Charging fees to nursing students is a non-starter

The extent to which nursing students in England are struggling to get by while pursuing their professional dream has been laid bare thanks to a Nursing Standard investigation. Our survey reveals that more than 6,500 have received hardship grants totalling £5.2 million from universities over the past three years, with some turning to food banks and other sources just to survive.

This comes in the context of the government’s plans to charge nursing students tuition fees, which will only add to their financial pressure. Although the fees will not have to be repaid until students have started earning a salary of more than £21,000 a year, such a change seems sure to deter thousands of potential recruits.

Among the arguments in favour of the new approach is that there is currently a cap on the number of pre-registration nursing places, which is set by the Treasury based on the amount of money it decides to make available. The heads of the UK’s nursing schools argue that universities will be able to train as many nurses as they like if they are allowed to charge fees to students, which will mean fewer applicants are turned away and the UK’s nurse shortage is alleviated.

However, this assumes there are plenty of would-be nurses prepared to land themselves with big debts, in the knowledge they will join a profession that is underpaid with no guarantee of career development.

Hopefully ministers will see sense and scrap plans to charge fees. If not then they need to come up with a more generous package of support and increase in salaries, so graduates can repay their debts and maybe take an occasional holiday.

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