

NEW DEGREE PROGRAMME FOR REGISTRATION AS AN ANAESTHETIC TECHNICIAN

In Brief

Last October (2019) the Medical Sciences Council announced that the prescribed qualification leading to registration as an anaesthetic technician in New Zealand was changing from the current diploma to a bachelor degree.

In this update the Council provides an overview of the progress made to date to get the new degree programme up and running.

AN OVERVIEW

- THE QUALIFICATION FOR REGISTRATION AS AN ANAESTHETIC TECHNICIAN IS MOVING TO A LEVEL 7 BACHELOR DEGREE
- THE LAST INTAKE INTO THE CURRENT DIPLOMA PROGRAMME WILL BE 2020
- THE DEGREE WILL BE OFFERED THROUGH THE AUCKLAND UNIVERSITY OF TECHNOLOGY (AUT)
- THE DEGREE WILL BE AVAILABLE THROUGH FULL-TIME (3 YEARS) OR PART-TIME STUDY. IF STUDYING PART-TIME, STUDENTS WILL NEED TO HAVE COMPLETED THE DEGREE WITHIN A MAXIMUM OF 6 YEARS.
- ENROLMENT IN THE AT SPECIFIC DEGREE PROGRAMME IS EXPECTED TO BE AVAILABLE FROM 2021
- THERE WILL BE AN OPPORTUNITY FOR STUDENTS ENROLLED IN THE 2020 BACHELOR OF HEALTH SCIENCE PROGRAMME TO CROSS CREDIT INTO THE AT DEGREE PROGRAMME IN 2021
- THERE WILL BE NO CHANGE TO THE CURRENT DEFINITION OF THE ANAESTHETIC TECHNICIAN SCOPE OF PRACTICE
- THE COUNCIL HAS BEEN MEETING WITH KEY STAKEHOLDERS TO WORK THROUGH THE CHANGES
- FURTHER FORUMS WITH STAKEHOLDERS ARE BEING PLANNED FOR LATER IN 2020. DUE TO THE CURRENT SITUATION WITH COVID-19 WE ARE UNABLE AT THIS POINT IN TIME TO CONFIRM WHEN THE FORUMS WILL HAPPEN

The degree programme for anaesthetic technicians will be a competence-based qualification. At least one-third of the programme will have a clinical focus specific to the practice of anaesthetic technology within the perioperative environment. Graduating students will be required to demonstrate entry-level competence in order to graduate.

What will the degree programme for anaesthetic technicians look like?

THE “DEVIL OF THE DETAIL” STILL NEEDS TO BE WORKED THROUGH BUT SOME OVERARCHING FEATURES OF THE DEGREE PROGRAMME HAVE BEEN IDENTIFIED:

- It will be a 3-year full-time programme of study.
- Year 1 will focus on core subjects common to most health-related degree programmes. Many of the papers offered will be able to be completed through online learning. This means students will not necessarily need to be on campus for the whole of the academic year, however they will need to attend some on-campus learning modules.
- Year 2 will focus on a combination of academic and clinical learning that is focused on students building more anaesthesia-specific knowledge and skills and will be primarily campus-based. Clinical learning will include both simulation and hospital-based placements.
- Year 3 will focus on clinical learning and practice with students placed at clinical sites around the country. These clinical placements may be within both the public and private health sectors.
- Some students may opt to do the degree through a part-time programme of study. In this scenario, completing the qualification will take longer than the usual 3-years. However the general structure of the degree will be the same.

Stakeholder Forums to Date

Between December 2019 and February 2020 the Council has met with representatives from key stakeholder groups to discuss the issues related to moving the prescribed qualification for anaesthetic technicians to a bachelor degree. We would like to take this opportunity to thank all of those involved to date for their input and insightfulness in helping to tease out the issues and set the goalposts for the eventual rollout of a degree programme. Stakeholder representatives have included:

- National Directors Allied Health Group
- Technical Advisory Services (DHBs)
- Northern Regional Alliance
- New Zealand Private Surgical Hospitals Association
- New Zealand Anaesthetic Technicians Society
- Australia and New Zealand College of Anaesthetists
- New Zealand Society of Anaesthetists
- Ministry of Health (Allied Health Directorate)

STAKEHOLDER FORUMS TO COME

The Council will be hosting more stakeholder forums in the near future. We are planning to hold a series of face-to-face meetings later this year. We are unable to give any idea on possible dates at this point in time due to the current pandemic situation with COVID-19.

Touching base with as many stakeholders as possible can be challenging, and the Council understands that not everyone would be able to attend a face-to-face meeting. Also, the number of meetings the Council is able to facilitate will be limited due to timing and fiscal constraints.

That said, we would like to offer other avenues for people to give us their feedback. The Council has set up a dedicated email where you can send us your thoughts and ideas on the degree programme for anaesthetic technicians. Please also use that email to ask any questions – we may not have all the answers at the time but it will help us to better understand what all the issues may be that will need to be addressed. You can reach us at:

atqual@medsci.co.nz

A NEW DIRECTION FOR THE ANAESTHETIC TECHNICIAN QUALIFICATION: SOME QUESTIONS AND ANSWERS

WHY A DEGREE AND WHY NOW?

There has been talk of a degree programme amongst the profession for a number of years, and the professional body (New Zealand Anaesthetic Technicians Society) have been actively promoting this. While the Medical Sciences Council had included a review of the qualification on their workplan in the not-too-distant future, circumstances have meant this had to be brought forward. Recent initiatives in the tertiary education sector has seen universities being advised by their funding body that they need to move away from providing qualifications that are at a lesser level than undergraduate bachelor degrees. This meant AUT had to put a stick in the sand and make a decision about the undergraduate diploma programme they were offering for anaesthetic technicians. With a change in the AUT school responsible for teaching the technician diploma programme (in 2020 the AT diploma programme has moved from the School of Applied Science to the School of Clinical Sciences), it was a suitable time for them to make that decision.

WHY NOT AN APPRENTICE MODEL?

An apprentice model is not off the table, it's just not the first cab off the rank. That model for degree programmes is not common in New Zealand, and the Council and AUT have had to move with speed to ensure there will not be a hiatus in the training of technicians. Consequently we have agreed to establish a standard academic based degree that will have a heavy emphasis on clinical experience with the third year of the programme consisting primarily of clinical placements for students.

Delivering a degree programme that is delivered through an apprentice framework will require considerable work in terms of how such a model would be funded, especially as it would span across both the 'vote health' and 'vote education' sectors. The Council will continue to work with AUT and the relevant funders to explore how an apprentice degree could be viable and/or implemented.

WILL THE DEGREE BE PS08 COMPLIANT?

Yes the degree to be offered by AUT will meet the requirements of PS08, including the expectation that assistants to an anaesthetist will have completed at least 12-months of clinical experience.

WILL THE DEGREE CHANGE THE ROLE OR SCOPE OF AN ANAESTHETIC TECHNICIAN?

The current scope for anaesthetic technicians (AT) will not change with the introduction of a degree programme. In 2018 the Council completed a review of the scope through a public consultation process and decided that a wholesale change to the parameters to the AT scope of practice as articulated in the Gazette notice, was not required.

Some people may perceive the AT scope as being too narrow, but the Council is confident that the scope is appropriately pitched to allow for flexibility of practice. There is an expanded practice framework already in place for ATs and the Council believes there is a lot more potential for this to be better utilised by employers to enable their AT workforce to engage in more varied practices within perioperative medicine. ATs who are currently engaged in expanded practice often have a base qualification (such as those for a UK-based operating department practitioner) that has encompassed skills and knowledge across a wider range of perioperative-related practices.

Moving to a degree programme will, in the longer term, produce a New Zealand trained AT workforce that has a wider and more informed learning base. Already having the underpinning knowledge of the various roles and practices within the perioperative environment will mean graduates are better prepared to build on their foundational entry-level competencies to engage in more flexible work roles and practices while still practising within the AT scope of practice. It is expected having a more flexible and skilled workforce will assist with meeting the challenges facing New Zealand perioperative services as demands on these services continue to steadily increase.

A degree programme will also open opportunities for ATs to engage in post-graduate study (which is something many cannot do at present due to not having an undergraduate degree qualification). This will be a significant step that could support increased perioperative medicine-related research opportunities which can subsequently help to improve the delivery and safety of perioperative services for the New Zealand public.

WILL STUDENTS STILL BE PAID WHILE DOING THEIR CLINICAL PLACEMENTS?

No, the degree will be like other health-related degrees where students are not paid for the times they are in clinical placements.

COULD THE MOVE TO AN UNPAID DEGREE MODEL IMPACT ON THE TYPE OF CALIBRE OF STUDENTS?

This would require a fair bit of crystal ball gazing and it would be neither fair nor appropriate to try and make any sort of predictions at this point in time. That said, New Zealand has produced some fantastic ATs over the years and there is no reason to think this would be likely to change.

One issue of note is that while it has been suggested anecdotally that the current apprentice diploma model is more conducive to attracting Maori and Pasifika trainees, there is scant evidence to support that perception. On the contrary, Council and AUT statistics strongly indicate that Maori and Pasifika are under-represented in the AT workforce and have been for some time. With AUT intending to base the degree programme at its south Auckland campus, there is an increased potential to attract more Maori and Pasifika into the AT programme. It is of note that AUT enrolment information shows a significantly higher proportion of Maori and Pasifika enrolled in their health programmes in comparison to the proportion of Maori and Pasifika in the current AT workforce.

WILL THE CLINICAL PLACEMENTS STILL BE IN THE SAME ACCREDITED HOSPITALS AS NOW?

Not necessarily. With the change to a degree programme responsibility for the clinical placement of students will be in AUT's court rather than the currently accredited training hospitals. While it is expected that the training hospitals which currently employ trainees would continue to provide clinical placements for AUT student cohorts, there is opportunity for all hospitals that provide perioperative services to become clinical placement providers. The range of hospitals providing clinical placements is expected to span across both the public and private health sectors, and can viably include both larger and smaller hospitals in both metropolitan and provincial areas.

There will be increased opportunity for smaller centres and hospitals to host students and reap the benefits of not only having some additional resource assistance from trainees, but also to build on their potential New Zealand trained workforce base going into the future.

As AUT does not intend to impose any cap to the size of each student intake, there is a very real possibility for increasing the number of graduates over the next few years (in comparison to the current diploma model). But this will require the commitment and cooperation from all centres/hospitals providing perioperative services to engage in the process of providing opportunities for clinical placements.

WILL THERE BE ENOUGH PEOPLE WANTING TO DO THE DEGREE PROGRAMME?

With the current diploma programme over recent years there have typically been more applicants than there has been trainee vacancies which suggests that pursuing a career as an AT is a reasonably popular choice. While the new degree programme will be different in that students will not be employed (and therefore unpaid) while in training, it is of note that all of the other health programmes at AUT are well subscribed. There is no obvious reason at this point in time that the AT degree programme would be an exception to this rule. Furthermore, with AUT being prepared to offer the AT programme as a part-time study option, there will be more opportunity to attract other potential groups of students who may otherwise have been unavailable/unable to commit to fulltime study.

Iterating our point above, as AUT does not intend to impose a cap on student intake numbers, a key mitigating factor to having a good supply of New Zealand trained graduates in the longer term

will be to successfully procure sufficient numbers of clinical placements for students. Thus, the responsibility for future proofing the future supply of New Zealand trained ATs rests with a number of key players, including all providers across the spectrum of perioperative health services, AUT, and the Council.

WILL GRADUATES FROM THE DEGREE PROGRAMME STILL HAVE TO SIT A MEDICAL SCIENCES COUNCIL REGISTRATION EXAM?

The registration exam will continue until the last graduating cohort of the diploma programme has completed their academic qualification (and subsequently sat the Council registration exam).

Graduates of the degree programme will not be required to sit a Council registration exam. This is because that programme of study will include an ongoing programme of assessment inclusive of a robust assessment of clinical competence for all students in their final year.

In accordance with the Health Practitioners Competence Assurance Act 2003, the degree programme at AUT will be subject to an accreditation review process and must be able to demonstrate the programme and the university meet the Council's accreditation standards.

HOW WILL MOVING TO A DEGREE AFFECT THE DAY-TO-DAY OF OPERATING THEATRES IN THE SHORT AND MEDIUM TERM?

To a large extent this will be DHB/private hospital dependant. Many hospitals are already used to providing student clinical placements for a number of different health professions. There will need to be preceptors and other teachers available to AT students similar to other student teaching programmes (such as nursing). Current AT educators may need to take on a change of focus.

As the organising of the detail for clinical placements will be a joint responsibility between AUT and the various hospitals, there may be some relief for those hospitals that have had to single-handedly carry the brunt of such organisational planning and training under the current diploma programme.

During the transitionary period, there will be a supply of students through the two different pathways – the diploma programme and the degree. With the advent of the 2020 COVID-19 pandemic, we are unsure at this point in time as to the impact this may have on the timelines for the final intake into the diploma programme and the rollout of the new degree programme. We will keep people updated as things become clearer once the pandemic has been resolved.

With the establishment of the degree programme there will no longer be a requirement from the Council that training hospitals are accredited. Review and monitoring of the quality of clinical placements will be managed through the Council's relationship with AUT rather than directly with the clinical sites. That said, the Council's accreditation standards and processes will include the collection and analysis and feedback from key stakeholders (including clinical sites) of the AT degree programme.

WILL MOVING TO A DEGREE PROGRAMME SOLVE THE ANAESTHETIC TECHNICIAN WORKFORCE SHORTAGES?

Workforce shortages can never be solved through a singular focus or approach, and it would be naïve to think that the move to a degree programme will be a panacea for the issues that have been plaguing not just the AT workforce, but the perioperative workforces collectively, for some time.

In line with our earlier observations, Council is of the viewpoint that the responsibility for future proofing the future supply of New Zealand trained ATs rests with a number of key players - the Council as the regulatory body, all providers across the spectrum of perioperative health services, AUT as the education provider, and of course the funders of both education and health services. Professional bodies also have a role to play through the ongoing promotion of anaesthetic technology practice and advising on contemporary best practice.

WILL ATs WHO REGISTERED WITH THE DIPLOMA QUALIFICATION BE DISADVANTAGED IN ANY WAY?

No. The Council is engaged in discussions with AUT as to possible future options for diploma-qualified ATs who already hold NZ registration, to be able to complete the degree through cross crediting arrangements. While this would have no bearing whatsoever on an individual's current registration and/or practising status under the Health Practitioners Competence Assurance Act 2003, it is likely to improve career related opportunities for individual practitioners.