Political affairs digest

A regular digest of House of Commons, House of Lords and higher education sector business. If you would like more information on parliamentary business, or advice on engaging with Parliament or a parliamentarian, please contact:

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Forthcoming Business

Westminster Hall debate – social mobility
Lucy Powell MP (Labour) has tabled an hour and a half debate on Government policies on social mobility. This will take place on Tuesday 11 July from 2.30pm.

Lords European Union Committee
Also on Tuesday 11 July, the Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union, Rt Hon David Davis MP, gives evidence to the Lords Committee. From 3.30pm.

Space Industry Bill
The Bill has its Second Reading in the House of Lords on Wednesday 12 July following oral questions at 3pm. You can see the Bill documents here.

Home Office oral questions

On Monday 3 July, Home Office ministers responded to oral questions. Shadow Immigration Minister Afzal Khan MP asked a question on the status of EU students. Brandon Lewis’ full response is below and you can read the other contributions here.

Afzal Khan: The Prime Minister’s recent remarks on the status of EU nationals were too little, too late. The Government have failed to reassure long-standing EU nationals living here and have failed to prevent the brain drain of much needed staff in high-value industries and academia, and of students. Will the Minister clarify the position of EU students studying in the UK who will be part-way through their courses when we leave the EU?

Brandon Lewis: I welcome the hon. Gentleman to his new position. This offer applies to all EU residents. If they are in this country and want to take settled status, they will be able to do that. That is an offer that will be open to everybody across the European Union, so in that sense it makes no change to the position of students.

Department of Health oral questions

On Tuesday 4 July, Health ministers responded to oral questions. There were several exchanges on medical school places and nursing bursaries, detailed below.

Sir Desmond Swayne (Conservative): If students with four As at A-level continue to find it very difficult to get into a medical degree in this country, is it any wonder that we have to import them from Europe?

Jeremy Hunt: My right hon. Friend makes a very important point. That is precisely why last year we increased the number of medical school places with, I think, the second biggest hike
in the history of the NHS—a 25% increase. We absolutely do believe that this country should be training all the doctors and nurses that we need.

**Dr Philippa Whitford (SNP):** When the Government removed the nursing bursary and introduced tuition fees, the Secretary of State said that it was being done, as he has repeated this morning, to fund 10,000 extra student nurse places. The universities are saying that no extra places have been commissioned, however, so when will we see an expansion of student nurse training?

**Jeremy Hunt:** I always welcome the hon. Lady’s forensic interest in matters south of the border, but given that Scotland has just seen its first fall in life expectancy for over 100 years, she might want to think about her own constituents. With respect to the number of nurses, we now have more than 50,000 nurses in training, and we are confident that we will deliver a big increase in the supply of nurses to the NHS.

**Dr Philippa Whitford (SNP):** We still have a nursing bursary and we have no tuition charges, so the Secretary of State may want to explain why universities claim there are no additional places. In addition, we are losing almost half of junior doctors at the end of their foundation years. What action is the Secretary of State taking to find out why?

**Jeremy Hunt:** At the heart of this is the need to open up avenues for more flexible working for both doctors and nurses. If the hon. Lady followed what we have done in England—by successfully pioneering such working, we have reduced agency spend by 19% in a year, whereas it is still going up in Scotland—she might find the NHS in Scotland has more money to spend on her own constituents.

**Mr Marcus Fysh (Conservative):** What steps are being taken to broaden routes into nursing.

**Philip Dunne:** Developing new routes into nursing is a priority for the Government. That is why we launched, as the Secretary of State set out, both the new nursing associate role and the nursing degree apprenticeship earlier this year. They will open new routes into the registered nursing profession for thousands of people from all backgrounds and allow employers to grow their own workforce from their local communities.

**Wes Streeting (Labour):** The fact is that when the Government chose to charge students record levels of tuition fees and scrap their NHS bursary, the Secretary of State and his Ministers were warned that that would lead to a fall in the number of applications, and what has happened since then? The number of applications for nursing degrees has fallen by 23%. Given that the Secretary of State has already acknowledged that we cannot continue our over-reliance on EU staff following Brexit, when will Ministers understand that the biggest challenge facing nursing recruitment is not our policy on the EU, but the Government’s own health policies?

**Philip Dunne:** The hon. Gentleman is right to draw attention to the fact that we continue to have a surplus of applicants for nursing degree courses in this country. The level of that surplus has fallen somewhat as a result of the change in funding structures. We shall have to see where it ends up, because at present universities are not recruiting directly outside the UCAS system, but we are confident that there will be more applicants than places this year by a ratio of some 2:1.
Jim Shannon (DUP): Does the Minister agree that there are opportunities for more mature students to gain access to courses easily, and that more work must be done with adult learning institutions to provide courses that allow such direct access?

Philip Dunne: The hon. Gentleman is right to point out that the more mature workforce, particularly people resuming careers later in life—perhaps, in the case of women, after they have had children—is an important source of experienced professionals, and we need to do more than we have been doing to try to encourage such people to return to the workforce.

Prime Minister's Questions

During PMQ's there was an exchange, detailed below, which referenced university tuition fees.

Anna Soubry (Conservative): When the Prime Minister and I left our comprehensive schools to go to university, we entered a privileged elite. Will she confirm that as a result of tuition fees, introduced by Labour and improved by the coalition, more young people from working class and poor backgrounds are now going to university than ever before? Some people say that there are fewer. Are they right or are they wrong?

The Prime Minister: I am very happy to join my right hon. Friend in recognising that she and I left comprehensive schools and went to universities at a time when the number of people going to university was significantly lower than it is today. I am also grateful to her for reminding the House that, actually, it was the Labour party that said it would not introduce tuition fees and then, when it got into government, introduced tuition fees. Under the current system, we are seeing more young people than ever going to university, and crucially—to address the point she raised—disadvantaged 18-year-olds are 40% more likely to go to university now than they were in 2009.

Cabinet Office oral questions

On Wednesday 5 July, Cabinet Office ministers responded to oral questions. Jo Stevens MP asked a question on student voter registration. Chris Skidmore’s full response is below and you can read the other contributions here.

Jo Stevens (Labour): If the Government are really committed to modernising the electoral register, will the Minister confirm that they will allow universities to block-register students during enrolment and re-registration, and ensure that schools and further education colleges give details of people who are approaching voting age to the electoral registration office?

Chris Skidmore: No. We do not agree with block registration. What the Government have done is to ensure, through the Higher Education and Research Act 2017, that universities
have a duty to encourage registration. We will publish ministerial guidance on the issue in 2018.

**Lords oral question – Brexit**

Baroness Ludford (Lib Dem) asked Her Majesty’s Government, in the light of their 2017 manifesto commitments, what are their criteria and specific objectives for Brexit; and how they intend to forge a deep and special partnership with individual European countries. Read the response [here](#).

**Lords oral question – curriculum fund**

Baroness McIntosh of Hudnall (Labour) asked Her Majesty’s Government when the intend to bring forward proposals to establish a curriculum fund for Britain’s leading cultural and scientific institutions, as outlined in their 2017 manifesto. Read the response [here](#).

**Commons debate – Brexit**

On Thursday 6 July, the whole House debated exiting the European Union and global trade. Several members raised the importance of the university sector in the context of Brexit. Read the contributions [here](#).

**Written answers**

**Private Education**

*Royston Smith MP (Conservative):* What information her Department holds on the proportion of privately-educated students who enter the (a) medical, (b) legal and (c) teaching professions.

*Joseph Johnson:* The information requested is not available.

**Further education: disadvantaged**

*Dan Jarvis MP (Labour):* What assessment she has made of the potential effect of increasing university tuition fees to over £9,000 a year on the number of young adults from deprived backgrounds attending university.
Joseph Johnson: The Department for Education published an equality analysis in May 2016, to cover the reforms set out in the Success as a Knowledge Economy White Paper, that were subsequently taken forward through the Higher Education and Research Act (2017). This included an assessment of the impact of allowing institutions who were successful in the Teaching Excellence Framework assessment process to increase their fees up to inflation.

The Department also published in December 2016 an Equality Analysis for the 2017/18 student finance package, which covered both the increase in fees and accompanying loan support.

These assessments concluded that this change was unlikely to significantly alter participation decisions. Tuition fees will not increase in real terms and Higher Education and publicly funded institutions will remain free at the point of access for those who are eligible, as tuition fee loans will increase to cover increased tuition fees.

A copy of the Equality Analysis – Higher Education and Research Bill (published May 2016) is available here.

A copy of the Equality Analysis for the Student Support and Fee Regulations (published December 2016) is available here.

Nurses: training

Roger Godsiff MP (Labour): For what reason the Government decided not to provide an additional 10,000 nursing degree places.

Philip Dunne: The Government remains committed to reforming nursing, midwifery and allied health pre-registration education and increasing the number of places available for students so that two in three nursing applicants are no longer turned down for a place; at the same time ensuring these students have more cash available to them while they study.

Universities and Colleges Admissions Service data show that up to March 2017 there had been around two applicants per available training place. Health Education England is confident that the National Health Service will have the required number of students it needs starting courses this year and will continue to work with the education sector to deliver these reforms successfully for the longer term.

It should also be noted that students will continue to apply for courses up to September and through clearing.

Arrangements confirming the future clinical placement commission model will be published in due course.

Justin Madders MP (Labour): What representations he has received on the number of applications to study nursing at degree level in the 2017-18 academic year.
Philip Dunne: A search of the Department’s Ministerial correspondence database has identified 34 items of correspondence received since 1 January 2017 about the number of applications to study nursing at degree level in the 2017-18 academic year. This figure represents correspondence received by the Department’s Ministerial correspondence unit only.

Gill Furniss MP (Labour): Whether the Government still plans to provide 10,000 new nursing degree places.

Philip Dunne: The Government remains committed to reforming nursing, midwifery and allied health pre-registration education and increasing the number of places available for students; at the same time ensuring these students have more cash available to them while they study.

Health Education England is confident that the National Health Service will have the required number of students it needs starting courses this year and will continue to work with the education sector to successfully deliver these reforms for the longer term.

Arrangements confirming the future clinical placement commissioning model will be published in due course.

Jonathan Ashworth MP (Labour): How many students he expects to begin (a) nursing and (b) midwifery degrees in each English university in (i) September 2017 and (ii) later entry periods for which figures are available.

Philip Dunne: The application cycle for student nurse intake in autumn 2017 is ongoing. Applicants can continue to apply until the end of June or can enter clearing following A Level results in August. The last publication from the Universities and Colleges Admissions Service (UCAS) in March 2017 showed that there were 40,560 applicants for the 23,237-commissioned nursing and midwifery courses in England. UCAS will continue to release updated information about the number of offers made by universities and acceptances from candidates with the next update covering applications to the end of June.

Jonathan Ashworth MP (Labour): How many students applied for (a) nursing and (b) midwifery degrees in each year since 2010.

Philip Dunne: These data are available here.

Liz McInnes MP (Labour) : What assessment he has made of comments by the vice-chancellors of Worcester University and of West of England University that no new money has been made available to fund the promised 10,000 new training places for nurses after the abolition of nurse bursaries; and if he will make a statement.

Philip Dunne: The Government remains committed to reforming nursing, midwifery and allied health pre-registration education and increasing the number of places available for students so that two in three nursing applicants are no longer turned down for a place; at the same time ensuring these students have more cash available to them while they study. As a result,
we expect these reforms to enable universities to create up to 10,000 additional nursing and other health professional training places by 2020.

Health Education England is confident that the National Health Service will have the required number of students it needs starting courses this year and will continue to work with the education sector to deliver these reforms successfully for the longer term.

It should also be noted that students will continue to apply for courses up to September and through clearing.

Arrangements confirming the future clinical placement model will be published in due course.

**Building: standards**

*Diana Johnson MP (Labour):* Whether his Department has conducted checks of the type carried out on residential buildings at (a) NHS hospitals, (b) schools, (c) colleges, (d) universities and (e) other public buildings.

*Alok Sharma:* We have initiated testing in priority buildings across the public sector, including hospitals, schools, colleges and universities. We are prioritising testing on buildings where people sleep overnight, which have Aluminium Composite Material (ACM) cladding and are of a certain height. Where appropriate, organisations are working with the fire and rescue service to put in place precautionary safety checks and measures. We have set up an expert panel to advise us on any immediate steps that should be taken to ensure fire safety, and we will act on those.

The role of the expert panel and the advice already given following Grenfell is set out in a note published last week [here](#).

*Neil Coyle MP (Labour):* What recent communications the Government has had with the higher education sector on fire safety inspections of student accommodation.

*Nick Gibb:* The Department has written to all Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE)-funded Higher Education Institutions and Alternative Providers of Higher Education to identify any student accommodation buildings that may require further investigation. We have requested that institutions flag any concerns immediately. We are also engaging with the sector directly and via key sector bodies including Universities UK and Guild HE.

*Harriet Harman MP (Labour):* When the last fire safety inspections were undertaken in student accommodation blocks in (a) the London Borough of Southwark and (b) London.

*Nick Gibb:* The Department does not hold information on fire inspections for any student accommodation blocks. In line with the cross-Government action following the tragic Grenfell Tower fire, the Department has written to all Higher Education Funding Councils For England (HEFCE)-funded Higher Education Institutions and Alternative Providers of Higher Education to identify any student accommodation buildings that may require further investigation. We have requested that institutions flag any concerns immediately. We are
also engaging with the sector directly and via key sector bodies including Universities UK and Guild HE.

**Degree apprenticeships**

*Angela Rayner MP (Labour)*
*Asked on: 21 June 2017:*
*To ask the Secretary of State for Education, what her policy is on teaching assistants becoming qualified teachers through a degree apprenticeship.*

**Corrected answer by Anne Milton**
*Corrected on: 04 July 2017*
*An error has been identified in the written answer given on 03 July 2017. The correct answer should have been:*

The Government is committed to building a stronger and more prosperous Britain for all. Developing an appropriate degree apprenticeship, that protects the professional status of teaching, will be an effective way of upskilling those individuals with a passion for teaching, such as teaching assistants. We will work with the sector in progressing this work, with employers at the heart of the route’s development.

The Government is developing an appropriate degree apprenticeship, that protects the professional status of teaching and will be an effective way of upskilling those individuals with a passion for teaching, such as teaching assistants. We will work with the sector in progressing this work, with employers at the heart of the route’s development.

**Freedom of information legislation**

*Chris Elmore MP (Labour):* What plans she has to end the exemption of universities from Freedom of Information legislation.

*Joseph Johnson:* The Government has no plans to amend the application of the Freedom of Information Act to universities.

**Non-continuation rates**

*Caroline Lucas MP (Green):* With reference to the Office for Fair Access report, Outcomes of access agreement monitoring for 2015-16, published on 29 April 2017, what assessment her Department has made of the growing gap in non-continuation rates between the most disadvantaged and the most disadvantaged students after the first year at university.

*Joseph Johnson:* Non-continuation rates for UK students at English Higher Education Institutions are lower than in 2009/10, including for the most disadvantaged students. Analysis by the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE) has found that students’ age, subject studied and entry qualifications account for a substantial portion of the gap between the most and least disadvantaged students. The analysis is available [here](#).
We want to continue to see reduced non-continuation rates for all students. The Higher Education and Research Act 2017 requires institutions to publish admissions and retention data by gender, ethnicity and socio-economic background, and this greater transparency will help the Higher Education sector make further progress to build on what has already been achieved. We are working closely with HEFCE and the Director of Fair Access to target resources effectively and to ensure that universities take more responsibility for widening access and retention for students from disadvantaged backgrounds, prioritising activities that demonstrate the greatest value for money.

**TEF awards**

*Lord Jopling (Conservative)*: Which higher education providers failed to attain at least a Bronze award in the Teaching Excellence Framework.

*Viscount Younger Of Leckie*: All higher education providers in the UK must meet rigorous national quality requirements for higher education. The Teaching Excellence Framework (TEF) measures excellence in addition to these requirements and is voluntary; therefore all participating providers received at least a Bronze award.

As TEF is voluntary, if a provider has no TEF award this does not necessarily signify a lack of quality, as it may have decided not to take part.

**Tertiary education review**

*Angela Rayner MP (Labour)*: What her policy is on reviewing funding across tertiary education.

*Anne Milton*: Further detail on the manifesto commitment to look at the funding of further, technical and higher education will be provided in due course.

*Angela Rayner MP (Labour)*: If her Department will publish a Green Paper on funding for tertiary education.

*Anne Milton*: Further detail on the manifesto commitment to look at the funding of further, technical and higher education will be provided in due course.

**Initial teacher training**

*Lord Addington (Lib Dem)*: What progress has been made in ensuring that those going through Initial Teacher Training have received adequate training on dealing with pupils with Special Educational Needs.

*Lord Nash*: We believe that all children and young people with special educational needs (SEN) should be supported in schools, so they achieve well in their early years, at school and in college.

The Government does not prescribe the content of initial teacher training (ITT) courses. It is for ITT providers to use their professional judgement to determine the content and structure.
of courses, but they must be designed so that teacher trainees can demonstrate that they meet all of the Teachers' Standards at the appropriate level.

The Standards set out the key elements of effective teaching and the minimum expectations for the professional practice and conduct of teachers. In order to be awarded Qualified Teacher Status, trainees must satisfy the Teachers' Standards which include a requirement that they have a clear understanding of the needs of all pupils, including those with special educational needs (SEN) and are able to use and evaluate distinctive teaching approaches to engage and support them. 'A Framework of core content for Initial Teacher Training ', published in July 2016 states that providers should ensure special educational needs and disabilities (SEND) training is integrated across the ITT programme.

Additional information on the framework can be found here. Additional information on The Teachers' Standards can be found here.

Sector News

Office for Students CEO

On Wednesday 5 July, it was announced that Nicola Dandridge CBE current Chief Executive of Universities UK will be taking up the post of Chief Executive for the Office for Students. Read the UUK press release here, and the DfE press release here.