

## **CAN FILIPINO NURSES WORK IN AUSTRALIA?**

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The State of New South Wales government of Australia has recently announced its intention to hire 2,500 registered nurses. It is eyeing at the entry of registered nurses from the Philippines, Singapore, Malaysia and other Asian countries. Pharmacists, radiographers, physiotherapists are similarly listed as occupations in demand. Filipinos in these professions could capture this market if they act on time.

Filipino nurses are usually required to undergo a nursing competence assessment before their registration can be approved. Many Filipino nurses who have been educated in the Philippines have undergone the competence assessment. However, it is reported by the State nurses registration authority in Sydney New South Wales that from 1992 to 2001, only 60% of those who took the test have passed. In this regard, if the export of nursing and other health services is seen by the Philippine government as a way of tilting the balance of trade with Australia in favour of the Philippines, the standard of Philippine education must be upgraded.

As a general rule, Philippine educated nurses are required to pass an English Test as the first step. Nurses who pass the English test, will be required further to pass a nursing test before registration consisting of a two hour theoretical test which can be held in Manila and a four week clinical test which must be held in Australia. For this purpose, they can be granted a non-working visa to undertake the clinical test. After registration, their visa in Australia can usually be converted to a working visa for up to four years. Their salary usually starts A\$35,828.00. per year and increases depending on their work experience.

Like nurses, physiotherapists, radiographers and pharmacists must also pass the English test, a written theoretical test and then a clinical test before their qualification or profession can be recognised in Australia.

English proficiency is a mandatory requirement in Australian skilled migration, recognition of overseas qualification or student visa application. Passing the English test under the International English Language Testing System (IELTS) is usually the evidence required. This English test consists of reading, writing, speaking, and listening.

The IELTS academic module is the same English test required of Engineers, Teachers, Health Professionals and Student Visa Applicants. But tradespersons and other professionals are required to take the IELTS *general* module instead of the *academic* module. Although the listening and speaking tests are the same for both the general module and the academic module but the test is different for reading and writing.

Generally, Filipinos are good in English, compared to their Asian neighbours. Filipinos however are more exposed to American English, the TESOL and TOEFL English tests but not that exposed to IELTS and the Australian English accent and idiom.

To prepare for the IELTS test, one must be aware of the objective and system for passing the test, the type of questions given and the criteria the examiner would be looking for in the answers. In the last two years, many Filipino registered health professionals have failed to achieve the required band score of 7 out of 9 in the academic module of the IELTS. As a result, their applications cannot be processed until they get the required band score without any component of reading, writing, speaking, or listening below 6.5. One who fails cannot take another test until after three months. For this reason, it is not advisable to take the test without the necessary preparation.

It seems that there is no established *intensive* IELTS review course currently being offered in the Philippines, with a good track record of success in assisting intending migrants, student visa and working visa applicants pass the IELTS English test. As an immediate remedial measure, we are offering an *intensive* IELTS preparation course in Manila in June 2003 to hasten the registration and/or migration process of participating registered nurses, professionals and tradespersons. A consultant from Australia has been engaged to facilitate this review. Practice tests, and familiarization of the type of questions and answers will be focused on. The consultant will also confer with English review course providers who may be interested in upgrading their course content in the future.

In the long term however, the Philippine Government should consider not only upgrading English proficiency skills but also adopting the Australian nursing curriculum for implementation in the Philippines in selected schools of nursing for students wanting to work in Australia. The Bachelor in Nursing course in Australia is usually for a period of only three years and could be incorporated in the current Philippine nursing curriculum. No Board exam is required before the graduates can become registered nurses in Australia. If a similar nursing course curriculum is offered in the Philippines, nursing graduates could easily register in Australia.

If properly implemented, such curriculum should not only facilitate the export of Philippine services to Australia but also open a new dollar earning venture for the Philippines by attracting foreign students to study in the Philippines and also bring in foreign currency for their living expenses.

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