

Where Are We? | Brief Number 3

Evidence Brief

The Attractiveness of Nursing for Prospective and Current Nursing Students

The State of Global Nursing

A catalyst for evidence-based workforce policy

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About the Global Nursing Workforce Centre

A joint initiative of the International Council of Nurses (ICN) and TruMerit® (formerly CGFNS International), the Global Nursing Workforce Centre is a clearinghouse for research from around the world focusing on the nursing workforce. In addition to collecting and organizing nursing workforce research papers and publications, the Centre analyzes findings to identify trends, summarizes policy recommendations, and highlights data and policy gaps. Its goal is to influence policy, improve working conditions, and enhance the quality of patient care across diverse health systems.

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Purpose of this evidence brief series

This series of evidence briefs has been developed by the Global Nursing Workforce Centre (GNWC) to synthesize current research on priority issues shaping the nursing workforce. Each brief addresses a key question within the GNWC's broader research framework and provides a focused, evidence-informed overview of a topic relevant to workforce sustainability.

Together, these briefs are intended to support understanding of complex workforce challenges and to identify forward-looking opportunities. They are designed to inform a broad audience, including policymakers, healthcare administrators, researchers, educators, and professional organizations engaged in nursing workforce planning and development.

These briefs will appear on a periodic basis, focusing on specific topics. Researchers interested in pursuing nursing workforce research are encouraged to reach out to Dr. Lynne Moronski, Research Scientist for the GNWC, for information and communication. Dr. Moronski can be reached at lmoronski@trumerit.org.

Introduction

Within the GNWC's research framework, a central theme concerns the attractiveness of nursing as a career choice. Understanding what influences individuals to enter or decide against entering the profession is foundational to workforce planning.

Attractiveness reflects how nursing is perceived by prospective students and early-career entrants, including perceptions of professional image, career mobility, compensation, working conditions, and alignment with personal aspirations.

This brief synthesizes current evidence on the determinants of nursing attractiveness and highlights implications for policymakers, educators, workforce leaders, and the public. The included studies span 42 countries (see the Appendix for full mapping) across all major world regions, enabling cross-country comparison and global benchmarking.

Framework question: How does the understanding of the values of the newer generations influence the long-term desirability and sustainability of the nursing profession?

Research question: What factors shape the attractiveness of nursing as a career among prospective nursing students and current nursing students?



Key themes

Across settings, nursing's attractiveness reflects a push–pull balance between prosocial motivations (e.g., helping others) and pragmatic considerations (e.g., job security), alongside powerful deterrents tied to work sustainability (Glerean et al., 2019; Gunawan et al., 2025; Jirwe & Rudman, 2012; Wu et al., 2015).

Professional image/status and media/recruitment messaging shape interest before entry and can either reinforce or undermine intent to pursue nursing (Duan et al., 2024; Glerean et al., 2019).

Workplace conditions and burnout narratives operate as upstream deterrents, affecting perceived viability of nursing and linking both recruitment and retention (Dall'Ora et al., 2020).

Career development, flexibility, and work–life balance are increasingly salient, particularly among newer cohorts, and interact with perceptions of status and sustainability (Kim et al., 2025; Lommi et al., 2024).

Background and rationale

Health systems face persistent nursing workforce challenges, and the “attractiveness” of nursing as a career is shaped well before graduation among applicants/prospective students and current nursing students. Evidence in this brief spans qualitative studies of motivations and perceptions (Glerean et al., 2019; Zamanzadeh et al., 2023), cross–sectional studies linking perceptions with intention to enter (Talman et al., 2024) or to leave nursing (Kandil et al., 2021), and broader syntheses of career–choice drivers and deterrents (Gunawan et al., 2025; Wu et al., 2015), complemented by evidence on burnout and organizational attractiveness (Dall'Ora et al., 2020; Karjalainen et al., 2025).

Methodology

A targeted search was conducted in PubMed using the following strategy: (“nursing student*” OR “student nurse” OR “prospective nurse*” OR applicant*) AND (“career choice” OR “career attractiveness” OR “career preference”) AND (attractiveness OR perception OR motivation OR “professional image” OR “organizational attractiveness” OR brand*). Searches were limited to English–language publications from the past 10 years, yielding 302 records. Studies were screened for relevance to nursing career attractiveness among prospective applicants and nursing students. A purposeful subset of studies was selected to illustrate key, recurring themes identified across the evidence base, with priority given to studies that were methodologically robust, conceptually clear, and frequently cited in related syntheses. A full mapping of included studies to thematic domains is provided in the Appendix following the reference list, with data drawn from 42 distinct countries across North America, Latin America, Europe, the Middle East, Africa, Asia, and Oceania.

What the evidence shows: thematic synthesis

Altruism, moral identity, and social contribution (pull factors)

Students frequently describe nursing as a calling grounded in helping others and contributing to society (Ait Ali et al., 2024; Kim et al., 2025). Review of evidence similarly identifies altruism as a consistent driver across contexts (Gunawan et al., 2025). Recruitment strategies that authentically reflect nursing's social contribution may resonate, especially when paired with realistic descriptions of working conditions (Ben Natan & Hazanov, 2025).

Employment security and pragmatic/economic considerations (pull factors with limits)

Job security and employability repeatedly emerge as important reasons for choosing nursing (Ait Ali et al., 2024). External, job-related motivators (including pragmatic considerations such as employment prospects and job security) were among the most highly ranked factors influencing nursing discipline choice (Hosseini Marznaki et al., 2021). Broader syntheses show that employability is a durable driver but coexists with persistent deterrents (Gunawan et al., 2025; Wu et al., 2015). Nursing attractiveness is also influenced by perceptions of pay relative to workload, responsibility, and emotional demands. While job security attracts entrants, concerns about pay–effort mismatch and limited long-term financial progression can undermine nursing's appeal as a sustainable career choice (Wu et al., 2015; Gunawan et al., 2025).

Professional image, status, and social recognition (high-leverage determinant)

Perceptions of nursing status and public image shape interest prior to entry and during training. Applicants' perceptions are influenced by media portrayals and personal encounters with nurses (Glerean et al., 2019). Concept and integrative analyses highlight tensions between “traditional caring” narratives and contemporary expectations of professionalism, autonomy, and technical competence (Duan et al., 2024; Moghbeli et al., 2025). Recruitment messaging can be misaligned with lived realities, contributing to dissatisfaction (Glerean et al., 2019). Image is not superficial: it is a pipeline factor. Monitoring image with validated tools can strengthen evaluation of recruitment and branding strategies (Glerean et al., 2019; Gunawan et al., 2025). Nursing's professional image is also shaped by persistent, gendered stereotypes that influence perceptions of status and value. The strong association of nursing with feminized caring roles has been shown to affect its social and economic valuation and remains a deterrent for some prospective entrants, particularly men (Yi & Keogh, 2016; Duan et al., 2024).

Workplace conditions, burnout, and sustainability (dominant deterrent)

Evidence consistently links poor working conditions and burnout to diminished professional appeal. A theoretical review describes burnout through organizational and workforce lenses, emphasizing system drivers (e.g., staffing/workload) that undermine sustainability (Dall'Ora et al., 2020). Students' negative perceptions of workload and future prospects are associated with intent to leave programs (Kandil et al., 2021). Deterrents to choosing nursing across health students include workload/stress and perceived status issues (Wu et al., 2015). Workforce conditions influence career attractiveness upstream; efforts to recruit without addressing workload and support risk weaker retention.

Career development, flexibility, and work–life balance (increasingly salient)

Recent work indicates growing emphasis on role diversity, career flexibility, and work–life balance, particularly for newer cohorts (Kim et al., 2025; Lommi et al., 2024). Students' outcome expectations and job satisfaction are associated with informal learning and early workplace experiences, reinforcing that placements matter for commitment (Anselmann & Anselmann, 2025). Career pathways and development opportunities can be made visible early (during recruitment and placements) rather than after graduation.

Education pathways, early exposure, and recruitment strategies (modifiable entry points)

Evidence suggests pre-entry and early training experiences can strengthen (or weaken) attractiveness, as applicants' desire to work in nursing appears shaped by early perceptions formed prior to entry (Talman et al., 2024). Recruitment strategies, such as targeted outreach, positive professional messaging, and early exposure initiatives, are frequently identified in the literature, although the rigor of their evaluation varies (Ben Natan & Hazanov, 2025). Evidence supports early exposure and messaging interventions, but stronger evaluation designs are needed to determine which approaches produce sustained effects (Ben Natan & Hazanov, 2025).



Forward-looking opportunities

The evidence synthesized in this brief does not point to a single intervention or linear solution. Rather, it consistently demonstrates that the attractiveness of nursing is a system-level outcome shaped by a set of interrelated structural, organizational, and policy conditions. This creates opportunities for policymakers, employers, and educators to enhance the appeal and long-term sustainability of nursing careers.

Align recruitment messaging with lived realities.

- Recruitment strategies can balance prosocial motivations with an accurate portrayal of workload, emotional demands, and available supports to reduce misalignment between support and experience (Ben Natan & Hazanov, 2025).
- Professional image may be monitored over time using validated measures to inform recruitment and communication strategies (Koob et al., 2025; Duan et al., 2024).

Ensure high-quality early clinical exposure and student support.

- Health systems and educational institutions may ensure that placements are well-supported and psychologically safe, as early experiences shape long-term career commitment (Anselmann & Anselmann, 2025; Talman et al., 2024).
- Structural drivers of workload and emotional demand, such as staffing and work environment, can be addressed, as these conditions influence both student perceptions and workforce sustainability (Dall'Ora et al., 2020).

Make career pathways visible, flexible, and attainable.

- Clear and accessible career pathways, including specialization and advancement opportunities, may be made visible early in training and reinforced throughout education (Kim et al., 2025; Lommi et al., 2024).
- Organizational learning opportunities and leadership structures can support career development and reinforce long-term engagement in the profession (Anselmann & Anselmann, 2025).

Address compensation and economic stability.

- Compensation structures can be evaluated in relation to workload, responsibility, and emotional demands to ensure nursing remains a financially sustainable career option (Wu et al., 2015; Gunawan et al., 2025).
- Persistent perceptions of pay-effort mismatch and limited financial progression can be addressed at policy and system levels, as they directly undermine the long-term attractiveness of the profession (Wu et al., 2015; Gunawan et al., 2025).

Strengthen professional image and address gendered perceptions.

- Efforts to modernize nursing's image may address gendered stereotypes and broaden representation, particularly to mitigate deterrents among underrepresented groups (Yi & Keogh, 2016; Duan et al., 2024).
- Professional messaging can reflect the full scope of nursing practice, including technical expertise, autonomy, and leadership roles, to improve perceived status and attract a wider applicant pool (Duan et al., 2024; Moghbeli et al., 2025).



Prioritize workforce sustainability as a recruitment strategy.

- Policies can address staffing levels, workload, and work environment, as these are central determinants of both recruitment and retention (Dall’Ora et al., 2020).
- Efforts to improve workplace conditions can be understood as foundational to strengthening the long-term appeal and viability of nursing careers (Kandil et al., 2021; Wu et al., 2015).

Discussion

The findings of this evidence brief reinforce that the attractiveness of nursing is not driven by a single factor, but by a dynamic interplay between individual motivations and structural realities. Across the evidence, a consistent pattern emerges while prosocial motivations such as altruism and the desire to contribute to society remain strong entry drivers, they are increasingly counterbalanced by concerns related to workload, burnout, professional status, and long-term sustainability (Ait Ali et al., 2024; Gunawan et al., 2025; Wu et al., 2015).

This tension highlights misalignment within current workforce strategies. Efforts to strengthen the nursing pipeline often emphasize recruitment, messaging, and individual motivations. However, the evidence suggests that perceptions of workplace conditions, which are formed early and reinforced through training and media narratives, play a decisive role in shaping both entry and retention (Dall’Ora et al., 2020; Glerean et al., 2019; Kandil et al., 2021). In this sense, attractiveness functions as a system-level indicator, reflecting the underlying health of the work environment rather than a discrete, modifiable perception alone.

Importantly, several themes identified in this brief operate across the full workforce trajectory. Workplace conditions, professional image, and career development opportunities influence not only initial career choice but also persistence within the profession (Duan et al., 2024; Kim et al., 2025; Lommi et al., 2024). This suggests the need to move beyond siloed approaches that treat recruitment and retention as separate challenges. Policies that improve work environments, support career progression, and enhance professional recognition are, therefore, likely to have dual benefits for both attracting and retaining nurses (Dall’Ora et al., 2020; Gunawan et al., 2025).

The findings also point to the growing importance of generational expectations. Newer cohorts place greater emphasis on flexibility, work-life balance, and career mobility, suggesting that traditional narratives of nursing as a purely altruistic vocation may no longer be sufficient (Kim et al., 2025; Lommi et al., 2024). At the same time, persistent structural issues, including pay-effort mismatch and gendered perceptions of the profession, continue to shape its perceived value and desirability (Wu et al., 2015; Yi & Keogh, 2016).

Taken together, the evidence suggests that improving the attractiveness of nursing is associated with coordinated action across education, health systems, and policy domains. Interventions that focus solely on messaging or recruitment without addressing underlying structural conditions are less likely to produce sustained improvements in workforce supply (Ben Natan & Hazanov, 2025; Dall’Ora et al., 2020).

Evidence gaps and limitations

The literature search is restricted to English-language publications, which may result in the exclusion of relevant studies.

- Many studies emphasize associations and perceptions; causal inference is limited (Dall’Ora et al., 2020; Talman et al., 2024).
- Recruitment strategy evidence varies in evaluation rigor and comparability (Ben Natan & Hazanov, 2025).
- Definitions and measurement of “attractiveness” and “image” remain heterogeneous, though measurement tools such as the Nurse Brand Image Scale are emerging (Koob et al., 2025).
- Cross-context transferability may be limited by differences in training pathways, labor markets, and social status dynamics (Gunawan et al., 2025).

Future research

The current evidence base identifies important and consistent themes but remains limited in strength and generalizability. Much of the literature relies on cross-sectional designs and self-reported perceptions, limiting causal inference and the ability to assess how attractiveness evolves over time (Talman et al., 2024; Gunawan et al., 2025). Further empirical studies are needed to validate these findings and strengthen the evidence base. There is a clear need for research that examines whether these patterns hold across diverse regions, income settings, and models of care, particularly in low- and middle-income contexts where workforce dynamics and educational pathways differ substantially (Gunawan et al., 2025).

As indicated within this analysis, several important domains remain underexplored and warrant focused investigation. One underexplored area is the role of early educational access in shaping entry into nursing. In particular, limited exposure to foundational science education at the secondary level may constrain eligibility for nursing programs and restrict the pipeline before formal application. This barrier is likely to disproportionately affect students from low-income communities, potentially reinforcing inequities in access to nursing education. Empirical studies are needed to examine how pre-entry academic preparation influences application, admission, and progression into nursing pathways.

Future research may also prioritize:

- Longitudinal studies that track perceptions of nursing from pre-entry through early career to better understand how attractiveness changes over time (Talman et al., 2024).
- Rigorous evaluations of recruitment and early exposure strategies to determine which approaches produce sustained effects (Ben Natan & Hazanov, 2025).
- Greater conceptual and measurement consistency for constructs such as “attractiveness” and “professional image,” including the use of validated tools (Duan et al., 2024; Koob et al., 2025).
- Empirical studies linking structural workforce conditions (e.g., staffing, work environment, compensation) to upstream perceptions of career desirability (Dall’Ora et al., 2020; Wu et al., 2015).

Taken together, the available evidence supports a shift from descriptive studies of perception toward a more integrated research agenda that examines how structural conditions, educational access, and workforce realities interact to shape the nursing pipeline over time.

Conclusion

The attractiveness of nursing as a career is shaped by a consistent set of drivers (altruism, job security, and professional image) and a set of powerful deterrents centered on work sustainability (workload, burnout, and perceived future prospects). Taken together, the evidence suggests that the attractiveness of nursing functions less as an isolated perception and more as a system-level signal of underlying workforce conditions. Factors influencing entry into the profession, such as professional image, early exposure, and perceived career opportunities, are closely intertwined with the same structural realities that shape retention, including workload, compensation, and work environment. This reinforces that recruitment and retention are unlikely to be best addressed as separate challenges and may instead be approached as a continuous pipeline shaped by educational access, workplace sustainability, and policy context.

As the field moves forward, strengthening the evidence base may necessitate a shift beyond descriptive studies toward integrated, longitudinal approaches that examine how these factors could interact over time and across contexts. Efforts to improve the attractiveness of nursing are, therefore, less likely to succeed if limited to messaging or recruitment strategies alone. Rather, the evidence suggests that attractiveness is shaped by broader workforce conditions, equitable access to education, and coherent career pathways that collectively influence long-term engagement in the profession.



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Appendix: Study-to-theme mapping of included literature

Author (Year)	Study design	Population	Primary focus	Themes addressed*
Ait Ali et al. (2024)	Cross-sectional	Nursing students (Morocco)	Career motivations	1, 2
Anselmann & Anselmann (2025)	Cross-sectional	Nursing students (Germany)	Perceptions, job satisfaction, learning	5, 6
Ben Natan & Hazanov (2025)	Systematic review	High school students, Nursing students (and 1 study with early career nurses) (Australia, Bahrain, Israel, Singapore, U.K., U.S.)	Recruitment strategies	1, 2, 3, 6
Dall'Ora et al. (2020)	Theoretical review	Nurses (North America, Europe, Asia, Other)	Burnout and work conditions	4
Duan et al. (2024)	Concept analysis	Public/profession ("Arab", Armenia, Australia, Canada, China, England, Ethiopia, Finland, Georgia, Ghana, Greece, Iran, Israel, Italy, Netherlands, Pakistan, South Africa, Spain, Taiwan, Turkey, United States)	Public image of nursing	3
Glerean et al. (2019)	Qualitative (FG)	Nursing applicants (Finland)	Pre-entry perceptions	3, 5, 6
Gunawan et al. (2025)	Scoping review	Nursing students (Singapore)	Career choice drivers	1, 2, 3
Hosseini Marznaki et al. (2021)	Quantitative (FHA)	Nursing students (Iran)	Ranked career choice factors	2
Jirwe & Rudman (2012)	Cross-sectional	Nursing students (Sweden)	Motivations for choosing nursing	1
Kandil et al. (2021)	Cross-sectional	Nursing students (Saudi Arabia)	Preference and intent to leave	1, 3, 5
Kim et al. (2025)	Qualitative	Nursing students (Australia)	Call to care and career flexibility	1, 3, 5
Lommi et al. (2024)	Quantitative (pilot)	Gen Z nursing students (Italy)	Career decision factors	3, 5

Moghbeli et al. (2025)	Integrative review	Public image of nursing (Armenia, Australia, Brazil, Canada, China, Croatia, Egypt, Ghana, Indonesia, Iran, Israel, Italy, Republic of Georgia, Greece, Iran, Italy, Korea, Pakistan, Poland, Saudi Arabia, Spain, Taiwan, Turkey, United Kingdom, United States)	Public image challenges	3, 6
Salminen-Tuomaala (2024)	Narrative review	Mixed (Finland)	Attractiveness of nursing	2, 3, 4
Talman et al. (2024)	Cross-sectional	Nursing applicants (Finland)	Desire to work in nursing	1, 6
Wu et al. (2015)	Systematic review	Health students (Brazil, Peru, Greece, India, Iran, Ireland, Israel, Jordan, Malaysia, Nepal, Nigeria, Norway, Pakistan, South Africa, Sweden, Turkey, United Arab Emirates, United Kingdom, United States)	Deterrents to nursing	1, 2, 3
Yi & Keogh (2016)	Qualitative SR	Male nursing students (Canada, Iran, Ireland, New Zealand, Taiwan, United States)	Gendered motivations	1, 3
Zamanzadeh et al. (2023)	Qualitative	Nursing applicants (Iran)	Professional perceptions	1, 2, 3

*Themes:

- 1 = Altruism & moral identity
- 2 = Employment security & pragmatism
- 3 = Professional image & status
- 4 = Workplace conditions & burnout
- 5 = Career development & work-life balance
- 6 = Education pathways & recruitment messaging