

# Royal College of Nursing submission of 1 February 2024

## PE2039/C: Fair pay to student nurses while on placement

### **The importance of supernumerary status**

All students undertaking pre-registration nursing programmes are required by the Nursing and Midwifery Council (NMC) to have supernumerary status while on clinical practice placements. This means that they must be additional to the workforce requirement and not counted as part of the workforce required to provide patient care. Supernumerary status is vital, as the purpose of clinical practice placements is to provide nursing students with a high-quality learning experience. This is why RCN Scotland does not support students being paid while on clinical placement.

However, we know that the quality of learning during clinical placements is being impacted by high levels of nursing vacancies and staff shortages, and that student nurses are exposed to the same pressures that are being felt by the wider health and social care workforce. In a 2022 RCN member survey, 46% of respondents in Scotland said that, on their last shift, nursing students were being counted as staff in terms of the numbers required to provide patient care.

The RCN is clear that all nursing students must be supernumerary when undertaking placements or protected learning as part of their education programmes and must not be included in the nursing workforce calculations or used as mitigation for workforce shortages.

As part of our work supporting the implementation of the Health and Care (Staffing) (Scotland) Act 2019, and the development of workforce planning tools, we are clear that the time needed for all elements of practice development, including mentoring, must be taken into consideration when defining the nursing workforce and calculating the nursing requirements and skill mix within teams.

## **Nursing Student Finance: the true costs of becoming a nurse**

**While RCN Scotland does not support student nurses being paid while on clinical placement, we are clear that the Scottish government must ensure that nursing students have appropriate financial support to allow them to prioritise their education, cope with the rising cost of living and complete their studies without falling into financial hardship.**

In June 2023 we published [Nursing Student Finance: the true costs of becoming a nurse](#). This report is based on a survey of over 1,000 RCN Scotland student members and found that nursing students across Scotland are facing serious financial pressures that are having a significant impact on their education, financial security and physical and mental wellbeing.

### ***Report recommendations:***

- **We're calling on the Scottish government to implement a cost-of-living increase to the bursary, and associated allowances, and establish a regular review to make sure it rises in line with the cost of living.**
- The Student Awards Agency Scotland (SAAS) and the universities need to agree a new clinical placement expenses process that enables students to claim during placements, improves access to advance payments, ensures prompt reimbursement and removes current barriers that may result in students falling into financial hardship. We are encouraged that our report, and a subsequent student member roundtable, has prompted action from the Scottish Government, Student Awards Agency Scotland, and universities to improve the clinical placement expenses process. This work is ongoing to update the guidance and refresh the processes in place.
- The Scottish government and SAAS must also uplift the value of travel and accommodation expenses to reflect the rising cost of living.
- NHS boards must review and streamline the processes for nursing students to register with their local NHS board staff bank, resulting in prompt registration and availability for part-time paid employment separate from programmes of study or placement experience.

### ***Key findings:***

- 99% of respondents said their finances cause them some level of concern.
- 74% said this was having a high or very high impact on their mental health, and 48% on their physical health.
- 58% said this was having a high or very high impact on their academic performance.
- 66% have considered dropping out of their course due to financial concerns.
- Nursing students are experiencing financial hardship. 64% said they have had to cut down on food and 49% have had to delay paying bills.
- 76% reported their concern that the bursary only covers some of their living expenses.
- 57% said the cost of getting to clinical placements was a key reason for considering leaving their course.
- Students reported being financially stretched due to expensive travel and accommodation and experienced delays in being reimbursed. 22% reported typically waiting more than a month to receive reimbursement after submitting an expense claim, with a further 7% waiting more than two months.
- 72% were encouraged to submit clinical placement travel and accommodation expenses at the end of placement or later. Given that placements can be up to 16 weeks, if students have to apply at the end of placement and face delays in payment, this is a substantial period of time between being out of pocket for travel and accommodation and being reimbursed.
- 90% have a job in addition to their nursing course, undertaking paid work alongside studies and clinical placement hours to supplement their income.
- On average, 25% were working between 11 and 15 hours a week, with a further 25% working between 16 and 20 hours a week, 20% working between 21 and 25 hours a week, and 10% working between 26 and 30 hours in a typical week.
- 25% reported the process took six months or more between applying and being able to work on an NHS bank.

Nursing is a fantastic career choice, full of variety and opportunity. It's a hugely diverse profession attracting people of all ages and from all walks of life, often as a second career. However, being a nurse should not be at the expense of personal wellbeing and financial security.

For the second year in a row, the number of places on nursing degrees have not been filled. The number of acceptances onto Scottish nursing courses for 2023 is 3,520; a significant shortfall of over 800 students compared to the number of places funded by Scottish government. This means the gap between the number of registered nurses that are needed, and the number entering the workforce, is set to widen even further.

Ministers must take action now to grow the domestic nursing workforce given persistently high registered nurse vacancy rates and increasing demand. A fair financial package has never been more important to encourage more people to take the undergraduate degree route into a nursing career.

The Nursing and Midwifery Taskforce, a direct result of the RCN's campaigning, comes at a pivotal moment and is much-needed recognition of the nursing workforce crisis. A key theme of the Ministerial Taskforce is attracting more people into nursing as a career, and this presents a significant opportunity to take forward actions to ensure that current and future nursing students receive the support they need.