Groans about student loans

Things are far from perfect now, but many feel it could get a lot worse with the proposed scrapping of bursaries

When chancellor George Osborne announced last November that student bursaries were to be replaced with loans from 2017, it sparked widespread concern among nursing students.

‘There’s a lot of anxiety about what’s going to happen and they are worried about the students of the future,’ says Anne Corrin, who became RCN interim head of education in February.

‘Students are talking a lot about the proposals and, while they don’t think that everything is necessarily marvellous now, they fear it will become worse. They are open to change, but it has to be for the better,’ she adds.

High among the concerns is that more students will leave their programmes because they cannot cope financially.

‘Anecdotally, some already know students who have had to leave because they are worried about money,’ says Ms Corrin.

‘What they really want to see is adequate funding for whatever comes in.’

Another significant anxiety is whether changes will affect those opting to become nursing students, with fears that there could be a disproportionate effect on some. Of particular concern are mature students, those with families and those who have done a first degree, so are already carrying some student debt.

Effect on inclusivity

‘Nursing attracts a wide range of applicants, and about 60% of students are mature,’ says Ms Corrin. ‘We will need to monitor what happens in the future so we can find out whether this inclusivity is adversely affected.’

In January, the RCN supported a march to Westminster, with more than 5,000 people protesting against the plans to scrap bursaries. ‘The RCN has worked hard to ensure that students have a voice on this issue,’ says Ms Corrin. Students have also been asked to share their stories online, with responses turned into a 290-page booklet.

One student said: ‘It is mad to consider saddling a future nurse with a £25,000 debt when their potential earnings are unlikely to be much higher than £25,000 a year’.

Another said: ‘I wouldn’t have been able to start this course if it wasn’t for the bursary. I am a mature student with a previous degree and debt from student loans, like many of my nursing cohort’.

Student placements are also a hot topic, with the RCN Students Committee concerned by a lack of consistency. ‘Sometimes placements are brilliant,’ says Ms Corrin. ‘But at other times, students just don’t get as much out of them as they should’.

The RCN has carried out a survey to explore the issue in more detail and the results are currently being analysed. ‘It looks at what students actually learned and what they had hoped to learn – in other words, the gaps in their training,’ explains Ms Corrin.

She believes that good quality placements can be vital for retention, and can have a strong influence on whether someone stays on their course or leaves.

‘Students set such store by them,’ she says. ‘When they are good, they can make a real difference. Mentors too can have the same impact. Once someone has had a brilliant mentor, they never forget them.’

‘These experiences sustain students and help to keep them in the profession. They have such a deep impact that we need to make sure we get it right’

By Lynne Pearce, freelance journalist

RESOURCES

Student Life on the internet
www.rcni.com/students
RCN students website with details about campaigns and events
www.rcn.org.uk/students