Transnational Education Review
2026
Volume: 4, No: 1, pp. 85 - 96
ISSN: 2753-8656 (Print) | ISSN: 2753-8664 (Online)
journals.tplondon.com/ter

TRANSNATIONAL PRESS® LONDON

Received: 12 March 2026 Accepted: 30 May 2026
DOI: https://doi.org/10.33182/ter.v4i1.3271

Graduate Entry Nursing: An Underutilised Solution to Workforce Shortages in the UK and Globally

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Abstract

The global nursing workforce is experiencing unprecedented shortages, with an estimated deficit of 5.9 million nurses worldwide. Graduate Entry Nursing (GEN) programmes, designed for individuals with prior degrees, offer a rapid and flexible pathway to expand the nursing workforce across diverse healthcare systems. This article examines GEN programmes in Australia, New Zealand, the United States, and the United Kingdom, comparing their structures, benefits, and challenges. GEN pathways attract mature, motivated students, often career changers, who bring a wide range of skills and perspectives to the profession. Despite their potential, barriers such as limited clinical placements, restrictive visa policies, and funding constraints impede the growth of GEN programmes, particularly in the UK. The findings support the need for strategic investment and policy reform to fully harness GEN's capacity to strengthen national and global nursing workforces and address context-specific shortages.

Keywords: *Graduate Entry, Nursing, Shortage, Workforce Development*

Introduction

The World Health Organisation (WHO) estimated a global nursing shortage of approximately 5.9 million, highlighting the scale of the workforce crisis (WHO, 2020). Although projections suggest the global nursing deficit may decrease by 2030, shortages are expected to remain substantial in many countries due to ageing populations, workforce attrition, and insufficient numbers entering the profession (WHO, 2020). This shortage threatens healthcare delivery worldwide, driven by factors such as ageing populations, burnout, and insufficient numbers of new entrants through traditional nursing education pathways (Peters, 2023; Home Office, 2024). Traditional nursing programmes alone are unlikely to meet projected workforce demand. The urgency of this situation cannot be overstated; it requires immediate, practical solutions.

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As strategic workforce initiatives, GEN programmes are well positioned to strengthen the resilience and sustainability of the global nursing workforce. By accelerating the preparation of capable graduates and widening access to the profession, GEN programmes offer a potential strategy to address the growing demand for nurses and support the future delivery of healthcare (WHO, 2025). GEN programmes have therefore been proposed as one approach to increasing the supply of registered nurses (RNs) and diversifying the profession's demographic profile (Rafferty, 2018). Interestingly, however, some graduates entering these programmes are already qualified nurses or doctors from outside the host country who are unable to register to practise, meaning that they are not entirely new to the healthcare workforce but are instead re-engaging with the profession through the GEN pathway.

GEN programmes are fast-track pathways designed for individuals holding a prior degree in a non-nursing discipline. These programmes provide an intensive route into the nursing profession, usually resulting in professional registration within 12 to 24 months. This 'intensive route' features a condensed curriculum, often with fewer breaks and a greater workload, to ensure students are thoroughly prepared for the demands of nursing. GEN programmes facilitate quick workforce growth, especially during healthcare crises or shortages. They also support diversity in nursing by attracting graduates with varied life experiences and skills. These qualities can improve clinical decision-making, patient care, and team resilience (Nannen, 2022).

Growing research indicates that GEN students possess distinctive learning profiles. They often demonstrate advanced critical thinking skills, strong peer-learning behaviours, and more rapid development of professional identity (McClunie-Trust et al., 2025). These features suggest that GEN students are not merely accelerated learners; they are a strategically valuable cohort whose educational strengths align well with the complexity of modern nursing practice. Given this, GEN programmes warrant explicit inclusion in national workforce planning, not as a niche option but as a core component of recruitment strategy.

Key Features of GEN Programmes:

- Target audience: Career changers or mature students with a previous degree in another field (e.g., biology, psychology, business, education).
- Accelerated timeline: Completion within 1–2 years, compared to 3–4 years for traditional undergraduate nursing degrees.
- Qualification awarded: A Master of Science in Nursing (MSc Nursing) or an equivalent qualification that fulfils registration requirements.
- Entry requirements: A prior undergraduate degree (2:2 or higher), and often relevant work or volunteer experience in healthcare or related fields.

Global Recruitment in Nursing

Historically, nurses have provided essential care to patients, highlighting the critical role in improving global health outcomes (WHO, 2017). Nursing as a profession has evolved from an apprentice-style model of training to one that requires a university degree and is recognised as a regulated profession internationally (WHO, 2017). Indeed, having sufficient RNs has a direct impact on patient safety, with reduced RN staffing levels increasing the likelihood of death in acute hospital wards (Griffiths et al., 2018).

The role of the nurse was never more essential than during the COVID-19 pandemic, with the nursing workforce undertaking a central role in providing critical care (Buchan & Catton, 2023). However, nursing is in crisis due to an ever-increasing shortage, with Buchan & Catton (2023) reporting this to be a global health emergency. This, in turn, negatively impacts patient safety, a problem that may not be mitigated by replacing RNs with less-trained staff (Griffiths et al., 2018).

WHO (2024) identifies a global shortage of nurses, with multiple factors contributing to it. Projections of supply and demand vary across countries and depend on each country's political and economic landscape (Drennan & Ross, 2019). Therefore, attracting sufficient numbers of nurses into the profession, alongside retaining those who enter, is a critical factor but requires very different strategies. For example, the most strongly supported determinants of nursing turnover are stress and burnout, and job satisfaction (Halter et al., 2017a), whilst interventions such as preceptorship of new graduates and leadership for group cohesion are evidenced to decrease turnover or increase retention (Halter et al., 2017b). Whilst increasing the number of students entering nursing education is not the only solution (Drennan & Ross, 2019), it is necessary to consider innovative ways to attract a more diverse group of students, including men.

Method

This article adopts an integrative review approach, guided by the framework developed by Whittemore and Knafl (2005), to synthesise international literature on GEN programmes and their role in addressing global nursing workforce shortages. Integrative reviews enable the inclusion of diverse sources of evidence, including empirical research, theoretical literature, and policy documents, allowing for a comprehensive understanding of complex healthcare issues.

Search Strategy

Relevant literature was identified through systematic and targeted searches of electronic databases, including CINAHL, PubMed, and Google Scholar. Search terms included combinations of: "graduate entry nursing," "accelerated nursing programmes," "direct-entry nursing," and "nursing workforce shortages." Searches focused primarily on literature published between 2010 and 2025 to ensure

contemporary relevance, while seminal earlier publications were included when considered influential to the development of GEN pathways or workforce policy. Table 1 outlines the inclusion and exclusion criteria.

In addition, grey literature was included to capture policy and workforce perspectives. This included reports and policy documents from organisations such as the World Health Organization (WHO), Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), the Royal College of Nursing (RCN), and NHS England. This approach combined research evidence and policy analysis to provide a broader understanding of the opportunities and challenges associated with GEN programmes globally.

Table 1: Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria

Inclusion	Exclusion
Focused on graduate entry, accelerated, or direct-entry nursing programmes	Focused exclusively on traditional undergraduate nursing programmes without reference to accelerated routes
Addressed nursing workforce development, recruitment, or retention	Not related to nursing education or workforce development
Included empirical research, systematic reviews, policy documents, or workforce reports	Opinion pieces without clear relevance to GEN pathways or workforce policy
Published in English	Were duplicate publications or lacked accessible full text
Relevant to high-income healthcare systems (with emphasis on the UK, Australia, New Zealand, the USA, and Canada)	

Data were organised around key areas, including programme structure, student characteristics, workforce contribution, barriers to implementation, and international policy approaches. Findings were then interpreted in relation to their implications for nursing workforce planning, with particular attention to scalability, sustainability, and equity in recruitment practices.

Findings

The UK faces a significant recruitment crisis that undermines national workforce ambitions and threatens the long-term sustainability of nursing provision (WHO,

2025). The GEN programme is a crucial route for attracting skilled, mature applicants, including career changers with valuable life and professional experience. However, several barriers continue to limit the expansion and uptake of these programmes (RCN, 2024).

These key challenges include funding restrictions, restrictive visa policies, limited placement capacity, and inflexible programme structures. Changes to UK student visa regulations, including restrictions on dependants accompanying international students, have reduced the attractiveness of UK GEN programmes for mature international applicants with families (Home Office, 2024). At the same time, rising placement costs and tuition fee limitations restrict Higher Education Institutions' (HEIs) ability to expand programme capacity (RCN, 2024).

Many GEN students face additional challenges in balancing studies alongside family and caregiving responsibilities. Christensen & Craft (2021) suggest that the intensive nature of accelerated programmes, combined with fixed placement schedules and limited opportunities for part-time study, can create barriers to participation for mature learners. Peters (2023) reports that financial pressures may further discourage applicants, as many students experience a substantial loss of income when leaving employment to undertake full-time study and may have limited access to financial support.

Awareness of GEN pathways also remains relatively low compared with traditional undergraduate nursing degrees and nursing apprenticeships. Misconceptions regarding programme availability, funding opportunities, and career progression may further limit recruitment (McDiarmid et al., 2021). Table 2 summarises the principal barriers affecting GEN programme expansion in the UK.

Despite these challenges, GEN programmes have become established in several countries as part of broader workforce development strategies. Australia, New Zealand, Canada, and the United States have developed accelerated nursing pathways supported by national workforce planning, flexible educational models, and policies that facilitate student recruitment and retention (Warrington et al., 2023)

In the UK, GEN programmes are typically delivered over 18–24 months and are available across all four nations (NMC, 2023). Similar programme durations are seen internationally. In Australia and New Zealand, more than seventeen institutions collectively offer master's level GEN programmes, generally incorporating approximately 1,000 hours of clinical practice. In the United States, Direct-Entry Master of Science in Nursing (MSN) programmes provide accelerated routes into professional registration and remain a recognised pathway for career changers. Although accelerated Bachelor of Science in Nursing (BScN) programmes remain more common in Canada, direct-entry master's programmes are also available at select institutions, such as McGill University.

Table 2: Barriers Affecting Graduate Entry Nursing Programme Expansion

HEIs' Financial Instability (RCN, 2024).	Rising costs and insufficient funding for clinical placements. Low tuition fee caps that don't reflect the real cost of training nurses, especially at the postgraduate level. Reduced international student income (post-visa changes, see below). This limits universities' ability to expand or even sustain GEN pathways.
Visa and Immigration Policy Changes (Home Office announcement (GOV.UK) 2024).	As of 2024, dependents of international students (except for research-based programmes) are no longer allowed under UK visa rules. GEN is not exempt, leading to: Decline in international applications, particularly from mature students with families. Less incentive for international students to choose UK nursing education programmes over countries like Canada or Australia.
Lack of Family-Friendly or Flexible Options (Christensen & Craft, 2021).	Intensive, with fixed full-time schedules, limited ability to study part-time or flexibly. Inflexible clinical placements, which conflict with caring responsibilities. **This creates barriers for:** Career changers, many of whom are parents or caregivers. Mature students who need financial and practical support to transition into nursing.
Inadequate Financial Support for Students (Christensen & Craft, 2021; Peters, 2023).	Insufficient bursaries or living cost support, especially since most graduate entrants have limited access to undergraduate student finance. Opportunity cost of leaving employment to undertake an intensive programme with minimal income. Even with initiatives like the NHS Learning Support Fund, this gap remains critical.
Perception and Awareness Issues (Christensen & Craft, 2021; McDiarmid et al., 2021).	GEN pathways lack visibility compared to traditional undergraduate routes or apprenticeships. Misconceptions persist around: The career progression potential. Availability of funding support. How it differs from traditional pathways.

Internationally, accelerated nursing pathways have demonstrated the potential to broaden participation in nursing, increase workforce diversity, and reduce the time required for qualified practitioners to enter the workforce. Additional examples include Singapore's government-supported Professional Conversion Programmes, which combine financial support with guaranteed employment opportunities following graduation. Current examples of international GEN opportunities are summarised in Box 1 below.

Box 1 Global Opportunities

Australia: More than 10 institutions offer Master-level GEN pathways, with strong national support, structured placements, and graduate visa options. Australian Government Department of Health 2023-2024

New Zealand: The Nursing Council of New Zealand have accredited eight institutions to offer Master-level GEN pathways. www.nursingcouncil.org.nz

United States: Direct Entry MSN programmes attract thousands annually, supported by federal financial aid and fast-track options into advanced practice nursing (AACN, 2022). https://www.aacnnursing.org

Singapore: Professional Conversion Programmes (PCPs) for nursing include government sponsorship and guaranteed job placements upon graduation (MOH Singapore, 2023). Professional Conversion Programmes

UK: MSc Nursing (GEN) programmes are available across England, Wales, Scotland, and Northern Ireland (NHS England, 2024).

Discussion

GEN qualified nurses are increasingly mobile, with credentials recognised across many healthcare systems due to international regulatory alignment (e.g., the EU Directive 2005/36/EC and NCLEX-RN equivalence). Creates a pipeline for global nursing migration and exchange, especially in high-income countries experiencing workforce depletion (OECD, 2021).

Table 3 demonstrates some of the benefits of GEN programmes in addressing the global nursing workforce shortage. GEN programmes offer a high-impact, scalable, and globally adaptable solution to the nursing workforce crisis. They enable rapid training of high-calibre professionals, attract underutilised talent, and support international workforce mobility. To fully harness GEN's potential, global health systems must invest in funding, flexibility, and infrastructure, while promoting the pathway to a broader audience. As a strategic workforce intervention, GEN programmes could significantly strengthen nursing resilience and sustainability worldwide. Include mature student recruitment in national workforce plans (e.g., NHS Long Term Workforce Plan, NHS, 2024). Incentivise HEIs to admit and retain mature

students through outcome-based funding. Reform visa and immigration policies to support mature international applicants with dependents.

Despite the potential benefits of GEN programmes for workforce expansion, international recruitment linked to such pathways raises important ethical considerations. Many high-income countries experiencing nursing shortages increasingly rely on internationally mobile students and healthcare professionals to sustain their workforce. Buchan & Catton (2023) suggest, recruiting nurses or prospective nursing students from countries already experiencing significant workforce shortages may exacerbate existing global health inequalities.

WHO (2025) has addressed these concerns through the WHO Global Code of Practice on the International Recruitment of Health Personnel, which encourages responsible recruitment practices and discourages active recruitment from countries facing critical health workforce shortages. The Code emphasises the importance of strengthening domestic workforce capacity while supporting fair and transparent migration practices.

Within this context, GEN programmes must balance the benefits of attracting internationally mobile students with the need to support global workforce sustainability. While international mobility can facilitate knowledge exchange and professional development, workforce policies should ensure that recruitment strategies do not undermine healthcare systems in lower-resource settings.

Table 3: Benefits of GEN Programmes in Addressing the Global Nursing Workforce Crisis

Key Benefit	Description	Supporting Evidence
Faster Workforce Expansion	A shorter training duration (18–24 months) enables a rapid response to workforce shortages.	McDiarmid et al. (2021)
Attracting Career-Changers	Draws professionals from diverse fields who bring valuable life and work experience.	Jamieson et al. (2020).
Diverse and Inclusive Workforce	Increases age and gender diversity, helping to challenge traditional stereotypes in nursing.	McDiarmid et al. (2021); Harding et al. (2018).
Improved Retention and Commitment	GEN graduates show high motivation and long-term career dedication.	MacDiarmid et al. (2021); Winnington et al. (2023).

WHO (2020) suggests that strengthening domestic training capacity, supporting bilateral partnerships, and promoting ethical recruitment frameworks are essential to

ensuring that GEN programmes contribute positively to both national and global health workforce goals.

Policy Implications

The contribution of GEN programmes should also be considered within the broader context of national workforce planning. In the UK, workforce expansion strategies outlined by the NHS England (2024) emphasise increasing the domestic supply of nurses through multiple educational routes, including undergraduate degrees, apprenticeships, and international recruitment. However, graduate entry pathways remain comparatively underutilised despite their potential to attract mature, highly motivated candidates who may transition rapidly into the workforce. Expanding GEN programmes could complement existing education routes by diversifying recruitment pipelines and drawing on individuals with prior academic and professional experience. Strategic integration of GEN within workforce planning frameworks, supported by sustainable funding models, increased clinical placement capacity, and greater programme flexibility, may therefore represent a pragmatic approach to strengthening nursing supply while maintaining educational quality. Aligning GEN expansion with national workforce strategies could help ensure that these pathways contribute effectively to long-term health system resilience.

Recommendations for supporting GEN students

Supporting GEN students requires targeted strategies that address both structural and individual barriers. Table 4 provides recommendations to support current and future GEN nursing students. Financial constraints remain a key challenge, and initiatives such as scholarships, maintenance support, or loan forgiveness can mitigate these obstacles (RCN, 2024). Flexible learning models, including part-time and blended delivery, help accommodate the diverse commitments of mature students and facilitate sustained engagement (Peters, 2023). Collaborative employer–university funding arrangements, as highlighted in the NHS Long Term Workforce Plan (2024), further enable students to pursue accelerated pathways without prolonged financial disadvantage. Recognising the distinct academic needs of mature students, including prior learning experience and self-directed learning preferences, is essential to optimise outcomes (Drennan & Ross, 2019; Winnington et al., 2023). Finally, proactive outreach and strategies to address negative perceptions of nursing can broaden recruitment and enhance inclusivity among potential GEN candidates (Peters, 2023).

Table 4: Recommendations for supporting GEN students

Support Strategy	Rationale / Evidence	Source
Remove financial barriers & offer support	Reduces cost-related dropout and improves accessibility	RCN (2024)
Offer flexible learning (part-time/blended)	Accommodates mature students' commitments; enhances engagement	Peters (2023)
Employer–university funding model	Shares financial burden, supports accelerated pathways	NHS Long Term Workforce Plan (2024); WHO (2024, 2025)
Address the academic needs of mature students	Recognises prior experience, supports self-directed learning	Drennan & Ross (2019); Winnington et al. (2023)
Outreach & perception initiatives	Improves recruitment, challenges negative stereotypes of nursing	Peters (2023)

Conclusion

As healthcare systems face growing demographic pressures and rising service demand, innovative educational pathways, such as GEN programmes, may play an increasingly important role in ensuring a sustainable and adaptable nursing workforce. GEN programmes represent one potential strategy to address nursing workforce shortages in several high-income countries, including the UK, Australia, New Zealand and the United States. While the structure and scale of these programmes vary across countries, common themes emerge regarding their potential to attract career changers and expand the nursing workforce more rapidly than traditional pathways. However, their effectiveness depends on supportive policy environments, including adequate funding, flexible programme delivery, and immigration policies that enable international participation.

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