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Policy dialogue

European health workforce development supporting health system transition and sustainability: strategy discussion and action plan

17/09/2025, 10:00-16:00, Brussels

Scope and purpose

This policy dialogue is to discuss how results achieved under the Joint Action Heroes can inform policies and further support health workforce development in Europe contributing to health system transition and health system sustainability in times of a health workforce crisis. Achievements of the Joint Action HEROES are used as an opportunity to discuss in detail and concretely what's in it for the EU, the Member States, stakeholders, health workers, patients and citizens.

Background

Many EU Member States are facing a profound health workforce crisis that threatens the performance and resilience of their health systems. Common challenges include staff shortages, skill mismatches, and so-called "medical deserts." These issues impact accessibility, quality and safety of care, patient experience, and health outcomes. Without effective measures, it will be increasingly difficult for health systems to withstand future shocks—whether pandemics, economic downturns, migration surges, or geopolitical crises.

This crisis is persistent and systemic, rooted in Europe's demographic trends. Populations are aging, with more citizens living longer and with multiple chronic conditions, driving up demand. At the same time, the health workforce is also aging, with a significant share expected to retire over the next 10–15 years. The inflow of new professionals is not keeping pace, as younger cohorts are smaller in size and the interest in pursuing careers in the health sector has been decreasing.

A proper response is strategic in nature as Member States must not only address the immediate crisis but also advance broader health system transformation. Modernising service delivery is essential. This includes expanding prevention and health promotion, supporting

self-management, enhancing efficiency, and strengthening interdisciplinary collaboration and digitalization and its role in productivity/efficiency gains. Many countries are already adopting new models of care, including:

- Strengthened primary care through expansion of roles of primary care, establishment of primary care centres and use of technologies
- Integrated and coordinated care
- Chronic disease management models
- Expanding prevention and health promotion, including through nurse-led prevention and health promotion
- Skill-mix and team-based approaches
- Interprofessional collaboration
- Hospital reform and restructuring and shifting care to home and community-based settings
- Better care integration and coordination with other social services

The European Commission is actively supporting this transformation. One major initiative is the HEROES Joint Action (*HEalth workfOrce to meet health challEnges*), which focuses on health workforce planning and forecasting in the context of system transformation and emerging models of care.

Aims and objectives

The overarching aim of this policy dialogue is to contribute to the strategic orientation of how the EU, together with its Member States and stakeholders, can further contribute to health workforce development strengthening health system sustainability. The strategic orientation will include the gains to be made from such and engagement by the EU, the Member States, stakeholders, health workers, patients and citizens. The policy dialogue will make first steps towards the development of an EU level Action Plan, which is planned as one of the final deliverables of the Joint Action HEROES. This policy dialogue will be run on the occasion of reviewing achievements and success stories made under the Joint Action HEROES which is supporting Member States in tackling the health workforce crisis through mutual learning across three interrelated dimensions to achieve this aim the policy dialogue will address three specific thematic objectives:

1. **Role of Health Workforce Planning in rethinking the healthcare models and in planning and managing the transformation of health systems:** System reform influences both the number and mix of health workers needed, as well as the competencies required. Understanding the workforce implications of different care models is essential for effective planning and forecasting. Health workforce planning and forecasting should also be more explored to support broader reforms of health systems.
2. **Opportunities for strategic use of health workforce planning in countries:** Several countries not only developed models and tools or improved data but are already

integrating them into policies. Sharing experiences, feedback, and lessons learned is crucial for accelerating and strengthening national implementation.

3. **Sustainability of results of the Joint Action HEROES as a core element of work on resilience of health systems:** ensuring long-term system resilience of health systems will require embedding health workforce planning in daily practice at operational level, but also in policy processes. Results of the Joint Action HEROES are a critical stepping stone, and it will be important to build on this work. The policy dialogue is an opportunity to discuss how the knowledge and tools developed could be embedded into national and EU-level frameworks to ensure lasting impact.

Learning from each other: transition to policy implementation

The HEROES Joint Action brings together 51 entities—beneficiaries, affiliated entities, and associated partners—from most EU countries. These stakeholders form a backbone of expertise, monitoring, analysis, and knowledge brokering. The action builds on long-standing efforts at EU level to improve data and models for health workforce planning and forecasting. Going forward, it will be critical to embed developed models in policy implementation, supporting not only the health workforce agenda but a broader agenda of healthcare reforms, including also digitalization, EHDS, use of AI for efficiency and productivity gains.

While national contexts vary, there are common challenges and opportunities for shared solutions. Countries at earlier stages of reform can benefit from the experiences of those further along. While structural differences exist—such as between tax-funded systems and insurance-based models, or between centralized and decentralized governance—cross-country learning remains possible. The policy dialogue will explore how transferability can be supported, including through adjustments to financing, payment systems, training structures, regulatory frameworks, and governance.

Participants

The target group includes

- Representatives from the Joint Action HEROES: participating entities and Policy Board Members
- Ministries of Health
- Health System Performance Assessment Expert Group (HSPA EG) members
- Aspher, EFN, CPME, PROMIS, EHMA, PGEU, EPSU, HOSPEEM, and others from the Brussels health workforce community
- The wider health workforce community
- Actors of other on-going actions on health workforce: BeWell, nursing action

Speakers and facilitators

- HaDEA
- The European Commission (SANTE)
- Semmelweis
- Agenas
- Members of the HEROES Policy Board

- HEROES work package leaders and project partners
- WHO Regional Office for Europe
- European Observatory on Health Systems and Policies
- HSPA EG: chair of the health workforce subgroup or another member of the group

Format

Policy dialogues serve as an essential tool for knowledge brokering, providing senior policymakers with an opportunity to engage freely on key issues. Typically, policy dialogues focus on evaluating policy options and their effectiveness or discuss strategies for implementation.

There will be ample opportunity for discussion, including questioning the experts. Active facilitation will encourage the sharing of tacit knowledge. The facilitator will be responsible for managing the time allocated to both presenters and discussants.

We are now investigating whether it could be possible to hold at least a part of the policy dialogue as a hybrid event.

Policy dialogue: supporting healthcare reforms through health workforce planning and forecasting

17/09/2025, 10:00-16:00

Location: THE Hotel Bd de Waterloo 38, 1000 Brussels, Belgium

All session will be moderated by Matthias Wismar, Michelle Falkenbach and Gemma Williams

Time	Action/responsibilities
09:30-10:00	Arrival: Coffee will be available, participants
10:00-10:20	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Welcome and opening from the European Commission <i>Dirk Van Den Steen</i> Welcome from Observatory <i>Ewout van Ginneken</i> Welcome from the Joint Action Coordinator AGENAS <i>Lisa Baldini and Marco Di Marco</i> Welcome from the Policy Dialogue team Semmelweis <i>Eszter Kovács</i>
10:20-11:20	<p><i>Setting the scene: facets of the health workforce crisis</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> European Commission: challenges and support to health workforce reforms, <i>Dirk Van Den Steen, Commission (15 min)</i> Overview of health workforce reforms in Europe (reform tracker) (10min) <i>Gemma Williams, European Observatory (10 min)</i> HEROES: success stories (10 min) <i>Lisa Baldini, AGENAS</i> <p>Facilitated discussion Matthias Wismar</p> <p>In this session, we want to set the scene for the day putting the Joint Action HEROES in its broader context and provide the basis for the discussion on its contribution to the solution of the health workforce crisis and reflection on sustainability of achieved results. We will briefly review the state of play of health workforce reforms across Europe and get a first glimpse of the added value of the JA HEROES Facilitated discussion could focus on expectations of stakeholders: is it important to continue efforts in health workforce planning and forecasting?</p>
11:20-11:30	<i>Coffee break</i>
11:30-12:30	<p><i>Session 1: What is the role of health workforce planning in rethinking the healthcare models and in planning and managing the transformation of health systems</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Keynote: a health workforce for new models of care – supporting the health system transition (20+ min) <i>NIVEL TBC</i>

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Two country case studies presented Belgium and Norway (à 5-7min) <p>Facilitated discussion Gemma Williams</p> <p>This session will explore the health workforce consequences of the strategic reorientation towards new models of care. What does health workforce planning and forecasting needs to consider making the health system transition successful? And the other way round: can health workforce planning and forecasting stimulate reforms of healthcare delivery?</p>
12:30-13:15	Lunch
13:15-14:15	<p>Session 2: Opportunities for strategic use of health workforce planning in countries</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Intro statement on strategic use of staffing levels <i>HSPA chair of health workforce subgroup Barbara Lipszyc (10min)</i> Staffing level survey overview <i>Michelle Falkenbach, European Observatory (10 min)</i> Three country case studies presented Slovenia, Sweden and Malta (à 5-7min) <p>Facilitated discussion Matthias Wismar</p> <p>In this session we want to discuss how we can make planning and forecasting useful for the big transformation. Can the staffing level instruments that are used in different countries help lead this transformation or do we need to be more strategic? We are looking at staffing levels from the HEROES perspective: what does it take to put HEROES tools and models to policy practice; how can we reach progress on this?</p>
14:15-14:30	Coffee break
14:30-15:15	<p>Session 3: Sustainability of results of the Joint Action HEROES as a core element of work on resilience of health systems</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Institutionalization is key and how it can be achieved <i>Ellen Kuhlmann, Goethe-University Frankfurt, Germany (7 min)</i> HEROES statement <i>Lisa Baldini, AGENAS (7 min)</i> Strategy for sustainability <i>Tom Hughes-Waage, WHO (10min)</i> <p>Facilitated discussion Michelle Falkenbach</p> <p>What is sustainability? How can we continue after the HEROES project finishes. Are we talking about the sustainability of HEROES results or the sustainability of planning and forecasting. We need the institutionalization of planning and forecasting.</p> <p>This session will be an opportunity to share the insights from colleagues working on sustainability of the Joint Action HEROES and listen to the perspective of stakeholders representing health professionals' associations and social partners. In this session we invite the work package leaders dealing with the sustainability</p>

	<p>strategy to explain how they aim for sustainability with their actions under HEROES and stakeholders representing health workers to discuss their perspective of sustainability of results of HEROES. The session should reflect on three levels, EU partnership, regional, and national level and how they are best tied together.</p> <p>Facilitated discussion addressing the following:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Present where countries are with their own sustainability plans: what are common enablers to sustainability? - What will enhance sustainability and what actors are necessary, what is the role of regional action? How can we support intra-regional collaboration? What can be done to more effectively support countries individually?
15:15-15:30	<i>Coffee break</i>
15:30-16:00	<p><i>Towards a future strategy and an action plan for health workforce development</i></p> <p>This will be a facilitated discussion to addresses the following questions:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Are we strategic enough in our Joint Action work? Do we provide the right tools to support the health system transition sufficiently? • Are we fully exploiting the opportunity to learn from each other? • What are the lessons learned from the JA for further work on health workforce planning?