REVIEW OF HIGHER EDUCATION FUNDING AND STUDENT FINANCE ARRANGEMENTS IN WALES

Review panel chaired by Professor Sir Ian Diamond

Response from BMA Cymru Wales

27 February 2015

INTRODUCTION

BMA Cymru Wales is pleased to provide a response to the call for evidence issued by the review panel on higher education funding and student finance which has been established by the Welsh Government and is being chaired by Professor Sir Ian Diamond.

The British Medical Association represents doctors from all branches of medicine all over the UK; and has a total membership of over 150,000 including more than 3,000 members overseas and over 19,000 medical student members.

The BMA is the largest voluntary professional association of doctors in the UK, which speaks for doctors at home and abroad. It is also an independent trade union.

BMA Cymru Wales represents some 7,000 members in Wales from every branch of the medical profession.

RESPONSE

BMA Cymru Wales does not seek, as part of this response, to provide a detailed view of all the specific questions that have been posed by the review panel in the published call for evidence document. We would, however, wish to submit the following points for the panel’s consideration:

- In the light of growing recruitment problems in Wales in certain specialties, as well as in general practice in various localities, it was felt that a key issue which should be considered by the panel is the need for initiatives to retain more medical students in Wales after they graduate. We therefore suggest that, as part of this review, consideration should be given to the possibility of some funding support being linked to such students staying on in (or returning to) Wales after
they graduate and/or the provision of specific financial incentives to encourage medical students to stay on in (or return to) Wales.

- We are also aware, however, that funding support is not the full picture in terms of encouraging more medical students both to study in Wales, or to stay on in (or return to) Wales for their training and subsequent careers. Specifically, we note that some medical trainees are leaving Wales after completing their foundation years because of a lack of what they perceive to be attractive career options in Wales in certain specialties. It therefore needs to be recognised that this also needs to be addressed – although we recognise that this may be beyond the scope of this specific review.

- We note that Scottish-domiciled students have to pay full tuition fees if attending a university in another part of the UK, whereas Welsh-domiciled students are eligible to apply for the tuition fee grant regardless of where in the UK they choose to study. However, should Wales adopt a similar approach by only offering the tuition fee grant to students studying in Wales, then some of our members felt this could be too restrictive. This would be particularly the case for Welsh-domiciled medical students given that there is only one undergraduate-entry medical school in Wales to which they can apply, compared to five in Scotland.

- Our members are of the view that the system of student finance in Wales is currently too complicated in many respects. We consider it would be helpful if it was made clearer to students what they are eligible to apply for. Initiatives should therefore be considered that are aimed at ensuring potential students in Wales are able to be adequately appraised of the support systems in place. A good example of how this can addressed is having advisors from Student Finance Wales visiting high schools and sixth-form colleges to explain how the system of student support works. We suggest this should be happening on a more consistent basis across Wales.

- Some of our members suggest that there needs to be more consideration given to maintenance costs, which in many ways are 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 are aware 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 because medical students have to study for a greater proportion of the year so have less opportunities to undertake paid work during vacation periods.

- During the latter years of study for Welsh-domiciled medical students, the support arrangements change 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 believe this should be addressed, and would urge the review panel to consider how a more consistent level of funding can therefore be provided to medical students across the full duration of their courses.

- Some of our members feel that the review panel might give consideration to looking at the possibility of a greater proportion of the support that is offered to students being means-tested so that it can be better targeted at those who are most in need of financial support. However, we also feel that careful consideration needs to be given to the extent to which parental income is taken into account in such calculations given that students do not always actually receive the contribution towards their living costs that the funding system assumes their parents will provide.

- Should it be determined that the Welsh Government might reduce the current level of financial support that is offered to Welsh-domiciled students, the panel should in our view be aware that
this would not necessarily guarantee that any funding saved would then be diverted to instead fund university courses.

- Some members feel that promises to provide more help for students from disadvantaged backgrounds in England when tuition fees were increased there to their current level have not in fact been fully delivered by English universities to the extent that was previously indicated would be the case. We would therefore be deeply concerned about the potential for this to also happen in Wales should it be recommended by the panel that a similar approach be adopted here.