

Dental hygiene and dental therapy provision

1. The purpose of this paper is to report on current finance arrangements, and expected changes to them, for courses leading on successful completion to first registration (with the General Dental Council) as a dental hygienist or dental therapist. It recommends a change to the rate of funding for those that are supported through HEFCE or OfS grant, to reflect the findings of a recent costing study.

Background

2. Dental Hygiene and Dental Therapy (DHDT) courses were included in the courses in scope for transfer from Health Education England (HEE) commissioning to mainstream higher education (HE) funding as part of the Nursing, Midwifery and Allied Health (NMAH) funding reforms announced by the Government in November 2015¹ and applicable from September 2017. Following the consultation run by the Department of Health in spring 2016, it was announced that the transfer of DHDT programmes would be deferred to 2018-19 at the earliest². This was because 5 of the courses, representing about one third of the provision in these disciplines, are delivered by NHS trusts, not publicly funded higher education institutions (HEIs), and need more time to develop sub-contractual relationships (and in some cases validation agreements) which would enable them to be HEFCE-fundable and for their students to access higher education student support. Moreover, unlike other NMAH subjects, financial support from HEE had developed piecemeal through local funding agreements and there was no benchmark price paid by HEE for commissioned DHDT. As a result more work was needed to understand the costs involved.

Findings of Costing Study

3. In 2016, HEFCE commissioned a costing study of all NMAH disciplines in scope for the transfer, which was published in April 2017³. Dental Hygiene and Dental Therapy courses were included in the initial scope for this piece of work but drafts of the report showed DHDT costs to be outliers and HEFCE commissioned a detailed costing study focused on DHDT to gain more detailed insight into the costs of teaching and placements relating to these subjects. Key findings of the study are that the overall weighted mean unit costs of delivering DHDT courses, including both teaching and placement elements, were £24,422 at 2014-15 prices for the courses in the study. The report indicates that £18,759 was attributable to teaching, and £5,663 to placement, though it underlines the difficulties in isolating accurately placement costs from teaching costs. A near final draft of the report is available on request.
4. These costs align DHDT more closely to dentistry than other NMAH courses though of shorter duration. Typically Dental Hygiene courses are of two years' duration; Dental Therapy programmes are three years' long, rather than 5 years for a full-time dentistry course. Members of the project steering group, including the chair of Dental Schools Council, agreed with this finding, which was further confirmed by input from institutions where DHDT courses

¹ This was announced as part of the Spending Review and Autumn Statement 2015. See section 7 of the key announcements, at: <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/spending-review-and-autumn-statement-2015-key-announcements>

² The Government's consultation and its outcome are available from: <https://www.gov.uk/government/consultations/changing-how-healthcare-education-is-funded>

³ Please see: <http://www.hefce.ac.uk/pubs/rereports/year/2017/prereqcosts/>

are run alongside dentistry, and where significant sharing of resources between the provisions, including the delivery of common modules, was observed.

Recommendation

5. It is recommended that the OFS board agrees to allocate these courses to price group A for funding purposes from 2018-19. This provides high cost supplementary funding which, together with the student tuition fee, reflects the costs of delivery reported in the costing study.

Funding implications

6. Student data submitted to HEFCE's Higher Education Student's Early Statistics (HESES) survey for 2017-18 is currently undergoing data verification, but reflects that some DHDT courses are already fundable, while others are not because they are commissioned by the NHS. Decisions from Government are expected to confirm if more will transfer to the higher education finance arrangements in 2018-19 or if some or all of the NHS-funded courses will be recommissioned. These decisions depend on changes to the student support regulations.
7. The HESES data shows variable practice in how institutions currently assign this activity to price groups, with some using price group B (laboratory-based subjects) and others price group C2 (other intermediate cost subjects with a laboratory, studio or field work element). Price group A funding (currently applying to the clinical years of courses in medicine, dentistry and veterinary science) would provide approximately £10,000 per full-time equivalent student per annum, whereas the equivalent rates are approximately £1,500 for price group B and nil for price group C2. Total student numbers at HEFCE-funded students are small (approximately 250 starting such courses and 700 in all years, whether fundable by HEFCE or not). Overall the cost for the OfS in 2018-19 of assigning these courses to price group A is estimated at approximately £0.4 million in relation to courses that are already HEFCE-fundable, and a further £0.3 million in relation to courses that may transfer from NHS funding. These sums are affordable within the teaching funding that is transferring from the Department of Health as part of the wider finance reforms for NMAH courses.
8. HEE have not historically allocated a specific placement tariff to these courses. As future funding for DHDT needs to include placement funding, HEFCE has engaged with HEE and the Department of Health to discuss the complete funding package. The Department of Health and HEE have so far not confirmed the amount of funding for DHDT placements.