

Research Briefing

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Medical, dental, and healthcare students: UK numbers and student support arrangements



Summary

- 1 Medical and dental students
- 2 Nursing and other healthcare students
- 3 Abolition of the NHS bursary in England for healthcare students

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Summary

Medical and dental students

Medical and dental school places are capped in each part of the UK, with “intake targets” used to limit the number of students a higher education provider may recruit in each year. There are caps for both home students and overseas/international students. In June 2023, the [NHS published a workforce plan for England](#) that committed to doubling the number of medical school training places to 15,000 a year by 2031/32 and expanding dentistry training places by 40%.

Changes to exam arrangements in 2020 – due to the Covid-19 pandemic – meant more applicants than expected met their grades for medical and dental school places. To alleviate pressure on places, the government lifted the cap in 2020/21. The number of English students accepted on medicine and dentistry courses increased by 770, or 9%, in 2020, the number of UK students increased by 890, or 9%.

Exams were replaced by teacher assessments in 2021 and the cap on medical and dental school places was again suspended. The total number of acceptances increased by a further 5% in 2021, before falling by 10% in 2022 when the cap was reintroduced. There was an increase of almost 600 (5%) in 2023 which it levels similar to those in 2020, but still below their 2021 peak.

Student support arrangements

Across the UK, students pursuing their first degree in medicine and dentistry can generally get funding for fees and living costs in the form of loans and/or grants.

In England, Wales, and Northern Ireland, medical and dental students are funded in the same way as other higher education students for the first four years of their degree. In their final years, these students become eligible for a bursary, which means their tuition fees are covered and they receive non-repayable grants.

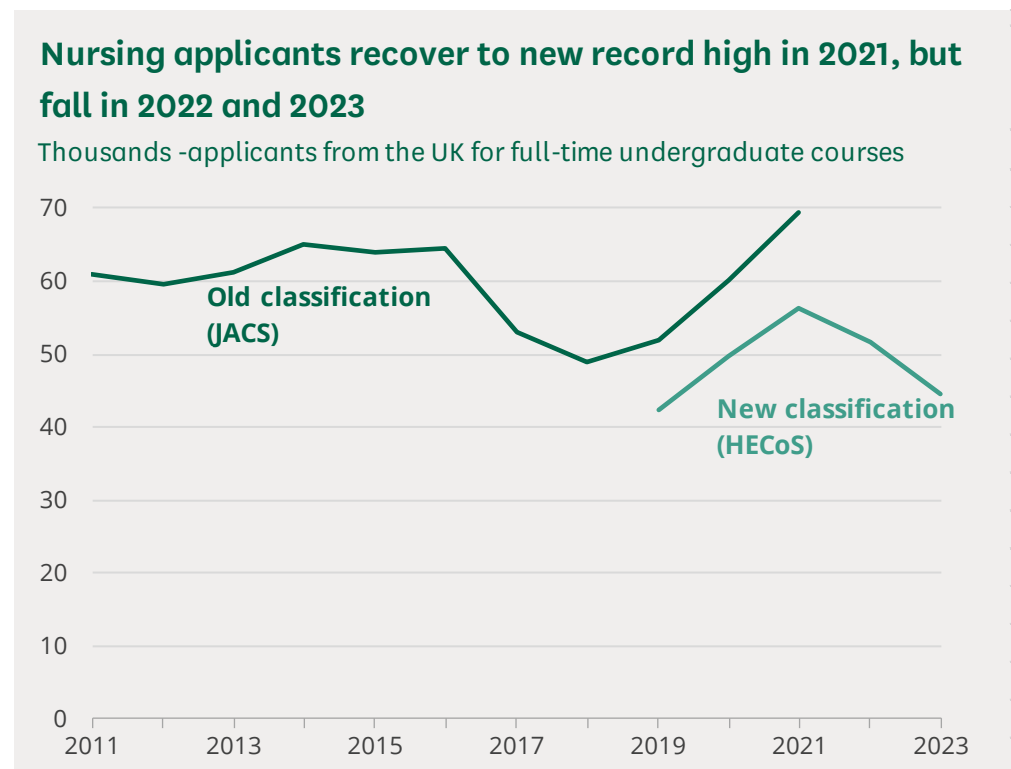
Like other students in Scotland, eligible medical students have their fees covered for the duration of their course by the Scottish Government. Eligible dental students can apply for an additional grant, which is tied to how long they stay with the NHS following graduation.

Nursing and healthcare students

Applicants for nursing fell in the first two years following the abolition of the NHS bursary for healthcare students in England. The number from England fell by 21% in 2017 and 10% in 2018, an overall fall of 19%. There were much smaller falls in applicants from the rest of the UK. Applicants increased by 6% in 2019 but were still well below levels from before the funding reforms.

The announcement of a new training grant in England came part way through the applications cycle for 2020. Applicant numbers in England increased by 18% in 2020 and by a further 16% in 2021. There were also increases in applicants from Scotland, Wales, and Northern Ireland, and the 2021 totals were new records for all parts of the UK. The increase in applicants in 2020 and 2021 was thought to be partly due to the Covid-19 pandemic and the way it has underlined the esteem in which the nursing profession is held.

Later data, using a different subject classification, shows the number of UK applicants to nursing fell by 8% in 2022 and by a further 14% in 2023. This took the total down to its lowest level since 2019.



[Early data on applicants for 2024](#) show substantial falls in home applicants for nursing and midwifery of 6% and 10% respectively.

Nursing and midwifery saw the largest fall in applicants of any subject allied to medicine in 2017 and 2018. All the broad groups of subjects allied to medicine saw increases in applicants in 2020 and 2021. Nursing and midwifery courses had the largest drop in applicants in 2022.

There have always been many more applicants than places for nursing, and the number of applicants from England who were accepted fell after the 2017 funding reforms, but by a much smaller amount than the number of applicants. Numbers increased in 2017 and 2018 in Scotland and Wales. There were larger increases in accepted applicants in all parts of the UK over the years 2019-2021 to a new UK record level. Numbers fell by 11% in both 2022 and 2023.

Student support arrangements

England is the only part of the UK where nursing and other healthcare students must currently pay for their own tuition (generally through student loan repayments). The governments of Wales, Scotland, and Northern Ireland fund the tuition fees for eligible students.

Students from across the UK can access non-repayable living cost support, which generally includes some form of grant towards living costs, and additional support depending on the student's personal circumstances. Scotland has the most generous living cost grant.

Wales is the only part of the UK that ties eligibility for student support to a commitment to working in the NHS following graduation. Students who cannot, or who do not want to, make this commitment are eligible for the standard student finance package instead.

Abolition of the NHS bursary in England for healthcare students

The last cohort of students to receive NHS Bursaries for nursing, midwifery, and other allied health profession programmes in England started their courses in September 2016. For these students, the NHS bursary included free tuition (fees were paid directly to their higher education provider by the NHS through Health Education England), a non-means tested grant of £1,000 per year, a means-tested bursary to help with living costs of up to £3,191, and additional allowances.

Following a 2016 consultation, the then-Conservative government reformed funding for undergraduate students starting courses in nursing, midwifery, and other allied health professions from 1 August 2017. Free tuition and non-repayable living cost support was abolished, and students became eligible for the standard student finance package of tuition fee and maintenance loans.

As part of the funding reforms, the government introduced the [NHS Learning Support Fund \(LSF\)](#), which initially just provided supplementary funding to parents and those in exceptional hardship. On 18 December 2019, the

government announced new and continuing nursing students would also receive an additional £5,000 training grant from September 2020.

Further reading

Background to the reforms to student support for healthcare courses is available in the Commons Library, [Reform of support for healthcare students in England](#), 2 February 2017.

More detailed information on historic student numbers and support in England is available in the Commons Library briefing [Funding for healthcare students in England](#), 8 March 2021.

1 Medical and dental students

1.1 The cap on medical and dental school places

Medical and dental school places are capped in each part of the UK, with “[intake targets](#)” used to limit the number of students a higher education provider may recruit in each year. There are caps for both home students and overseas/international students.

- In 2023/24, 10,000 medical school places were made available across the UK to train new doctors.¹ Since 2013, this figure has increased by around 2,500.²
- There are around 1,100 dental school places made available across the UK each year.³ This figure has remained largely unchanged since 2013.⁴

The UK Government has said medical and dental school places are capped in England “to ensure teaching, learning and assessment standards are maintained as well as ensuring there are enough high quality placements for each student.”⁵

There have been calls for the UK to expand the number of doctors and dentists it trains.⁶ Expansion is complicated by the cost of training, university and clinical placement capacity, and the number of clinically qualified academic staff who design and deliver courses.⁷

England’s NHS Long Term Workforce Plan

In June 2023, the NHS published a workforce plan for England. It modelled workforce supply and demand in the NHS over a 15-year period and set out

¹ The Office for Students, [Medical and dental intakes](#); Medical Schools Council, [The expansion of medical student numbers in the United Kingdom](#), October 2021, p7

² Higher Education Funding Council for England, [Medical and Dental Students survey 2013](#) (archived), March 2014

³ The Office for Students, [Medical and dental intakes](#).

⁴ Higher Education Funding Council for England, [Medical and Dental Students survey 2013](#) (archived), March 2014

⁵ [PQ 132369 \[Medicine: Higher Education\] 6 February 2023](#).

⁶ Health and Social Care Committee, [Workforce: recruitment, training and retention in health and social care](#), Third Report of Session 2022–23, 25 July 2022

⁷ Medical Schools Council, [The expansion of medical student numbers in the United Kingdom](#), October 2021, pp12-14

actions to address the resulting shortfall in staff and skills.⁸ On training new doctors and dentists in England, the plan committed to:

- Doubling the number of medical school training places in England to 15,000 a year by 2031/32.
- Expanding dentistry training places by 40% so there will be over 1,100 places by 2031/32.

Funding medical and dental school places

The cost to train a doctor is shared between individual students, who pay tuition fees (generally through student loan repayments following graduation), and government departments and agencies, which provide funding to universities for teaching costs and funding to healthcare providers for clinical placements.

The Scottish Government pays the tuition fees of eligible students in Scotland for the entirety of their course, and the NHS and Department of Health in Northern Ireland cover the tuition fees of eligible students elsewhere in the UK for the final years of their courses.

Students are also eligible for non-repayable living cost support, in the form of grants and bursaries, which adds to the total public cost of medical and dental school places. This includes:

- maintenance support through the standard student finance packages available to all eligible higher education students in Wales, Scotland, and Northern Ireland;
- specific support for medical and dental students, such as the NHS bursary in England and Wales in later course years;
- additional support related to a student's personal circumstances. For example, if they are disabled or have childcare costs.

Temporary lift to the cap during the Covid-19 pandemic

In 2020, the cap on the number of medical school places in England was lifted.⁹ This was to accommodate the higher number of students meeting their university offers following changes to exam arrangements prompted by the Covid-19 pandemic.

The Department for Education made up to £10 million in additional teaching grant available to providers, and up to £10 million in additional capital

⁸ NHS England, [NHS Long Term Workforce Plan](#), 30 June 2023

⁹ Department for Education press release, [Action agreed to support students into preferred universities](#), 20 August 2020

funding. The Office for Students consulted on how best to distribute this funding to support increased student numbers in 2020-21.¹⁰

In 2021, the cap in England was adjusted again, and more than 9,000 medical and dentistry places were made available for the 2021/22 academic year.¹¹

Almost 30,000 people applied for entry on medical courses in September 2022, but the cap was reintroduced for this year.¹² In August 2022, the then-Education Secretary, James Cleverley, said lifting the cap in the previous two years was only a short-term intervention, and increasing the number of medical school places was not straightforward because of the associated costs. He said:

To increase those numbers you would also need to increase the capacity in training institutions, both in universities and in hospitals. It is not something you can just flick a switch and significantly increase the capacity to train.

The increases have got to be funded, they are technical and expensive courses and we need to understand the balance of requirements between these courses and other courses that the government is supporting financially.¹³

In September 2020, the Welsh Government announced an additional 25 undergraduate places would be funded for the 2021/22 academic year, and up to a further 12 additional places for 2022/23.¹⁴

In Scotland, the 2020/21 intake was initially set at 1,038 by the Scottish Funding Council, but, due to the effects of Covid-19 on exam results, an additional 100 students met the terms of their conditional offer.¹⁵ The Scottish Government funded those 100 additional medical school places on a “one off” basis.

1.2

Entrance requirements

Applying to medical and dental degrees is very competitive. Places are limited and always oversubscribed. Entrance requirements for undergraduate medicine and dentistry degrees vary slightly from provider to provider, which set their own admissions criteria.

¹⁰ Office for Students, [OfS seeks views on distributing funding for increased student numbers](#), 15 October 2020

¹¹ Department for Education press release, [Extra places on medical and dentistry courses for 2021](#), 5 August 2021

¹² “[Government defends medical student number cap](#)”, BBC News, 18 August 2022

¹³ “[Government defends medical student number cap](#)”, BBC News, 18 August 2022

¹⁴ Welsh Government press release, [37 extra medical places created at Cardiff University](#), 5 September 2020

¹⁵ Scottish Government, [The number of medical training places in 2021-22: FOI release](#), 6 December 2022

Typically, applicants are required to achieve a minimum of three A-Levels, which must include Chemistry and Biology, at A* and A grades. Applicants from Scotland will normally be expected to achieve Highers at AAAAB or AAABB grades in S5 (the fifth year of secondary school) as a minimum, and Advanced Highers at AB or BBB in S6 (sixth year). Applicants will generally be expected to have studied Chemistry and Biology.

Applicants are also generally expected to have achieved at least five GCSEs at grade 6 (previously a B) as a minimum, but most successful applicants will have grades 7 to 9 (previously A to A*). Scottish applicants are generally required to have achieved at least Bs in their National 5s, particularly in Maths, English, Biology, and Chemistry.

Many medical and dental schools use contextual information to understand an applicant's academic potential by placing their qualifications in the context of their socioeconomic and/or educational background. This is called 'contextual admissions'.

In addition to formal qualifications, applicants will generally be expected to undertake an admissions test, and have some form of work experience in a caring or service role they can draw on at interviews.¹⁶

Medical school requirements

Most medical courses use admissions tests as a part of their entry requirements. There are three admissions tests: UCAT, BMAT and GAMSAT. Different medical courses require different tests.

Many medical schools use interviews in the latter stage of their application process.

More information about entrance requirements for medical students can be found on the [Medical School Council's website](#).

Dental school requirements

Most dental courses use admissions tests as a part of their entry requirements. There are two admissions tests: UCAT and BMAT. Different dental schools require different tests.

Many dental schools use interviews in the latter stage of their application process.

More information about entrance requirements for dental students can be found on the [Dental Schools Council website](#).

¹⁶ British Medical Association, [Getting medical work experience](#)

1.3

Applicant and entrant numbers

Summer examinations in 2020 were cancelled and students were awarded grades based on centre-assessed grades (CAGs). Using CAGs led to a level of grade inflation and more students than expected met their first-choice university offers and grades for medical and dental school places.

To alleviate pressure on places the government announced that for 2020-21 the cap on medical and dental school places would be lifted:

For medicine and dentistry, we are lifting the specific cap set on places for these subjects and providers should offer places to students who meet the terms of their offer this year, where clinical placements are available. I will provide additional funding through the Teaching Grant in line with existing per student rates to support the delivery of these courses.¹⁷

10,890 UK applicants for medicine and dentistry were accepted on a full-time undergraduate course in 2020. This was 890 (8.9%) more than in 2019, but a smaller increase than that seen in 2019.

The temporary lifting of the cap on places continued into 2021 when exams were again cancelled and replaced with teacher-assessed grades. The number of UK accepted applicants to medicine and dentistry increased again in 2021 to 11,480.

The following table looks at trends in acceptances since 2012 and shows numbers fell gradually during the first half of the 2010s, before increasing in the second half of the decade, with large increases in 2018, 2019, and 2020. The 2021 figure on accepted applicants was 42% higher than a decade earlier.

¹⁷ Department for Education [Letter to vice chancellors](#), 20 August 2020.

UK applicants accepted to medicine and dentistry

Full-time undergraduate courses via UCAS

	Number	Annual change
2011	8,080	..
2012	8,155	+1%
2013	7,840	-4%
2014	7,875	+0%
2015	7,830	-1%
2016	7,985	+2%
2017	8,165	+2%
2018	8,890	+9%
2019	10,000	+12%
2020	10,890	+9%
2021	11,480	+5%

Source: [UCAS undergraduate sector-level end of cycle data resources 2021](#)

The introduction of a new subject classification systems for student data means that figures for 2022 are not directly comparable to the data in the table.

Comparisons can be made on the new basis back to 2019. These show similar percentage increases (to those in the table) in 2020 and 2021. The temporary lifting of the cap on places ended in 2022 and there was a fall in acceptances to medicine and dentistry of around 1,200 (10%) in 2022. Their number increased by almost 600 (5%) in 2023 which took the total back to levels seen in 2020, but still below their 2021 peak. The proportion of UK applicants who were accepted increased from 58% in 2019 to 62% in 2020. It fell back to 52% in 2021 and, fell further to 46% in 2022 when the cap on places was reintroduced.¹⁸

1.4

Support for medical and dental students

Summary

Across the UK, students pursuing their first degree in medicine and dentistry can generally get funding for fees and living costs in the form of loans and/or grants. The funding available in each part of the UK is set out below.

In England, Wales, and Northern Ireland, medical and dental students are funded in the same way as other higher education students from each respective nation for the first four years of their degree. In their final years,

¹⁸ [UCAS undergraduate sector-level end of cycle data resources 2023 \(and earlier\)](#)

these students become eligible for a bursary, which means their tuition fees are covered and they receive non-repayable grants. The Liveable NHS Bursary campaign has called for more student support for medical students in England.

In Scotland, eligible medical students have their fees covered for the duration of their courses by the Scottish Government, like other students in Scotland. Eligible dental students can apply for an additional grant, which is tied to how long they stay with the NHS following graduation.

Medicine and dentistry can also be studied as a second degree, but graduate students are generally entitled to less funding and may need to self-fund parts of the course. To help fund their studies, graduate students can apply to educational trusts and charities for small amounts of funding if they meet an organisation's eligibility criteria.¹⁹

Organisations such as [Turn2Us](#) and [Family Action](#) have searchable online databases of grants. The London School of Economics has [published a list of charitable funding available to students](#), and St George's Medical School has [published a list specifically for medical students](#). The British Dental Association website gives information on alternative sources of funding for dental students.²⁰

England

Information on funding for medical and dental students is [set out on the NHS Careers website](#).²¹

Support for undergraduate students doing first degrees

For students who normally live in England, and who are studying on five-year medical and dental undergraduate degree courses, or [six-year courses with an intercalated year](#),²² in England, the available support depends on what year the student is in.

- In their **first four years**, students are eligible for the standard student support package from Student Finance England (SFE).
 - This comprises a loan to cover their tuition fees, a maintenance loan to help cover their living costs, and additional support for some students depending on their personal circumstances (for example, if they have children or are disabled).²³

¹⁹ See a document published by London Metropolitan University, [Educational Trusts and Charities](#) for more information.

²⁰ British Dental Association, [Other sources of funding](#)

²¹ NHS, [Financial support for medical and dental students](#)

²² British Medical Association, [Intercalated degrees](#), 3 November 2022

²³ Student Finance England, [Student finance for undergraduates](#); Commons Library briefing CBP-8237, [Student support for undergraduates across the UK](#)

- From **year five onwards**, students become eligible for the NHS Bursary scheme.²⁴
 - Students have their tuition fees paid, receive a grant of £1,000, and can apply for a means-tested bursary of up to £3,191 based on their household income. Other allowances are available depending on personal circumstances.²⁵
 - Students can also apply for a reduced-rate maintenance loan from Student Finance England.

Support for graduates doing second degrees in medicine and dentistry

In 2008, the UK 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 deemed to be of public benefit. Medicine and dentistry were included as exempt subjects.

There are two ways to study medicine and dentistry as a second degree, and the support available depends on the chosen course:

- Graduates can study the standard undergraduate five-year medical or dental course (some universities also have a six-year programme with foundation year).
 - **In the first four years** of the course, students must self-fund their own fees but are eligible for a maintenance loan from Student Finance England and additional support depending on their personal circumstances.
 - **From year five**, students become eligible for the NHS bursary scheme and can apply for a reduced-rate maintenance loan from Student Finance England.
- Graduates can study the accelerated four-year, graduate-entry course, but may require prior experience in a medical setting and/or a science-based first degree to do so.
 - **In their first year**, students must self-fund the first £3,465 of their tuition fees, but can apply to Student Finance England for a tuition fee loan to cover the remaining balance. They are also eligible for a maintenance loan from Student Finance England and additional support depending on their personal circumstances.
 - **From year two**, the NHS bursary scheme covers the first £3,715 of students' tuition fees and they can apply for a tuition fee loan to cover the remaining balance. Students become eligible for the NHS

²⁴ NHS Business Services Authority, [NHS Bursary students](#)

²⁵ NHS Business Services Authority, [NHS Bursary students](#)

bursary scheme's grant and means-tested bursary, and can apply for a reduced-rate maintenance loan from Student Finance England.

Wales

Support for undergraduate students doing first degrees

For students who normally live in Wales, and who are studying on five-year medical and dental undergraduate degree courses, or six-year courses with an [intercalated year](#) or a foundation year,²⁶ the available support depends on what year the student is in.

- In their **first four years** of study, students are eligible for support from Student Finance Wales on the same terms as other students.
 - This includes a tuition fee loan and a mixture of maintenance loan and grant to help towards living costs.²⁷ Students from lower income families are entitled to more of their living cost support being a grant. Extra support is available to students depending on their personal circumstances, for example if they are disabled.
- **From year five**, students become eligible for the [NHS Wales Bursary Scheme](#)
 - Students have their tuition fees covered, and receive a bursary for living costs, which includes a £1,000 grant, a means-tested bursary, placement costs related to travel and accommodation, and additional support depending on their personal circumstances.
 - Students can also apply for a reduced student loan (subject to Student Loans Company Regulations)

Support for graduates doing second degrees in medicine and dentistry

There are two ways to study medicine and dentistry as a second degree, and the support available depends on the chosen course:

- Graduates can study the standard undergraduate five-year medical or dental course.
 - In the **first four years of the course**, students must self-fund their own fees but are eligible for a maintenance loan from Student Finance Wales and additional support depending on their personal circumstances.

²⁶ British Medical Association, [Intercalated degrees](#), 3 November 2022

²⁷ Student Finance Wales, [Full-time undergraduate, Welsh students. What's available.](#)

- **From year five**, students become eligible for the NHS Wales bursary scheme and can also apply for a reduced-rate maintenance loan from Student Finance Wales.
- Graduates can study the accelerated four-year, graduate-entry course, but may require prior experience in a medical setting and/or a science-based first degree to do so.
 - In their **first year**, students must self-fund the first £3,465 of their tuition fees, but can apply to Student Finance Wales for a tuition fee loan to cover the remaining balance. They are also eligible for a maintenance loan from Student Finance Wales and additional support depending on their personal circumstances.
 - **From year two**, the NHS Wales bursary scheme covers the first £3,715 of students' tuition fees and they can apply for a tuition fee loan to cover the remaining balance. Students are also eligible for the NHS Wales bursary scheme's grant and means-tested bursary, and can apply for a reduced-rate maintenance loan from Student Finance England.

The British Medical Association has [published a finance guide for medical students studying in Wales](#) with more information.²⁸

Scotland

Medical students

Students who normally live in Scotland, and who remain there to complete a first degree in medicine, have their fees paid for them directly to their institution by the Student Awards Agency Scotland.²⁹ This reflects the Scottish Government's policy of funding free undergraduate tuition in Scotland for eligible students.³⁰

Medical students are also eligible for the standard undergraduate student support package, which, depending on their household income and status as a [‘young student’](#) or [‘independent student’](#), may include a means-tested bursary and/or loan towards their living costs. Additional support related to a student's personal circumstances, for example if they are disabled or a parent, is also available.³¹

For those students on the [Scottish Graduate Entry Medicine degree \(ScotGEM\)](#), tuition fees are paid by the Student Award Agency Scotland

²⁸ BMA, [Medical student finance](#)

²⁹ SAAS, [Medicine students](#)

³⁰ SAAS, [Undergraduate funding](#)

³¹ SAAS, [Undergraduate funding](#)

(SAAS), and students can also apply for a maintenance loan and living costs grants in all years of their course.

Students on the ScotGEM course are also eligible for a “return of service” bursary, a grant worth up to £16,000 in total, in exchange for working in NHS Scotland for up to four years.

The British Medical Association has [published a guide on the support available](#) to students from Scotland studying medicine in Scotland or elsewhere in the UK, and UK students studying in Scotland.³²

Dental students

Students who normally live in Scotland, and who remain there to complete a first degree in medicine, have their fees paid for them directly to their institution by the Student Awards Agency Scotland.³³ This reflects the Scottish Government’s policy of funding free undergraduate tuition in Scotland for eligible students.³⁴

Medical students are also eligible for the standard undergraduate student support package, which, depending on their household income and status as a [‘young student’ or ‘independent student’](#), may include a means-tested bursary and/or loan towards their living costs. Additional support related to a student’s personal circumstances, for example if they are disabled or a parent, is also available.³⁵

Dental students in Scotland can apply for the [Dental Student Support Grant \(DSSG\)](#). This grant is worth £4,000 per year and available to those who:

- are enrolled on the Bachelor of Dental Surgery (BDS) course at the University of Aberdeen, Dundee, or Glasgow;
- have an annual household income of less than £34,000 per year;
- are allowed to live and work in Scotland after graduation.³⁶

Students must apply for each academic year they wish to receive the DSSG. Dental students at the University of Aberdeen can apply from their first year while students studying at Dundee and Glasgow must wait until their second year to apply.

Those in receipt of the DSSG must work for the NHS in Scotland for one year for each year they receive the grant. They must begin work within one year of graduation and have NHS earnings as 80% of their income.

³² BMA, [Medical student finance](#)

³³ SAAS, [Medicine students](#)

³⁴ SAAS, [Undergraduate funding](#)

³⁵ SAAS, [Undergraduate funding](#)

³⁶ Scottish Government, [Dental Student Support Grant \(DSSG\)](#).

More information about the DSSG can be found on the [Scottish government website](#).

Northern Ireland

Support for the **first four years of study** for students from Northern Ireland completing medicine and dentistry degrees in Northern Ireland is available on the same basis as for other higher education students:

- Tuition fee loans are available to cover the full cost of fees.
- To help with living costs, some students are entitled to both a maintenance loan and maintenance grant, and potentially a supplementary special support grant. The level and balance of maintenance support is determined by a student's household income.
- Additional support is available to students depending on their personal circumstances, for example if they are disabled, have a long-term health condition, or have childcare costs.³⁷

From their **fifth year of study**, medical and dental students are eligible for a bursary from Northern Ireland's Department of Health (DoH).

- Tuition fees are paid in full by the DoH and students are eligible for an income-assessed bursary.
- Students are also eligible to apply for a reduced rate non-income assessed Maintenance Loan.

The British Medical Association has [published a finance guide for medical students studying in Northern Ireland](#) with more information.³⁸

1.5

The 'Liveable NHS bursary' campaign

Current bursary arrangements

From their fifth year of study, medical and dental students in England become eligible for the [NHS bursary scheme](#), which means in addition to having their tuition paid for by the NHS, they receive a grant of £1,000 and a means-tested bursary based on their household income.

The maximum annual rates for the means-tested bursary in 2023/24 are:

- Up to £3,191 for students attending a university in London.

³⁷ SFNI, [Full-time undergraduate, NI students](#). Commons Library briefing CBP-8237, [Student support for undergraduates across the UK](#)

³⁸ BMA, [Medical student finance](#)

- Up to £2,643 for students attending a university outside London.
- Up to £2,207 for students living at home.³⁹

Students may also be eligible for extra weeks allowance if their course runs for more than 30 weeks and 3 days in the academic year. There is also additional support if they have childcare costs, have dependents, are disabled, or are in “genuine financial hardship”.⁴⁰

Students are also eligible for a reduced rate maintenance loan from Student Finance England.

Calls to increase the support available

The [#LiveableNHSBursary](#) campaign was founded by four medical students in 2022. They argued the support available to medical students was insufficient to cover rent, household bills, and other living costs. They said this meant many students must work as well as study.⁴¹

While many students are in this situation, medical students must balance any part-time job with studying to pass their exams and the demands of their medical school placements, which can often entail 40 hours a week in a hospital or a clinical setting away from where they live during term time.⁴²

The [#LiveableNHSBursary](#) campaign called for:

- Immediate access to full maintenance loans for medical students in line with other healthcare professional courses for the duration of the degree programme.
- Access to the [NHS Learning Support Fund](#), which is accessed by other healthcare professional students, to replace the standard medical student NHS bursary. This would enable all medical students to access a £5,000 non-means tested grant.
- A review of the [Travel and Dual Accommodation Expenses](#), so that fuel and accommodation reimbursements are reflective of the cost of living.

The campaign for a ‘Liveable NHS Bursary’ was backed by the British Medical Association, which described the current funding arrangements as “a failure from the Government”.⁴³

³⁹ NHS BSA, [NHS Bursary](#)

⁴⁰ NHS BSA, [NHS Bursary additional allowances](#)

⁴¹ Sutton Trust, [A liveable NHS bursary is needed to make medicine truly accessible to all](#), 17 June 2022

⁴² Sutton Trust, [A liveable NHS bursary is needed to make medicine truly accessible to all](#), 17 June 2022

⁴³ “[Final year medical students 'can't afford to pay rent'](#)”, BBC News, 7 May 2022.

More information is available in a [briefing document published for MPs](#) (PDF) by the campaign.⁴⁴

In September 2023, the then-Conservative government announced medical and dental students would be able to claim 50% more for travel and accommodation expenses.⁴⁵ It also raised the household income threshold for the bursary so students would be entitled to more funding.

⁴⁴ The #LiveableNHSBursary campaign, [MP Briefing](#) (PDF), 26 May 2022

⁴⁵ Department of Health and Social Care, [Healthcare studies more affordable as financial support increased](#), 1 September 2023

2 Nursing and other healthcare students

Students taking nursing, midwifery, paramedicine, and other healthcare courses are funded differently to medical and dental students. Student support arrangements vary across the UK, with different courses attracting different support.

The ‘Allied health professions’ make up the third largest workforce in the NHS.⁴⁶ In England, they are a category of 14 mainly degree-level professions that include:

- Art Therapists
- Dramatherapists
- Music therapists
- Chiropodists/podiatrists
- Dietitians
- Occupational therapists
- Operating Department Practitioners
- Orthoptists
- Osteopaths
- Paramedics
- Physiotherapists
- Prosthetists and Orthotists

- Radiographers

- Speech and language therapists.⁴⁷

2.1 Entrance requirements

Entrance requirements for nursing courses vary between course and institution. Typically, individuals are required to achieve a minimum of five

⁴⁶ NHS England, [About AHPs](#)

⁴⁷ NHS England, [The 14 allied health professions](#)

GCSEs at grade 4/C or above and two A levels or equivalent level 3 qualifications.⁴⁸ Specific entry requirements can be found on the [NHS Course finder](#).

2.2

Nursing applicant and entrant numbers

Applicants

2017 to 2019: Impact of abolishing bursaries in England

NHS Bursaries were abolished for new students from England in 2017 (see section three for more information). In the first year after this change, the number of applicants for nursing courses from England fell by 21% from 52,740 in 2016 to 41,715 in 2017.

There were falls in applicants from the other home countries, but these were much smaller; 2% from Scotland 6% from Northern Ireland and 7% from Wales.^{49 50}

Applicant numbers from England fell again in 2018. Applicants from England fell to 37,470 or 10% down on the 2017 total. The 2018 figure was the lowest since nursing courses first started to be included in the UCAS system a decade ago.⁵¹

There was an increase of 6% in 2019 but the total remained below 40,000, well below any year before the 2017 funding reforms. Applicants from Scotland, Wales, and Northern Ireland all increased between 2017 and 2019. The increase in Scotland was largest at 14%.

2020 onwards: Impact of grants in England and the pandemic

The number of applicants from England increased by a greater amount in 2020 after the £5,000 Learning Support Fund training grant was introduced (see section three for more information). They were up by 18% in 2020 to 46,680, but this only partially reversed the earlier falls.

There was a further increase to 53,990 in 2021 which took the total to above its 2016 level and a new record high. There were also substantial increases in applications for nursing from Scotland and Wales in 2020 and 2021.

A new system of subject classification means that data from 2022 are not directly comparable,⁵² but comparisons on the new basis can be made back

⁴⁸ [Entry requirements \(adult nursing\)](#), accessed 11 October 2022

⁴⁹ [UCAS undergraduate sector-level end of cycle data resources 2021](#)

⁵⁰ These figures include all applicants who made at least one application to the B7 'nursing and midwifery' subject group. This included midwifery and dental nursing.

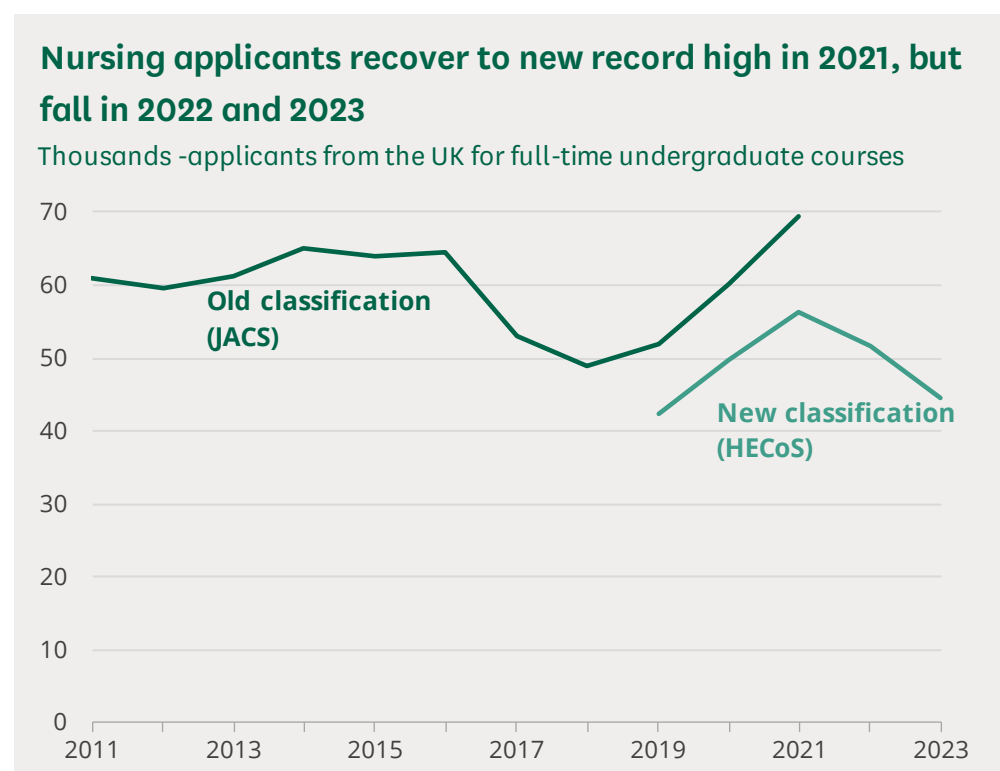
⁵¹ [UCAS undergraduate sector-level end of cycle data resources 2021](#)

⁵² One change is that UCAS now excludes those who applied to midwifery or dental nursing courses in its figures on 'nursing'.

to 2019. These data show that UK nursing applicant numbers fell in 2022 and 2023 and by a total of 21% between 2021 and 2023. The falls were 40% in Wales, 29% in Northern Ireland, 23% in Scotland, and 19% in England. Trends are illustrated below.

	JACS subject classification								Change 2015 -2021	Trend	HECoS subject classification		
	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021	2021			2022	2023	
	England	52,095	52,740	41,715	37,470	39,665	46,680	53,990			+4%		43,575	40,570	35,275
Scotland	6,025	5,725	5,605	5,825	6,380	7,420	8,390	+39%		6,995	6,265	5,360	
Wales	3,105	3,310	3,070	3,105	3,290	3,460	3,850	+24%		3,015	2,395	1,785	
N. Ireland	2,715	2,760	2,600	2,400	2,620	2,525	3,085	+14%		2,815	2,495	2,000	
Total	63,940	64,535	52,990	48,800	51,955	60,085	69,315	+8%		56,400	51,720	44,420	

Source: [UCAS undergraduate sector-level end of cycle data resources 2023 \(and earlier\)](#)



Source: [UCAS undergraduate sector-level end of cycle data resources 2023 \(and earlier\)](#)

The admissions service UCAS explicitly linked the UK-wide increase in applications for nursing in 2020 and 2021 to the pandemic and the way it underlined the high esteem in which the profession the profession is held.^{53 54}

The number of new applicants to nursing between January and June 2020 were up by 63% on the same period in 2019. The UCAS head of analysis said at the time:

One trend we should all be particularly thankful for is the number of people who've clearly been inspired in recent weeks to study nursing. Never has the nation been so indebted to these professionals, who have worked tirelessly and selflessly over recent weeks and months to keep us safe.⁵⁵

A [UCAS Insight](#) from June 2020 looked at the diversity of those applying for and starting courses in nursing and social work.

Applicants and entrants to nursing degrees tend to be somewhat older than most other full-time students. The 2016-18 drop in nursing applicants was largest among mature students and smallest among those aged under 21. The increase in 2019 among those aged under 21 was above average at 9% while there was little increase in those aged 21-24. In contrast, the increases in 2020 and 2021 were substantially larger among older groups; 50% in the 35+ group (across the two years) and 47% in the 30-34 group.

Trends are set out in the table below.

UK applicants to nursing by age												
Full-time applicants to undergraduate courses via UCAS												
	JACS subject classification								Change 2015 -2021	HECoS subject classification		
	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021	Trend		2021	2022	2023
Under 21	24,130	23,565	21,250	20,330	22,085	23,460	27,675		+15%	22,005	21,965	18,770
21-24	12,155	11,695	9,130	8,160	8,165	9,070	10,115		-17%	7,845	6,645	5,520
25-29	10,015	10,290	7,755	6,720	7,005	8,270	9,585		-4%	7,500	5,770	4,495
30-34	6,435	6,830	5,180	4,675	4,940	6,140	7,275		+13%	5,865	5,090	4,055
35+	11,205	12,155	9,675	8,915	9,760	13,145	14,665		+31%	13,185	12,250	11,580
Total	63,940	64,535	52,990	48,800	51,955	60,085	69,315		+8%	56,400	51,720	44,420

Source: [UCAS undergraduate sector-level end of cycle data resources 2023 \(and earlier\)](#)

The drop in applicants in 2022 and 2023 (under the new classification) was driven by smaller number of older applicants. The overall fall between 2021 and 2023 was 40% among those aged 25-29, 31% in the 30-34 group and 30%

⁵³ [Keep calm – students still want to study](#), Wonkhe blog 9 July 2020

⁵⁴ UCAS, [Nursing applications soar and UCAS publishes latest undergraduate applicant analysis](#), (18 February 2021)

⁵⁵ Wonkhe blog 8 July 2020, [Keep calm – students still want to study](#)

for those aged 21-24. The fall was much smaller among those aged under 21 at 15%, all of which happened in 2023.

2024 data

Data on the number of applicants up to the main (pre-clearing) deadline of 30 June 2024 suggest a further decline in applicants to nursing in 2024. Their numbers were down by 6% compared to the same point in 2023. Applicants to midwifery were down by 10%.⁵⁶

Entrants

Full-time undergraduate courses through UCAS

There have always been many more applicants than places for nursing. In the mid-2010s, only just over 40% of applicants were accepted. The drop in applicants in 2017 and 2018 reduced the gap between applicants and acceptances, but did not see the number of applicants fall below the number of places. The number from the UK accepted fell by only 0.3% in 2017 and increased by 6.3% in 2018. The proportion of applicants who were accepted was increased to 57% in 2017 and remained at this level in 2018.

The 2017 fall in acceptances to nursing was driven by a larger fall (2.6%) from England after the funding changes. Acceptances from England fell again in 2018, before rising sharply in 2019 and 2020. There were also large increases in these years in acceptances from elsewhere in the UK. The increases from 2015 to 2021 in Wales and Scotland were larger than those seen in England.⁵⁷

The new subject classification system also affects data on acceptances from 2022. These new figures show a fall in 2022 across the UK and an overall drop of 10.5%. Trends are illustrated below.

Accepted UK applicants to nursing applicants by country												
Full-time applicants to undergraduate courses via UCAS												
	JACS subject classification							Change 2015 -2021	Trend	HECoS subject classification		
	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021			2021	2022	2023
England	21,450	22,630	22,045	21,745	23,060	28,920	29,240	+36%		24,935	22,375	2,050
Scotland	2,995	2,950	3,225	3,375	3,655	4,410	4,365	+46%		4,055	3,825	3,395
Wales	1,550	1,630	1,730	1,785	1,925	2,110	2,140	+38%		1,795	1,335	1,060
N. Ireland	970	1,105	1,090	1,090	1,110	1,340	1,305	+35%		1,200	1,085	935
Total	26,965	28,315	28,090	27,995	29,750	36,780	37,050	+37%		31,990	28,625	25,435

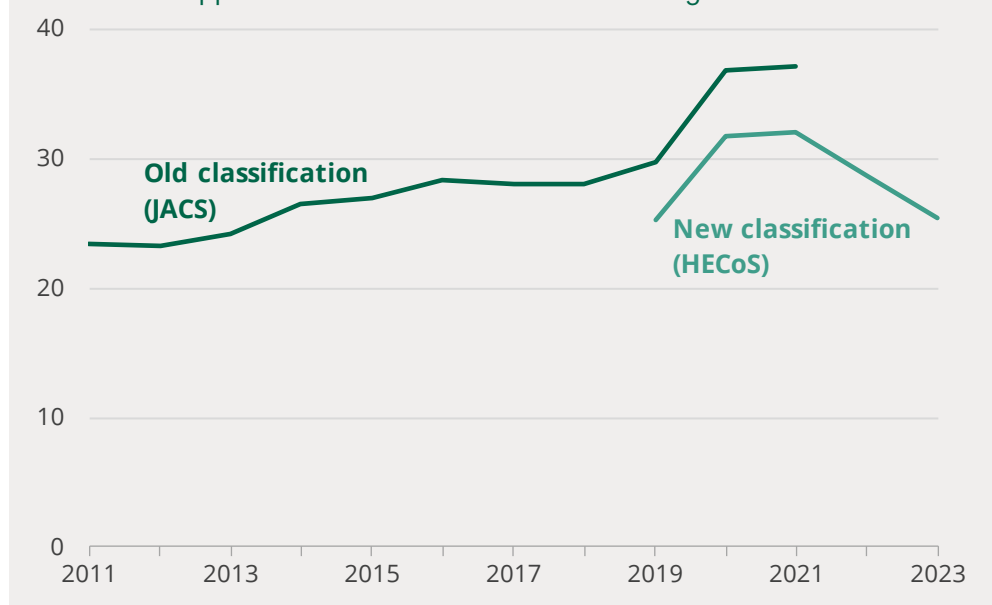
Source: [UCAS undergraduate sector-level end of cycle data resources 2023 \(and earlier\)](#)

⁵⁶ [UCAS, 2024 cycle applicant figures -30 June deadline](#)

⁵⁷ [UCAS undergraduate sector-level end of cycle data resources 2021](#)

Accepted applicants for nursing hit a new records in 2020 and 2021, but fall back in 2022 and 2023

Thousands -applicants from the UK for full-time undergraduate courses



Source: [UCAS undergraduate sector-level end of cycle data resources 2022](#) (and earlier)

All full and part-time undergraduates

The UCAS data covers full-time undergraduates only. Information from the Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA) covers all full- and part-time students. In 2017/18, the first year after the funding reforms in England, the total number of first year undergraduate nursing and midwifery 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. There were smaller falls in nursing students from Scotland (4%), Wales (3%) and Northern Ireland (8%).

The total number of full- and part-time home entrants to undergraduate nursing and midwifery in the UK was 54,400 in 2017/18 and increased slightly to 54,500 in 2018/19. Within the UK there was an increase of 1% in England, 4% in Scotland, 10% in Northern Ireland but entrants from Wales fell by 20%.⁵⁸

The new subject classification system was introduced for this data in 2019/20. HESA has not published overlapping data on both the old and new systems, so it is not possible to look at trends between 2018/19 and 2019/20. The total number of undergraduate nursing and midwifery entrants from the UK increased by 20% between 2019/20 and 2020/21 from 46,500 to 56,000. It remained at this level in 2021/22 before falling by 5% to around 53,000 in

⁵⁸ HESA, [Student data table 22: HE student enrolments by subject of study and domicile 2014/15 to 2018/19](#).

2022/23. Despite this, 2022/23 entrants numbers were still 14% above 2019/20 levels.⁵⁹

The largest increase between 2019/20 and 2022/23 was in students from England (19%) followed by Northern Ireland (7%). There was no change in Scotland and a 15% drop in entrants from Wales.^{60 61}

The table below shows how numbers changed by speciality, including midwifery between 2019/20 and 2021/22. Among the larger specialities the biggest increases were in adult, mental health, children's, and critical care nursing.

First year UK nursing and midwifery students					
Detailed subject breakdown, full- and part-time undergraduates					
	2019/20	2020/21	2021/22	2022/23	Change 19/20 to 22/23
Adult Nursing	15,965	20,105	21,100	18,695	+17%
Nursing (non-specific)	14,995	17,315	16,680	17,030	+14%
Mental Health Nursing	4,485	6,330	5,915	5,400	+20%
Midwifery	3,845	4,385	4,375	4,205	+9%
Children's Nursing	3,235	4,075	3,995	3,845	+19%
Critical Care Nursing	420	620	660	860	+105%
Clinical Practice Nursing	820	705	845	730	-11%
Learning Disabilities Nursing	605	640	725	700	+16%
Community Nursing	720	835	730	510	-29%
General Practice Nursing	170	140	150	185	+9%
Dental Nursing	170	220	190	175	+3%
Theatre Nursing	95	75	160	165	+74%
Neonatal Nursing	95	200	110	120	+26%
Emergency Nursing	130	120	70	95	-27%
Health Visiting	120	85	75	95	-21%
Older People Nursing	255	20	10	75	-71%
Palliative Care Nursing	105	35	55	60	-43%
School Nursing	60	45	45	50	-17%
Medical Nursing	180	75	65	35	-81%
TOTAL	46,470	56,025	55,955	53,030	+14%

Source: HESA, [HE student enrolments by subject of study and permanent address 2019/20 to 2022/23](#)

⁵⁹ HESA, [HE student enrolments by subject of study and permanent address 2019/20 to 2022/23](#)

⁶⁰ HESA, [HE student enrolments by subject of study and permanent address 2019/20 to 2022/23](#)

⁶¹ These comparisons may be affected by an increase in the number of students whose domicile was not known in 2022/23.

2.3

Healthcare student applicant and entrant numbers

Applicants

The following table summarises recent data on number of applicants and acceptances through UCAS for all subjects allied to medicine. This uses the latest subject classification so is only available from 2019 onwards.

Home applicants to subjects allied to medicine						
Full-time applicants to undergraduate courses via UCAS						
	2019	2020	2021	2022	2023	Change 2019-2023
Applicants						
Pharmacology, toxicology & pharmacy	4,510	4,660	5,435	6,150	..	..
Nursing & midwifery	43,630	50,455	57,585	51,950	..	..
Medical science	13,380	14,205	15,165	14,995	..	..
Allied health	20,170	22,320	26,520	26,440	..	..
Any Subject allied to medicine	81,695	91,640	104,715	99,525	..	..
Acceptances						
Pharmacology, toxicology & pharmacy	4,040	4,295	5,005	5,310	5,750	+42%
Nursing & midwifery	29,185	36,310	36,520	32,855	29,740	+2%
Medical science	11,455	12,175	12,750	12,680	15,390	+34%
Allied health	14,360	16,255	17,010	16,425	15,930	+11%
Any Subject allied to medicine	59,025	69,030	71,295	67,260	66,790	+13%

Source: [UCAS undergraduate sector-level end of cycle data resources 2023 \(and earlier\)](#)

Applicants to nursing and midwifery make up just over half of the subject allied to medicine total. The number of applicants to all these groups of subjects increased in 2020 and 2021. Applicants to nursing and midwifery, medical science,⁶² and allied health⁶³ subjects all fell in 2022, but their totals were still higher than in 2019.

The number applying to pharmacology, toxicology and pharmacy continued to increase in 2022 and saw the largest overall increase between 2019 and 2022.

UCAS has not published applicant data by detailed subject for 2023.

⁶² Consists of medical technology, healthcare science (non-specific), biomedical sciences (non-specific) and anatomy, physiology and pathology.

⁶³ Consists of health sciences (non-specific), nutrition and dietetics, ophthalmics, environmental and public health, physiotherapy, complementary and alternative medicine and counselling, psychotherapy and occupational therapy.

Entrants

The number of accepted applicants to full-time undergraduate courses (shown in the table on the previous page) followed broadly similar trends to applicants numbers, although the overall increase between 2019 and 2022 was smaller than the increase in applicant numbers.

Accepted applicants to nursing and midwifery fell in 2022 and 2023, but numbers were still slightly higher than they were in 2019. In contrast the number of acceptances to pharmacology, toxicology and pharmacy have increased in each year and by a total of 42% from 2019 to 2023. The overall increase in acceptances to medical science was almost as high at 34%.

The largest increase in accepted applicants to subjects allied to medicine between 2019 and 2023 were from London (27%), the West Midlands and North West (both 21%). There were falls in acceptances over this period from Wales (12%), the North East (9%) and the South West (1%).⁶⁴

Data from the Higher Education Statistics Agency (including part-time students) showed a 7% fall in first year UK students on undergraduate subjects allied to medicine courses in 2017/18. This was driven by an 8% drop in those from England. The UK total number remained broadly stable in 2018/19 at 87,750.⁶⁵ Their number under the new subject classification in 2019/20 was 82,900. It increased by 18% to 97,500 in 2020/21, increased more slowly to 98,300 in 2021/22, before falling by 4% to 94,400 in 2022/23.⁶⁶

Outside of nursing the other major subjects allied to medicine which increased the most between 2019/20 and 2022/23 were physiotherapy (38%), pharmacy (34%), occupational therapy (33%), operating department practice (32%) and pharmacology (30%).⁶⁷

Paramedic science students

Data from UCAS on applications to full-time undergraduate courses does not separately identify those applying for paramedic courses.

The total number of home students starting full- or part-time paramedic courses was around 3,500 in each year from 2016/17 to 2018/19.⁶⁸ Their number was 4,000 in 2019/20 under the new subject classifications used for higher education data.

It is not possible to say how much of this change was due to the different classification system rather than any real change in entrants. However, their

⁶⁴ [UCAS undergraduate sector-level end of cycle data resources 2023 \(and earlier\)](#)

⁶⁵ HESA, [Student data table 22: HE student enrolments by subject of study and domicile 2014/15 to 2018/19](#)

⁶⁶ HESA, [HE student enrolments by subject of study and permanent address 2019/20 to 2022/23](#)

⁶⁷ HESA, [HE student enrolments by subject of study and permanent address 2019/20 to 2022/23](#)

⁶⁸ HESA, [Student data table 22: HE student enrolments by subject of study and domicile 2014/15 to 2018/19](#)

number increased by 22% to 4,900 in 2020/21 before falling in each of the following two years to around 4,600 in 2022/23.

The number of new paramedic science students has increased from all the home countries since 2019/20. There was a particularly large increase from Scotland between 2019/20 and 2020/21 when numbers went from 210 to 575. They have since fallen back somewhat and were 365 in 2022/23.⁶⁹

2.4

Support for nursing and healthcare students

Summary

England is the only part of the UK where nursing and other healthcare students must pay for their own tuition (generally through student loan repayments). The governments of Wales, Scotland, and Northern Ireland fund the tuition fees for eligible students.

Students from across the UK can access non-repayable living cost support, which generally includes some form of grant towards living costs, and additional support depending on the student's personal circumstances. Scotland has the most generous living cost grant.

Wales is the only part of the UK that ties eligibility for student support to a commitment to working in the NHS following graduation. Students who cannot make this commitment are eligible for the standard student finance package of tuition fee loans and living cost funding instead.

England

Since 2017, new undergraduate students starting courses in nursing, midwifery, and allied health profession (AHP) courses have been ineligible for the NHS Bursary and free tuition (see section three below for more information).

Instead, nursing, midwifery, and AHP students are now funded by the standard student finance package of:

- a tuition fee loan to cover the cost of fees;
- a maintenance loan to help with living costs;⁷⁰

⁶⁹ HESA, [HE student enrolments by subject of study and permanent address 2019/20 to 2022/23](#)

⁷⁰ Individuals can get an estimate of how much maintenance loan they will receive using the [Student Finance Calculator](#) on gov.uk.

- additional support for some students depending on their personal circumstances (for example, if they have children or are disabled).⁷¹

Students on courses exceeding 30 weeks and 3 days in an academic year may also be eligible for additional funding through the [long courses loan](#).⁷²

Since September 2020, students eligible for tuition fee and maintenance support can apply for the [NHS Learning Support Fund \(LSF\)](#). This is supplementary funding and eligible students can also apply for other forms of extra support, including through the standard higher education student support system and institutional hardship funding available from universities.⁷³

The NHS Learning Support Fund includes:

- A training grant of £5,000 per academic year.
- A specialist subject payment of £1,000 per academic year for students on degrees that struggle to recruit, including mental health and learning disability nursing.
- Parental support of £2,000 per academic year for students who have at least one dependent child under 15 years, or under 17 years if registered with special educational needs.
- Help towards additional travel and accommodation costs related to clinical placements.
- An exceptional hardship fund of up to £3,000 per academic year.⁷⁴

Students wanting to apply for any elements of the NHS Learning Support Fund must be studying on an eligible programme at a university in England that leads to professional registration in either nursing, midwifery, or eligible AHP courses.

Support for second degrees

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

As part of the government's reforms to funding for nursing and healthcare courses, it also relaxed the equivalent or lower-level qualification (ELQ) rules, which meant students starting a second degree in nursing, nursing and social

⁷¹ Student Finance England, [Student finance for undergraduates](#); Commons Library briefing CBP-8237, [Student support for undergraduates across the UK](#)

⁷² Student Loans Company, [Guidance for students who qualify for a Long Courses Loan](#)

⁷³ However, eligibility rules prevent students claiming support for childcare costs through both the standard higher education student support system and the NHS Learning Support Fund.

⁷⁴ NHS Business Services Authority, [NHS Learning Support Fund \(LSF\)](#); NHS Health Careers, [Financial support at university](#)

work, midwifery, AHP subjects, dental therapy, and dental hygiene became eligible for the standard student support package.⁷⁵

Paramedic science courses

Student funding for paramedic courses in England has always been different to funding for other allied health professional courses like nursing and midwifery. This is because of the different training routes that were available to paramedics, some of which were funded, and because, historically, paramedic science did not hold degree status, which meant student paramedics were not offered financial support in the form of the NHS bursary.

Since March 2018, paramedicine has been an all-degree profession, meaning most paramedic students are eligible for the standard student finance package. On 19 January 2020, the government announced the NHS Learning Support Fund would cover new and continuing undergraduate or postgraduate paramedic degree level courses, and those who are eligible for student loans (those doing paramedicine as their first degree).⁷⁶

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

Funding for second degrees in paramedicine

Students studying paramedicine as a second degree are not eligible for student finance and are therefore not eligible for the NHS Learning Support Fund. This is because paramedic courses were never part of the NHS bursary scheme, so the exemption to the equivalent and lower-level qualification (ELQ) rules for students taking second degrees in nursing, midwifery, and AHP courses does not apply to paramedic degrees (see section 3.2 for more information).

The College of Paramedics is campaigning to enable student paramedics with an equivalent or lower qualification to access funding in line with other Allied Health Professions.⁷⁷

In June 2022, the then-Conservative government said it was considering whether to extend the ELQ exemption to student paramedics:

The Department of Health and Social Care is in discussions with the Department for Education about providing an Equivalent or Lower Qualification exemption to the student finance rules for paramedicine. Subject to the outcome of these discussions and availability of the necessary funding, those studying paramedicine as a second degree could access tuition fee and

⁷⁵ Department of Health, [Reforming healthcare education funding: creating a sustainable future workforce Government Response to public consultation](#) (PDF), July 2016, p16

⁷⁶ Department of Health and Social Care, [Paramedic students will get £5,000 support payment each year](#), 19 January 2020

⁷⁷ College of Paramedics, [Funding for paramedic science courses should be available to all regardless of previous higher education study](#)

maintenance loan support if eligible and if so, would have access to the NHS Learning Support Fund.

The Government keeps the funding arrangements for all pre-registration National Health Service health professionals' education under review, to ensure that students are appropriately supported. In doing so, it must make use of finite financial resources to balance the level of support students receive with the need to make best use of public funds to deliver value for money.⁷⁸

Scotland

Most healthcare students in Scotland can apply to the Student Award Agency Scotland (SAAS) to have their tuition fees paid by the Scottish Government. They may also be eligible for the standard student finance package of a means-tested bursary and loan to help cover living costs while at university.

Nursing, midwifery, and paramedic students from Scotland, studying a course that leads to a degree or Diploma in Higher Education in Scotland, are funded differently to students on other healthcare courses. They may be eligible for a [Paramedic, Nursing, and Midwifery Student Bursary \(PNMSB\)](#) instead of the standard student finance package.

The bursary is not income assessed. It comprises £10,000 for the first three years of a course and £7,500 for the fourth year. Additional support is also available to students depending on their personal circumstances and towards the costs incurred during clinical placements.

The bursary includes:

- Free tuition.
- Standard Bursary of £10,000 per year and £7,500 for the fourth year.
- Single parents allowance of £2,303 per year.
- Childcare allowance for registered care of up to £2,466 per year (less only if the registered childcare amounts to less).
- Dependants' allowance of £3,640 for first dependent child, and £557 for each other dependent child, also per year.⁷⁹

Students who have received funding for a higher education course before may still get full support to study a paramedic, nursing, or midwifery course providing their previous study was not in one of these subjects.

⁷⁸ [PQ 17073 \[Paramedical Staff: Training\] 16 June 2022](#)

⁷⁹ SAAS, [Funding for paramedic, nursing and midwifery students](#)

Wales

Eligible students on nursing, midwifery, paramedic science, and certain AHP courses in Wales have the choice as to whether they receive funding from:

- Student Finance Wales, which comprises the standard student finance package of loans and grants; or
- the NHS Wales Bursary Scheme, which includes free tuition and living cost grants.

To be eligible for the NHS Bursary scheme, students must commit to working for NHS Wales after graduating. For a three-year course, it is a two-year commitment, and for a two-year course, it is an 18-month commitment.

The NHS Wales Bursary includes:

- Free tuition;
- A non-means-tested grant of £1,000;
- A means-tested bursary;
- A reduced rate maintenance Loan;
- Additional allowances depending on their personal circumstances, such as funding to help disabled students or students with dependents.⁸⁰

Northern Ireland

Students doing nursing, midwifery, paramedic, and allied health profession courses have different funding arrangements from other higher education students.⁸¹

All such students from Northern Ireland studying in Northern Ireland have their tuition fees paid for them by the Department of Health. Living cost support differs slightly depending on the course studied:

- Nursing and midwifery students may be eligible for a non-means tested bursary and, if they have dependants and/or children, additional support. They are not eligible for a maintenance loan.
- Students on other health professional courses can apply for a means-tested bursary and additional support depending on their personal circumstances to help with living costs. They may also be eligible to apply for a reduced rate non-income assessed maintenance loan.

⁸⁰ NHS Wales, [NHS Wales Bursary Scheme Terms and Conditions](#) (PDF)

⁸¹ NI Direct, [Health professional courses](#)

Full-time paramedic science courses usually take between three or four years and include a mixture of theory and practical work, including placements with the ambulance services.

3 Abolition of the NHS bursary in England for healthcare students

3.1 What did the bursary include?

The last cohort of students to receive NHS Bursaries for nursing, midwifery, and other allied health professions (AHP) programmes started their courses in September 2016. For these students, the NHS bursary consisted of the following elements:

- Free tuition (fees were paid directly to their higher education provider by the NHS through Health Education England).
- 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.
- Extra allowances for courses that run for longer than 30 weeks and 3 days each academic year.
- Additional funding related to clinical placement expenses.

Students who qualified for the NHS Bursary could also apply for a reduced rate maintenance loan from Student Finance England.

3.2 Reforms to funding for healthcare students

Following a 2016 consultation, the then-Conservative government reformed funding for undergraduate students starting courses in nursing, midwifery, and other allied health professions from 1 August 2017.⁸² Free tuition and non-repayable living cost support was abolished, and students became eligible for the standard student finance package of tuition fee and maintenance loans.

In 2018, NHS bursaries were also abolished for postgraduate students.⁸³

⁸² Department of Health and Social Care, [Changing how healthcare education is funded](#), 2016-18
Department of Health and Social Care, [NHS bursary reform](#), 2015-18

⁸³ Department of Health and Social Care, [Changes to healthcare education funding](#), February 2018

As part of the funding reforms, the government also relaxed the equivalent or lower-level qualification (ELQ) rules, which meant students starting a second degree in nursing, nursing and social work, midwifery, AHP subjects, dental therapy, and dental hygiene became eligible for the standard student support package.⁸⁴

The government said its reforms would help to secure the healthcare workforce by:

- enabling universities to offer up to 10,000 extra training places on pre-registration healthcare programmes;
- offering students around 25% more upfront financial support while studying (for example, a single student on a three-year programme would receive approximately £2,000 more each year on a student loan compared to an NHS bursary);
- improving access to pre-registration undergraduate study for those from disadvantaged backgrounds;
- giving students with an existing qualification the chance to get funding for a second degree.⁸⁵

Medical and dentistry students were not included in the reforms and continue to be eligible for the NHS bursary for some of their course. Paramedic students were also not covered by the reforms as they were never included in the NHS bursary system.

England is the only part of the UK that has ended the bursary scheme for nursing and healthcare students. Wales, Scotland, and Northern Ireland have all retained some form of free tuition and non-repayable living cost support for students on pre-registration courses.

Background to the reforms is given in library briefing, [Reform of support for healthcare students in England](#).⁸⁶

3.3

Reaction to the reforms

The government's proposal to abolish the NHS bursary in favour of student loans was met with criticism across the health sector.

In June 2016, over 20 health unions, charities, and professional colleges, including the Foundation of Nursing Studies, Royal College of General Practitioners, and the British Medical Association, wrote to the Prime Minister

⁸⁴ Department of Health, [Reforming healthcare education funding: creating a sustainable future workforce Government Response to public consultation](#) (PDF), July 2016, p16

⁸⁵ Department of Health and Social Care, [NHS bursary reform](#), 27 January 2017

⁸⁶ Commons Library briefing, [Reform of support for healthcare students in England](#), February 2017

asking for the decision to be reconsidered, describing abolition of the bursary as “reckless”.⁸⁷

There was concern the removal of the NHS bursary would undermine any long-term solution to the shortage of nurses, midwives, and AHPs, since the prospect of taking out loans could deter people from these courses. MillionPlus, the representative group for post-1992 universities, raised concerns about the possible disproportionate effect on mature students, students with children, and students who already have a degree, because these groups made up a high proportion of nurses, midwives, and AHPs and are also typically more debt averse.⁸⁸

A petition titled ‘[Keep the NHS Bursary](#)’ was launched on the Parliament petitions website in response to the government’s announcement. It received 162,568 signatures and was debated in Parliament on 11 January 2016.⁸⁹

The effect of the reforms to funding for nursing and healthcare students was discussed in a Health Committee report, [Nursing Workforce](#), published in January 2018.⁹⁰ The report raised concerns about the drop in the number of mature students applying for nursing degrees, which had followed the reforms to funding for these degrees.

The report said this could potentially lead to shortages in areas that attracted mature applicants, such as mental health nursing and learning disability nursing. It said:

Figures just published by UCAS confirm a drop in older nursing students [...]

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.⁹¹

3.4 Introduction of the NHS Learning Support Fund

As part of the funding reforms, supplementary funding was also made available to new students starting pre-registration healthcare courses from 1 August 2017 by the NHS Business Services Authority. This funding was in addition to the standard student finance package and was dependent on a student’s personal circumstances.

⁸⁷ Unison, [Health workers and charities unite to urge rethink on NHS bursaries](#), 19 June 2016. National Health Executive, [PM urged to halt ‘reckless’ plans to cancel nursing bursaries](#), 20 June 2016

⁸⁸ MillionPlus, [MillionPlus response to NHS Bursaries: reforming healthcare education funding consultation](#), 13 July 2016

⁸⁹ [HC Deb \[NHS Bursary\] 11 January 2016 Vol 64](#)

⁹⁰ Health Committee, [The nursing workforce](#), HC 353 2017-19, 26 January 2018

⁹¹ Health Committee, [The nursing workforce](#), HC 353 2017-19, 26 January 2018, para 61-62

This funding is now known as the [NHS Learning Support Fund \(LSF\)](#). It initially consisted of three different allowances:

- a non-repayable grant of £1,000 per year for students with child dependants (Child Dependants Allowance);
- exceptional support of up to £3,000 per year in the case of severe hardship (Exceptional Support Fund);
- support for excess travel and dual accommodation expenses incurred by students attending practice placements.⁹²

On 18 December 2019, the government announced new and continuing nursing students would receive an additional £5,000 grant from September 2020.⁹³ Up to £3,000 was also made available to eligible students, including for specialist disciplines that struggle to recruit and for additional childcare cost support.⁹⁴

Today, the NHS Learning Support Fund includes:

- Training grant of £5,000 per academic year.
- Specialist subject payment of £1,000 per academic year for students on degrees that struggle to recruit:
 - Mental Health Nursing
 - Learning Disability Nursing
 - Radiography (Diagnostic and Therapeutic)
 - Prosthetics and Orthotics
 - Orthoptics
 - Podiatry.
- Parental support of £2,000 per academic year (previously Child Dependants Allowance) for students who have at least one dependent child under 15 years, or under 17 years if registered with special educational needs.
- Travel and dual accommodation expenses.

⁹² Department of Health and Social Care, [NHS bursary reform](#), 27 January 2017

⁹³ Department of Health and Social Care, [Nursing students to receive £5,000 payment a year](#), 18 December 2019

⁹⁴ Department of Health and Social Care, [Nursing students to receive £5,000 payment a year](#), 18 December 2019

- Exceptional Support Fund of up to £3,000 per academic year.⁹⁵

3.5

Are there retrospective payments for the 2017-2020 cohort?

There is a cohort of students who studied between 2017 and 2020 and so missed out on the NHS bursary and on the recently introduced training grant. It has been suggested by some that this cohort should receive backdated funding, or a reduction in their student loan repayments.⁹⁶

The issue of the 2017-20 cohort has also been raised in Parliament, but answers to Parliamentary Questions have stated students who have completed their course will not receive backdated payments:

Conor McGinn: 24 February 2020

To ask the Secretary of State for Health and Social Care, with reference to his Department's announcement on 18 December 2019 that funding will be allocated to the provision of grants to nursing students from September 2020, whether that funding will include compensation for students that were not eligible for an NHS bursary as a result of the removal of the NHS bursary scheme in 2017.

Helen Whately: 27 February 2020

The maintenance grants announced on 18 December 2019 are available to new and continuing students from September 2020. Students who started courses in the 2017/18 academic year and will have completed their studies will not receive backdated payments.⁹⁷

⁹⁵ NHS Business Services Authority, [NHS Learning Support Fund \(LSE\)](#); NHS Health Careers, [Financial support at university](#)

⁹⁶ Royal College of Nursing, [Removing student debt will boost nursing number, says new RCN report](#), 21 July 2020

⁹⁷ [PQ 19994 \[Nurses: Training\] 24 February 2020](#)

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