

## Nursing Education in Greenland

Suzanne Møller  
University of Greenland

### Abstract

This report is part of a special collection from members of the University of the Arctic Thematic Network on Northern Nursing Education. The collection explores models of decentralized and distributed university-level nursing education across the Circumpolar North. This report provides a brief overview of the nursing program at the University of Greenland, or *Ilisimatusarfik*. Greenland has had jurisdiction over its own health care system since 1990, and began a nursing program in 1994. The nursing education program at the University of Greenland has developed into an institute offering bachelor's degrees and research and PhD programs. Before the start of the program, only a small percentage of nurses were born in Greenland. Now, half of the nurses are speaking Greenlandic, and have their home and family in Greenland, and this has had a huge impact on the Greenland health care system. Meanwhile, recent research undertaken by colleagues in Greenland has explored the nature of nursing practice in rural and remote communities. In an ethnographic study involving nurses practising in remote Greenland, Hounsgaard et al. (2013) found that "the nature of nursing practice in rural and remote Greenland is characterized by a high degree of variability and complexity, with a requirement for a wide range of knowledge and skills. Nurses need to be better prepared with regard to acute medical care, preventive care, social work, humanistic approaches and information technology to implement the ideology of health strategies." (See Hounsgaard, L., Jensen, A., Wilche, J., & Dolmer, I. (2013). The nature of nursing practice in rural and remote areas of Greenland. *International Journal of Circumpolar Health*, 72. <http://dx.doi.org/10.3402/ijch.v7+2i0.20964>)

**Keywords:** Nursing education; Greenland; remote nursing

## **Context**

Greenland is the largest island in the world (2.2 million km<sup>2</sup>) and has about 56,400 inhabitants—89% of the population is born in Greenland and the rest are from outside, mainly Denmark. Greenland has self-rule, but is a part of the Danish kingdom. There are sixteen towns and sixty settlements (the largest of which is Nuuk, with about 16,500), all along the coast line. The language is primarily Greenlandic, the second is Danish, and, for some, English is taught in primary school.

In 1990, Greenland took over the health care system from Denmark and in that process it was decided to establish a four-year nursing education program on an international level. In 1994, the first nursing students were admitted to the program. The program has been financed by the Greenland Home Rule government and it has been inspired by the Danish nursing program.

The nursing education program has developed into an institute with diploma programs, research, and PhD programs, and it is a part of the Institute for Nursing and Health Science at the University of Greenland, *Ilisimatuseqarfik*.

Greenland has about 325 nurses and, in 2015, 140 of those were educated in Greenland, although about ten or fifteen of these have left for some period of time. Prior to the start of the program, there were only about thirty Greenland-born nurses educated in Denmark. That half of the nurses are speaking Greenlandic and have their home and family in Greenland has had a huge impact on the Greenland health care system.

## **Program Format**

The nursing education program is located at the University of Greenland in Nuuk, the capital of Greenland. All of the theoretical education—five semesters (or 150 ECTS, the European Credit Transfer & Accumulation System)—occurs there. The facilities are very good with nice big classrooms, ergonomic furniture, access to free Internet and databases with the opportunity to borrow a personal computer at the campus, a very nice library, a learning lab for clinical studies, a cafeteria with healthy food, and access to a fitness room.

The clinical education, three semesters or 90 ECTS, is at the town hospitals, including psychiatric in Nuuk or Denmark. It is possible for the students to go to other places in the North or in the world. Travel expenses for clinical placements are financed by the home-rule government.

The nursing education program in Greenland is now a Bachelor of Science in Nursing, and consists of one additional semester compared to the Danish nursing education—this is due to the fact that nurses in Greenland often work with fewer colleagues and so they also learn how to take on management responsibilities for general and acute care.

The curriculum is based on the international science literature, but the teachers try to place it in a Greenlandic context for students. The teaching language is Danish, but in recent years three Greenlandic speaking teachers with academic degrees have been employed; all of these were originally educated as nurses in Greenland.

As far as internationalization, we have joined the Nordkvist (Nordplus) program, and in the last few years some of our students have gone to placements in Denmark, Faroe Islands, Norway, Sweden, and Tanzania. Students have also attended international conferences, one has gone to the Korean Arctic Academy, and one was recently accepted as a Fulbright student in the United States.

The faculty of the nursing program includes six teachers, and over the years it has been extremely hard to recruit teachers; all came from Denmark for relatively short periods. Right now we have four teachers—one nurse with a PhD, and three with master's degrees (one is on leave for further education). Two are Greenlandic speaking. The leader of the program has lived in Greenland for twenty-six years and has been working on the program for twenty years.

In addition to the nursing program, we have developed a research group within the institute, which has been a huge success—it provides knowledge about Greenlandic nursing and other topics of relevance. The nursing program benefits very much from this, as the researchers sit next door. The research is focusing on providing knowledge to the Greenlandic health care providers. Subjects include women's perspective on potential illness (cervical cancer), everyday life with illness, patients' cultural perspective on health practices in Greenland, palliative care, and environmental medical research on pregnant women's and traditional foods.

Some of the challenges for the program include teacher recruitment, especially in anatomy, physiology, and microbiology. This has had the impact that, from autumn 2015, we provided the lessons in these subjects as blended learning in co-operation with a Danish university college. We plan to repeat this way of teaching.

## The Students

The nursing students come from all over Greenland; entrance requirements include passing high school examinations and successfully graduating.

In the first years of the program, student recruitment was difficult, but we never compromised the level required for entering the program.

Once a year, between fourteen and fifteen students are admitted—in the last ten years, the number of applicants has increased, and this year sixty young people applied. It is not possible to admit more students due to clinical placement availability.

There are no geographic or ethnic restrictions on admission. Over the years, the admitted students have become younger. Students must be Greenland citizens to get financial assistance from the government, which is very important because this pays the travel expenses to the clinical placements. The students go to clinical placements for six periods in the four year program and it is very costly.

There is no tuition fee; the students receive between US\$800 and US\$1,000 each month from the government. The students have to pay for their books, which is about US\$300–500 per semester.

Housing is provided by the government, and the rent is reasonable.

At the present, about ten or eleven students graduate every year.

Quite a few students have children; some become pregnant during the educational program, and we try to support them.

Some of the big challenges have included the following: 1. that the student is often the first in the family to attend higher education; 2. language, Danish and English; and 3. that the students are far away from their family, parents, and so on.

It is very important that the teachers act as role models and are available for the students just by being a responsible adult.

Other challenges are staff recruitment; there are very few persons to provide the whole curriculum and to support the clinical placement; infrastructure challenges and the distances; and entering or developing projects with relatively few resources, and so on.

### **The Future**

Some of our vision is to establish education in natural sciences within the institute; this will increase the student population and will contribute to the interdisciplinary environment. We are planning a master's level interdisciplinary course in health and environment, in collaboration with the University of the Arctic.

### **Author**

**Suzanne Møller** is head of the Institute of Nursing and Health Science at the University of Greenland (*Ilisimatusarfik*) in Nuuk, Greenland.

### **Reference**

Houngaard, L., Jensen, A., Wilche, J., & Dolmer, I. (2013). The nature of nursing practice in rural and remote areas of Greenland. *International Journal of Circumpolar Health*, 72. <http://dx.doi.org/10.3402/ijchv72i0.20964>