International workforce in the UK after Brexit: nursing issues
INTERNATIONAL WORKFORCE IN THE UK AFTER BREXIT: NURSING ISSUES

Background
Given the continuing global nursing shortage and rising demand for health and care services the UK needs to be able to attract nursing staff with the right skills and attitudes to work and remain in the sector, particularly registered nurses.

The UK’s domestic workforce supply has not kept pace with rising patient need, nor the increasing demand for care outside hospital settings. In the NHS in England alone there are approximately 40,000 vacancies1. Scotland has vacancy rates of 4.5%2 and there is an estimated NHS vacancy rate in Northern Ireland of 6.9%3. In Wales, although national vacancy rates are not collected and published, the high spend on agency nursing does demonstrate a need for additional nurses in Wales.

For the last two years across the UK, more nurses have left the profession than joined.4

Following the UK’s decision to leave the European Union (EU) the Government is considering future immigration arrangements for both EU and non-EU nationals. The RCN is clear that it is crucial that a new system continues to support appropriate recruitment of international recruitment nursing

What are the issues?
The UK Government has repeatedly stated that the existing free movement arrangements for EU nationals will end after Brexit. In its July White Paper on the future UK-EU relationship, it proposed instead a “framework for mobility” with the European Union without any detail. The UK Government intends to issue a White Paper in autumn 2018 on the wider immigration system post Brexit. An Immigration Bill is expected to follow in early 2019. Any new arrangements would need to be in place by December 2020, when the Brexit transition period is set to end. For those EU nationals already living and working in the UK, the Home Office is introducing “settled status”. This will give residency to those EU nationals who are here for five years or more by the end of the transition period.

Post-Brexit immigration arrangements will undoubtedly impact on nursing which is why the RCN is seeking to shape them. The UK has a diverse nursing workforce with circa 15% of our registered nurses coming from overseas.5

A key objective of any future immigration system should be ensuring that the UK can attract and retain the highly skilled nursing workforce required to provide quality care which meets patient need. Internationally recruited nurses have made an important contribution to this goal while enhancing the cultural diversity of the profession and facilitating a rich exchange of skills and experience.

The current immigration system is currently supportive in the following ways:

- EU nursing staff do not currently require a visa to enter and work in the UK and there is no Government cap on the number of EU nurses who can register here.

- Before the 2016 EU referendum, recruitment of nurses from other EU countries had been increasing rapidly. The mutual recognition of professional qualifications framework also meant that EU nurses have been able to register  

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1 Royal College of Nursing, ‘Safe and Effective Staffing: the Real Picture’ 2017. Available at: https://www.rcn.org.uk/professional-development/publications/pub-006195


more easily with the NMC than those trained outside the EU.

Nurses from outside the EU require a certificate of sponsorship from an employer to secure a Tier 2 visa - a complicated and costly process. However, nursing is currently on the Home Office’s “Shortage Occupation List” which gives them priority for visas.

What needs to happen?
The RCN has outlined some key requirements for any future immigration policy.

We believe that from an overall workforce perspective, the post-Brexit immigration system should:

- Support the education, recruitment and retention of the nursing workforce as a whole, to ensure the UK has sufficient numbers of staff with the right skills and attitudes to deliver the vital health and care services the population needs.

- Complement much needed investment in educating and training our domestic nursing workforce and not undermine the UK’s commitment to recruit overseas health professionals in an ethical manner in line with the World Health Organisation and UK codes on international recruitment of health personnel.

- Support the UK as a world leader in innovations in health treatments and care delivery, supported by movement of nurses and other health professionals across the globe.

The immigration system itself should:

- Be responsive, easy to understand and navigate, transparent, predictable, accessible, and affordable for nurses, health professionals and individuals to use.

- Provide clear routes for internationally recruited nurses who have worked in the UK to be granted indefinite leave to remain, without needing to meet a salary threshold.

- Avoid any arbitrary cap on working visas as this conflicts with having criteria for selecting highly skilled migrants that contribute to the economic and social wellbeing of the UK.

- Rebalance from the focus on salary levels as a measure of value in prioritising visas, towards a positive recognition of the contribution that public sector staff, including nurses and social care workers make to health and care.

- Exempt non-EU nurses coming to work in the UK from having to pay the Immigration health Surcharge. Given the contribution overseas nurses already make to our health services and the fact that they pay tax and national insurance, it is morally unjustifiable that they should pay extra to access care.

- The EU’s Mutual Recognition of Professional Qualifications Directive (MRPQ), has enabled the free movement of nurses and other health professionals by converging the standards of competency required to practice. If MRPQ is retained, we believe having differentiated immigration arrangements for EU nurses to work in the UK would be beneficial.

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Department for Health and Social Care, UK Code of Practice on Ethical Recruitment 2004. Available at: http://www.nhsemployers.org/your-workforce/recruit/employer-led-

7 Department for Health and Social Care, ‘Health charge for temporary migrants will increase to £400 a year’ 2018. Available at: https://www.gov.uk/government/news/health-charge-for-temporary-migrants-will-increase-to-400-a-year