

Racism is preventing the NHS from getting the most from its international recruits



By Titilola Banjoko | 15 August 2023

Titilola Banjoko discusses the untapped expertise of healthcare professionals from the black and minority ethnic diaspora within the NHS

The NHS is renowned for its diverse and skilled workforce, making it a global leader in healthcare. However, internationally recruited diaspora healthcare professionals face barriers of unconscious bias and racism, hindering the NHS from fully benefitting from the potential of its multinational workforce. The importance of recognising and valuing the expertise of diaspora staff is crucial now more than ever for our NHS.

The Tropical Health and Education Trust's Diaspora Staff and Global Health survey plays a vital role in providing diaspora healthcare professionals with the opportunity to be heard and capture new insights from the one in six healthcare professionals in the NHS who connect us to more than 200 global health systems. Platforming the voices of diaspora staff is one of the ways we can ensure the NHS is benefitting fully from the expertise of its diverse workforce.

A multinational National Health Service

With a multinational workforce exceeding the general population's diversity, the NHS remains an attractive employer. It continues to draw in international healthcare professionals, fuelling its strength. This diversity continues to grow as we move towards increasing efforts to recruit internationally to further strengthen the support our health service provides patients across the UK.

To put this in numbers, around one in six of NHS staff report a non-British nationality. Between them, 214 different nationalities were represented among NHS staff in June 2022.

Since Brexit, there has been a shift in recruitment trends from EU to non-EU countries. This change, combined with the global shortage of healthcare workers, raises concerns about how the UK is supporting the health systems we recruit from and the staff who join the NHS. Here, there remain questions on how ethical our recruitment practices are if we are contributing to a skills shortage in low- or middle-income and low-income countries whilst also disregarding the skills imparted to the NHS through diaspora staff.

Hidden asset or untapped asset?

The NHS possesses the potential to harness its diversity to enhance healthcare delivery. However, the valuable expertise gained from diverse health systems often remains unnoticed, untapped, and undervalued. When barriers like unconscious bias and racism remain unaddressed, organisationally, the NHS is at risk of perpetuating inequalities. For diaspora staff, a disregard for the skills they attain overseas means a lack of professional development opportunities and nullifies the value of our global connections.

Given the global healthcare workforce shortage and interdependency among health systems, it becomes essential to view our diverse workforce differently. Diaspora healthcare professionals possess invaluable knowledge and insights from more than 200 global health systems. Neglecting their experiences and their understanding of socio-cultural and religious norms across multiple health systems would be a tremendous loss.

Progress is being made, and there is clear scope for the NHS to couple its diversity with a more inclusive, and equitable environment. However, catching the attention of key decision-makers at policy and strategic levels poses a challenge due to competing priorities and the structural hurdles that the NHS encounters.

Valuing the Experts in Our Midst

THET's Experts in Our Midst programme calls for collective advocacy, working with and on behalf of our diaspora healthcare workforce to push through the noise. The programme, building upon the recommendations of THET's 2021 policy report, *Experts in Our Midst: Recognising the contribution NHS diaspora staff make to global health*, is a scheme of work that aims to recognise the contribution NHS diaspora staff make to global health systems.



Mapping these connections and platforming the voices of our multinational healthcare workforce is a key component of this work which is being supported by THET's Diaspora Staff and Global Health Survey. This first step is crucial to our collective advocacy in creating an equitable UK health system and why I encourage all diaspora professionals to complete this survey.

Against a backdrop of a global skills shortage, and the impact this has on quality healthcare services, we are witnessing a widening gap in healthcare outcomes. Tapping into the invaluable knowledge of our diverse workforce is a tool we need to leverage to improve global health outcomes.

THET's Diaspora Staff and Global Health survey

THET's Diaspora Staff and Global Health Survey forms a crucial part of the Experts in Our Midst programme. Through illuminating the intricate web of global connections, we have the chance to enrich our healthcare system. This is because harnessing the expertise staff gain overseas paves the way for innovation and the development of our staff, improving patient outcomes and our contribution to global health outcomes.

Join THET in shaping a healthcare landscape where every voice is heard, and every contribution is celebrated. Together, let's unlock the true potential of our diverse workforce, propelling the NHS to new heights of excellence.