

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:

Taidgh Pledger

taidgh.pledger@universitiesuk.ac.uk
020 7419 5434

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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

email
info@universitiesuk.ac.uk
website
www.universitiesuk.ac.uk

Company limited by
guarantee and registered
in England and Wales
number 2517018

Registered charity number
1001127

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Forthcoming business

Continuation of debate on Section 13 (1) (B) of the European Union (Withdrawal) Act 2018

On Monday 14 January and Tuesday 15 January MPs will debate the European Withdrawal Agreement before a meaningful vote following the debate on Tuesday 15 January.

The debate can be viewed [here](#).

Westminster Hall debate on e-petitions related to Brexit

On Monday 14 January there will be a debate in Westminster Hall from 4:30pm on several e-petitions related to Brexit. These include e-petitions 229963, 221747 and 235185, relating to leaving the EU without a withdrawal agreement, 232984 and 241361 relating to holding a further referendum on leaving the EU, and 226509 and 236261 relating to not leaving the EU.

The debate can be viewed [here](#).

Draft Higher Education (Fee Limits for Accelerated Courses) (England) Regulations 2018

This secondary legislation will pass before a delegated committee on Monday 14 January. The legislation will allow providers to increase fees for accelerated degrees by 20% a year.

The session can be viewed [here](#).

Continuation of Lords debate on the purposes of section 13(1)(c) of the European Union (Withdrawal) Act 2018

On Monday 14 January the House of Lords will continue to debate the European Union (Withdrawal) Act, taking note of the negotiated withdrawal agreement and the framework for the future relationship. The debate will be led by Lord Callanan.

The debate can be viewed [here](#).

Health and Social Care oral questions

From 11:30am on Tuesday 15 January Ministers from the Department for Health and Social Care will answer questions from MPs. This will include questions on new mental health support teams to be placed in schools and colleges and the adequacy of mental health provision in the long-term.

The session can be viewed [here](#).

Health and Social Care Committee hears evidence on the budget and NHS long-term plan

From 2:30pm on Tuesday 15 January the Health and Social Care Committee will hear evidence as part of their enquiry in to the budget and the NHS long-term plan. This may include topics relevant to mental health provisions.

Witnesses will be:

- Dr Jennifer Dixon, Chief Executive, The Health Foundation
- Nigel Edwards, Chief Executive, Nuffield Trust
- a representative from the King's Fund
- Chris Hopson, Chief Executive, NHS Providers
- Julie Wood, Chief Executive, NHS Clinical Commissioners
- Dr Nav Chana, Chair, National Association of Primary Care
- a representative from the Local Government Association

The session can be viewed [here](#).

APPG On Apprenticeships

From 4pm on Tuesday 15 January the APPG for Apprenticeships will hold a meeting on the topic of the 'Fourth Industrial Revolution and career development – What skills do we need in education to prepare future generations?'

Speakers will be:

- Dave Phoenix, Vice-Chancellor, London South Bank University,
- Sue Parr, Business Development Director, WMG at Warwick University
- Kathryn Gomme, Apprenticeship Program Lead, KPMG.

Education Committee accountability hearings

On Wednesday 16 January from 10am the education committee will question Rt Hon Damian Hinds MP, Secretary of State, Department for Education and Jonathan Slater, Permanent Secretary, Department for Education on the workings of the Department.

The session can be viewed [here](#).

Lords oral question on remaining in the European Union

On Wednesday 16 January the House of Lords will debate public support for remaining in the EU. Lord Dykes will ask her Majesty's Government what assessment they have made of public support for remaining in the European Union.

The debate can be viewed [here](#).

Debate on Economic Affairs Committee report - 'Treating Students Fairly: The Economics of Post-School Education'

On Wednesday 16 January the House of Lords will debate the recent report from the Economic Affairs Committee entitled 'Treating Students Fairly: The Economics of Post-School Education'. The debate will be led by Lord Forsyth of Drumlean.

The debate can be viewed [here](#).

Lords question on international students

On Monday 7 January there was a debate in the House of Lords on the counting of international students in migration statistics. Lord Holmes of Richmond asked Her Majesty's Government what plans they have to remove international students from the net migration statistics. In answer to the question Baroness Williams of Trafford claimed that as there is no limit on the number of students who come here, there is no disbenefit to students being counted in those figures and pointed to figures showing an increase in student visa applications since 2010/11.

The full debate can be found on [Hansard](#).

Education Committee hears evidence on Fourth Industrial Revolution

From 10am on Tuesday 8 January the Education Committee heard evidence as part of their ongoing enquiry into the Fourth Industrial Revolution.

Witness were:

- Priya Lakhani, Founder CEO, CENTURY Tech,
- Vinous Ali, Head of Policy, Tech UK,
- Martin Hamilton, Futurist, Jisc,
- Matthew Fell, Chief UK Policy Director, Confederation of British Industry (CBI)
- Iain Murray, Senior Policy Officer, Trades Union Congress (TUC)

The session can be viewed [here](#).

Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy oral questions

From 11:30am on Tuesday 8 January Ministers from the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy answered questions from MPs, with Chris Skidmore being asked about the use of vocational training to promote youth entrepreneurship. To this he responded that the introduction of T-levels was promoting this goal.

The session can be found on [Hansard](#).

Debate on Apprenticeships and skills policy

On Tuesday 8 January there was a debate on apprenticeships and skills policy in Westminster Hall. The debate was led by Judith Cummins, with Emma Hardy raising the issue of degree apprenticeships and the challenge of making them more widely used.

The session can be found on [Hansard](#).

EU Home Affairs Sub-Committee hears evidence on Brexit: EU student exchanges and funding for university research

From 10:30am on Wednesday 9 January the EU Home Affairs Sub-Committee heard evidence as part of their ongoing enquiry into the effect of Brexit on EU student exchanges and funding for university research.

Witnesses were:

- Mr Chris Skidmore MP, Minister of State for Universities, Science, Research and Innovation,
- Ms Jane Racz, Director, Erasmus+ UK National Agency
- Ms Madeleine Rose, Deputy Director, Erasmus+ UK National Agency

During his session Chris Skidmore claimed that in the event of a no-deal UK institutions would be able to access any part of the programmes that are open to third-country participation, but he expects any negotiations to join the schemes as an associate member to take between 9-12 months, if the department does decide to seek association. He also claimed that he was looking for alternative funding streams to replace grants from the European Research Council and Marie Skłodowska-Curie actions as these are not open to third country participation.

The session can be viewed [here](#).

Amendment to Section 13(1) (b) of the European Union (Withdrawal) Act 2018

On Wednesday 9 January MPs voted to approve an amendment to the European Withdrawal Bill to require a Minister of the Crown to table a motion to the House setting out what they propose to do, in the event that the Withdrawal Bill is voted down in the meaningful vote on Tuesday 15 January. This reduced the time that the government would have to respond from 21 sitting days to 3.

Debate on Section 13(1) (b) of the European Union (Withdrawal) Act 2018

From Wednesday 9 January to Friday 11 January MPs debated the European Withdrawal Agreement before a meaningful vote scheduled for Tuesday 15 January. During this debate Carol Monaghan and Dr Roberta Blackman-Woods raised the issue of loss of EU funding for universities, while Vicky Ford warned of the risks of no deal to our science community, and the real possibility of a brain drain.

The debate can be found on [Hansard](#).

Lords debate on the purposes of section 13(1)(c) of the European Union (Withdrawal) Act 2018

On Wednesday 9 January the House of Lords debated the European Union (Withdrawal) Act, taking note of the negotiated withdrawal agreement and the framework for the future relationship. The debate was led by Lord Callanan, who proclaimed the certainty that the withdrawal agreement offers to universities. However Lord Watson of Invergowrie highlighted the potential damage to universities through the loss of EU funding and decline in applications from EU students.

The debate can be found on [Hansard](#).

Debate on social mobility in the North West

On Wednesday 9 January there was a debate in Westminster Hall on the topic of social mobility in the North West of England. The debate was led by Jo Platt. Nadhim Zahawi pointed to increasing numbers of students from the North West now attending university, up from 27.6% in 2010 to 33.1% in 2018.

The debate can be found on [Hansard](#).

Written questions

Student loans

Wes Streeting: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer, what estimate he has made of the amount by which the deficit will increase in 2018 as a result of the ONS decision on the treatment of student loans in Government accounts.

Elizabeth Truss: The Office for Budget Responsibility (OBR) published estimates of potential impacts of the new treatment on the deficit in their October 2018 Economic and fiscal outlook, which is available here: <https://obr.uk/box/accounting-for-student-loans/>

However, the Office for National Statistics (ONS) has made it clear that there is a lot to decide before their methodology is finalised. The ONS currently aim to fully implement the new treatment for student loans in the public sector finances in September 2019.

Wes Streeting: To ask the Secretary of State for Education, if he will ensure that the level of funding allocated to universities is not reduced as a result of the ONS decision on the treatment of student loans in Government accounts.

Elizabeth Truss: The Office for National Statistics (ONS) announced a new treatment of student loans in the public sector finances and national accounts on 17 December 2018. The decision by the ONS relates to the recording of student loans in the national accounts and public sector finances. Prior to the announcement of the ONS review, the government had already launched the Review of Post-18 Education and Funding in which, amongst other features of the system, funding is being considered.

The review is considering how to ensure that the education system for those aged 18 years and over is accessible to all, is supported by a funding system that provides value for money and works for students and taxpayers. In addition, the review is considering how the education system incentivises choice and competition across the sector and encourages the development of the skills that we need as a country.

Disabled students' allowances

Steve McCabe: To ask the Secretary of State for Education, pursuant to the answer of 5 December 2018 to Question 199283 on Disabled Students Allowances, what information his Department holds on the demographic characteristics of the students that chose to take up the disabled students' equipment allowance in each year since 2014-15.

Chris Skidmore: The information requested is not readily available and could only be obtained at disproportionate cost. The department has commissioned a research project to examine the effectiveness of Disabled Students Allowances (DSAs) and the impact of DSAs on eligible students.

Steve McCabe: To ask the Secretary of State for Education, pursuant to the Answer of 13 December 2018 to Question 199285, whether support recommended through student needs assessments for students with visual impairments is required to be paid for by those students.

Chris Skidmore: Study needs assessments identify the type and level of support required for a student to access their course. This includes the support available from the student's higher education provider (HEP), and the help available via Disabled Students' Allowances (DSAs).

Students should not be required to pay for reasonable adjustments provided by their HEP, or for support recommended by DSAs up to the maximum amount available for each allowance, with the exception of providing a £200 contribution towards computer hardware should this be recommended.

Steve McCabe: To ask the Secretary of State for Education, pursuant to the Answer of 5 December 2018 to Question 199283 on Disabled Students Allowances, if he will publish the information for part-time students.

Chris Skidmore: Provisional data for 2017/18 provided by the Student Loans Company (SLC) shows that 1,600 part-time undergraduate English domiciled students have so far been paid Disabled Students' Allowances (DSA) for equipment, a 23% increase on the number paid at the same point in the academic year 2016/17 (1,300).

Data provided by the SLC shows that, in the academic year 2016/17, 1,500 part-time undergraduate English domiciled students were paid DSA for equipment. This compares to 1,700 in the academic years 2015/16 and 2014/15.

For full-time students only, DSA provisional uptake and expenditure data for 2017/18 show an increase in the number of students benefitting from the equipment allowance to 21,800, compared to 18,700 at the same point in the previous year. The overall expenditure has also

risen, to £21.5 million in 2017/18 compared to £14.4 million at the same point the previous year: an increase of almost 50%. This means that the average expenditure per student over those two years has risen to £986 in 2017/18 from £770 at the same point in 2016/17.

Steve McCabe: To ask the Secretary of State for Education, pursuant to the Answer of 5 December 2018 to Question 199283 on Disabled Students Allowances, how many full-time undergraduate students were domiciled in England in each year since 2014-15.

Chris Skidmore: The Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA) publish statistics on the number of students enrolled at UK Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) here: <https://www.hesa.ac.uk/data-and-analysis/students>.

In the academic year 2014/15, there was a total of 972,330 English domiciled students enrolled on full-time undergraduate courses at UK HEIs. This compares to 1,004,505 in the academic year 2015/16 and 1,032,950 in the academic year 2016/17.

Equivalent data for the academic year 2017/18 will be published by HESA on 17 January 2019.

Steve McCabe: To ask the Secretary of State for Education, pursuant to the Answer of 5 December 2018 to Question 199283 on Disabled Students Allowances, what the provisional figure is for 2016-2017.

Chris Skidmore: The Student Loans Company publish statistics on the number of English domiciled students paid Disabled Students' Allowance (DSA): <https://www.slc.co.uk/official-statistics/financial-support-awarded/england-higher-education.aspx> .

In the academic year 2016/17 the provisional (as at August 2017) figure for the number of English domiciled students paid full-time undergraduate equipment DSA was 18,700.

Steve McCabe: To ask the Secretary of State for Education, pursuant to the answer of 13 December 2018 to Question 199284 on Disabled Students' Allowances: Visual Impairment, what support is available to students who invoke an exceptional case process.

Chris Skidmore: The Exceptional Case Process (ECP) provides support to students eligible for the Disabled Students' Allowances (DSAs), who are in dispute with their higher education provider (HEP) over reasonable adjustments for areas of need identified in the students' DSAs needs assessment report. The ECP can provide interim funding to pay for recommended support to enable the student to study whilst the dispute is being settled.

It is not the purpose of ECP interim funding to replace reasonable adjustments that should be made by a HEP.

Steve McCabe: To ask the Secretary of State for Education, pursuant to the Answer of 13 December 2018 to Question 199284 on Disabled Students' Allowances: Visual Impairment, what steps his Department has taken to ensure that students are aware of their right to invoke an exceptional case process.

Chris Skidmore: Students who are eligible for Disabled Students' Allowances can apply for the Exceptional Case Process where they have entered into dispute with their Higher Education Provider (HEP). Students will be advised of this process by the HEP's disability officer or welfare officer. Students will also be advised of the process should they contact the Student Loans Company.

Steve McCabe: To ask the Secretary of State for Education, pursuant to the Answer of 13 December 2018 to Question 199284 on Disabled Students' Allowances: Visual Impairment, what steps his Department has taken to monitor whether higher education providers are fulfilling their responsibilities under the Equality Act 2010 to make reasonable adjustments for all disabled higher education students and not just those in receipt of Disabled Students' Allowance.

Chris Skidmore: In 2017, the Higher Education Funding Council for England published a report of research into higher education providers' models of support for disabled students in higher education. The report is available at:
<https://webarchive.nationalarchives.gov.uk/20180322111239/>
<http://www.hefce.ac.uk/pubs/rereports/year/2017/modelsofsupport/> .

The Office for Students' equality and diversity objectives include challenging higher education providers to reduce gaps in access, success and progression for students from all backgrounds. This includes reducing the challenges for disabled students in accessing, succeeding and progressing in higher education.

Special educational needs

Emma Lewell-Buck: To ask the Secretary of State for Education, with reference to payments under the specialist equipment allowance, what the (a) minimum, (b) maximum and (c) average amount a student has had to contribute towards equipment.

Chris Skidmore: Occasionally, students with particularly complex equipment needs may contribute to the cost of other specialist equipment if they exceed the maximum allowance amount, which in the 2018/19 academic year is £5,529 for the whole course for full-time students. Figures on the numbers of students who exceed the maximum allowance amount are not kept routinely.

Disabled students who are recommended a higher-powered computer to run assistive software as part of a Disabled Students' Allowances needs assessment are required to contribute £200 towards the cost of their computer.

Emma Lewell-Buck: To ask the Secretary of State for Education, how much funding her Department has allocated to the Disabled Students Allowances Quality Assurance Group; and what proportion of that funding has been spent.

Chris Skidmore: The department does not allocate funding to the Disabled Students' Allowances (DSAs) Quality Assurance Group (DSA-QAG).

DSA-QAG is a charity, funded through an annual registration and audit fee collected from three groups of DSAs providers - Assessment Centres, Assistive Technology Service Providers and Non-Medical Helper organisations.

International students

Lord Goodlad: Whether they have conducted an evaluation of the Tier 4 visa pilot for masters students; if so, when it was completed; and what changes are now proposed in the Immigration Rules.

Baroness Williams of Trafford: An initial evaluation of the Tier 4 Visa Pilot was published on gov.uk on 19 December.

The evaluation supported the proposals set out in the Immigration White Paper: The UK's future skills-based immigration system.

Admissions

Royston Smith: To ask the Secretary of State for Education, what information his Department holds on the number of students who have been granted a university place after obtaining three D grades or lower at A-level in each of the last three years.

Royston Smith: a To ask the Secretary of State for Education, what information his Department holds on the proportion of students granted a place at (a) Russell Group, (b) University Alliance, (c) Million Plus and (d) Guild HE universities having obtained three D grades or lower at A-level in each of the last three years.

Chris Skidmore: The Universities and Colleges Admissions Service (UCAS) publish data on the number of English 18 year-olds accepted into full-time higher education (HE) by A level points score.

The table below shows the number of 18 year-olds in England who held at least three A levels and were accepted into HE with A level points equivalent to DDD or below:

| Year | 2016 | 2017 | 2018 |
|-------------|-------|-------|-------|
| Acceptances | 6,605 | 7,095 | 7,505 |

These figures are not published at an institution level.

Bangor University

Guto Bebb: To ask the Secretary of State for Wales, what discussions he has had with representatives from Bangor University on the effect of that university 's proposed closure of its chemistry department on the development of skills in North Wales as set out in the North Wales Growth Deal ; and if will he make a statement.

Alun Cairns: We have regular discussions with Universities in North Wales regarding the North Wales Growth Deal, and the UK Government Minister for Wales recently visited Bangor University on 15 November 2018. However, growth deals are locally led and it is for the region to determine the impact of such developments on their proposals.

University funding

Gordon Marsden: To ask the Secretary of State for Education, with reference to the article entitled University debt: credit crunch looms as debt spirals, published by the Times on 3 January 2018, what estimate he has made of the levels of debt of UK Universities; and if he will make a statement.

Chris Skidmore: Data from the Higher Education Statistics Agency for the most recent financial year available (2016/17) shows that UK universities' external borrowing totalled £11.8 billion, equivalent to roughly 33% of sector income. [1]

In the new higher education (HE) regulatory framework, the Office for Students has responsibilities to monitor and assess the financial viability and sustainability of registered HE providers in England.

[1] External borrowing as defined by Higher Education Statistics Agency:
https://www.hesa.ac.uk/collection/c16031/key_financial_indicators.

Gordon Marsden: To ask the Secretary of State for Education, what discussions he has had with the Chancellor of the Exchequer on the financial viability of UK universities after the UK leaves the EU.

Chris Skidmore: My right hon. Friend, the Secretary of State for Education meets with my right hon. Friend, the Chancellor of the Exchequer and other cabinet ministers regularly to discuss the Department for Education agenda.

University of Oxford

John Howell: To ask the Secretary of State for Education, what discussions he has had with the University of Oxford on the effect on its (a) national and (b) international reputation of the suspension by Christ Church of its Dean.

John Howell: To ask the Secretary of State for Education, whether he has had discussions with the University of Oxford on its governance following the suspension of the Dean of Christ Church cathedral and college Oxford; and if he will make a statement.

Chris Skidmore: There have been no discussions. Higher education providers' governance arrangements are matters for the Office for Students (OfS), the independent regulator of higher education in England.

The OfS requires all registered providers to meet the public interest governance principles, which include that all providers must operate openly, honestly, accountably and with integrity and demonstrate the values appropriate to be recognised as an English higher education provider.

If providers fall short, the OfS has powers to intervene. The OfS considers a range of factors before deciding whether an intervention is required, including reputational damage to the higher education sector caused by the actions of a provider registered with the OfS.