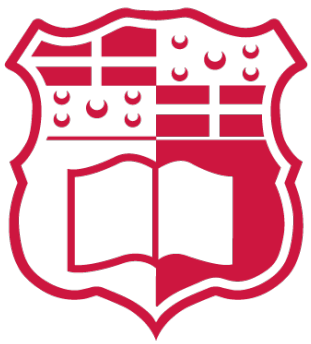




Exploring Nurses' and Nursing Students' Career Aspirations and Intentions During Transition to Practice: A Scoping Review

Project brief

Aims & objectives

Career aspirations formed during nurse education and early practice may influence long-term retention, mobility, and workforce stability. However, evidence on how these aspirations develop across the transition from student to registered nurse remains fragmented. This scoping review mapped what is currently known about nurses' and nursing students' career aspirations and intentions during transition to practice. It also considered how aspirations are shaped by clinical learning environments, mentorship, self-efficacy, emotional adjustment, and wider structural conditions. The review provides a foundation for nursing education, workforce planning, and transition support strategies.

Methodology

This scoping review followed JBI methodology and was reported in line with PRISMA-ScR guidance. A comprehensive search was conducted across 13 databases to identify studies examining career aspirations and intentions among nurses and nursing students, particularly during the transition from student to qualified professional. Thirty-five studies were included. Data were charted and synthesised using the PAGER framework to identify key patterns, advances, gaps, evidence for practice, and research priorities. Findings were interpreted through an integrated theoretical lens combining Social Cognitive Career Theory, Benner's Stages of Clinical Competence, and Duchscher's Transition Shock Theory. This approach supported analysis of how personal, educational, emotional, and structural factors interact in shaping aspirations during early professional development. Figure 1 shows the article selection process. Figure 2 shows the geographic distribution the studies used in the review.

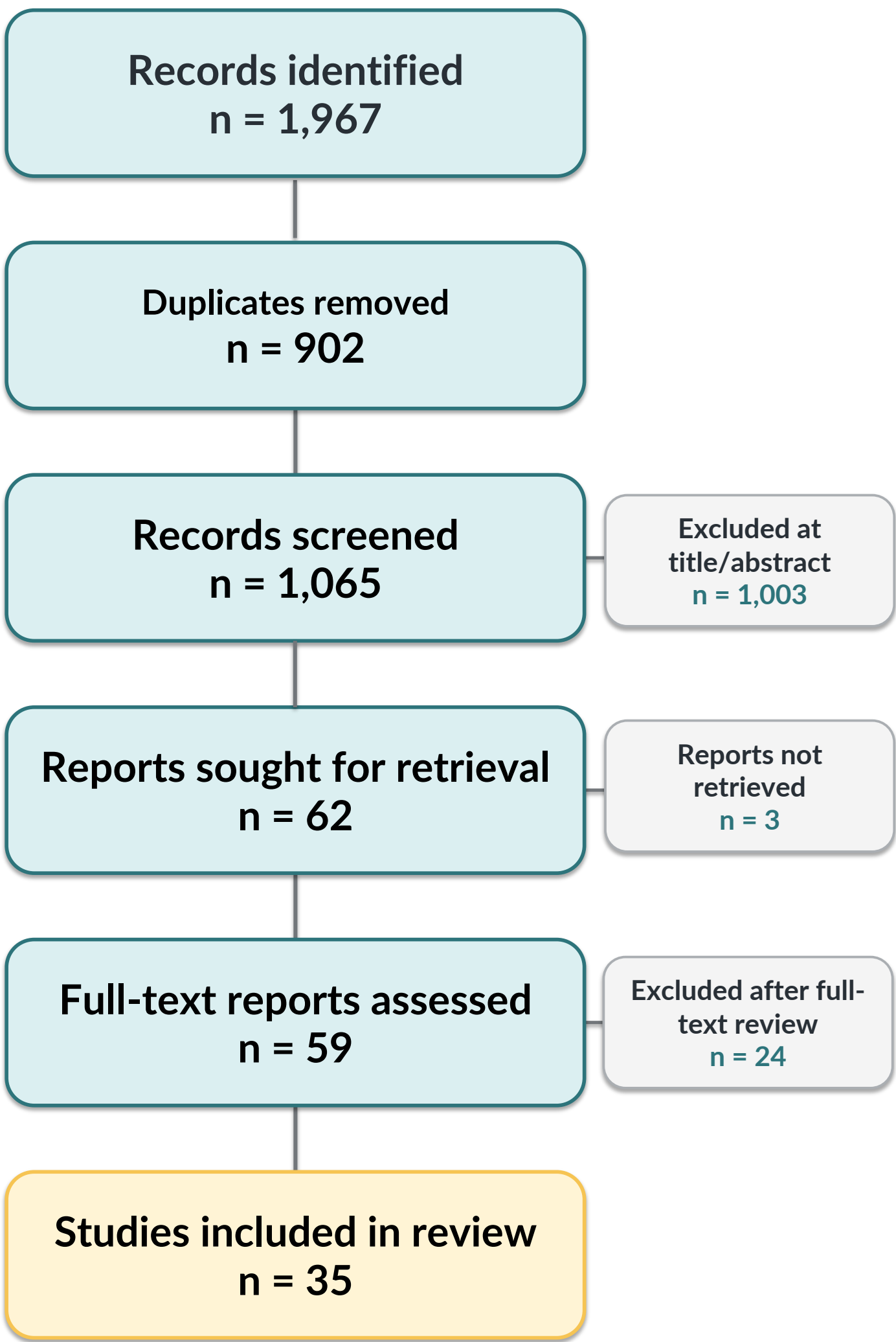


Figure 1.
Article selection process summaries



Figure 2.
Geographic Distribution
of Included Studies

Primary design used in the included studies
Quantitative – 18 ; Qualitative – 12; Mixed methods – 5

Clinical Placements & Mentorship	Students test fit, belonging and specialty identity in real settings. Continuity with a skilled preceptor often matters more than exposure alone.
Preference for Acute Hospital Work	Acute care signals faster learning, stronger status and clearer progression. Non-acute settings gain appeal when autonomy and continuity are made visible.
Early Transition & Emotional Load	Workload, responsibility shock and the education-practice gap drive strain. Supportive teams buffer stress; incivility and ambiguity amplify exit risk.
Evolving Motivations & Confidence	Goals broaden from idealism to a mix of meaning, security and advancement. Confidence grows when responsibility matches capability and feedback is timely.
Structural & Equity Influences	Training route, migration status and resources shape what feels reachable. Trajectories are not only chosen; systems also open or narrow options.

Figure 3. Main Themes

Results & conclusions

Five themes were identified (Figure 3), suggesting that career aspirations during the transition are dynamic.

- Clinical placements help students test professional fit, belonging, and future career pathways.
- Mentorship and preceptorship appear important in shaping confidence, support, and commitment.
- Acute hospital work was often viewed as attractive because of perceived learning, progression, and professional identity.
- Early transition was shaped by emotional adjustment, workload, confidence, and practice realities.
- Career aspirations may evolve over time, highlighting the need for longitudinal, context-sensitive research, including in Malta.