

THE GLOVES ARE OFF

**It's time to value
nursing properly**

Because Scotland's
health depends on it.

BRIEFING:

**Nursing students
and attracting more
people into the
nursing profession**



It's clear that Scotland needs more nurses.

Yet over the last four years, thousands fewer students have begun nursing degrees than were originally planned in the targets set by Scottish government.



Nursing is a wonderful and deeply rewarding career, offering a wealth of opportunities to work across diverse roles, specialisms, and care settings. But the worrying decline in people choosing to study nursing makes it clear that the next Scottish government must do more to promote nursing careers and support the individuals who do decide to study nursing.

This must include a clear pathway for career progression, safe staffing, and stronger financial support for students.

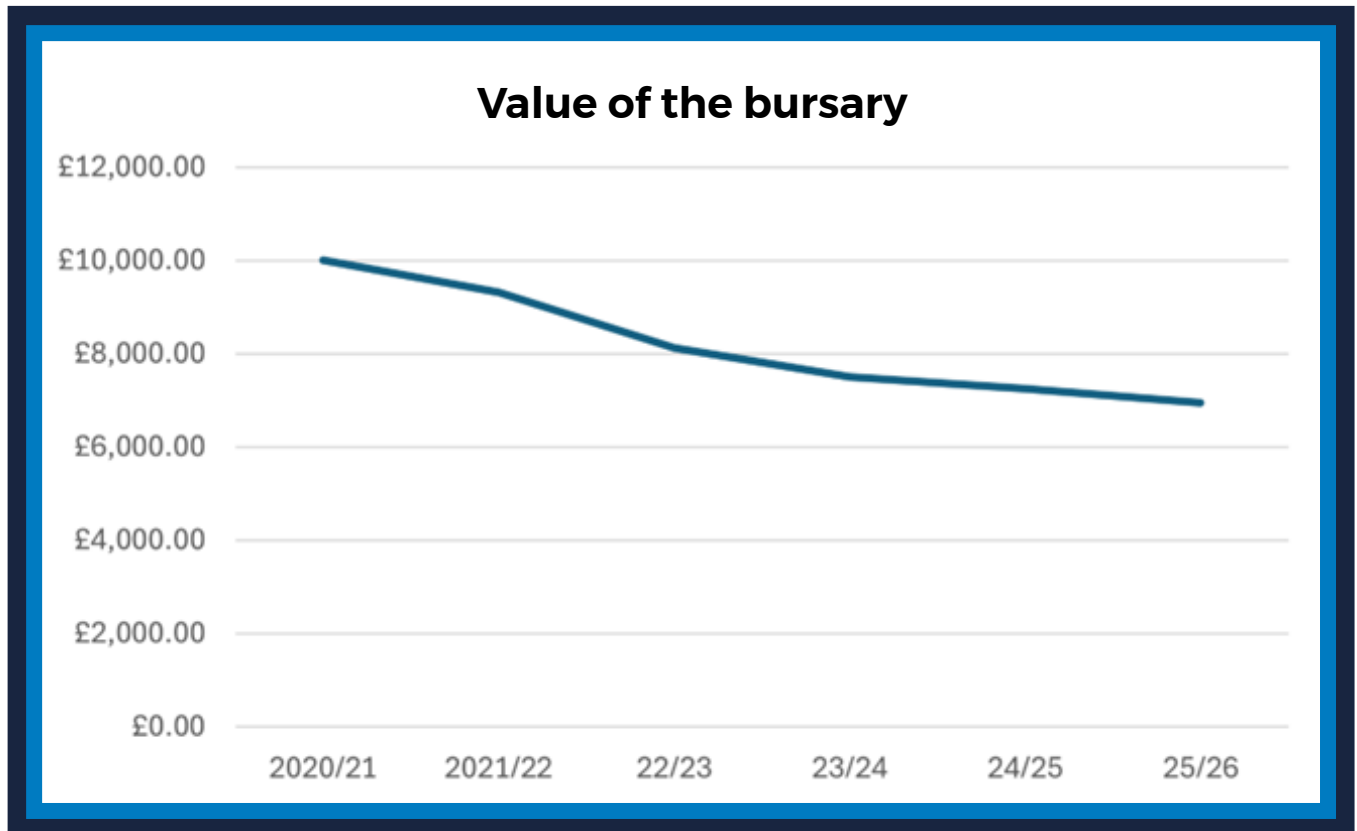
The case for change



- There has been a **steep decline** in the number of students starting undergraduate nursing courses in Scotland, with the number of students accepted onto courses starting in autumn 2025 **down 11%** compared to the number starting courses in 2019.
- The figures also show a **significant fall** in the total number applying to undergraduate nursing courses, with over **1,000 fewer** people applying in 2025 compared to 2019.
- Over the last four years **over 3,500 fewer nursing students** have started university than planned in the targets set by Scottish government. This is equivalent to a full year's cohort, comparable to the actual intake in 2025 (which was 3,535). Student numbers are **falling persistently short** of what was considered necessary.
- Although there have been improvements in course completion rates, not all nursing students complete their courses and progress into a career as a registered nurse. Of the nursing students due to complete their degree in 2024, **almost 20% did not complete their course**. Surveys of student members indicate that financial hardship and the quality of the learning experience on placement have an impact on completion rates.

The case for change

While the Scottish government's ongoing commitment to the nursing bursary is welcome, it has failed to keep pace with significant increases in the cost of living. The last increase in the bursary, up to £10,000, was in 2020-21. Taking into account RPI inflation since 2020-21, the bursary has decreased in value as shown in the chart below and the buying power of £10,000 in 2025-26 is now the equivalent of £6,940.



The vast majority of nursing students who responded to a 2025 RCN survey reported that the bursary is not sufficient to cover their living expenses and, of those who had considered leaving their course, the most frequently reported reason was financial concerns.

In response to lobbying from the RCN and our student members, the Scottish government committed, in 2023, to a review of the current financial support package for nursing students. While some initial actions have been taken, the full review was not completed by the end of the parliamentary term and recommendations to strengthen financial support have not been made. This should have been completed, and improvements made, by now.

The Nursing and Midwifery Taskforce considered how to attract more people into the nursing profession and in its report the Scottish government committed to a wide range of actions. These include a nationwide recruitment campaign and working with partners to develop alternative nursing degree models (including blended and distance learning) and to developing alternative entry routes in the profession (including part time, earn as you learn and apprenticeship models). Yet progress in delivering these changes has been far too slow.

The case for change

Safe staffing is particularly crucial to ensure students can learn effectively while on clinical placement.



Nursing students are meant to be **supernumerary - they should not be counted within the staffing numbers.**

However, we continue to hear numerous reports of students being treated as part of the workforce and of registered nurses struggling to provide the necessary level of support to students due to persistent staffing pressures.

Alongside declining applicants and acceptances, the funding difficulties affecting universities cannot be viewed separately from the wider nursing workforce. Ensuring a sufficient nurse educator workforce that is supported and valued must be a priority for wider nursing workforce planning. A diminishing nurse educator workforce and any threat of reduction of nursing programmes would have significant consequences for nursing students and the quality of their learning environment, experience and outcomes and the attrition rate of nursing students.



Our manifesto calls for:

- A cost-of-living increase to the nursing student bursary as well as improved support for students in their academic setting and in practice placements to address worrying dropout rates.
- Action to attract more people into the nursing profession, including a nationwide recruitment campaign and an expansion of the routes into nursing.
- The protection of nursing courses at Scotland's universities, recognising that any cuts to nurse education risks the future of the workforce.
- Implementation of the Nursing and Midwifery Taskforce recommendations, and the investment necessary to deliver this. These recommendations represent a recruitment and retention strategy for nursing, and are a significant opportunity to tackle some of the issues which are making it difficult to attract and retain the nursing workforce that we need.
- The introduction of a clear career pathway that allows registered nurses to progress from band 5 to band 6 after completing a period of preceptorship. Whilst pay is only one element of the complex web which runs through the recruitment and retention crisis, we strongly believe that providing career progression, and parity with other healthcare professions (such as midwifery and the allied health professions), will attract more people into the nursing profession.



Royal College
of Nursing
Scotland

#RCNGlovesOff

For more information about our priorities for the next Scottish government, as well as information on how you can support our campaign, please visit:

rcn.org.uk/glovesoff

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