



CANADIAN FEDERATION  
OF NURSES UNIONS  
LA FÉDÉRATION CANADIENNE  
DES SYNDICATS D'INFIRMIÈRES  
ET INFIRMIERS

## POSITION STATEMENT

June 2025

### Internationally Educated Nurses

In an attempt to address the nursing shortage crisis in Canada, which has been significantly worsened by the COVID-19 pandemic, many provincial governments are turning to internationally educated nurses (IENs), both those currently in Canada and through international recruitment. Taking such measures is critical as the nursing shortage crisis continues to escalate; based on pre-pandemic forecasting models, it is estimated that shortages in Canada will reach over 100,000 nurses by 2030.<sup>1</sup>

Recruiting nurses internationally should be part of a comprehensive health human resource plan. Efforts to address nurse shortages within the domestic context must be a priority for all provincial and territorial governments. A multi-pronged approach to health human resources must focus on both short-term and long-term measures to enhance the retention and recruitment of nurses within Canada, which would include IENs.

The recruitment of IENs from abroad must be aligned with the WHO Global Code of Practice on the International Recruitment of Health Personnel<sup>2</sup>, to which Canada is a signatory and is expressly committed.<sup>3</sup> The WHO Code encourages the commensurate employment of internationally educated health professionals (IEHPs) in the receiving country and reciprocating benefits for the supplying country. When examined against the WHO Code, the ongoing underutilization of IENs in Canada can be seen as a failure to meet this obligation.

The CFNU endorses the ethical recruitment strategies as outlined by the International Council of Nurses (ICN) and encourages governments and organizations, including employers, recruiters, and non-governmental organizations, to adopt the ICN principles<sup>4</sup>, including:

- Access to full and flexible employment opportunities
- Regulation of recruitment and good faith contracting
- Comprehensive and effective nursing regulation
- Freedom of movement, freedom of association, freedom from discrimination
- Equal pay for work of equal value
- Access to grievance procedures, safe work and effective orientation/mentoring/supervision
- National self-sustainability to effectively match health human resources to population needs

In keeping with these principles, as well as the commitments of the WHO Code, the CFNU would discourage the targeted recruitment of nurses from countries that are experiencing a chronic or temporary shortage of nurses. When international migration occurs, the CFNU will advocate to protect nurses' interests and rights to ensure decent work. In this vein, the CFNU also strongly supports IENs' right to freedom of association, including the right to join a union in the pursuit of collective workplace goals arrived at through the collective bargaining process.

The CFNU recognizes that many internationally educated nurses currently in Canada are unemployed or underemployed. Internationally educated health professionals are significantly less likely to work in their field than their Canadian-born counterparts. Faced with numerous barriers to employment in their fields, many internationally educated nurses may experience deskilling. Even as Canada desperately needs nurses on the front lines, non-practising nurses continue to be unemployed or underemployed; as of 2021, only 42% of employed immigrants in Canada with a nursing degree are employed as working nurses.<sup>5</sup> IENs may be working as personal support workers, as live-in caregivers, in home care or even in non-health care jobs like retail – because the barriers to working as a nurse in Canada are onerous, expensive and time-consuming. In 2021, although there were approximately 85,700 IENs in Canada with an employment rate of nearly 80%, only 69% of those employed were employed in a health-related occupation.<sup>6</sup> According to World Education Services, many of these nurses will be unable to return to practise in their chosen field.

Despite the ongoing underutilization of the large supply of IENs ready to join the nursing workforce, Canada continues to recruit more IENs from abroad. The CFNU believes that a primary focus of provincial governments on recruiting more nurses internationally is misplaced. There is a clear need for investment in system-wide reforms that remove barriers, and which improve and standardize the assessment, registration and integration of qualified IENs already living in Canada.

At the workplace level, employers are responsible for supporting the effective workplace integration of IENs and upholding their rights to decent work. IENs have the right to receive appropriate clinical and cultural orientation and supportive supervision in their workplaces. IENs have the right to fair and equal treatment on employment-related issues, including working conditions, promotion and access to career development. They must be educated about union rights and occupational hazards, including workplace violence. When nurses' rights, benefits or safety are threatened or violated, appropriate processes must be in place to hear grievances in a timely manner.

The CFNU and its Member Organizations are committed to representing our IENs by ensuring that they are educated about the provisions in the collective agreement, have access to all those provisions and are supported by their union. Nurses will be provided with a union orientation, focusing on areas such as seniority, job postings, hours of work, overtime, no discrimination/harassment, etc., to ensure that they are aware of their rights and are able to actively participate in the workplace. Nurses' unions will actively engage with employers to ensure that IENs have conditions of employment as favourable as those of other nurses in Canada, and to encourage a workplace environment that is culturally safe, and respects diversity and multicultural perspectives. IENs will be provided with contact information for union representatives, who will provide advocacy and support for workplace issues.

On an immediate basis to help address the nursing shortage, Canada and employers must act to address the myriad concerns of IENs within the system.

Federal and provincial governments must adopt a pan-Canadian approach to addressing the unethical recruitment and underutilization of IENs systematically, and in a coordinated and coherent way, which would include the following.

- Establishing a collaborative multi-stakeholder body to assist with strategy, planning and coordination of IEN registration, integration and necessary supports to be hosted at the federal level by Health Canada. This would include representatives from Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada (IRCC), Employment and Social Development Canada (ESDC), provincial regulatory bodies, provincial and territorial health ministries, nursing education, IEN support providers, nurses' unions, employers and IENs.
- Creating a coherent system-wide approach across the country, built by all the key stakeholders that would ensure systematic, equitable and accountable labour force integration of IENs. The strategy must address the three interconnected elements of the IEN journey, and the roots of underutilization and inequity: the immigration and licensure process, as well as employment.
- Implementing existing best practices and solutions, drawing on the dozens of successful programs and models that exist across the country (and internationally) to effectively assess, orient, bridge or upgrade, where necessary, and integrate IENs into our workplaces. This would include scaling up and spreading externship pilots, including in LTC, community health and home care settings.
- Implementing a comprehensive curated supervised clinical experience (SCE) to provide income, clinical orientation and assessment opportunities, and to meet recent practice and language requirements. Nursing preceptors participating in the SCE should be compensated for their involvement.
- Providing wrap-around supports to IENs throughout the registration process, including:
  - Compensation packages for SCEs that consider the whole IEN context
  - Reimbursement for IENs that successfully pass the NCLEX (CPRNE or relevant nurse registration exam) within the first six months of their SCE
  - Establishing an IEN mentor role in every jurisdiction
- Standardising the registration process for IENs across Canadian jurisdictions to reduce complexity, redundancy, barriers and costs through federal-provincial-territorial joint coordination.
- Approving nursing education abroad that prepares one for practice as a regulated nurse as sufficient to meeting the educational requirements for registration, accompanied by a transition to practice in Canada course.
- Expanding proof of language proficiency options.
- Ensuring that all international recruitment missions abide by ethical standards, including but not limited to following the WHO Code and the ethical recruitment strategies outlined by the International Council of Nurses (ICN). Recruitment missions should accordingly respect the WHO "red list" while also considering other issues within the global nursing supply, including concerns from countries that are not found on the list but are experiencing nursing shortages nonetheless.

The employer must demonstrate accountability for third parties contracted to recruit nurses, supporting IENs as they integrate into the workplace, including:

- Appropriate accommodations.
- Relocation allowances.
- Demonstrated sensitivity and attention to cultural issues faced by both IENs and their co-workers. This should include the implementation of anti-bias/anti-discrimination training and monitoring to safeguard IENs from discrimination in the workplace, accompanied by anonymous reporting mechanisms.
- Facilitating contact so that IENs are assisted in establishing a community, including the implementation of institution-specific orientation plans that foster a supportive and welcoming environment.
- Ensuring that any recruitment initiatives do not create additional fees or barriers to IENs obtaining employment in Canada and joining one of its affiliate bargaining units.

### References

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