

RCN briefing: Motion on Statutory Instrument *Education (Student Support) (Amendment) (No. 2) Regulations 2018 (S.I., 2018, No. 443) (NHS Bursary)*

- This briefing outlines the consequences of removing the NHS bursary for undergraduate nursing students in England, and the planned removal of the NHS bursary for postgraduate pre-registration nursing students.

Summary

- **The Government reforms to undergraduate nursing education in England are failing to increase the number of nursing students.**ⁱ The Government committed to monitor and evaluate the effects of the student funding reforms. However, indications have shown that this policy is proving ineffective: the reforms have not led to the anticipated increase in nursing students. **Overall, applications to nursing courses have fallen by 33%** since the same time in March 2016, with applications from mature students falling by 42%.ⁱⁱ
- **This is at a time when the nursing workforce is in crisis.**ⁱⁱⁱ The NHS in England has approximately 40,000 nursing vacancies^{iv} and a National Audit Office^v (NAO) report on the social care workforce showed that the vacancy rate for nurses more than doubled between 2012-13 and 2016-17. For the second year in a row, more nurses and midwives are leaving the profession compared to the number joining and one in three nurses are due to reach retirement age within the next ten years.^{vi} The impact of the EU referendum appears to be driving nurses away from the EU^{vii} and the Care Quality Commission and NAO have raised safety concerns relating to nursing shortages.^{viii}
- **Sufficient levels of registered nurses are critical for the health and care system to maintain patient safety.** When sufficient numbers of registered nurses are present, mortality rates reduce, quality improves and patients report better overall satisfaction.^{ix}
- The Health and Social Care Committee inquiry into the nursing workforce in England found that it must be expanded at “scale and pace” and **that future projections of demand for nurses should be based on demographics and other demand factors, rather than on affordability**.^x The Committee and other stakeholders agreed that the fastest and most effective route into registered nursing is through higher education^{xxv} and there are existing unused opportunities, such as fast-tracking graduates through a postgraduate route.
- **Plans by the Government to remove the NHS Bursary for postgraduate pre-registration students^{xi} in England must be stopped immediately.** We believe the policy represents poor and ineffective public policy as it undermines the Government’s commitment to increase the number of nurses entering the workforce. We are calling for the Government to withdraw this Statutory Instrument to ensure that the Secretary of State for Health and Social Care retains the power to provide direct funding to postgraduate nursing students, on the basis of their unique characteristics and the opportunity this route offers to quickly grow the nursing workforce to meet growing population need.
- **Nursing students need bespoke financial support** if the Government is to meet its commitment to grow the nursing workforce and meet future population demand for health and care services. We have submitted a number of policy options to HM Treasury and the Department of Health and Social Care to support their work on higher education routes into nursing. However, we have received no formal response.

Further information

Entry routes into the nursing workforce

There are two established routes onto the nursing register from higher education, 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. There are existing options for expanded use of this entry route which costs £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.^{xii}

New routes in nursing

The Government claims^{xiii} it is prioritising new routes into nursing such as the nursing associate and apprenticeship route. However, the apprenticeship route is not currently providing the 1,000 new nursing apprentices per year as intended by Government, and does not currently present a meaningful solution to the nursing workforce crisis. Most recent data suggests that there are just 30 nursing apprentices in total.^{xiv} Also, it will take a nurse apprentice four years to become a registered nurse compared to the undergraduate route, which takes 3 years and will not address the current shortfall of registered nurses.

The nursing associate is a support role and should not be used as a substitute for registered nurses. The research is clear: diluting and substituting the registered nursing workforce with nursing support workers has potentially life-threatening consequences for patients.^{xv} Although the plan is for progression routes to allow nursing associates to progress to become registered nurses^{xvi}, in total it would take at least four years to train a registered nurse this way.

The impact of introducing tuition fees to undergraduate nursing students

The stated policy aim of the reforms to nursing undergraduate education was to increase student numbers and grow the future workforce we desperately need, however this has not happened. By moving nursing students onto loans, Government assumed that opening up higher education to the 'market' would increase the number of students. Instead, we have seen applications to nursing courses fall by 33% since 2016^{xvii} and there has been a 3% decline in the number of people starting nursing courses since 2016.^{xviii} Our projections suggest at the current rate of student intake, in 2020 we will not have increased the number of new nurses into the workforce as predicated by the Government.

Changes to the nursing student profile

We know that the profile of higher education undergraduate students appears to be changing, with applicants now younger than in previous years. Applications from mature students have been disproportionately affected by the funding reform, with applicants aged over 25 having fallen by 42% by March 2018 when compared to March 2016.^{xix} 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, they are more likely to remain in the profession and are 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, where there were cuts of 38% (-2,018 FTE) across all learning disabilities settings and 11% (-4,447 FTE) across all mental health settings since 2010.^{xx}

While we recognise some efforts have been made in making additional allowances available to these students we fear that these measures are unlikely to be enough to attract this particular student group as there is a significant risk that the prospect of student debt will be such a considerable deterrent that this group will simply not apply.

The benefit of the postgraduate route into nursing

Just 5%^{xxi} 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 Department of Health and Social Care (DHSC) strategically investing in this would bring real and immediate benefits to growing the nursing workforce to meet future demand.

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.^{xxii}

The potential impact of removing the NHS Bursary for postgraduates nursing students

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 health care 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.^{xxiii} 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.

We understand that universities need clarity on the future of postgraduate pre-registration funding. However, we know that the sector is open to the use of flexible approaches by the Government and policymakers alongside the reforms to support student participation and boost workforce numbers.

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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