

Authors: Rebecca Atanassov | Carolin Böse | Moritz Scholz | Hannah Wolf

Lost nurses:

When the “requirement” of a compensation measure might hinder the recognition procedure and how drop-outs can be prevented.

Results of the BIBB Recognition Monitoring Project



Key points in brief

Around 85,000 nurses who qualified abroad applied for recognition as a general nurse in Germany over the period from 2012 – when the Recognition Act entered into force – up to and including 2021; 60,000 of these nurses had a professional qualification from a third country.

Qualifications from the European Union (EU), the European Economic Area (EEA), and Switzerland are automatically recognised. However, for most nurses with qualifications from third countries, substantial differences between their foreign professional qualification and the German reference occupation mean that successful completion of a compensation measure is required in order to achieve full equivalence. This compensation measure may be a knowledge test or an adaptation period.

Official recognition statistics show that this is precisely the phase during which a significant number of nurses who qualified in third countries terminate or pause the recognition procedure. The German labour market therefore risks losing the capabilities of individuals who qualified abroad; and there are also consequences for the skilled worker personally. This is the focus of the present study.

The assumptions derived from the statistical findings are confirmed by the interviewees in this study. They identify barriers in the process and, for nurses who qualified abroad and received a notice with a “requirement”, they state specific reasons which might cause these nurses to pause the recognition procedure for extended periods or not complete it. The barriers preventing the German labour market from being able to draw on foreign qualifications need to be addressed, because skilled worker immigration is a key tool in resolving staff shortages in nursing occupations. At this stage, nurses who qualified abroad have already invested time and money and, with a notice of this type, they have also been given a realistic chance of full recognition. And full recognition is, in turn, the requirement for being able to work in Germany in the occupation in which they trained and for being appropriately paid as a general nurse. Since skilled workers are desperately needed in the healthcare sector, every effort possible should be made to identify and to remove these barriers.

The compensation measure route represents a significant barrier. There is a particularly high risk of recognition plans being “put on hold” (temporarily or over the long term) even before the start of a compensation measure. This may be because no appropriate compensation measure is offered in the relevant federal state or that, for the nurse who qualified abroad, participation in the compensation measure entails too much uncertainty in terms of the work involved or the associated costs. In some instances, nurses who qualified

abroad do not even expect that a compensation measure will be an official “requirement”, which increases the risk of them dropping out of the process of recognition.

Many of the nurses are also already working as assistants in hospitals or in outpatient care services and opt not to continue with their recognition if a compensation measure is not compatible with their personal circumstances. They prefer their existing employment within familiar structures and with working conditions already agreed upon (such as part-time or specific shifts), even though this work is not as well paid and they are required to perform activities below the level of the qualification for which they have trained.

The findings of the study show that the risk of dropping out or pausing the process of recognition is lower if the nurses who qualified abroad have already started the compensation measure.

In order to ensure that nurses who qualified abroad continue on to full recognition even if compensation measures are required, barriers must be removed for them wherever possible. Offers must be provided nationwide, which requires far greater involvement by employers, such as hospitals and nursing colleges, in order to implement the compensation measures. Cooperative arrangements between different institutions and learning locations may be effective in ensuring successful compensation of substantial differences by means of compensation measures.

Cooperation between learning locations is also a key element in the new nursing training. In this case too, the extent to which compensation measures can be jointly considered should be examined in order to improve implementation in different regions.

Guidance to support nurses who qualified abroad is also advised, in particular because the appropriate route to compensation of substantial differences is frequently dependent on individual circumstances.

Notices (or explanatory comments) from the competent authorities should also be written as straightforwardly as possible in order to best serve as a guide for the next step in the process.

Overall, long breaks or drop-outs can be prevented if, early on, a clear pathway exists with regard to the effort (time and costs) involved and which includes defined stakeholders and supporting structures and which ends in full recognition. Providing greater awareness of funding options should be considered just as early as language learning (also specialist language learning), which is a requirement for a successful compensation measure and for integrating into the labour market at a level appropriate for the qualification gained. The integration and involvement of employers in implementing compensation measures is also important because, by passing on knowledge of the German healthcare system and of day-to-day work, they can act as a key component in the process of long-term integration.