

International Migration Opportunities and Occupational Choice:
Evidence from Philippine Nursing Students

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Short abstract

With globalization, the migration of health care workers from developing countries to developed countries has accelerated, leading to renewed concern about brain drain. However, increased opportunities for skilled work in developed countries might result in a brain gain if more students decide to become nurses than can find work abroad. The Philippines provides an ideal setting to study whether brain gain might occur because it is the world's largest source country of nurse migrants. In addition, the nursing education sector is very flexible and is dominated by private universities that are responsive to market signals. Based on focus group discussion data and survey data obtained from nursing students in the Philippines, we examine students' motivations to become nurses and to what extent their choices were affected by the possibility of international migration. We analyze recent trends in nursing education in the Philippines in the context of international nurse migration.

Extended abstract

If the expanded international demand for nurses provides sufficient incentives for individuals to pursue higher education, and not all qualified nurses are able to obtain employment abroad, then globalization might result in a brain gain rather than a brain drain. If brain gain does occur, the nursing sector in the Philippines presents a favorable context. The nursing educational system is heavily skewed towards private education. The sector was able to expand rapidly in the mid 2000s in response to strong demand with established programs increasing their enrollments and the openings of new schools.

However, in the past two years, international demand for nurses has slowed down. At the same time, the large nursing school cohorts that decided to enroll in the peak years for international demand are graduating at a time when there are fewer international opportunities. Graduates in 2007 and 2008 are finding it difficult to find jobs. Hospitals in developed countries typically require 1 to 2 years of tertiary hospital experience. Philippine hospitals have responded to the new climate by taking on volunteer nurses and in some cases by charging recent graduates to work in the hospitals.

To examine the response of the Philippine nursing education sector to international demand, we conducted interviews with nursing school deans, public health officials, nursing researchers, and hospital nurse staffing directors. We asked about trends in enrollment, job prospects for graduates, and the quality of nurse education.

To examine the extent to which nursing students decide to become nurses because of the possibility of migrating to a developed country, we conducted 8 focus groups with Philippine nursing students in 4 nursing schools and universities. The focus groups were segregated by gender and occurred in 3 universities in Manila and one university in the Visayas region south of Manila. The focus group questions included items about intentions to migrate, motivations to migrate, and the extent to which the possibility of international migration affected the

students' decisions to become nurses. We also asked questions designed to elicit information about what students know about international migration and whether these perceptions are accurate. Another topic of discussion was the attributes of migration destinations, and whether students would prefer temporary or long-term contracts.

In addition, we conducted 2 focus groups discussions with education students who intended to become Philippine history teachers. This group is contrasted with nurses, because an international market for Philippine history teachers is very small.

All focus group participants filled out a survey with quantitative data including the amounts paid for tuition, room and board, food, and transportation. The survey included questions about parents' education and occupation, whether any relatives currently lived abroad, and preferred migrant destinations.

We find strong evidence that in the Philippines, international nurse migration is contributing to a brain gain. Almost all of the students we interviewed were motivated to become nurses because of the possibility of obtaining a job in the United States, UK, or Canada. The requirement that nurses obtain 1-2 years of hospital experience to obtain jobs abroad leads to a glut of newly graduated nurses in Philippine hospitals. However, although the number of nurses has increased, the Philippine health care system faces the problem that experienced nurses and the graduates of the most highly ranked universities are migrating, leaving nurses with lower skills behind. Nursing enrollments respond to international demand. Nursing deans report lowered enrollment this year as the media spread the word that migration to the US is becoming more difficult.