

Welsh Government: Considering future options for the NHS Wales bursary scheme

Open consultation

Shaping the future of the NHS Wales bursary scheme

Since its launch in 2017, the current NHS Wales Bursary Scheme, managed by Health Education and Improvement Wales (HEIW) since 2018, has supported over 15,500 healthcare students to complete their studies and join the NHS workforce in Wales. That's something we're incredibly proud of.

But times have changed.

While the bursary continues to offer vital financial support, it hasn't been reviewed for some time. A key update in the 2024 to 2025 academic year allowed eligible, full-time Welsh-domiciled students to access the full amount of maintenance loan, an important step forward. However, we know we need to go further.

We're now looking ahead. What should the future NHS Wales Bursary Scheme look like?

Question 1

Are you responding as an individual, or on behalf of one or more organisations or professional bodies?

- Professional body – The Royal Pharmaceutical Society

Question 2

What is your age? (optional)

- N/A

Question 3

Which gender description most closely matches how you identify? (optional)

- N/A

Question 4

Is the gender you identify with the same as your sex registered at birth? (optional)

- N/A

Question 5

What is your ethnic group? (optional)

- N/A

Question 6

In what capacity are you responding to this survey?

- On behalf of the Royal Pharmaceutical Society, the professional leadership body for pharmacists and pharmaceutical scientists.

Question 6a

Are you currently a student studying at university?

- N/A

Question 6b

Are you Welsh-domiciled as defined above (ordinarily resident in Wales)?

- N/A

Question 6c

Are you studying in Wales?

- N/A

Question 6d

What are you studying?

- N/A

Question 6e

If you aren't currently a student studying in university, please tick one of the boxes below that best describes your interest in the consultation.

- N/A

Question 7a

If you answered 'on behalf of another individual' in Question 6e, please write in below on whose behalf you are responding.

- N/A

Question 7b

If you answered 'a healthcare or medical or dental profession' in Question 6e, what is your profession?

- N/A

Question 7c

If you answered 'on behalf of an organisation' in Section One, on whose behalf are you answering the survey?

- Royal Pharmaceutical Society

Question 8

Do you agree with this requirement to work in Wales after graduation?

- Yes. We agree with the requirement to work in Wales after graduation. This condition helps to sustain and grow the health and social care workforce in Wales and ensures that the significant public investment made through the NHS Wales bursary scheme delivers clear benefit to patients in Wales and to the wider NHS in Wales. Given that the bursary is funded from the Welsh Government budget, it is appropriate that the funding supports workforce capacity and service delivery within Wales.

Question 9

Do you agree or disagree medical and dental students should continue to be exempt from this work-in-Wales requirement?

- N/A

Question 10

Do you agree or disagree the current commissioning process is an effective way to plan and fund healthcare training in Wales?

- Pharmacy places are not currently commissioned and given that our members would not have benefited from this source of financial support under the current system, we are not in a position to provide comment.

Question 11

Do you agree or disagree that offering something instead of the NHS Wales Bursary could be a better option for attracting and retaining healthcare professional students to Wales?

- Given that our members would not have benefited from this source of financial support under the current system, we are not in a position to provide comment.

Question 12

Do you agree or disagree that all the healthcare courses listed in Annexe 1 should continue to offer the NHS Wales Bursary?

- Yes

Question 13

Do you agree or disagree that the NHS Wales Bursary should offer more flexible financial support for students to reflect these different circumstances? For example, giving students a choice between non-repayable funding while they study, or a one-off payment (like a starting-your-career incentive payment) if they commit to working in NHS Wales after graduating?

- Given that our members would not have benefited from this source of financial support under the current system, we are not in a position to provide comment.

Question 14

Do you agree or disagree it's easy to access information and advice about the bursary right now?

- Given that our members would not have benefited from this source of financial support under the current system, we are not in a position to provide comment.

Question 15

Is there anything else you'd like to tell us about the NHS Wales Bursary, including your experiences where appropriate?

The main point that we want to highlight in this response, is that the RPS believes that it is fundamentally inequitable that pharmacy students are excluded from the NHS Wales Bursary Scheme under the current system.

We recognise that the pharmacy degree has historically been classified as a “scientific degree” and that this classification has contributed to its exclusion from the bursary scheme. While of course, the scientific foundations of the MPharm degree remain essential and underpin the safe and effective use of medicines, over time the nature of pharmacy education has evolved significantly, with an increasing emphasis on clinical practice, patient-facing care and clinical placements across a range of care settings.

This evolution directly reflects the direction of travel set by Welsh Government policy over the past 10–15 years, which has consistently sought to maximise the clinical contribution of pharmacists across primary care, community pharmacy and hospital settings. Strategic documents such as *Pharmacy: Delivering a Healthier Wales*, *Presgripsiwn Newydd* and the Welsh Government-commissioned *Independent Review of Clinical Pharmacy Services in Hospitals* all emphasise the expanding clinical role of pharmacists and their importance to delivering clinical, high-quality health care for patients in Wales. Excluding pharmacy students from the bursary scheme no longer aligns with the modern clinical reality of the profession or with the policy ambition for pharmacists to play a central role in NHS clinical service delivery.

From 2026 onwards, all newly registered pharmacists will qualify as independent prescribers, making pharmacy only the third healthcare profession, after medicine and

dentistry, to graduate with prescribing responsibilities as standard. This represents a significant shift in professional responsibility and further strengthens the case for recognising pharmacy education as core NHS workforce training. Pharmacists will therefore be even better placed to contribute to NHS Wales priorities, improve access to care, and help address workforce pressures across the health system.

The exclusion of pharmacy students is also increasingly difficult to justify in the context of recent investment in pharmacy education capacity in Wales. Historically, Wales had a single provider of pharmacy education; this has now expanded to three universities, with Swansea University launching its MPharm programme in 2021 and Bangor University having welcomed its first pharmacy students in 2025.

A central driver for this expansion is the need to grow the pool of pharmacists trained in Wales to meet workforce demand, support the evolving role of the profession and multidisciplinary team working to optimise patient care. Continued exclusion from the NHS Wales Bursary Scheme risks undermining this investment by creating financial barriers that may deter applicants or reduce retention within Wales following qualification. This risk is particularly acute given the need to develop a sustainable pharmacy workforce that reflects the needs of Welsh communities, including increasing the number of pharmacists who can speak Welsh and who have undertaken parts of their education and training through the medium of Welsh.

While the Royal Pharmaceutical Society welcomes the positive direction of travel for pharmacy and pharmacy education in Wales, we believe that inclusion of pharmacy students within the NHS Wales Bursary Scheme is a necessary and vital step. Extending bursary support would help maintain momentum, support workforce growth and ensure parity with other healthcare professional groups whose education is explicitly recognised as integral to the NHS workforce.

We urge Welsh Government to address this anomaly as part of future reforms to the bursary scheme, so that pharmacy students are supported in a way that reflects their clinical role and their essential contribution to the health and care system in Wales.