**Will the consultations on healthcare student funding result in an increase in student nurse application for training in British Universities?**

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**Alan Glasper as a student nurse at Great Ormond Street Hospital in 1974**

Emeritus Professor Alan Glasper, from the University of Southampton discusses the recently launched Government consultation on the future funding of nurse education and the abolition of student nurse bursaries.

**Introduction**

We recently reported in the British Journal of Nursing the impact of the autumn public funding review of 2015 by Chancellor George Osborne. In this review he announced the cessation of student nurses' and other health care student bursaries in England; an initiative that plans save the government up to £800 million a year.(Glasper 2015)

The media has reported the disappointment of nurses and nursing unions such as the Royal College of Nursing (RCN) to this announcement. They believe that recruitment to the profession will be adversely effected by the introduction of loans for student nurses to attend university undergraduate courses. Baring a reversal of the government decision, as of the academic year 2017/18 the current bursary given to student nurses in England will be replaced by loans to offset the £9000 per annum university tuition fees and maintenance costs. The guardian newspaper has reported that many student nurses will find it difficult to complete their training without the benefit of a bursary.

<http://www.theguardian.com/healthcare-network/2016/feb/10/nursing-student-bursaries-shortage-nhs>

**Background**

Despite the strident pleas by student nurses to repeal the government decision to abolish bursaries it is interesting to note that in the 19th century, many student nurses funded their own training. An inspection of the London Hospital archives for example shows that in 1884 a class of paying probationers for those who could afford to pay for their training, was introduced. This would have resembled a means tested system where those that could pay would and a probationer's training at the hospital lasted 2 years, the first year being concerned with theoretical knowledge and the second with practical skills. If successful in the examination at the end of this time, the qualified nurse was expected to serve for a further year. The archives report that training was later extended to 3 years and 1 year after qualification which today would translate into a preceptorship year

<http://www.aim25.ac.uk/cgi-bin/vcdf/detail?coll_id=3909&inst_id=23>

Lorentzon (2003) highlights the attributes of 19th and early 20th century probationer nurses where character traits as opposed to academic ability were seen as more important. Perhaps this reflects Black’s (2005) view of the lessons of 19th century nursing which reinforces the veracity that nurses must be central to the running of all aspects of hospitals. The arrival of the NHS in 1948 heralded the introduction of equitable salaries for student nurses in the UK.

I vividly remember my first student nurse wage packet of £18 per month at the age of seventeen when I commenced an orthopedic nursing course of 20 months duration in January 1969, before undertaking my state registration nurse training .My meagre wage thankfully included my subsistence but not my accommodation, as I lived at home with my parents. I remember being somewhat perturbed when at the age of eighteen the hospital started to deduct my salary to cover my pension contributions. A pension was the last thing on my mind as an eighteen year old, but fortunately unlike many of my peers in the 1970’s, I made no attempt to withdraw my pension contributions to fund for example an exotic post qualifying holiday. This meant that by the age of 58 I had accrued 40 years of pensionable service on a final salary scheme. Since the introduction of Project 2000 which heralded the introduction of the bursary rather than a salary, student nurses cannot begin paying into an NHS pension until after they have qualified!

This situation was predicated on the supernumerary full time student status which Project 2000 conferred on applicants to NHS colleges of nursing which were accredited by local universities or polytechnics. Subsequently the NHS divested itself of its colleges and schools of nursing and they were assimilated into the higher education sector.

However up until the introduction of the all degree level nursing courses which commenced in England in 2011, student nurses undertaking diploma level courses leading to registration were entitled to a non means tested bursary.(Glasper 2015) Subsequent to the roll out of the new nursing degree courses and the abolition of diploma level courses, student nurses were still able to apply for means tested bursaries usually based on parental or spouse income , NHS grants of a £1000 or reduced maintenance loans from Student Finance England. It is important to stress that it was the NHS in England that funded tuition fees which in most universities are currently set at £9000 per year or £27,000 over a typical three year nursing course leading to registration. The major benefit for current nursing students is that they do have to repay them, unlike fellow university students taking traditional degree courses who must repay student loans. This is all set to change and the media have been supportive of student nurses retaining the bursary system with for example the Guardian reporting that over 80,000 health care students are currently being supported by the NHS to complete their training degrees.

<http://www.theguardian.com/healthcare-network/2016/feb/10/nursing-student-bursaries-shortage-nhs>

However there will be many nurse readers who have helped their own sons or daughters through university and may perhaps feel that health care students should be treated no differently to undergraduates who for example, have undertaken history degrees with a view to becoming teachers.

The Chancellor in defending his decision to replace the bursaries with student loans justifies this by emphasising that the bursary system has actually imposed a cap on student nurses nurse recruitment and has pointed out that over half of all applicants are not accepted for a university place and because of this are leaving many hospitals to rely on filling nursing posts with agency/bank nurses or recruiting nurses from overseas.

<http://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/politics/autumn-statement-grants-for-student-nurses-to-be-scrapped-and-replaced-with-loans-a6748446.html>

However it must be stressed that it was the same government who cut commissions in nurse training places in many English universities as part of its drive to reduce costs to the exchequer in the wake of the last financial crisis.

**The consultations on healthcare student funding**

It is because of the complexities involved in this change to the funding of health care students that in April 2016 the Department of Health (DH) launched a consultation into healthcare student funding and how the changes to student funding for degree places can be implemented.

<https://www.gov.uk/government/consultations/changing-how-healthcare-education-is-funded>

It is beyond the scope of this paper to consider student funding for all health care professions and information which is only pertinent to student nurse funding will be considered here .The Department of health believe that under the current funding arrangements which are financed through the local education training boards, nearly two-thirds of people who apply to enter nurse training are not accepted. The DH believes that the new funding proposals will create many more training places for student nurses by 2020, thus allowing universities who offer nursing courses to accept more suitably qualified applicants than they are currently able to do. Some nurse teachers however, are concerned that the tuition fees of £9000 per year may deter some applicants to nursing who may consider seeking access to professional nurse training through the apprenticeship schemes which will give them nursing associate status and where for many fees will be underwritten by NHS employers. Nursing associates will then be able to continue to further education through either full degree-level nurse apprenticeships or a shortened nursing degree courses at a university. (DH 2015)

The DH consultation will run until 30 June and the department is urging interested organisations such as hospitals and members of the public to contribute to the [consultation](https://www.gov.uk/government/consultations/changing-how-healthcare-education-is-funded) which is designed to examine how best these changes to student nurse funding can best be implemented. Importantly this includes a consideration of opportunities for existing graduates in other subjects who apply for nurse training as a second degree to be eligible for a student loan. This notwithstanding and irrespective of the government’s intentions, it is the role of Health Education England to work with institutes of higher education to ensure that only highly educated nursing graduates are recruited to the NHS to ensure that patients are given a safe and high high-quality service. Parallel to this consultation the government aspires to increase the nursing workforce through the development of the [new nursing associate role](https://www.gov.uk/government/news/nursing-associate-role-offers-new-route-into-nursing), which will occupy a role once held by the enrolled nurse of yesteryear. (Glasper 2016)

These government reforms to the funding of nurse education are intended to address a number of factors which have been caused by the current funding arrangements. The primary impacts of these reforms are:

* That there will be a significant increase, typically anticipated to be around 25% or more, in the living cost support available for full-time students, funded through student loans which for the period of their studentship would increase the amount of spending money they have during their undergraduate years. In this context I interviewed two second year student nurses about the proposed changes. One of them told me that she would not have considered entering nursing if it would result in her leaving university with a considerable debt and the other told me that she would not mind being treated like other non-vocational students although she had a caveat in as much that she thought it unfair if nurses had to work a 37.5 hour week whist on placement and have less holiday entitlement than for example a history undergraduate. This is because history students do not have to as nursing students’ do, complete 50% of their course in practice.
* A significant increase in the available supply of trained nurses allowing more nursing students to study a degree avoiding the situation where 2 out of 3 nursing applicants who apply for a place are rejected. However this does not consider that the provision of a bursary may be a deciding factor for many applicants’ to enter nursing, especially mature students.

**Conclusion**

Commencing in August 2017 nursing students will no longer have their course fees paid by the government and instead will be able to acquire a student loan and have access to the standard student support system provided by the student loan company to cover the cost of their tuition fees, and means tested support for their living costs. Importantly and a fundamental sea change for nursing students, is that the terms of repayment for the loan will be the same as for all other graduates. Currently graduate repayment starts when a salary of £21,000 is achieved with repayments being 9% of income over £21,000.The Department of Health has estimated that a band 5 newly qualified staff nurse who earns £21,700 per year will pay back around £5.25 a month. Importantly if this loan is not repaid within 30 years the balance is written off. It remains to be seen if this latest government initiative will result in an improvement in student nurse recruitment or push some into the slower but less costly health care associate route to 1st level nursing.

**Key points**

* The Department of Health (DH) launched a consultation into healthcare student funding and how the changes to student funding for degree places can be implemented. The consultation will run till the 30th of June 2016.
* The cessation of student nurses' and other health care student bursaries in England; plans save the government up to £800 million a year.
* The RCN believes that recruitment to the nursing profession will be adversely effected by the introduction of loans for student nurses to attend university undergraduate courses.
* Some nurse teachers are concerned that tuition fees of £9000 per year may deter some applicants to nursing.

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