Students need more than the bursary back

The #FundOurFuture campaign is calling for a whole new funding package to attract and support nursing undergraduates.

Protests calling on the government in England to reintroduce funding for nursing higher education started almost as soon as the bursary’s removal was announced in 2016.

RCN students cautioned ‘bursary or bust’ and called for an urgent policy rethink before the first non-bursary-funded students had even secured university interviews. Campaigners correctly predicted that the prospect of graduating with a mountain of debt would deter people from entering the profession.

But government ministers dismissed our concerns. Instead, they said the new funding system would remove the ‘artificial cap’ placed on NHS-commissioned training places and would enable many more people to study nursing at university. By 2018, the data on student intake confirmed our worst fears; applications to nursing higher education courses were down 30%, with acceptances of students on to courses down almost 4% over the same period.

In Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland, nursing students don’t pay tuition fees and get a bursary for living expenses. In October 2018, Scotland first minister Nicola Sturgeon said the bursary for all nursing and midwifery students will increase to £10,000 per year by 2020-21.

Nurses and nursing students in England had already been calling on the government to intervene to address the significant drop in undergraduate applications, with social media being used widely as a platform for discussion.

Listening closely, members of the RCN students committee knew it was time to act. We worked with the college to support student members and unify voices under a single campaign, and in November 2018 #FundOurFuture – which calls on the government in England to invest at least £1 billion per year back into nurse higher education – was born.

Personal experience was key to the campaign from the outset, with the nursing community in England volunteering stories of life as a nursing student. People told us of the crippling financial pressure they were under, and the physical and mental stress of balancing full-time study with part-time work just to make ends meet.

We heard about the pressures of being on clinical placements where wards didn’t have enough nursing staff to cope, meaning nursing students were being used to fill the gaps caused by a lack of funding.

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For the RCN students committee, bringing back the old bursary does not go far enough. Nursing students deserve better than this, and a new funding package is urgently needed to attract more students to nursing and grow the nursing workforce of the future.

The committee worked with the college to develop costed policies for the government to consider. Options included a £10,000 maintenance grant for all nursing students and introduction of ‘forgivable’ tuition loans.

The campaign dares to suggest students in England deserve support just like nursing students in Wales, Northern Ireland and Scotland.

United in our call for parity

At RCN congress in May, hundreds of nursing students from across the UK stood united and called for parity for all. The message to everyone at congress was simple: take this message back to your workplace and ask everyone to support the future of nursing.

Nursing students are passionate about patient care – that’s why we joined the profession. But better financial support is vital if we are to encourage more prospective nursing students to...
By standing shoulder to shoulder and speaking with a unified voice, we can achieve the change our profession needs and so desperately deserves.

The ‘our’ in #FundOurFuture is the future of nursing, the future of the NHS, and the future of staffing for safe and effective care. The nursing student on placement today is the registered nurse of tomorrow.

The #FundOurFuture campaign continues to encourage nursing students to get involved and spread the word at universities and placements, to push funding for undergraduate nursing education higher up the political agenda.

Securing better financial support is our mission and we are committed to achieving it.

#FundOurFuture campaign
tinyurl.com/funding-future-campaign

An illustration from the Fund our Future Nurses report puts the case, using figures from the Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (QAA).

According to the QAA – Students of a normal bachelor’s degree need 360 credits and it’s assumed each credit should take 10 hours study. This would mean studying for 40 hours a week. The courses are only 30 weeks a year.

A student nurse will study for up to 45 weeks a year. They need complete 2,300 hours of academic study and have 2,300 hours placement time to be able to qualify as a registered nurse. Shift schedules are often irregular, and this makes it difficult for student nurses to have part-time jobs to support themselves.