

Indonesian nurses abroad: leveraging migration as human capital for national advancement

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The migration of Indonesian nurses to countries such as Japan, Singapore, Germany, and the Gulf states continues to reveal an important yet under-recognised dimension of national human capital formation. Their lived experiences—navigating unfamiliar health systems, mastering advanced clinical technologies, and engaging in multicultural teams—represent a reservoir of competencies that extend beyond individual careers. These experiences embody accumulated professional, cultural, and adaptive capital that Indonesia has yet to systematically recognise or mobilise (Kurniati, Chen, Efendi, & Ogawa, [2017](#); Efendi, Haryanto, Indarwati, Kuswanto, & Chong, [2021](#)).

As the World Health Organization ([2016](#)) notes, countries must invest in strengthening and optimising health workforce human capital to meet both national and global demands. This principle is highly relevant for Indonesia, where outward nurse mobility is often viewed merely as labour export rather than as an opportunity to enrich the nation's strategic capabilities in global health. The Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD, [2019](#)) likewise highlights that countries of origin can benefit from the return of health professionals through skills circulation and knowledge transfer, provided that structured reintegration and co-operation mechanisms are established to retain such human capital.

Despite the maturity of Indonesia's nursing workforce and the increasing sophistication of their international placements (Efendi, McKenna, Reisenhofer, Kurniati, & Has, [2021](#)), formal mechanisms for recognising the knowledge and skills gained abroad remain limited. Many returning nurses possess competencies that could strengthen clinical governance, enrich nursing education, and enhance leadership capacity. Yet these assets often dissipate because of fragmented reintegration pathways and limited institutional recognition (Raharto & Noveria, [2023](#); Permatasari, Hamid, Chandra, Panjaitan, & Asato, [2025](#)).

Evidence from the Indonesia–Japan Economic Partnership Agreement (IJEPA) programme shows that many returnees experience deskilling and downward mobility, as their advanced competencies are not fully utilised upon returning home (Efendi, Mackey, Huang, & Chen, [2015](#)). Similar patterns are observed globally, where internationally educated Asian nurses face systemic barriers in retaining their competencies and advancing professionally after reintegration (Ung, Goh, Poon, Lin, & Seah, [2024](#)). Without deliberate policy interventions, this cycle risks wasting accumulated human capital that could otherwise strengthen the national health system.

It is time to reconceptualise Indonesian nurse migration as cyclical knowledge mobility, where global exposure becomes a strategic input for domestic transformation. Establishing structured reintegration platforms—national skills-recognition frameworks, mentoring networks, and bilateral professional exchanges—would allow Indonesia to transform individual migration journeys into collective advancement. The Philippine experience illustrates how well-organised reintegration and alumni networks of overseas nurses can contribute to national health-system improvement and leadership pipelines (Moncatar, Leyva, Maniacup, Andonaque, & Lorenzo, [2023](#)). Learning from these regional models, Indonesia could develop a Global Indonesian Nurses Network to connect returnees, nursing schools, and policy-makers in shaping curricula, training, and collaborative research.

Nurturing, documenting, and mobilising the narratives of Indonesian nurses abroad is not merely storytelling—it is an act of national strategy. Recognising migration as part of Indonesia's human-capital investment requires a shift in mindset: from exporting labour to leveraging global experience for national resilience and equity (Efendi et al., [2021](#)). In this light, every Indonesian nurse working abroad is not a resource lost, but a bridge connecting the nation to a broader, globally competent healthcare community.

By reframing nurse migration through the lens of human-capital accumulation and cyclical knowledge mobility, Indonesia can transform what was once seen as brain drain into knowledge gain—fueling national development, regional competitiveness, and global health solidarity (Yeates & Pillinger, 2018).

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