Nursing education policy and funding in England
What’s the issue?

Too few nursing students are being educated at university in England to meet current or future requirements for staffing for safe and effective care.

Between 2016/17 and 2018/19, there was a 31% decrease in applications to nursing courses and an 11% decrease in acceptances¹.

We know that in the NHS in England alone there are 43,000 missing nurses². 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.

Why is this important?

There can be no safe and effective staffing without a guaranteed supply of new nurses. The health and care system is a safety critical industry. 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.

However, there is no strategic approach to funding and planning for the supply of new nurses through higher education, as well as other smaller routes such as apprenticeships. The UK Government reformed nursing health care education in 2016 to create a market based loans system where there was no financial support offered to nursing students.

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 courses³. Nurses spend 50% of their learning time in clinical placements in services, are far less able than other students to earn while studying.

This year, both the NHS Long Term Plan and the Interim People Plan were published. Both documents contained welcome statements that England needs a significant increase in the number of nursing students studying at university. Simons Stevens, Chief Executive of NHS England, also said this year that the NHS clearly needs a bigger supply of new nurses.

However, there have been no significant funding announcements to follow this rhetoric.

The longer the wait to invest, the larger the scale of the challenge.

The window of opportunity to put real financial support and incentives in place for the 2020/21 academic year is closing soon. Last year, more than 80% of total applicants to nursing courses had already applied by the January 15 deadline⁴.

One year has already passed since we published Fund our Future – where we laid out the case for at least £1bn of investment per year for nursing undergraduate
education underpinned by modelling undertaken by London Economics.

The new Chancellor of the Exchequer after the UK Government General Election will need to act quickly.

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. These models demonstrate that an investment of at least £1bn per year is required.

This level of investment is required to incentivise people to study nursing and support them while they do so.

It is important that any new funding is equitable and effective. Funding for students must follow our five key principles:

- it must be for all current and future undergraduate and postgraduate nursing students regardless of when they started their courses or which field they study
- it must provide at least the same amount of cash in hand as the current loan system. Any shortfalls must be addressed by access to top up maintenance loans
- there must also be access to hardship funding for those in acute need
- it must be easy to access, universal and paid upfront
- funding must be focused on driving a significant increase in the overall supply of nurses. Addressing field specific crises must be achieved through measures which compliment a significant increase in the investment in overall supply.

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, as well as incentives for universities to provide more places, and health and care service to increase clinical placement capacity.

Ensuring adequate supply for the nursing and wider health and care workforce is a key element in our call for legislation for accountability at all levels for staffing for safe and effective care. Workforce planning and investment which maps against population based need for the nursing workforce in England is also essential for safe, effective and sustainable services.
What needs to happen?

The UK Government must invest at least £1bn per year into nursing higher education in England through a combination of tuition support and grants. Any new funding must follow our five key principles and be based on a population needs assessment of future demand.

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
• proactively taking every opportunity to promote our student members’ interests to civil servants, ministers, MPs and Peers.

What can RCN members do?

• Get involved with Fund our Future: 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

Want to provide feedback on this briefing?

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

References

1 Analysis of bespoke UCAS data from 2018/19 cycle.
5 These are available in further detail on the RCN website: https://www.rcn.org.uk/professional-development/publications/pub-007348.
The RCN represents nurses and nursing, promotes excellence in practice and shapes health policies

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