

ACCCN 2026 POSITION STATEMENT CRITICAL CARE NURSE EDUCATION

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INTRODUCTION

The Australian College of Critical Care Nurses Limited (ACCCN) is the peak national professional nursing association representing critical care nurses in Australia ^[1]. This position statement provides evidence-based recommendations for education and preparation of critical care nurses in Australia. Clinical workforce education is a crucial component for the provision of safe, quality, and individualised care and support for patients, their families and carers and occurs within a conceptual framework that covers:

- enabling education programs to support entry to critical care clinical practice environments
- postgraduate level critical care programs (AQF level 8 and 9 ^[2])
- continuing professional development at the specialist level ^[3] of critical care nursing practice.

KEY DEFINITIONS

For the context of this Position Statement, the following definitions are provided:

Clinical capability refers to the application of ACCCN Practice Standards for Specialist Critical Care Nurses in complex and unstructured situations ^[4].

Critical Care is an organised system for the provision of care to critically ill people, providing intensive and specialised medical, nursing and allied health care, an enhanced capacity for monitoring, and multiple modalities of physiological organ support to sustain life during a period of acute organ system insufficiency. Although critical care is based in a defined geographic area of a hospital, their activities often extend beyond the physical space to include emergency departments, coronary care units, hospital wards, follow-up clinics. [3, 4]

Critical illness refers to an unstable clinical state (actual or potential) of a patient who requires an intensive level of care. The needs of critically ill patients include continuous monitoring and intervention to minimise complications and restore health where possible, for patients with unstable conditions who are at risk of deterioration.

Entry-level critical care programs are designed for nurses who have worked with critically ill patients for less than one year [5]. They may also refer to 'Transition to Specialty Practice' programs. Thus, an entry-level critical care nurse might be a recent graduate or an experienced nurse who had previously worked in acute care or subacute care. [5]

Specialist level of critical care practice is provided by a critical care qualified nurse who demonstrates the application of a high level of clinical nursing knowledge, experience and skills in complex nursing care with minimal direct supervision. [3]

METHOD OF REVIEW

The position statement is underpinned by evidence informed by an integrative review of published research, building upon previous versions of the Position Statement on Critical Care Nurse Education published in 1996, 2006, 2017. The version extends upon the original work developed in partnership with key stakeholders, including healthcare consumers, ACCCN members, and critical care nurse educators employed by healthcare services and/or higher education providers. The statement has evolved since the 2017 version to reflect themes derived from the integrative review to incorporate three stages of education provision, namely enabling, formal postgraduate qualification and ongoing professional development.

BACKGROUND

This Position Statement has been developed to articulate a leadership perspective on critical care education, addressing the demands of a highly mobile workforce and the complexities of an increasingly dynamic global environment. Recent changes to International and Australian standards, principles of, and approaches to education, particularly in critical care nursing necessitates a forward thinking, adaptive and flexible approach. The rapid advancement of technology and artificial intelligence technologies [6], the growing emphasis on health literacy [7], the ongoing threat of global pandemics [8], the importance of planetary health, the impact of climate change [9] and, the prioritisation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander health and wellbeing [10], all compel education providers to re-evaluate curricula and traditional delivery methods to align more effectively with evolving workforce requirements and contemporary challenges and opportunities. Central to this commitment is the establishment and adherence to comprehensive educational critical position statements. The revised ACCCN Position Statement on Critical Care Education builds on the work

undertaken by ACCCN ^[11] following the 2005 Declaration of Madrid on the preparation of critical care nurses ^[12], with a revised statement published in 2006 and updated in 2017 ^[3,13].

The ACCCN Practice Standards for Specialist Critical Care Nurses ^[3] provide guidance on the expected capability of a critical care nurse. Further, minimum criteria for an Australian critical care nursing qualification were developed and defined ^[14, 15]. The Australian Qualifications Framework (AQF) ^[2] is the national policy for recognised qualifications in Australia, providing consistent policy and regulation for Australian education and enhanced transferability of qualifications. The statements in this Position Statement are to be applied in conjunction with the Practice Standards for Specialist Critical Care Nurses enabling, formal postgraduate qualification and ongoing professional development.

CRITICAL CARE NURSE EDUCATION

The Australian College of Critical Care Nurses endorses the following statements:

CRITICAL CARE NURSES

All critical care nurses should:

- Accept responsibility for their own professional development, embracing the concept of continuous professional development and learning over their career ^[16]
- Integrate and apply clinical capabilities (knowledge, skills, attitudes and behaviours) with sound theoretical knowledge underpinned by cultural safety that enhances critical care nursing practice, patient outcomes and improved safety ^[17,18]
- Advocates for patients and person-centered care, and collaborates with other healthcare professionals to ensure coordinated and effective care while promoting social justice principles^[16]
- Apply a culturally considerate and culturally safe perspective to caring for people and their families^[19]
- Work within a defined scope of educational and professional practice ^[16]
- Contribute to the continuing professional development of others ^[11,13,16]
- Reflect on their own critical care practice, and seek out and critically appraise evidence to inform and implement best practice ^[16]
- Engage in research, quality improvement, and safety projects ^[16] to promote excellence in critical care nursing and improve person and family-centred care ^[10, 18,19], experience and outcomes
- Recognise and actively promote inter-professional and team learning to broaden skill sets and develop a cohesive approach to patient and family care within critical care environments ^[19-20]
- Develop and apply digital literacy capabilities to improve the quality, safety and efficiency in critical care ^[8, 20]

- Support implementation of innovation and sustainability initiatives in critical care practice to enhance delivery of quality care^[20,21] and promote environmental and planetary wellbeing⁽²¹⁾.
- Recognise the health impact of climate change on people and populations as shifting environmental conditions increasingly affect physical, mental and community wellbeing^(21,22)
- Promote awareness and knowledge that critical care delivery is resource intensive and significantly contributes to health care carbon footprint and waste generation. Educational providers need to develop and deliver educational resources that support critical care nurses to adopt evidence based sustainable practices without compromising patient safety^(21, 22)
- Use planetary health competencies to strengthen health care systems resilience, improve disaster preparedness and support health equity for vulnerable populations disproportionately affected by environmental harms⁽²³⁾

THE CRITICAL CARE CLINICAL PRACTICE LEARNING ENVIRONMENT

The clinical practice learning environment is central to critical care nurses' education. It provides the framework for critical care nurse development as a continuum from entry-level, through the various Transition to Practice programs, into critical care environments, postgraduate level programs and experiential learning, facilitating specialist-level critical care practice. Collaboration and partnership between healthcare services, universities and education providers are essential to facilitate educational and professional development, research and knowledge translation and promote sustainable, responsive communities and systems.

The critical care clinical practice learning environment should:

- Utilise the Practice Standards for Specialist Critical Care Nurses^[3] to inform critical care education programs and assessment of clinical practice^[15, 17, 18, 24]
- Promote a person-centred, culturally safe approach to develop a working alliance with patients and their families^[10,19, 23]
- Recognise that knowledge acquisition is a dynamic process. Critical thinking, problem solving and demonstration of evidence-informed solutions for practice develop incrementally, through learning, varied clinical experience and practice exposure.^[24]
- Provide adequate education resources (i.e. professional development time, nurse educator support, validated educational materials, and journal database access)^[25, 26]
- Be supported by Health Services and Health Departments to provide career incentives to encourage critical care nurses to complete postgraduate level critical care programs^[25] and higher research degrees^[27, 28]
- Be adequately resourced to support and guide critical care nurses at all education levels by appropriately experienced staff^[24, 25-27]
- Adopt a sustainable, evidence-based approach to the utilisation of resources within teaching and clinical practice^(28,29)
- Apply evidence based clinical protocols and pathways for environmentally linked conditions⁽²⁹⁾

- Integrate low risk high yield sustainability practices in clinical care (for example, medication and device stewardship, energy and waste conscious procedures and practices (without compromising patient safety) ^(23, 29)
- Communicate planetary health risks to patients, key stakeholders and communities and advocate for policies that reduce harmful environmental exposure ^(23,29)
- Engage in interprofessional and community partnerships to address sustainable health goals ^(23,30,31)
- Provide preparation, support and facilities for educators, mentors, facilitators and assessors to promote objective assessment, skill transfer and development ^[24-26]
- Enact ethical decision-making and advocate and foster this in others ^[16, 32]
- Recognise that critical care practice can occur in various healthcare settings, including outreach, liaison, educator and research roles ^[18, 33, 34]
- Acknowledge the importance of self-care and wellbeing for all those providing critical care and promote and develop a resilient and compassionate workforce ^[16, 35]

LEVEL OF EDUCATIONAL PROGRAMS FOR CRITICAL CARE NURSES

ENABLING: Entry-level / Transition to practice programs

- Health Services and Health Departments should support all critical care facilities to provide Transition to Practice or refresher education programs. Such programs should incorporate agreed core competencies, commensurate with critical care services ^[5, 6, 36]
- Provision of structured critical care education programs should allow for the development of incremental capability development. This includes structured supervised practice. ^[17, 25, 26, 37]

FORMAL: Critical care postgraduate level programs

Postgraduate nursing programs should include curricula that aligns with the recommendations provided in Table 1. Also,

- Postgraduate programs must provide a balance between clinically oriented content and broader postgraduate skills and qualities ^[2] that enable the nurse to contribute to the profession. Such curricula should support critical thinking, problem solving, situational awareness, emotional intelligence, socio-emotional support for patients and families, cultural safety, evidence-informed practice, quality improvement, research literacy, policy development and leadership, competencies of planetary health and sustainability, and embrace the WHO Sustainable Development Goals ^[13, 15, 17, 18, 20-26, 38]
- Postgraduate critical care programs must include supervised, supernumerary professional experience to ensure students demonstrate competency in the specific standards of practice required for critical care ^[1, 3, 24-26]
- Flexible, content delivery approaches should be considered to ensure equitable and sustainable access for diverse and geographically dispersed student cohorts ^[39]
- Close collaboration between education providers and key staff in the critical care practice setting should include formal stakeholder engagement and regular program evaluation and review ^[16, 24, 40]

- Programs must include an appropriate theoretical component demonstrating the complexity and depth of achievement as identified by the relevant AQF level [2, 16, 24-26]
- Supported clinical experience is a vital component to prepare nurses undertaking critical care programs to deliver safe and effective patient care and meet the ongoing challenges of clinical practice [15,17,24-26]
- The assessment and integration of clinical capability should be an integral component of programs [17, 24, 26]
- Minimum practice outcomes for postgraduate critical care nurses [15] should be clear and measured using valid and reliable tools and measurement criteria [17] (for example, the SPECT [14])
- The minimum standard for a postgraduate critical care qualification is AQF level 8 [2]
- The minimum course practice outcome for a postgraduate critical care qualification is for the graduate to be able to care independently for most critically ill patients in the majority of critical care contexts. [3, 13, 15, 18, 41-43]

ONGOING: Specialist level critical care practice

The specialist level domains of critical care practice are professional practice, provision and coordination of care, critical thinking and analysis, collaboration and leadership. [3] Critical care nurses should have the opportunity through ongoing personal and professional development to demonstrate specialist practice level. This may be reflected through engagement in:

- Master by coursework or research degree preparation [2], and/or
- Professional Doctorate or Doctor of Philosophy preparation to build new knowledge through research designed to evaluate and improve care for patients and their families [34, 42-46]
- Significant work-related experience and ongoing professional development in critical care practice extending their scope of practice; with recognition as an expert critical care nurse by others [25, 37, 45, 46]
- Leadership development that extends and diversifies critical care and clinical leadership capabilities [47,48]
- Development and delivery of programs for staff, patient and family education [49]
- Analysis, critique and contribution to the development of systems of care within the critical care and broader hospital environment [41, 50, 51]
- Thinking critically, problem solving and adapting when unprecedented situations emerge including global challenges [29-31, 37, 47, 48]
- Contribution to strategic planning and development of critical care services [46-48]
- Leadership in professional organisations and forums at a local, state, national and international level [46-48]
- Critical Care nursing clinical and education leaders should engage in local regional and national advocacy to promote planetary health policies that protect vulnerable populations (52)

- Critical care education and practice have the potential to be influenced by generative artificial intelligence ⁽⁵⁴⁾, and clinical and education leaders must engage in discussions at all levels of care delivery, data collection and interpretation ⁽⁵⁵⁾

SUMMARY

This position statement provides the critical care nurse with a benchmark for professional development, education and research across several domains. These include the individual critical care nurse, the critical care clinical practice learning environment, educational programs for critical care nurses and their relationship to specialist-level critical care practice. The position statement also provides a benchmark for collaboration between healthcare services, education providers and the ACCCN, to foster high-quality education and training for the Australian critical care nursing workforce.

Table 1: Curricula recommendations

As a minimum, course content for a postgraduate critical care qualification (AQF level 8) should include:

- advanced anatomy and physiology and pathophysiology
- psychosocial aspects of care, including practicing cultural safety and inclusion principles
- communication and interprofessional collaboration skills ⁽⁵³⁾
- digital literacy, including the use of technology applications for health literacy
- pharmacology, pharmacodynamics, pharmacokinetics and pharmacotherapeutics
- clinical health assessment and interpretation of clinical data (including diagnostic, medical imaging and laboratory results)
- care planning for quality of care and patient safety considerations (e.g. infection control, ventilator-acquired pneumonia avoidance strategies, skin integrity monitoring, iatrogenic complication avoidance strategies)
- resuscitation including rapid response team roles and responsibilities
- patient, family and carer education
- illnesses and alterations of vital body functions
- legal and ethical issues
- end of life care
- plans of care and nursing interventions
- sustainability, climate change and impact of planetary health on vulnerable populations
- include learning resources on planetary health principles and competencies, addressing the WHO Sustainable Development Goals
- caring for the carer, including debriefing, stress management and peer support
- professional nursing roles in critical care including clinical teaching strategies
- team leadership and management issues
- career and professional development planning
- using generative artificial intelligence in critical care

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