

What happens when a changing migration infrastructure meets COVID-19 pandemic: the analysis of migrant workforce dynamics in the UK healthcare sector

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From the start of COVID-19 pandemic, healthcare work has been identified as one of high-skilled key occupations with a high proportion of migrant professionals (Fasani and Mazza, 2020). In the UK, prior to the pandemic, health professional bodies expressed concerns over migrant workforce shortages and staff retention in the field of nursing due to Brexit (RCN, 2020); during the pandemic significant regulatory changes were introduced in respect to migrant healthcare workers. The overlap of two major developments –the pandemic and Brexit, provides a background for the analysis. Drawing on the concept of migration infrastructure (Xiang and Lindquist, 2014) and industrial relations oriented studies of migrant nurses in the UK (Bach, 2010), this paper considers how various actors have responded to shocks related to COVID-19 and Brexit and examines the ways in which it has affected their engagement with healthcare migrant workers. The analysis relies on primary data collected in late 2020 and early 2021, mainly interviews with a senior healthcare HR consultant (previously the director of NHS hospital trust), a Health Education England international recruitment manager and leaders of associations representing Filipino and Indian nurses in the UK. The interpretation of data focuses on how Brexit and COVID-19 have affected employers and migrant workforce. While the analysis points to instabilities related to Brexit and vulnerabilities heightened by COVID-19, the interpretation of interviews with migrant nurses' association groups also finds evidence supporting suggestions that the COVID-19 crisis may have strengthened migrant rights' advocacy (Isaac and Elrick, 2020).

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