

What are the implications of changes in nurse migration?

Earlier this decade, a rise in healthcare demands and financial investment in nursing saw the United Kingdom rely heavily on overseas recruitment as a way to fill nursing vacancies in the National Health Service during the so-called 'boom' period [1]. However, the recent 'bust' period with its decline in workforce investment has caused a significant drop in international recruitment to the UK [2,3]. Stricter registration and work permit regulations introduced around 2005 have significantly reduced the number of non-European Union (EU) nurses entering the UK workforce. In this Policy+ we draw upon a NNRU researcher's recent work on nurse migration from Malawi, a low-income country in sub-Saharan Africa [4] to examine the potential implications of these regulations on non-EU source countries and for the UK nursing labour market.

UK reliance on migrant nurses

The UK's colonial history and language have made it a key destination for many nurse migrants, especially those from English-speaking former colonies, like South Africa and Australia. Strong nurse education links and established migrant networks have also made the UK a popular choice for nurses from Malawi. In the early 2000s a combination of active recruitment from the UK and growing dissatisfaction with working conditions and salaries saw Malawi lose a significant proportion of its most qualified and experienced nurses to the UK [4]. Whilst this exacerbated Malawi's critical nursing shortage [4, 5], the UK was able to benefit from rapid and inexpensive registered nurse recruitment [2]. This outflow of nurses to the UK around 2000 was replicated worldwide and contributed to unprecedented numbers of overseas entrants to the UK nursing register.

Changes in UK migration regulation

However, since 2005 there has been a sharp decline in internationally trained nurses coming to the UK- especially those from non-EU countries- reflected in the fall of annual entrants from 10,000 to 16,000 around 2000 to 2,500 per annum in 2010 [2]. This decline has been attributed to reduced UK demand, and rising barriers to UK entry for non-EU nurses, including stricter regulatory and migration controls [3]. These controls include ethically motivated regulations such as the Department of Health Code of Practice that prevents the active recruitment of nurses from countries receiving UK aid [6]. A sharp decline in the migration of nurses from Malawi after 2005 was attributed primarily to these stricter controls [4,7].

Malawi – An example of changing migration to the UK

Recent findings from a study of nurse migration from Malawi suggest that stricter regulations have not led to improved retention of nurses in their home country. Instead nurses have found alternative pathways to migration, with some leaving the profession completely. Whilst intention to migrate is still high amongst nurses in Malawi, in the light of changing opportunities, registered nurses are choosing employment with a Non-Governmental Organisation (NGO) in Malawi as the next best option [5,7]. In some cases they have settled on non-nursing, administrative roles diminishing the likelihood of them re-joining the nursing profession. On an individual level nurses perceive the current UK regulations as discriminatory, particularly in relation to the preferential recruitment of EU nurses and difficulties with subsequent family reunification. Some nurses felt aggrieved that the doors of the UK that had previously been open to them, were now closed [4].

New patterns of migration

But Malawi may be unusual in this pattern of movement as levels of international nurse migration elsewhere have risen [8]. New destinations have assumed importance on the global nurse migration stage. Recent reports suggest Hong Kong and South Africa are considering foreign nurse recruitment in response to staff shortages, and the Jamaican government have begun recruiting Cuban nurses [9]. In recent years, Japan has also begun special arrangements to allow nurses from Southeast Asian countries to enter and practice in Japan [10]. Meanwhile the UK has become a passive source country for nurse recruitment with UK educated registered nurses attracted to work in Australia. In 2008, whilst less than 200 Australian nurses registered in the UK (a fall from approximately 1,000 in 2000-1) over 6,000 UK nurses applied to practice in Australia (up from 2,000 in 2000-1) [3].

Conclusions and Implications

Tighter migration restrictions have caused a decline in nurses entering the UK workforce from non-EU countries. In some countries like Malawi, this has led to an absolute fall in nurse migrant numbers. But this has not had the anticipated effect of improving source country retention, as increasingly nurses leave the profession to work outside of nursing. In other countries, such as The Philippines and India, nurses continue to migrate but are taking up employment in a new wave of destination countries. Whilst the UK is not currently recruiting nurses from countries outside the EU, other countries, including those previously harder to migrate to such as Japan are becoming important destination countries for registered nurses.

Key points for policy

- The UK has been criticised for its 'boom to bust' approach to nurse workforce planning [1] and its reliance on internationally recruited nurses to fill the gaps created.
- In the long term demand for nursing staff in the UK is likely to increase to meet the challenges of an ageing workforce and population. It may be necessary to re-establish overseas recruitment and there is an opportunity to learn from the past. Tightening up of regulatory and migratory controls to the UK have compromised the 'attractiveness' of the UK as a destination for nurses, and there may be work to be done in the future to convince internationally trained nurses that they are welcome and needed in the UK.

References and information

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