

Guidelines for Operationalizing Extern Programs

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PURPOSE

To provide considerations and recommendations that harmonize approaches for Toronto Region hospitals and academic institutions when operationalizing the Ministry of Health's Extern Programs.

BACKGROUND

In January 2021, 11 Greater Toronto Area (GTA) hospitals with large COVID-19-related pressures were invited by the Ministry of Health (MOH) to participate in the Nursing Extern Program, a time-limited program that provides qualifying nursing learners with employment opportunities while alleviating health human resource (HHR) challenges in the hospitals, including patient care and COVID-19 pressures. MOH also provided guidance on the parameters around eligibility, education requirements, mentorship/supervisors, etc. Since then, MOH has been considering expanding the Extern Program to learners of other health professions (e.g. medicine and radiation therapy).

While operationalization of Extern Programs has been left to the discretion of organizations, academic programs and hospitals agreed that a harmonized approach to operationalizing these programs would ensure consistent communication to learners and avoid duplicated efforts. Having guidelines for this operationalization would still offer flexibility for hospitals to identify how Externs can be effectively utilized and positioned for the local context.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The below recommendations are intended for hospitals and academic institutions to consider when operationalizing Extern Programs in order to inform planning efforts of individual organizations and harmonize core elements of operations across hospitals.

1. Ensure Education Requirements (i.e. Year of Study & Academic Standing) are Met

MOH has defined education requirements for Extern Programs. For example, to be eligible for the Nursing Extern Program, learners must be enrolled in a College of Nursing of Ontario (CNO) approved Baccalaureate Nursing (BScN or BN) Program or be in their final year of a Practical Nursing (PN) Program. In addition to this requirement, it is recommended that learners hired for externships are in good academic standing at their academic program.

It is suggested that learners provide hospitals with a reference letter confirming their academic standing and year of study; requiring a transcript is not suggested. To limit the administrative burden on academic programs, it is suggested that a standard reference letter (see sample communication in Appendix A) be developed by the program to confirm these details and operationalized locally through various offices (e.g. Registrar's Office).

2. Ensure Appropriate Scope of Practice, Capacity, & Training of Externs

The Extern Program offers hospitals an opportunity to supplement HHR in a flexible way to meet the organization's needs. As externship is a form of employment, hospitals should consider the following:

- As per MOH's *Extern Program: Guide for Health Care Organizations*, hospitals should determine the appropriate scope of practice for Externs, guided by the legislation, organizational policies, and balanced with patient needs.

- As the employer, hospitals should ensure appropriate human resource supports, Workplace Safety and Insurance Board Coverage (WSIB) and any other insurance coverage or benefits necessary to ensure the safety of Externs.
- Hospitals should ensure appropriate capacity for onboarding and orienting Externs, including additional training in Personal Protective Equipment (PPE) donning and doffing.
- Hospitals must have appropriate capacity of supervisors to ensure the safety of patients, staff, and learners.
- As much as possible, hiring, training, and the scope of Extern positions should not impact opportunities for learners to complete unpaid academic placements at a hospital.

3. Harmonize Communications to Learners from Hospitals and Academic Institutions Related to Extern Programs

Learners have the opportunity to apply for employment outside of their academic programs. To ensure learners understand their professional responsibilities, both as a potential employee of a hospital and as a learner in an academic institution, it is suggested that hospitals and academic institutions clearly communicate the Extern role's scope, job requirements and time commitment. It is recommended that key messages to learners include the nature of the Extern role as an employment relationship with the hospital, and considerations (e.g. on academics and obligations) for learners seeking extern roles (see sample communication in Appendix B), and should be adapted for local context.

REFERENCES

- Heenan, M., & Hillmer, M. (2021, January 8). Memo Re: Nursing Extern Program and COVID-19 Hospital Incremental Expenses.
- Ministry of Health. (2021). *Extern Program: Guide for Health Care Organizations*.
- Toronto Academic Health Science Network. (2020). *Hospital-Based Academic Recovery Strategy & Guidelines*.

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N.B. Please note that this document is only providing guidance and/or recommendations to support individual planning for hospitals within the Toronto Region of Ontario Health. This document does not constitute provincial decisions, directions or guidance.

APPENDIX A

Sample reference letter that academic institutions may customize and standardize to facilitate a more streamlined approach to provide reference letters for learners applying to Extern Programs:

Dear [Name of Hospital/Name of Contact]

This is to confirm that [Name of Learner] is currently enrolled in the [Name of Academic Program, Name of Academic Institution].

The student/learner is currently enrolled in [level/year of the program] and is in good academic standing.

Regards,

[Name of Responsible Person]

[Name of Academic Program, Name of Academic Institution]

APPENDIX B

Sample letter including key messages for organizations (i.e. academic institutions or hospitals) to use and adapt, as desired, when communicating information to learners related to Extern Programs:

Dear [Learner/name of specific student bodies],

In January 2021, select hospitals with large COVID-19 related pressures were invited by the Ministry of Health (MOH) to participate in the Nursing Extern Program, a time-limited program that provides qualifying nursing learners with employment opportunities. The Extern role is designed to alleviate health human resource (HHR) challenges in the hospitals, including patient care and COVID-19 pressures.

We are committed to supporting your success as learners, and to ensuring you have appropriate, impactful opportunities to contribute to our healthcare system during these unprecedented times. The Extern Program offers learners in several professions employment opportunities in select hospitals in an effort to support the additional needs of patients and families at this time. To help you make informed decisions, we have listed the following information and considerations for you to review before you apply or accept such opportunities:

Nature of Extern Programs

- *Participation in Extern Programs is not mandatory and will not contribute to curricular requirements for academic programs.*
- *Individuals in the Extern Programs are considered employees of the hospital and are regarded as unregulated health service providers. As such, when operating as an Extern, they are not protected by their healthcare professional regulatory body. Extern employment duties, training for the role (e.g. PPE training), insurance coverage, and supervision for the role are determined at the discretion of the hospital offering the externship.*

Considerations before Applying to or Accepting an Extern Program Role

- *Learners are responsible for maintaining good academic standing in their academic programs.*
- *As with any employment opportunity, learners should consider the role's time obligations, as well as their own capacity and ability to fulfill their responsibilities broadly. Additionally, learners should adhere to any academic institutional policies and heed advice from their program as it relates to their employment, training, and academic responsibilities during their studies.*
- *Individuals accepting Extern roles are considered hospital employees. As with any employee, provision of human resource supports, Workplace Safety and Insurance Board Coverage (WSIB) and any other insurance coverage or benefits related to safety are the responsibility of the hospital.*

If you have any questions or concerns about the Extern Program or would like further guidance or advice related Extern roles, please do not hesitate to contact us via [insert contact information or contact person].

Regards,

[Name of Responsible Person]

[Name of Organization]