

# Strengthening and enhancing UK public services in response to Covid-19

## *Boosting education capacity and support retention of key workers in hospitals, schools and local authorities*

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### Executive summary

1. This paper sets out proposals that flesh out and elaborate [Achieving stability in the higher education sector](#), the Universities UK plan published on 10 April 2020. Section C.i of the plan proposed “*targeted support to protect and sustain courses that meet the national need for key workers*” in public services and facilitate planned growth in 2020-21 and 2021-22 in areas such as nursing, healthcare, medicine, teaching and social work (p. 4).
2. The UUK plan seeks to mitigate income lost to universities through a decline in home and international student numbers via an increase in research funding and other investment streams. This complements those proposals, by considering what can be done to support public services education and workforce capacity both now and in the next 3-5 years. Some elements of this plan could be implemented UK-wide (for instance, in encouraging applications from students and investment in professional development of current key workers), but particularly attention is needed in considering some nation-specific approaches, for example the implications for the fee system in England.
3. It has been widely acknowledged that universities and their students and staff have stepped up unequivocally since the Covid-19 crisis erupted only weeks ago. They have supplied equipment, expertise and, principally in healthcare settings, vital staff now serving on the front line in our hospitals and communities across Britain. In addition, teachers in schools and colleges have shifted quickly to online learning models to support the nation’s children, and local authority social workers have ensured the most vulnerable in care homes and the community are kept safe and well.
4. This strategic response to meet the needs of society has been remarkable. Universities have worked with hospitals, schools and local authorities to effectively and efficiently make a huge difference in the national interest. This has not been without challenge, and there will be a long-lasting impact on public services and key workers as life continues to be changed by Covid-19. Universities, in partnership with government, can play a vital role in investing in public services and supporting the next generation of key workers.
5. Working together, government and universities can strengthen and enhance public services by boosting education capacity and supporting the retention of key workers in hospitals, schools and local authorities. This can be achieved with a three-pronged approach:

- Supporting students and graduates to become key workers in public services, by offering a maintenance grant of up to £10k for all students, removing any recruitment caps, and providing fee-loan forgiveness for those remaining in the relevant professions for at least 5 years.
- Strengthening and enhancing key public service higher educational capacity in UK universities by increasing the funding to the Office for Students to reflect the added costs and also creating a new Public Services in Higher Education Capital Fund to enable universities to invest in simulation equipment and other infrastructure.
- Retaining and developing key workers in public services, by increasing general staffing budgets and creating a new professional development programme focused on enhancing skills of current key workers in public services and the new NHS volunteer reserve.

## Introduction

6. The impact of Covid-19 on the public sector has been challenging to manage. It has required redeployment of staff to priority areas, new ways of working such as online teaching, and temporary arrangements from regulatory bodies, such as the decision to allow nursing students to support the workforce during the crisis prior to formal registration (which will only take place when those students return to education to complete their programmes as normal). These challenges will be long-lasting, affect the current and future key workers in the UK's hospitals, schools and local authorities.
7. In order to strengthen these vital public services, it will be necessary to ease existing staffing pressures so that these services run effectively and safely and deliver high-quality care. Working together, the government and the UK's universities can support key workers in public services to meet these challenges.
8. Training nurses, doctors, teachers and social workers takes a number of years – usually a minimum of three. Any decline in the number of people training has a long-term impact on the ability of the UK's public services to support the health and wellbeing of individuals. It will therefore be important to encourage more people to train in these areas, and to strengthen the existing workforce.

## Supporting students and graduates to become key workers in public services

9. There is a clear need to incentivise students to apply to the relevant courses and for graduates to remain in role. The government has already announced financial support for nursing students and some allied health professions students who start training in September 2020. In order to remove cost barriers and encourage more students to make applications, a maintenance grant (possibly means-tested) of up to £10,000 per annum could be extended to all those students enrolling in subjects that educate key workers in the public services from September 2020.
10. The fee system enables the government to remove a cap on the numbers training. The UUK plan recommended that from 2020, universities should limit growth in student numbers to 5% of forecast levels. Removing this limit and allowing uncapped growth in students applying to public service subjects will significantly boost the number of key workers entering hospitals, schools and local authorities over the next 3-5 years. It might also be appropriate to exempt all of these subjects from the rules that

prevent students from accessing student loan support if they already have a degree (this would mainly apply to teaching and social work, as most healthcare subjects are already exempt).

11. A system of fee-loan forgiveness for students enrolling in public service subjects from September 2020 could be considered. In order to be eligible, every student could be obliged to commit to at least five years as a key worker in the relevant profession after graduation before accessing any forgiveness. It may also be possible to apply this retrospectively to recent graduates, and to current students, particularly those in their final years who have become key workers earlier than expected.

## Strengthening and sustaining key public service higher educational capacity in UK universities

12. The expected financial pressures on universities created by Covid-19 were highlighted in the *UUK Achieving Stability in HE* plan, along with a proposal to support universities to mitigate this. Encouraging additional demand for training from students enrolling on university courses will also mitigate other financial losses, but in a targeted way that benefits local economies, communities and public services.
13. A key element of supporting training demand from students is that the cost of provision is usually higher than the level of tuition fee in England. The Office for Students currently provides additional funding to universities to support the cost of this provision. In the event of increased demand for places in these public service subjects, a corresponding increase in the funding to the Office for Students would reflect the added costs to universities, particularly in managing placement provision, which are already high and will be higher as demand is increased. This would build on the existing expertise in allocating, managing and regulating funding that rests within the Office for Students. It will be important that this additional funding reflects the full costs of provision.
14. A specific and additional component focused on public service provision in universities would have a significant positive impact on enabling these universities to grow capacity in this area, helping them protect these pivotal areas from the impact of wider institutional financial destabilisation. This would enable universities to invest in shared developments with public service providers, including for clinical skills simulation equipment and other professional simulation facilities to support high-quality training for the next generation of key workers, as well as enhancing continuous professional development of the current workforce. This could be accompanied by new arrangements between universities and healthcare trusts to encourage and facilitate the exchange of equipment when need to boost capacity in the NHS in the future.
15. This could be achieved via a new Public Services in Higher Education capital investment programme that allocates funding to universities with provision in these subjects, supporting them in retaining staff and building infrastructure to deliver high-quality training in partnership with hospitals, schools and local authorities. This will enable them to meet increased demand from students to begin training and from current key workers for ongoing professional development need to maintain expertise. An initial investment by the UK government of **£500 million** could be allocated on proportionate terms via the four funding bodies, drawing on existing expertise to ensure effective management and robust accountability, with specific obligations and conditions on universities accessing this support.
16. As provision of public service subjects is present in most universities in some form, this investment will be spread across the UK and therefore bring benefit to all communities throughout the country. This will therefore be a significant contribution to the government's 'levelling up' agenda and will support the

economic recovery after Covid-19, meeting its manifesto commitment to invest in the NHS, schools, people and towns in the UK.

## Retaining and developing key workers in public services

17. Students training in public service subjects require regular and high-quality supervision. It is a regulatory requirement for students to have access to placements for the duration of their course, and when on those placements to be supernumerary (e.g. in addition to the standard workforce). This requires high staffing levels in the relevant areas and for those staff to be properly trained to provide this supervision. This means that hospitals, schools and local authorities will be able to combine delivering high-quality services to communities while at the same time ensuring the next generation of key workers receive excellent training and education.
18. Given the expectation of long-term impacts of disruptions to staffing, it will be vital to retain current staff and incentivise their professional development, particularly those responsible for managing pre-registration trainees. The governments across the UK can support this by increasing general staffing budgets for key workers in hospitals, schools and local authorities to enable organisations to retain staff that have returned to professions in response to the Covid-19 crisis. An increase in professional development budgets from September 2020 would release training capacity within hospitals, schools and local authorities to support students entering training over the next 3 years. This provides an opportunity to upskill and develop current staff to create a clinical education workforce.
19. This funding would support investment in human resources as part of the start-up for new programmes in these areas which will be very challenging in the light of the inevitable restructuring elsewhere, and enable organisations to grow capacity rapidly in nursing and some of the allied health specialities where the current pipeline is insufficient.
20. This increased investment would also enable additional in-service short course provision to provide current key workers with new and enhanced skills that support them in new ways of working and increase opportunities for redeployment when needed. It is also a route through which the newly recruited NHS volunteer reserve force could be trained in vital skills and retained for future use within hospitals and the community.

## Annex 1: Financial implications of providing a maintenance grant and fee-loan forgiveness for public service students in England

This annex presents estimates of some of the costs involved in supporting students enrolled in public service subjects from September 2020, based on HESA Student Data from 2018-19.

Some of these costs are already accounted for as the government is re-introducing maintenance grants of up to £8,000 for nursing and some allied health students in England from September 2020 to help with living costs.

	All public service students	Medicine	Nursing	Allied Health	Social work	Teaching
Estimated costs of providing a maintenance grant of up to £10k to all students in England (UG and PG)	3656.7	486.1	1166.1	1109.2	389.7	505.7
Estimated costs of fee-loan forgiveness for undergraduate students in England	1243.4	168.9	474.9	372.7	132.8	94.0

\* all figures in £ million | \*\* RAB charge used is overall of 45%. Actual RAB charges will vary by subject but overall has been used for ease and consistency

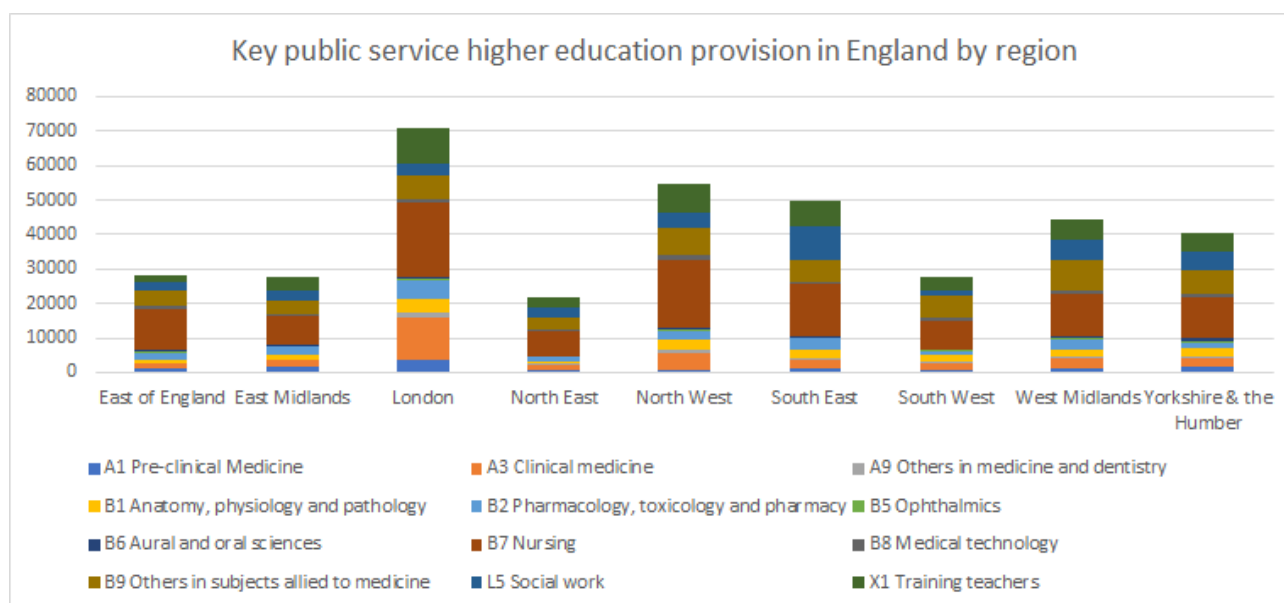
A recent House of Commons Library Briefing, [Coronavirus: implications for the higher and further sections in England](#), noted that the issue of loan write-off has already been raised by Members of Parliament. The briefing estimates costs in the region of £200-£250 million to write-off the loans for 15,000 student nurses. This figure has been calculated based on the assumption that nursing graduates will pay off 30%-35% of their student loans at the end of their 30-year loan term before they are written off by the government.

### Loan write off for fast-tracked nurses in England

Health Education England have said that around 15,000 student nurses in England have responded to a call by NHS England and taken paid placements in hospitals to assist during the coronavirus pandemic<sup>28</sup>. A group of more than 80 Labour MPs have signed a letter organised by Sarah Owen MP calling on the Government to support these student nurses by cancelling their university debts.<sup>29</sup>

There are **no official estimates of the costs of such a policy**. The cost to government would be in the form of lost loan repayments, which would depend on the lifetime income of this group of nurses and the size of their loans. Assuming they all took out maximum loans<sup>30</sup> and that they would earn somewhat less than a 'typical' graduate, the costs could be in the region of **£200-250 million** in current prices.<sup>31</sup> This would be a one-off cost to the public sector. The actual cost could be different from this range if average loans were smaller and/or repayments different from the assumptions used here.

## Annex 2: Key public service higher education provision in English universities



## Annex 3: Current key worker vacancies in public services in England by region (based on most recent available data for each profession)

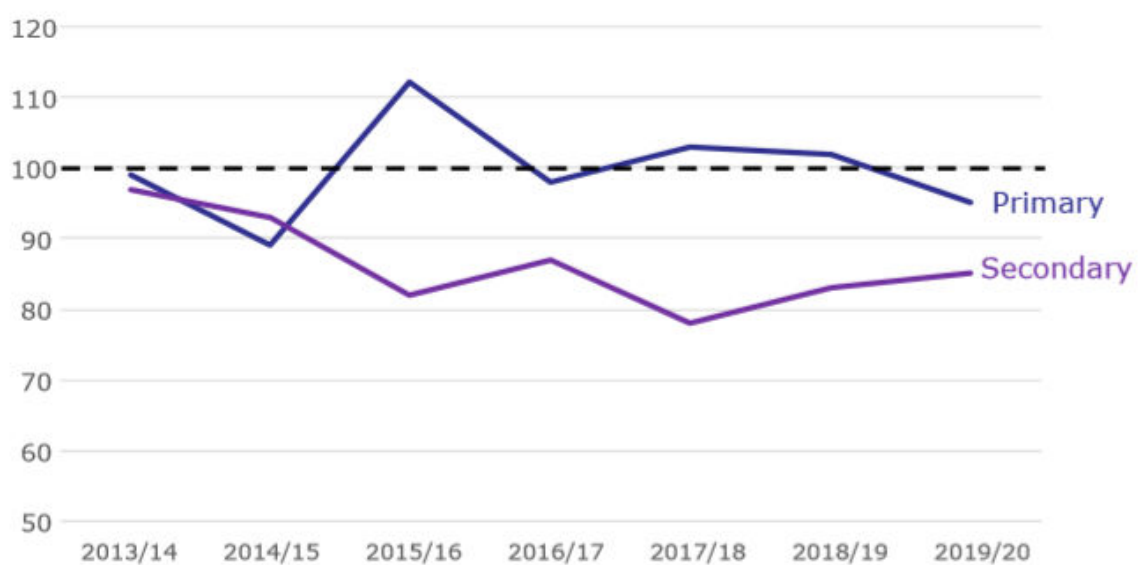
	<b>Nursing vacancies</b>	<b>Vacancy rate</b>	<b>Medical vacancies</b>	<b>Vacancy rate</b>	<b>Social Work</b>	<b>Vacancy rate</b>	<b>Teaching*</b>
East of England	3,625	10.7%	1,219	9.4%	685	19.4%	140
London	9,334	13.5%	1,677	5.9%	1,649	24.2%	154
Midlands	7,810	11.5%	1,840	8.2%	1,010	15.1%	200
North East & Yorkshire	4,729	8.2%	991	5.0%	524	8.7%	116
North West	5,056	9.2%	1,248	7.2%	738	14.6%	117
South East	5,388	11.3%	1,307	7.2%	855	16.0%	174
South West	2,843	9.0%	452	3.6%	577	17.7%	86

\*teaching vacancy rates are unavailable

#### Annex 4: Recruitment of trainee teachers in England: 2013/14 to 2019/20

Nationally teacher recruitment and retention are significant challenges. The Department for Education has missed its own secondary recruitment targets for teachers in England for the last seven (2013/14 to 2019/20).

The DfE's census figures also show that for 2019- 2020 the Government missed its primary recruitment (96% of target).



Source –

[https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/848851/ITT\\_Census\\_201920\\_Main\\_Text\\_final.pdf](https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/848851/ITT_Census_201920_Main_Text_final.pdf)