

RCN briefing ahead of Finance for Student Nursing Adjournment Debate 14th December 2015

With a membership of more than 430,000 registered nurses, midwives, health visitors, nursing students, health care assistants and nurse cadets, the Royal College of Nursing (RCN) is the voice of nursing across the UK and the largest professional union of nursing staff in the world. RCN members work in a variety of hospital and community settings in the NHS and the independent sector. The RCN promotes patient and nursing interests on a wide range of issues by working closely with the Government, the UK parliaments and other national and European political institutions, trade unions, professional bodies and voluntary organisations.

Background

All students in England on university courses in nursing leading to registration with the Nursing and Midwifery Council (NMC) are currently eligible for financial help from the NHS while studying. Funding is available from the NHS Business Services Authority and the Student Loans Company.

The Chancellor announced in the Comprehensive Spending Review 2015 a transformation of the funding system for health care students, by replacing grants with student loans and abolishing the cap on the number of student places for nursing, midwifery and allied health subjects.

The RCN has significant concerns regarding Government claims that this reform will enable universities to provide up to 10,000 additional nursing and other health professional training places this Parliament. The RCN also questions the Government's claim that the move to loans will give health students access to 25% more financial support.

The RCN's Position

- Bursaries are a vital financial support that help many nursing students, from a wide range of social and economic backgrounds, to complete their studies and go on to be the nurses of the future.
- Without this essential support, many of those who are currently studying to enter the nursing profession would have been unable to do so. The RCN is concerned about what this move means for the future of the NHS, our future colleagues and above all, patient care.

- There are still a lot of question marks about how the system will actually work, however, the RCN is certain that anything that makes people worse off or deters them from becoming nurses, would be a big loss to our society.
- Student nurses aren't like other students. 50% of their time is spent in clinical practice working directly with patients and their families and they have a longer academic year.
- These proposals will saddle future generations of student nurses with even more debt and financial pressures, and unless nurses pay improves, many graduates will never be in a position to pay their loans back.
- This is a political decision and motivated by short-term financial gain whose impact will be felt long after this Government has left office.
- The ring-fence to nursing student funding has been removed and a precious link between the NHS and its nurses is potentially at risk, making it harder to plan for the future workforce.
- This decision was made with no consultation or evidence gathering, and the RCN believes that there has been very little consideration of other options for future nursing students.
- The RCN hopes to be able to work with the Government to design a solution which addresses some of these very real risks.
- The RCN will be responding to the proposals in England, as well as ensuring that the Scottish, Welsh and Northern Irish Governments don't make the same mistake.

Risks and Challenges

Impact on workforce planning

The Government claim that the new system will increase the supply and self-sufficiency of the nursing workforce. However, the Government have a fundamental responsibility to secure the supply of a professional and multi skilled nursing workforce to deliver care to the population. The new proposals will compromise the Government's duty to plan, and deliver, the health care workforce of the future and represents a significant shift to a free market approach away from a planned one. In addition to ensuring the right numbers, the removal of centralised planning will compromise the ability to match workforce planning with the design of new services, for example new models being developed under the Five year Forward view.

Impact on clinical placements

It is unclear how funding for clinical placements will work in the future, whether there will be sufficient number of placements across a range of clinical settings for additional students and if there will be enough mentors to support students in clinical practice. This could mean that the training for some students is limited in terms of the specialisms they experience and the support they receive.

Pay and impact of debt on future career

The RCN is deeply concerned that there is a risk of people being put off from applying to nursing degrees, because of concerns over debt. There is no certainty that the changes will increase nursing supply and put more money in the hands of nursing students.

RCN calculations show that the vast majority of nurses will not have paid their loan off within the 30 year repayment term. Instead, the debt will remain throughout nurses' working lives, effectively as a tax on their earnings. Debts in excess of £50,000 will impact on nurses' ability to secure a mortgage or further loans in the future.

Student nurses aren't like other students

As part of their training nurses spend 50% of their time in practice placements within the NHS. This is a key difference between training staff for healthcare and training staff in other sectors such as education.

If the risks are not fully considered this could directly impact on the quality of patient care. The current bursary funding ensures that nursing students have a link with the NHS from the very start of their studies and that lasts until retirement.

The current bursary funding encourages students from all socio-economic backgrounds to become healthcare professionals. The impact of these changes on access has not been fully considered. There also remains a possibility that the change to loans may have a disproportionate effect on those from lower income backgrounds and act as a disincentive.

The RCN is clear that students make an important contribution to clinical care. The RCN does not support a return to employee status, however this clinical contribution must be recognised in the financial support given to students. Nursing is a unique profession, and arrangements must reflect this to address the number of weeks, clinical and academic requirements plus the inability to undertake other paid work.

Student hardship

The RCN is unconvinced by the claim that nursing students will be much better off under Student Finance England arrangements while studying. Initial calculations by



RCN reveal that the difference has been over-stated, particularly for mature students and those with dependants.

Next Steps

There are still a lot of question marks about how the system will actually work. Any move towards a loans and fees based system would pose significant risks that have the potential to diminish any likely benefits. The RCN believes that any change must genuinely result in an increased number of entrants from diverse backgrounds.

The design and implementation of a new model must be shaped by full consultation with stakeholders and allow time for concerns to be properly addressed. The programme must also be subject to regular monitoring and systematic evaluation, including exploring any unintended consequences of reform. The process for evaluation should be transparent and enable Government, as well as stakeholders, to quickly identify any falls in the number of applications.

There are significant risks of this change to funding model, which has the potential to impact directly and detrimentally on patient care and the provision of comprehensive health services. For this reason, it is imperative that its impact is fully assessed, thoroughly tested and systematically evaluated.

December 2015

Lizzie Dowd
Royal College of Nursing
Parliamentary and Stakeholder Engagement Manager
lizzie.dowd@rcn.org.uk
0207 647 3840