

NURTURING TOMORROW'S NURSES

Lessons from the Enhanced Extern Program

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DESCRIPTION

The Ontario Ministry of Health launched the Enhanced Extern Program (EEP) in January 2021, during the COVID-19 pandemic to support hospitals facing health human resource (HHR) challenges. Externs are clinical learners enrolled in any year of a Bachelor of Nursing program and are unregulated care providers working under the supervision of regulated professionals. The EEP helped address critical HHR capacity issues during the pandemic.

At Humber River Health (HRH), the EEP evolved into the Continuous Student Model, a long-term HHR strategy that provides nursing students with clinical experience and a clear pathway into independent nursing practice. From 2021 to date, HRH has hired over 800 externs, which demonstrates the program's positive impact on nurturing the future workforce.

OBJECTIVE

Integrate and preserve a successful EEP as part of HRH's human health resource strategy, fostering student knowledge growth and promoting professional development to maximize retention as HRH nurses.

ACTIONS TAKEN

- HRH implemented the EEP effectively in February 2021.
- Recruited clinical learners enrolled in Bachelor of Nursing programs as externs from partnering schools.
- Provided comprehensive orientation to externs as unregulated care providers, working under clinical supervision.
- Introduced the Continuous Student Model throughout HRH to support students' professional development and transition into nursing roles.
- Maintained the extern role as a permanent part of HRH's HHR strategy beyond the immediate pandemic period.

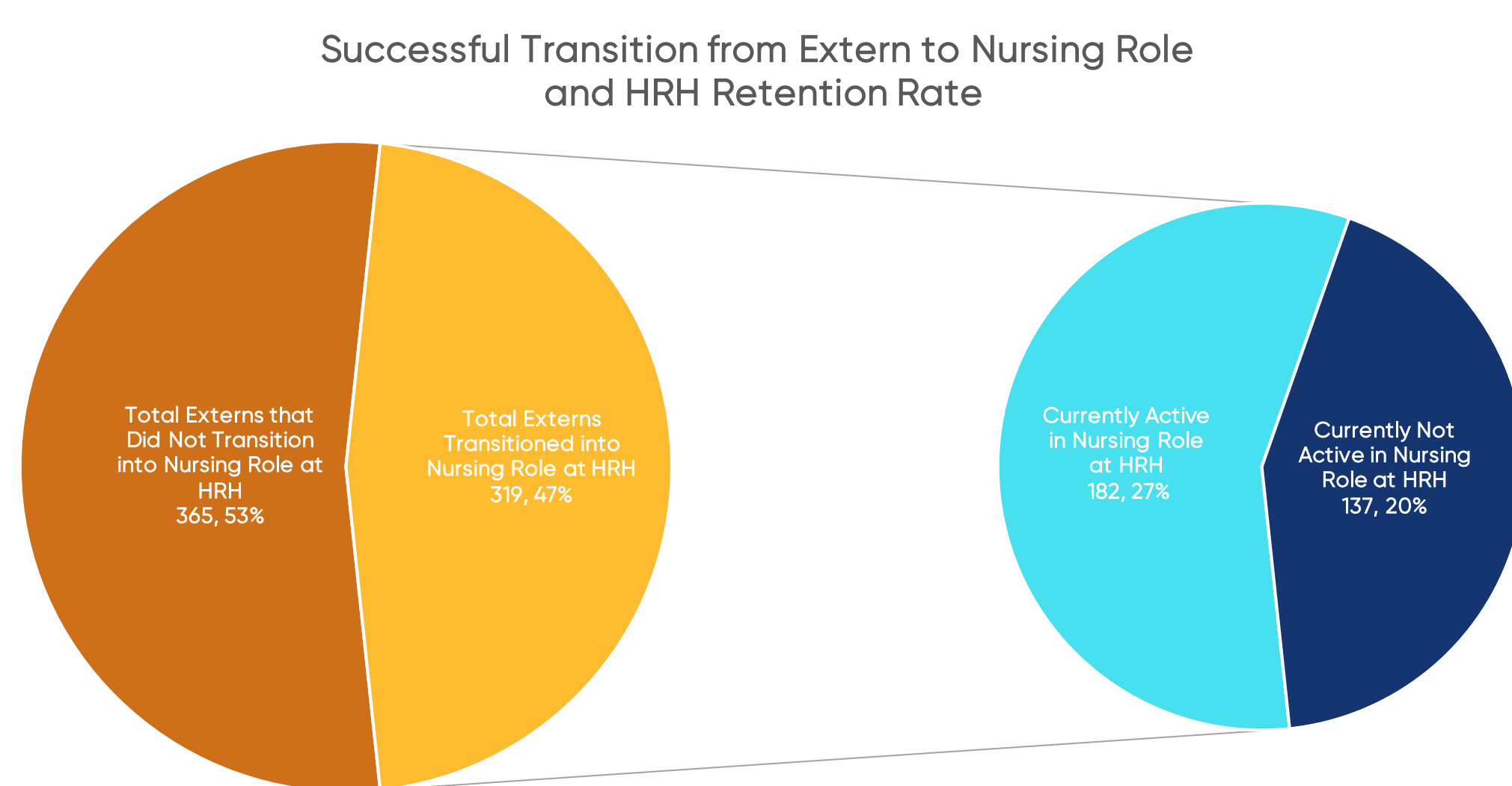


Figure 1. Graphical Representation to display the successful transition from extern to nursing role over the course of 5 years (February 2021 – July 2025) and the number of nurses retained from successfully transitioned externs as of July 2025.

	Count	Notes
Total Externs Hired To Date	814	
Currently Active Externs	130	
Inactive Externs	684	
Total Externs Transitioned to Nursing	319	Retention of 47% of 684
Currently Active in Nursing	182	Retention of 57% of 319

Table 1. Table demonstrates organizational statistical data for externs over the course of 5 years (February 2021 – July 2025).



Nursing Extern Orientation Agenda DAY 3

Time	Topic	Presenter	Date Location
0800 – 0830	Welcome & Introduction	Education Coordinator	
0830 – 0845	Patient Family Liaison	PPL, Social Worker	
0845 – 0900	Patient Feeding	PPL, Dietician & PPL, SLP	
0900 – 0930	Wound Care	CPL, Wound & Skin	
0930 – 0945	BREAK		
0945 – 1045	Safe Mobility Protocol / Hoyer Lift	PPL, Physiotherapy	
1045 – 1130	Falls Risk & Post-Falls Demo	Clinical Practice Leader	
1130 – 1230	Trans Vac System / Meditech Training & Documentation	Clinical Practice Leader	
1230 – 1300	LUNCH		
1300 – 1600	Unit Specific Orientation	Unit Leaders	

Figure 2. Student extern-tailored orientation schedule.

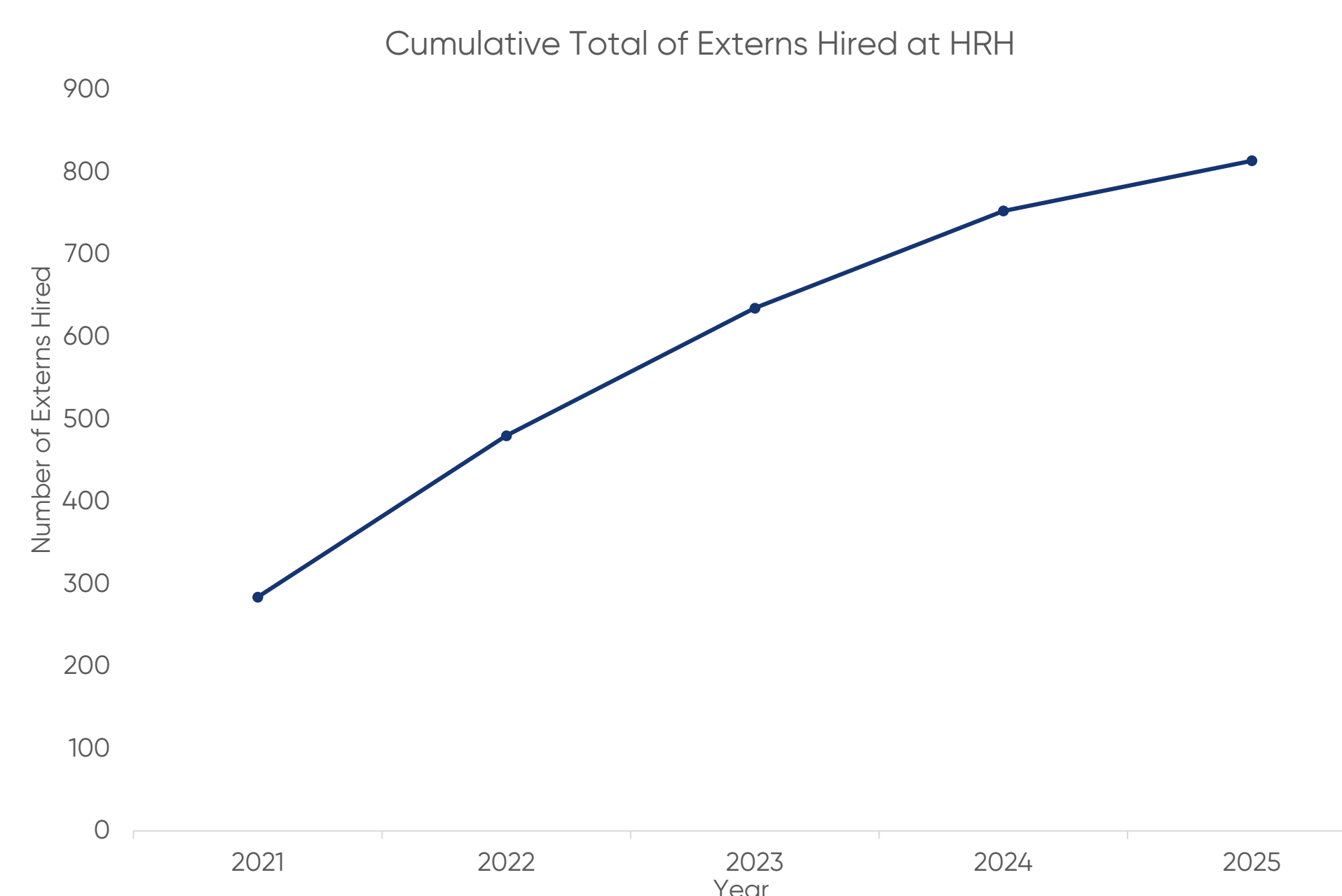


Figure 3. HRH continues to leverage the EEP to stabilize its workforce. HRH has continued to leverage this program since 2021 to fill staffing needs.

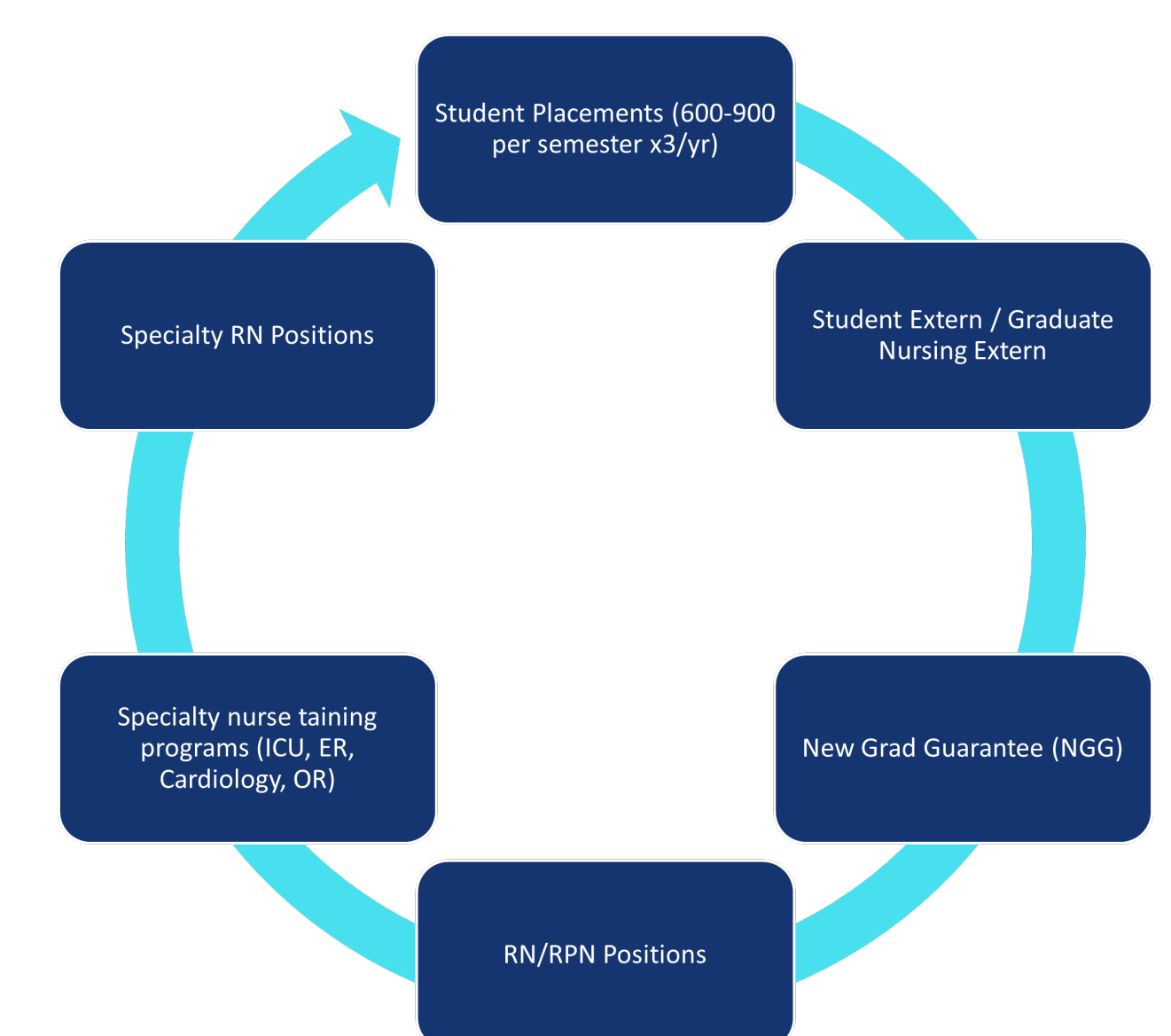


Figure 4. HRH's Continuous Student Model utilized as part of HRH's human health strategy.

SUMMARY OF RESULTS

Since 2021, HRH has hired 814 externs, with 319 successfully transitioning into nursing roles, resulting in a 47% retention rate. The program has strengthened HRH's ability to maintain quality patient care during critical staffing shortages while creating a sustainable pipeline from clinical education to independent practice. Although some externs do not continue at HRH due to incomplete education, career changes, relocation, or accepting positions elsewhere, the initiative continues to nurture tomorrow's nurses. As a strategic human health resource strategy, EEP plays a vital role in supporting the future of nursing at HRH and ensuring high-quality patient care.

LESSONS LEARNED

The EEP provided vital support at HRH during the pandemic and continues to do so in the years that followed. Students transition smoothly to independent practice, highlighting the importance of an initiative that is impactful beyond emergencies.

