



International nurse recruitment: policy, regulation and the role of UK universities

International nurse recruitment and registration – July 2019

The health and social care system has relied on recruitment from overseas for a long time. Many NHS Trusts actively recruit staff from abroad and organise the recruitment and training process locally. However, there are plans to improve the processes around the international recruitment of nurses in England in light of rising demand and high vacancy rates, and to develop more regional approaches to recruitment. Universities already play a role in supporting international staff recruitment and are well placed to offer even greater support to regional recruitment efforts.

This briefing has been written in light of the Interim NHS People Plan and recent developments to the Nursing and Midwifery Council (NMC) international registration process. It outlines the changes to registration and NMC competency test and provides examples of how Trusts and Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) are currently involved in the process.

Proposed changes to international recruitment

Whilst the aim is to grow the domestic supply of staff substantially to reduce the NHS's dependence on overseas staff, the [Interim NHS People Plan](#), published in June 2019, makes a commitment in the short to medium term to 'increase international recruitment significantly to secure rapid increases in supply' in England to meet demand. It aims to ensure the system is running efficiently and ethically in order to support this increase through the continuation of Health Education England's global partnership work, and through NHS England/NHS Improvement regional teams coordinating local recruitment efforts. The plan sets out actions to develop a national procurement framework of approved agencies and a best practice toolkit for employers, and to work with the Department of Health and Social Care and regulators on streamlining regulation and registration processes.

Since the publication of the [White Paper](#) on the UK's future immigration system by the Home Office in December 2018, the various proposals outlined to change visa processes and the salary and skills requirements have been widely discussed. At the same time, the Migration Advisory Committee has [reviewed](#) the Shortage Occupation List for the current immigration system, recommending that nurses should remain on it and all doctors should be added. Until the new immigration system, due to be implemented from January 2021, has been confirmed there is some uncertainty around how it could impact on Trusts recruiting nurses from overseas, including the impact on bringing over spouses and children.

Ethical considerations

It is essential that there is recognition of the ethical impact of international nurse recruitment. Overseas nurses can be a valuable supplement to our domestic workforce and provide development opportunities

for the recruits. However, it can also have a detrimental effect on low and middle income countries, particularly in Africa and Asia, which are facing health workforce shortages themselves. A recent [report](#) by the Tropical Health and Education Trust (THET) makes a series of recommendations for ensuring ethical routes of recruitment which align with the World Health Organization's (WHO) [Global Code of Practice](#). It emphasises that partnership, especially collaboration between governments, is key to growing sustainable health workforces both in the UK and abroad.

NMC international registration

Regulation around language and skills testing has been changing and further adaptations to the new professional standards are planned.

Currently, in order to gain [NMC registration](#), international nurses must start an NMC application and pass three tests in two stages. The first stage is passing; 1. a computer based test (CBT), and 2. an English language test either International English Language Test System (IELTS) or Occupational English Test (OET). Usually these are completed in the nurse's home country, and they come to the UK to complete stage 2 once they have received an NMC letter of approval. The third test is the Objective Structured Clinical Examination (OSCE) which they complete at a UK OSCE test centre. If a nurse from outside the EU/EEA has employer sponsorship, they have eight months to pass the OSCE and complete registration upon their arrival in the UK. If a nurse from outside the EU/EEA does not have employer sponsorship, they can stay in the UK on a six-month visitor visa in order to take the OSCE.

Cost of process

Bookings made from 1 April 2019 incur the following costs: NMC application £140; CBT test £90; OSCE £794; resit OSCE £397; admission onto NMC register £153.

OSCE test centres

The three OSCE test centres are at the [University of Northampton](#), [Oxford Brookes University](#) and [Ulster University](#). The NMC is currently not planning to tender for further test centres. OSCE tests can be booked by individuals or group bookings can be made by trusts/agencies. The NMC holds regular meetings with all test centres to ensure compliance and consistency.

There has been recent improvement in the OSCE pass rates. This may be partly due to more guidance being produced by the NMC and test centres, including mock OSCE information. The three test centres also run 'train the trainer' courses.

Test centre pass rates		October 2018	November 2018	December 2018	Qtr Total	January 2019	February 2019	March 2019	Qtr Total
Oxford Brookes University	OSCEs	228	171	140	539	227	212	170	609
	Pass rate	69%	67%	61%	66%	65%	67%	61%	65%
University of Northampton	OSCEs	292	285	188	765	285	281	348	914
	Pass rate	83%	79%	85%	82%	89%	83%	84%	85%
Ulster University	OSCEs	231	270	214	715	272	214	243	729
	Pass rate	88%	91%	91%	90%	91%	82%	86%	87%
Total sittings	OSCEs	751	726	542	2,019	784	707	761	2,252
	Pass rate	80%	80%	81%	81%	83%	78%	79%	80%

NMC review of registration process

The NMC has been undertaking a review of its international registration process. Some changes have been implemented and some are ongoing.

- In April 2019, the CBT and OSCE test fees were reduced by approximately 20%.
- In December 2018, the required waiting time between CBT and OSCE test attempts was reduced from three months to 10 working days.
- In July 2018, the OSCE resit requirements were changed so candidates no longer have to retake the whole test and instead only the part of the test they have failed.
- The 12-month post registration experience requirement has been removed, allowing candidates to apply for registration without this.
- IELTS requirement changed so that a level 6.5 in writing will now be accepted alongside a level 7 in reading, listening and speaking.
- The introduction of a mock exam, marking criteria and top tips to support candidates in preparing for the OSCE.
- A route for nursing associates opened in January 2019.

Future developments

- The NMC plans to coordinate a new test of competence assurance panel, a group of experienced nurses, midwives and other healthcare professionals, who will use their broad range of expertise to ensure consistency of tests across the test centres.
- Updating tests to align with the new standards of proficiency for nurses.
- The NMC is developing a new online application system which aims to be more efficient and accessible and will include a pre-application check list. The new process will be:
 1. The applicant uploads a copy of their qualification certificate as evidence that they hold a qualification that has or would lead to registration as a nurse.
 2. The applicant can then begin the application process and at the same time complete both parts of the test of competence. They can complete the different parts of the test in any order although it would be advisable to sit the English language test before the CBT.
 3. Applicants can take the CBT in the UK but will still have eight months to complete registration once they enter the country (unless immigration policies change).

4. Once the applicant has passed the test and completed their application this can be submitted to the NMC for assessment.
 5. The NMC has committed to 35-day assessment SLA after which the applicant may be registered.
- The NMC has appointed AlphaPlus to design and develop the new OSCE test. They are also currently procuring a new CBT delivery partner.

Examples of international recruitment

National recruitment initiatives

National organisations have initiatives to support the recruitment of international nurses.

Health Education England

Health Education England (HEE) launched a nursing [Global Learners project](#) in April 2018 as part of its Global Engagement portfolio, which has been termed a 'earn, learn, return programme'. Internationally registered nurses are brought to the UK to work as healthcare assistants whilst they receive training to gain NMC registration. HEE has developed an education programme for OSCE preparation including an online CBT toolkit and now has a 100% pass rate for first and second tests.

Regional recruitment initiatives

International nurse recruitment can be co-ordinated regionally as the examples below illustrate.

NHS Grampian

NHS Grampian has been running a pilot international recruitment programme for overseas nurses due to high vacancy rates and retention issues. Following feedback that English proficiency is often a barrier to recruitment, it has mainly recruited from Australia and the United States. NHS Grampian has developed an in-house, person centred approach to training. So far it has recruited small numbers of staff but has had a 100% successful recruitment rate. Costs, resource implications, the high level of pastoral support, and differences between Scottish practice and OSCE requirements were all noted as challenges experienced during the pilot programme.

Bangor University and Betsi Cadwaladr University Health Board

Bangor University will be involved in the training of overseas nurses currently working as health care assistants for their local health board Betsi Cadwaladr. This will be a tripartite partnership with a local further education (FE) college providing the stage 1 part of the training process and Bangor providing stage 2 of the training. This venture will start initially as a pilot in Autumn 2019 and if successful has the potential for long term growth.

Employer recruitment initiatives

There are examples of individual employers leading international recruitment.

King's College Hospital NHS Foundation Trust

International nurse recruitment has been undertaken for 15 years. However, in last three years, King's has developed an internal training programme and it has a team to deliver this. The Trust recruits approximately 400 overseas nurses a year; mainly from Philippines, India and Dubai. The total cost to bring over one nurse is approximately £10,000. The process takes about one year, however the Trust has seen higher retention rates compared to UK nurses. The Trust runs an eight-week training programme and now has a 91% OSCE pass rate. It emphasises the importance of pastoral support in the process and has developed its own resources handbook for candidates.

University involvement

Universities can support international nurse recruitment as demonstrated by the examples below.

University of the West of England

The University of the West of England runs a European Union Nursing Adaptation (EUNA) course (30 credit Level 3 or Master's level module). It is aimed at nurses registered in other European Economic Area countries who wish to gain registration with the NMC. Course attendees are mainly from Poland, Serbia, Croatia and Romania, and just over half have previously been working in nursing homes or hospitals in the UK.

University of Hertfordshire and East and North Hertfordshire NHS Trust

The University of Hertfordshire and the East and North Hertfordshire NHS Trust (ENHT) have worked together to improve recruitment and retention of their overseas recruits. They undertook a visit to the region in India where the Trust recruits from in order to better appreciate the differences in nurse training and working practice as well as lifestyle and culture. These partners recommend this as a recruitment strategy as it was effective in providing knowledge of the technical and pastoral support needed for their overseas recruits. Their experience of this is outlined in a recent Nursing Standard [article](#).

Recommendations and considerations for members

- Interim NHS People Plan: Whilst the commitment to increase international recruitment in the Interim NHS People Plan will affect only English providers, the recruitment of international nurses is also on the agenda in the devolved nations as the case studies above show.
- Regional partnerships: Newly empowered regional teams will be placed to support Trusts with delivering best practice on international recruitment that aligns with the vision of workforce within their patch. It is important to work with them and develop, collaboratively, local/regional offerings.
- English proficiency: A recent [survey](#) found that the biggest barrier to recruitment for trusts was candidates not passing the English tests required by the NMC. There could be an opportunity for the HE sector to be involved, or collaborate with the FE sector, in supporting overseas recruits in passing English proficiency tests.

- Pastoral support versus technical guidance: OSCE guidance and preparation is important in ensuring candidates pass, however the significance of pastoral support was highlighted by many stakeholders as being key for successful recruitment.
- Cost versus efficiency: The whole process of international registration is costly for Trusts and health boards who need to invest in training. For those recruiting on a large scale it is more cost efficient for them to train international recruits internally. However, there are opportunities for members to be involved in training for smaller providers or to work in partnership with local health boards.
- Ethical issues: Members should ensure that they have considered any ethical implications of their recruitment and that they have, where possible, worked in partnership with the source country.

Next steps for the Council

The Council would like to collect further examples of HEI involvement in international nurse recruitment and intends to discuss with NHS England/NHS Improvement and the Department of Health and Social Care as well as policy makers in Scotland and Wales how universities can support international recruits.

We would like to acknowledge the Council's Global Advisory Group for their helpful contributions to this briefing, as well as the valuable insight gained from external stakeholders such as the NMC and the Department of Health and Social Care. We look forward to continuing this engagement in the future.

Resources

Below are some resources which may be useful in supporting international nurses in gaining NMC registration. Please note though that the most up to date resources for international registration and OSCE guidance can be found online on the NMC website, and the websites for each of the three test centres.

[Candidate Journey Process Map](#)

[NHS Trusts/agencies candidate journey process map](#)

[How to prepare for your OSCE](#)

NHS Employers [International recruitment survey report](#)

NMC [recommended reading](#) for overseas applicants

OSCE [Candidate Information booklet](#)

[Royal Bournemouth and Christchurch Hospitals – Getting OSCE support right](#)

THET report on ethical leadership: [‘From Competition to Collaboration’](#)

[Top tips for Adult Nursing OSCE](#)

[Top tips for Mental Health Nursing OSCE](#)

[Top tips for Children's Nursing OSCE](#)

World Health Organization (WHO) [Global Code of Practice](#)

For more information contact:

Robyn Cooke, Policy Officer, robyn.cooke@cod-health.ac.uk