



EFN Policy Statement on Co-designing the EU Health and Care Workforce Strategy

The EFN welcomes the call for the co-design of a comprehensive EU Health and Care Workforce Strategy by which Member States aim to intensify their efforts to “prevent, retain, attract and invest” to achieve a resilient nursing workforce in the EU and Europe.

Nursing workforce shortages currently exist in all EU countries. In addition, the demand for nursing staff is expected to grow due to demographic change and a growing burden of chronic diseases. Furthermore, another pandemic or health crisis of any type will negatively affect the frontline nurses’ responsiveness to act, potentially leading to a collapse of the healthcare systems in the EU and Europe.

The huge challenges of frontline registered nurses’ shortages have led to decreased workforce well-being and increased economic costs and, in some cases, impacted care quality. A proactive approach to healthcare, which combines prevention and care, is needed, as by promoting healthier communities, we are decreasing the number of hospitalisations and chronic Non-Communicable Diseases, reducing the burden on the limited healthcare workforce.

While Internationally educated nurses have made a massive contribution to European health services, the recruitment by national governments of international foreign-trained nurses to fill the massive workforce gaps is an unsustainable and unethical solution. “Robbing Peter to pay Paul” creates shortages in origin countries and negatively impacts migrant staff, such as de-skilling or the need to requalify in the destination country.

Tackling workforce challenges requires bold action, not political promises in Charters, but concrete frontline actions. Setting political priorities will be key to make sure frontline nurses are prepared for the next health crisis! If not, politicians cannot count on the nursing workforce anymore to risk their own lives while caring for others.

In this context, the EFN welcomes the “*Council Conclusions on the Future of the European Health Union: A Europe that cares, prepares and protects*”¹, announced at the EPSCO Health Council meeting of 21 June 2024. In particular, the EFN welcomes the Council’s call on the Commission to develop a comprehensive approach on the health and care workforce that should take into account the following provisions:

- planning and forecasting;
- national and international recruitment and training;
- Continuous Professional Development (CPD);
- retention, including by ensuring fair pay that recognises nursing as a safety-critical profession;
- ensuring mental and physical health of healthcare workers, including via dedicated mental health support services;
- improving the working conditions;
- the challenges of skills mix and inappropriate skills substitution;
- life-long training (LLL), including on digital and leadership skills and competencies, and leadership training; and,
- surge capacity to cope with crisis situations.

To achieve these outcomes, the Council conclusions call for targeted investments and the creation of an EU Forum composed of Member States, the Commission and stakeholders. These are all positive provisions, however, concrete, targeted, and swift action is needed to translate these Conclusions into real improvements to the working conditions of the frontline nursing workforce.

Therefore, the EFN calls on the European Institutions and Member States to take into account the key following aspects during the development of an EU Health and Care workforce strategy:

- The Health and Care Workforce strategy must be based on an independently verified assessment of future nursing workforce numbers across health, social care and public health, based on the projected health and care needs of the population (including health inequalities) for the following five, ten and twenty years.
- It must intensify the efforts to “retain, attract and invest” in frontline general care nurses in line with Directive 2013/55/EU and the Proportionality Test Directive in order to achieve a resilient, highly educated (at least Bachelor level/EQF 6) nursing workforce.

¹ <https://data.consilium.europa.eu/doc/document/ST-9900-2024-INIT/en/pdf>

- It must seek to increase frontline nurses' satisfaction through better wages reflecting the competencies and areas of responsibility. Negotiations on salary and working conditions should be a natural part of social dialogue through collective agreements.
- It must ensure decent and healthy working conditions as frontline general care nurses frequently operate in hazardous environments that jeopardise their health and safety. Nurses' hard physical work and demanding operational environments lead to physical impairment, with nurses being confronted with violence and harassment, which is unacceptable.
- It should include clear actions to support increases in the domestically-educated workforce and avoid over-reliance on internationally educated nursing staff, and include measures to address potentially unethical practices in international recruitment.
- It should consider each field of nursing and specialism and all levels including senior nursing leadership roles.
- For significant increases in training places, consideration must be given to the nursing educator workforce to ensure that there is sufficient capacity to deliver on these growth ambitions.
- Workforce productivity projections underpinning workforce planning should be realistic.
- It should use the Recovery and Resilience Facility to upscale frontline good practices that have shown to be impactful, leading to better citizens/patients' health outcomes. There is no need for more congresses, webinars and recommendations to understand the extent of the challenges. Instead, we need at the EU level coordinated and concrete actions to upscale evidence-based good practices. The European Semester is key to making all these measurable.
- A fit-for-purpose EU consultation forum must be developed where key stakeholders, including EFN, can voice their priorities and concerns, offer their expertise, and share evidence-based best practices, which will ensure that the Health and Care Workforce Strategy takes into account the real needs of frontline, registered general care nurses.

Accurate data is crucial and must be the foundation for the strategy. Therefore, the EFN also calls on the International Labour Organisation (ILO) to:

- Urgently update the International Standard Classification of Occupations (ISCO) concerning nurses. Nurses are being defined according to the tasks they perform,

but there is already extensive scientific proof to demonstrate that this method is outdated, leading to inaccurate data collection on the shortage of registered nurses. If the European Institutions and the Member States utilise these definitions in the process of formulating and implementing an EU Health and Care Workforce strategy, it will lead to ineffective interventions and risks worsening the problem.

Further readings:

- WHO (2023) What steps can improve and promote investment in the care workforce?, p.7.
- EFN (2023) Overcoming the nursing workforce crisis in Europe to improve care for people with non-communicable diseases, p. 6 & 8
- EFN Policy Statement on EU Nursing Workforce within a Global SSL Context (2024). Available at: <https://efn.eu/wp-content/uploads/2024/04/EFN-Policy-Statement-on-EU-Nursing-Workforce-within-a-Global-SSL-Context-April-2024.pdf>
- EFN Policy Statement on “Consequences of Nurses Shortages in Public Health” (2020). Available at: <https://efn.eu/wp-content/uploads/EFN-Policy-Statement-on-Consequences-Nurses-Shortages-in-Public-Health-Nov.2020.pdf>
- EFN Report on Education, Workforce, Quality & Safety (2022). Available at: <https://efn.eu/wp-content/uploads/2023/01/EFN-Report-on-Education-Workforce-Quality-Safety-July-2022.pdf>
- EFN Comprehensive Report on Nurses Added Value in the Health and Social Ecosystems (2018). Available at: <http://www.efn.eu/wp-content/uploads/EFN-Compendium-Nurses-Added-Value-in-the-Health-and-Social-Ecosystems-Final-Dec.2018-compressed.pdf>
- EFN Policy Statement on the Review of the ILO ISCO definitions and tasks composition (2022). Available at: <https://efn.eu/wp-content/uploads/2022/11/EFN-Policy-Statement-on-ILO-Guidance-of-Nursing-Profession-Data-Oct.-2022.pdf>

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