



BRIEFING PAPER

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Funding for healthcare students in England

By Sue Hubble
Paul Bolton

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Summary

Up until August 2017 students taking certain healthcare degrees, including nursing and midwifery, were funded by **NHS Bursaries** – these were a package of support which included the payment of tuition fees and funding for living costs. NHS Bursaries were abolished for all new entrants starting healthcare courses in the academic year 2017/18 and these students were transferred onto the **standard support system** of loans for fees and maintenance.

These changes were highly controversial and concerns were expressed about the impact of these changes on recruitment to healthcare professions.

Applicants for nursing fell in the first two years after the change in funding was introduced. The number from England fell by 23% in 2017 and 12% in 2018, an overall fall of 32%. There were much smaller falls in applicants from the rest of the UK.

There was an **increase of 4% in 2019** but this only partially reversed the earlier falls.

Applicants and entrants to nursing degrees tend to be somewhat older than most other full-time students. **The drop in nursing applicants was largest among mature students** and smallest among those aged under 20.

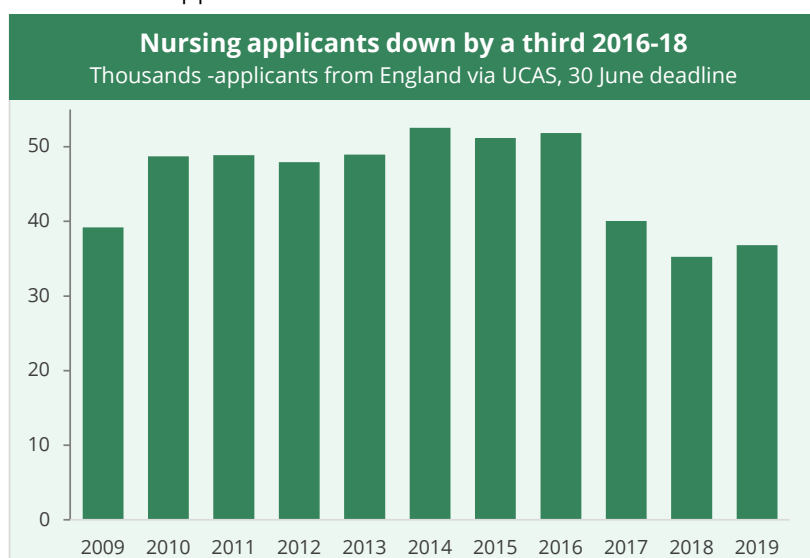
Nursing saw the largest fall in applicants of any subject allied to medicine in 2017 and 2018. There were falls of more than 20% in applicants for nutrition, aural and oral science and medical technology.

There have always been many more applicants than places for nursing and the number of applicants from England who were **accepted** has fallen by a much smaller amount: **a fall of 3% in 2017 and a further fall of 4% in 2018. If all part-time students are included the fall in entrants from England in 2017 was down by 13%.**

The funding reforms did not affect medical and dentistry students and paramedics as these students are funded differently.

This paper outlines the current funding system for: healthcare students, medical and dentistry students and paramedics and discusses the impact of the 2017 reforms on entrants to healthcare degrees.

Background to the reforms is given in library briefing, [Reform of support for healthcare students in England](#), 2 February 2017.



1. Background

In 2016 the Government announced that the funding of healthcare students would be reformed. Following a consultation, from 1 August 2017 **NHS Bursaries** for students starting courses in nursing, midwifery and other allied health professions (AHP) **were abolished** and these students became funded in the same way as all other full-time undergraduate students. The changes were brought in under the [Education \(Student Fees, Awards and Support\) \(Amendment\) Regulations 2017](#) SI 114.

These reforms were highly controversial and concerns were expressed about the impact that the changes would have on recruitment for these professions.

England is the only one of the four UK regions that has ended the bursary scheme for nursing students – Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales have all retained some form of bursary-funded model for pre-registration nurse education.

Medical and dentistry students also receive NHS Bursaries for part of their courses, but these students were not included in the reforms and these students **continue to receive NHS Bursaries**.

Box 1: NHS Bursaries

The last cohort of students to receive NHS Bursaries for nursing, midwifery and AHP degrees started their courses in September 2016. For these new full-time students the NHS Bursary consisted of the following elements:

- A **non-means tested grant of £1,000** per year (pro-rata for part-time students)
- A **means tested bursary** to help with living costs of up to:
 - £3,191 for students living away from home and in London
 - £2,643 for students living away from home and outside London
 - £2,207 for students living at home.
- Other **bursary elements** such as **extra week's allowances** for courses that run for longer than 30 weeks and 3 days each academic year, and practice placement expenses.

Students who qualified for a bursary also had the costs of their **tuition paid directly** to their higher education institution by the NHS. Healthcare students could also apply for a non-income assessed **reduced rate maintenance loan** from Student Finance England.

Paramedics were also not covered by the reforms as they were never included in the NHS bursary system.

Background to the reforms is given in library briefing, [Reform of support for healthcare students in England](#), 2 February 2017.

1.1 Funding for second degrees

In 2008 the Government abolished funding for students taking second degrees that were at an **equivalent or lower level** to one that they already held. The equivalent or lower level qualification (ELQ) rules contained **exemptions** for a limited number of subjects that were

deemed to be of public benefit – medicine and dentistry were included as exempt subjects.

The list of exempt subjects has been extended over time and now includes some healthcare subjects.

2. Funding for nursing, midwifery and AHP degrees

Since 1 August 2017 all new entrants to nursing, midwifery and other allied health professional (AHP) degrees have been funded by the **standard student support package** - students are eligible to apply for a **tuition fee loan** to cover the cost of fees and a **maintenance loan** to help with living costs. Students may also be eligible for other grants depending on their circumstances.

Information on funding for students is available on the GOV.UK website at [Student Finance](#), in a booklet by Student Finance England, [Student finance – how you're assessed and paid 2019/20](#) and on the NHS Health Careers website at [Financial support at university](#).

At the time of the reforms the Government said that transferring healthcare students to the standard student finance system would **increase the amount of support for these students by 25 percent** and enable universities to provide up to **10,000 additional training places** for nursing and other health professional courses.¹

Discretionary funds for nursing students

As part of the reforms in funding a new Learning Support Fund (LSF) came into force on 1 August 2017. The LSF provides **supplementary funding** to higher education student loans, for eligible new students starting pre-registration healthcare courses on or after 1 August 2017.

The LSF consists of three different allowances:

- **Child Dependants Allowance** – this allows students who have parental responsibility for a child under 15 years, or under 17 years if registered with special educational needs, to claim a **£1000 grant per academic year** which is paid in three termly instalments.
- **Travel and Dual Accommodation Expenses** – this lets students who have been on a practice placement to claim back travel and temporary accommodation costs incurred as part of the placement.
- **Exceptional Support Fund (ESF)** – students who find themselves in financial difficulty can apply for a grant of **up to £3000 per academic year** to help bridge the shortfall between their income and expenditure to allow them to continue with their studies.

Information on the LSF is available in an NHSBSA publication, [NHS Financial Support for Healthcare Students 2019/20 – Guidance for students Learning Support Fund](#).

LSF is **supplementary** funding and students who are eligible for support are still eligible to apply for other forms of extra support

¹ HM Treasury, [Spending Review and Autumn Statement, November 2015](#), p32

through the standard higher education student support system such as - Childcare Grants and Adult Dependents Grants and institutional hardship funding which is available from universities.

2.1 Funding as a second degree

Up until 2017/18 students taking second degrees in healthcare subjects were not eligible for student funding.

As part of the funding reforms the Government **extended the equivalent or lower level qualification (ELQ) exemptions** to cover new **undergraduate students** starting ordinary degrees, or honours degrees in **nursing, nursing and social work, midwifery and allied health professional subjects on a full-time or part-time basis**. Students starting these courses in September 2017 would therefore be eligible for the full student support package.²

In 2018/19 the ELQ exception was extended further to include new students starting diplomas, foundation degrees, ordinary degrees or honours degrees in pre-registration **dental therapy and dental hygiene** courses on a full-time or part-time basis and **full-time postgraduate pre-registration courses in nursing, midwifery and AHP**.

² Health [Reforming healthcare education funding: creating a sustainable future workforce Government Response to public consultation](#), July 2016 p16

3. Impact of changes on applications and entrants

3.1 Nursing

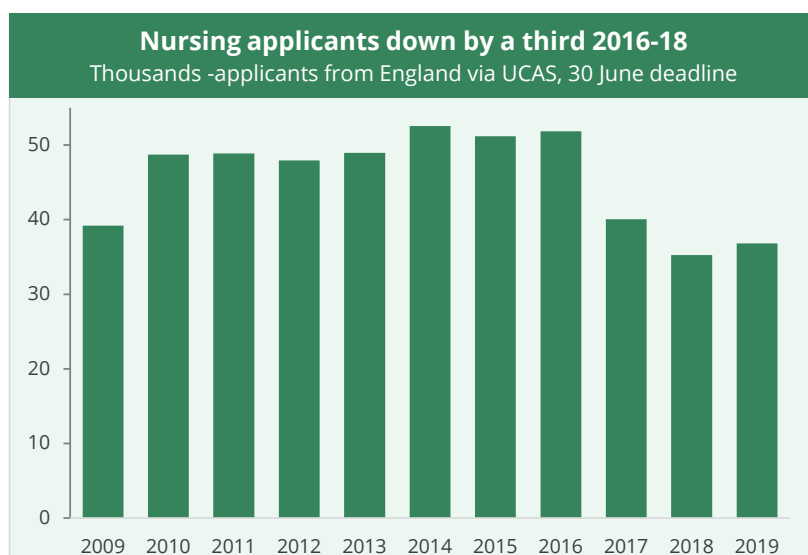
Applications

The number of applicants through UCAS for nursing from England up to the 30 June (pre-clearing) deadline went down from 51,840 in 2016 to 40,060 in 2017; **a fall of 23%**. There were falls in applicants from the other home countries, but these were much smaller; 2% from Scotland 6% from Northern Ireland and 10% from Wales.³

Numbers **fell again in 2018**. The latest data on the 2018 cycle is also for the 30 June deadline. Applicant numbers from England up to the 30 June deadline fell to 35,260 or **12% down** on the equivalent stage in the 2017 cycle.

There was an **increase of 4% in 2019** but this only partially reversed the earlier falls. Trends are shown in the chart opposite. The 2018 figure was the **lowest since nursing courses first started to be included in the UCAS system a decade ago**.⁴

Applicants and entrants to nursing degrees tend to be somewhat older than most other full-time students. **The drop in nursing applicants was largest among mature students** and smallest among those aged under 20. Trends are set out in the following table. This pattern continued into 2019 when there was a 9% increase in applicants aged 19 and under, but little or no increase in some of the older age groups.



³ [2017 cycle applicant figures – June deadline](#), UCAS

⁴ [2019 cycle applicant figures – June deadline](#), UCAS

English applicants to nursing by age by 30 June deadline each year								change 2016 to 2018
	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	Trend	
19 and under	15,150	15,250	15,070	13,090	12,470	13,610		-17%
20-24	14,170	13,200	12,510	9,590	8,190	8,120		-35%
25-29	8,300	7,930	8,220	5,700	4,620	4,770		-44%
30-34	5,550	5,250	5,570	3,870	3,290	3,300		-41%
35+	9,380	9,530	10,470	7,810	6,690	7,010		-36%
TOTAL	52,550	51,160	51,840	40,060	35,260	36,810		-32%

Source: [2019 applicant figures — 30 June deadline, UCAS](#),

Entrants

There have always been many more applicants than places for nursing.

In the past only around 40% of applicants were accepted. The drop in applicants from 2017 has reduced the gap between applicants and acceptances, but has not seen the number of applicants fall below the number of places. This means that the number of applicants from England who were accepted has fallen by a much smaller amount. In 2017 from 22,630 to 22,045, **a fall of 3%**. There was a **further fall of 4% in 2018** to 21,745. The acceptance rate was 44% in 2016 and increased to 55% in 2017 and 62% in 2018.⁵

The UCAS data covers full-time undergraduates only. Information from the Higher Education Statistics Agency covers all full- and part-time students. Their latest data are for academic year 2017/18, the first after the new funding rules were introduced. **The total number of first year students from England studying nursing at UK universities fell by 13% from 49,600 to 43,200.** The fall was **larger among part-time students** at 18% compared with 8% among full-timers.⁶

The table opposite shows how numbers changed by speciality in 2017/18. The biggest falls, among the larger specialities were in clinical practice, school and dental nursing. There was a 5% *increase* in first year critical care nursing students.

First year nursing students from England

Detailed subject breakdown, full- and part-time undergraduates

	2016/17	2017/18	change
Nursing	19,775	17,210	-13%
Adult nursing	95	25	-74%
Mental health nursing	870	870	+0%
Midwifery	725	665	-8%
Practice nursing	110	55	-50%
Children's nursing	60	45	-25%
Clinical practice nursing	1,240	445	-64%
Community nursing	3,075	2,975	-3%
Critical care nursing	2,205	2,310	+5%
Learning disability nursing	40	45	+13%
Medical nursing	13,780	11,695	-15%
Surgical nursing	20	20	+0%
Health visiting	160	170	+6%
Palliative care nursing	3,480	3,085	-11%
Dental nursing	510	315	-38%
School nursing	385	180	-53%
Neonatal care	515	440	-15%
Emergency nursing	255	260	+2%
Older people nursing	65	195	+200%
Nursing not elsewhere classified	2,210	2,205	-0%
TOTAL	49,575	43,210	-13%

Source: [HE student enrolments by subject of study and domicile 2014/15 to 2017/18](#), HESA

⁵ 'End of cycle data resources', UCAS

⁶ [HE student enrolments by subject of study and domicile 2014/15 to 2017/18](#), HESA

3.2 Other Allied Health Professions

Applications

The following table summarises recent data on number of applications through UCAS to all subjects allied to medicine. Unlike the earlier data on nursing these figures are for *applications* not *applicants*. As applicants can make up to five choices, which are all counted separately, there are many more applications than applicants. There is also the possibility that changes in the number of applications per applicant over time obscure trends in the underlying number of applicants. Equally, if the number of applications per applicant varies by subject then direct comparisons of the absolute numbers may not show the full picture.

Applications from England to subjects allied to medicine						
Thousands of applications to full-time undergraduate courses through UCAS by 30 June						
	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	change 2016 to 2018
Anatomy,Physiology and Pathology	23.4	23.9	25.1	21.9	21.7	-14%
Pharmacology,Toxicology and Pharmacy	18.7	17.1	16.7	15.2	15.2	-9%
Complementary Medicine	1.8	2.1	2.1	2.2	2.0	-6%
Nutrition	4.3	4.5	4.9	4.5	3.8	-24%
Ophthalmics	4.4	4.5	4.9	5.2	5.6	+14%
Aural and Oral Sciences	3.7	3.9	4.0	3.1	2.9	-28%
Nursing	191.8	186.3	188.1	144.8	121.1	-36%
Medical Technology	12.3	11.7	13.0	10.6	9.5	-27%
Others in Subjects allied to Medicine	49.5	49.5	49.0	46.9	45.0	-8%
Combinations within Subjects allied to Medicine	1.1	1.2	1.0	0.7	0.9	-14%
TOTAL	310.9	304.6	308.9	255.2	227.6	-26%

Source: [End of cycle data resources](#), UCAS

Applications to nursing make up most of these applications and **nursing has seen the largest drop since 2016 of 36%**. Other **subjects with falls of more than 20% were nutrition, aural and oral science and medical technology**. The absolute number of applications to these subjects was small compared to nursing. There were recent increases in applications to only one of these subjects; ophthalmics.

Entrants

The number of students from England **accepted** to full-time undergraduate courses in subjects allied to medicine increased by 30 (0.1%) in 2017 and 245 (0.6%) in 2018. Acceptances to nursing fell by 4% between 2016 and 2017. There were larger falls in nutrition (17%) and complementary medicine (5%) while 'Anatomy,Physiology and Pathology', 'Pharmacology,Toxicology and Pharmacy' and 'Others in Subjects allied to Medicine' all increased by 8-9%.⁷

Data from the Higher Education Statistics Agency (including part-time students) shows a 8% fall in first year students from England in

⁷ ['End of cycle data resources'](#), UCAS

2017/18. The pattern by subject was broadly similar to that shown in the UCAS data on acceptances.⁸

3.3 Comment

The impact of the changes to funding for nursing students were discussed in a Health Committee report, [Nursing Workforce](#), 26 January December 2018.⁹ The report raised concerns about the drop in number of mature students applying for nursing degrees and stated that this could potentially lead to a shortage of nurses in areas which particularly attracted mature applicants such as mental health nursing and learning disability nursing:

Figures just published by UCAS confirm a drop in older nursing students:

the number of acceptances for older age groups fell in 2017. This year, 4,575 applicants aged 21 to 25 were accepted, a fall of 680 (-13 per cent) compared to 2016, and 8,450 applicants aged 26 and over were accepted, a fall of 545 (-6.0 per cent).

This is of great concern, given that a significant proportion of trainee nurses are over the age of 25. Of particular concern is the fact that mature students make up an even larger proportion of students in the shortage areas of mental health nursing and learning disability nursing. (para 61-62)

There are shortages across a wide range of NHS staff groups, However, the most urgent challenge is the current shortage of nurses. We need to act now to address this.

[Interim NHS People Plan](#), 3 June 2019
p8

⁸ [HE student enrolments by subject of study and domicile 2014/15 to 2017/18](#), HESA

⁹ Health Committee, [The Nursing Workforce](#), 26 January 2018, HC 353 2017-19

4. Funding for medical and dentistry degrees

Information on funding for medical and dental students is set out on the NHS Careers website at [Financial support for medical and dental students – England](#).

Students on five-year courses are eligible for the standard student support package from Student Finance England (SFE) of maintenance loan and tuition fee loan in their **first four years**.

From **year five onwards**¹⁰, tuition fees will be paid by the **NHS Student Bursary Scheme** and students are eligible to apply for a **means-tested NHS bursary** to cover maintenance costs and a **reduced-rate maintenance loan** from SFE.

Students will also have access to a **non-means tested grant of £1,000** as part of their NHS Bursary award. Other allowances are also available to cover specific circumstances such as: dependants allowances and extra weeks attendance allowance.

Information on NHS Bursaries is available in an NHSBSA booklet, [NHS Bursary Funding for Medical and Dental Students 2019/20](#).

4.1 Funding as a second degree

Students taking second undergraduate degrees in medicine and dentistry are eligible for a certain level of student support.

Funding amounts will vary depending on whether a student is doing the course as a **second undergraduate degree**, or as a **graduate accelerated programme**. Students will have to fund **fees for the first four years** of the undergraduate degree (although they are eligible for maintenance support) and for **half of the fees for the first year** of the graduate course.

Funding arrangements for second degrees in medicine are explained on the Royal Medical Benevolent Fund (RMBF) website at [Medicine as a second degree](#), these funding arrangements also apply to dentistry degrees:

Standard 5+ years medical degree

Years 1-4

You'll have to pay the tuition fees yourself for the first four years. This is normally the standard rate of £9,250 but check the amount with individual medical schools before you commit yourself to the course.

For living costs, you'll be eligible to apply to Student Finance England Finance for:

Student loan for maintenance

- Adult Dependants' Grant

¹⁰ This includes students doing a six year course with an intercalated year

- Childcare Grant
- Parents' Learning Allowance
- Disabled Students' Allowance
- Travel Expenses for medical students

Year 5

You'll be eligible for support from NHS Business Services Authority for living cost and tuition fee support – your tuition fees will be paid in full. This support is the same as that received in year 5 by students doing medicine as a first degree depending on when you start your course. See the financial support section for England for more detail.

This page is provided on the basis of current information from the Student Finance England Assessing eligibility Guidance and the NHS Bursary Scheme Rules, 5th edition.

Accelerated 4 year graduate entry programme

First year

You can be charged up to a maximum of £9,250 for the year in tuition fees. You'll have to pay the first £3,465 yourself but you can apply to Student Finance England for a tuition fee loan to fund the difference between £3,465 to a maximum of £9,250.

These figures are adjusted if tuition fees rise in line with inflation.

For living costs you'll be eligible to apply to Student Finance England for:

Student loan for maintenance

- Adult Dependants' Grant
- Childcare Grant
- Parents' Learning Allowance
- Disabled Students' Allowances
- Travel Expenses for medical students

Years 2 to 4

During these years you'll be eligible for support from NHS Student Bursaries (England).

The Department of Health will contribute the first £3,715 towards the tuition costs and graduates can apply for a tuition fee loan for the £5,535 difference up to £9,250. Your living cost support will be the same as that received in year 5 by students doing medicine as a first degree. See the article on [financial support for medical students in England](#) for more detail.

A BMA publication, *Medical student finance guide 2018, English domicile students* gives information on funding for a second undergraduate medical degree and gives a list of charities that may be approached for support in un-funded years:

I'm a graduate student on the undergraduate course – where can I access financial support?

Your university may be able to offer you financial support in the form of grants or hardship bursaries, but don't forget to contact other [charitable organisations](#) too to see what help they can offer.

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For example, The BMA Charities Trust Fund provides awards specifically for graduate students on undergraduate medicine course. (p25-26)

The British Dental Association website gives information on alternative sources of funding for dental students at [Other sources of funding](#).

5. Funding for paramedics

Information on training for paramedics is available on the NHS Health Careers website at [Entry requirements and training \(paramedic\)](#).

Funding for paramedics **has always been different to funding for other allied health professional courses** like nursing, medicine and dentistry, due to the different training routes that were available to paramedics, some of which were funded. Students could receive different support packages depending on their training route.

Students taking paramedic science degrees receive the **standard student funding package**. Since March 2018 paramedicine has been an all degree profession so most paramedic students will be eligible for funding from SFE.

Students following a different training route may be eligible to receive funding through the **Local Education and Training Boards** (LETBS which is former Strategic Health Authority) or **Local Ambulance Service Trusts**. Students funded through this route may in some cases also be eligible for SFE funded student support, this is explained in an SFE document [NHS Guidance Higher Education Student Finance in England 2019/20 Version 2.0 August 2019](#) :

Students on some Paramedic courses may be eligible to receive funding through the Local Education and Training Boards (LETBS formerly Strategic Health Authorities) or Local Ambulance Service Trusts. Students who receive funding from these sources are **deemed to be in receipt of a healthcare award** and fall within the definition of a healthcare bursary (regulation 2 (1)) and whether they are eligible to apply for support from SFE depends on if the funding they receive from the Department for Health and Social Care (DHSC) is income assessed or non income assessed.

- Where the student is awarded **non income assessed** funding for the paramedic course from their LETBS or health authority (see comment above re SHA) or Ambulance Service Trust the student is **ineligible** to apply for support under the SSR (regulation 4(3)(c)).
- Where the student is awarded **income assessed** funding for the paramedic course via their LETBS or Ambulance Service Trust the student the student **is entitled** to a reduced rate maintenance loan (RRML) only from SFE (regulation 68(e)(i)).

Paramedics have **never been eligible for NHS bursaries**, so the funding changes put in place by the 2017 reforms do not apply to paramedics and **they are not therefore eligible for extra funding from the LSF**.

Information on paramedics' access to the LSF was given in a PQ on 25 February 2019:

[Paramedical Staff: Training](#): Written question - 222012

Julian Sturdy: 15 February 2019

To ask the Secretary of State for Health and Social Care, for what reasons student paramedics are unable to access the NHS Learning Support Fund on the same terms as other allied health profession students.

Stephen Hammond: 25 February 2019

The NHS Learning Support Fund (LSF) was implemented in 2017 to ensure course sustainability so that subjects previously funded through National Health Service bursaries continued to offer some non-repayable funding for the unique characteristics of these courses – such as placement length, clinical placement requirements and student demographic. The LSF is applicable only to those courses which, at the time, were within the scope of the education funding reforms in 2017.

In 2017 the route into paramedicine had various education and funding models which did not include access to an NHS Bursary, therefore it was not part of the funding reforms and students were not eligible to access LSF funding.

From March 2018 paramedicine became an all degree subject, with students accessing loans and allowances from the Student Loans Company. In line with the general student population and depending on personal circumstances, students can access funding for all their tuition fees and a maintenance loan of between £7,300 and £11,300 a year.

There are no immediate plans, within the current spending review period, to review those professions which can access the LSF.

A *BBC News* article, [University of East Anglia paramedic students call for 'fair' expenses](#), 9 March 2019 discussed the issue of funding for paramedics and said that Health Education England was “to consider the implications of the current financial provision and review the support available to paramedics in training from 2020”.

5.1 Funding as a second degree

Paramedic courses were **never part of the NHS bursary scheme** so the **ELQ exemption** for students taking second degrees in nursing, midwifery and AHP courses **does not generally apply** to paramedic degrees. Most students taking second degrees in paramedic science will therefore have to fund their own degrees.

Information on the ELQ rules relating to paramedic courses was given in a PQ on 19 April 2018:

Paramedical Staff: Training: Written question - 135158

Michelle Donelan: 29 March 2018

To ask the Secretary of State for Education, if he will classify paramedic science as an exception course to allow those who study it as a second degree to obtain a student loan.

Mr Sam Gyimah: 19 April 2018

The Department of Health and Social Care decided, as part of the reforms to healthcare education funding, to provide an exemption from equivalent or lower qualification (ELQ) rules for new students starting undergraduate pre-registration nursing, midwifery and allied health profession courses from 2017/18 to allow students to receive support for these courses as a second course.

This exemption has now been extended to new students starting pre-registration courses in dental profession subjects and pre-registration postgraduate courses in nursing, midwifery and the allied health professions from 1 August 2018. As students on paramedic science courses could already access the standard student loan system, these courses were not included in the reforms noted above, and therefore they do not attract this exemption from the ELQ rules.

It is the responsibility of the Department of Health and Social Care to decide which healthcare courses should be in scope of receiving an ELQ exemption.

However some students who receive funding from a LETB or Local Ambulance Service Trust may be deemed to have received a healthcare award and students studying on courses which attract an income assessed healthcare award may be eligible for a reduced rate maintenance loan for living costs, even if they hold a qualification that is an ELQ.¹¹ This is applicable to all courses which attract NHS/Healthcare bursaries starting before, on or after 1 August 2017.

The Paramedic Education and Training Steering Group is conducting a review on future funding for paramedics and a report was due for publication in November 2017.

¹¹ SFE, [*NHS Guidance Higher Education Student Finance in England 2019/20 Version 2.0 August 2019*](#) p20-21

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