



Australian College of Nursing

# MIGRATION, PATHWAY TO NATION BUILDING

Submission to The Joint Standing Committee on Migration  
Inquiry

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## Background

The Australian College of Nursing (ACN) recognises the vital role that nursing migration plays in strengthening the Australian nursing workforce to meet the growing healthcare needs of our community.

Australia has historically attracted Internationally Qualified Nurses and Midwives (IQNMs) to support workforce sustainability. Before the COVID-19 pandemic, many nurses migrated to Australia through a range of temporary and permanent visas. In 2021, almost 20 per cent of nurses working in Australia received overseas qualifications, and nearly 40 per cent were born overseas.<sup>1</sup>

IQNMs have played a particularly important role in rural and regional areas of Australia where attracting and retaining skilled nurses can be difficult. A recent inquiry into health outcomes and access to health and hospital services in rural, regional and remote New South Wales found widespread nursing shortages in all areas of the health system, including primary health care, mental health and hospitals. The inquiry heard that in some regional hospitals, nursing shortages were so dire that cooks and cleaners were being asked to supervise patients.<sup>2</sup>

Nursing migration has been, and will continue to be, a vital input response to address these ongoing workforce shortages. It has also helped to diversify the nursing workforce in Australia by bringing in nurses from different cultural backgrounds who can bring unique skills and perspectives to the profession and patient care.

During the Joint Standing Committee on Migration Inquiry into Australia's skilled migration program in 2021, ACN's Chief Executive Officer, Adjunct Professor Kylie Ward, provided detail on the benefits that a diverse nursing workforce can bring to the profession. She noted that information from ACN indicates that IQNMs, particularly those from the United Kingdom, Ireland and Africa, have significantly higher-level skills in some specialised areas of nursing, such as mental health and drug and alcohol treatment and rehabilitation. Locally qualified nurses can then benefit via the transfer of knowledge, skills, and experience of skilled migrants.<sup>3</sup>

The ongoing challenges of the COVID-19 pandemic have exacerbated existing pressures on the nursing workforce due to widespread shortages and growing population demand for care due to factors such as our ageing population.<sup>4</sup> In 2016, the Department of Health predicted that under current migration settings, there will be a shortfall of approximately 85,000 nurses by 2025 and 123,000 nurses by 2030.<sup>5</sup> There has been no further updated modelling of nursing workforce shortages undertaken by the Australian government since. This means that the actual shortfall is likely to be much greater than predicted, due to the impact of COVID-19 which has increased pressures on the nursing workforce and disrupted the flow of IQNMs.

<sup>1</sup> Australian Government Department of Health and Aged Care Dashboard 2021, <https://hwd.health.gov.au/nrmw-dashboards/index.html>

<sup>2</sup> NSW Legislative Council 2022, <https://www.parliament.nsw.gov.au/lcdocs/inquiries/2615/Report%20no%2057%20-%20PC%202%20-%20Health%20outcomes%20and%20access%20to%20services.pdf>

<sup>3</sup> Joint Standing Committee on Migration 2021, [https://parlinfo.aph.gov.au/parlInfo/download/committees/commjnt/0f7eb030-5c55-4369-8a92-32126eec78f0/toc\\_pdf/Joint%20Standing%20Committee%20on%20Migration\\_2021\\_03\\_03\\_8541\\_Official.pdf;fileType=application%2Fpdf#search=%22skilled%20migration%22](https://parlinfo.aph.gov.au/parlInfo/download/committees/commjnt/0f7eb030-5c55-4369-8a92-32126eec78f0/toc_pdf/Joint%20Standing%20Committee%20on%20Migration_2021_03_03_8541_Official.pdf;fileType=application%2Fpdf#search=%22skilled%20migration%22)

<sup>4</sup> The New Daily 2022, <https://thenewdaily.com.au/news/national/2022/05/27/nurses-shortage-crisis-australia/>

<sup>5</sup> Department of Health 2014, <https://www.health.gov.au/sites/default/files/documents/2021/03/nurses-australia-s-future-health-workforce-reports-detailed-report.pdf>

Additionally, information from the Department of Health has indicated that 11,800 registered nurses will be needed over the next year to meet the federal government's promise to require a registered nurse on-site in residential aged care facilities for 24 hours a day, 7 days a week from 1 July 2023.<sup>6</sup> ACN believes this figure to be very conservative.

As the largest component of the health workforce, nurses play a role in all areas of health care across all geographic areas and population groups. Therefore, the state of recruitment and retention of nurses has a significant impact on the overall ability of our health system to meet the needs of the Australian community.<sup>7</sup>

Australia's health sector significantly contributes to national productivity, wellbeing, and economic growth.<sup>8</sup> Supporting the nursing workforce and wider health system to deliver maximum benefits to the community will contribute to achieving the government's priorities of full employment, productivity growth and equal opportunities for women.<sup>9</sup> This will require strategic and long-term planning and actions at multiple levels. Creating an environment that enables the skilled migration of IQNMs is a key means to providing immediate relief to the health system and ensuring nurses can continue to deliver high-quality care to the Australian community.

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<sup>6</sup> The Sydney Morning Herald 2023, <https://www.smh.com.au/politics/federal/aged-care-reforms-will-require-25-000-new-workers-over-two-years-internal-documents-20230302-p5coze.html>

<sup>7</sup> Global Health Education 2022, <https://globalhealtheeducation.com/au/categories/nursing/australia-healthcare-skills-shortage-problem>

<sup>8</sup> The Conversation 2017, <https://theconversation.com/why-reforming-health-care-is-integral-for-our-economy-86209>

<sup>9</sup> UN Women, Facts and Figures: Economic Empowerment, <https://www.unwomen.org/en/what-we-do/economic-empowerment/facts-and-figures>

## Immigration as a strategic enabler of sustainable communities

ACN has long championed the benefits of the right to work visas for IQNMs. Skilled migration of health workers enhances the quality of care delivered to the community by filling key skill gaps and contributing to Australia's proud history of multiculturalism and diversity. IQNMs help maintain the high standards of care delivered to the Australian community and bring their valuable skills, knowledge and experience to the healthcare system.

In addition to strengthening our health system, the skilled migration of nurses can also promote flourishing regional and remote communities. Over recent years, the Australian government has introduced several initiatives to encourage immigration to regional areas, including the Regional Skilled Migration Scheme, the Designated Area Migration Agreement, and the Regional Sponsored Migration Scheme. These initiatives provide incentives for skilled migrants to live and work in regional areas to address skill shortages. Each scheme or agreement requires an ethical approach to ensure that IQNMs are treated with respect when they come to live and work in Australia, including consideration for families as the nursing profession is predominately female worldwide.

Nurses play a crucial role in providing health care to people living in rural and remote areas who experience a higher burden of disease than the general community.<sup>10</sup> By supporting migration pathways for IQNMs to work in remote and rural communities, the Australian community will benefit from greater access to care for those who need it most. Permanent migration pathways will enable IQNMs to integrate within the community and develop their ties to rural and remote Australia. Recent IQNMs could be profiled to become mentors for the next generation of IQNMs working in health sector.

ACN also recognises the importance of ensuring that nursing migration does not negatively impact the nursing workforce in the countries from which nurses are migrating. ACN supports the International Council of Nurses (ICN) position statement on international career mobility and ethical nurse recruitment.<sup>11</sup> ACN encourages the Australian government and health services to work with relevant international and national organisations and peak bodies to develop sustainable strategies for addressing nursing workforce shortages.

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<sup>10</sup> Australian Institute of Health and Welfare 2022, <https://www.aihw.gov.au/reports/rural-remote-australians/rural-and-remote-health>

<sup>11</sup> International Council of Nurses 2019, [https://www.icn.ch/system/files/documents/2019-11/PS\\_C\\_International%20career%20mobility%20and%20ethical%20nurse%20recruitment\\_En.pdf](https://www.icn.ch/system/files/documents/2019-11/PS_C_International%20career%20mobility%20and%20ethical%20nurse%20recruitment_En.pdf)

## Attraction and retention strategies for working migrants to Australia, including relevant policy settings and market participation.

Attracting and retaining IQNMs requires a range of strategies at all stages of their recruitment and employment. This should start with streamlining the visa application process the registration process through the Australian Health Practitioner Regulation Agency (Ahpra), as well as reducing the associated costs which would make it easier for nurses to migrate to Australia.

The Australian immigration system is notoriously difficult to navigate, with multiple visa categories assigned to skilled migration pathways, with extended associated wait times. The cost of securing a permanent visa is significant and comes in addition to the cost of registration which currently includes approved bridging courses or the outcomes assessment pathway.<sup>12</sup> Although Australia's firm immigration policy holds an important role in ensuring the security of our communities, it is important that regulations can be balanced according to community needs.

Many IQNMs enter Australia on temporary visas that lack a pathway to permanency, due to their relative simplicity to navigate. This places the Australian health system at a disadvantage when competing against other countries for a finite pool of IQNMs. It additionally limits the ability of IQNMs to integrate into the Australian community and come to appreciate our nation as home.

Moreover, IQNMs have informed ACN that the extensive delays by the regulator in receiving letters, including updated letters during the pandemic, to coincide with their visa applications. This has left, possibly hundreds of, IQNMs who were waiting to enter Australia with no choice but to relocate to another country like the UK or Canada.

Streamlining visa processes and providing fast-tracked pathways to permanent residency offers a key mechanism to attract more IQNMs. For example, in response to the challenges brought about by the COVID-19 pandemic, Canada instituted a time-limited permanency pathway in 2021 for temporary foreign health workers. This could be similarly modelled in Australia in response to the ongoing and increasing nursing workforce shortage.

Pathways to permanent residency should also be made available for any migrating family members of IQNMs. Partners of IQNMs or other family members must be included in the migration pathway, including exploring opportunities to utilise their skills and knowledge in the form of alternate workforce options.

ACN presented at the Health Workforce Roundtable in September 2022 and highlighted that Australia needs to improve its Migrant Integration Policy Index<sup>13</sup> rating across all eight criteria to remain competitive. Australia will only be seen as a desirable destination if we welcome migration and rebuild our reputation following border closures in response to the pandemic.

To improve the attraction and retention of IQNMs, the government should prioritise ongoing integration pathways to support nurses settling into Australia and the local workforce, particularly in

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<sup>12</sup> Nursing and Midwifery Board Ahpra, <https://www.nursingmidwiferyboard.gov.au/Accreditation/IQNM.aspx>

<sup>13</sup> Migrant Integration Policy Index 2022, <https://www.mipex.eu/>

rural and regional areas. Recent research indicates that integration and retention is the primary issue host countries face when recruiting IQNMs to supplement the domestic workforce.<sup>14</sup>

At the Health Workforce Roundtable in September 2022 ACN suggested that skilled migrants be linked with and supported by professional organisations and community groups in the state or territory where they settle. Connecting migrants supports their integration into Australian society and culture, creating a 'sense of belonging and connecting with people who have a lived skilled migrant experience'.

Some mechanisms to enhance integration and retention include dedicated mental health and wellbeing pathways tailored to IQNMs; pastoral care and mentoring resources that are nurse-led and designed; avenues for connecting nurses from similar backgrounds; English-language and culture courses; possibilities for partner employment, a mentoring or buddying system as well as relocation services and information on local community opportunities.

ACN also proposed at the Health Workforce Roundtable that 'recent migrants be profiled to become mentors for the next generation of migrants working in the health sector.'

Such programs should be designed and funded to encourage maximum uptake by being free of charge to successful IQNMs who fill a designated visa quota.

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<sup>14</sup> Zanjani, Ziaian, Ullrich & Fooladi 2021, [Overseas qualified nurses' sociocultural adaptation into the Australian healthcare system: A cross-sectional study](#).

## The role of settlement services and vocational training in utilising migrant experiences, knowledge and opportunities

The Australian Nursing and Midwifery Accreditation Council (ANMAC) is responsible for assessing the qualifications of IQNMs seeking to work in Australia. For IQNMs from similar countries, such as the United States, Canada and the United Kingdom, their qualifications are automatically recognised in Australia and no further assessment is needed.

There are two avenues through which IQNMs from other countries can obtain registration in Australia. Firstly, IQNMs can undertake a bridging course delivered by an authorised provider, at a cost greater than AUD\$10,000. ACN's bridging course not only ensures the requirements for registration including clinical placement, but also delivers a graduate certificate qualification which provides IQNMs with the best possible opportunities for recruitment and a pathway for future study.

The number of approved providers has been diminishing since the introduction of the second avenue, the Outcomes-Based Assessment (OBA), in 2020, which has a cost of AUD\$4,000. IQNMs who were required to undertake an OBA faced challenges during the pandemic as this was only provided in one state. ACN's bridging course on the other hand continued to be offered during the pandemic.

Government support for funding bridging courses for IQNMs is needed to give migrant nurses the flexibility needed to register for work in Australia while adapting to a new country. Thorough approval processes for IQNMs to be registered in Australia are paramount for community safety, however, making the process easier and more flexible where possible is important.

It is also critical that strategies are implemented to support migrant nurses and their families to meet the many challenges they can face when moving to Australia. These can include language barriers; cultural differences; workplace discrimination; and social isolation.

Support for IQNMs and their families can include help finding adequate housing, healthcare for themselves and migrating family members, education and mentoring in the workplace, and culture and language training.

In particular, the availability and accessibility of settlement services for IQNMs who migrate to regional areas should be carefully considered in Australia's migration policy. As with major cities, regional areas increasingly face pressure in the housing market.

According to the Grattan Institute, the cost of renting has increased by 12.5 per cent over the past year and vacancy rates are the lowest on record.<sup>15</sup> Regional migration schemes must be implemented with the correct policy settings and funding opportunities to ensure that migrants can access settlement services.

The ongoing migrant pipeline is only sustainable if interagency collaboration implements strategies that improve the Migrant Integration Policy Index.

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<sup>15</sup> Grattan Institute 2022, <https://grattan.edu.au/news/housing-crisis-has-spread-to-the-regions/>



## Recommendations

ACN recommends that the Australian government:

1. Streamline the skilled migrant visa process and prioritise fast-tracked pathways to permanent residency, to address the ongoing nursing workforce shortage.
2. Commit to extending and subsidising the cost of bridging courses and the OBA.
3. Streamline the Ahpra registration processes, including the timely issuing of letters and paperwork to assist IQNMS meet the Australian requirements.
4. Fund programs that are designed to support the integration of IQNMs into the Australian community, such as mental health services, mentoring resources and English-language and cultural training.
5. Ensure that all skilled migrants have access to adequate and appropriate settlement and housing services, for IQNMs recruited via regional migration schemes.
6. Consider the IQNM's partner and family as vital to the retention of the IQNMs and possible opportunities for additional workforce options.

## About the Australian College of Nursing

The Australian College of Nursing (ACN) is the national professional organisation for all nurses. It aims to ensure that the Australian community receives quality nursing care now and in the future. ACN is a membership organisation with members in all states and territories, health care settings and nursing specialties. ACN is also an Australian member of the International Council of Nurses headquartered in Geneva in collaboration with the Australian Nursing and Midwifery Federation (ANMF).

An organisation not afraid to challenge industry issues affecting the nursing profession or Australia's health care, ACN is a well-connected and educated national body that drives change with people of influence to enhance the delivery of health services to the Australian community. ACN's membership includes nurses in roles of influence, including senior nurses, organisational leaders, academics, and researchers.