

Country report: Advanced Practice Nursing (APN) in Finland



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Background

The roots for nursing education in Finland go back to the early 19th century. Since the beginning of 1990s registered nurses (RNs) have been educated at Universities of Applied Sciences (UAS, also called Polytechnics). It takes three-and-a-half years to complete bachelor level degree, which is worth 210 ECTS. *(ECTS is a standard for comparing the study attainment and performance of students of higher education across the European Union and other collaborating European countries. One academic year corresponds to 60 ECTS credits that are equivalent to 1500–1800 hours of study).*

National legislation closely regulates the education and professional practice of health care personnel. Nursing training in Finland is also based on the European Union's Directive 2013/55/EU amending

Directive 2005/36/EC. Therefore, the requirements in Finland are similar to those of elsewhere in the European Union and other collaborating European countries.

The public health nursing degree (four years/240 ECTS), paramedic degree (four years/240 ECTS), and midwife degree (four-and-a-half years/270 ECTS) are also all bachelor level degrees. They all include the right to practice as a registered nurse. Altogether, there are 74 781 registered nurses of working age in Finland (statistics by Valvira 31.12.2014).

The National Supervisory Authority for Welfare and Health (Valvira) grants upon application the right to practice as a licenced or authorised professional and authorises the use of the occupational title of healthcare professional. Under Finnish law, licensing is granted to 17 different health care professions, including those of nurse, midwife, and public health nurse. In Finland, we do not have a re-licensure system, and once you are a registered nurse your registration is permanent and can only be withdrawn due to severe malpractice.

We have not traditionally used the concept of APN in Finland, but there are nurses working in various advanced clinical roles, as well as in primary health care as in hospitals. Finland has a long experience of close cooperation and task sharing between physicians and nurses, especially in primary care centres. Most of the nurses working in different specialized or advanced clinical roles do not have a master's level education and their educational background varies. For the most part these roles are also not regulated.

In Finland, various advanced roles for registered nurses have been developed since the early 2000s. Advanced roles and task allocation have been identified as a way to improve access to health care, for instance in the situations of limited supply of physicians and in a period when elderly population is ageing rapidly. According to a recent survey, Finnish nurses view advanced roles and clinical career prospects as an important way of increasing the appeal of nursing (Finnish Nurses Association 2014).

Nevertheless, the APN is still at a relatively early developmental phase in Finland. At present, we have no national guidelines to steer the development and realization of the role of APN, and APN titles and requirements have yet to be regulated. We do not even yet have a consensus on how to translate the term APN into Finnish, or who we would include under the 'APN umbrella' when we compare the roles and requirements in this field internationally.

Master's degree education in nursing

The Finnish higher education system consists of two complementary sectors: **Universities** and **Universities of Applied Sciences** (UAS, also called Polytechnics). The mission of universities is to conduct scientific research and provide instruction and postgraduate education based on it. UASs train professionals in response to labour market needs and conduct R&D which supports instruction and promotes regional development in particular. A registered nurse can apply to a university or a UAS to take a Master's level degree.

Registered nurses with Master's level degrees often tend not to work with 'hands-on' clinical, direct patient care, but for example in management and administration, research and development, education, consultation, or in health care specialist positions. The Master's degree has not often provided a possibility to advance clinical career, this has thus caused talented nurses to move away from direct patient care. However, while speciality practice patterns and education have existed in Finland for decades, the education for Advanced Practice Nursing (APN) roles is more recent. There is

no nationally congruent APN curriculum for universities or UASs. Regulation would be one important way to move forward.

Master's level education in University of Applied Sciences (UAS)

The requirements for studying for a Master's degree at a UAS is a Bachelors' level UAS degree and at least three years work experience. The UAS Master's degree is worth 90 ECTS and takes about one-and-a-half to two years. It is equivalent to a university master's in the labour market. There are seven UASs in Finland that offer Master' degree courses in health care. The degree programmes vary, for example Clinical Nursing, Emergency and Critical Care Nursing, Management in Social and Health Care, or Health Promotion.

During 2011-2012, 82 students majoring in clinical nursing graduated from UASs. They have been employed in different positions in the labour market. We still have challenges to define and develop their independent role, their professional concept, and the positions in working life.

Master's education in University

There are five universities in Finland offering Master's courses in nursing sciences. To enrol one needs to be a registered nurse or to have an equivalent qualification in health care. The curricula vary between the universities. For example, the Department of Nursing Science at the University of Turku offers a degree course in nursing science as a major, with clinical nursing, health care administration and management as a minor subject.

The university master's studies consist of two separate degrees, together worth 300 ECTS. The Bachelor of Nursing Science degree is a lower academic qualification (180 ECTS) and the degree Master of Nursing Science is a higher qualification (120 ECTS). Depending on their previous studies, registered nurses need to obtain about 80-100 ECTS for the Bachelor degree and 120 ECTS for the Master's degree, amounting in total to about 200-220 ECTS.

In addition to Master's degrees, universities provide postgraduate Licentiate and Doctoral degree courses. One can also take Licentiate or Doctoral degrees after completing a Master's at a UAS.

Nurses in advanced roles in Finland

In 2009, the Ministry of Social Affairs and Health developed a four-category model to define the different expert roles of nurses in Finland: 1. Nurses in Clinical Care, 2. Specialized Nurses in Clinical Care, 3. Clinical Nurse Specialists, 4. Specialists in Clinical Nursing Science. (see the table 1). This model has been developed to describe nurses' different roles in evidence-based practice, not in first hand practice for career development, even it can be used also in such meaning. However, the systematic nationwide development of these roles is still in the developmental stage.

Experts' roles in evidence-based practice	NURSES IN CLINICAL CARE	SPECIALIZED NURSES IN CLINICAL CARE	CLINICAL NURSE SPECIALISTS	SPECIALISTS IN CLINICAL NURSING SCIENCE
Core competencies	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> advanced clinical competency skills to apply evidence into practice acquainted with the context (unit level) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> advanced specialized clinical competency skills to apply evidence into practice and utilize it in a specialized area developmental skills acquainted with the context (several units and department level) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> advanced clinical competency in a certain clinical area advanced developmental skills research skills acquainted with the context (department or hospital level) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> expertise in conducting scientific research organize clinical research and development projects leader of clinical research acquainted with the context (department, hospital, national and international level)
Emphasis of competency	Competencies in clinical nursing and patient- or client-oriented implementation of EBP		Competencies in development and research in generation and dissemination of EBP	
Actions in implementation of EBP	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Utilize EB knowledge in patient or client care Maintain and develop own expert knowledge 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Utilize EB knowledge in patient or client care and facilitate implementation in own specialized area. Disseminate EB knowledge in own specialized area. Maintain and develop own expert knowledge 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Apply scientific knowledge Develop consistency of EBPs at the unit and regional level. Develop, disseminate and monitor clinical practices. Maintain and develop own expert knowledge 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Search, appraise and synthesize evidence, develop measurement tools, disseminate evidence into practice. Evaluate EBPs and conduct intervention- and effectiveness research. Support development by different types of experts Maintain and develop own expert knowledge
Focus of action	Patient / Client		Staff / Organization	

Reference: <http://www.hotus.fi/hotus-en/expertise-evidence-based-health-care>

Modified from: Ministry of Social Affairs and Health, 2009

Table 1: A four-category model to define the different expert roles of nurses in evidence based practice in Finland . Modified by the Nursing Research Foundation.

Even though we do not have a national consensus on who we should categorise as APNs at the moment, we can give examples of nurses with an advanced level of competency and/or advanced clinical roles. The list of nursing positions that we could place under a prospective 'Finnish APN umbrella' could be as follows, bearing in mind that some of the roles/education fulfil the international requirements concerning APNs better than others:

- **Clinical Nurse Specialists (CNS) / Specialists in clinical Nursing Science** with a Master's or Doctoral degree. There are at present more than 40 CNSs and they are positioned mainly in specialized health care at university hospitals throughout Finland, but also in some of the central hospitals and also the first ones at primary health care. The first CNSs appeared in the early 2000s, and more of them are coming onto the professional scene. Most of the CNSs have a university Master's degree and some of them have doctoral degree. According to a recent study, the central focus of practice for Finnish CNSs is advanced clinical nursing. They are experienced, independent professionals whose role includes advanced responsibilities, specialization and expanded practice. They operate in the four distinctive yet interrelated role spheres of patient care, nursing, organization, and scholarship. Within the academic sphere, the CNSs operate in two ways: they corroborate EBP thus bringing nursing science to the bedside, and they have first hand knowledge of nursing issues, and thus can introduce them from the front-line of nursing into their own research or joint research with stakeholders. The Finnish role of CNSs seems to be rather consistent with the international role. Nevertheless, the first few Finnish CNSs appear to have difficulties in comprehending and

mastering the advanced clinical practice domain, as according to recent research, over half of CNSs spend no time in direct clinical practice. (Jokiniemi 2014).

- European Qualifications Framework (EQF) level 7 (Master's degree) or 8 (Doctoral degree)
- **Nurses with a Master's degree from a University of Applied Science**, have varying titles and roles in working life. We have some local experiments of educating APNs (NPs) with advanced clinical competencies based on ICN criteria as a Master's degree at a UAS, but we do not yet have a nationwide system for this. This experimental education aims to provide nurses with advanced clinical competencies to work very independently in clinical patient care work. (Fagerström 2009, Nieminen et al. 2011, Fagerström & Glasberg 2011).
 - European Qualifications Framework (EQF) level 7
- **Nurses in clinical care with the limited right to prescribe medicines.** This requires 45 ECTS further post-graduate training. The first courses started in 2010. In addition the requirements include an employment relationship with the health centre and an authorisation from the physician-in-charge. The studies encase clinical nursing, pathology, clinical pharmacology and studies on legislation and regulations. The aim has been to support better access to care, better utilisation of nursing knowledge and skills in patient care, and flexibility of services in primary health care and emergency care. We currently have about 150 registered nurses in primary health care with the limited right to prescribe medicines. The first experiences have been very positive when evaluated by nurses, patients and physicians. The National Supervisory Authority for Welfare and Health (Valvira) keeps a record of this competence.
 - European Qualifications Framework (EQF) level 7
- **Nurses with Clinical Practice Nursing Certification awarded by the Finnish Nurses Association (FNA).** When applying the Certification, one has to demonstrate post-graduate work experience, formal post-graduate education, professional cooperation and developmental work, together worth a minimum of 200 ECTS. FNA has created the system for recognizing and acknowledging advanced clinical competency in nursing, to clinical career development, and in this way to push for the national regulation of advanced clinical practitioners. The system was introduced in 2008 and thus far we have about 30 nurses with the certification.
 - European Qualifications Framework (EQF) level not defined (mostly 6)
- **Specialized Nurses in clinical practice** who have taken specialist supplementary training in different clinical fields and have advanced professional roles in nursing. The UASs offer 30-60 ECTS Continuous Professional Development (CPD) courses in different fields, e.g. anaesthetic nursing, diabetes nursing, family nursing, case management, paediatric nursing, mental health nursing, or gerontology. The curricula and professional roles are not regulated.
 - European Qualifications Framework (EQF) level 6
- **Examples of some other advanced or specialized roles in primary health care**, where post-graduate education varies:
 - Physicians–Nurses working in pairs. Certain patient groups have been shifted from the consultations with physicians to consultations with nurses in health centres. They include non-communicable diseases (NCD) such as arterial hypertension, diabetes, MBO, cardiovascular diseases, asthma, COPD, as well as acute health problems, such as common infections, allergies, minor wounds and injuries. For support, the nurses make use of evidence-based guidelines, and are able to consult physicians, and most often also various postgraduate research.

- Case managers for the most demanding patients with NCDs. The relevant post-basic education is worth 30 ECTS.
 - Consultations with nurses for acute health problems and NCDs
 - Consultations with nurses supported by physicians' consultations over distance
 - Public health nurses working very independently, such as in maternity and child health clinics and as school nurses
- **Examples of other advanced or specialized roles in specialized health care and emergency care, post-graduate education varies**
- Consultations with nurses, for example for patients with NCDs, medical examinations, minor surgery
 - Midwives generally work very independently - with a normal delivery a physician is needed only very rarely
 - Telephone consultations with nurses, triage and consultations with nurses

Developing the roles of nurses through some national health policy programmes

- National Health Project 2002-2007
 - Kick-off for developing advanced roles of nurses
- National Development Plan for Social and Health Care Services 2008-2011
 - To disseminate the advanced roles of nurses and prepare proposals for changes in legislation
- National Development Programme for Social Welfare and Health Care 2012-2015
 - To continue the dissemination and development of the redistribution of the tasks and advanced roles of nurses

Next steps

- National Development Programme for Social Welfare and Health Care 2012-2015
 - A proposal by the Ministry of Social Affairs and Health on establishing a national framework on postgraduate education in line with advanced clinical nursing practices
- Multidisciplinary evaluation group appointed by the same Ministry
 - Will complete a survey on the implementation, outcomes and proposals for changes by the end of 2015
- The Finnish Nurses Association has appointed for the years 2013-2015 a group of experts to develop APN in Finland:
 - to evaluate and define the current status
 - to give a statement on and recommendations for future steps, based on national needs, in accordance with the international context

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