After extensive delays, on 6 February 2018 the Government laid secondary legislation before Parliament to allow postgraduate pre-registration nursing, midwifery and allied health profession students access to standard student loans. Subject to Parliamentary approval, The Education (Student Support) (Amendment) Regulations 2018 will come into force on 27 February 2018.

The legislation has two main purposes:

- to bring the funding for dental hygiene and dental therapy in line with arrangements for most other undergraduate healthcare courses (note that funding arrangements for paramedic courses remain unchanged)
- to allow postgraduate pre-registration students to access the standard student loan package to meet tuition fees and support living costs.

Postgraduate pre-registration students will be able to access loans to cover tuition fees of up to £9,250 per year and to support living costs. These loans will be the same as those available to undergraduate students. These changes will apply to eligible new students starting courses in the 2018/19 academic year from 1 August 2018 onwards.

Students who are obliged to incur essential additional expenditure while undertaking a course of higher education as a result of a disability will qualify for disabled students’ allowances.

Students who are already registered in nursing, midwifery, or an allied health profession will not be eligible for support for a second full-time or part-time pre-registration course or a second full-time postgraduate pre-registration course leading to registration in the same profession.

Students will naturally have questions about loan repayment terms. Guidance is expected to follow from Student Finance England.

Like undergraduates, postgraduate pre-registration students will be eligible for additional support through the Learning Support Fund administered through the NHS Business Services Authority including:

- a £1,000 Child Dependents Allowance
• up to £3,000 for exceptional hardship
• reimbursement of additional travel and accommodation costs over normal daily travel to clinical placements

Impact
The Government has published an equality analysis of these changes. This analysis reviews the impact of the 17/18 undergraduate funding changes and assesses the possible impact of these new changes on postgraduate student behaviour. The Government acknowledges that the removal of the NHS bursary may have a greater impact on postgraduate students than undergraduate students. It has committed to keeping the impact on student numbers under review.

What are the implications for universities?

Indicative commissions
Some universities recently received indicative commissions for 2018/19 postgraduate pre-registration courses from Health Education England regions. These may be honored but it is probable that some indicative commissions will not be confirmed because of the new financial support arrangements for students.

Teaching costs and course fees
The student loan will cover fees of up to £9,250 a year for postgraduate pre-registration education. This is often below the costs of delivery. We will be looking to HEFCE/the Office for Students to make arrangements for teaching grants to supplement the tuition fee cap in recognition of the high cost of these courses. The explanatory note for the current legislation says: ‘replacing NHS bursaries with the standard student finance arrangements may increase funding to Higher Education providers as tuition fee payments and teaching grant funding will on average be higher under the new system’.

What is the Council’s policy stance?

The Council has been asking the Government to confirm funding arrangements for postgraduate pre-registration students for many months. We have repeatedly highlighted the inconvenience caused to all parties by the lack of certainty and the risk this has posed to postgraduate provision. The Council welcomes the fact that universities and postgraduate students can finally prepare for the 2018/19 academic year.

In the Council’s response to the original Department of Health consultation on funding reform we argued strongly that the standard postgraduate loan of £10,000 is unsuitable for healthcare courses and that postgraduate students should be treated in the same way as those taking second undergraduate degrees in healthcare subjects. As a result of this feedback the Government revised its original funding proposals for postgraduate courses and postponed the removal of the bursary.

In our written submission to the Health Select Committee’s nursing workforce inquiry in Autumn 2017 we called for greater support of postgraduate entry as a valuable route into the professions and suggested the use of innovative student funding incentives to help grow the workforce. The Government itself seemed to recognise the value of this approach in its sponsorship of the 2017 ‘Nurse First’ programme for a small number of learning disability and mental health nursing students. In light of falling applications to nursing, midwifery and allied health profession courses, some will feel that retention of a postgraduate commissioning and bursary system would be preferable to the introduction of student loans.
The laying of this legislation has led to some political wrangling, with some suggestion that Labour will oppose the plans. Further delays to funding arrangements for postgraduate pre-registration education could be hugely detrimental to the 2018/19 intake.

Applications to the healthcare professions from mature students have fallen more than those from younger students so we might expect reforms to postgraduate pre-registration funding to have an effect on application numbers, particularly as students will already have student loans from first degrees. The Government acknowledges the risks in its full equality analysis.

We will insist on close monitoring of postgraduate application numbers over the coming years and will want to see new measures introduced to mitigate any adverse effects of postgraduate student loans.

For more information contact:

Fleur Nielsen, Head of Policy, fleur.nielsen@cod-health.ac.uk

If you have further questions please let us know and we will add them to this resource.