

FAO PGTFI Consultation Response

HE Policy Branch
Department for the Economy
Netherleigh
Massey Avenue
Belfast
BT4 2JP

22 June 2021

Review of the Postgraduate Tuition Fee Loan Consultation

Dear Sir/Madam

The British Medical Association (BMA) is an apolitical independent trade union and professional association representing doctors and medical students from all branches of medicine across the UK. Our mission is we look after doctors so they can look after you.

BMA Northern Ireland welcomes the opportunity to respond to this consultation on the review of the postgraduate tuition fee loan. Our response is informed by the Northern Ireland Medical Students Committee (NIMSC) who represent medical students in NI. Our comments on the consultation itself will be brief, as our focus will be on the issues which we believe that the department should consider alongside this important issue.

We agree completely with the consultation that the postgraduate tuition fee loan should be extended to cover the full amount of postgraduate fees. However, whilst this would be a welcome step for those students who are undertaking postgraduate courses, the department must consider what support can be made available to students who are undertaking a second undergraduate degree. This includes extending the NHS 5th year bursary to those students who are undertaking medicine as a second degree.

To clearly outline the issue; medical students who have previously undertaken unrelated or related degrees prior to commencing medical school are known as “graduate medical students.” These graduate medical students:

- are not eligible for tuition fee support or for a maintenance grant if they have previously received funding
- are required to pay their tuition fees upfront
- can only apply for a reduced (i.e. means-tested) maintenance loan

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- cannot avail of the NHS Bursary scheme in their final year of study. This bursary covers tuition fees

Medical students who are undertaking medicine as a first degree can avail of all this financial support and BMA Northern Ireland firmly believes that students who are undertaking medicine as a second degree should receive similar support.

NIMSC has previously lobbied DoH and DfE on this issue and been told that it is department policy to target resources at undergraduate level to allow a greater number of students to experience third level study, therefore graduate students, who have already received support at undergraduate level, are ineligible for further support. However, we believe there are many factors that mean DfE should reconsider this stance:

- Any support would be repaid, with interest, as a tuition fee loan
- For many students, entry to medicine is only possible as a second degree
- This stance will stop many potential future doctors with valuable experience and skills, from undertaking the degree and entering the workforce

Widening participation

A continuing key priority for NIMSC has been widening participation to the medical profession, which we believe should be representative of the society that it serves. The lack of support for graduates who want to study medicine, will mean many highly motivated students will be lost to the health service as they will no longer see medicine as a viable vocation. To solely cover the costs of tuition fees, graduate medical students are expected to find £22,630, based on the current level of tuition fees. It is important to remember that this is a course with a heavy timetable and much more contact time than many undergraduate courses, significantly curtailing the ability of students to work alongside their course.

Ulster University graduate entry medical school

BMA welcomes the opening of the graduate entry medical school at Ulster University and believes that this presents an opportunity for DfE to review the financial support for tuition fees available to those students who are undertaking medicine as a second undergraduate degree. The opening of UU medical school is a hugely important investment decision and will mean more medical students graduating annually in Northern Ireland to hopefully stay and work in NI HSC. Therefore, it is extremely important that these students receive sufficient financial support to both begin and complete their studies. (Note: currently 22- 28% of students entering QUB Medical School are graduate medical students¹)

Format of this consultation

We would also like to note that the format of this consultation was not ideal. To be restricted to the departmental survey does not allow for wider, important points such as ours to be made. Additionally, there is no way in which to complete the survey without a computer which will restrict the potential audience and recipient pool.

We would like to thank the department for consulting on this important issue but also urge you to look further at wider issues relating to postgraduate support. Please consider making tuition fee support available to students undertaking medicine as a second degree and remove the anomaly that Northern Ireland graduate medical students receive less support than their peers across the UK.

¹ <https://www.health-ni.gov.uk/sites/default/files/publications/health/Medical-School-Places-Review.pdf>

Should you have any queries relating to our response or if you would like to discuss it further please contact Hilary Nesbitt, senior policy executive via hnesbitt@bma.org.uk in the first instance.

Yours sincerely

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Aisling McCarthy". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

Aisling McCarthy

Chair, BMA NI medical students committee (NIMSC)