Unison slams the RCN for supporting bursary status

By Graham Scott

A SIMMERING row between the UK's two biggest nursing unions was fuelled last week as the government announced a 10.4 per cent increase in student bursaries.

Unison condemned the RCN over its insistence that the bursary paid to nursing students should be retained, albeit at a much enhanced rate. Unison has been campaigning for students to regain salaried status, and with it access to benefits such as maternity leave.

A review of student funding is continuing but the RCN's position appears to be favoured by ministers, given the bursary rise.

From September, diploma students will receive a non-means tested bursary of £5,305 and degree students a means tested bursary of up to £2,100. The rises apply only in England.

RCN general secretary Christine Hancock said: 'The RCN is delighted with this announcement which should help make a real difference to students. We hope the ongoing bursary review will further modernise the current system of funding to ensure that not a single nursing student has to leave their course because of financial hardship.'

But Unison head of nursing Karen Jennings said: 'We condemn the RCN for holding out against the restoration of salaries for nursing students.'

Nursing organisations have long campaigned against student hardship, but they disagree over how to solve the problem.

'The rise in the bursary takes students' pay to £2.71 an hour. Although many students will welcome the extra cash, Unison wants to see an increase above the minimum wage.'

The RCN's position appears to be that favoured by ministers, as last week they announced a 10.4 per cent increase in the bursary.

A further 52 per cent rise would be needed, as the minimum wage will increase to £4.10 an hour on October 1.

The RCN pointed to a survey of its own members which found four in five favoured the retention of bursaries.

The Council of Dears and Heads of UK university nursing faculties said the increases are welcome and will help attract more applicants for courses. But council chair Eileen Martin added regret that the government had not brought the bursary paid to degree students into line with that paid to those studying for a diploma.

A health department spokesperson said the review of student funding is a complex exercise that also involves the education and social security departments. The outcome is not expected in the near future.

How will the bursary increase affect students?

Frances Portman, a second-year adult branch student at Middlesex University: 'Ten per cent sounds like a very big increase at first, but it is not a lot of money to live on. I think all nursing students should get the same amount - I know degree students who have to work night shifts and then come straight to college.'

Rebecca O'Brien, a first-year adult branch student at the University of Central England: 'Ten per cent is a good start, but it's only enough to buy three hours' child care and a few groceries each week. We need at least an extra £30 a week to make a difference. One day a week I have lectures that don't finish till 8.30pm, so childcare is not a luxury.'

Stuart McKenzie, RCN Association of Nursing Students' executive member for Scotland: 'The increase doesn't apply in Scotland. Wales or Northern Ireland, so these students will be disadvantaged compared with their English colleagues. Attrition rates in Scotland are about 25 per cent, so we are pushing for a quick response from the Scottish Executive.'

Rent increase prompts action

NURSING STUDENTS in one of England's hardest to staff areas are threatening to withhold rent after their trust slapped a huge increase on accommodation rates.

Four of those in arrears are already facing eviction and one who has left through financial hardship has received a court summons.

Furious Nursing students, staff nurses and ancillary staff in University College London Hospitals NHS Trust flats are furious their rent will rocket to £260 a month, for some of them a 40 per cent increase.

'We're looking at the possibility of not paying rent,' said a spokesperson for the students, Anna Denby, who lives in the trust's Rockefeller block, which is due to close in March 2002.

'Many people in the NHS believed things would improve with the extra funding that's being invested. But the rhetoric doesn't match the reality.'

Backed by Unison and the RCN, the students voted last week to fight the rent increases and to keep the Rockefeller block open until decent alternative accommodation is provided. They are seeking support from local MP Frank Dobson, the former health secretary.

'Fair' increase

In a circular sent to the students, the trust says: 'The new rent levels will introduce greater fairness to the system by removing existing variations in rent paid by staff for identical accommodation. It also reflects the fact that the central location of the residencies means that residents have no travel costs.'

The circular adds that the trust will soon be completing a programme of improvements.