

International Recruitment to the Community CASE STUDY

2023/#4



Interview with Irene Boham, QN, Head of Occupational Health, University of Hertfordshire

After my A-levels, I trained at the Sekondi-Takoradi Nurses Training College, in Ghana West Africa and qualified as a State Registered Nurse (SRN) in 1991. I registered with the Ghana Nursing and Midwifery Council and began working as a qualified nurse, supporting a wide variety of patients and their families.

Whilst in Ghana, it was my aim to gain international experience and to further my nursing education to degree level. Therefore, after my SRN training, to increase my chances of going to University, I applied to a few universities outside Ghana. The University of Hull in the UK offered me an interview. I had a telephone interview, and I was accepted on to their BSc Nursing programme. The admission process took approximately six months, and I was overjoyed to have the opportunity to share and further my knowledge and experience in the UK.

When I arrived in the UK, I faced a lot of challenges. The weather, sociocultural issues, unmet expectations, and accommodation issues. At one point, I had no home to go to, but kept going. Whilst preparing to start my degree course, I was advised that as a qualified nurse from Ghana, it would be beneficial to register with the UK Nursing and Midwifery Council (NMC). At the time, one had to do the adaptation course to register with the NMC. I did the adaptation course and after three months

of hard work, I gained my NMC registration.

After the NMC registration, I started studying for my degree whilst working part-time. Being an internationally educated nurse (IEN) in the UK at that time was both mentally and emotionally difficult without support. I am pleased there are now several channels of support for IENs through organisations such as The Queen's Nursing Institute (QNI), The Florence Nightingale Foundation (FNF), and NHS England. There are also other local organisations such as the Diaspora Foundation that understand the culture of IENs from their home countries, as well as individuals like me who have supported IENs to settle in the UK and continue to provide advice and support in a variety of ways.

I had to privately fund all my studies including the adaptation course to register with the NMC. It was very challenging, but I had some private support from a 'Good Samaritan'. Once I obtained my NMC registration, I started supporting other IENs by assisting with their adaptation course preparation and conducting mock

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Above: Irene Boham Queen's Nurse



assessments towards their assessment for their NMC registration. I was only able to work part-time while I studied, until the Royal College of Nursing (RCN) helped to sort out my status to enable me to work full time.

On completing my degree, I was offered positions within the NHS where I worked in surgical, medical accident and emergency, post operative intensive recovery and intensive care units, nursing critically ill patients. I quickly moved from a D to an E-grade nurse. After approximately 8 years of working in acute settings, I decided to move into the community setting but I was unsure of what to do, even though I had thought about and liked occupational health (OH). After speaking to a friend who was an OH Nurse about her specialist area, I enrolled at Brunel University where I completed a Postgraduate Certificate (PgCert) in OH and Safety Management in 1999, but continued to work in the acute setting as I thoroughly enjoyed working in intensive care.

One morning when I arrived home after four continuous long night shifts in intensive care, I made a firm decision on moving into community nursing as my very young son literally flew down the stairs asking me "Mum, are you doing another shift tonight?" This was very emotional. My years of experience in intensive care had significantly improved my confidence and knowledge in nursing so I felt ready to deal with challenges that I may come across in the community setting.

I explored further options, as I had a Degree in Nursing, and a PGCert in OH and Safety. I decided to enrol onto the Postgraduate Diploma in OH Specialist Community Public Health Nurse (SCPHN) course at London Metropolitan University. Prior to this, I had registered with OH agencies and I was pleasantly surprised to find that in OH, there is a wide variety of nursing jobs available in settings other than the NHS. I worked in corporate, private and public organisations, doing short

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agency contracts with organisations including the British Airways, the BBC and some investment banks such as ABN AMRO, Morgan Stanley, and Merrill Lynch.

I was eventually employed into a substantive post by the Citi Group Bank where I worked for a couple of years. I was always amazed when, as an OH nurse, I found myself on the trading floor supporting financial traders, providing them with ergonomic advice amongst other advice, and ensuring their work does not adversely affect their health and vice versa. It was a fascinating experience as coming from Ghana where nursing jobs are predominantly in hospitals, I would never have had the opportunity of working in an investment bank as a nurse. I realised that if I developed myself further in OH, I could support others to progress and explore a variety of areas in community nursing, predominantly in OH.

As my son became older, our family moved away from the city to a suburb. I took a job with Barnet Hospital Occupational Health as a Band 6 nurse. I completed the SCPHN course while I was at Barnet OH. Soon after that, I received a Band 7 job at Camden NHS Occupational Health. It was again challenging but I learned a lot there from the very dynamic knowledgeable OH manager. In 2012, I took a job with a government agency, but I was devastated when I was made redundant in 2015. In hindsight, it turned out to be positive for my career progression in OH nursing going forwards.

I rejoined an OH agency and the first job they sent me to was in OH within a higher education. After my first day, the director responsible for occupational health asked me if I would like to manage the OH service. I was reluctant as I had lost confidence after being made redundant in my previous job but with her encouragement, I agreed. She was so confident in me that she asked me to apply for a substantive post as the manager, a role equivalent to Band 8a. With her support I regained my confidence and attended the interview and was successful.

The challenges I had faced as an IEN made me more resilient and as I proved myself through my practice, I was quickly asked to sit on several committees and played key roles in the university's decision-making as a member of a few strategic groups. My role includes managing a team of doctors, nurses and administrators, and advising management, academics, employees, education and healthcare students on all matters relating to the effects of health on work and work on health.

Many students, especially IENs, struggle to find OH placements so I acted strategically, demonstrating to senior management how providing OH placements

would benefit the students and the university. I identified the need to offer practice placement opportunities for SCPHN students. Our service now provides quality placements to OH students, and I have supported many nurses who have successfully completed the specialist OH SCPHN course and registered on part 3 of the NMC register. These nurses, upon qualifying as a OH Nurse are now making a positive impact to their own lives and the lives of other individuals, the community and the public, as they deliver OH services.

To be an effective practice educator within the university required me to obtain the Associate Fellow of the Higher Education Academy (AFHEA) and the Practice Teacher qualification, so I pursued those courses. In addition, I have just completed an MA in Educational Leadership. This has improved my knowledge further, enabling me to continue to have a significant positive impact on the next generation of OH nurses in their delivery of workplace public health strategies.

During the pandemic, I had clinical oversight implementing the COVID-19 testing centre for the university and the Hertfordshire County Council COVID-19 lateral flow testing. The value of my work resulted in me being awarded four honorariums over four consecutive years. I also received a Queen's Nurse award in December 2021. I have also been nominated Manager of the Year and my team was also nominated as Team of the Year. I was also nominated as the Professional Staff Member of the Year.

Last year, I was promoted to the Head of the OH Service, a role equivalent to Band 8b.

In 2022 I was a finalist for the Braveheart Award for exemplary work in nursing in supporting others and demonstration of integrity <http://ow.ly/EeYV50J4Uli>

I was invited to participate at the BAME Careers Fair at the university, as a panellist and a keynote speaker on prevailing through the pandemic – "Advice for Home and International Students and Staff".

I have published an article, co-written with Professor Anne Harris, a principal workplace health strategist <https://www.personneltoday.com/hr/cpd-learning-curve-disclosing-a-disability-before-a-midwifery-university-placement/>

I am a member of the Ghana Nurses Association UK <https://www.gna-uk.org/pastoral-support-for-internationally-educated-nurses-ien/>, a diaspora organisation that supports IENs from Ghana. I have managed to support many Ghanaian Nurses in the UK by providing mentorship, coaching and general advice. My humble beginning and the support I had from others as an IEN led to me setting up the IBB programme <https://www.theibbfoundation.org/> in 2017, which supports less privileged international students. The scheme provides IENs in Ghana with a wide variety of support including mentorship, one-off awards, and financial support towards their education.

It is positive that IENs now have pastoral support in place to help them navigate the new systems they will be exposed to when they first arrive in the UK. This will hopefully reduce the anxiety associated with being in a new country and adjusting to a new professional environment. It is hoped that this support will enable IENs to quickly settle into living and working in their various roles and develop their skills to reach their maximum potential, resulting in rewarding and fulfilling careers in the UK.

Despite the challenges, it is worth the hard work. To say I am pleased with my career progression as an IEN in the UK is an understatement.

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