Written evidence submitted by the Royal College of Midwives (CSR0056)

1. The Royal College of Midwives (RCM) is the trade union and professional organisation that represents the vast majority of practising midwives in the UK. It is the only such organisation run by midwives for midwives. The RCM is the voice of midwifery, providing excellence in representation, professional leadership, education and influence for and on behalf of midwives. We actively support and campaign for improvements to maternity services, and provide professional leadership for one of the most established clinical disciplines.

2. On 10th December 2015 the Health Committee invited written submissions on the impact of the Comprehensive Spending Review on health and social care. The RCM welcomes the opportunity to respond to this consultation.

3. In the terms of reference, the Committee specifically identified as important, “the effect of cuts to non-NHS England health budgets e.g. public health, health education and Department of Health, and their impact on the Five Year Forward View”. The RCM wishes to make a submission on this point, specifically about proposed changes to financial support to healthcare students such as those undergoing midwifery training.

Executive summary

4. The Government is proposing big changes to the financing of healthcare students in England, such as student midwives. These changes were announced as part of the Comprehensive Spending Review (CSR) in November.

5. Student midwives, nurses and others will become liable for full tuition fees, their bursaries will be abolished, and access to loans opened up for them to borrow to cover these costs.

6. These announcements were made with no prior consultation or discussion with students or the bodies that represent them. There are many questions about their impact, especially given the different nature of study for those training for healthcare roles. We are calling on the Government to publish more information about their plans, including their responses to questions posed since November’s CSR.

Detailed points

7. Under the proposed changes, student midwives, nurses and others starting their courses from autumn 2017 would no longer receive free tuition, and would instead pay tuition fees. Additionally, the current bursary system would end, replaced entirely by access to loans.

8. The impact of these changes on those studying to become midwives would be sizeable. The introduction of tuition fees alone would leave those studying to become midwives with £27,000 of debt.

9. With regard to bursaries, in 2014/15 there were 6,305 midwifery students in receipt of a bursary. The average paid in that year was £5,645. These numbers were given in an answer dated 25th November 2015 to a written parliamentary question (number 16671)\(^1\). The Government plans to abolish this system.

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\(^1\) The question and answer are available online at [http://www.parliament.uk/business/publications/written-questions-answers-statements/written-question/Commons/2015-11-17/16671/](http://www.parliament.uk/business/publications/written-questions-answers-statements/written-question/Commons/2015-11-17/16671/)
10. In its place, student midwives will be able to borrow to cover their maintenance costs. Midwifery students living in London and away from the parental home will be able to borrow up to £12,054 per year; students living outside London and away from the parental home will be able to borrow up to £9,257 per year; and students living in the parental home will be able to borrow up to £7,592 per year.

11. This means that student midwives starting their training in autumn 2017, when the proposed changes come in, could graduate with up to around £60,000 of debt. These debts will be payable for up to 30 years.

12. The Government has made it clear that it plans to change the current rules so that those wishing to study to become midwives, nurses or other types of healthcare worker who already hold a degree can add to their debts from that degree and take on more debt to finance their healthcare qualification.

13. With the Institute for Fiscal Studies estimating that some of the poorest students will be set to graduate with debts of up to £53,000, students who already hold a degree who go on to study a midwifery (or other healthcare) course could face combined debts of over £100,000.

14. It is not an insignificant number who fall into this category. The RCM surveyed its student midwife members in December 2015 and of the 466 who took part, 33 per cent had already graduated with a university degree. Of this group, 74 per cent had taken out loans to help pay for those studies. In other words, around one in four of today’s student midwives already holds a degree and took out debt to finance it; any debt from a midwifery course would be additional to that existing debt.

15. Unlike the average student, someone training to become a midwife will have clinical placements to attend in addition to their formal classroom tuition. Study and placements for a student midwife take up 45 weeks per year. During their placements, which will include night shifts, they must also experience at least 40 live births. This leaves them with virtually no time to seek part-time or seasonal work to help avoid the accumulation of excessive amounts of debt. This also applies to other healthcare students, such as those training to become nurses.

16. The process by which the Government came forward with this announcement was flawed. Such deep changes to the system for financing healthcare students should have involved more consultation with those affected. As the Government admitted on 10th December 2015, in answer to a written parliamentary question, it “did not hold any formal discussions or consultations” with the Royal College of Midwives, the Royal College of Nursing or Unison prior to the announcement.

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3 Confirmation of this has been given in answer to more than one written parliamentary question, for example the answer to PQ 18019 dated 1st December 2015: http://www.parliament.uk/business/publications/written-questions-answers-statements/written-question/Commons/2015-11-26/18019/


5 The question and answer (HL4107), dated 10th December 2015, is online at http://www.parliament.uk/business/publications/written-questions-answers-statements/written-question/Lords/2015-12-01/HL4107/
17. Opposition to the proposed changes has been strong. Over 150,000 signed the e-petition\textsuperscript{6} to Parliament against the changes, triggering a debate in Westminster Hall on 11\textsuperscript{th} January 2016.

18. The RCM would like to see the Government conduct a thorough review of the impact on future student midwives of what is proposed, in particular on the following groups: (a) healthcare students who already hold a degree and who still have debt from the tuition fees or maintenance costs incurred during those studies; (b) healthcare students with dependents, and (c) older healthcare students, who could face making repayments until they are near retirement age.

19. The RCM estimates that the NHS in England is short of the equivalent of around 2,600 full-time midwives\textsuperscript{7}. We are unaware of evidence that increasing the likely debt to be carried by graduates will lead to an increase in training numbers, as the Government suggests it will.

20. There are currently around 10 applicants for every place on a nursing course\textsuperscript{8}, according to the chair of the Council of Deans of Health. We are concerned that the scale of the changes to financing, with such massive new debts brought in, will drastically reduce this number. We would like the Government to spell out what assessment it has conducted on the likely size of this reduction, and which types of individual are more likely to be deterred.

21. With regard to clinical placements, where healthcare students develop their practical knowledge and understanding, the RCM would like to see the Government publish an explanation of how it expects them to be funded, whether this comes out of the tuition fee and, if it does, what impact that has on the higher education sector. Students are deemed to be vocational learners in law, and make a vital contribution to care provision. They are exposed to the same risks and work the same shifts as healthcare professionals. By charging fees will students in effect be paying to work? In the event that the changes come into force and result in increased numbers of students, will enough placements be available? What planning has been undertaken by the Government to ascertain whether and how this can be done? What financial support will there be for students on clinical placements, for example their travel costs.

22. The RCM would like assurances from the Government that neither teaching quality nor patient safety will suffer as a result of dramatically increasing the number of students in clinical settings.

23. Many questions remain over these proposals and their impact. We would like to see urgent and meaningful talks between the representatives of healthcare students, including the RCM, and the Department of Health to work through the questions and issues thrown up by these proposals.

\textit{22 January 2016}

\textsuperscript{6} E-petition to Parliament, Keep the NHS Bursary, \url{https://petition.parliament.uk/petitions/113491}
\textsuperscript{8} “Will scrapping nurse bursaries help or worsen NHS staffing crisis?”, The Guardian, 7\textsuperscript{th} December 2015, \url{http://www.theguardian.com/healthcare-network/2015/dec/07/will-scrapping-nurse-bursaries-help-or-worsen-nhs-staffing-crisis}