

Briefing for Westminster Hall debate on funding higher education Wednesday 28th February 2018

This briefing outlines the impact of the introduction of tuition fees for undergraduate nursing education and the proposal to do the same for postgraduate nursing students.

Key points

- **Early indication has shown that the UK Government reforms to undergraduate nursing education in England are failing to increase the number of nursing students.**ⁱ Overall, applications to nursing courses have fallen by 33% since the same time in January 2016.ⁱⁱ
- This is at a time when the nursing workforce is in crisis.ⁱⁱⁱ For the first time in years there are now more nurses and midwives leaving the profession before retirement, with 27% more nurses and midwives leaving the register than joining.^{iv} One in three nurses are due to retire within the next ten years.^v The impact of the EU referendum appears to be driving nurses away from the EU^{vi} and the Care Quality Commission has raised safety concerns relating to nursing shortages.^{vii} The new funding model for nursing students is not meaningfully resolving this crisis for now and the longer term.
- **The UK Government should stop plans^{viii} to remove the NHS Bursary for postgraduate students in England on the basis of their unique characteristics and the opportunity this route offers to quickly grow the nursing workforce to meet the growing population need.** Doing so runs contrary to the Government's aspiration to grow the supply of the future nursing workforce as we are calling on the Government to stop its plans immediately and continue to provide direct funding to postgraduate nursing students.
- Stakeholders and the House of Commons Health Select Committee agree that the fastest and most effective route into registered nursing is through higher education.¹ There are existing options for expanded use, such as a two-year postgraduate route, which would be £33,500 per student. This is less than the average annual premium paid by trusts over a single year for a full-time equivalent agency nurse filling a post vacant due to shortages.^{ix}
- We have proposed a number of options for Government, HM Treasury and Department of Health and Social Care (DHSC) to put in place to encourage applications from diverse groups and to meet the growing population demand for health and care services in the future:
 1. **Grants for placements:** provides universal direct support to all healthcare students.
 2. **Investment in health care education through employers:** provides the means to significantly pump-prime workforce growth through a local market-led approach, rather than central commissions.
 3. **Means-tested grants:** ensure that the existing diversity of the student population with regards to socio-economic background and the widening participation agenda is preserved.
 4. **Targeted support for parents and carers:** extend existing hardship funding, supporting what Government has already committed to do, to support students with caring responsibilities and those suffering severe hardship.

¹ Council of Deans of Health, Written evidence to the Health Select Committee inquiry into the nursing workforce, <http://data.parliament.uk/writtenevidence/committeeevidence.svc/evidencedocument/health-committee/nursing-workforce/written/70875.html> (accessed 25/01/18); House of Commons Health Committee. *The nursing workforce*. Second Report of Session 2017-19.HC353.January 2018. <https://publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm201719/cmselect/cmhealth/353/35302.htm> (accessed 30/01/18)

Further information

Entry routes into the nursing workforce

There are two established routes onto the nursing register, also known as pre-registration training:

- The three-year undergraduate university nursing degree.
- The two-year postgraduate degree/diploma route for students who already have a degree in another subject and wish to train as a nurse. This represents a small and under-utilised route into the nursing workforce.

The unique profile of nursing students

The nursing student population is markedly different from the wider one. Nursing students are more diverse than other undergraduate groups and usually include more students from low participation neighbourhoods.^{2,3} They are far more likely to be mature students (41% aged over 25, compared with 18% of the total student population) and to have caring responsibilities.⁴

The placement element in their degree means that they spend up to 50% of their degree on placements, making a valuable contribution to the quality of patient care and service delivery across the health care system while they are learning. It also means they have the highest total workload hours of all higher education subjects⁵, at 39 weeks per year (and some studying for 48 weeks a year). This severely restricts any opportunity to support themselves through part-time work outside of university.

Apprenticeships in the nursing profession are being developed and implemented across the whole breadth of the profession and at different levels of qualifications. Data shows that only 30 registered nursing degree apprentices began university courses in September 2017.⁶

The impact of introducing tuition fees to undergraduate nursing students

By moving nursing students onto loans, Government assumed that opening up higher education to the 'market' would increase the number of students within higher education. However, in the first year after the reform, universities have not seen the expected expansion in the number of nursing students. This means there will not be an increase in newly qualified nurses in 2020. In 2017, the number of nursing training applicants in England fell by 23% compared with 2016⁷. For students applying to start courses this autumn, the first numbers show another fall of 13% compared to the same time last year, a total fall of 33% since 2016⁸.

The impact on course provision has been entirely left to chance, with no assessment of the minimum necessary provision across the four fields (adult, children, learning disability and mental health nursing). Some courses may simply become financially unviable for universities to run, with a knock-on effect on local

² Department of Health (2016) Reforming healthcare education funding: creating a sustainable future workforce. Government Response to public consultation, <https://www.gov.uk/government/consultations/changing-how-healthcare-education-is-funded>

³ HESA (2016) UK performance indicators 2014/15: A relatively high proportion (37.2%) of all students on subjects allied to medicine are from NS-SEC classes 4,5,6 and 7 compared to most other courses: HESA Table SP5 -Percentage of UK domiciled young entrants to full time first degree courses from NSSEC Classes 4,5,6 and 7 by subject and entry qualification 2014/15, www.hesa.ac.uk/data-and-analysis/performance-indicators/releases/2014-15-widening-participation

⁴ Department of Health and Social Care (2016), Reforming healthcare education funding: creating a sustainable future workforce. Government Response to public consultation, <https://www.gov.uk/government/consultations/changing-how-healthcare-education-is-funded>

⁵ Neves J and Hillman N (2016) The 2016 Student Academic Experience Survey, Higher Education Policy Institute and Higher Education Academy, www.hepi.ac.uk/wp-content/uploads/2016/06/Student-Academic-Experience-Survey-2016.pdf

⁶ Matthew Mckew, *A scheme off to a slow start*, <http://journals.rcni.com/nursing-standard/a-scheme-off-to-a-slow-start-ns.31.52.12.s12>

⁷ UCAS (2017) Application rates by the January 2017 deadline, www.ucas.com/corporate/news-and-key-documents/news/applicants-uk-higher-education-down-5-ukstudents-and-7-eu-students (accessed 25/01/18)

⁸ UCAS (2018) 2018 Cycle Applicant Figures – January Deadline <https://www.ucas.com/corporate/data-and-analysis/ucas-undergraduate-releases/2018-cycle-applicant-figures-january-deadline>

workforce supply. However, at the same time, new providers may choose to offer nursing courses as they can now recruit more freely than previously and are able to charge fees.

Changes to the nursing student profile

The Government committed to monitor and evaluate the effects of the student funding reforms. In its equality analysis, the Government accepts that the change could adversely affect participation of female, disadvantaged, older and ethnic minority students due to increased debt aversion.⁹ Early indications suggest that the profile of higher education undergraduate students appears to be changing, with applicants now younger than in previous years. Applications from mature students to nursing degrees have been disproportionately affected by the funding reform, dropping by 28%.¹⁰ This has resulted in a smaller number of mature applicants placed onto nursing programmes. The profession and health care services, benefit from workforce entrants with significant life experience and they are more likely to remain in the profession. Mature students are also more likely to choose the shortage areas of mental health or learning disability nursing. This drop may therefore increase pressures on the already existing staff shortages in these fields.

Previously, nursing students were twice as likely as the rest of the student population to come from low participation neighbourhoods – making a vital contribution to social mobility and widening participation.

The benefit of the postgraduate route into nursing

Just 5% of first-year students in 2015/16 studied at a postgraduate level. Yet, this route offers a significant untapped opportunity to grow the workforce through training existing graduates within 18 months to two years. The DHSC strategically investing in this would bring real and immediate benefits to growing the nursing workforce to meet future demand.

Postgraduate students in particular are more vulnerable to the introduction of fee loans: 64% of postgraduate health care students are aged over 25, compared to only 18% of students generally. Women are largely attracted to the healthcare postgraduate route and they represent 80% of the course places. There is a higher percentage of ethnic minority students on postgraduate healthcare courses (28%) compared to the general population (14%). The Department for Education equality analysis clearly states that these groups are known to be more debt-averse.¹¹ Introducing loans is likely to undermine recruitment of this cohort and represents yet another missed opportunity to grow the nursing workforce at a time of severe shortage.

Education providers estimate that many postgraduate courses could expand by around 50% if more funding were available. They also estimate that funding tuition costs for these programmes at the 2018 fee rate for undergraduate studies (£9,250 per year) and providing a modest student bursary of £7,500 per student per year towards living costs, would significantly support programme expansion. The total cost of this through a two-year postgraduate route would be £33,500 per student. This is less than the average annual premium paid by trusts over a single year for a full-time equivalent agency nurse.¹²

⁹ Department for Education, *Equality Analysis: Higher Education Student Finance for the 2018 to 2019 Academic Year*, February 2018, https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/680707/Equality_Analysis_Higher_Education_Student_Finance_for_the_2018_to_2019_Academic_Year_.pdf (14/02/18)

¹⁰ UCAS (2017) Application rates by the January 2017 deadline, www.ucas.com/corporate/news-and-key-documents/news/applicantsuk-higher-education-down-5-uk-studentsand-7-eu-students (accessed 25/01/18)

¹¹ Department for Education, *Equality Analysis: Higher Education Student Finance for the 2018 to 2019 Academic Year*, February 2018, https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/680707/Equality_Analysis_Higher_Education_Student_Finance_for_the_2018_to_2019_Academic_Year_.pdf

¹² Council of Deans of Health, Written evidence to the Health Select Committee inquiry into the nursing workforce, <http://data.parliament.uk/writtenevidence/committeeevidence.svc/evidencedocument/health-committee/nursing-workforce/written/70875.html> (accessed 25/01/18)

Incentives for the higher education route into nursing

Financial support for living costs to incentivise a wider range of applications could take the form of: **universal grants for students** in recognition of their placements; **means-tested grants** to maintain diversity; and/or **targeted support for parents and carers**. For a local targeted approach, a central fund could be created within the DHSC. Employers could access this pot to receive dedicated funding to incentivise and grow the required workforce in their area, for example through tuition fee write off or stipends in recognition of service.

As well as graduates of other subjects, strategic initiatives that target people who already work in the health care system, recognising prior learning and enabling progression to degrees and registration are critically important. Not only might such initiatives – deployed at scale – play a key role in meeting the demand for a clinical workforce, they also widen participation in these professional courses. This is a core mission of higher education, a stated aim of the Government, and can also bring significant benefits to the diversity and quality of the workforce.

About the Royal College of Nursing

The RCN is the voice of nursing across the UK and the largest professional union of nursing staff in the world.

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ⁱⁱ UCAS (2018) 2018 Cycle Applicant Figures – January Deadline <https://www.ucas.com/corporate/data-and-analysis/ucas-undergraduate-releases/2018-cycle-applicant-figures-january-deadline>

ⁱⁱⁱ House of Commons Health Committee. *The nursing workforce*. Second Report of Session 2017-19.HC353.January 2018. <https://publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm201719/cmselect/cmhealth/353/35302.htm> (accessed 30/01/18)

^{iv} Nursing and Midwifery Council, *The NMC Register*, 30 September 2017, www.nmc.org.uk/globalassets/sitedocuments/other-publications/the-nmc-register-30-september-2017.pdf (accessed 25/01/18)

^v Institute for Employment Studies, 'One in three nurses to reach retirement age within ten years', press release 7 July 2016, www.employment-studies.co.uk/news/one-three-nurses-reach-retirement-age-within-ten-years (accessed 25/01/18)

^{vi} Nursing and Midwifery Council (2017), *The NMC register 2012/13 – 2016/17*, www.nmc.org.uk/globalassets/sitedocuments/other-publications/nmc-register-2013-2017.pdf (accessed 25/01/18)

^{vii} House of Commons Health Committee. *The nursing workforce*. Second Report of Session 2017-19.HC353.January 2018. <https://publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm201719/cmselect/cmhealth/353/35302.htm> (accessed 30/01/18)

^{viii} Statutory Instrument, The Education (Student Support) (Amendment) Regulations 2018

^{ix} Council of Deans of Health, Written evidence to the Health Select Committee inquiry into the nursing workforce, <http://data.parliament.uk/writtenevidence/committeeevidence.svc/evidencedocument/health-committee/nursing-workforce/written/70875.html> (accessed