

## 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

### Public Accounts Committee hearing on the higher education market

From 4.45pm on Monday 12 March, the Public Accounts Committee will hear from a number of witnesses as part of its **short inquiry** into the higher education market in England. This one-off session is linked to a recent National Audit Office **report** on the same issue.

The witnesses will be:

- **Maddalaine Ansell**, Chief Executive, Universities Alliance
- **Amatey Doku**, Vice President (Higher Education), National Union of Students
- **Dennis Farrington**, Visiting Fellow, Oxford Centre for Higher Education Policy Studies
- **Jonathan Slater**, Permanent Secretary
- **Dr Philippa Lloyd**, Director General, Higher and Further Education, Department for Education
- **Nicola Dandridge**, Chief Executive, Office for Students

You can watch the evidence session live **here**.

### Education Committee hearing on apprenticeships and skills training

From 9.45am on Tuesday 13 March, a number of witnesses will give oral evidence to the Education Committee on its **inquiry** into the quality of apprenticeships and skills training.

The following witnesses will appear:

- **Stephen Evans**, Chief Executive, Learning and Work Institute
- **Graham Hasting-Evans**, Managing Director, NOCN
- **Neil Heslop OBE**, Chief Executive, Leonard Cheshire Disability
- **Nick Linfoord**, Editor, FE Week
- **Dr Alison Birkinshaw OBE**, President, Association of Colleges
- **Angela Middleton**, Chief Executive, MiddletonMurray
- **Simon Hawthorn**, Leadership Team, National Society of Apprentices

While the inquiry is focused on further education, issues related to higher education and degree apprenticeships are likely to feature during the evidence. The sessions can be watched **here**.

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

On Tuesday 13 March at 10am, the House of Lords Science and Technology Committee will have a hearing linked to its [inquiry](#) on life sciences and the industrial strategy.

The only witness will be Professor Tony Young PhD, National Clinical Director of Innovation at NHS England. The session can be watched [here](#).

### **Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy oral questions**

From 11.30am on Tuesday 13 March, ministers in the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy will answer questions on their work. No questions tabled are of direct relevance to universities, but topical questions may be of interest.

### **Lords oral question on adjustments to the apprenticeship levy**

In the afternoon of Tuesday 13 March, Labour peer Lord Blunkett will ask an oral question on 'making adjustments to the Apprenticeship Levy to facilitate the improved working of that programme.'

### **Ministers give evidence on the economics of tertiary education**

At 3.30pm on Tuesday 13 March, the Apprenticeship and Skills Minister Anne Milton will appear before the House of Lords Economic Affairs Committee as part of its [inquiry](#) into the economics of higher, further and technical education.

Immediately afterwards, Universities Minister Sam Gyimah will appear before the select committee on the same issue. You will be able to watch the sessions live [here](#).

### **Exiting the European Union oral questions**

From 9.30am on Thursday 15 March, the House of Commons will host oral questions to the Department for Exiting the European Union. While the list of questions has not yet been published, there are often questions related to students and research funding which are of interest to universities.

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### **Sir Mark Walport gives oral evidence on research integrity**

On Tuesday 6 March, the Commons Science and Technology Committee heard oral evidence from the Chief Executive of the new UK Research and Innovation (UKRI), Sir Mark Walport to inform the committee's [inquiry](#) into research integrity.

In the session following this with Sam Gyimah (see below), the minister agreed to re-schedule his cancelled appearance with the select committee to give evidence to inform the inquiry at a future date.

You can watch a recording of the session [here](#).

## **Science and Technology Committee hears from Universities Minister on Brexit**

Immediately after the above session, the Universities, Science, Research and Innovation Minister Sam Gyimah gave oral evidence to the Commons Science and Technology Committee as part of its [inquiry](#) into Brexit and science and innovation.

The minister also recently gave evidence at the committee's [summit](#) on this subject. At the oral evidence session, the minister was joined Amanda Dickins, Deputy Director, EU Exit: Science and Innovation at the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy.

A recording of the session is available [here](#).

## **All-Party Parliamentary University Group meeting on widening participation**

In the evening of Tuesday 23 January, the All-Party Parliamentary University Group held a speaker event in parliament on the topic of widening participation and access.

The following speakers took part:

- **Rt Hon Alan Milburn**, former Chair, Social Mobility Commission
- **Chris Millward**, incoming Director of Fair Access and Participation, Office for Students
- **Les Ebdon**, outgoing Director of Fair Access, Office for Fair Access (OFFA)
- **Professor Liz Barnes**, Vice-Chancellor, Staffordshire University

The delegate guide for the meeting has been published online and meeting notes will be available soon (see [here](#)).

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## **Written questions**

### **Sharia-compliant loans**

*Peter Kyle:* To ask the Secretary of State for Education, pursuant to the Answer of 23 February 2018 to Question 128612, whether the proposed Sharia-compliant alternative student finance product will be available for students applying for university in the 2018-19 academic year.

*Sam Gyimah:* As previously stated, we are currently working with Islamic Finance experts to design an alternative product that meets Islamic financial principles while delivering an equivalent outcome to the main student loan system. This work is complex and we will provide an update and a timetable in the summer.

It can typically take two years to introduce a new student finance product, which would rule out launching for Academic Year 2018/19.

*Lyn Brown:* To ask the Secretary of State for Education, whether a sharia-compliant alternative student finance system will be available for people beginning university courses in September 2018.

*Lyn Brown:* To ask the Secretary of State for Education, what progress has been made on providing a sharia-compliant alternative student finance system.

*Sam Gyimah:* We understand the concern that some prospective students may be deterred from pursuing higher education because they are unable to use loans that bear interest. We are therefore continuing to work on an alternative student finance product that would avoid using interest. We have appointed specialist advisors from the Islamic Finance Council to help design a new system that can make maintenance and tuition fee payments and collect repayment contributions in a way that is both equivalent to the current system and compliant with the requirements of Islamic finance.

This is a complex area requiring careful consideration of a range of technical issues, including the nature of the accounting for the new arrangements, the degree of legal separation required for any fund, the treatment of cashflows, the nature of the commitments that a student will make under the new system, and the method for establishing equivalence of outcome, amongst others.

This work is being undertaken at pace and we will be in a good place to provide an update in the summer. I will set out our planned timetable at that time. I note that it typically takes two years to introduce a new student finance product, which would rule out launching for academic year 2018/19.

### **Brexit: EU student status**

*Baroness Randerson:* When they intend to clarify the fee status of EU students studying at UK universities from September 2019.

*Viscount Younger of Leckie:* Future arrangements for EU students starting courses after 2018/19, and who are not settled in the UK or on a pathway to settled status by the specified date, will need to be considered as part of wider discussions about the UK's relationship with the EU.

Applications for courses starting in 2019/20 do not open until September 2018, and we are working to ensure students applying have information well in advance of this date.

*Daniel Zeichner:* To ask the Secretary of State for Education, if the Government will take steps to ensure that as part of the transitional arrangement EU students starting courses in

English higher education institutions during any agreed implementation period will continue to be eligible for (a) home fee status and (b) student loans and grants.

*Sam Gyimah:* Future arrangements for EU students starting courses after 2018/19, and who are not settled in the UK or on a pathway to settled status by the specified date, is being considered as part of wider discussions about the UK's relationship with the EU.

Applications for courses starting in 2019/20 do not open until September 2018, and we are working to ensure students applying have information well in advance of this date.

## **EU student loans**

*Lord Grocott:* What has been the total cost of student loans to students from EU 27 countries in each of the last ten years.

*Viscount Younger of Leckie:* Information showing student loans paid to English higher education providers on behalf of EU domiciled students (UK/EU nationals, resident in the European Economic Area or Switzerland prior to studying) can be found in the Table 1, attached.

Statistics covering English loans paid to students on higher education courses are published annually by the Student Loans Company (SLC) in the Statistical First Release 'Student Support for Higher Education in England': (see [here](#) and [here](#)).

## **Students: mental health**

*Richard Burden:* To ask the Secretary of State for Education, what estimate he has made of the number of people who left their undergraduate degree course for mental health reasons in each of the last five years.

*Sam Gyimah:* Mental health is a priority for this government. The Children and Young People's Mental Health green paper outlines the government's plans to set up a new national strategic partnership focused on improving the mental health of 16-25 year olds, encouraging more coordinated action, innovation and robust evaluation of mental health services. One recommendation in the green paper is for the partnership to provide a systematic strategy to improve what we know about student mental health by encouraging improvements in data linkage and analytics. Data is available from the Higher Education Statistical Agency on the number of higher education students who leave their course early for health reasons, but the data does not make it possible to distinguish mental health reasons specifically.

The department is working closely with Universities UK on the programme of work on Mental Health in Higher Education, which has included work with the Institute for Public Policy Research to strengthen the evidence-base on mental health in higher education.

## **OfS and UKRI: postgraduate students**

*Daniel Zeichner:* To ask the Secretary of State for Education, if he will take steps to ensure that the interests of postgraduate students are properly reflected in the operations of the (a) Office for Students and (b) UK Research and Innovation.

*Sam Gyimah:* The Higher Education and Research Act 2017 (HERA) provides clarity on the respective responsibilities of the Office for Students (OfS) and UK Research and Innovation (UKRI), including with regard to postgraduate students.

The OfS is responsible for protecting the interests of all students (including postgraduate taught and research students) and the quality of all regulated provision, working with the designated quality body, the Quality Assurance Agency. OfS will be responsible for the funding of taught postgraduate education, including the teaching grant currently allocated for this purpose through Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE). It will be the regulator for all degree awarding powers (DAPs), but in respect of research DAPs, there is provision for taking into account the views of UKRI.

UKRI will be responsible for all research funding, which will include the funds that Research Councils currently distribute for doctoral studies. UKRI will also be responsible for all research funding currently distributed by HEFCE, including quality-related research funding, which has an element to support the provision for doctoral students in England. UKRI, through its councils, will also be responsible for the financial sustainability of the research base. The two organisations will work together and with other bodies to understand the pipeline and take oversight of the health of disciplines through all levels of education, including postgraduate.

The two bodies are also committed to working effectively together on areas of mutual interest, including postgraduate provision, and are developing a collaboration agreement to support this aim. OfS must also have regard to any guidance given to them by the Secretary of State in performing its functions and duties, under HERA section 2(3), as must UKRI under HERA section 104.

## **Brexit: EU student levels**

*Daniel Zeichner:* To ask the Secretary of State for Education, whether the Government has undertaken an assessment of the potential effect of the UK leaving the EU on the ability of universities to attract EU students at (a) undergraduate and (b) postgraduate levels.

*Sam Gyimah:* The government is undertaking a comprehensive and ongoing programme of analytical work across a range of scenarios for EU exit. As part of this, we are engaging closely with the higher education (HE) sector, including through my High Level Stakeholder Working Group on EU Exit, Universities, Research and Innovation. The UK is a highly attractive destination for EU and international students, second only to the USA in the numbers we attract, and we recognise that student mobility is a key issue for our world-class HE sector. The government has commissioned the Migration Advisory Committee (MAC) to provide an objective assessment of the impact of EU and international students by September 2018. This provides an important opportunity for the sector to share evidence, and the MAC's independent advice will help inform decisions on the future migration system.

To help provide certainty, we have also announced that EU students starting courses in England in the academic year 2018/19 or before will continue to be eligible for student loans and home fee status for the duration of their course, and will remain eligible for Research Council PhD studentships on the current basis. These students will also have a right to remain in the UK to complete their course.

## **University strikes**

*Alex Sobel:* To ask the Secretary of State for Education, what discussions his Department has had with the University and College Union as a result of its decision to undertake strike action over changes to staff pension schemes.

*Sam Gyimah:* I have spoken to senior representatives of the University and College Union (UCU) as part of my engagement with all parties to the debate over reforms to the Universities Superannuation Scheme, to encourage them to continue discussions to find a solution. Officials in the Department for Education have also met with representatives of the UCU.

*Jo Swinson:* To ask the Secretary of State for Education, what assessment he has made of the effect on students of the loss of teaching hours as a result of the university lecturers' pension strike.

*Sam Gyimah:* Universities are autonomous institutions and it is for them to assess the impact of the strike action on their provision. While the Department for Education has not made its own assessment, we remain concerned about any impact of the strikes on students and expect universities to put in place measures to maintain the quality of education that students should receive.

We note that the Universities and Colleges Employers Association, which represents UK higher education organisations as employers, polled the 56 universities, which were the focus of strikes on 22 and 23 February 2018. Results of this polling indicate that the overall impact in four out of five institutions was between 'none' and 'low-medium'.

*Lord Myners:* To ask Her Majesty's Government what action, if any, they propose to take to improve the funding of the Universities Staff Superannuation Fund; and whether they intend to consider taking steps to allow universities to increase income, including through commercial activities, to increase employer contributions to pension schemes.

*Viscount Younger of Leckie:* Higher education providers are autonomous institutions and they are responsible for making appropriate pension provision for their staff. The government believes that it is for universities to resolve the current dispute regarding reforms to the Universities Superannuation Scheme through dialogue between Universities UK and the University and College Union.

As autonomous providers, universities are already able to undertake commercial activities.

## **School leavers: higher education**

*Douglas Chapman:* To ask the Secretary of State for Education, what proportion of school leavers have participated in higher education in England in each year since 2010.

*Sam Gyimah:* The department has two principal sources showing participation in education and other activities by young people as they transition between ages 16 and 19. Destination measures show the activities of young people in the year following their completion of key stage 4 (GCSEs) and key stage 5 (A-levels and other Level 3). The 16-18 Participation Statistical First Release (SFR) shows snapshot estimates of participation in different activities at each of academic ages 16, 17 and 18.

Destination measures show the percentage of students with sustained participation in education or employment over six months following the end of their phase of study. Information on pupil destinations is published annually on GOV.UK [here](#).

The table in attachment one shows the proportion of students in sustained study at higher education institutions since 2010 following their completion of 16-18 study (state-funded mainstream schools and colleges in England). See table NA10 in the 'Key stage 5 –national tables: SFR56/2017' document for full breakdowns: [here](#).

Estimates of national participation rates in England at academic ages 16, 17 and 18 are provided in the department's SFR 'Participation in education, training and employment: 2016' published [here](#). These differ from the destination measures estimates provided, because they are not linked to previous study and provide estimates for the whole population, and they are based on a snapshot of activities at the end of the calendar year (rather than over a six-month period).

The table in attachment two shows estimates of the proportion of young people participating in full-time education, by institution type, at academic age 16 and 18, at the end of 2016.

The following document(s) are referenced by this answer: [1](#) and [2](#).

## **Office for Students: pensions**

*Lord Myners:* To ask Her Majesty's Government whether the Office for Students has the power to compel or direct universities to increase contributions to employee pension schemes to reduce funding deficits.

*Viscount Younger of Leckie:* Higher education providers are autonomous institutions and are responsible for their own pension provision. The Office for Students does not have the power to direct universities regarding contributions to their pension schemes.

## **Video games: graduates**

*Justin Tomlinson:* Higher education providers are autonomous institutions and they are responsible for making appropriate pension provision for their staff. The government believes that it is for universities to resolve the current dispute regarding reforms to the

Universities Superannuation Scheme through dialogue between Universities UK and the University and College Union.

As autonomous providers, universities are already able to undertake commercial activities.

*Sam Gyimah:* The Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA) collects and publishes statistics on enrolments and qualifications obtained at UK Higher Education Institutions. The Latest statistics refer to the academic year 2016/17.

The **table attached** shows the numbers of first degree qualifiers in computer game design and graphics subjects.

### **Universities: overseas staff**

*Nigel Dodds:* To ask the Secretary of State for Education, what proportion of staff employed by UK Universities are citizens of (a) another EU member state (b) a non-EU state.

*Sam Gyimah:* The Higher Education Statistics Agency collects and publishes statistics on staff employed at UK Higher Education Institutions (HEIs). Annual statistics on staff employed by HEIs are published under the following link: **here**.

In the academic year 2016/17, 12% of staff with known nationality were EU nationals and 8% were non-EU nationals at UK HEIs.

*Nigel Dodds:* To ask the Secretary of State for Education, how many and what proportion of academic staff employed by UK universities spend more than 180 days working in academic institutions in other EU member states as part of their contract of employment.

*Sam Gyimah:* The information requested is not held centrally.

### **Promotion of STEM subjects**

*Layla Moran:* To ask the Secretary of State for Education, what steps he is taking to promote STEM careers and pathways to (a) students, (b) parents, (c) teachers and (d) governors as part of the 2018 Year of Engineering.

*Anne Milton:* The Year of Engineering 2018 is a year-long, cross-government, national campaign aimed at raising the profile of engineering among seven to 16 year olds and widening the pool of young people that consider engineering as a career.

It will do this by:

- Working with partners from different sectors to give young people direct and inspiring experiences of engineering, including outreach work in schools, behind the scenes tours and activities for young people and their families.

- Showcasing the variety, creativity and social value of modern engineering and the difference it can make to people's lives, appealing to the career aspirations of young people, in particular girls and young women.

- Challenging negative or traditional perceptions of the profession and obstacles to considering it as a career choice by putting engineering role models in the spotlight to show that background, gender and education do not need to be a barrier to becoming an engineer.

The department's reforms of the national curriculum and qualifications will ensure that young people study a rigorous mathematics and science curriculum that will provide them with the foundation they will need to study engineering at the next stage of their education or to enter employment.

We also have a number of initiatives to improve the quality of teaching science, technology, engineering and mathematics (STEM) subjects in schools, such as incentives to attract top graduates into teaching and the provision of high quality professional development for teachers through the network of mathematics hubs and science learning partnerships. More targeted support for schools also seeks to address more specific issues such as the take-up of mathematics and physics at A-level, particularly among girls, and the number of pupils opting to take GCSE triple science. From 2018-19, the Advanced Maths Premium will provide schools and colleges an additional £600 per year for every extra pupil studying one of a range of academic level 3 mathematics qualifications.

The department is improving STEM careers advice in schools, including ensuring that STEM encounters, such as with employers and apprenticeships, are built into school career programmes by updating school and college statutory guidance.

### **Migration: technology entrepreneurs**

*Adam Afriyie:* To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department, what progress her Department has made on enabling skilled technology entrepreneurs to enter and work in the UK.

*Caroline Nokes:* The UK has a comprehensive offer for skilled technology entrepreneurs seeking to work in the United Kingdom.

Migrants wishing to establish, set up or take over a business in the UK may apply under our Tier 1 (Entrepreneur) visa route if they can demonstrate a credible business plan and have £50,000 funding to invest in their business from a specified source, or £200,000 from any source.

For migrants who have studied at UK universities and now wish to set up their own technology business, the Tier 1 Graduate Entrepreneur visa route is also available. This route requires applicants to be endorsed by a Higher Education Institution but does not require any minimum investment funds and allows applications to work part time to support themselves as they develop their business. The independent Migration Advisory Committee's review of the route in 2015, concluded that the Graduate Entrepreneur scheme works well; it has limited numbers and attracts high quality people. The Government is currently considering the MAC's wider recommendations from that review.

For skilled technology entrepreneurs who are at the very top of their profession that can demonstrate exceptional skills or potential the UK also maintains an exceptional talent route. The Tier 1 (Exceptional Talent) route has 5 endorsing bodies of which Tech City provides endorsement for those in the digital technology sector. On 11 January 2018, we doubled the number of exceptional talent places available each year to 2000 places, recognising the contribution that these highly skilled migrants make to the UK. Exceptional talent visas do not require applicants to have a sponsoring employer and thus represents an attractive offer to the very best potential technology entrepreneurs.

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