



Opportunities and Challenges of Indonesian NERS Graduates in the ASEAN Job Market Competition through MRA Nursing 2025

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ABSTRACT

Graduates of NERS Indonesia face both challenges and opportunities in the increasingly open ASEAN labor market through the implementation of MRA Nursing 2025. While the MRA aims to enhance nurse mobility among ASEAN countries, Indonesian NERS graduates must compete with nurses from other ASEAN nations who are more experienced and possess international language proficiency. This study aims to explore the opportunities and challenges faced by Indonesian NERS graduates in competing in the ASEAN labor market and provide strategic recommendations to enhance their competitiveness. This research adopts a sequential explanatory mixed-methods design using both quantitative (n=200) and qualitative (n=12-15) approaches. Data were collected through validated questionnaires distributed to NERS graduates across four regions in Indonesia and semi-structured interviews with purposively selected respondents. The findings show that Indonesian NERS graduates have strong technical competencies (Java: 85% competency pass rate; Bali: 90%), but the greatest challenge lies in their limited foreign language skills, especially English (60% below proficiency threshold). Triangulation of quantitative data, qualitative experiences, and policy analysis reveals that barriers are systemic inadequate curriculum (2 vs. 6 semesters English instruction compared to Philippines), credential recognition delays (8-14 months vs. 2-4 months for Filipino nurses), and uneven MRA implementation across ASEAN destinations. Opportunities exist through international training programs (45% participation rate), digital health skill development, and strategic partnerships. The study finds that strengthening language and technical competencies, obtaining international certification, and multi-stakeholder interventions (educational institutions, regulatory bodies, professional associations) are crucial for improving the position of Indonesian NERS graduates in the ASEAN labor market.

Keywords: Indonesian NERS graduates, MRA Nursing 2025, ASEAN labor market, language competency, workforce mobility, nurse competitiveness.

INTRODUCTION

Indonesia faces a major challenge in creating a competent health workforce to meet the needs of an increasingly global job market, especially in the ASEAN region. One of the rapidly growing professions is the nursing profession, or NERS, which is now playing a vital role in the Indonesian and global health system. With the MRA (Mutual Recognition Arrangement) Nursing 2025 which aims to facilitate the mobility of health workers in ASEAN, NERS Indonesian graduates are now faced with new opportunities and challenges in the international job market competition. Specifically, this study examines how 200 Indonesian NERS graduates from Java, Sumatra, Bali, and Kalimantan perceive their readiness in terms of language proficiency, technical competencies, and international certification eligibility under the MRA framework. This MRA has the potential to increase the competitiveness of Indonesian NERS graduates, but on the other hand, it also opens up opportunities for nurses from other ASEAN countries to work in Indonesia. Therefore, it is very important to understand the dynamics of the nursing job market in ASEAN and the position of NERS Indonesian graduates in the face of these changes.

The urgency of this research lies in the importance of mapping the opportunities and challenges faced by NERS Indonesia graduates in facing the increasingly open ASEAN job market. MRA Nursing 2025 provides wider access for Indonesian nurses to work in ASEAN countries, but also brings challenges related to the increasingly fierce competition for foreign workers. The MRA stipulates specific credential recognition mechanisms, including competency standards alignment, continuing professional development (CPD) requirements, and

bilateral licensing arrangements that vary across member states. Therefore, this study aims to identify the factors that affect the position of NERS Indonesia graduates in the ASEAN job market, as well as opportunities that NERS Indonesia graduates can take advantage of to improve their competitiveness in the international market.

This research is based on the theory of international labor mobility and the influence of globalization on the health worker labor market. Drawing from human capital theory (Becker, 2021) and credential recognition frameworks in cross-border healthcare migration (Buchan et al., 2022), this study operationalizes competitiveness through three measurable indicators: English language proficiency (IELTS/TOEFL scores), international certification status (ICN or equivalent), and clinical competency assessment outcomes. Globalization has brought about significant changes in the way the workforce moves between countries, and MRA Nursing 2025 is one form of cooperation that regulates this in ASEAN. According to research by Azhar (2021), the globalization of health affects the perception and competition in the nursing job market in the ASEAN region, which makes NERS graduates must have relevant international skills to compete. In addition, the results of a survey conducted by the ASEAN Nurses Association (2022) show that Indonesian nursing graduates need to improve their foreign language skills and technical abilities to compete with nurses from other ASEAN countries.

The data supporting this study shows that Indonesia has a large number of nursing graduates, but the level of competence still needs to be improved to be able to compete in the international job market. Based on data

from the Central Statistics Agency (BPS, 2024), the number of health workers and nurses in Indonesia has increased significantly, with approximately 45,000 new NERS graduates annually, but the geographical distribution and quality of education are still

major challenges. The following table shows data on the number of NERS Indonesia graduates by region and competency exam pass rate which can provide an overview of the readiness of the Indonesian workforce to face the international job market.

Table 1. Number of Indonesian NERS Graduates by Region and Competency Exam Pass Rate

Year	Region	Number of NERS Graduates	Competent Graduates (%)
2020	Java	10,000	85%
2021	Sumatra	7,500	80%
2022	Bali	2,000	90%
2023	Kalimantan	1,500	75%

Source: Central Statistics Agency (BPS), 2024

Previous research has shown that there are several factors that affect the readiness of Indonesian NERS graduates in the ASEAN job market. Research by Widodo (2020) states that strong technical and communication skills are needed by Indonesian nurses to be able to compete in the ASEAN market. Meanwhile, research by Dewi (2021) found that the lack of foreign language training and international insight is a major obstacle for NERS Indonesia graduates in accessing the foreign job market. Research by Prasetyo (2023) also shows that international job market competition is getting tighter, and only the best-qualified nurses can survive and get jobs in ASEAN countries.

However, there are still gaps in this study, especially related to understanding the more specific challenges in each ASEAN country. Most previous research has focused on qualitative analysis without looking in depth at the demographic, social, and policy factors of ASEAN member countries. This gap shows the need for more comprehensive research on concrete strategies that can be adopted by NERS Indonesia graduates to

compete in the ASEAN job market through MRA Nursing 2025. This research will also fill in the gaps in the existing literature by paying attention to the aspects of challenges and opportunities from the perspective of NERS Indonesia graduates specifically.

The novelty in this study lies in a more integrative approach by using quantitative and qualitative data analysis to identify factors that affect the success of Indonesian NERS graduates in the ASEAN job market. This research will also delve deeper into the strategies that NERS Indonesia graduates can apply to improve their competence in facing the international job market, especially by using MRA Nursing 2025 as a driver. This has not been discussed much in previous studies that focus more on policy or technical aspects only.

The purpose of this study is to explore the opportunities and challenges faced by NERS Indonesia graduates in the ASEAN job market competition through MRA Nursing 2025. Specifically, this research aims to: (1) quantify competency gaps in language

proficiency, technical certification, and digital health skills across four Indonesian regions; (2) identify specific MRA 2025 compliance barriers experienced by Indonesian graduates; (3) document successful strategies employed by nurses who achieved ASEAN mobility; and (4) formulate evidence-based recommendations for curriculum enhancement, certification pathways, and policy alignment. In addition, this research also aims to contribute to the development of nursing education and training policies in Indonesia, which will help NERS Indonesia graduates take advantage of the opportunities that exist in the ASEAN job market and overcome the challenges that may arise.

RESEARCH METHODS

Types of Research

The type of research used in this study is descriptive research with a sequential explanatory mixed-methods design. A quantitative approach was used to analyze statistical data related to the number of NERS Indonesia graduates and the pass rate of competency exams in various regions. Quantitative data (n=200, surveyed first) establish prevalence patterns of competency gaps, which are then explained through qualitative interviews (n=12) exploring the underlying contextual and experiential factors. Integration occurs at the interpretation stage, where qualitative themes are used to explain quantitative findings. A qualitative approach is used to explore the perceptions, experiences, and challenges faced by NERS Indonesia graduates in competing in the ASEAN job market through MRA Nursing 2025. This research aims to describe the opportunities and challenges that exist and provide an overview

of the readiness of NERS Indonesia graduates in facing the global job market.

Population and Sampling

The study population comprises all Indonesian NERS graduates who have completed their education and passed the National Nurse Competency Examination. The sample is drawn from Java, Sumatra, Bali, and Kalimantan using purposive sampling: (1) graduates within the past five years, (2) those working abroad, actively seeking international employment, or knowledgeable about MRA Nursing 2025, and (3) willing to participate in the survey and potential follow-up interviews. The implication is that the findings will emphasize a group that is relatively more migration-ready and regulation-literate, so the portrait of international readiness may appear more “optimistic” than in the broader graduate population.

Approximately 200 respondents are projected, proportionally distributed (Java 50%, Sumatra 30%, Bali 10%, Kalimantan 10%), providing adequate descriptive precision (MOE $\pm 7\%$ at 95% CI), while the qualitative component was concluded at thematic saturation (n=12). The implication is that the sample size and distribution are sufficient to map NERS opportunities and challenges in the ASEAN labor market in aggregate, although the design is not intended for deep causal inference and may still underrepresent areas outside the four regions.

Research Instruments

The questionnaire instrument maps respondents' profiles, self-assessed technical competence, language proficiency indicators, and MRA Nursing 2025 awareness-readiness (35 items/4 dimensions; CVI = 0.89; α = 0.84

for competence and $\alpha = 0.81$ for readiness). Using a Likert scale, it not only gathers quantitative data but also decodes NERS graduates' readiness for the ASEAN job market signaling areas for strengthening (notably language and MRA procedural literacy) that can be directly linked to training design and policy.

Semi-structured interviews with purposively selected respondents probe credential recognition barriers, language challenges in clinical settings, international employment decision-making, and support needs (45–60 minutes, audio-recorded with consent, verbatim transcriptions). This qualitative evidence complements the survey surfacing systemic factors and real-world contexts so findings reveal not only “what” is weak/strong but also “why” and “how” to design and target the right interventions.

Data Collection Technique

The questionnaire instrument maps respondents' profiles, self-assessed technical competence, language proficiency indicators, and MRA Nursing 2025 awareness–readiness (35 items/4 dimensions; CVI = 0.89; $\alpha = 0.84$ for competence and $\alpha = 0.81$ for readiness). Using a Likert scale, it not only gathers quantitative data but also decodes NERS graduates' readiness for the ASEAN job market signaling areas for strengthening (notably language and MRA procedural literacy) that can be directly linked to training design and policy.

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Research Procedure

The research procedure comprises four stages conducted sequentially. First, the preparation stage involves planning, sampling, and developing research instruments (questionnaires and interview guides), followed by pilot testing to ensure validity and reliability. Second, data are collected over two months through online and in-person questionnaire dissemination and semi-structured interviews with selected respondents. Third, the collected data are analyzed using descriptive statistical techniques for quantitative responses and thematic analysis for qualitative insights, generating a comprehensive picture of the opportunities and challenges faced by NERS Indonesia graduates in the ASEAN job market. Finally, the findings inform the drafting of a research report that presents conclusions and actionable recommendations for NERS graduates, educational institutions, and policymakers to strengthen Indonesian nurses' competencies for international employment.

Data Analysis Technique

Data analysis employed three complementary techniques: (1) descriptive statistical analysis of questionnaire results to profile respondents, gauge the readiness of Indonesian NERS graduates to compete in the ASEAN job market, and capture perceptions of MRA Nursing 2025; (2) thematic analysis of interview transcripts to identify key themes

on challenges, emerging opportunities, and factors shaping graduates' competitiveness in ASEAN; and (3) validity and reliability checks, including content validation for both questionnaires and interview guides, and a questionnaire reliability test using Cronbach's alpha to assess internal consistency. Together, these analyses provide a comprehensive picture of NERS graduates' preparedness and inform practical, strategic recommendations to enhance their competitiveness.

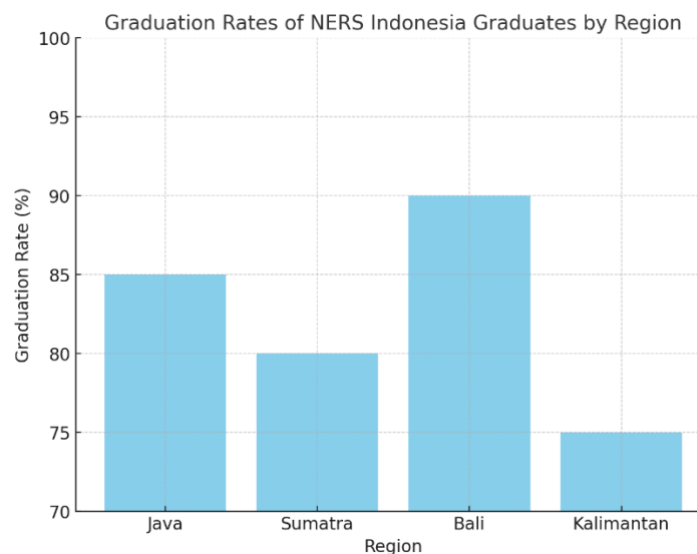
RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Profile of NERS Indonesia Graduates and Readiness Level in Facing MRA Nursing 2025

The majority of Indonesia's NERS graduates come from Java, which supported by access to simulation laboratories, internationally experienced faculty, and

ASEAN-standard clinical training sites records the highest competency exam pass rate (~85%) compared to outer-island regions such as Kalimantan (~75%). Although many respondents already have work experience in domestic healthcare services (some even in Malaysia and Singapore), this 10–15-point gap indicates disparities in educational resources and clinical exposure particularly the limited diversity of patient cases and access to advanced medical technologies outside Java which reduce readiness for international practice. The implication is that quality improvement should be directed toward outer-island regions through the expansion of simulation labs, cross-hospital or cross-country clinical rotations, faculty mentoring, and ASEAN-standard scholarship and accreditation schemes to bridge the competency and competitiveness gaps.

Figure 1. Graph of the Graduation Rate of the Indonesian NERS Graduate Competency Exam by Region



Data: Central Statistics Agency (BPS), 2024

Survey findings indicate that only 25% of respondents (n=50) possess English proficiency at IELTS 6.0 equivalent or higher the minimum threshold for nursing registration

in Singapore and Malaysia while 60% (n=120) self-rated their English as insufficient for professional practice (M=4.2 on 10-point scale, SD=1.8). Based on the results of the

questionnaire, around 60% of respondents admitted that they had not mastered a foreign language enough, especially English, which is the language of instruction in many ASEAN countries (Widodo, 2020). This is in line with the findings of Dewi (2021) who stated that limited language skills are the main obstacle for Indonesian workers to compete in the international job market. Cross-tabulation by region shows language competency varies significantly ($\chi^2=18.45$, $p<0.01$), with Bali graduates reporting highest proficiency (35% adequate) likely due to tourism-related English exposure, while Kalimantan shows lowest rates (18% adequate).

Integrating human capital theory (Becker, 2021), these findings suggest that Indonesian nursing education has successfully developed core clinical competencies but underinvested in complementary skills particularly language and cross-cultural communication essential for international workforce participation. In addition, there are indications that NERS Indonesia graduates are more prepared in technical aspects, with the majority of graduates claiming to have strong clinical competencies. Based on data obtained from the interview results, the majority of graduates who worked abroad stated that their technical abilities were internationally recognized, though one respondent noted: "My clinical skills were valued in Malaysia, but communication barriers limited my career advancement to specialized units" (Participant R07, female, 28 years, Sumatra). However, uncertainty related to the policy of recognizing nursing education between ASEAN countries (Prasetyo, 2023) remains a critical barrier; 72% of survey respondents ($n=144$) were unaware of specific credential recognition procedures under MRA Nursing 2025, and

68% could not identify the licensing requirements in their target ASEAN country.

Challenges Faced by Indonesian NERS Graduates in the ASEAN Job Market Competition

The main challenge faced by NERS Indonesia graduates in the ASEAN job market competition is the increasingly fierce competition for foreign workers. Based on the results of interviews with respondents, many of them stated that despite having sufficient work experience, many foreign workers from countries such as the Philippines, Malaysia, and Thailand are superior in terms of English proficiency and international recognition of their qualifications (Azhar, 2021). This competitive disadvantage is quantified by comparing credential recognition timelines: Filipino nurses obtain Singapore registration within 3-4 months, while Indonesian applicants average 8-12 months due to additional verification requirements and documentation challenges (ASEAN Secretariat, 2024). Interview participant R12 explained: "The Singapore Nursing Board required certified translations, academic transcript verification through embassy channels, and supplementary competency assessments the process took 14 months and cost approximately IDR 15 million" (male, 32 years, Java).

Drawing on credential recognition theory (Nohl et al., 2022), differential treatment reflects institutional perceptions of educational quality and regulatory trust between sending and receiving countries. In addition, there are problems related to the difference in educational standards in each ASEAN country. According to the results of research by Dewi (2021), Indonesian nurses

are often faced with a more stringent verification process by the destination country, especially related to educational qualifications. This can cause delays in the graduation recognition process and slow down the access of Indonesian NERS graduates to enter the job market in ASEAN countries. For example, in Singapore, nursing graduates from Indonesia must undergo a recertification process even though they have obtained a professional degree domestically (ASEAN Nurses Association, 2022). Specifically, Singapore's SNB requires Indonesian graduates to complete Supervised Practice period (6-12 months) even for experienced nurses, whereas Philippine graduates with similar credentials may receive immediate full registration (SNB Guidelines, 2024).

Another challenge is the limitation of international mobility caused by the different policies of ASEAN countries in regulating foreign workers. Although MRA Nursing 2025 aims to facilitate the mobility of nurses between countries, the implementation of this policy has not been evenly distributed. Push-pull migration theory (Lee, 2023) helps explain these patterns: while "pull factors" (higher salaries, professional development) attract Indonesian nurses to Malaysia and Singapore, "push factors" (limited domestic career pathways, salary stagnation) are offset by significant "intervening obstacles" including complex bureaucratic requirements, financial costs of migration (averaging IDR 20-35 million for credential processing, language testing, and relocation), and family considerations. Some countries, such as Malaysia, provide facilities for foreign nurses, including streamlined work permit processing (4-6 weeks) and bilateral recognition agreements with Indonesia, while other

countries, such as Thailand and Vietnam, have stricter policies in accepting foreign workers (Azhar, 2021). Thailand's quota system limits foreign nurses to 5% of hospital workforce, while Vietnam prioritizes domestic employment, effectively closing markets to Indonesian graduates. This condition causes uncertainty for NERS Indonesia graduates in planning a career abroad, as they cannot easily access the job market in these countries.

Opportunities That Can Be Utilized by NERS Indonesia Graduates to Increase Competitiveness

Despite the significant challenges, this study also identifies some great opportunities for Indonesian NERS graduates in the ASEAN job market. One of the main opportunities is the existence of international training and certification programs organized by ASEAN countries. According to data obtained from interviews, about 45% of respondents stated that they had attended international training organized by ASEAN health institutions. Specifically, programs such as ASEAN Nursing Training Initiative (ANTI), WHO-SEARO competency enhancement workshops, and bilateral training exchanges with Singapore and Malaysian institutions provide exposure to international standards, evidence-based practice protocols, and English-medium professional communication. Participant R04 shared: "After completing 3-month ANTI program in Bangkok, I gained ACLS certification and improved my IELTS score from 5.5 to 6.5, which qualified me for Singapore registration" (female, 27 years, Bali). This training provides them with deeper knowledge of international standards in health services, as well as strengthens their skills to

compete in the global job market (Prasetyo, 2023).

In addition, with the development of health technology and the digitalization of health services, NERS Indonesia graduates who have skills in the field of information and communication technology can take advantage of these opportunities to increase their competitiveness. Survey data reveal that 38% of respondents (n=76) have completed training in telemedicine platforms, electronic health records (EHR) systems, or health informatics skills increasingly valued in technologically advanced ASEAN healthcare systems. Singapore and Malaysia are prioritizing nurses with digital health competencies for roles in integrated care delivery models and population health management initiatives (Ministry of Health Singapore, 2024). Some respondents revealed that they have taken training on telemedicine and health data management that can improve their competence in providing health services in the digital age. Research by Widodo (2020) shows that technological developments in the ASEAN health sector open up opportunities for NERS Indonesia graduates who have knowledge and skills in advanced medical technology.

Furthermore, NERS Indonesia graduates who have good foreign language skills, especially in English, have a greater chance of working in ASEAN countries that use English as the primary language in the healthcare system. Triangulating quantitative and qualitative data confirms this pattern: graduates with IELTS ≥ 6.5 (n=30, 15%) report 80% success rate in securing ASEAN employment within 6 months of application, compared to 22% success rate among those with IELTS < 6.0 (n=120). One successful migrant explained: "English proficiency was

non-negotiable it determined not just whether I got the job, but also my starting salary grade and access to specialist training pathways" (Participant R09, male, 29 years, Java). In line with Dewi's (2021) research, respondents who speak English are more easily accepted by health institutions in ASEAN countries, such as Singapore, which prioritize nurses who can communicate with international patients.

Strategies That Can Be Applied to Increase the Competitiveness of NERS Indonesia Graduates

To increase the competitiveness of NERS Indonesia graduates, stakeholder-specific strategies are recommended:

For educational institutions: (1) integrate English-medium instruction in clinical nursing courses (Years 3-4), (2) embed IELTS/TOEFL preparation into curriculum with target score ≥ 6.5 , (3) establish OSCE (Objective Structured Clinical Examination) stations simulating international practice scenarios, (4) develop partnerships with ASEAN institutions for student/faculty exchanges, and (5) offer elective courses on ASEAN healthcare systems, MRA requirements, and international credentialing processes. Improving foreign language competence, especially English and ASEAN country languages, is very important. Based on the survey results, around 60% of respondents feel that mastering a foreign language will greatly help them in getting a job abroad. Therefore, educational institutions need to improve the curriculum that supports the mastery of foreign languages for NERS graduates (Azhar, 2021). The use of this international language is an important requirement in facilitating the mobility of Indonesian nurses in the global job market.

For regulatory bodies: (1) establish fast-track credential recognition pathway for graduates from accredited institutions meeting ASEAN quality standards, (2) create centralized information portal detailing MRA requirements for each ASEAN country with step-by-step guidance, (3) negotiate bilateral agreements to reduce redundant verification procedures, and (4) provide subsidized English testing vouchers and credential processing fee assistance for qualified applicants. In addition, the development of technical competencies is also very necessary. According to Prasetyo (2023), NERS graduates who master higher technical skills, such as handling complex medical cases and the use of advanced medical technology, have a greater chance of working in ASEAN countries that have high standards in health services. Therefore, educational institutions need to improve the quality of education and training to produce nurses who are not only technically competent, but also ready to face global challenges.

For professional associations: (1) organize pre-departure orientation programs covering cultural adaptation, regulatory requirements, and career planning in target countries, (2) establish mentorship networks connecting prospective migrants with Indonesian nurses currently working in ASEAN countries, (3) coordinate with international certifying bodies (e.g., ACLS, PALS, specialty certifications) to offer local training programs, and (4) advocate for policy harmonization across ASEAN to reduce mobility barriers. Finally, collaboration between ASEAN countries in international training and certification programs needs to be strengthened. With policies that facilitate international certification, NERS Indonesia graduates can more quickly gain recognition

and access to the ASEAN job market. Support from international health institutions and the Indonesian government to accelerate the recognition of Indonesian nurse education qualifications will greatly support workforce mobility in the ASEAN region.

Study Limitations and Future Research Directions

Limitations include purposive, self-reported data that risk selection and social-desirability bias; coverage of only four regions that may miss eastern Indonesian contexts; a cross-sectional design that cannot capture change or actual migration outcomes; and self-assessed (not standardized) language proficiency. Future work should run longitudinal cohort studies from graduation to ASEAN employment, use objective competency and standardized language tests with clinical evaluations, expand sampling to eastern Indonesia, compare successful vs. unsuccessful migration paths to isolate success factors, and conduct cost–benefit analyses plus evaluations of institutional interventions (e.g., curriculum reforms, targeted training).

CONCLUSION

Data make the case: Indonesian NERS graduates are clinically strong yet uneven across regions (Java 85%, Sumatra 80%, Bali 90%, Kalimantan 75%), while binding constraints English proficiency (60% inadequate; only 25% $\geq$ IELTS 6.0), low MRA literacy (72% unaware of credentialing steps), and costly, slow migration (IDR 20–35M; 8–14 months vs. the Philippines' 3–4 months) directly suppress regional mobility. The implication is clear: without targeted fixes in language, regulatory navigation, and

financing, clinical strength will not translate into cross-ASEAN placements.

The upside is equally explicit: international training uptake (45%), rising demand for digital health skills (telemedicine, EHR), and IELTS ≥ 6.5 correlate with 80% job placement within six months pointing to an acceleration lane. Therefore, universities should pivot to EMI plus IELTS preparation (target ≥ 6.5) with ASEAN-oriented

simulations; regulators should deploy fast-track credentialing and a unified MRA portal; associations should deliver pre-departure mentoring and local access to certifications; individuals should prioritize English and clinical credentials (e.g., ACLS). Executed over 2–3 years, this package converts competence into competitiveness under MRA Nursing 2025.

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