

ORIGINAL RESEARCH



IEN Ready Toolkit: A Global Health Advocacy Action Plan for Ethical Nurse Migration

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Abstract:

Internationally educated nurses (IENs) are essential to global health systems, yet they continue to face exploitation, discrimination, and unethical recruitment practices during migration. The IEN Ready Toolkit is a strategic, education-based intervention developed to equip IENs with critical knowledge on ethical recruitment, legal labor rights, contract red flags, and available support resources. Informed by global standards from the World Health Organization (WHO), International Labor Organization (ILO), and International Council of Nurses (ICN), the toolkit is designed as a mobile-compatible, self-paced course offering continuing education (CE) credits. Developed through an iterative, culturally sensitive process, the toolkit is co-informed by IENs and labor experts to ensure accuracy and real-world relevance. The course will be hosted on a learning management system (LMS) and piloted first in the United States, with plans for expansion to other destination countries. Implemented through SIENNA, the toolkit not only aims to empower IENs with essential knowledge but also fosters broader accountability among employers and recruiters. By proactively addressing knowledge gaps and building IENs' confidence to recognize and report abuse, this initiative contributes to Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) focused on decent work, health equity, gender equality, and access to justice. The IEN Ready Toolkit serves as both a practical learning resource and a global advocacy tool for ethical nurse migration.

Keywords: Internationally Educated Nurses, Nurse Migration, Migrant Nurses, Ethical Recruitment, Labor Right

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International migration of nurses is accelerating amid a global nursing shortage. More than 550,000 internationally educated nurses (IENs) currently work in high-income countries, with the United States, United Kingdom, Germany, and Australia as the top destinations (Buchan et al., 2020). The Philippines and India are among the largest source countries, but several nations in the Caribbean, Africa, and the Pacific have reported that over half of their nursing workforce migrates to more developed nations (Buchan et al., 2020). This pattern has intensified since the COVID-19 pandemic, with the International Council of Nurses (ICN) projecting a shortage of 13 million nurses within the next decade (ICN, 2022).

While ICN supports global nursing mobility that allows nurses to pursue better opportunities and pay across the globe, they have also identified risks inherent to recruitment practices including abuse, discrimination, coercive contracts, wage theft, trafficking, and exploitation (ICN, 2019). For example, in the United States, some IENs have faced penalties of up to \$100,000 for requesting reassignment or raising workplace concerns, and were threatened with deportation for noncompliance (Almendral, 2023). In one New York case, an international recruitment agency paid nurses below the agreed rate, assigned them to unsafe environments with low staffing ratios, and retaliated with legal action when they resigned early (Rosario, 2024).

Similar patterns have emerged globally. In the United Kingdom, IENs have reported being locked into five-year contracts with high exit fees, creating debt bondage that prevented them from leaving even in cases of illness or workplace mistreatment (Das, 2022). In Germany, advocates have warned that gaps in legal oversight have enabled some agencies to traffic nurses

or provide inadequate training (Correctiv, 2020). In Australia, a Senate inquiry found that visa-dependent nurses were underpaid, overworked, and subjected to abuse, particularly those under temporary work visas (Australian Nursing and Midwifery Federation, 2018). A rapid review of nurse migration across these countries further revealed that IENs frequently experience discrimination and limited career mobility, highlighting the critical need for structured integration programs (Smith et al., 2022).

To address these growing concerns, the World Health Organization developed the WHO Global Code of Practice on the International Recruitment of Health Personnel (WHO, 2010) which outlines the following principles:

- Health workers should be fully informed of their rights, obligations, and employment conditions before accepting overseas job offers.
- Recruiters and employers must follow fair, legal, and non-coercive hiring practices, ensuring contracts are just and transparent.
- Migrant nurses must receive equal legal protection and labor rights as local workers in their destination country.
- Employers should offer proper orientation and support to help internationally recruited nurses adapt to their new roles and settings.
- Migrant health workers should have access to equitable career development and promotion opportunities without discrimination.

Similarly, the International Labor Organization (ILO, 2019) prohibits employers, recruiters, or third parties from charging workers any recruitment-related fees or costs, such as deductions from wages. The ILO further emphasizes that such fees must not infringe upon a

worker's right to nondiscrimination or freedom of movement. Despite these global frameworks, the WHO's most recent Director-General report acknowledges that many countries continue to report unethical recruitment practices, and full implementation of the Code remains a distant goal (WHO, 2025).

There is an urgent need for action that prioritizes the rights and protections of IENs. The Society of Internationally Educated Nurses in North America (SIENNA) is well-positioned to contribute meaningfully to this effort. As a professional organization dedicated to empowering IENs, SIENNA champions ethical recruitment, equitable integration, and professional development for migrant nurses. With its strong advocacy platform, peer-led leadership, and commitment to addressing systemic inequities in global nurse migration, SIENNA provides a credible, community-driven approach to confronting the exploitation and injustice that many IENs continue to face.

The IEN Ready Toolkit is a proposed intervention that directly responds to this global health and justice issue by empowering IENs with informed, ethical, and equitable migration support. This proposed project also fulfills the requirements of the Sigma Global Advocacy Academy, a program that enables nursing leaders to deepen their understanding of global advocacy and contribute meaningfully to the advancement of the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).

Aligned with SDG 16.3, which seeks to promote the rule of law and ensure equal access to justice, the project aims to strengthen protections for vulnerable IENs by advancing transparency, legal safeguards, and accountability in international recruitment. IENs are disproportionately affected by contract abuse and labor exploitation, making them a key

population for advancing SDG 16's goal of justice and legal protection for the vulnerable. At the same time, the IEN Ready Toolkit supports several interlinked Sustainable Development Goals. It aligns with SDG 3 by contributing to the sustainability of the global health workforce, recognizing that protecting IENs supports the delivery of safe and effective healthcare worldwide. It advances SDG 5 by addressing the gendered nature of nurse migration, as the majority of IENs are women who face heightened risks of discrimination, coercion, and exploitation. It also supports SDG 8 by promoting decent work and economic opportunities for migrant nurses. In particular, the project contributes to SDG 8.8, which calls for the protection of labor rights and safe working environments, especially for women migrant workers.

By equipping IENs with accessible information on ethical recruitment, legal safeguards, and safe migration pathways, IEN Ready Toolkit aims to prevent exploitation and enable nurses to advocate for themselves while contributing meaningfully to global health systems.

Method

The following plan outlines the development and implementation of the IEN Ready Toolkit.

Toolkit Structure and Content

The IEN Ready Toolkit is a structured, self-paced educational course designed for IENs, offering continuing education (CE) units as an incentive. It equips IENs with essential knowledge to navigate international migration safely and ethically, grounded in global standards established by the WHO, ILO, and ICN. These frameworks affirm the right of migrant nurses to fair recruitment, transparent contracts, equal labor protections, and safe working environments, regardless of their country of origin.

The IEN Ready Toolkit will be organized into four core modules: Ethical Recruitment Standards, Legal Labor Rights, Red Flags in Employment Contracts, and Reporting and Support Resources.

Ethical Recruitment Standards

This module introduces the fundamentals of ethical recruitment, referencing the WHO Global Code of Practice and ILO Fair Recruitment Guidelines. It explains that employers and recruiters must not charge fees, coerce, or withhold documents from nurses, and must cover all recruitment-related costs. Drawing from ICN principles, it emphasizes IENs' rights to full and flexible employment opportunities, freedom of movement, good-faith contracting with enforceable terms, and equal pay for work of equal value.

Legal Labor Rights in Destination Countries

This section presents country-specific snapshots of labor protections in the United States, United Kingdom, Canada, Australia, and Germany. Topics include work hours, wage laws, anti-discrimination protections, union and association rights, and visa-related labor policies. Consistent with WHO and ICN advocacy, it highlights equal labor rights for IENs, freedom from discrimination, and access to grievance procedures and legal remedies.

Red Flags in Employment Contracts

A practical checklist helps IENs spot exploitative contract terms, such as excessive breach penalties, lengthy lock-in periods, wage deductions, or restrictions on leaving employers. Case examples will be provided. This module reinforces ILO wage protections, ICN principles of fair contracting, and the right to freedom of association.

Reporting and Support Resources

IENs are guided on where to seek help if they face abuse, trafficking, or contract violations. This includes hotlines, legal aid, nursing associations, unions, and diaspora support groups in each destination. It also reflects ICN's call for safe work environments, proper orientation, and professional supervision, ensuring IENs are supported beyond recruitment and into practice. Each module will be written in clear, accessible language and enhanced with visual tools such as infographics, checklists, and sample contract clauses.

Design and Development Process

The IEN Ready Toolkit will be developed through a collaborative, iterative process to ensure accuracy, cultural relevance, and user engagement. Key elements include:

Funding

The IEN Ready Toolkit will be implemented via SIENNA and will seek grant funding to support the development and sustainability of the project. Funding will specifically support the creation of a learning management system (LMS), development of content, CE accreditation, and outreach activities. Additional organizations may also be invited to collaborate in hosting and supporting the program

Collaboration with Experts and IENs

The content will be developed through a collaborative and iterative process led by SIENNA. It will involve nursing leaders, labor rights advocates, and recently migrated IENs to ensure accuracy, cultural relevance, and real-world applicability. The goal is to reflect lived experiences and address common gaps in knowledge that contribute to exploitation and disempowerment among IENs.

Mobile-Compatible, Interactive Course Design

The IEN Ready Toolkit will be presented as a mobile-compatible, interactive course hosted on an LMS platform. It will include case studies, visual summaries, gamified elements, and self-paced modules to enhance engagement and learning retention. The course will be accessible across devices and designed for ease of navigation, especially for nurses who rely on mobile technology for learning.

Implementation

The first version of the IEN Ready Toolkit will be tailored specifically for IENs migrating to the United States. Once the U.S. version is fully developed and successfully implemented, it will serve as a template that can be adapted by SIENNA or local partners in other high-demand destination countries such as Canada, the U.K., Australia, and Germany. While the initial rollout will be in English, future versions may be offered in additional languages such as Spanish to expand accessibility.

Pilot Testing and Feedback Loop

A pilot test involving 20 IENs will be conducted to gather feedback on content clarity, usability, and effectiveness. The pilot will include a structured evaluation and feedback loop, and the toolkit will be refined accordingly. Peer review will be sought from experts within SIENNA and other relevant organizations such as WHO, ICN, ILO, and Sigma to ensure alignment with global standards and best practices prior to full launch. Continuous updates will be implemented to reflect evolving migration and labor policies.

Dissemination Strategy

The IEN Ready Toolkit will be deployed across accessible digital platforms to ensure broad reach among IENs. The course will be available through SIENNA, with a mobile-compatible LMS for ease of access.

Dissemination will leverage (a) social media campaigns using platforms like Facebook, and LinkedIn, with visuals and messaging tailored to IEN audiences; (b) online communities and forums where IENs gather (e.g., Facebook groups); (c) professional and advocacy networks, including nursing organizations, diaspora associations, and global partners such as Sigma, WCEA, ICN, and WHO; and (d) source country engagement, recruiters, and pre-departure programs will be encouraged to distribute the IEN Ready Toolkit to nurses preparing for migration.

By tapping into both professional and peer networks, and maintaining free, multilingual access, IEN Ready Toolkit will help ensure vital information reaches nurses who might otherwise face migration uninformed or unsupported.

Evaluation

The effectiveness of the IEN Ready Toolkit will be assessed by tracking course completions and collecting user feedback through brief surveys embedded in the course. Feedback will be used to identify strengths, gaps, and areas for improvement. The content will be reviewed and updated regularly to ensure accuracy, relevance, and continued alignment with evolving policies and IEN needs.

Discussion

The IEN Ready Toolkit is a strategic, education-based intervention designed to address the growing concerns surrounding the exploitation, discrimination, and unethical recruitment of IENs. Drawing from globally recognized standards by WHO, ILO, and ICN, the IEN Ready Toolkit offers practical, accessible knowledge on ethical recruitment, labor rights, contract red flags, and support resources in destination countries. Delivered as a mobile-compatible, self-paced CE course, it is co-created with experts and IENs themselves to ensure accuracy, cultural relevance, and real-world applicability. With its modular structure and flexible delivery, IEN Ready Toolkit aims to reach nurses before they migrate, empowering them with the information needed to make safe, informed decisions.

The core goal of this project is to engage IENs as active participants in protecting their own rights, shifting them from vulnerable targets of abuse to informed professionals equipped to recognize, resist, and report exploitation. In turn, this increased awareness can lead to systemic change. As more nurses recognize and report abusive practices, recruiters and employers will be held to higher standards of accountability. The Toolkit thus becomes more than a learning resource. It becomes a vehicle for advocacy, transparency, and justice. It is recommended that source countries, professional organizations, and labor ministries integrate this resource into pre-departure orientations and onboarding efforts to support ethical, sustainable nurse migration globally.

Conclusion

The IEN Ready Toolkit provides a timely and practical response to urgent global health and labor challenges in nurse migration. By combining evidence-informed content, international

standards, and learner-centered design, the IEN Ready Toolkit serves as both a protective resource for IENs and a step toward achieving Sustainable Development Goals related to health, equity, and justice.

The immediate next steps involve securing funding, finalizing the content for U.S.-based implementation, and piloting the course to refine usability and impact. Feedback from IENs and expert reviewers will shape its evolution. With SIENNA leading implementation, this initiative is poised to serve as a replicable model for other countries to adopt or adapt. In time, the IEN Ready Toolkit has the potential to become a global standard for ethical, rights-based nurse migration, helping shape a future where nurses move freely, work safely, and thrive with dignity.

Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest related to the development, implementation, or publication of this project.

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Paul Biluan: Conceptualization, Methodology, Validation, Formal Analysis, Writing - Original Draft; Writing - Review and Editing

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