

Nursing education policy and funding in England

MEMBER BRIEFING



What's the issue?

Too few nursing students are being educated at university in England to meet current and future workforce requirements to provide safe and effective care for all patients.

Between 2016/17 and 2019/20, there has been a 25% decrease in applications to nursing courses in England.¹

We know that in the NHS in England alone there are 43,000 missing nurses.² And this doesn't include all the additional vacant posts in social care and public health. Despite this, there is currently no overarching UK Government workforce strategy that plans for the number of nurses we need in the future or what policy and funding is required to meet that need.

The *NHS Long Term Plan* and the *Interim People Plan* were published in 2019. Both documents contain statements that England needs a significant increase in the number of nursing students studying at university.

In December 2019, the UK Government announced annual £5,000 funding, to help with living costs, for those on degree-level nursing, midwifery and selected allied health professional courses from September 2020. Additional funding of up to £3,000 per year will also be available for students studying particular specialisms or those with childcare responsibilities.³

While this is a first step in supporting the much-needed supply of new nurses, we must ensure that any barriers for people wanting to enter this profession are removed.

Why is this important?

Nursing is a safety critical profession. To ensure patients receive safe and effective care, a guaranteed supply of new nurses is needed. Therefore, the UK Government has a responsibility to create the necessary workforce to ensure that there are enough new nurses to provide safe and effective care to all patients.

Financial support for nursing students is essential to increase the numbers to where they need to be. Health Education England research has identified financial concerns as the number one reason why people drop out of nursing courses.⁴ Nurses spend 50% of their learning time

in clinical placements in services and are therefore far less able than other students to earn while studying.

What is the RCN calling for?

In 2018 we launched the *Fund our Future* campaign. This campaign calls for substantial investment in nursing education to incentivise people to study nursing and to support them while they study.

We have developed a series of costed policy options that demonstrate the cost and scale required to boost the supply of

nursing students through a combination of grants and tuition fee support.⁵ These models demonstrate that an investment of at least £1bn per year is required.

The Government's announcement of maintenance support is the first step towards a comprehensive funding package that begins to remove all barriers to studying nursing.

However, as it stands, nursing students will still graduate with at least £28,000 of debt and this will likely put off many who are debt averse.

It is important that any new funding must:

- Be for all current and future undergraduate and postgraduate nursing students regardless of start date or which field they study. Addressing field specific crises must be achieved through measures which compliment a significant increase in the investment in overall supply.
- Cover maintenance grants, which should reflect actual student needs, and tuition fee support.
- Provide at least the same amount of cash in hand as the current loan system.
- Have hardship funding accessible for those in acute need.
- Be easy to access, universal and paid upfront.

The UK Government must build on its announcement for maintenance grants made in December 2019, by investing at least £1bn per year into nursing higher education in England in the upcoming Budget.⁶

However, student funding incentives are just one part of the investment necessary to increase the number of student nurses.

There are also wider considerations such as the need for a nation-wide communications campaign to promote nursing, incentives for universities to provide more places and an increase in clinical placements to allow universities to offer more places.

In addition, more needs to be done to address the overall workforce capacity crisis. Legislation is needed to provide clear responsibilities and accountability for the workforce planning and supply in England. More information can be seen in our *Standing up for patient and public safety* publication: www.rcn.org.uk/professional-development/publications/007-743

As the RCN we:

- Have commissioned economic modelling by London Economics to demonstrate the level of investment required, and potential funding options, to remove barriers to nursing for all potential students.
- Are undertaking a student member-led campaign *Fund our Future* to call for at least £1bn per year to be reinvested in nursing education in England.
- Are proactively taking every opportunity to promote our student members' interests to civil servants, ministers, MPs and Peers.

Want to provide feedback on this briefing?

Email us at: papa.ukintl.dept@rcn.org.uk

What can RCN members do?

- Get involved with *Fund our Future* campaign: www.rcn.org.uk/news-and-events/blogs/5-ways-to-help-fund-our-future-nurses
- Become an e-campaigner so that you can participate in our campaigns and influencing work: www.rcn.org.uk/join-the-rcn/become-an-e-campaigner

References

- 1 UCAS, End of Cycle report 2019/20, available here: www.ucas.com/data-and-analysis/undergraduate-statistics-and-reports/ucas-undergraduate-end-cycle-reports/2019-end-cycle-report
- 2 NHS Improvement, Quarterly Performance of the NHS Provider Sector – Q4 2018/19 [Available at https://improvement.nhs.uk/documents/5404/Performance_of_the_NHS_provider_sector_for_the_quarter_4_1819.pdf]
- 3 Exact details are still unclear. For an up to date summary of what the RCN knows about this announcement see here: www.rcn.org.uk/news-and-events/news/uk-student-grant-response-181219
- 4 Health Education England, *Reducing Pre-registration Attrition and Improving Retention*, available at: www.hee.nhs.uk/our-work/reducing-pre-registration-attrition-improving-retention
- 5 This is available in detail in our *Fund our Future* report: www.rcn.org.uk/professional-development/publications/pub-007348
- 6 The figure of £1bn per year is indicative based on the size of the 2016/17 nursing cohort and will be larger should there be overall growth in the size of the nursing student population.

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