

Petitions Committee: Pay and financial support for healthcare students

Introduction

The Petitions Committee ran an online survey to inform a debate on Monday 11 September 2023 on pay and financial support for healthcare students. The survey asked petitioners and others about their views on financial support for healthcare students, and their workload and responsibilities while on placement.

The survey was shared on social media, with stakeholder organisations, and with signatories of the following petitions, which triggered the debate:

- [Ensure student nurses are paid for placement hours](#)
- [Extend 30 hours free childcare to student midwives/nurses/paramedics](#)
- [Minimum wage pay for all healthcare students for placement hours worked!](#)

The contents of this brief should be read as reflecting only the experiences of those who responded to the survey.

Response

2,135 survey responses.

About the respondents

- **71%** said they were current healthcare students. Of those **55%** said they were nursing students and **32%** said they were midwifery students.
- **7%** said they were former healthcare students.

- **13%** said they were close friends or family members of a healthcare student.
- **5%** said they were considering becoming a healthcare student.
- Unless stated otherwise, this summary refers to current healthcare students as “healthcare students”.

Some healthcare students received [financial support from the Government](#):

- **82%** said they received a Training Grant.
- **10%** said they received a Specialist Subject Payment.
- Less than **1%** said they received a grant from the Exceptional Support Fund.

Demographics

Of the healthcare students who answered our demographics questions:

- **92%** said they were female.
- **63%** described their ethnicity as ‘White: English/Welsh/Scottish/Northern Irish/British’. **15%** described their ethnicity as ‘Black/Black British: African or Caribbean’.
- **34%** described themselves as coming from a disadvantaged background.

The cost of living

Healthcare students on placement said they were struggling to afford essentials and other spending.

- **60%** said it was 'difficult' or 'very difficult' to afford food.
- **58%** said it was 'difficult' or 'very difficult' to afford energy, including gas and electricity.
- **69%** said it was 'difficult' or 'very difficult' to afford clothing.
- **73%** said it was 'difficult' or 'very difficult' to afford transport, including fuel.
- **79%** said it was 'difficult' or 'very difficult' to afford leisure and recreation, including entertainment and holidays.
- **19%** said they had visited a foodbank and **26%** said they were considering it.

Financial concerns were the main reason healthcare students had left or were considering leaving their courses.

- Of the healthcare students who said they had considered leaving, **95%** said financial worries were a factor.
- Of former healthcare students, **88%** said financial worries were one of the reasons they left their course.

Quotes

- Paramedic student: "As a mature student, the LSF [Learning Support Fund] unfortunately does not cover household bills and therefore requires me to work at least a minimum of 20hrs a week on top of university days to be able to support myself. Not only would I be unable to pay my bills and eat if I didn't work, I couldn't afford the fuel to get to university or placements as they can be an hour travel or more from home [...] I honestly consider leaving my course daily because of the financial struggle. If we were paid for our time on placement I would no longer need to work and that precious time could go towards my learning and at the end of the day to benefit the NHS when I qualify."
- Nursing student: "After all my expenses this year including placement, I was left with less than £10 in my account many times. I have had to borrow money from family to afford food, we could not even afford to have the heating on for very long during the winter which caused mould and illness. Meaning I couldn't work. If I had been paid the bare minimum for placement, I don't think this would've happened."
- Nursing student "My thoughts have always been of quitting since life is so hard without money, I lack money to pay for

childcare, and everything has gone up, we are spending more on food, electricity, and bills. In addition to unpaid placements, I have to work extra hours. My mental health has been very challenged as a result of this. I feel tired and depressed. Student nurses need more support."

- Nursing student: "I wanted to leave my course this year when I was working on placement and not able to afford food. I was so hungry and my energy was so depleted that it was affecting my work. I was struggling so much financially that the staff resorted to giving me toilet rolls, sanitary products and even paying for some food for me."

Placement expenditure

Healthcare students spoke about facing extra expenses due to their placements, such as uniform, transport and childcare costs.

Quote

- Midwifery student: "There are travel/parking costs, uniform costs such as having to size up and buy new uniform, pin badges, fob watches, (expensive!) shoes etc. Cost of food on placement also, as may not always have time to make food at home on back to back nights for example."

- Nursing student: "I pay up to £100 a week in fuel driving to and from placements or to and from university. I pay £200 in weekend childcare fees or on school holidays just so I can continue to get enough hours for placements."
- Nursing student: "Pursuing a career in nursing requires significant financial investment in tuition fees, textbooks, uniforms, equipment, and other educational expenses [...] During clinical placements, I also sometimes incur additional costs related to transportation, meals, and accommodation if I am required to travel to different healthcare settings. Therefore, recognising our dedication and compensating us with some level of grant or additional financial supports could contribute to our overall well-being, motivation, and success in becoming competent healthcare professionals."

Additional jobs

Many healthcare students said they relied on a paid job to make ends meet. Some said their course workload was so high, they were unable take an additional job, putting them under financial strain.

- **51%** of healthcare students on placement said they had a paid job alongside their course.

Quotes

- Nursing student: "I am having to work bank shifts for the flexibility, on top of my placement hours in order to eat and put petrol in my car to get to the placement! I am doing on average 72-hour weeks."
- Nursing student: "I am a single mother. I have to work 40 hours a week for free on my placement and on top of that I have to work [...] in a restaurant whenever I can to get money for living! On top of that, I have to cover childcare for both works [...] at night I have to do assessments, read and prepare for exams! This is a continuous struggle and I have repeatedly ended up in A&E for exhaustion and heart issues."
- Midwifery student: "We are required to do 160-360 hours of placement a semester. We have no control over when these shifts are, which means we are always needing to cancel other work (paid) shifts to do an unpaid placement shift."

- Nursing student: "It is not possible or safe to work another job alongside placement as the hours are that of a full-time job. Due to this myself and many colleagues have struggled financially and even putting food on the table can be a struggle."
- Midwifery student: "If I got a part-time job, I would never see my children and would not be able to complete my coursework to the best of my abilities."

Supernumerary status

Healthcare students have supernumerary status. This means that the student should not, as part of their programme of preparation, be contracted to provide care.

Many former and current healthcare students said they did not feel that they were in practice treated as supernumerary on placement.

- **60%** of healthcare students and **59%** of former healthcare students said they were not treated as supernumerary on placement.
- **40%** of healthcare professionals said the students they work with were not treated as supernumerary on placement.

Quotes

- Nursing student: "Due to the shortness of nurses currently in the NHS, sometimes through no fault of anyone in particular we as students have to jump in. There have been placements where I have felt that I was working full-time rather than learning. There are times where I have been told I cannot take a break/lunch break yet as another member of staff is on theirs and there are not enough people. Therefore, indicating that I am more than supernumerary."
- Paramedic student: "Students are often used to relieve the workload on understaffed wards. As a paramedic student, I once went to a road traffic accident and there were more patients than paramedics. I treated patients on my own administering a variety of treatments on my own, but I did not get paid for it. At some point during 2nd year of university, you are treated as an independent clinician on placement. We administer treatments independently and our mentors intervene only when we are doing something wrong. If I am expected to be an independent clinician, I should be paid as one."
- Nursing student: "Often I have been asked to stay behind to help out despite it not being a learning opportunity, I'm often "used" as a second pair of hands, I've had shifts moved to accommodate the staffing needs of the ward (when short staffed my shifts are changed to fill in for missing nurses)."
- Medical student: "As a medical student I do believe I am treated as supernumerary however I have witnessed student nurses being 'used' as HCAs [Healthcare Assistants] when staffing low- which obviously prevents them from accessing so many learning opportunities."

The importance of healthcare students

Healthcare professionals spoke of the hard work carried out by healthcare students in the NHS

- **82%** of healthcare professionals said the work carried out by students on placement was 'important' or 'extremely important' to patient care and the successful running of their hospital or healthcare service.
- **91%** of respondents said they 'strongly agreed' and **7%** said they 'agreed' that healthcare students should be paid for placement hours.

Quotes

- Nurse: "Students work equally as hard as the rest of the workforce and also have to study in their own time. I feel it is unfair they are not paid fully for their hard work. I also feel that if they were paid more fairly it would encourage more people to want to train which is what we desperately need right now."
- Midwife: "Students are just as valuable as support staff and registries health care professionals. They are the next work generation and need supporting to help bridge the work force gaps! Many are over worked and burnt out before they even begin."
- Nurse: "Some shifts we would drown without students, unfair they are not recognised financially for the contribution they make to keeping the children on my ward safe. I would not be able to afford to train to be a nurse now with 2 small children, with the staffing crisis the way it is why are we putting obstacles in the way of those who could be staffing the wards in 3 years time?!"

Workload

Many healthcare students said they found their workload unmanageable or overwhelming. Some said this had taken a toll on their mental health.

- **85%** of respondents said they 'disagreed' or 'strongly disagreed' that current financial support for healthcare students fairly reflected their workload and needs.
- Of the healthcare students on placement, **74%** said they worked 30-40 placement hours a week, and **21%** said they worked over 40 placement hours a week.
- **71%** of healthcare students said they had considered leaving their course in part because the workload was too large.
- **53%** of former healthcare students said they left their course in part because the workload was too large.

Quotes

- Nursing student: "During the challenges and workload I experienced during placements, I reached a point of burn out. I experienced extremely low mood to which I sought professional help. I'm still unsure as to whether I will be finishing the course due to my position last year and potential for that to occur again."

- Nursing student: "Throughout placement, as I am also working on top of those hours, I am not able to see my son very often and this has taken a toll on both mine and his mental well-being. When I do get to spend precious time with him, it is hindered by how tired I am, and this is noticeable to him."
- Nursing student: "Having to undertake assignments during placement times is causing us a huge workload and added stress. I've failed an assignment 3 times due to the stress of completing it during placement time."

Parenting while studying as a healthcare student

Former and current healthcare students spoke of the difficulties of parenting while undertaking their courses. Many said they were under considerable financial strain and found their workload difficult to manage.

- **45%** of the healthcare students who answered were parents. **35%** of former healthcare students said they had been parents while studying.
- **93%** of respondents said they 'strongly agreed' and **5%** said they 'agreed' that healthcare students should be eligible for free childcare.
- **71%** of healthcare students who are parents said they had received a parental support payment: a £2,000 payment for those with a dependent child.

Quotes

- Midwifery student: "It's really difficult to cover childcare both in practical and financial terms. We are often given very short notice for our placements, and it is difficult and expensive to arrange childcare when you don't know your shifts."
- Midwifery student: "The most stressful part of being a student midwife at the moment is not managing a good family life and study balance, nor is it the demands of assignments or placements. It is wondering whether I can continue to pay for childcare for my 10-month-old and the wraparound care for my 7-year-old. Although I get financial support of a maintenance loan and NHS LSF [Learning Support Fund] towards childcare, it does not cover the cost of childcare. I have to top up the bill [...] If the government would extend the free 30 hours of childcare for healthcare students it would make a massive difference. I am 100% sure that more student midwives would continue to complete the degree, instead of having to give up on a career that they have worked so hard for due to financial stress."

- Midwifery student: "I'm a single parent, my child sees his nursery workers and grandparents more than me. When I am home, I am sleeping for placement, studying for exams, trying to keep up with housework. Truly the only real time I have had for him was a week over Christmas, a week at Easter and a few weeks in the summer before going back to working full time on placement. I worked full time before this course in healthcare, but had a lot more time for him and was able to be comfortable knowing we had money coming in every month, I could have a life, now that's not possible."
- Midwifery student: "Being a parent and a healthcare student is almost unmanageable. The physical and mental strain is absolutely draining. Trying to juggle paying for childcare and the fuel for uni/placement plus all of the other financial responsibilities is so difficult. I also have to work part time to get tax free childcare to make it possible, resulting in having to work 53+ hours (between paid work and placement) every week just to afford to live."

Methodology

Committee staff manually reviewed hundreds of individual comments and answers, using both subject searches and randomised selection. They also analysed survey questions which produced statistical results.

Further information

Find out more about the NHS Learning Support Fund:

<https://www.nhsbsa.nhs.uk/nhs-learning-support-fund-lsf>