

## 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:

### Mark Condren

020 7419 5605

[mark.condren@universitiesuk.ac.uk](mailto:mark.condren@universitiesuk.ac.uk)

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## The voice of universities

**Chief Executive**  
**Alistair Jarvis**

**Universities UK**  
Woburn House  
20 Tavistock Square  
London  
WC1H 9HQ

**telephone**  
+44(0)20 7419 4111

**twitter**  
[@universitiesuk](https://twitter.com/universitiesuk)

**email**  
[info@universitiesuk.ac.uk](mailto:info@universitiesuk.ac.uk)

**website**  
[www.universitiesuk.ac.uk](http://www.universitiesuk.ac.uk)

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## **Forthcoming business**

### **Public Accounts Committee hearing on alternative higher education providers**

From 4pm on Monday 15 January, the Public Accounts Committee will hold a one-off oral evidence **session** on alternative higher education providers. This serves as a follow-up to the committee's **inquiry** in 2015 on the same issue.

The following witnesses will take part:

- **Jonathan Slater**, Permanent Secretary, Department for Education
- **Philippa Lloyd**, Director General, Higher and Further Education, Department for Education
- **Peter Lauener**, interim Chief Executive, Student Loans Company
- **Nicola Dandridge**, Chief Executive, Office for Students

### **Scottish Affairs Committee takes oral evidence on immigration**

On Tuesday 16 January from 9.45am, the Scottish Affairs Committee will hear from a number of higher education representatives as part of its **inquiry** into immigration, with the session likely to focus on the value of international students and staff to the nation's universities and economy. A second session will feature business representatives.

The witnesses giving evidence will be:

- **Professor Andrea Nolan**, Convener of Universities Scotland and Principal of Edinburgh Napier University, Universities Scotland
- **Andrew Witty**, Director of Sector Policy, Colleges Scotland
- **Annette Bruton**, Principal, Edinburgh College
- **Alix Thom**, Workforce Engagement and Skills Manager, Oil and Gas UK
- **Scott Johnstone**, Chief Executive Officer, Scottish Life Sciences Association
- **Kirsty Ramsay**, HR Director (UK and Ireland), IQVIA

### **Lords Science and Technology Committee hearing on life sciences**

On Tuesday 16 January from 10am, the Lords Science and Technology Committee will hold another oral evidence session as part of its **inquiry** into life sciences and the industrial strategy.

The committee has announced the following witnesses:

- **Dr Mark Downs**, Chief Executive, Royal Society of Biology
- **Professor Paul Kellam**, Chair-Elect of the Policy Committee, Microbiology Society

- **Mr John Bassett**, Policy and Scientific Development Director, Institute of Food Science and Technology

### **Joint Committee on Human Rights evidence on freedom of speech in universities**

From 3.15pm on Wednesday 17 January, the Joint Committee on Human Rights will hear from further witnesses to inform its **inquiry** into freedom of speech in universities.

The witnesses will be:

- **Amatey Doku**, Vice President, National Union of Students
- **Wes Streeting MP**, former President, National Union of Students
- **Professor Alison Scott-Baumann**, SOAS University of London
- **Professor Steven Greer**, Professor of Human Rights, University of Bristol
- **Professor Jonathan Rosenhead**, Emeritus Professor of Operational Research, London School of Economics and Political Science

### **House of Lords debate on foreign languages and Brexit**

In the afternoon of Thursday 18 January, the House of Lords will hold a debate on the 'importance of modern foreign language teaching in schools and universities and the impact of the UK's withdrawal from the EU'. This debate has been called by Crossbench peer Baroness Coussins.

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### **House of Lords debate on the industrial strategy and productivity**

On Monday 8 January, the House of Lords held a debate on the 'government's industrial strategy and the case for boosting earning power and productivity across the UK with investment in the skills, businesses and infrastructure of the future.'

The Business Minister Lord Henley led this debate, with a number of peers raising the vital role which universities play in driving economic growth, increasing productivity and delivering skills training. You can read the full debate on Hansard: **here** and continued **here**.

### **Urgent question on Toby Young's appointment to the OfS board**

On Monday 8 January, the Shadow Women and Equalities Secretary asked an urgent question in the House of Commons regarding the appointment of free schools proponent Toby Young to the board of the new Office for Students (OfS).

Following the **announcement** of Toby Young's board appointment, there was significant controversy about his suitability for the role, focused particularly on past statements he has made which were widely considered to be derogatory and offensive.

Responding to the urgent question in his valedictory appearance as Universities Minister, Jo Johnson defended the appointment against criticism from both sides of the House of Commons. You can read the session in full on Hansard [here](#).

The following day, Toby Young resigned from the role, with an accompanying [blog](#) in the Spectator stating that he had done so due to his appointment becoming ‘a distraction from its [the OfS’s] vital work of broadening access to higher education and defending academic freedom.’

### **Lords oral question on Toby Young’s appointment to the OfS board**

In addition to the above, on Tuesday 9 January the Liberal Democrat Education spokesperson Lord Storey asked an oral question in the House of Lords about the procedure for appointments of members to the Office for Students (OfS) board.

The initial questions and ministerial answers are copied below, with a transcript of the full session available [here](#).

*Lord Storey:* To ask Her Majesty’s Government what processes were followed for the appointment of Board members of the Office for Students.

*Viscount Younger of Leckie:* My Lords, the Office for Students board needs members who bring a broad range of skills and experience to deliver its objectives. In the recent recruitment round, six people were appointed to the OfS board, although, following this morning’s resignation, the board stands at 14 members. Appointments to the Office for Students board were made in line with the Governance Code on Public Appointments, which, as is conventional, included open advertisement, an applications process, shortlisting and interviews.

*Lord Storey:* I am sure the Minister would agree that there is no place for cronyism in public appointments. Given that public appointments are based on Nolan principles, and the fact that somebody was appointed to this position who had posted on social media the most appalling comments, do those principles need to be strengthened?

*Viscount Younger of Leckie:* I say at the outset that this is very much a time of reflection following the resignation this morning. We will want to learn from this. It is regrettable that the offensive tweets were not picked up on or before the appointment. The Prime Minister herself made it clear that a repeat of any such language from someone within a public position would not be acceptable. There is always a balance of proportionality in undertaking due diligence. In this case, there were more than 50,000 tweets, some of which were completely abhorrent. We need to learn from this and be sure that the due diligence is improved.

## Joint Committee on Human Rights hearing on freedom of speech in universities

On Wednesday 10 January, the Joint Committee on Human Rights heard from witnesses as part of its **inquiry** into freedom of speech in universities.

The following witnesses were present:

- **Professor Sir Timothy O'Shea**, Vice-Chancellor and Principal, University of Edinburgh
- **Patrick Kilduff**, President, Edinburgh University Students' Association
- **Professor Adam Tickell**, Vice Chancellor, University of Sussex
- **Frida Gustafsson**, President, Student Union, University of Sussex
- **Baroness Valerie Amos CH**, Director, SOAS University of London

You can watch a recording of the session **here**.

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### Written questions

#### Electoral registration: students

*Andrew Gwynne:* To ask the Minister for the Cabinet Office, what plans he has to provide funds from the public purse for programmes to encourage students to register to vote before the next General Election.

*Chris Skidmore:* The government recently published the Democratic Engagement Plan that set out strategies for democratic engagement with under registered groups including students. The Plan is available **here**.

The Cabinet Office is continuing to work with the Electoral Commission, local authorities, universities, colleges and other organisations to ensure citizens have every chance to be registered. The Government is also working to enact the student registration provisions of the Higher Education and Research Act (HERA) 2017, which encourages Higher Education providers to share information with EROs' in order to encourage registration.

#### Doctors: training

*Lord Clark of Windermere:* To ask Her Majesty's Government how many undergraduates in total were enrolled in UK university training to be doctors on 1 November of (1) 2010, (2) 2011, (3) 2012, (4) 2013, (5) 2014, (6) 2015, (7) 2016, and (8) 2017; and how many new undergraduates enrolled in UK universities to train to be doctors in each year from 2010 to 2017.

*Viscount Younger of Leckie:* The Higher Education Statistics Agency collects data on students enrolled and qualifying from courses at UK Higher Education Institutions, including information on subject of study.

The **attached table** shows the numbers of enrolments in first degrees in pre-clinical and clinical medicine (as defined by the Joint Academic Coding System in each academic year, including how many were newly enrolled that year (“entrants”). Information for the 2016/17 academic year will become available on the 11 January 2018.

### **Government loan interest rates**

*Lord Morris of Aberavon:* Further to the reply by Viscount Younger of Leckie on 13 December (HL Deb, cols 1552–4), whether any Government body, other than the Student Loans Company, provides loans on which interest is charged at six per cent or more per annum

*Lord Bates:* The Government has issued many loans over the years and interest rates have varied considerably over time. Given this, details of all loans issued and the rates applied are not held centrally by HM Treasury.

### **Universities: illicit financial flows**

*Lord Chidgey:* What assessment they have made of the exposure of universities to illicit financial flows through university engagement with philanthropic sources of funding.

*Viscount Younger of Leckie:* The department has not made any assessment of illicit flows of funding to universities. However, as a result of the Higher Education and Research Act 2017, the Office for Students (OfS), as the market regulator, will act swiftly and decisively where the interest of the student and the taxpayer is at risk at any registered provider of higher education. OfS will have a range of powers that it will employ at a sector and individual provider level, as appropriate and proportionate, both to prevent fraud and to act when fraud is suspected.

### **Mature students: widening participation**

*Alex Sobel:* To ask the Secretary of State for Education, with reference to her Department's report, *Unlocking Talent, Fulfilling Potential: a plan for improving social mobility through education*, published in December 2017, Cm 9541, what funding will be allocated to support widening participation in higher education of people aged 21 and above.

*Anne Milton:* Government wants to make sure that higher education is available to all who wish to pursue it and this includes mature students. That is why, in our last guidance to the Director of Fair Access, we asked that institutions take into account the needs of older learners and make more effort to attract mature students as part of their Access Agreements. Higher Education Providers expect to spend around £860 million for 2018/19 on activity to widen participation.

In addition, the government is looking into ways of promoting and supporting a wide variety of flexible and part-time ways of learning which should have the effect of making higher education a more attractive option to mature students. For instance, we are consulting on how we make accelerated degrees more widely available. These shorter degree courses

offer various benefits to all students - including lower costs, more intensive study, and a quicker entry or return to the workplace.

We have also taken steps to help those wanting to study part-time, often a mode of study preferred by mature students, by offering financial support in the form of loans to cover fees and maintenance costs. The National Collaborative Outreach Programme (NCOP) is targeted at 18 year olds to support the government goal in doubling the proportion of young people from disadvantaged backgrounds in higher education by 2020. The NCOP targets those areas of the country where progression into higher education is both low overall and lower than expected given typical GCSE attainment rates in order to address a potential lack of aspiration among school leavers. A key element of the NCOP is the partnership between universities and schools.

### **RAB charge: part-time loans**

*Gordon Marsden:* To ask the Secretary of State for Education, with reference to table 1.9 of Autumn Budget 2017, what estimate he has made of level of Resource Accounting and Budgeting required for undergraduate part-time student loans as a result of the rise in tuition fees to £9250 and the proposed changes to the student loan repayment threshold.

*Anne Milton:* The Resource Accounting and Budgeting (RAB) charge for fee loans for part-time higher education undergraduate students in 2017/18 is estimated to be around 40%, following the decisions to increase the repayment threshold for post-2012 student loans to £25,000 from April 2018 and to freeze tuition fees in the 2018/19 academic year at the same level as in 2017/18.

The government subsidy, represented by the RAB charge, is a conscious investment in young people and the long-term skills capacity of the economy.

### **Accelerated degrees: part-time employment**

*Layla Moran:* To ask the Secretary of State for Education, with reference to Accelerated degrees: widening student choice in higher education, published on 11 December 2017, what assessment she has made of the effect of her proposals for two-year university courses on the ability of students to seek part-time employment alongside studying to fund their living costs.

*Anne Milton:* The impact of accelerated degree study on part-time working was evaluated by the Institute for Employment Studies as part of their literature review of current research on accelerated degrees. Although the authors noted concerns expressed by the NUS that accelerated study could prohibit students from part-time work, their assessment of current research data finds “no real difference in the level of part-time work undertaken during the summer period between those on accelerated programmes and those on traditional programmes”. The literature review is available [here](#).

### **Student housing**

*John Healey:* To ask the Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government, how newly built student accommodation is recorded in his Department's data set entitled Housing

supply: net additional dwellings; whether each block of such accommodation counts as one unit or as a number of units corresponding to the number of students it accommodates; what steps his Department takes to ensure consistency in applying rules about recording student and other communal accommodation as net additional dwelling; and how many student accommodation units are included in his Department's most recent estimate of the number of net additional dwellings.

*Dominic Raab:* Consistency in applying the definitions, which can be found at the following links ([Link 1](#); [Link 2](#)), is maintained by detailed guidance for local authorities who complete the data returns and through data validation and communication with the data providers.

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## **Sector news**

### **Government ministerial reshuffle**

Earlier this week, Theresa May oversaw a reshuffle of her ministerial frontbench. While this reshuffle mostly affected junior ministers, perhaps the most significant news of the day was the departure of Education Secretary Justine Greening from government.

After reporting declining a move to the Department for Work and Pensions, Justine Greening resigned and was replaced as Education Secretary by Damian Hinds. Universities and Science Minister Jo Johnson was also moved from his former role, being succeeded by Sam Gyimah, who joins the joint DfE/BEIS role from the Ministry of Justice, having previously served as Early Years and Childcare Minister.

Also of relevance to the university sector, Immigration Minister Robert Goodwill was replaced by Caroline Nokes and International Trade Minister Mark Garnier has been succeeded by Graham Stuart. You can read a full list of new ministerial appointments [here](#).

### **Committee of University Chairs consultation on senior staff pay**

On Tuesday 9 January, the Committee of University Chairs (CUC) published a new consultation on its proposed guidelines regarding senior pay in universities. These guidelines are intended to increase transparency and ensure all institutions have appropriate governance structures and processes in place around senior staff remuneration.

The deadline to submit responses is Monday 12 March 2018. You can find the proposed guidelines and information about how to respond to the consultation [here](#).