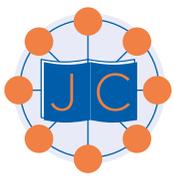


In this article...

- Why it is important to improve the experiences of internationally educated nurses
- How individuals came together through a community of practice to find ways of offering support
- How the principles of positive deviance can be used to make positive change

Supporting internationally educated nurses to stay and thrive in the NHS



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Key points

The scale of international nurse migration has increased in recent years

Nurses from abroad now make up a substantial part of the nursing workforce in England

These nurses must be supported to experience positive personal and professional lives

Certain practices make some teams particularly successful at supporting internationally educated nurses

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Abstract Guided by positive deviance methodology, a community of practice named #StayAndThrive came together to positively influence the experience of internationally educated nurses working in England. Findings suggest that improving the experiences of such nurses can be achieved by creating strong foundations, making new recruits welcome, building a sense of belonging, and maximising personal and professional growth. These four key pillars were developed into a bundle of evidence-based learning tools and recommendations to support internationally educated nurses in practice.

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There is a substantial worldwide shortage of nurses and, in recent years, there has been increased activity of nurse migration across the globe (Buchan et al, 2022). Undoubtedly, there are many benefits for destination countries' health structures, so migrating internationally educated nurses (IENs) are much sought after by employers looking to immediately and effectively fill nursing vacancies (Buchan et al, 2022; NHS, 2019; Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, 2019).

The Nursing and Midwifery Council (NMC) (2023) reported that international nurse recruitment was progressing significantly in the UK and, in particular, from countries such as the Philippines, India and Nigeria. This increase in recruitment activity means nurses from around the world now account for around one in five of all nurses, midwives and nursing associates on the professional practice register in the UK (Baker, 2023; NMC, 2023).

Acknowledging the widespread demand for nurses and appreciating the need to realise sustainability in the longer term, it is important to understand that recruitment alone is an incomplete strategy. Knowing that, globally, many other healthcare systems are also looking to recruit international nurses increases the need for host countries to think competitively and act proactively (Buchan et al, 2022).

England's healthcare system has attributes – such as employment terms and conditions, and opportunities for continuing professional development – that attract IENs (Davda et al, 2018). If these are optimised and actively progressed, England could have a competitive employment offer to help secure longer-term workforce stability (Pressley et al, 2022). Regrettably, when starting work in England, some IENs still experience avertable barriers, such as:

- Challenges with communication, colloquialisms and NHS jargon;
- Discrimination;

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- Placement in areas that do not align with their skillset;
- A lack of personal and professional support networks (Afriyie, 2020; Bond et al, 2020; Stubbs, 2017).

Appreciating and raising the profile of issues that can be addressed to improve the quality of working lives is critical to promoting positive experiences to encourage enculturation of IENs and support them to want to stay working in England (Pressley et al, 2023; Bond, 2022).

Background

In recognition of the need to endorse the working experiences of IENs, #StayAndThrive worked with associated partners between September 2021 and October 2022. The project was centred around a community of practice concept, as described by Wenger-Trayner et al (2023), to bring together people who share concern for improving the experiences of IENs, and guided by a positive deviance methodology to learn from those already doing great work.

Positive deviance is an approach to behavioural and social change that seeks to identify practices that, despite having similar constraints to others, ostensibly and outside of the odds are particularly successful (Herington and van de Fliert, 2018). The methodology aims to initially define and determine what it is that people are doing that works so well, and then to discover and design solutions to overcome problems (Singhal and Dura, 2017). Box 1 describes this process in greater detail.

The #StayAndThrive project group was first established by a small group of senior leaders working in NHS England's South West, and North East and Yorkshire, regions who held regional responsibility for IEN recruitment and retention. Founding senior-leader members of the project engaged in early discussions to identify the positive deviants working in their regions and invited them to join the project group.

Applying the principles of positive deviance means appointing into the position of expert successful frontline workers who, ordinarily, would implement any decisions made. The nominated individuals then lead on designing how to carry out positive change (Sternin et al, 1999). This is an atypical approach to the usual hierarchy associated with change projects in large healthcare systems. Positive deviance methods suggest giving middle management and leaders the role of supporting ideas and making them happen, rather than planning and initiating decisions

Box 1. The positive deviance approach developed for the #StayAndThrive project

- **Stage 1:** Define the problem and the desired outcomes, and reframe the problem positively
- **Stage 2:** Determine who are the positive deviants by identifying teams and individuals that appear to have overcome the problems being addressed
- **Stage 3:** Discover the uncommon and successful practices and strategies used by the positive deviants identified in stage 2 through inquiry methods
- **Stage 4:** Design opportunities to spread knowledge in practice throughout the community

“Many organisations had established programmes achieving wonderful things”

themselves (Herington and van de Fliert, 2018). Once positive deviants had been selected to lead this project, senior-leader members of the project stepped back into supporting roles.

Aim

The ambition was for positive deviants to lead a project group and bring together a community of practice, to discover interventions that could serve as a blueprint to share with other health and social care systems in England. Generative conversations in the project group focused on discovering the practices and strategies used by positive deviants. Members shared insights and learned via case study presentations and stories of lived experiences from IEN colleagues.

Early into the project, it was identified that there were issues with employment support offers for IENs working in England being inconsistently defined and designed. It was felt that this was due to the absence of comprehensive empirical research available on the needs of this group. Due to the recent accelerated pace and scale of international recruitment, some healthcare providers – for example, smaller organisations or, perhaps, those in remote geographical areas – were relatively new to the international nurse recruitment process. That said, many organisations had established programmes achieving wonderful things and it was felt that there was much positive deviance to share with a wider community of practice.

Methodology

Design

Applying a community of practice concept and positive deviance methodology, researchers captured the project's findings. They applied a structured guide observation to study 'social worlds',

defined by Strauss (1978) as “those groupings of individuals bound together by networks of communication who share perspectives on reality”. They observed positive deviants to see what they described doing to positively affect the experiences of IENs working in England.

The project received ethical approval from the School Research Ethics and Integrity Committee at the University of Huddersfield.

Sample and data collection

The 14 positive deviants initially invited to join the project group were recognised by NHS England regional senior leaders as inspirational and working in roles supporting IENs. This group then worked together to host eight community of practice events, each one attended by around 150 participants.

Participants were invited to the community of practice events and, before the events, information and consent forms were circulated to them and completed to ensure all attendees were told about and consented to the observational study.

Data collected was in the form of the observational study of positive deviants sharing insights and learning via case study presentations and stories of practices supporting IEN colleagues.

Data analysis

Thematic analysis of the dataset was conducted alongside observation notes using a six-phase approach to coding and theme development, as set out by Braun and Clarke (2006).

Findings

The group's findings identified four elements that improve the experiences of IENs working in England:

- Creating strong foundations;
- Making new recruits welcome;
- Building a sense of belonging;
- Maximising personal and professional growth.

In each of these areas, employers can enhance the working experiences of IENs.

Creating strong foundations

The importance of promoting and supporting active integration, rather than passive assimilation, was recognised as significant and witnessed in the behaviours of positive deviants. Designing strategies that create inclusive and psychologically safe foundations was identified as a principal way to support IENs to #StayAndThrive. The examples shared by University Hospitals Dorset NHS Foundation Trust described how to create a strong foundation (Box 2).

Making new recruits welcome

There was abundant evidence of the invaluable contribution IENs made to the experiences and health outcomes of people receiving care in England, and yet the community of practice described IENs themselves as often facing challenges when integrating in the workplace and wider society. This discrepancy was something that positive deviants were working tirelessly to correct, and the #StayAndThrive community gave many examples of supporting and enriching the personal and professional lives of this group to demonstrate how this can positively impact on enculturation (Pressley et al, 2022).

University Hospitals Dorset set up an IEN forum to ensure all new recruits were supported to feel welcome and to create a strong foundation. They explained how what may seem like simple and small things – such as information about how to build credit scores, or receiving a warm welcome on arrival – could make all the difference to feeling valued and recognised. Actions like these were integral to creating a culture of support for colleagues who were finding their way living and working in a new country.

It was noted how members of the community of practice were determined to make sure new IENs felt welcomed. Behaviours that stood out highlighted people's thoughtfulness and generosity; copious stories of goodwill gestures of social support were shared, such as sourcing washing machines on Facebook and delivering them free of charge, and there were many accounts of invitations to social events or revision groups set up outside of work in preparation for exams.

Building a sense of belonging

Examples of how belonging has a positive effect on experiences were signalled in many case stories, and positive deviants

Box 2. IEN forum

University Hospitals Dorset NHS Foundation Trust has a monthly forum for IENs recruited by the trust. Forums provide a safe space to discuss experiences and access information on topics such as educational training and career development, childcare and schools' admission processes, and maternity/paternity benefits and finances – for example, how to build credit scores.

IEN = internationally educated nurse

prioritised propagating belonging. York and Scarborough Teaching Hospitals NHS Foundation Trust contributed examples of celebrating cultures to break down communication barriers, promote inclusion, and explore recognising experience and skills through sharing of lived experiences (Box 3), as recommended by Afriye (2020) and Bond et al (2020).

Maximising personal and professional growth

Maximising personal and professional growth was defined as a necessity for IENs to #StayAndThrive. The community shared issues these nurses faced when starting work in England, describing how they had advanced ways to support to overcome challenges; Box 4 features an example of this.

Discussion

The positive deviants had exemplary positive attitudes and were passionate about not only sharing, but also learning how to help IENs. The need to use inclusive language and create protected safe spaces where conversations could take place, as advocated by Baxter and Lawton (2022) and Brown and McCormack (2016), was collectively agreed as a working principle. However, it was soon

established that these principles should also be adopted by all employers wanting to protect the susceptibilities of IENs. By designing ways to promote inclusion and psychological safety, employers were creating conditions that would empower international nurses in work (Bond, 2022; Moyce et al, 2016).

Published studies have highlighted the lack of social support and the detrimental impact this can have (Afriye, 2020; Bond et al, 2020; Stubbs, 2017), but in this study there were many examples of IENs being cared for personally and welcomed into new communities.

Feeling welcome builds a sense of belonging, which can positively affect the migration experience; when individuals feel they belong they are more likely to want to stay (Pressley and Garside, 2023; Bond, 2022). Given the sense of non-belonging commonly reported when IENs do not feel accepted, respected or valued, or part of defined groups (Leone et al, 2020), it was vital to identify ways to build support networks, as with the celebrating culture initiatives in York.

The community of practice also identified prioritising the need to maximise personal and professional growth, and collaborated to find ways to influence and inspire. Members of the group shared many instances of breaking down barriers in ways such as promoting access to leadership programmes and mentoring, or influencing local and regional policy to change.

The importance of learning from communities that succeed can prove invaluable (Baxter and Lawton, 2022). Our findings showcased just a few examples of the many innovative things identified to create strong foundations, promote feeling welcome, build a sense of belonging, and maximise personal and professional growth.

Box 3. Celebrating cultures

York and Scarborough Teaching Hospitals NHS Foundation Trust organised a week to celebrate the cultures of IENs working at the trust. Showcasing different types of cultural expression, the trust promoted cultural diversity through an appreciation of the arts and cultures of the world to promote social inclusion, awareness and a feeling of belonging.

Much was learnt from formal presentations and from IENs sharing their lived experiences. The trust encouraged that, on each day of celebration, IENs tell their stories and share their experiences of migration, and days always ended with sharing foods from each culture.

The celebration week closed with a party to which family and friends were invited, and was attended by more than 400 people. The party involved food, music, dancing and many different games. The week-long initiative provided an opportunity for staff to deepen their understanding of cultural diversity.

IEN = internationally educated nurse

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Positive deviance methodology offers the core idea that knowhow is often held within groups (Baxter and Lawton, 2022), and this certainly transpired throughout this project. The interventions the community described themselves as doing aligned perfectly to that which the wider contemporary empirical literature suggests are the right things to do (Pressley et al, 2023; Pressley et al, 2022; Bowie and de Wet, 2014).

When presented with a challenge and in the face of not having an obvious solution, positive deviants inquisitively set about networking to explore solutions. An observed noted catalyst effect of empowerment was also witnessed between members of the community as stories were told, imaginations were sparked and learning was shared about how to determine, discover and design ways to support IENs.

Further development

Applying these positive deviance methods can bring about wider societal and cultural change (O'Donovan and McAuliffe, 2020). The community generated an infectious sense of increased new power collectively. As momentum grew, the project extended significantly beyond the community of practice events; one spin-off initiative was a #StayAndThrive Twitter (X) campaign that reached an audience of 2.75 million people.

In November 2022, #StayAndThrive extended from a cross-regional collaboration to a national collaboration involving all seven regions of NHS England, while opening invitations to multiprofessional internationally educated colleagues. The #StayAndThrive community of practice now has representation from IENs, midwives, allied health professionals and medics. As the community continues to grow, strength is being seen in learning from positive deviant practices across professions, while highlighting the impact of 'new power' in empowering change in large-scale collaboration.

The focus of #StayAndThrive is to continue its spread-and-scale approach, with the aim to positively impact the experience of all internationally educated colleagues who join the NHS in England. Resources have been developed to help maximise engagement of different audiences in different ways – one of these is the #StayAndThrive podcast, released in February 2024. This seven-part series explores the key emergent research themes identified by Pressley et al (2022), which support the retention of colleagues who have been educated internationally.

Further work is being done to support

Box 4. Promoting career development opportunities

The Rotherham NHS Foundation Trust is actively sponsoring the development and progression of IENs and has recently celebrated several promotions to band 6 positions in clinical areas. IENs at the trust are also doing the professional nurse advocate course to enhance coaching and leadership skills.

IEN = internationally educated nurse

colleagues to design #StayAndThrive learning sessions in their own organisations so additional positive deviance practices can be identified, while centring the experience of international colleagues as a priority agenda item across all organisations. Recommendations are to:

- Continue to be supported by academic research;
- Remain driven by positive deviance methodology;
- Stay collaborative and agile;
- Stand grounded in continuous improvement;
- Encourage the sharing and celebrating of successes.

The #StayAndThrive community was keen to demonstrate tangible results to increase the likelihood of the approach being adopted by others. These learnings have been developed into a bundle of evidence-based tools for employers. Findings have also been incorporated into NHS Employers' International Retention Toolkit, enabling the spread of positive deviant practices to national audiences.

Conclusion

By holding inquisitive and generative conversations, sharing positive stories, and replicating the values and behaviours exemplified by positive deviants, IENs can be supported to #StayAndThrive. It feels pertinent to acknowledge the successes of this collaborative and emboldening project design, but the design was only one part of the success – the project was only able to show its true potential because it was fully embraced by an empowered community and led by exceptional positive deviant individuals who support international nurses who are working in England. **NT**

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