



# Management Summary to report: Professional Careers in Nursing

Results of a longitudinal study after entrance into the profession of nurses and findings from a combined data set with data to nurses and healthcare assistants

René Schaffert<sup>1</sup> (Ed.)

With the collaboration of  
Ines Trede<sup>2</sup>, Miriam Grønning<sup>2</sup>, Miriam Hänni<sup>2</sup>,  
Andreas Bänziger<sup>1</sup>, Esther Helfenstein<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> ZHAW Zurich University of Applied Sciences,  
Institute of Health Sciences

<sup>2</sup> SFUVET Swiss Federal University for Vocational Education and  
Training, Swiss Observatory for Vocational Education and Training

Forschungsstelle  
**Gesundheits-  
wissenschaften**

# Management Summary

In a long-term study, the ZHAW Institute of Health Sciences investigated the early professional careers of nurses. Nurses graduating in 2011/12 with degrees from universities of applied sciences and colleges of higher education were followed over three survey waves until about six years after entering the profession (last study year, one and six years after graduation). The results reveal reasons for career decisions in the first years of employment and point to possible measures to increase retention. Supplementary analyses were carried out in a combined data set with data from the ZHAW survey and data from the long-term survey on career paths of healthcare assistants of the Swiss Federal University for Vocational Education and Training (SFUVET).

More than 600 nursing graduates from the cohort graduating in 2011/12 took part in the third and final survey around six years after entering the profession. This corresponds to 38 percent of all graduates of this year at Swiss colleges of higher education and universities of applied sciences. With a response rate of 48 percent, healthcare assistants who were surveyed by the SFUVET five years after entering the profession responded more often. In the combined data set with nurses and healthcare assistants, there are around 1400 cases for which data are available from all three surveys.

As the findings show, that for many graduate nurses the first years of professional life represent a phase of intensive career development. They switch frequently between jobs and functions and deepen their professional knowledge in trainings and continuing education. The proportion of those who have already left the profession is still low, compared to later years. However, already in these early years, it is possible to identify the main reasons why nurses are leaving the profession or considering doing so: The current conditions in the nursing profession are too stressful and contradict the main needs of nurses.

Possible measures to increase retention can be drawn from the investigation of professional careers. For example, nurses' specifications of differences between idealized work values and professional reality, as well as additional conditions for career retention mentioned by nurses as summarized below.

Primary starting points for retention strategies can be found,

- in the high intention of nurses to remain in the profession if the situation improves,
- in the perceived lack of compatibility between work and private or family life,
- in the mostly unfulfilled expectations of nurses for their professional future,
- in the high workload and its effects on private life and health,
- in the recognition of care by management and by means of higher wages, and
- in facilitating transitions between fields and levels of education.

### **If conditions improve, most nurses would stay in the profession for a long time.**

Six years after entering the profession, the nurses show a strong commitment to the profession. Nine out of ten can imagine working in the nursing sector in the following ten years. However, half of them expect the situation in the nursing sector to improve. This result points to a great potential for improvement in the conditions of the nursing profession in order to increase retention.

### **The reality of the workplace is at odds with core values to the professional future.**

With regard to their professional future, it is most important to the nurses surveyed to have enough time for their private life and to be able to combine work and family life well. This is shown by the participants' weighting of twelve aspects of their professional future: The top four prioritized aspects for their professional future included: 1) Time for private life 2) Work family compatibility 3) Work meaningfulness, and 4) Personal skill utility. What stands out is that the good compatibility of work life with private or family life has gained in importance in the first professional years and is even more important six years after graduation than in the first year.

However, these expectations are at odds with the perceived reality at work. When the reality of the professional life is assessed on the basis of the same twelve aspects, the aspects "having time for private life" and "compatibility of work and family" are only in second and third last place in the ranking. There are also clear discrepancies between expectations and reality with regard to wages and the ability to use own skills. However, expectations are exceeded with regard to the availability of jobs and contact with clients.

The perceived discrepancies with regard to the two aspects of compatibility and time for private life are interrelated with professional satisfaction and the frequency of thoughts about leaving the profession. The more pronounced a nurse experiences a negative discrepancy (unfulfilled expectations), the more often they think about leaving the profession and the less satisfied they are with the professional situation. Statistically, correlations of  $-0.29$  (Spearman's Rho, sign.  $p < 0.01$ ) were found between satisfaction and discrepancies in compatibility, and  $-0.28$  ( $p < 0.01$ ) between satisfaction and discrepancies in time for private life. Concerning exit thoughts, correlations of  $0.19$  with discrepancies in compatibility and  $0.22$  with time for private life were found (sign.  $p < 0.01$ ).

### **The lack of reconciliation between work and private or family life prevent people from remaining in the profession.**

Six years after completing their training, 5% of qualified nurses have changed to another profession and a further 5% are not working, mainly for family reasons. The majority of those who left the profession justified their decision with the better working hours in the new occupation (62%). Two out of five (42%) also refer to better conditions for reconciling work and family. Reconciliation problems, however, are not only at the forefront of the dropouts; they are also cited by around half of the part-time workers as a reason for their part-time work. When rating the conditions for remaining in the profession for a longer time, nurses also attach great importance to the conditions for reconciliation of work and family. Almost three quarters (72%) of those who answered this question expect an improvement in order to remain in the profession. More than half (51%) also expect an improvement in irregular working hours in order to stay in the profession.

As measures to reduce reconciliation problems, study participants most frequently mention offering low-percentage part-time work models, more regularity in working days and work schedule, more flexibility in accounting for nurses' needs, and more suitable childcare options.

### **Working conditions put a strain on health and have an impact on private life.**

More than half of the nurses surveyed (55%) often feel tired and tense because of stress at work. Likewise, more than half feel that their leisure activities are noticeably restricted because of stress at work (54%). Around 46 percent of nurses also state that work puts a strain on their health; 43 percent cite negative effects of work stress on their private lives. These findings are supported by the reasons for working part-time, where almost one-third of part-time workers (30%) say that a full-time job is too physically and mentally demanding.

Overall, a majority of around 80 percent of the nurses rate both their mental and physical health as good or very good. However, this value is low, compared to self-assessed health of same-aged women in the general population. In a similar question in the Swiss Health Survey, over 90 percent of women between 25 and 35 state that they have good to very good health.

Those nurses who assess their health as poorer think more often about leaving the profession (correlation mental health - thoughts of leaving: Spearman's Rho = 0.30, sign.  $p < 0.001$ ). Those who "rarely" to "sometimes" think about leaving the profession show as 87 percent on good to very good mental health. This proportion is significantly lower, at 59 percent, among those who often to very often think about leaving their profession. Accordingly, those who often feel tense and tired due to the stresses at work or who feel that their health is being put under strain by their work also think more often about leaving their profession (both correlations: Spearman's Rho = 0.37, sign.  $p < 0.001$ ).

### **Nurses expect more recognition by the management and through better wages.**

For longer-term retention in the profession, 57 percent of nurses expect better support from higher-level management, and almost nine out of ten (87%) expect an improvement in wages. The lack of recognition through pay is also manifested in the discrepancy between the importance of pay for the professional future and the assessment of professional reality in this regard. Although the wage ranks only sixth in the values for the professional future, in the assessment of the nursing profession, the wage receives the lowest ranking. This pronounced dissatisfaction with pay and the perceived lack of support point to a need for greater recognition of nurses in companies and in society.

Measures to improve wages would mostly have to be initiated at the political level, as companies have little leeway due to cost pressure. At the level of the institutions, there is room for manoeuvring when it comes to better supporting nurses through higher-level management. In text responses, participants refer to aspects such as the visibility of leaders at the grassroots level and transparency in decision-making. Another important issue is a tension perceived by nurses between profitability and quality of care. Here, some explicitly wish for a stronger focus on quality than on economic arguments. As one nurse puts it in a nutshell: "Less economy, more care".

### **Support mobility between fields of work and levels of training and facilitate career entry.**

With an average of 2.6 jobs in the first six years after entering the profession, nurses show a high job turnover. These job changes often occur due to individual interests such as better job offers, not liking the job, or starting an education.

If the career paths of healthcare assistants and nurses are considered together, patterns emerge that also represent starting points for reducing the workforce shortage. Concerning mobility between healthcare sectors, more nurses and healthcare assistants move to the acute care sector than to other sectors in the first few years after graduation, while the long-term sector loses skilled

staff. However, mobility differs between nurses and healthcare assistants. While the majority of healthcare assistants who start nursing studies move to the acute care sector, healthcare assistants who re-main in their occupation, more often move to the home-care sector. Among nurses, the most significant mobility is from the various other areas to the acute-care sector.

Based on these findings, it can be recommended to improve attractiveness of the long-term care sector as a place of learning and working for nurses. As nurses in their first years of professional life often seek new challenges and want to further develop their knowledge and skills, one approach would be to offer functions with extended tasks and to create good conditions for further education and training.

Another approach to improve retention would be to support nurses with little previous practice experience for example with mentoring programs, when they enter the profession. Results from the combined data set indicate that nurses with previous experience as healthcare assistants suffer less from psycho-physical stress when entering the profession and have a clearer understanding of their role due to their practical experience than nurses who have a baccalaureate degree.

In summary, the results of this study show that with targeted measures it is possible to prolong healthcare professionals stay in their profession. First and foremost, the conditions for work-life balance need to be improved. Possible measures include flexible working time models adapted to the needs of the staff and greater regularity in working days and shifts. From the perspective of the nurses, other approaches could include reduction of stress at work, higher recognition in the companies and better wages.

### **Competence Network Health Workforce**

All analyses were carried out as part of the ZHAW site project "Occupational Careers and Job Retention of Health Professionals" in the Competence Network Health Workforce (CNHW). The CNHW is a cooperation between the Universities of Applied Sciences in Health in Switzerland to develop a competence network to face staff shortage in the health care sector. To this end, the participating universities are developing basic knowledge and possible measures in their respective site projects.

More information to the CNHW is available on the webpage: [www.cnhw.ch](http://www.cnhw.ch)

Zürcher Hochschule  
für Angewandte Wissenschaften

## Gesundheit

Kontakt:

René Schaffert

Institut für Gesundheitswissenschaften

Zürcher Hochschule für Angewandte Wissenschaften

Katharina-Sulzer-Platz 9, Postfach

8401 Winterthur

E-Mail [info.gesundheit@zhaw.ch](mailto:info.gesundheit@zhaw.ch)

Web [www.zhaw.ch/gesundheit](http://www.zhaw.ch/gesundheit)