



European Forum of National Nursing and Midwifery Associations



EFNNMA Report
Strengthening recruitment and retention of nurses in EU countries
WHO Euro EU Nursing Action Project

2025

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This EFNNMA Report was developed within the framework of the Nursing Action project, which is led by the World Health Organization Regional Office for Europe (WHO/Europe) and receives financial support from the European Commission. The views expressed herein do not reflect the official positions of WHO/Europe or the European Commission.

The preparation of this report was guided by the leadership of Dr Karen Bjørø, PhD, RN, Vice President of the European Forum of Nursing and Midwifery Associations (EFNNMA), with key contributions from Professor Dr Walter De Caro, PhD, RN, EFNNMA Board Member and President of the Italian Nurses Association.

We extend our sincere gratitude to Mervi Jokinen, EFNNMA President, and Steve Pitman and Franz Wagner, EFNNMA Board Members, for their dedicated efforts in finalizing this report. Valuable input was also provided by Dr. Elisabetta Corvo, PhD (Canterbury CC University, UK) and Massimiliano di Carlo (PhD.s., University of Rome Tor Vergata, Italy) whose expertise is gratefully acknowledged.

This initiative was further strengthened by the essential feedback and expertise of the EFNNMA National Nursing Associations (NNAs) members and the EFNNMA General Assembly. We extend our sincere gratitude to all contributors whose insights and dedication made this publication possible.

About EFNNMA

The European Forum of Nursing and Midwifery Associations (EFNNMA) was established in 1996 and registered in Belgium as an ASBL (non-profit organisation) in 2025. EFNNMA aims to influence health policy, improve the quality of health services and the health of people across the 53 Member States of the WHO European Region. EFNNMA advocates for the central and unique contribution that Nurses and Midwives make to individual and population health and well-being across Europe and is committed to ensuring both nursing and midwifery professions are supported to deliver excellence in their practice. The ongoing nursing shortage is a threat to health care across Europe. EFNNMA believes greater investment in the nursing and midwifery workforces is critical to achieve excellence in public health and people-centered healthcare. EFNNMA calls on all governments and stakeholders to commit to strengthening nursing and midwifery service delivery, leadership, education, research and regulation.

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Purpose of the report

European healthcare systems confront an unprecedented nursing workforce crisis that threatens the fundamental capacity to deliver safe, effective, and equitable care across the continent. This crisis emerges at a critical juncture, as aging populations drive increased demand for healthcare services, non-communicable diseases proliferate, and healthcare systems continue recovering from the profound disruptions of the COVID-19 pandemic.

The WHO Europe Nursing Action initiative, funded by the European Commission, represents a comprehensive 36-month program dedicated to improving nursing recruitment and retention across Europe. This initiative engages Ministries of Health from 20 countries—Bulgaria, Cyprus, Estonia, Finland, France, Greece, Hungary, Ireland, Italy, Latvia, Lithuania, Malta, Netherlands, Norway, Poland, Portugal, Romania, Slovenia, Spain, and Sweden—in collaborative efforts to address workforce challenges. The European Forum of National Nursing and Midwifery Associations (EFNNMA) serves as a crucial partner, ensuring meaningful engagement of the nursing profession through national nurses associations.

This EFNNMA report provides a comprehensive analysis of European nursing workforce challenges through three integrated components: survey data from National Nurses Associations, systematic evidence review, and development of an innovative workforce framework. This multifaceted approach establishes a robust foundation for evidence-based recommendations targeting policy, education, practice, and research infrastructure at multiple levels.

Section I: survey results

Survey findings from National Nurses Associations across Europe reveal a profession in extensive crisis, with consistent patterns of workforce distress evident across all participating countries. Every association participating in the survey evaluated their nursing workforce deficiency as serious or very serious and no nation reported having no substantial workforce shortage. All European healthcare systems with their different economic frameworks have shown uniform indicators which demonstrate the deep extent of the crisis. Survey results show how NNAs properly identify problems yet fail to develop strategic solutions. Most countries lack strategic national nurse recruitment plans while more than half have nurse retention programs. The strategic deficiency becomes more critical when examining the uncoordinated and underfunded nature of existing initiatives that lack systematic evaluation methods. The absence of governmental workforce strategy allows National Nurses Associations to function as essential entities for workforce development. National Nurses Associations use their own resources to create recruitment strategies according to the survey which also shows they maintain retention-focused initiatives at a rate of 50%. The most crucial findings

show that associations implement mental health programs at an 80% rate to support members' professional and personal wellbeing and to contribute to workforce sustainability. These organizations demonstrate exceptional innovation functioning as the link between policy makers and frontline nurses to develop evidence-based solutions while working with limited resources. The mental health findings deserve particular emphasis. The widespread implementation of psychological support programs by NNAs marks a fundamental change in workforce challenge understanding. The sustainability of nursing practice extends beyond numerical workforce targets, as demonstrated by national supervision initiatives and well-being campaigns that address both burnout and workplace violence.

Section II: Evidence review and policy analysis

The systematic review of studies and policy documents establishes robust evidence to understand the various dimensions of nursing recruitment and retention issues. The projected 2030 nursing shortage of more than half a million represents more than numbers because it includes geographic distribution problems alongside skill gaps and concerns about nursing profession endurance. Research evidence shows that successful recruitment depends on diverse strategies that combine salary incentives with structured career progression opportunities along with supportive workplace culture and modern recruitment techniques. Financial incentives are a necessary solution but insufficient alone to attract and retain nurses since modern nursing professionals assess potential employers through a holistic evaluation of work-life balance and professional development possibilities and organizational values. Digital recruitment approaches have shown excellent results because targeted social media initiatives generate engagement rates between 300% and 500% above conventional recruitment methods. Nurse retention is equally complex requiring continuous focus on workplace quality, professional autonomy and career progression opportunities. Research indicates that organizations which support their leaders and maintain proper staffing ratios and shared governance models achieve higher employee retention rates of 25-35% compared to organizations using financial incentives alone. The important transitional period between education and practice needs special attention through established residency programs that cut first-year staff departure rates from 25-30% down to under 10%. The recruitment of international staff offers both potential advantages and moral dilemmas. The sustainable recruitment of foreign-educated nurses from Europe requires support programs that extend past basic orientation to achieve successful integration. The essential elements for success include language training combined with credential recognition, cultural adaptation and family support. The evidence demonstrates that implementing WHO ethical recruitment principles results in better healthcare outcomes for both source and destination countries because workforce disparities lead to exploitation. The existing gap between research findings and real-

world applications stands as the most disturbing finding. Research-based effective interventions exist but implementation at the original research protocol level occurs in less than 20% of cases. The implementation gap persists due to lack of investment in the nursing workforce, fragmented governance systems and healthcare systems' resistance to change. The implementation failure represents a problem of systemic nature that requires complex implementation science methods to handle organizational cultural elements as well as change management.

Section III: The Nursing Workforce Framework Model

The Nursing Workforce Framework Model brings together survey and literature review evidence to present an integrated holistic conceptualization of nurse recruitment and retention. The model shows how institutional reputation and positive workplace cultures develop from retention success to improve recruitment effectiveness while recruitment quality enhances retention through better team dynamics and person-organization fit. The framework establishes four main strategic recruitment domains and two main retention domains.

Recruitment Domains: 1) Financial Incentives 2) Professional Development opportunities, 3) Workplace Environment and 4) Targeted Recruitment (i.e. digital platforms, diversity programs). Retention Domains: Work-life Balance and Recognition and Growth. Multiple essential elements must be taken into account for the framework's successful implementation. Success requires coordinated strategies which handle multiple factors simultaneously rather than through separate individual interventions. Adaptation to the healthcare context remains vital because rural hospitals deal with different obstacles than urban academic institutions. The planning and implementation process requires active participation from frontline nursing staff who serve as stakeholders. Workforce expectations and healthcare contexts need ongoing evolution because these factors continue to transform. The implementation of such initiatives requires major financial support yet studies show they yield positive results through lower turnover expenses and better care delivery.

Conclusion, recommendations and strategic directions

This comprehensive analysis illuminates a critical paradox: while Europe faces an unprecedented nursing workforce crisis of staggering proportions, proven solutions exist and await implementation. The confluence of demographic aging, evolving disease patterns, and pandemic-induced system stress has created a pivotal moment demanding transformative action rather than incremental adjustments. The evidence presents both sobering realities and genuine hope. Current trajectories predict sad workforce shortfalls that will fundamentally compromise healthcare delivery across the EU. Yet success stories scattered throughout Europe provide compelling proof that transformation remains possible, like some countries

workforce planning demonstrates how systematic approaches can reverse decades of fragmentation or mental health support infrastructure shows how investing in workforce wellbeing yields measurable returns in retention and quality. These exemplars share common elements: political will translated into sustained investment, genuine partnership with nursing organizations, and recognition that workforce sustainability requires addressing human needs alongside operational demands.

The path forward demands a necessity of paradigm shifts. Healthcare systems must transition from viewing nurses as interchangeable human resources to recognizing them as irreplaceable professional partners. Policymakers must move beyond crisis-driven reactive measures toward proactive, evidence-based workforce planning spanning decades. Organizations must leave outdated hierarchical structures in favor of collaborative governance models that leverage nursing expertise in shaping practice environments.

Most critically, the transformation requires bridging the persistent chasm between rhetoric and reality. While policy documents universally acknowledge nursing's essential role, budget allocations, regulatory frameworks, and organizational practices often tell a different story. Closing this implementation gap demands accountability mechanisms ensuring that workforce commitments translate into tangible improvements in nurses' daily practice experiences.

The window for action narrows daily. Each passing day reduces the available time for taking action. Each nurse who leaves the profession represents lost expertise, mentorship capacity, and institutional knowledge that cannot be easily replaced. Conversely, each successful intervention produces beneficial effects which include nurses remaining at their posts to mentor others while enhanced work environments draw new recruits and professional prestige increases recruitment potential. European healthcare systems must choose between current workforce transformation investment or endure prolonged substandard care delivery which will harm millions of citizens.

Recommendations

The following recommendations are organized across five key domains: policy development, practice environment, educational systems, research, and the role of professional organizations.

These recommendations require coordinated implementation rather than siloed approaches, with representation from all stakeholder groups should oversee integrated action plans with clear timelines, measurable objectives, and transparent reporting mechanisms. Nurses themselves must be genuine partners in designing, implementing, and evaluating all workforce initiatives, ensuring that solutions address real-world practice challenges rather than theoretical constructs.

National Level Policy Recommendations for governments

- **Develop Comprehensive National Nursing Workforce Strategies:** Establish integrated evidence-based recruitment and retention frameworks with dedicated funding mechanisms, clear accountability structures, measurable outcomes, and regular evaluation cycles
- **Employ senior nurse leaders** in the central government to ensure expertise in nursing workforce development.
- **Strengthen Mental Health Infrastructure:** Mandate workplace psychological support systems for the nursing and health workforce encompassing prevention programs, early intervention services, crisis management protocols, and long-term support mechanisms
- **Transform Nursing Education Investment:** Expand educational capacity while maintaining quality standards through increased funding for academic institutions, faculty recruitment and development, simulation laboratories, and clinical placement opportunities
- **Reform Regulatory Frameworks:** Enable nurses to work to the full scope of their education and practice, implement advanced practice roles, standardize credentialing processes, and facilitate appropriate workforce mobility while maintaining quality standards
- **Implement Evidence-Based Staffing Legislation:** Establish mandatory nurse-to-patient ratios based on acuity and care requirements, ensuring both patient safety and professional well-being.
- **Engage with National Nurses Associations** to hear the voice of the nursing profession and lift the image of the nursing profession.
- **Close the gender pay gap** by improving the remuneration of nurses.

Professional Association Recommendations

- **Enhance Advocacy Capacity:** Strengthen National Nurses Associations' ability to influence policy through robust evidence generation, strategic stakeholder engagement, media relations, and public communication campaigns
- **Expand Direct Member Services:** Develop comprehensive support programs addressing professional development, mental health and well-being, career guidance, and peer support networks
- **Foster Innovation Leadership:** Lead development, testing, and dissemination of innovative recruitment and retention strategies, serving as living laboratories for workforce solutions
- **Engage in International Collaboration:** Enhance cooperation through EFNNMA, WHO, ICN, and other international partners to share best practices, coordinate advocacy efforts, and develop pan-European solutions.

- **Establish Monitoring Systems:** Implement robust mechanisms for tracking workforce trends, evaluating intervention effectiveness, and providing real-time data for decision-making.
- **Engage with nursing students:** Develop future NNA membership and strengthen advocacy by including the next generation of nurses in NNAs advocacy initiatives.

Educational System Recommendations

- **Curriculum modernization:** Update nursing education to reflect contemporary practice realities, integrate technology competencies, and prepare graduates for evolving healthcare environments.
- **Expand education in advanced roles:** enhance educational opportunities to prepare specialized and advanced practice nurses to meet citizens' healthcare needs while improving access to care. Develop robust pathways for specialty certifications and advanced practice roles that address critical gaps in healthcare delivery, particularly in underserved areas.
- **Faculty development:** Invest in recruiting and retaining qualified nursing educators through competitive compensation, research support, and professional development opportunities
- **Clinical partnership enhancement:** Strengthen academic-practice partnerships ensuring adequate, high-quality clinical placements and seamless education-to-practice transitions
- **Interprofessional education:** Integrate collaborative practice preparation throughout nursing education, fostering team-based care competencies from the beginning.

Research Development

- Expand funding for research to ensure nursing educational capacity and build the evidence-base for the nursing profession. Develop research infrastructure for the nursing profession:
 - **Integrated data systems:** Develop interoperable platforms linking human resources, clinical outcomes, financial metrics, and quality indicators to understand workforce-outcome relationships
 - **Multi-Site research networks:** Establish collaborative infrastructures enabling large-scale studies across diverse populations, healthcare systems, and cultural contexts
 - **Rapid learning systems:** Create mechanisms for real-time experimentation, continuous improvement cycles, and rapid translation of findings into practice
 - **Open science platforms:** Implement systems for sharing data, methodologies, and findings to accelerate collective learning and avoid duplication of efforts

Organizational level practice recommendations for employers

- **Transform organizational culture:** Prioritize psychological safety, implement shared governance structures, foster professional practice environments, and create cultures of continuous improvement
- **Invest in leadership development:** Provide systematic leadership preparation at all career stages, support succession planning, and create pathways for clinical leadership advancement
- **Implement comprehensive retention programs:** Develop multifaceted strategies addressing career development pathways, work-life integration, meaningful recognition systems, and holistic well-being support
- **Strengthen transition support:** Standardize comprehensive orientation programs, implement structured residency initiatives for new graduates, and provide ongoing mentorship throughout career transitions
- **Leverage technology strategically:** Implement digital solutions reducing administrative burden, enhancing clinical decision support, and improving practice efficiency while maintaining human-centered care.

The evidence is clear, the strategies are proven, and the urgency is undeniable. Europe's nursing workforce crisis demands immediate, comprehensive, and sustained action at every level. The health of European populations depends on decisions made today about tomorrow's nursing workforce. Through coordinated implementation of these evidence-based recommendations, European healthcare systems can transform current challenges into opportunities for creating sustainable, thriving nursing workforces capable of meeting population health needs for generations to come.