

## Political Affairs Digest

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A regular digest of House of Commons, House of Lords, and higher education sector business.

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# Parliamentary business

## **Plans to increase the number of medical student places in England – HoL oral question**

On Monday 22 April, Baroness Merron (Labour) asked an oral question in the House of Lords on what progress has been made on plans to increase the number of medical student places in England.

Lord Evans of Rainow (Conservative), a government whip, said the government was on track to meet the NHS Long Term Workforce Plan and double the number of medical school places in England from 7,500 to 15,000 places a year by 2031-32.

Baroness Merron pointed out that the government had only committed to fund 350 additional trainee doctor places in 2025-26. She highlighted that, at the current rate, it would take over 21 years to meet the government's target of doubling places and asked where this left government's plans. Lord Evans said expansion of places is not uniform each year and will 'increase substantially in later years'. He said this 'allows for new and existing medical schools to build the physical and teaching capacity needed'.

Lord Naseby (Conservative) drew attention to the fact that only one in three sixth formers who wish to study medicine get a medical school place. He asked whether the government would revise its forecasts for expansion in light of this. Lord Evans referred back to his initial answer and said he would look into any specific cases of young people not getting a place.

You can [read a transcript](#) and [watch the session](#).

## **Minimum income thresholds for partner and spousal visas – Westminster Hall debate**

On Tuesday 23 April, there was a Westminster Hall debate to consider minimum income thresholds for partner and spousal visas. This debate was tabled by Paul Blomfield MP (Labour). While this debate largely focused on the broader impact of the partner and spousal visa changes, there were various references to impact relating to universities.

Paul Blomfield opened the debate by accusing the government of ‘hit[ting] out in all directions, looking to headlines but without regard to the consequences’ in response to rising net migration. While listing recent measures taken by government to lower net migration, he criticised ‘reviewing the graduate visa without regard to the impact on universities whose funding model has been designed by the government to be dependent on international students’.

In relation to the partner and spousal visa, he drew on examples of students in his constituency. One had met their Chinese partner while studying at university and was now unable to start their graduate life together as planned. Another was considering dropping out of their degree to fund full-time employment to meet income requirements. On the minimum income requirement, he pointed to evidence from the University of Sheffield that 557 of its researchers ‘doing vital work in the life sciences and in research for our economy’ are on a salary below the threshold.

In her contribution, Olivia Blake MP (Labour) accused the government of ‘blaming every kind of migrant for the chaos they themselves have created in the asylum and migration system and beyond, whether that is asylum seekers, social care workers, overseas graduates or now families’.

Alison Thewliss MP, the SNP spokesperson for Home Affairs, pointed out that the £38,700 minimum income threshold ‘is well above the salaries of most post-doctoral researchers, so it will undermine Scotland’s ability to compete and attract people to work in science and technology, which are the great sectors where we want people to come and innovate’. She added that this will further hinder those already impacted by Brexit. She gave an example of a researcher she met at a constituency surgery who now felt unwelcome due to government decisions. She stressed that ‘this measure is not about a group of foreigners who want to come here. This affects people who are already here’.

In his response, the Minister for Legal Migration and Delivery, Rt Hon Tom Pursglove MP, highlighted that net migration is too high and the government has implemented various ways of reducing the figure, insisting ‘the British people want decisive action, and we are delivering the change that we promised’. On the government’s commissioning of the Migration Advisory Committee (MAC) on various immigration issues including the graduate visa, he said ‘to make requests of it to consider areas of migration policy is within the gift of Ministers’ and that the role of the MAC is kept under review.

You can [read a transcript](#) and [watch the session](#).

## **Disabled students' allowance – Education Select Committee oral evidence**

On Tuesday 23 April, the Education Select Committee heard oral evidence on the disabled students' allowance.

The first panel consisted of Tara Chattaway, Head of Education, Thomas Pocklington Trust; Lesley Morrice, Chair, National Network of Assessment Centres; and Sarah Todd, Chair, National Association of Disability Practitioners. They reflected on changes to the Disabled Students' Allowance (DSA) delivery model, the use of assessment centres and their quality, university provision of disability services, immediate issues and consultation with stakeholders. Their evidence illustrated that the DSA system was complex and students were poorly informed, assessment centres varied in quality and the length of the process meant students had started their studies without support.

The second panel consisted of Laura Blackman, Managing Director of Education Programmes, Capita and Glenn Tookey, Managing Director, Study Tech. They spoke on Students Loans Company (SLC) contracts and KPIs within them, the assessment process, resources, staff training, contract income, student complaints procedures and communication with stakeholders. Both said they have worked closely with universities, stakeholder groups and third sector disability organisations.

The third panel consisted of Baroness Barran MBE, Minister for School System and Student Finance, Department for Education (DfE); Anne Rimmer, Deputy Director Student Funding Policy and Student Loans Company Sponsorship, DfE; and Chris Larmer, CEO, Student Loans Company. Their evidence covered the rationale for changing the DSA system, performance metrics, contract awards, supplier insolvency, alternative models that were considered, working with stakeholders, accountability, market pricing, funding and non-medical help provided by the DSA.

On the role of universities, Anne Rimmer said universities had an obligation under the Equality Act to provide support to students, but the DSA was there to address specific costs that students faced as a result of their disability. DfE's call for evidence was to understand the student experience in 2024 and make sure policy reflected that. Baroness Barran said DSA was a student right and universities could not 'opt-out', although they could decide to provide more.

[A transcript will be available here](#) and you can [watch the session](#).

## **Skills for the Future: Apprenticeships and Training – HoL Industry and Regulators Committee oral evidence**

On Tuesday 23 April, the Former Minister for Skills, Apprenticeships and Universities, Rt Hon Robert Halfon MP, gave oral evidence on apprenticeships and training to the House of Lords Industry and Regulators Committee.

In his evidence, Robert Halfon MP criticised what he saw as a culture in the UK of academics being seen as much more valued than vocational and technical education. He condemned an obsession with Oxbridge and Russell Group universities when other universities and colleges also produced good outcomes and were beacons of social justice. He said there is a false divide between knowledge and skills and degree apprenticeships are important in increasing the prestige of vocational qualifications.

The former Minister said he did not understand the reason schools only looked at Russell Group universities as their metric for successful student outcomes as there were many other vocational universities which did well and provided good courses for students. He conceded that the Russell Group metric had been introduced by a Conservative Government but he believed the metric was wrong. He used the University of St Andrews as an example of a university that was not a Russell Group so not included in schools' measure of success and emphasised the measure should be the best universities with the best outcomes for students.

[A transcript will be available here](#) and you can [watch the session](#).

## **Misogyny in music – Women and Equalities Committee oral evidence**

On Wednesday 24 April, the Women and Equalities Committee heard oral evidence from David Smy, Deputy Director of Enabling Regulation at the Office for Students (OfS) in a session on misogyny in music.

On the condition of registration for higher education settings, David Smy said a [OfS consultation](#) had taken place last year and had received 216 responses. The final decisions on this would be published next month alongside the pilot prevalence survey around sexual misconduct and harassment.

On misconduct and sexual harassment, David Smy said providers would be required to have certain policies on misconduct and sexual harassment and to set out the steps they would take according to their context. If something did go wrong, OfS

would investigate and examine the effectiveness of the provider's policy. OfS had clear powers to fine providers up to £500,000 or two percent of qualifying income and investigations would usually be published. Providers were not checked systematically every single year, but it was possible OfS would carry out spot checks in future. He agreed it was important to educate people on what was and wasn't appropriate behaviour.

On the pilot prevalence survey, David Smy said the survey indicated problems with harassment and sexual misconduct within a higher education setting and outside of it. OfS would give an indication of next steps when the outcomes of the pilot were published in late May. Prevalence data was very valuable and couldn't be substituted by reporting data.

You can [read a transcript](#) and [watch the session](#).

## **Renters (Reform) Bill – remaining stages**

On Wednesday 24 April, MPs debated the Renters (Reform) Bill at Report Stage and Third reading.

The Minister for Housing, Jacob Young MP set out a series of Government amendments to the Bill which will affect student tenants in the private rental sector. These include expanding the grounds for possession for student properties (amendment 227). This will ensure that properties which are let to students, whether they are living individually, in pairs or in larger shared housing, will be vacated by the summer, as long as all the tenants on the tenancy agreement are students. Landlords will need to provide notice to the tenant at the outset of the tenancy that the ground may be used to evict them. Possession will not be possible using this ground unless written notice has been given by the landlord at the beginning of the tenancy.

New clause 15 will ensure that tenants will be unable to leave a property until they have resided in it for at least six months unless the landlord agrees otherwise. Clause 36 places a duty on the Secretary of State to produce an annual report to Parliament on the stock of residential tenancies in the private rented sector. That report will need to be provided in the five years after the Bill receives Royal Assent. Reports will include an analysis of the number, location and size of private rented sector properties.

Relevant amendments tabled by the Labour Party include Alex Sobel's (Leeds Northwest) which would end guarantor schemes. Paul Blomfield (Sheffield Central)

raised his amendment which says that designated student contracts should not start sooner than March of the year in which students will take occupation in September. This is to stop students being forced into contracts early in the academic year. Both amendments were withdrawn.

Helen Hayes' (Dulwich and West Norwood) amendment would prevent guarantors being held liable for rent after a tenant's death. The Minister said the Government have committed to looking at an exemption where a tenant dies, so that a notice can be served in the usual way.

The Bill will now move to the House of Lords.

You can [read a transcript](#) and [watch the session](#).

## **Importance of educational trips and exchanges – HoL short debate**

On Thursday 25 April, the House of Lords debated the importance of educational trips and exchanges. This debate was tabled by Baroness Coussins (Crossbench).

Baroness Coussins expressed concern for universities cutting modern languages courses and the impact that has on the supply of Modern Foreign Language (MFL) teachers. She cited evidence from the Association for Language Learning that 'University students who have spent a year abroad are more likely to gain a first or 2.1 degree and are 23% less likely to be unemployed six months after graduation, compared to people who have not spent a year abroad as part of their course, whether they are linguists or not'.

Outlining the APPG for Modern Language's six-point plan of action, Baroness Coussins called for the Turing scheme to be reviewed. She said that while the streamlined application process was welcomed, the single-year funding cycle was impractical. She suggested the easiest solution was to rejoin Erasmus+ as a non-EU associate country.

Baroness Garden of Frognal (Liberal Democrat) echoed concerns about universities closing modern languages courses and called for a return to Erasmus. She asked: 'What efforts are being made for us to rejoin Erasmus+ and what are the future prospects for the Turing scheme?' Lord Hannay of Chiswick (Crossbench) was also critical of the government's abandonment of Erasmus.

Lord Storey (Liberal Democrat) criticised the Turing Scheme's funding shortfall as hindering equal opportunities to undertake creative study and work abroad, as well

as forcing students reliant on funding to drop out due to unreliable funding timelines. He also expressed concern that fewer international students were now coming to the UK, citing Universities UK's research into the importance of international students to local economies. He also highlighted how this negatively affects universities' partnerships with other institutions in research and other educational projects.

In her response, Minister of State for the School System and Student Finance, Baroness Barran, cited statistics demonstrating the success of the Turing scheme and said the government was taking steps to address difficulties faced by universities in organising international exchanges and visits.

You can [read a transcript](#) and [watch the session](#).

You can [read the House of Lords Library briefing](#).

# Forthcoming business

## DfE – oral questions

On Monday 29 April from 2:30pm, the Secretary of State for Education, Rt Hon Gillian Keegan MP, and her ministerial colleagues will answer oral questions in the House of Commons.

Relevant tabled questions include:

- What steps her Department is taking to encourage take-up of degree-level apprenticeships. [Chris Clarkson MP, Conservative]
- What assessment she has made of the potential impact of the Plan 5 student loan repayment plan on levels of applications for university undergraduate courses. [Yasmin Qureshi MP, Labour]

You can [view a full list of tabled questions](#) and [watch the session](#).

## FCDO – oral questions

On Tuesday 30 April from 11:30am, the Minister of State for Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Affairs, Rt Hon Andrew Mitchell MP, and his ministerial colleagues will answer questions in the House of Commons.

Relevant tabled questions include:

- If he will make an assessment of the implications for his policies of the European Commission's proposal for an EU-UK youth mobility scheme. [Drew Hendry MP, SNP]

You can [view a full list of tabled questions](#) and [watch the session](#).

## Scotland – oral questions

On Wednesday 1 May from 11:30am, the Secretary of State for Scotland, Rt Hon Alister Jack MP, will answer questions in the House of Commons.

Relevant tabled questions include:

- What recent discussions he has had with Cabinet colleagues on the potential impact of the European Commission's proposal for a youth mobility scheme on young people in Scotland. [Alyn Smith MP, SNP; Anne McLaughlin MP, SNP; Richard Thomson MP, SNP]

You can [view a full list of tabled questions](#) and [watch the session](#).

### **Supporting the study of the arts and humanities in higher education – HoL oral question**

On Wednesday 1 May from approximately 3:20pm, the Earl of Clancarty (Crossbench) will ask an oral question in the House of Lords on supporting the study of the arts and humanities in higher education.

You can [watch the session](#).

# Written Questions

## Students: Grants

**Rosie Duffield MP (Labour):** To ask the Secretary of State for Education, whether she has made an assessment of the potential merits of introducing non-repayable maintenance grants for higher education students from the least advantaged backgrounds. [UIN 22095]

**Luke Hall MP (Conservative):** The government believes that income contingent student loans are a fair and sensible way of financing higher education (HE). It is only right that those who benefit from the system should make a fair contribution to its costs. The government have continued to increase maximum loans and grants for living and other costs for undergraduate and postgraduate students each year, with a 2.8% increase for the 2023/24 academic year and a further 2.5% increase announced for 2024/25.

In addition, the government have frozen maximum tuition fees for the 2023/24 and 2024/25 academic years. By 2024/25, maximum fees will have been frozen for seven successive years. The department believe that the current fee freeze achieves the best balance between ensuring that the system remains financially sustainable, offering good value for the taxpayer, and reducing debt levels for students in real terms.

The government understands the pressures people have been facing with the cost of living and has taken action to help. The government have already made £276 million of student premium and mental health funding available for the 2023/24 academic year to support successful outcomes for students including disadvantaged students.

The government have also made a further £10 million of support available to help student mental health and hardship funding for the 2023/24 academic year. This funding will complement the help universities are providing through their own bursary, scholarship and hardship support schemes. For the 2024/25 financial year, the government have increased the Student Premium (full-time, part-time, and disabled premium) by £5 million to reflect high demand for hardship support. Further details of this allocation for the academic year 2024/25 will be announced by the Office for Students in the summer.

Overall, support to households to help with the high cost of living is worth £108 billion over 2022/23 to 2024/25, which is an average of £3,800 per UK household.

The government believes this will have eased the pressure on family budgets, which will in turn enable many families to provide additional support to their children in HE to help them meet increased living costs.

## **Academic Freedom**

**Paul Blomfield MP (Labour):** To ask the Secretary of State for Education, pursuant to the Answer of 21 March 2024 to Question 17725 on Academic Freedom, whether she has had recent discussions with the Office for Students on whether (a) higher education institutions and (b) students' unions will have enough time to implement the guidance on securing free speech within the law before those obligations enter into force. [UIN 20287]

**David Johnston MP (Conservative):** My right hon. Friend, the Member for East Sussex, and former Minister for Children, Families and Wellbeing with responsibility for freedom of speech in the department, met with Professor Arif Ahmed in 2023 following his appointment, and discussed plans for implementation of the Higher Education (Freedom of Speech) Act (the Act) over the next two years. I also met with Arif Ahmed on 16 January 2024. The intention has always been for the Office for Students (OfS) to publish any guidance within good time of the Act coming into force to allow the sector sufficient time to consider it. The expectation expressed was that any guidance pertaining to the provisions that come into force on 1 August 2024 would be published by summer 2024, giving the sector the summer period to implement it into their practices.

The department understands that the OfS continues to work towards these timelines as set out on their website here: <https://www.officeforstudents.org.uk/advice-and-guidance/quality-and-standards/freedom-of-speech/changes-to-regulation/>, although precise timings are a matter for the OfS.

A draft version of the guidance that the OfS intend to issue following consultation has already been published for the sector to consider here: <https://www.officeforstudents.org.uk/media/fsvjdjrh/regulatory-advice-24-guidance-related-to-freedom-of-speech.pdf>.

## Graduates: Visas

**Kim Johnson MP (Labour):** To ask the Secretary of State for Business and Trade, what assessment her Department has made of the potential impact of changes to the graduate visa route on export earnings. [UIN 21367]

**Greg Hands MP (Conservative):** The Government remains committed to sustainable growth in student numbers and the International Education Strategy ambition to host 600,000 international students a year. The Department for Business and Trade is aware of the potential impact of any changes to the Graduate Route visa via assessments made by stakeholders such as Universities UK. To that end, HMG's International Education Champion, Sir Steve Smith, is advising the Migration Advisory Committee's review of the Graduate Route.

## Research: Public Sector

**Chi Onwurah MP (Labour):** To ask the Secretary of State for Science, Innovation and Technology, what steps his Department is taking to help improve the performance of public sector research establishments. [UIN 22307]

**Andrew Griffith MP (Conservative):** Public sector research establishments are diverse organisations that deliver science and research for public good, often playing a vital role in critical infrastructure and public safety. The Government's response, published in November 2023, to the Independent Review of the UK's Research, Development and Innovation Organisational Landscape sets out ambitious commitments to support PSREs to maximise their capabilities and performance. Commitments include raising awareness of PSREs, reducing barriers for collaborative working across PSREs and understanding challenges within recruitment and retention for PSREs. This work is underway, and progress will be reported through the Science and Technology Framework implementation plans.

## Research: Overseas Investment

**Chi Onwurah MP (Labour):** To ask the Secretary of State for Science, Innovation and Technology, what steps her Department is taking to help incentive overseas investment in research and development businesses based in the UK. [UIN 22308]

**Andrew Griffith MP (Conservative):** The UK is a highly attractive destination for inward investment in R&D with a world-class research and skills base. Foreign direct

investors have invested over £2 trillion in the UK, the UK's FDI stock has more than doubled over the last 10 years showing the confidence multinationals have in the UK as place to do business (ONS).

Through the Science and Technology framework my department is working to improve all aspects of the R&D ecosystem in the UK to support both domestic and international businesses to invest in R&D.

## **Research: Foreign Investment in UK**

**Chi Onwurah MP (Labour):** To ask the Secretary of State for Science, Innovation and Technology, which Department is responsible for foreign direct investment into research and development in the UK. [UIN 21659]

**Andrew Griffith MP (Conservative):** The Department for Business and Trade (DBT) is responsible for the promotion and facilitation for foreign direct investment (FDI). DSIT works closely with DBT to promote global collaboration and investment opportunities in R&D.

FDI is a key source of R&D funding, accounting for 14% of UK R&D investment. Our collaborative approach resulted in the successful 2023 Global Investment Summit, securing over £29 billion, including investments in AI, life sciences and quantum.

## **Universities: Finance**

**Caroline Lucas MP (Green):** To ask the Secretary of State for Education, what steps she is taking to ensure that funding allocated to universities enables institutions to mitigate losses incurred from the decline in international student recruitment. [UIN 20960]

**Luke Hall MP (Conservative):** The department considers it important that it has a sustainable system to support students and support higher education (HE), that is responsive to the needs of labour markets and the wider economy and is fair to students and fair to taxpayers. In 2021/22, the total income of the HE sector in England was £40.8 billion, which was up from £28 billion in 2014/15. Of the £40.8 billion, approximately £16 billion was provided by government. This is on top of the department's £1.3 billion capital investment for teaching and research over the current Spending Review period.

Through the Strategic Priorities Grant, the department is investing hundreds of millions of pounds in additional funding over the three-year period from the 2022/23 to 2024/25 financial years to support high-quality teaching and facilities. This includes the largest increase in government funding for the HE sector to support students and teaching in over a decade. In addition, the department has provided £450 million of capital funding across the 2022/23 to 2024/25 financial years to allow HE providers to invest in a greater range of projects that will deliver better facilities for students.

With our world-class universities, the government fully expects the UK to continue to be a major destination of choice for international students. The department will continue to work closely with the Home Office on the student visa system and on how it impacts international students.

Longer-term funding plans for the HE sector will be set out at the next multi-year Spending Review, in line with the approach to long-term public spending commitments across government.

## **Visas: Graduates**

**Caroline Lucas MP (Green):** To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department, what assessment he has made of the impact of the (a) removal of the ability of students on taught masters courses to bring dependants and (b) increase in (i) visa and (ii) Immigration Health Surcharge fees on levels of demand for the Graduate visa. [UIN 20961]

**Tom Pursglove MP (Conservative):** An Impact Assessment has been prepared to accompany the dependant changes to the Student route, announced in May 2023, which came into force in January 2024. The Impact Assessment will be published in due course.

Impact assessments estimating the impacts of increasing visa fees and the Immigration Health Surcharge were published alongside the explanatory material for the changes. These can be found at [The Immigration and Nationality \(Fees\) \(Amendment\) \(No. 2\) Regulations 2023 - Impact Assessment](#) and [The Immigration \(Health Charge\) \(Amendment\) Order 2023 - Impact Assessment](#).

## Universities: Overseas Students

**Marsha De Cordova MP (Labour):** To ask the Secretary of State for Education, if she will make an assessment of the potential impact of trends in the number of enrolments of international students on the finances of universities. [UIN 21395]

**Luke Hall MP (Conservative):** The government seeks to ensure that there is a fair and robust migration policy, whilst maintaining the UK's place as a top destination for the best and brightest students from around the world. The department remains committed to the ambitions set out in the government's International Education Strategy to host 600,000 international students per year and to increase the value of our education exports to £35 billion per year, both by 2030.

The department expects the UK to remain a highly attractive study destination. The UK has four universities in the top ten, and 17 in the top 100, worldwide. The UK has a highly sought after higher education experience, which is respected by students across the globe. The department is hugely proud to have met its international student recruitment ambition two years running.

However, the level of legal migration remains too high. As a result, on 4 December 2023, the government announced a new package of measures to reduce net migration and curb abuse and exploitation of the country's immigration system.

The Office for Students (OfS), the independent regulator of the higher education sector in England, continues to work closely with the Home Office, Department for Business and Trade, and other governmental departments to assess the impact of these changes on higher education providers.

Our universities are autonomous institutions responsible for managing their own budgets. The department also works closely with the OfS to understand the evolving landscape, including on risks relating to international students.

## Students: Finance

**Daniel Zeichner MP (Labour):** To ask the Secretary of State for Education, if her Department will review and amend the criteria for student finance applications based on compelling personal reasons to ensure they offer appropriate flexibility where students experience unavoidable delays beyond a single academic year in completing their course of study. [UIN 21058]

**Luke Hall MP (Conservative):** Generally, standard entitlement to fee support on full time courses will be available for the duration of the course, plus one extra year if needed.

If a student needs to repeat a year of study due to compelling personal reasons (CPR), they may be entitled to an additional year of tuition fee funding, in addition to their standard entitlement. Only one such year can be awarded at a time. However, if the student fails the repeat year and Student Finance England (SFE) determines that the CPR criteria have been met, a further CPR year may be awarded.

Additionally, the regulations allow a current system student, who did not complete their previous, most recent course due to CPR to access fee support for one additional year. This fee support for an additional year will be provided in respect to the first year that the student takes of the current course. Provided that it was the most recent course that the student withdrew from for CPR, it does not matter how long ago they withdrew from that course.

The decision to award fee support due to CPR is for SFE to make based on the evidence provided and the individual merits of each case.

## **UK Research and Innovation: Publications**

**Andrew Rosindell MP (Conservative):** To ask the Secretary of State for Science, Innovation and Technology, whether her Department has made a recent assessment of the effectiveness of funding provided by UK Research and Investment for research papers. [UIN 21593]

**Andrew Griffith MP (Conservative):** UKRI is the national funding agency that invests in and facilitates research and innovation activities across the United Kingdom. Research papers are a key means of communicating the results of research and innovation activities contributing to the body of knowledge across different research areas.

Every £1 of public R&D funding leverages around £2 of additional private sector investment. The UK is a leader in science and research. With less than one per cent of the world's population, the UK accounts for 6.3% of the world's academic publications, and 13.4% of the most highly cited research publications.

## Artificial Intelligence: Training

**Andrew Rosindell MP (Conservative):** To ask the Secretary of State for Education, what steps she is taking to improve access to artificial intelligence training. [UIN 21931]

**Damian Hinds MP (Conservative):** The department is committed to creating a world-leading skills system which is employer-focused, high-quality and fit for the future.

The department will continue its work to ensure that the education system is able to adapt to deliver upskilling and to provide the skills that learners need for the workplaces of the future, including jobs that will be impacted by, or require the use of, artificial intelligence (AI).

World class T Levels are boosting access to high-quality technical education for thousands of young people and creating a skilled workforce for the future. 18 T Levels are available in a range of in-demand subject areas, including T Levels in digital subjects, which have been designed by employers and will help to equip students with the skills and knowledge required for great careers in the digital industry.

Employers have designed over 30 high-quality apprenticeships in digital occupations, including Level 7 Artificial Intelligence Data Specialist, which will provide cutting edge skills in AI. Since it was introduced in May 2020, starts in this standard have grown from 100 in the 2020/21 academic year to 350 in the 2022/23 academic year.

The Institute for Apprenticeships and Technical Education (IfATE) are revising the Level 7 Artificial Intelligence Data Specialist standard this year to ensure it meets employers' needs. They have also developed Level 5 in Data Engineering and are currently developing Level 6 Machine Learning Engineer. These standards include high levels of content regarding the application and use of AI.

IfATE are also hosting workshops with a range of stakeholders to discuss the impact of AI on skills requirement across the economy and will be updating the Digital Skills and Characteristics Framework with AI-related content when it is revised next year. This will ensure all employers are thinking about the use and impact of AI when developing or revising occupational standards.

Skills Bootcamps are delivering skills training for the digital sector in 2024/25 in each English region. There are also online Skills Bootcamps in AI Marketing and Content Creation and AI and Machine Learning.

Higher Technical Qualifications (HTQs) provide the skills needed for a range of specialist digital occupations, such as cyber security technologist and software developer. There are 56 digital HTQs currently approved for teaching and a further ten approved for teaching from September 2024. HTQs provide a range of opportunities and pathways to build up the skills needed for AI-related roles.

In higher education, the department is working with the Department for Science, Innovation and Technology to deliver new postgraduate AI and data science conversion courses to boost skills and diversity in AI jobs. The government is also investing £117 million in doctoral training for AI researchers.

In 2023, the department's Unit for Future Skills (UFS) developed a Science and Technology Jobs and Skills Dashboard to understand the supply and demand of science, technology, engineering, and mathematics skills to develop critical technologies like AI and quantum. This data will support improved access to relevant training.

The UFS has also undertaken analysis which attempts to quantify the impact of AI on the UK job market. It shows the occupations, sectors and geographic areas expected to be most affected by AI and large language models, as well as the training routes that typically lead to these highly affected jobs.

Digital and computing skills will play an important role for individuals developing and using AI in the future workforce. The department is harnessing government and external expertise through the Digital and Computing Skills Education Taskforce to increase the number of people taking digital and computing qualifications and attract a diverse range of individuals into digital jobs.

## **Teachers: Recruitment**

**Matt Western MP (Labour):** To ask the Secretary of State for Education, what assessment she has made of the potential impact of trends in the level of funding for subject knowledge enhancement programmes for (a) primary maths, (b) design and technology, (c) English, (d) biology and (e) religious education on the future recruitment of student teachers in those subjects. [UIN 22351]

**Damian Hinds MP (Conservative):** The department reviews all policies, including subject knowledge enhancement (SKE) courses, on a regular basis to adapt its approach to attracting new teachers where needed and to ensure that interventions

are focused where they will have the most positive impact for children and young people.

When reviewing the SKE package for the remainder of the 2023/24 academic year, factors including teacher supply needs, the volume of SKE participants associated with each subject and the relative recruitment to Initial Teacher Training (ITT) were all taken into account to ensure that the department is targeting funding where it is needed most.

The department remains committed to recruiting the teachers it needs. The ITT financial incentives package for the 2024/25 recruitment cycle is worth up to £196 million, which is a £15 million increase on the last cycle. Tax free ITT bursaries continue to be available in design and technology, English, biology and religious education for ITT 2024. The department will continue to review the SKE programme on a regular basis to ensure that its funding is targeted as effectively as possible.

## **Universities: Freedom of Expression**

**Nadia Whittome MP (Labour):** To ask the Secretary of State for Education, what steps she is taking to ensure that universities uphold the right to freedom of expression for students campaigning on matters relating to the (a) war in Gaza and (b) rights of Palestinians. [UIN 23081]

**David Johnston MP (Conservative):** The right to freedom of speech, freedom of expression and academic freedom in higher education (HE) is one this government takes very seriously, and one that it has legislated to further protect.

Universities should be places where academics, students and visiting speakers can express a diverse range of views without fear of repercussion. The Higher Education (Freedom of Speech) Act received Royal Assent on 11 May 2023 and is now an Act of Parliament. The main provisions in the Act will come into force on 1 August 2024.

The Act will strengthen HE providers' duties to secure freedom of speech and will create a new duty to promote the importance of freedom of speech. The Act will also extend the duties to secure freedom of speech to students' unions and will establish new routes of redress if the duties are breached.

It is important to note that the Act only covers speech that is within the law. The right to freedom of speech is not an absolute right and it does not include the right to harass others or incite them to violence or terrorism. Encouraging terrorism and inviting support for a proscribed terrorist organisation are criminal offences, and HE

providers should not provide a platform for these offences to be committed. In addition, providers should be very clear that any antisemitic abuse or harassment will not be tolerated.

## **Office for Students: Finance**

**Daniel Zeichner MP (Labour):** To ask the Secretary of State for Education, how much additional Strategic Priorities Grant recurrent funding was allocated to the Office for Students between financial years (a) 2022-23 and (b) 2024-25. [UIN 22316]

**Luke Hall MP (Conservative):** The Strategic Priorities Grant (SPG) is funding supplied by the government on an annual basis to support teaching and students in higher education (HE), which includes funding for subjects that are expensive to deliver, such as science and engineering, students at risk of discontinuing their studies, and world-leading specialist providers. The department is investing hundreds of millions of pounds in additional funding over the three-year period from 2022/23 to 2024/25 to support high quality teaching and facilities, including in science and engineering, subjects that support the NHS, and degree apprenticeships. This includes the largest increase in government funding for the HE sector to support students and teaching in over a decade.

In the 2022/23 financial year, the total recurrent SPG funding was £1,397 million. This was increased to £1,454 million for the 2023/24 financial year. The department has recently provided a budget of £1,456 million in recurrent SPG for the 2024/25 financial year.

## **Home Office: Visas: Graduates**

**Philippa Whitford MP (SNP):** To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department, if he will make an assessment of the implications for his policies of the letter from the Chair of the Migration Advisory Committee of 12 March 2024 on the timescales for its review of the graduate route. [UIN 22959]

**Tom Pursglove MP (Conservative):** It is important that we have clarity on the use of the Graduate route in a timely manner, which is why we asked the Migration Advisory Committee (MAC) to carry out a rapid review. We will consider the evidence put forward by the MAC very closely.

# Sector News

## **AGCAS survey sheds light on international graduates' employment struggles**

On Friday 19 April, the Association of Graduate Careers Advisory Services (AGCAS) published findings from a survey of AGCAS members which shed light on the current recruitment environment for international students and graduates.

The survey found:

- 72% of careers professionals are reporting that Graduate route visa holders are having their applications refused by UK employers.
- 75% of respondents reported that employers are refusing to offer Skilled Worker sponsorship to international students and graduates.
- 70% reported recruitment pauses from employers.
- Half reported that these trends are happening due to the changes to visa requirements and the MAC review.
- 70% of the international students and graduates seeking employment, who are speaking to their university careers team, are now considering alternative employment options outside of the UK.
- Of those looking at further study, 56% are looking outside the UK for their next course.
- 51% of the employers who are speaking to university careers services are requesting advice and support on their recruitment practices, from their university contacts.
- 77% of careers and employer engagement professionals reported that employers have a lack of awareness on visa and immigration routes.

You can [read the full findings](#).

## **UK immigration policy impact on Welsh universities – UW briefing**

On Monday 22 April, Universities Wales published a briefing on the impact of UK immigration policy on Welsh universities.

The briefing note covers:

1. International researchers working in Welsh universities.
2. Impact of changes to the UK immigration system.
3. Continued role of international migration.
4. Impact of Brexit.
5. Promoting Wales overseas.

You can [read the full briefing](#).

## **Income from startups, spinouts and intellectual property for London universities in 2022-23 – London Higher briefing note**

On Tuesday 23 April, London Higher published a briefing note analysing HESA data on British higher education institutions' (HEIs) income from a variety of streams related to startups, spinouts and intellectual property in the 2022-23 academic year.

The analysis shows:

- Small and large institutions, as well as specialist and non-specialist institutions, all demonstrated significant capacity to generate income from these types of ventures.
- The intellectual property income for London institutions is led by the Institute of Cancer Research (ICR).
- The top four UK higher education institutions with a total income of more than £100,000 from combined intellectual spin-off properties are London HEIs.

You can [read the full briefing note](#).

## **Student loans system wide open to fraud with risks to students and taxpayers – PAC report**

On Wednesday 24 April, the Public Accounts Committee (PAC) published a report warning of a lack of transparency about student outcomes and teaching quality from franchised providers.

Sir Geoffrey Clifton-Brown MP, Deputy Chair of the Committee, said:

A back door into the student loan system for organised fraudsters has been left hanging wide open here by the lack of oversight by government. Fraud involving franchised providers now makes up a little over half of all fraud identified by the Student Loans Company. Our Committee’s scrutiny has now long established that tackling fraud cannot be left to the experts, but the fight needs to be prioritised and led from the top.

These issues must be addressed with some urgency, as the use of franchised providers only looks set to grow. Indeed, concerning the franchising out of education seems to be viewed by some providers as a way of underpinning their finances. The risk to the taxpayer from unchecked fraud is clear, but the systemic risks to the quality of education provided to students must also be taken in hand. Shockingly, up to 30% is retained from tuition fees by lead providers under the franchise system without students necessarily knowing it’s happening. We hope the recommendations in our report help the Government ensure transparency and robust oversight of the whole sector.

You can [read the full report](#).

## **‘Dropouts or stopouts or comebackers or potential completers?’: Non-continuation of students in the UK – HEPI policy note**

On Thursday 25 April, the Higher Education Policy Institute (HEPI) published a policy note on student non-continuation rates.

The report includes the following policy recommendations for reducing non-continuation further:

1. Providing **better information for applicants** so that there is a better match between the student experience and prior expectations;

2. Putting **more focus on students' living costs**, reversing the recent declines in the real value of maintenance support;
3. Making **clever use of big data**, enabling the provision of more personalised support for at-risk students;
4. Responding at an institutional level both to the existing evidence base on non-continuation and to bespoke information gathered through **structured exit interviews** of students who depart before their course of study ends; and
5. Making **greater use of staging qualifications**, making it easier for students who do not complete their whole original target qualification to obtain some academic credits, which can then be used in the labour market or upon returning to study.

You can [read the full report](#).

## **Higher Education Entrants and Qualifiers by their Level 2 and 3 Attainment – DfE data**

On Thursday 25 April, the Department for Education (DfE) released an ad hoc statistics publication presents a time-series of English-domiciled full time first degree entrants to UK higher education providers from 2016/17 to 2021/22 by their level 2 and 3 attainment.

Key statistics include:

- **382,605** English-domiciled full time first degree entrants to UK providers in 2021/22.
- **76.6%** of HE entrants at UK providers achieved GCSEs at CC/Grade 4 or higher or Level 2 Functional Skills in English and maths in 2021/22.
- **69.6%** of HE entrants at HEPs achieved equivalent to 'CCC' or higher at A level in 2021/22.
- **79.9%** of English-domiciled full time first degree entrants in 2017/18 completed their degree within 5 years.
- **81.9%** of HE entrants at UK providers in 2017/18 who achieved GCSEs at CC/Grade 4 or higher or Functional Skills in English and maths completed their degree in 5 years.

- **83.8%** of HE entrants at HEPs in 2017/18 who achieved equivalent to ‘CCC’ or higher at A level completed their degree in 5 years.

You can [view the data in full](#).

## **Foreign states targeting sensitive research at UK universities – MI5 roundtable**

On Thursday 25 April, Vice-chancellors from 24 institutions were briefed on the threat of hostile foreign states targeting sensitive research by MI5’s director general, Ken McCallum, and National Cybersecurity Centre (NCSC) chief, Felicity Oswald.

After the security briefing, Dowden said: “For a millennium, our universities have thrived on being open – open to ideas, open to innovation, open to being independent of government.

“This is not about erecting fences, this is about balancing evolving threats and protecting the integrity and security of our great institutions.”

Universities UK chief executive Vivienne Stern said: “For several years, [Universities UK](#) has worked with government to ensure that universities are supported and equipped to recognise and mitigate risks to national security.

“This is important and necessary, and we welcome the government’s approach to working hand in hand with us to get the mechanisms right.”

You can [read more](#).

## **Concordat for the Environmental Sustainability of Research and Innovation Practice – cross-sector concordat**

On Thursday 25 April, a new concordat was announced to ensure research and innovation continues to play a critical part in understanding how our planet is changing, while helping the sector to act responsibly to protect and promote our environment.

The aims of the concordat are to:

- **Have visible and credible leadership for environmental sustainability at all levels** within institutions and across the research and innovation sector – from

organisational leaders to individual researchers and from those funding the ideas to those delivering impact.

- **Ensure research and innovation is carried out in an environmentally sustainable way**, aligned to the science of climate change and ecology and signatories are transparent about environmental impacts of research and innovation and are open to collaboration and shared learning.
- **Establish new ways of working** so that institutions, researchers, and innovators continue to achieve a global reach and deliver world-leading impact in research and innovation using a climate conscious, low carbon approach, taking advantage of new ideas from across all disciplines, wider enterprise, and new technologies.
- **Ensure net zero or near-net zero carbon infrastructure is being used** to deliver research and innovation (with scientifically robust carbon sequestration where absolute zero carbon is not possible).
- **Support robust decisions made in resourcing** research and innovation projects and data, based on circular economy principles and life cycle costing, with the need for responsible sourcing demanded all through supply chains.
- **Promote a shift to the greater use of reusable products**, innovative developments in single use materials and to have reduced the use of fossil fuel-based products being used and disposed of by those carrying out research and innovation to only those areas where there is no viable alternative.

You can [read more](#).

## **International students in English universities – Education Committee inquiry**

On Friday 26 April, the Education Committee launched an inquiry into international students in English universities.

The inquiry will examine the changes in numbers of international students in recent years, the impact of international students on university funding and availability of places for domestic students, and whether universities are achieving an appropriate balance between international and domestic students.

The Committee will also look at recent and proposed changes to student visas and the Graduate Route to understand the impact of these changes on international student numbers, as well as the effectiveness of the Government's International Education Strategy.

[Read the call for evidence](#) for more detail about the inquiry.