



# So what now?

Supporting students through a global pandemic and beyond



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# So what now?

## Supporting students through a global pandemic and beyond

**Midwifery studies are demanding, not only academically, but financially. Long hours of study and clinical placements mean students find it difficult to work alongside their degree, and the majority of students do not receive adequate financial support. In spite of this, when the COVID-19 pandemic hit, midwifery students were quick to step in to support the maternity care workforce. They were rewarded with limited consideration and uncertainty as to their future employment.**

The Royal College of Midwives has heard the laudable commitments to improving maternity care by all four national governments. If these commitments are to be realised, we must ensure student midwives are properly supported to receive high quality training and moved quickly into employment. With that in mind, the RCM is calling on the four UK governments:

1. to ensure all newly qualified midwifery students can move seamlessly from training to employment;
2. to conduct a wholesale review of financial support for midwifery students with a view to providing maintenance grants which reflect actual need; and
3. to provide comprehensive mental health support for midwifery students.

# Before the pandemic: coming up short

**At the RCM, we knew students were struggling even before the pandemic began. In 2019, we surveyed our student membership<sup>1</sup> and found that, on top of the demands of their degree, they were struggling to make ends meet. This was impacting on their studies, and their mental health.**

A student training as a midwife will need to attend clinical placements in addition to formal classroom tuition. This means a longer academic year. In addition, during clinical placements, which include night shifts, bank holidays, weekends, case loading, and being on call, student midwives are required to support women in labour and oversee 30 to 40 births.<sup>2</sup> This means midwifery students have limited time to seek the part-time work to supplement their income.

As a result, midwifery students often depend heavily on government support. However, that support is coming up short. In 2019, 91 per cent of the students in Scotland, Wales, and Northern Ireland who responded to our survey, told us their bursary was not enough to live on, citing an average monthly deficit of £433.60.

Meanwhile, the vast majority of students in England (91%), who from 2017 have not received a bursary, and have been required to pay up to £9,250 a year in tuition fees, have had to take out maintenance loans. They now expect to graduate with an average debt totalling £41,000.

1 We ran this survey from 14 May to 30 June 2019 and received 1,197 responses, accounting for 19% of our student membership. This gives us a confidence interval of 99% with a 3% margin of error.

2 Nursing and Midwifery Council (2020) <https://www.nmc.org.uk/globalassets/sitedocuments/standards/standards-for-pre-registration-midwifery-programmes.pdf>

In addition, more than three quarters (76%) of students across the UK were relying on top-ups from family or friends, and a further 60 per cent had accessed private loans. On average students are carrying £30,108.52 of personal debt. This is higher than the average UK household debt.

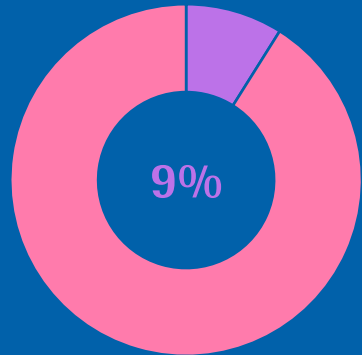
## Living this way is taking its toll.

**OVER HALF** of students strongly agreed with the statement 'I worry about paying my bills.'

**OVER TWO-THIRDS** strongly agreed with the statement 'I worry so much about money that it affects my studies.'

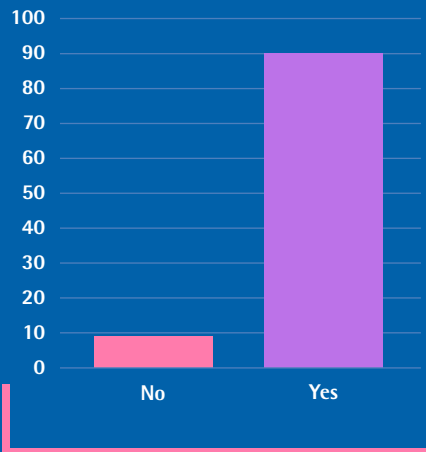
A further 80 per cent of students felt financially precarious, and over a third (34%) rated their mental health as 'poor' or 'very poor'. Finally, almost 75 per cent of students had considered or seriously considered ending their studies.

Are your bursary payments enough to live on?



■ Yes ■ No

Have you got a maintenance loan for living costs?



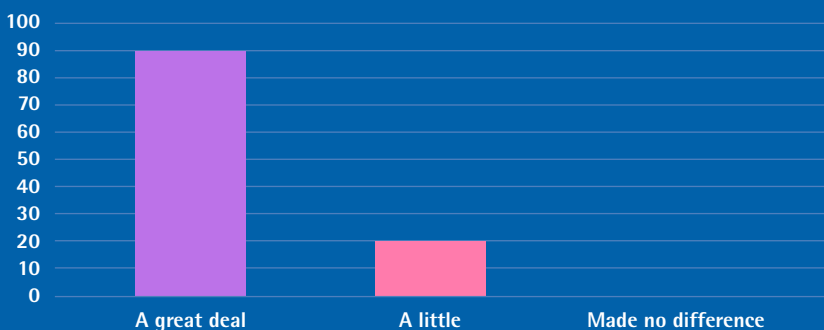
# During the pandemic: making a bad situation worse

The additional stress, uncertainty, and disruption caused by the COVID-19 pandemic have made students' lives even more difficult.

## First year students

According to an RCM survey conducted this year,<sup>3</sup> as a result of the pandemic, 97 per cent of first year students had their clinical placements ended. This means first year students will be required to navigate significant adjustments to their programme to make up the hours lost and graduate on time. In addition, even though the majority of first year students were able to continue with the academic element of their course, 80 per cent felt the pandemic had impacted on their ability to study 'a great deal'.

Thinking about the impact of the COVID-19 crisis, how much has it disrupted your studies?



3 We ran this survey from 19 June to 17 July 2020 and received 345 responses, accounting for 5% of our student membership. This gives us a confidence interval of 95% with a 5% margin of error

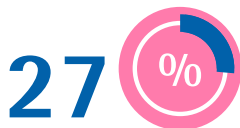
## Second and third year students

A further 50 per cent of second – and third – year students had their clinical placements ended. However, a significant proportion of these students were later deployed to support our maternity care workforce. While deployed, second- and third-year students made a real and significant contribution to maternity care. However, they faced considerable lack of clarity as to their position, and delays in receiving both contracts and pay.

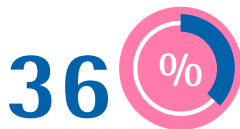
### In July:



**Second and third year students** had not been given a contract

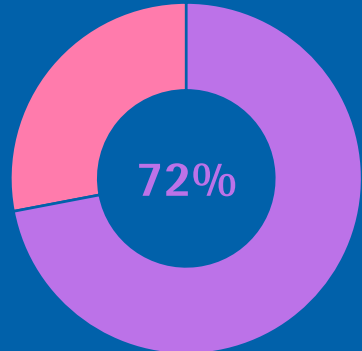


**Second and third year students** who entered the workforce had not been paid



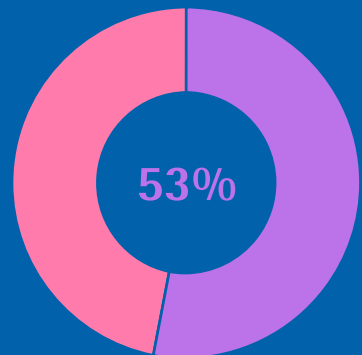
**Graduating students** had received a job offer as a newly qualified midwife

### Have you been paid yet?



■ Yes ■ No

### Have you been able to balance working with continuing to study?

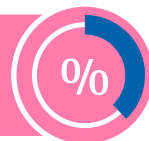


■ Yes ■ No

In addition, although the hours worked by deployed second- and third-year students were counted towards their degrees, deployed students were also required to continue with the academic element of their degree. However, 40 per cent of those students told us they did not have protected study time - as required by the NMC's emergency standards<sup>4</sup> 41 per cent did not feel they had sufficient time to prepare for exams or coursework, and almost half (47%) felt they were not able to balance working with continuing to study.

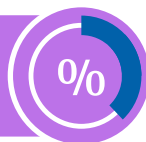
Students who told us they did not have protected study time - as required by the NMC's emergency standards

40



Students who did not feel they had sufficient time to prepare for exams or coursework

41



## All students

When discussing the impact of the pandemic on their studies, students also noted struggling due to limited access to quiet study space (82%) and limited access to peer support (76%). Many students also had restricted time due to caring responsibilities (56%). In addition, more than half (63%) students were required to shift to a partially virtual learning environment and many felt this has impacted negatively on their ability to concentrate (80%) and to engage or ask questions (64%).

This additional disruption has taken a heavy toll. A staggering 96 per cent of students reported experiencing 'mild' or 'moderate' mental health issues since the pandemic began.

<sup>4</sup> Nursing and Midwifery Council (2020) <https://www.nmc.org.uk/globalassets/sitedocuments/education-standards/emergency-standards-for-nursing-and-midwifery-education.pdf>



# After the pandemic: playing catch-up and needing support

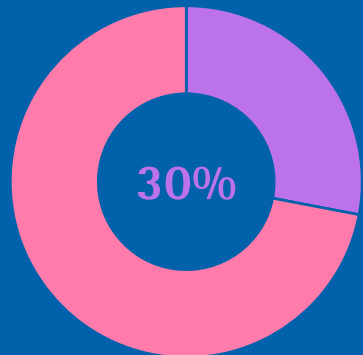
## So what is next for the student midwives who dedicated three years to their education and are looking for work or the students needing support to play catch-up in their studies?

When surveyed in July, only 4 in 10 graduating students had received a job offer. It would be a considerable injustice if after dedicating three years to their education, making substantial contributions to our maternity care system, and in many cases, accumulating heavy debts, newly qualified midwives are unable to find employment.

Further, even if the UK can avoid a second wave of COVID-19 infections, the current cohorts of students will be playing catchup for the foreseeable future. This will be especially difficult without adequate financial support.

Although the Scottish Government will provide a substantial increase to student midwives' bursaries in 2020/21; in England, Wales, and Northern Ireland, students face continuing difficulties when it comes to supporting themselves financially throughout their degree.

As a third year midwifery student  
have you received a job offer yet?



30%

Yes No

In England, the recent commitment by the Conservative Government to provide £5000 per year<sup>5</sup> to midwifery students is welcome. However, it is unlikely that this grant will be sufficient to cover students' living costs, and in any event, the grant will only assist students in the short-term. Midwifery students in England will still be required to pay or accumulate up to £27,250 in debt to cover their tuition fees. In addition, the grant will only benefit students from September 2020. As a result, the cohort of second- and third-year students who stepped up to join our maternity care workforce during the pandemic will either entirely or partially miss out on this support.

Similarly, in Wales and Northern Ireland, the bursary made available to midwifery students is limited to £4,405 and £5,164 respectively. Based on the findings of our student survey in 2019, these amounts are often insufficient to cover the living costs of Welsh and Northern Irish student midwives, leaving them so stressed about money that it impacts their studies.

To make matters worse, continued underfunding of midwifery courses means universities may be underprepared to support continuing and future midwifery students. Based on data retrieved via Freedom of Information (FOI) requests to pre-registration midwifery education providers, there is a continued downward trend in the number of midwifery teaching staff per institution.<sup>6</sup>

While our midwifery educators strive to provide high-quality education and training, the lack of staffing will not only unfairly increase educators' workload but will inevitably impact the quality of students' education. This situation is likely to worsen significantly as a result of the increase in student numbers following alternations to A-level results.

5 Up to £8000 in limited circumstances.

6 From 1 FTE member of teaching staff to every 13 students in 2014/15 to one FTE to every 17 students in 2018/19.

# So what now?

**The UK governments have made a series of laudable commitments to improving maternity services. If these commitments are to be realised, UK Governments must do all they can to ensure that NHS maternity services are futureproofed, and there are enough midwives to deliver safe high-quality care to women and their babies.**

This means ensuring universities and employers are sufficiently resourced, ensuring our trainee midwives are properly supported to receive high quality training. Given the public and private investment required to train a midwife, it is also vital that the UK governments ensure newly qualified midwives can move quickly into employment.

The RCM is calling for three commitments from the UK governments:

1. to ensure all newly qualified midwifery students can move seamlessly from training to employment;
2. to conduct a wholesale review of financial support for midwifery students with a view to providing maintenance grants which reflect actual need; and
3. to provide comprehensive mental health support for midwifery students.

## The Royal College of Midwives

The Royal College of Midwives is the voice of midwifery. We are the UK's only professional organisation and trade union led by midwives for midwives and the maternity teams which support them. The vast majority of the midwifery profession are our members. The RCM promotes midwifery, quality maternity services and professional standards. We support and represent our members individually and collectively in all four UK countries. We influence on behalf of our members and for the interests of the women and families for which they care.

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