



Ashford and St. Peter's Hospitals  
NHS Foundation Trust



Specialist Language Courses



CASE STUDY:

# OET NURSING PREPARATION FOR OVERSEAS-QUALIFIED NURSES

A guide  
to best  
practice

## Background

In 2021, SLC prepared 64 groups of overseas-qualified nurses working as healthcare assistants from 35 different NHS Trusts around the country to achieve the grades in OET Nursing required by the NMC for registration.

This case study looks at a group we worked with at Ashford and St Peter's Hospitals NHS Foundation Trust in Middlesex. The organisation of the course and the results achieved are an excellent example of best practice and provides a clear model for others to follow.

## Overview

There were six candidates in the group from a variety of language backgrounds. The students were all level-tested across the four skills – Reading, Listening, Writing, Speaking – before course commencement and assessed to be at an average mid-B2 or strong intermediate level. During the course, one student was withdrawn and another added.

The candidates undertook a 150-hour course with an SLC teacher, designed specifically for a group starting at this level. Lessons were delivered online via Zoom. Homework assignments, materials and personal study plans were integrated into the course plan. Mock tests were also embedded into the course and administered on-site in conjunction with the Trust. None had taken OET before.

**At the end of the course, the six candidates sat the test. Five passed first time.**

We spoke to Lisa Punter, the Lead Nurse for Workforce at the Trust, who selected candidates and organised the course at the hospital, as well as Ceveagh Chan (pictured right), their teacher, to understand what the key factors were that contributed to the success of the course.

As in pretty much any tutored course you can think of, clearly it's important to have a teacher who really knows what they're doing, as well as excellent materials for the candidates to learn from, both in and out of the classroom.

In addition, Lisa and Ceveagh highlighted the following:

- Initial level assessment
- Measures to ensure high levels of commitment from the students
- Giving students paid study time to attend lessons
- Providing support and mentoring from within the hospital
- Giving students flexibility on where and how they attended classes.
- Providing on-site mock exams with follow up analysis and candidate tutorials
- Ongoing communication between SLC (course provider) and the hospital

These seven factors are detailed below with comments from Lisa (**LP**) and Ceveagh (**CC**). We then make a related **recommendation** based on our experience.



*“Our teacher is very good, well prepared, clear communication, good explanation, encouraging to us for the group activities and sometimes she gave us her extra time too.”*

Dil, student



## 1. Initial level assessment

**LP:** Really important to look at this and all of our candidates benefited from taking the baseline assessment through SLC, which then helped us work out hours each needed and match the groups accordingly. Ours was a small group in the end (6 students), but this wouldn't have worked if everyone had been at different levels. For a couple of other people, we then were able to offer a more bespoke programme, for example through some one-to-one lessons.

**CC:** That the candidates were of a similar level contributed to an effective learning dynamic and pace in lessons, and allowed for real and multiple learning opportunities to take place.

### Recommendation

Arrange a skill-by-skill pre-course language assessment to map candidates' English levels to the scores they need. Where possible, use an assessment geared to the kind of language candidates need to learn for OET, a mix of healthcare-focused, academic and everyday English. Use the results to identify how many hours candidates need to study and where students can learn together.

SLC has taught over 2,000 students sponsored by NHS Trusts and has developed a benchmark assessment specifically for OET. We now have an excellent understanding of how many hours groups at different levels need to achieve NMC requirements and have developed a series of curricula to meet the needs of different cohorts of nurses.

## 2. Ensuring the right levels of commitment from the students

**LP:** This was the biggest challenge for me. Initially we had nearly 30 expressions of interest and it became like a full time job to follow up. Some people seemed to think this (OET) was going to be an “easy” route to meet the language requirements, so once they learnt it was still the same standards and scores (as IELTS) and would take a lot of commitment from them, they didn't want to pursue this. I then referred 17 people initially for assessment, so more people dropped out after that for various reasons – a couple left the Trust, some decided the level of self-directed learning was not going to fit in with their work/life balance. This all meant that those that did the course were really committed and understood the expectations.

**CC:** The students were extremely motivated, committed and applied despite the majority having young children and working. Their attendance was key, not only for keeping up with the material and pace of learning, but also to feel confident in their progress and feel satisfied that they were keeping up with the requirements and acquiring the knowledge they need. This group often asked for more material, completed all homework and consistently did extra study tasks I recommended. They were clearly disciplined with their schedules, and they found the self-study plan helpful.

### Recommendation

Ensure all potential participants understand the course and what it involves – the number of tutored hours, the homework commitments, and the levels of language they need to achieve. Achieving the OET grades required by the NMC is challenging. The level of language is high, and students need to learn exam techniques and strategies as well as understand what the marking criteria are.

SLC provides briefings to nurse managers, ward managers and potential students where we share previous experiences, including where results have been excellent and where not. Briefings are clear and draw on thousands of hours of OET teaching experience.



### 3. Giving the students paid study time to attend lessons

**LP:** We included 10 paid hours of study time a week which most people managed to take advantage of. This was all signed off by the Chief Nurse and heads of nursing. It caused some challenges with the rosters, but because we had time to plan this and those on the course were committed, it was possible to work around. However, there was one person not working in a HCSW role that did the course who always worked nights and hadn't discussed this with their manager until a couple of days before or perhaps even not until they started so wasn't released. This was the one person that didn't pass, so again another essential aspect in my opinion.

**CC:** I found that the students who were supported in having paid study time seemed to feel that class time was scheduled for them and as such, they did not seem to approach it as an extra task resulting in feeling pressured, but as an activity that had been allowed for and encouraged. This, in my opinion, led to the candidates feeling as if they were allowed to dedicate time to study rather than feeling harried or pressured, especially in terms of the self-study expected to take place outside of class.

#### Recommendation

Give participants study time. This enables them to focus on their studies, do their homework and revise as they approach test day. Knowing the Trust supports them in this way improves commitment and motivation. It also mitigates against any burnout resulting from taking on a considerable study load in addition to full-time work. Taking night shifts during the course is also unhelpful.

In our experience, there is a clear correlation between allocated study time on the one hand and positive results with more first-time passes on the other.

### 4. Providing support and mentoring from within the hospital

**LP:** I wouldn't say we mentored the candidates in a formal way. However, we did provide them with some books donated from our library services and the departments were very supportive in ensuring candidates could attend classes. As we made arrangements and then booked the tests, this made it less stressful for them. The candidates said they felt supported by the Trust.

**CC:** Lisa at the Trust was very helpful, I believe, for example in helping students attend lessons, setting up the in-house mock tests and helping when the students booked the actual tests.

#### Recommendation

Provide resources and make it easy for candidates to attend classes and take the test. This increases engagement and motivation. Having a contact person at the hospital for candidates to speak to on any issues related to the course has a positive impact.

SLC can support hospitals by recommending resources and taking nurse managers through the test booking process, for example. Every hospital has a Programme Manager at SLC to speak to about course issues. The Programme Manager can then bring in others, such as the teacher or Academic Director, where appropriate.

### 5. Giving students flexibility on where and how they attended classes.

**LP:** The candidates took different approaches. Some opted to attend classes during their working days so would take time away from the clinical area in a quiet place to join, while others attended outside their working hours. We didn't want to dictate how this worked and felt the candidates would be more committed if they made their plans individually with their managers.

Allowing them to be flexible with how they fitted their classes into their clinical roles meant we saw high attendance rates.

The majority opted to study from home, though I think the pandemic had some effect on this as we had to use some of the library spaces for other things and social distancing etc. so we may have seen more people use work areas had this not happened.

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*“The materials were excellent and the duration was just right.”*

Mona, student

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*“The teacher really pushed us to our limits and gave us everything we needed.”*

Aleli, student

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**CC:** The course was long (150 hours) with students attending 3 sessions per week. The flexibility given to the students on where they attended from reinforced high attendance. This allowed for extensive and in-depth practice, and gave us time to focus on emerging 'weaknesses'.

#### Recommendation

Give students flexibility where possible on how and where they attend lessons from. Classes are online, so candidates need a quiet space where they can talk without disturbing others. They need a reasonable internet connection.

SLC provides flexible teaching schedules to fit around student availability. Lessons can be held from once a week to five times a week and can last from 1.5 hours to 3 hours or more. Where longer sessions are required, then breaks need to be built in. We recommend a minimum of 2 lessons a week to maintain learning momentum.



## 6. Providing on-site mock exams with follow up analysis and candidate tutorials

**LP:** This seemed to work well and everyone attended. We held these on site and the candidates took these seriously and made the best use of them. We did three mock exams at different points during the course. Any concerns or unexpected results and recommendations for improvement were made both to the candidates and to me by SLC.

**CC:** Having the mock tests in the hospital was a fantastic experience for the candidates. They seemed to approach it as seriously as they would a 'real' exam and the test experience allowed them to identify obstacles such as nerves and timing, which we were then able to discuss and work through in class. This was an important factor in reducing 'nerves' or panic, which affected one of the candidates in particular. She achieved lower scores in her second mock than in her first and attributed this to 'nerves' and 'going blank'. After this second mock, we focused on practising good exam habits and managing internal narrative (confidence boosting rather than self-defeating), as well as relaxation exercises such as deep breathing, which all contributed to reducing exam fears in the official test.

After each mock test, I provided a one-to-one tutorial to each student to focus on identifying specific areas requiring attention. I was then able to give self-study tasks and resources designed to help improve the skills they need to develop, as well as adjust the teaching programme where necessary.

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*“All tasks were good. I recommend this course to others.”*

Charlotte, student

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### Recommendation

Provide timed mock tests for students. They are great indicators of progress and show where work still needs to be done. Students understand the timings better and the stress of taking one paper after the other, just as on the test day. They are made aware of any issues specific to them which can then be addressed in the remainder of the course. Students are therefore better prepared for the official test.

SLC provides hospitals with the mock test papers and clear guidance on how to administrate the test. Speaking tests are conducted separately by the SLC teacher. All papers are marked and scores are reported to nurse managers by the Academic team as part of the course review process. Students get a one-to-one feedback session after each test. Recommendations are made and course design may adjust accordingly.

## 7. Ongoing communication between SLC (course provider) and the hospital

**LP:** Really enjoy working with SLC – a super friendly and approachable team as well as being really knowledgeable and professional. It was really helpful having the regular catch-up sessions about everyone's progress. Concerns can be raised early. In this case one candidate was behind owing to poor attendance, which was dealt with quickly by withdrawing the candidate and adding another one to the group in their place. We felt it was important not to disrupt learning for other candidates.

### Recommendation

Keep talking to the course provider, for example through regular catch-up meetings, so you understand how each candidate is doing and can quickly address any issues.

SLC arranges regular online meetings with nurse managers and a detailed feedback and review session with the Academic Director after each mock test. As part of this, we recommend when each candidate is ready to sit the official test so bookings can be made in a timely way.

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*“Thank you so much for giving me this opportunity that will give me the chance to continue my chosen profession. I have already recommended this course to my colleagues.”*

Aleli, student

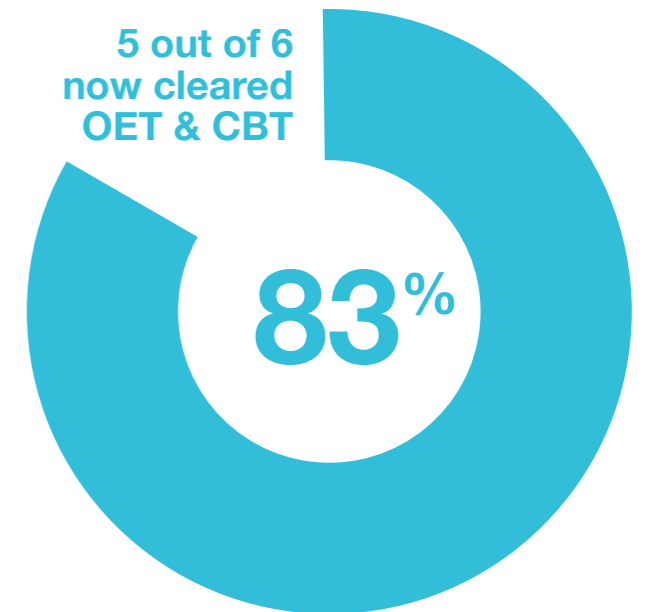
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*“It's a really useful course to develop our professional/personal career. Thank you so much for giving us this opportunity.”*

Dil, student

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### Where are the candidates now?

**LP:** Of the candidates that went on to pass the OET, I am pleased to say that one candidate now has NMC registration after clearing OET, CBT and OSCE and all four of the others have cleared CBT and have either started or are about to start OSCE preparation training.





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