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RESEARCH BRIEF

Integration determinant: Do I stay or do I go?

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Over the last few decades, the phenomenon of migration of nurses has grown steadily. Globally, one in eight nurses worldwide is foreign-trained and it is predicted that around 10.6 million nurses will be needed in the next decade to address the existing nursing shortage and to replace the 4.7 million nurses reaching retirement. (Buchan & Shaffer, 2022, Pressley et al., 2022) The phenomena of nurse migration are expected to continue to prevail given the persistent global shortage in the nurse workforce because such a shortage is known to fuel migration. (Botezat, 2024). The nurse workforce across the archipelago of Malta, in which Gozo is a small island, is believed to fall short of meeting the local demands for nursing services. As a consequence, recruitment of internationally educated nurses (IENs) is also constantly indicated because home-grown supplies of nurses are not adequate despite the significant increase in the recruitment and retention rates of student nurses in pre-registration programmes over the last few decades. (Malta Chamber of Commerce, 2022, Thake et al., 2020). Around nine percent of the total local nurse workforce are IENs in Malta (Thake et al., 2020). The percentage of IENs in the nurse workforce in the country remains on the increase, but there is a parallel increase in the number of foreign nurses leaving the country (Malta Chamber of Commerce, 2022). Between January 2020 and September 2022, a total of 185 non-EU migrant nurses resigned and left Malta for other countries (Malta Chamber of Commerce, 2022). It is, therefore, essential to support the integration and retention of these key workers by identifying how to meet their expectations and aspirations (Pressley et al., 2022).

A qualitative research study was carried out to explore the integration of internationally educated nurses in the small island context of Gozo (Gatt, 2023). The major findings of the research study are particularly interesting because they reveal that IENs' plans for the near future overbear heavily (a) IENs' intention to, and (b) IENs' investment towards integration and (c) IENs retention, in the receiving country. The research study was conducted through the use of an exploratory qualitative research design drawing upon a descriptive phenomenological approach. Twelve participants were included. The participants were IENs who, at the time of data collection, had worked in the health system in Gozo for more than one year. All IENs had pursued pre-registration nurse education in the Asian continent. IENs seeking registration as nurses in Malta and Gozo are obliged to successfully complete a short bridging programme for IENs. This mandatory programme is offered by various licensed educational entities in the country. Also, a brief induction programme to a service entity is expected from respective employers. IENs are also expected to attend basic Maltese language classes aiming to facilitate integration with the locals hence, improving their participation in the local nursing workforce. There are no other formal opportunities offered to IENs. Data was collected using one-to-one open-ended semi-structured interviews. All interviews were carried out individually online. The online interviews were recorded and transcribed verbatim. Thematic analysis of the data was carried out using the online software, MAXqda. The research study was approved by the

research ethics body of the University of Malta, and permission to conduct the research study was granted by the respective employers of IENs. No funding or sponsorships supported the research study and there was no conflict of interest claimed by the researchers. Written consent was sought from all participants.

The findings revealed that various factors impact the participation and integration of IENs in Gozo. Such factors span personal, societal, environmental or contextual or organizational elements and namely included language, cultural and management aspects such as poor language proficiency, and racist attitudes (Gatt, 2023).

This paper, however, seeks to highlight a specific interesting finding, that is, that the original or initial plans of an IEN "to stay" in a receiving country or "to go" and relocate elsewhere, have a dominant impact on the IEN's participation and integration in the receiving country, that is Gozo. The data provided evidence that strongly suggests that an IEN's plan "to stay" or "to go" strongly influences one's intention to invest towards integration and the eventual retention or otherwise in the receiving health system, context and society. The data from IENs who arrived in the receiving country with plans to relocate to another country offers a reasonable explanation for gaps in their integration. This evidence is particularly interesting for two reasons. Primarily it may inform policy and procedure development related to IENs recruitment and retention strategies. Secondly, it challenges existing strategies, which typically focus on post-arrival measures in a receiving country. The most common measures offered to IENs are cultural education adaptation programmes, service navigation information and guidance and language support opportunities. (Smith et al, 2022). In the absence of plans to stay, existent initiatives and investment channelled towards the integration of the IEN appear to be seriously compromised and their impact is grossly jeopardized. Given the findings of this research study, policies and strategies should also, specifically, address an IEN's plans to stay or to go in a receiving country. This evidence suggests that novel new measures that actively seek to influence decision-making around such plans at the earliest possible, possibly at the initial stages of recruitment, before arrival at the receiving country, need to be designed and introduced.

Essentially, the identification of plans of IENs "to go" and move on and away from the receiving country are to be identified as early as possible and addressed accordingly, if integration is to be enabled effectively and retention more secured. In turn, plans of IENs "to stay" need to be actively targeted, encouraged and nurtured, because such plans seem to bear a lot of weight on the successful integration and retention, or otherwise of IENs. Whilst acknowledging the limitation of this research study, it is hoped that through this commentary paper, policy directions, educational initiatives and researchers are invited to take note of this

unique research finding; the centrality of an IEN original plan to the question, “Do I stay or do I go?” in an IEN's successful integration.

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