An RCN training and education framework for fertility nursing
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Purpose

The purpose of this document is to:

1. provide a clear framework for training and education for nurses/midwives who are engaged in delivering fertility care
2. assimilate information relevant to providers of fertility services and commissioners for the development of education programmes
3. eradicate the confusion over job titles used within fertility services and to set out a framework where employers, commissioners and patients can understand the role and level of education/competence that correlates with the job title
4. provide a point of reference from which to reinforce workplace skills and competence through accredited development programmes. This can be achieved using the RCN’s strategic aims and objectives for education and training (RCN, 2008).

This framework will help:

- health care support workers* to enhance their knowledge and skills, and therefore competence, to support the delivery of quality fertility care
- registered practitioners*, senior practitioners*, advanced and consultant nursing/midwifery practitioners* – who provide care for people with fertility problems in a variety of generalist and specialist settings and aspire to a particular career level within this specialist field – to identify learning opportunities to meet their role requirements
- develop the appropriate academic preparation for those practising at registered, senior, advanced and consultant practitioner levels, and to enable progression to the next level of a career pathway**
- education providers, including professional organisations and higher education institutions, to develop and deliver learning opportunities, modules and awards at

* The role titles used within this publication are aligned with the Career Framework for Health (Skills for Health, 2006) and recommended by Chief Nursing Officer (CNO) Directorate Scottish Government (2008), NHS Education Scotland (NES) (2012) NHS Wales/ NЛИAH (2010) and Department of Health (DH, 2010).

** The academic levels used within this publication are aligned with recommendations from NES (2010), NHS Wales/NЛИAH (2010) and Department of Health (DH, 2010) for advanced level nursing.
different academic levels, that meet the range of education needs of practitioners providing fertility care and services

- service providers to develop role descriptors/job plans and to identify professional development requirements of prospective and current roles in accordance with HFEA requirements and guidance for nursing staff (www.hfea.gov.uk/350.html)

- commissioners of fertility services and professional education to create a consistent and sustainable approach to training and education opportunities for practitioners working in fertility care across the UK.

The RCN framework also acknowledges that many practitioners provide fertility care as part of their clinical practice (oncology, gynaecology, midwifery) and they may wish to develop their knowledge, skills and competence in specific aspects of fertility care (ie, onco-fertility, gynaecology, management of early pregnancy, recurrent miscarriage).
Introduction

The Royal College of Nursing (RCN) Midwifery and Fertility Nursing Forum recognised the need for clarity about the training and education requirements of nurses and midwives working at different levels of practice. In response, the forum commissioned an online survey to establish the current training and education available to support the increasing role extension and opportunities for career progression. A key finding was the need to provide career and professional development guidance for practitioners working in the area of fertility care (Peddie et al., 2011). This framework has been developed in consultation with experts (nursing, education, research and sonography) to ensure the vision for fertility nursing in the 21st century can be met across the UK.

Background

Fertility nursing is defined within this document as the care and practice undertaken by any nurse/midwife providing fertility care from primary to tertiary level. The role of the fertility nurse is to provide a holistic approach to fertility investigation, treatment and early pregnancy, through compassionate, informed and evidence-based practice (RCN, 2011). Fertility nursing is highly specialised and has been subject to dramatic change and rapid development over the last decade. Fertility nurses are at the forefront of patient care, many assuming increased clinical responsibility and skills in advanced level practice, and this has presented significant opportunities for those employed in this field.

Political drivers, future workforce requirements and the modernisation of advanced level practice rely on multidisciplinary collaboration, with roles based on recognised levels of capability and competence, as opposed to professional background (NHS Wales/National Leadership and Innovation Agency for Healthcare (2010). Whilst it is recognised that not every nurse/midwife will aspire to advanced level practice, all are expected to reach the maximum potential expected of their role in the context of competence and knowledge. This will ensure they meet the same standards, whether they are working in the NHS, university, private or independent sectors.

The RCN’s Specialist competences for fertility nurses (RCN, 2011) has been aligned with the Career Framework for Health (Skills for Health, 2006), with regards to career and role development across all disciplines in health care (NES, 2012).
These documents provide an opportunity to establish and sustain consistent role benchmarks for professional practice in fertility care. Using the competences with this framework will facilitate a more consistent and sustainable approach to the commissioning of training and education for practitioners working in fertility across the UK.
Levels of nursing practice

One of the strengths of the nursing and midwifery profession has been the ability to adapt and respond to the changing health care landscape. The range of expertise and competence has been acknowledged, and nurses are now leading and delivering a range of generalist and specialist services, including procurement and management across a diverse range of health care settings. There has also been a significant shift in the way care is delivered. New models of care often utilise and rely on a multiprofessional approach to practice, and include nurses with enhanced or advanced skills such as:

- consultation and referral
- order and/or performing diagnostic tests
- nurse prescribing
- co-ordination and delivery of treatment programmes.

Many of these skills have previously been the domain of medical professionals. Alongside this role expansion and development, there has been a growth in role descriptors and job titles. However, the disparity of advanced and specialist job titles is of concern to practitioners, regulators and the public alike (Peddie et al., 2011). Nationally, there appears to be varied understanding of the meaning of titles and the expectation of the role of nurses using them. Figure 1 summarises the Career Framework for Health (Skills for Health, 2006).

Job titles themselves do not consistently reflect the level of competence or educational preparation of practitioners. Although the Department of Health (DH, 2010) position statement on advanced level practice does not engage in the regulation or protection of titles, it takes the first step in describing a standard of educational preparation and the requirements for a practitioner working at an advanced level of practice (NHS London, 2011).
**Figure 1: Career Framework for Health. Adapted from Skills for Health (2006)**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Level</th>
<th>Role</th>
<th>Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>More senior staff – level 9</td>
<td>Staff with the ultimate responsibility for clinical caseload decision making and full on-call accountability, for example, nurse managers/directors.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>Consultant practitioner – level 8</td>
<td>Staff working at a very high level of clinical expertise and/or have responsibility for planning of services, for example, consultant nurse.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>Advanced practitioners – level 7</td>
<td>Experienced clinical professionals who have developed the skills and theoretical knowledge to a very high standard. They are empowered to make high-level clinical decisions and will often have their own caseload. Non-clinical staff at level 7 will typically be managing a number of service areas, for example, advanced nurse practitioner.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>Senior practitioners – level 6</td>
<td>Staff who would have a higher degree of autonomy and responsibility than practitioners in the clinical environment, or would be managing one or more service areas in the non-clinical environment, for example, senior specialist nurse.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>Practitioners – level 5</td>
<td>Most frequently registered practitioners in their first or second post-registration/professional qualification job, for example, registered nurse.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Assistant practitioners/associate practitioners – level 4</td>
<td>Unregistered practitioner. Probably studying for foundation degree, BTEC* Higher or HND. Some of their remit will involve them in delivering protocol-based clinical care that had previously been the remit of registered professionals, under the direction of a state registered professional, for example, health care assistant practitioner.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Senior health care assistants/technicians – level 3</td>
<td>Unregistered practitioner. Has a higher level of responsibility than support worker, probably studying for, or has attained S/NVQ** Level 3, or assessment of prior experiential learning (APEL). For example, health care assistant practitioner.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Support workers – level 2</td>
<td>Unregistered practitioner. Frequently with the job title of health care assistant or health care technician – probably studying for, or has attained, S/NVQ Level 2.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*BTEC Business Technology Education Council

**S/NVQ National Vocational Qualification
Defining advanced level practice

Specialist and advanced practice roles have changed in response to national strategies and policy. There has, however, been limited national guidance on defining these titles and the associated recommended educational preparation. As a result, nurses have often experienced varied educational preparation, clinical supervision and assessment of competence.

In 2005, the Nursing and Midwifery Council (NMC) defined advanced practice as requiring not only an extension of practice knowledge, change management and decision-making skills, but also an understanding of how to instigate development of services through leadership and research. More recently, in November 2010, the Department of Health (DH) for England released a position statement on advanced level nursing that provided a “benchmark to enhance patient safety and the delivery of high-quality care by supporting local governance, assisting in good employment practices and encouraging consistency in the development of roles and posts” (DH, 2010). The DH position statement defined advanced level nursing practice by building on the standards required of a registered nurse on entry to the NMC register. The position statement describes a level of practice rather than a nursing role or specialty and is therefore generic, and not prescriptive, to specific health care settings. It proposes twenty-eight elements that encapsulate advanced level nursing based on four themes:

1. clinical/ direct patient care
2. leadership and collaborative practice
3. improving quality and developing practice
4. developing self and others.

These elements define a minimum threshold for advanced level nursing roles and an expectation that nurses working at an advanced level will continue to develop their individual practice. Finally, this document sets out the expectation that nurses working at this advanced level would have achieved through “extensive clinical and practice experience and following completion of master’s level education/learning or its equivalent” (DH, 2010). An academic programme of study alone is insufficient for advanced practitioner development; appropriate education and training to develop the competence and expertise in a practice setting being equally important (NHS, 2008).

The variety and number of specialist posts and services has increased across the UK, and for nurses with the desire (or requirement) to practice at advanced level, there is a need to undertake professional development at postgraduate level (NES, 2010; CNO Directorate Scottish Government 2008; NHS Scotland 2012; DH 2010; NHS Wales/NLIAH, 2010; NHS London, 2011).
Differences between specialist and advanced practice

It is important to define the difference between specialist and advanced practice. The issues around classification or categorisation of roles have been shown in Figure 1. The Departments of Health for England, Wales and Scotland have also provided guidance and this is available in the online advanced practice toolkit produced by NHS Scotland in 2008 (updated in 2012). The toolkit identifies that, “the ‘specialist’ should be considered as one pole of the ‘specialist-generalist’ continuum, rather than on the developmental continuum from ‘novice’ to ‘expert’” (Figure 2). It is, therefore, the developmental continuum which defines the level of practice (and role title as shown in Figure 1) for a practitioner, not the clinical/workplace/specialty setting indicated by the specialist-generalist continuum. Specialist practice is described as that which is particular to a specific context, be it a client group (fertility nursing care), a skill set (sonography) or an organisational context (fertility services) (NHS Scotland, 2012). This contrasts with the level of practice achieved by a practitioner, senior practitioner, advanced practitioner and consultant practitioner. This level of practice is a particular stage on a novice-expert continuum with the advanced role profile characterised by high levels of clinical skill, competence and autonomous decision-making. This reflects a particular benchmark on a career development ladder as exemplified in the Career Framework for Health (Skills for Health 2006) (Figure 1).

Figure 2 illustrates the inter-relationship between the novice-expert continuum and the generalist to specialist-generalist continuum (CNO Directorate Scottish Government 2008; NHS Scotland 2012; NHS Wales/NLIAH 2010).

The relationship between specialist and advanced practice

Figure 2 recognises that the developmental pathway towards advanced level practice in nursing/midwifery may be different for individual practitioners. Some may follow a nursing route within a specialist field (with focus on high-level skills and decision making within a particular client group or clinical context). Others will develop a portfolio that reflects high-level assessment, decision making and autonomous practice across a greater breadth of practice.

As this is a national framework, the definitions of the specialist-generalist continuum and the registered, senior, advanced, consultant practitioner levels of practice developed by the Department of Health (2010), NHS Wales/NLIAH (2010) and CNO Directorate Scottish Government (2008) NHS Scotland (2012), have been used throughout this document.
Figure 2: Specialist and advanced practice and the career framework
Adapted from NHS Wales/NLIAH (2011)
### Structure of higher education awards

**Figure 3: Fertility nursing education career framework**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Academic levels in England, Wales and Northern Ireland*</th>
<th>Levels 1-4</th>
<th>Levels 5-6</th>
<th>Level 6</th>
<th>Levels 6-7</th>
<th>Levels 7-8</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Academic levels in Scotland*</td>
<td>SCQF 3-6</td>
<td>SCQF 6-8</td>
<td>SCQF 9-10</td>
<td>SCQF 11</td>
<td>SCQF 12</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*The academic levels refer to the required educational level to be attained through accredited higher education institution modules or awards. These are not career and/or competence levels, which are frequently attached to individual posts and used in the NHS careers framework.*
The academic levels used within this section have been aligned with recommendations from CNO Directorate Scottish Government (2008), NHS Scotland (2012), NHS Wales/NLIAH (2010) and the Department of Health (2010). It is anticipated that to progress from registered practitioner level through to senior practitioner level, continuing professional development (CPD) and postgraduate (master’s level) education will be undertaken, and that by advanced practitioner level, master’s level will have been achieved. Doctoral level qualification is recommended for consultant practitioner roles. Figure 3 illustrates progression and role development.

Higher education institutions (HEIs) or universities offer a range of awards including:

- foundation degree
- undergraduate certificate
- undergraduate diploma/advanced diploma
- undergraduate degree (Bachelor of Science (BSc) or Arts (BA))
- postgraduate certificate and postgraduate diploma
- Master of Science (MSc) or Master of Arts (MA) or Master of Philosophy (MPhil)
- Doctor of Philosophy (PhD or DPhil)
- professional doctorate (nursing (ProfD) or education (EdD) or health care (DHC)).

Each award requires the nurse to demonstrate achievement of a defined number of academic credits at the appropriate level for country of study.

**Foundation degrees**

Professional development opportunities for health care support workers include foundation degrees. These are designed and delivered in partnership with employers to equip people with the relevant knowledge and skills to deliver competent and high quality care. They are offered by institutions in partnership with universities and further education colleges.

The study methods can be very flexible, which means that they are available to people already in work, those wishing to embark on a career change and to those who have recently completed level 3 qualifications (for example, A levels (England), Higher/Advanced Higher (Scotland), Higher Leaving Certificate (Ireland), Advanced Apprenticeships or NVQ3)).

A foundation degree requires achievement of 240 academic credits in total, normally achieved as:

Level 4/SCQF 3-6 = 120 credits
Level 5/SCQF 3-6 = 120 credits.
Accreditation of prior learning (APL) explained

Accreditation of prior learning (APL), as defined by the Universities and Colleges Admissions Service (UCAS), is the overall term widely used for the recognition of, and award of, academic credit on the basis of demonstrated learning that has occurred at sometime in the past. This learning may have come about as the result of a course, or self-directed study, or as the result of experience either at work or in leisure pursuits.” (UCAS, 2012). APL may also be referred to as accreditation of prior certificated learning (APCL) and accreditation of prior experiential learning (APEL). APCL and APEL are academic processes that enable practitioners to gain recognition for skills and knowledge they already possess, to facilitate entry on to a university award, or provide an exemption from parts of an award.

Health care support workers may be able to use prior learning from S/NVQs to enter foundation degree awards. Prior to 1992, most nursing and midwifery pre-registration programmes were not approved or accredited by higher education institutions. A registered nurse or midwife without HEI accreditation may be able to use prior experiential/workplace learning, study day attendance and accredited modules to access undergraduate and postgraduate awards. HEIs normally require applicants to provide evidence of the knowledge and learning achieved from these experiences. This evidence can also be used as part of a portfolio to demonstrate continuing professional development to the regulator, where registration is required to practice.

Individual universities may have specific requirements for the presentation and assessment of evidence, and also regulations about the amount of prior certificated and/or experiential learning, which may contribute to an undergraduate or postgraduate award. It is essential, therefore, that practitioners contact the local education provider or learning representative to explore the options available about how they can access the right level of education and appropriate practice placement to proceed.

Both APCL and APEL can help students progress onto an award where previous learning overlaps with the area of study. Expectations for APCL and APEL will vary between HEIs and further details can be found at local universities or colleges. Alternatively, practitioners can refer to the UCAS website for more information: www.ucas.com/students/wheretostart/maturestudents/courses/apl

Undergraduate certificate/diploma/degree

From September 2011, all pre-registration nursing programmes required approval at undergraduate degree level. This means that nurses will achieve NMC registration and be awarded a minimum of an undergraduate degree (BSc or BA). A registered nurse/midwife may continue their professional development pursuing post-registration undergraduate or
postgraduate (master’s) level education. Post-registration undergraduate and postgraduate degrees are available on a full or part-time basis to enable continuity in practice and study at the same time. The academic level and number of academic credits required to achieve a post-registration/qualifying undergraduate certificate/diploma/degree are detailed below.

**Undergraduate certificate**
Level 4/SCQF 3-6 = 120 academic credits.

Most universities will accept a professional registration in nursing or midwifery as equivalent to level 4, depending on the qualifying route and the APEL processes.

**Undergraduate diploma**
Achievement of 240 academic credits in total, normally as:
level 4/SCQF 3-6 = 120 credits
level 5/SCQF 6-8 = 120 credits.

**Undergraduate honours degree BSc (Hons) or BA (Hons)**
Achievement of 360 academic credits in total, normally as:
level 4/SCQF 3-6 = 120 credits
level 5/SCQF 6-8 = 120 credits
level 6/SCQF 9-10 = 120 credits.

Figure 4 provides an example of how a nurse could plan an undergraduate degree pathway, with the assistance of local education providers.
Figure 4: Example of undergraduate honours degree pathway

- Undergraduate certificate
  - 120 credits.
  - Normally APEL for registered general nurse (RGN)/registered midwife (RM).

- Undergraduate diploma
  - 240 credits (120 credits from above with additional 120 credits) employing some of the following:
    - may use Accredited Prior Certificated Learning (APCL) for those registered practitioners with diploma award
    - for those without diploma award consider modules with focus on fertility
    - work-based module (focus on skills, role development or project)
    - mentorship module (enables students to develop skills necessary to support learning and assessment in practice).

- Undergraduate degree
  - 360 credits (240 credits from above with additional 120 credits) employing some of the following specialist fertility modules, ie leadership and management, mentorship and/or research – award may require mandatory/core dissertation project.
Taught postgraduate certificate/postgraduate diploma/master’s awards

There are three awards available at master’s level (MSc or MA), each with a different total credit to be achieved. For postgraduate awards, practitioners must hold the equivalent of a first degree in credits. Again, nurses might choose to study an individual module or select modules to make up the required amount of credits for award.

**Postgraduate certificate**
Level 7/SCQF 11 = 60 credits

**Postgraduate diploma**
Level 7/SCQF 11 = 120 credits

**Master’s (MSc or MA)**
Level 7/SCQF 11= 180 credits

**Doctor of Philosophy (PhD)**
Level 7/8/SCQF 12

The awards may be flexible, including opportunities to study modules focused on fertility practice and core modules, which are compulsory (for example, research methods and, for the master’s award, a dissertation or project). Figure 5 demonstrates how a practitioner could plan a master’s level pathway using a range of modules.
Figure 5: Example of taught postgraduate degree level pathway

- **Postgraduate certificate**
  - 60 credits at Level 7/SCQF 11.
  - May be optional choice of modules.
  - Consider modules with focus on fertility.
  - Work-based module (focus on skills, role development or project).

- **Postgraduate diploma**
  - 120 credits at Level 7/SCQF 11 (60 credits from above) with additional 60 credits.
  - Specialist fertility modules: Leadership & management, mentorship and/or research methods (20-30 credits of which, may be gained from mandatory research methods modules/s).

- **Postgraduate degree**
  - 180 credits at Level 7/SCQF 11 (120 credits from above) with additional 60 credits, which may be gained from dissertation/project/thesis.
Postgraduate research degree – Master of Philosophy (MPhil)

A research-related degree gives the opportunity to determine a particular field of study. Working with a supervisor, a research topic will be agreed with an action plan to undertake a research project, leading to publication. This may be undertaken full or part-time. A full-time MPhil can usually be completed in two years, whilst a part-time MPhil might take between two and five years. Research projects are, almost by definition, unique and used to enhance the overall evidence to support best practice in the subject area, for example, fertility nursing care.

Doctoral level awards – research degrees

A Doctor of Philosophy award may be undertaken full or part-time. A full-time PhD is normally completed in three years whilst a part-time PhD within five years. The first year of a full-time PhD is typically spent on an initial registration for a master’s in Philosophy (MPhil). Study will be focused on a review of existing literature in the proposed area, and the refining of the research proposal, combined with formal training in research methodology and/or statistics.

The second year of a full-time PhD programme may involve data collection. In the third year, a detailed collation and analysis of the results will lead to an organised, logical and persuasive thesis. The output of this will add to the current body of literature in fertility nursing care.

The DPhil award can be achieved by those with a track record of research publications. This can be undertaken over a period of several years, with development of a portfolio of evidence and supporting commentary in the final year.

Professional doctorates

A professional doctoral degree is as academically rigorous as a PhD. It is normally designed for senior, experienced professionals and is highly applicable within the specific sector and/or career pathway. Professional doctorates are available in education, management, nursing and midwifery. The awards are often focused on part-time study and completion is normally within five years. As with a PhD, the ability to execute an individual research project and critically appraise the literature, will contribute towards the continued development of expert knowledge, focusing upon the diverse and changing environments in which fertility nurse roles are situated.
Career progression in fertility nursing

Fertility nursing is a specialised and dynamic field of practice, subject to change as innovations and new techniques are adopted (RCN, 2011). Fertility nurses are increasingly demonstrating their capacity for providing nurse-led, holistic care, from investigation to early pregnancy and end of treatment management, in both the NHS and independent sector.

This training and education framework should be used in collaboration with the RCN’s *Specialist competences for fertility nurses* (RCN, 2011). The competency document details core and specialist competences across the patient/client pathway. It identifies the causes of infertility through to investigation, treatment and follow-up. Both these documents should be used in guiding professional development, identifying the level of practice required and educational decisions to meet current and future role expectations. It is also recommended that academic learning is linked to relevant clinical practice.

As individual role requirements and career aspirations vary, it is beyond the remit of this report to recommend specific modules, awards or educational organisations, as individuals might undertake a range of learning opportunities. For example, fertility nurses may elect to complete a university accredited module or participate in non-accredited courses provided by a variety of professional organisations, focused on a particular aspect of fertility care. Practitioners may also study accredited modules at one or more HEI, accumulating academic credits rather than a specific ‘named award’. It may be possible to combine a previous portfolio of learning (APL) to contribute to a named award at an HEI. Refer to *Examples of programme pathways* below for possible education routes for career progression. These are not designed to be prescriptive.

**CPD and competence levels in fertility nursing**

Continuing professional development (CPD) can be defined as accredited or non-accredited in the context of courses or events that provide training and education. However, it can also include in-house training, mandatory study days, networking, shadowing, consulting with experts and organised events (conferences). CPD is normally self-directed to achieve agreed aims and objectives, perhaps following an appraisal/performance review between a practitioner and their manager. CPD enables nurses and other regulated practitioners to demonstrate their continuing development to provide high quality evidence-based care.
Practitioners might also utilise the RCN’s *Specialist competences for fertility nurses* (RCN, 2011) to meet their CPD requirements. For example, practitioners can use them to identify specific aspects of practice and the level at which to develop their role, and through an agreed action plan, undertake work-based activities and learning to demonstrate achievements. Documentation of evidence facilitates the process of APL credit at HEIs; therefore, practitioners should also document evidence of learning/experience using the following online toolkits:

**Skills Passport (Skills for Health, 2006)**
www.skillsforhealth.org.uk/developing-your-organisations-talent/skills-passport

**The NHS Knowledge and Skills Framework (DH, 2004)**

**The RCN’s Specialist competences for fertility nurses (RCN, 2011) details five different levels of competence.**
Levels 2 to 4: Health care support worker.
Level 5: Registered practitioner.
Level 6: Registered practitioner/senior practitioner.
Level 7: Senior practitioner/advanced practitioner.
Level 8: Consultant practitioner.

This framework, in conjunction with the RCN’s competences, can be used for:

- **self-assessment** – to identify the current level of knowledge, skill and competence in specific/required aspects of fertility care for your role
- **planning personal development** – to identify education and training requirements to enhance your level of knowledge, skill and competence to meet role development and career aspirations
- **identifying education and training requirements** to enhance your level of knowledge, skill and competence, or address issues with service needs and quality assurance/external standards
- **developing education and training** – in association with education providers, where provision may be limited/non-existent
work-based learning – through developing action plans and learning opportunities to meet specific competences within the practice setting. The competences may also be incorporated into higher education accredited work-based learning modules as part of credit accumulation or an award.

Fertility nurses wishing to progress their career should:

- consider discussing with their line manager the requirements/expectation of the role, and the academic level required for this level of practice. The RCN’s *Specialist competences for fertility nurses* (RCN, 2011), together with the information above (about levels of practice), will assist in preparing for this discussion

- seek guidance from the local HEI/university for details about how to select the learning opportunities/modules/awards most appropriate for their practice. For example, practitioners may wish to access stand-alone module or select a combination of learning opportunities. To achieve an academic award, these should include an aspect of fertility-specific topics, in addition to topics relating to management/leadership, education and research methods, in order to address all DH themes for advanced level practice (master’s level).

For fertility nurses undertaking, or aspiring to, senior, advanced and consultant level practice roles, the recommendation from Departments of Health across the UK is that these roles incorporate the following four themes:

1. clinical/direct patient care
2. leadership and collaborative practice
3. improving quality and developing practice
4. developing self and others.

In addition to local study days/in-house training, a variety of certified modules/courses for fertility nurses exist. For example, the RCN, Royal College of Obstetricians and Gynaecologists (RCOG), British Fertility Society (BFS) and Senior Infertility Nurse Group (SING) offer practical-based modules for nurses, medical and scientific staff. Alongside attendance at relevant study days/conferences, these currently meet the requirements of the NMC vision for CPD (NMC, 2010).

For health care support workers, in-house, National Vocational/Scottish Vocational Qualifications NVQ/SVQ and similar, are available to enhance their skill set.
Examples of programme pathways

This section is intended to demonstrate the contemporary options available to help inform choice about career progression, through both CPD and academic study. It is critical to consider individual role requirements and career aspirations in order to make appropriate selections from the options available. Career progression in fertility nursing may take many forms. Non-accredited CPD and accredited modules/awards both enhance the understanding of clinical practice, leadership, collaborative practice, service enhancement and team development.

The following sections provide a few examples of how pathways may be built to achieve a diploma, undergraduate level degree or a master’s. They are intended as examples only, whilst acknowledging local variation and diversity of individual needs.
Example of undergraduate diploma pathway (fertility nursing)

Level 5/SCQF 6-8

- Professional registration (RGN/RM) or access course or APEL
  120 credits at level 4

- Fertility awareness
  30 credits at level 5

- Research methods module
  30 credits at level 5

- Mentorship and assessment module
  30 credits at level 5

- Understanding health
  15 credits at level 5

- Case study module
  15 credits at level 5

- Undergraduate diploma
  120 credits at level 4
  120 credits at level 5

Exit with certificate of achievement

End

Note: The project team acknowledges that the ideal is for all nurses to strive towards an undergraduate degree as a minimum for advancing their career, whilst a minimum of a master's degree is recommended for all nurses planning to move towards advanced and specialist levels of practice. This pathway demonstrates how nurses can begin this career journey with one or two modules and build a portfolio that will enable them to progress.
Example of undergraduate degree pathway (fertility nursing)

Level 6/SCQF 9-10

Developing an advanced portfolio for practice or RGN/RM
120 credits at level 4

- Research methods
  30 credits at level 5

- Leadership module
  30 credits at level 5

- Fertility awareness
  30 credits at level 5

- Communication in health
  30 credits at level 5

Exit with undergraduate diploma
120 credits at Level 4
120 credits at level 5

- Principles of medical ultrasound
  30 credits at level 6

- Early pregnancy ultrasound
  30 credits at level 6

- Managing infertility
  30 credits at level 6

- Mentorship and assessment module
  30 credits at level 6

BSc (Hons) BA (Hons)
undergraduate degree
120 credits at level 4
120 credits at level 5
120 credits at level 6

End
Example of master’s degree pathway (fertility nursing)

Level 7/SCQF 11

- Ethics module
  - 20 credits at level 7

- Independent work-based learning project
  - 20 credits at level 7

- Reflective practitioner
  - 20 credits at level 7

- Exit with postgraduate certificate
  - 60 credits at level 7

- Portfolio of innovative practice
  - 20 credits at level 7

- Contemporary issues: law and fertility
  - 20 credits at level 7

- Research awareness
  - 20 credits at level 7

- Exit with postgraduate diploma
  - 120 credits at level 7

- Independent scholarship
  - 60 credits at level 7

- MSc or MA
  - 180 credits at level 7

* Please refer to page 31 for examples of optional modules.
Career progression – sonography

Sonography is now considered an integral and essential part of fertility nursing practice, and requires specialist training and assessment. Specialist nurses wishing to extend their scope of practice can access accredited sonography related modules and programmes at postgraduate levels. This requires access to practice mentored placements that will enable students to complete modules of learning at master’s degree level, which are accredited by the Consortium for the Accreditation of Sonographic Education (CASE, 2011).

CASE is an organisation established to promote best ultrasound practice through accreditation of training programmes that develop safe and competent ultrasound practitioners. Practitioners can select their HEI of choice and modules best placed to fulfill individual clinical and educational requirements, such as ‘negotiated specialist practice’ modules. This may include areas such as principles of medical ultrasound, focused specialist and/or early pregnancy ultrasound. These modules require a clinical training placement for several hours per week under the supervision of an appropriate CASE accredited sonography practitioner. Courses can be accessed if practitioners hold a first degree or relevant professional qualification.

Some courses/modules offer an online academic component, whilst others require attendance at lectures and workshops. Assessment can either be practical/clinical based, and/or include reflective portfolios and written assignments. In order to obtain a postgraduate certificate in Medical Ultrasound (many students are accepted who have relevant clinical experience or hold a first degree), modules worth a total of 60 credits at level 7/SCQF 11 must be completed. Students can continue their studies to postgraduate diploma level if required, by obtaining 120 credits. For those wishing to progress to master’s level, a further 60 credits (180 in total), can be achieved by completing a research methodology module and dissertation.

For those seeking non-accredited modules, professional membership organisations offer single study days in pelvic ultrasound, supported by training log, appraisal record and certificate of attendance.
**HyCoSy and HSG**

Many specialist nurses are now required to perform ultrasound techniques of tubal patency testing, such as hysterosalpingo contrast sonography (HyCoSy) and hysterosalpingogram (HSG). These two examinations could also be incorporated into routine clinical fertility nursing practice. Both diagnostic tests are highly observer-dependent, therefore accuracy is reliant on appropriately trained practitioners. Specialist nurses might find it useful to discuss the specific training and assessment required for diagnostic ultrasound with the HEI programme leader. The RCN’s specialist competences (core competence 3) details the level of understanding required to undertake diagnostic imaging of the uterine cavity and fallopian tubes.

The diagram on page 30 provides an example of a specific sonography/ultrasound pathway, and might be useful when discussing career progression.
Example of master’s degree pathway (sonography/ultrasound)

**Level 7/SCQF 11**

- **Principles of medical ultrasound**
  - 20 credits

- **Ultrasound in fertility (focused practice negotiated module)**
  - 20 credits at level 7

- **Ultrasound in early pregnancy assessment**
  - 20 credits at level 7

- **Exit with postgraduate certificate**
  - 60 credits at level 7

- **Ultrasound in early pregnancy assessment (if not already completed)**
  - 20 credits at level 7

- **Negotiated learning module – clinical focus**
  - 20 credits at level 7

- **End**

- **Exit with postgraduate certificate**
  - 120 credits at level 7

- **Independent scholarship**
  - 60 credits at level 7

- **MSc or MA**
  - 180 credits at level 7

- **Optional module**
  - 15 credits at level 7

* Please refer to page 31 for examples of optional modules.
The following examples will provide some information on possible modules to consider when choosing optional modules.

**Optional modules examples (master’s level 7)**

**Advancing communication skills**
Use of communication in complex, sensitive or contentious situations. In this module students assess their own communication skills and consider theoretical principles in areas that relevant to them.

**Examples of application in fertility:** delivering bad news, implication counselling and general counselling skills.

**Advancing practice**
Continuing professional development is vital to ensure practitioners maintain competences and develop clinical/research practice. Students can use this subject area to critically reflect upon an area of interest to them, and utilise their theoretical and professional clinical knowledge in complex problem solving.

**Examples of application in fertility:** identify an area within clinical practice, for example, the dilemma faced by couples in considering single versus double embryo transfer; review of the literature in an area of clinical practice.

**Advancing technology**
Usually a work-based module which will help practitioners gain knowledge of emerging technologies that directly or indirectly influence their clinical practice, and ensure that they are getting the most out of modern technology.

**Examples of application in fertility:** use of ultrasound (embryo transfers, diagnostics); pre-implantation diagnosis (PGD); intracytoplasmic sperm injection (ICSI).

**Research methodologies – application to advanced practice**
A research-focused module will enhance the development of skills in either, or both, quantitative and qualitative research methods.

**Examples of application in fertility:** students should select a topic of research of interest and search for related articles (both qualitative and quantitative). Students should consider undertaking a small research/audit project within their clinical area, with the aim of facilitating improved service provision.
Work-based learning – negotiated module

The ethos of advanced nursing practice should be relevant to the individual role and job description, therefore, it is essential to consider and evaluate the service needs of the workplace, considering both current and future requirements. This area of study should include liaising and/or collaboration with the multidisciplinary team and/or service users.

Examples of application in fertility: students should discuss current service provision with their line manager and consider what might be improved (for example, patient satisfaction with information and communication received). This should then be used as a basis for developing a proposal for service improvement.
Conclusion

“The role of the fertility nurse is to provide a holistic approach to fertility investigation, treatment, and early pregnancy through compassionate, informed and evidence-based practice. Fertility nurses work as part of multi-professional teams whose focus is on delivering a high standard of care. Research plays a fundamental part in this process.”

Specialist competences for fertility nurses (RCN, 2011)

Fertility nursing provides the opportunity for participation in advanced nursing practice and research, in addition to leadership and management. There are opportunities to develop nurse-led clinics and advanced practitioner/nurse consultant roles, which incorporate diagnostics and management of the infertile couple/individual. There are also career opportunities to develop individual profiles nationally and internationally through multidisciplinary involvement with professional and government bodies, as well as contributing to the political dimension of enhancing practice. Developing higher levels of training, education and clinical practice will enable nurses to meet the rapidly changing service needs, in addition to engaging with the political and workforce challenges in fertility care.

The project team set out to develop a flexible document, intended to reflect the contemporary options available to those wishing to pursue further training and/or a career in fertility nursing. It is designed to ensure a competent and flexible nursing workforce, which can actively engage with both the practical and political dimensions in the provision of fertility services.

This framework provides clear guidance for all nurses wishing to progress their career in the area of fertility. Its implementation will help standardise training and education and ensure an appropriate strategy to support future developments – from undergraduate to postgraduate studies – including advanced level practice in fertility nursing across the UK.
References


Useful websites

**British Fertility Society**
www.britishfertilitysociety.org.uk/index.aspx

**British Medical Ultrasound Society**
www.bmus.org

**Human Fertilisation and Embryology Authority**
www.hfea.gov.uk

**National Vocational Qualifications, City & Guilds**
www.cityandguilds.com

**RCN Fertility Nursing Forum Community**
www.rcn.org.uk/fertility

**Royal College of Obstetricians and Gynaecologists**
www.rcog.org.uk
Notes
Notes
The RCN represents nurses and nursing, promotes excellence in practice and shapes health policies

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RCN Online
www.rcn.org.uk

RCN Direct
www.rcn.org.uk/direct
0345 772 6100

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