

# As competition for migrant nurses hots up, Singapore should be worried

Many nurses are skipping Singapore altogether, instead of treating it as a stepping stone to other destinations.

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There is a story I often hear from Singaporeans worried about the country's healthcare workers. It starts with the acknowledgement that few locals are willing to take on nursing jobs. Despite state efforts to raise wages and improve work conditions, migrants remain a vital part of the nation's health workforce. The problem is that many foreign nurses eventually remigrate, mostly to places that offer higher wages and clear pathways to citizenship. In the end, Singapore continuously recruits new migrants to replace those who leave.

The beginning of this story is still true. But the ending is likely to change. A lot.

It is true that, while Singapore can attract healthcare workers from overseas, it suffers from an outflow of nurses seeking better opportunities elsewhere. In 2019, 38 per cent of nurses within the country were migrants on work visas, with Filipinos as the largest nationality group. This number declined to 26 per cent in 2023, as nurses either left the country or obtained permanent residency after the pandemic. Still, Singapore received an influx of new recruits that year, originating from nations like Malaysia, Myanmar, India, and the Philippines.

When we contextualise these numbers with the high attrition rate among foreign nurses (around 14.5 per cent in 2022), what we can discern is an ongoing throughflow of migrants moving to and from the country's healthcare system.

This story is not unique to Singapore. Researchers have long documented how nations like the United Arab Emirates, Kuwait, and Japan share this in-between status as "temporary stops" or "stepping stones" in nurses' migration trajectories.

Before the pandemic, few nurses had the capacity to migrate directly to popular destinations like the United States. Some lacked the resources to pay for testing fees and migration-related expenses. Others needed the international experience to fulfil the standards for clinical skill. While jobs in stepping-stone nations were often temporary, obtaining these positions was relatively easier and the pay received was much higher than back home.

However, Singapore can no longer rely on recruiting new migrants to replenish its nursing ranks. While local hospitals can still meet their labour needs today, heightened competition will make future recruitment more difficult and costly. And for the most qualified, well-trained nurses abroad, passing through Singapore may no longer be a necessary step.

## THE DECLINE OF STEPWISE MIGRATION

What has changed for aspiring nurse migrants? Faced with labour shortages, made worse by the pandemic, governments across the world have loosened foreign nurses' requirements for entry, enabling migrants to move directly from their home countries towards their desired destinations. For example, in the UK, the National Health Service (NHS) lowered the marks required for critical thinking exams and language tests – a common barrier for aspiring migrants in the past. British hospitals also removed the requirement for two years of clinical exposure for foreign applicants. Nurses now migrate earlier in their careers instead of having to move to an interim stop like Singapore.

Meanwhile, recruiters have increasingly taken on the costs of nurses' migration, from licensure exam fees to air tickets and visa applications. In the Philippines, the world's leading source of



migrant nurses, recruitment can start even earlier, with scholarships that bond nursing students to overseas hospitals before they even graduate. These benefits make it unnecessary for nurses to move to a stepping-stone nation just to accumulate more savings for their next move.

As a migration scholar, I've seen how these changes have reshaped nurses' aspirations in drastic ways. When I first began interviewing Filipino nurses in 2009, jobs in the West were scarce and thousands of nursing graduates struggled to find decent work at home. Singapore was an ideal interim stop in a world of limited opportunity.

By 2023, the Philippines' biggest nursing schools were fielding multiple offers from private hospital groups in the US and UK. The nursing students I spoke to sheepishly admitted that Singapore was a "last choice", or at times, not even an option at all. Today's migrant nurses were skipping over the many steps that previous generations had been forced to navigate.

Data shows that while Singapore still manages to attract its fair share of nurses from the Philippines, many more nurses from that country are going directly to the UK. And if the UK is the destination of choice for nurses from the Philippines, this also raises the question of whether Singapore is still attracting its finest nurses.

## MORE COMPETITION AMONG STEPPING STONES

Beyond direct pathways to popular destinations in the West, Singapore also faces increasing competition from other stepping-stone countries. Within Asia, Japan has poured massive resources into recruiting migrant nurses and caregivers, establishing bilateral agreements with Indonesia and the Philippines.

However, the most aggressive recruitment efforts have come from the Gulf states, where nurses do not have to struggle with passing language tests, and wages are comparable with Singapore's. Tertiary hospitals in cities like Dubai and Riyadh allow nurses to gain clinical skills recognised in the West. Unlike Singapore, most employers in the Gulf pay for nurses' food, accommodation, and even their vacation flights home.

Though researchers have noted the challenges non-Muslim nurses face in the Gulf, these destinations remain appealing to those aiming to earn more in less time. In fact, Saudi Arabia is a top destination for nurses from India and Indonesia – two nations where Singapore has tried to intensify recruitment efforts. The nurses earn roughly the same amount they can get in Singapore, but can save more, as they don't have to pay for accommodation.

Compared with some stepping-stone nations, Singapore is also more stringent in assessing foreign nurses' credentials.

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Factors such as the number of hospital beds in a nurse's previous workplace can determine whether they are hired as a staff nurse or relegated to a lower position with lower pay. While these standards make sense for acute hospitals, they can make it hard for community hospitals to recruit staff who only need to provide rehabilitation and sub-acute care.

At present, there is no data on why nurses choose one stepping-stone country over another, or how policy changes in one destination impact the amount of time nurses might spend in interim stops. One thing is clear: the global nurse market is changing the course of nurses' migration trajectories.

## WHERE DO WE GO FROM HERE?

The rising competition for nurses shouldn't discount what Singapore offers healthcare workers. Many of the migrant nurses I've met are grateful for the skills they've gained within the country's health system. But in addressing issues of recruitment, I worry about a narrative that reduces nurses' motivations in terms of money and visas alone.

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Some seek pathways to permanent residency because they want to start a family. Others want to avoid early burnout in places that offer better work-life balance. Stressful workloads and short-term contracts make nurses question whether they are making the best use of their time.

In 2020, I remember speaking to a Filipino nurse who moved from Singapore to the UK in 2018. He wished that he had left sooner. Unable to bring his family to Singapore, he spent four years

away from his wife and son. "If I had applied to the UK right away, we would have been able to spend more time together," he said.

Another Filipino nurse wondered whether she should have moved to Singapore at all. While she found her work at a community hospital meaningful, she felt tired and overworked. "If other nurses in the Philippines were to ask me, I will not recommend that they come here," she admitted. "I would say, if you're ready and you have some money, take your exams, take your IELTS (language test) and just go straight to the UK. Just go for it."

Where do we go from here? Policymakers have taken important steps in retaining nurses – offering monetary incentives and pathways to permanent residency. But perhaps, there need to be more creative ways of facilitating nurses' entry into Singapore. For example, more flexible requirements can allow acute and community hospitals to set skill standards according to their needs. Leveraging off Singapore's location to source nations, hospitals can also offer more time off for nurses to visit their families at home. This is a privilege that is harder to enjoy in destinations like Qatar or Saudi Arabia.

As a small nation, Singapore has shown that it is possible to attract talent amid global competition. Yet, so far, much of this focus has been placed on recruiting technical and computing skills. Even with close to 12,000 migrant nurses already working in the country, more nurses will be needed as the nation ages. It is time to see care work as a skill that Singapore needs to attract. Doing so means navigating a crowded space, where other nations are already working to determine where nurses will go and where they don't.

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