

University top-up fees: are pharmacy students an endangered species?

The Government has proposed that university top-up fees are introduced. What effect will this have on prospective pharmacy students? Dawn Connelly investigates

STUDENTS could soon be leaving university with debts of up to £30,000, the National Union of Students warned following the announcement of the Government's higher education strategy. The White Paper states that from 2006 universities in England will be allowed to charge tuition fees of up to £3,000 per student per year. Payment of fees will be deferred until postgraduate earnings reach a certain level.

Could this affect the number of students choosing the MPharm degree course and make an impact on the pharmacy workforce?

Professor Stephen Denyer, head, School of Pharmacy and Biomolecular Sciences, University of Brighton, told *The Journal* that the University of Brighton has been surveying its students about their finances for the past 11 years. Results show that in 1992 only 40 per cent of students were taking out student loans. That figure has now risen to 89 per cent. "Only 23 per cent of these students actually agree in principle that students should take out loans for education," says Professor Denyer, "so they are doing it by necessity but not through willingness." He adds that 92 per cent of students surveyed believe that loans deter people from entering higher education.

The survey also reveals that 54 per cent of students have a term-time job and one fifth of these work for more than 16 hours per week. Of those students working, 63 per cent said that their work had a detrimental effect on their studies.

CHOICE OF UNIVERSITY AND COURSE

It is apparent from these figures that many students at Brighton University are already struggling to survive financially. It is likely that the situation at Brighton reflects the situation in other universities throughout England. So, if some universities decide to charge the maximum £3,000 per year what influence will that have on students' choice of institution and course?

Professor Denyer believes that schools of pharmacy will charge top-up fees but will be cautious about the steps they take in the first instance. "The University of Brighton takes a large proportion of students from financially disadvantaged backgrounds . . . we would be most cautious about the level of top-up fees that we introduced, although the decision may rest with the institution rather than the school."

Because the established 16 schools of pharmacy in the United Kingdom have a strong track record in pharmacy education, students will not necessarily differentiate between them in terms of the quality of courses but could differentiate in terms of the fees they will have to pay, suggests Professor

Denyer. And, he adds, the new schools of pharmacy, none of which will have produced pharmacy graduates by 2006, will be in a different position and will have to compete for students without any history of their institution's academic success. He suggests that one way of doing this would be to waive fees.

Professor Denyer predicts that there will be a period from 2006 when students will look carefully at whether a course is going to provide them with a profession, whether that profession is going to provide them with a job and whether that job is going to be well paid. "I think that the prospect of taking on an additional and larger loan is going to affect students' choice of career and university, and if pharmacy is not offering attractive and readily available career options, students will be dissuaded from choosing it." He concludes that the profession needs to advertise the fact that it can offer important and valuable careers.

Professor Sandy Florence, dean of school, School of Pharmacy, University of London, is also concerned about the effect of differential fees on the provision of pharmacy education. "I see a danger principally in the question of differential fees, particularly with the new universities that are now opening up schools of pharmacy. Will they be using pharmacy as some sort of loss leader? This would damage schools like us, Manchester and Nottingham, which have a large staff who are devoted to teaching and research. If we begin to lose students to cheaper places then this must change the nature of the provision."

A spokeswoman for the University of East Anglia, where one of the new schools of pharmacy is due to open in 2003, told *The Journal*: "The university will be looking at the White Paper in depth but no decisions have yet been made about fees on any courses."

WILL FEES ACT AS A DETERRENT?

But will top-up fees actually deter potential students? Professor Florence says that there was talk that the move to a four-year course might put people off applying but that there is no evidence that this has happened. "I think pharmacy is in a strong position because of the employment situation."

In contrast, Professor David Luscombe, head, Welsh School of Pharmacy, is concerned that many students will be discouraged from pursuing a career in pharmacy. Currently students at Cardiff University graduate with debts of around £16,000. Further increases in tuition fees will result in this figure rising to about £25,000. "The already shrinking pool of students applying for pharmacy will diminish further causing a

crisis in recruitment and threatening the viability of some of our schools," he says.

Mark Koziol, director, Provincial Pharmacy Locum Services, says that in his experience the driver for most newly qualified pharmacists to become locums is the need to pay off student debts. "Newly qualified pharmacists often ask for higher rates in order to pay off their student loans."

Dr Robert Dewdney, head, education division, Royal Pharmaceutical Society, says: "Although the Government has put off to 2006 the hike in fees that time will come around quickly. My worry is that the change will have a destabilising effect in an already changing environment. But if I were a betting man, I would wager that this will not happen — it is New Labour's poll tax."

There appears to be mixed views on whether top-up fees proposed by the Government will lead to a decrease in the number of students choosing pharmacy or whether it will simply lead to a redistribution of students according to the level of fees. Either way, there are implications for the provision of pharmacy education and any decline in the number of graduates may have serious consequences for the profession.

Current pharmacy students and trainees

Tomorrow's Pharmacist, our annual guide for students and preregistration trainees, is published this week. The cover is the same as this week's *Pfj*. The guide is sent to all preregistration trainees and schools of pharmacy. *Tomorrow's Pharmacist* carries articles that will help students cope with university life, help them decide where to spend the preregistration year and offers advice on the first job. It is supported by Lloydspharmacy.