Student support funding for students ordinarily resident in Wales

Dear Sir/Madam,

On behalf of BMA Cymru Wales, I am writing to respond to the Welsh Government consultation on student support funding for students ordinarily resident in Wales.

In accepting that resources are finite, we are supportive of the general principle that the provision of an element of the support funding to students should be means-tested and therefore targeted at those who need it most. We are fully supportive of the need to widen access to medical education to those from more disadvantaged backgrounds, and we recognise that targeting an element of the funding support that is available in this manner is helpful towards achieving that aim.

We are also supportive of the principle of a shift in the funding support provided towards maintenance support. In our submission to Professor Sir Ian Diamond’s review we noted that maintenance costs are in many ways more of an immediate issue for students whilst they are studying than costs they will only have to repay subsequent to completing their degrees. We further noted that the impact of maintenance costs can be more of an issue for medical students given that courses are longer than those for other undergraduate degrees, and also because medical students have to study for a greater proportion of the year and so have less opportunities to undertake paid work during vacation periods. The intensity of medical courses, also makes it more difficult for medical students to supplement their income by undertaking some part-time work during the times of the year when they are studying.

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We were disappointed that these particular aspects relating to undergraduate medical study were not specifically picked up for consideration by the review panel, and that there were not specific recommendations in relation to funding support for medical students as a result. And whereas the Welsh Government has highlighted that the proposals it now plans to implement will mean those students who qualify for the maximum level of support will receive the equivalent of the national living wage during term time while they study, we believe this is based on students studying for around 30 weeks of the year. This is not the case for medical students who study for 48 weeks a year. These proposals will not therefore deliver the equivalent of the national living wage in the case of medical students.

We would therefore call on the Welsh Government to now give consideration to the support it will offer to medical students, so that those in receipt of the maximum level of support can similarly receiving the equivalent of the national living wage in line with those studying other undergraduate courses.

As we explained in our submission to the Diamond review itself, the current support arrangements for Welsh-domiciled medical students change during the latter years of study, and are provided by the combination of a non means-tested NHS grant, a means-tested NHS bursary and a reduced maintenance loan from Student Finance Wales. For many students, however, these different arrangements can lead to them receiving a reduced overall level of maintenance support compared to that which they will have received in earlier years. This may cause clear hardship difficulties for some given that they will still have to face the same living costs.

We are disappointed that this issue was also not picked up by the review panel. We believe it should be addressed, and consideration given to how a more consistent level of funding can be provided to medical students across the full duration of their courses.

We note that the Welsh Government has already agreed as part of its current primary care plan to pursue the reimbursement of student fees accrued during the duration of medical school where an individual decides to pursue a career in general practice. This is something we fully support, and we would advocate a similar approach also being undertaken in other areas of medicine to help in tackling growing recruitment challenges.

In conclusion, whilst we are supportive of the proposals from the Welsh Government for the implementation of the Diamond review proposals, we would also urge that the Welsh Government gives serious consideration to the issues we raise in this response and brings forward further proposals to ensure that these issues are also addressed.

Yours sincerely,

Dr Rodney Berman
Senior Policy Executive