



UCD to provide medical degree for graduates from next year

Katherine Donnelly

UNIVERSITY College Dublin (UCD) yesterday unveiled plans for a graduate-entry medicine degree programme from next September, in what would be the biggest ever shake-up in doctor training.

The four-year course would be open to graduates with at least a 2.1 honours degree in any discipline, although they will have to sit an entrance exam that will have a considerable scientific content and an aptitude test.

The move needs the approval of the Government, via the Higher Education Authority (HEA), but Prof Bill Powderly, the head of UCD medical school, said the university was "anxious" to implement its decision in 2006.

UCD has also notified the Medical Council.

UCD's plans will be welcomed as a contribution to easing pressure on school-leavers, who this year needed between 575 and the maximum 600 points to be sure of a place in medicine, by offering an alternative route into such a career.

However, it could reduce the number of places for school-leavers.

If the Government does not lift the cap on medical student numbers, the graduate places would be taken from UCD's current allocation of 108.

If the Government does not fund the places, graduates could face annual fees of between €15,000 and €20,000, raising concerns about equality of opportunity for those less well off.

The figure is below the €23,500 charged to non-EU medical students but more than double the €7,000 paid by the Government to the universities for Irish students.

Charging fees, even to graduates, would raise concerns about access for disadvantaged groups, but UCD would offer scholarships for those who could not afford to take up places they are offered.

The University of Limerick also has advanced plans for a graduate-entry medicine programme.

This will be offered in partnership with St Georges University of London.

UCD is in discussions with the Higher Education Authority about funding for any new places and the fee to be charged to students.

It is also discussing whether or not the graduate students would displace non-EU students whose fees – at €23,500 – subsidise the education of Irish medical students.

The college currently takes 108 students from the EU (mostly from Ireland) into the medicine course each year.

The college has stated that by 2010 it intends to have a 50:50 balance of school-leavers and college graduates studying medicine.

"We have made this decision for strategic and educational reasons.

"We need to educate and train more doctors, and we need to encourage diversity by creating more entry

pathways to our medical schools," Prof Powderly said.

Dr Philip Nolan, UCD registrar and vice president of academic affairs, said the introduction of graduate entry created a second opportunity for individuals to consider a career in medicine, and added that it should attract a different type of candidate.

The UCD announcement precedes a Government decision on a major report on medical education.

This recommended graduate entry intake, and a more than doubling in the number of funded places from 305 to 725.

Education Minister Mary Hanafin, who is known to favour an expansion of places, plans to bring the proposals before Cabinet shortly.