project was to assess the value and impact of the *RCN Education and Career Progression Framework for Fertility Nursing*. When asked about the overall use of the framework, those who use it were positive; some identifying that some units were better at implementation than others. There is further opportunity to expand its use, and improve its distribution across the UK, both within the NHS and the independent sector. The competencies in the framework are still valid and appropriate for nurses in fertility services to enhance their career pathways.

As a result of the impact assessment, the framework is continuing to improve practice and enable those working in this area to develop skills, knowledge and career pathways. Consequently, the framework has been reviewed and published in 2021 to take account of the evidence gathered and is available at: rcn.org.uk/publications (publication code: 009 926).

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