

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

Lords oral question on education and skills training

In the afternoon of Monday 15 October afternoon, Labour peer Lord Haskell will ask an oral question in the House of Lords on the topic of “adapting education and training to address the needs of the changing economy.” This session will likely cover relevant issues like the importance of flexible learning.

Education Committee hears oral evidence on the Fourth Industrial Revolution

From 10am on Tuesday 16 October, the Education Committee will hear from a number of witnesses, including a robot, as part of its inquiry into the Fourth Industrial Revolution.

The witnesses will be:

- **Professor Rose Luckin**, Professor of Learner Centred Design, UCL Knowledge Lab
- **Brian Holliday**, Managing Director, Siemens Digital Factory
- **Joysy John**, Director of Education, Nesta
- **Professor Martin Loomes**, Pro Vice-Chancellor for Research, Middlesex University
- **Babak Jahanbani**, General Manager, Festo Didactic
- **Joana Miranda**, robotics student, Middlesex University
- **Nicholas Fitton**, computer science student, Middlesex University
- **Pepper**, robot

The evidence session can be [watch here](#).

Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy oral questions

From 11.30am on Tuesday 16 October, MPs will question ministers from the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy on their work. One question is scheduled on investment in research and development, with other relevant issues often featuring in supplementary and topical questions.

House of Lords select committee hears evidence on the European Investment Bank

The House of Lords EU Financial Affairs Sub-Committee will hear oral evidence as part of [its inquiry](#) into the European Investment Bank from 10am on Wednesday 17 October.

The committee will hear from:

- **Philip Harding**, Director of Finance and Business Affairs, UCL
- **Pete Clutton-Brock**, Policy Advisor, E3G
- **Piers Williamson**, Chief Executive, The Housing Finance Corporation
- **Alex Conway**, Assistant Director, Brexit and European Programmes, Greater London Authority (GLA)

The oral evidence session can be watched [here](#).

Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy committee hears evidence on sector deals

Also from 10am on Wednesday 17 October, the Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy Committee will hold an oral evidence session as part of [its ongoing inquiry](#) into sector deals and productivity.

The witnesses will be:

- **Benj Sykes**, Vice President, Ørsted
- **Andrew Jamieson**, Chief Executive, ORE Catapult
- **Emma Pinchbeck**, Executive Director, RenewableUK

While not specifically focused on universities, relevant issues will likely be covered during the session given the importance of university-business collaboration to the industrial strategy and sector deals.

You can watch the oral evidence session online [here](#).

Migration Advisory Committee Chair gives oral evidence to select committee

On Tuesday 9 October, the Home Affairs Committee heard [oral evidence](#) from Professor Alan Manning, Chair of the Migration Advisory Committee (MAC). This followed two recent reports from the MAC to help inform future government policy: one on [international students](#) and another on [EEA migration](#).

The select committee also heard from Madeleine Sumption, Director of Migration Observatory at the University of Oxford. You can watch the oral evidence session [here](#).

The session covered a range of issues, such as the MAC's reasoning for not considering immigration options which give preferential treatment to EU citizens post-Brexit, the effect of salary thresholds on university staff mobility, inclusion of students in the government's net migration target, and student visa costs.

Economic Affairs Committee holds evidence session on use of RPI

The House of Lords Economic Affairs Committee held an oral evidence session on Tuesday 9 October about the government's use of retail price index (RPI) as a measure of inflation.

This inquiry follows a [recent report](#) by the same committee into tertiary education which criticised the level of interest applied to student loans, which is based on the level of RPI.

This evidence session featured Dr Ben Broadbent, Deputy Governor of the Bank of England, and can be watched [here](#).

This week, the select committee also published a **new letter** from the Chair of the UK Statistics Authority Sir David Norgrove which criticised the use of RPI. It stated that the body “wants to see a continued move away from the use of RPI. Our preference on the next step would be for a concerted programme to phase out the use of RPI, with appropriate transitional or other arrangements to reflect the needs of existing RPI related contracts.”

Urgent question on student loan book sales

On Thursday 11 October, the Shadow Education Secretary Angela Rayner was granted an urgent question in the House of Commons on sales of the Plan 1 student loan book by the government. This followed a **written statement** by the Universities Minister Sam Gyimah announcing a further sale of these loans to the private sector.

In her contributions, Angela Rayner criticised this decision as poor value for money for the taxpayer and argued it was simply designed to superficially improve the government’s deficit figures. In his response, the minister gave reassurances that the sale will benefit taxpayers and will lead to no change in conditions of repayment for graduates.

The urgent question session can be found **on Hansard**. Later that day, a parallel session took place in the House of Lords which covered similar issues – this can be read **here**.

House of Lords oral question on the government’s use of education statistics

On Thursday 11 October, the Labour Lords Education Spokesperson Lord Watson of Invergowrie asked the government a question on “what action they will take to address the concerns raised in the letter sent to the Secretary for State for Education on 8 October by the chair of the UK Statistics Authority concerning the department’s presentation and use of statistics.”

This oral question followed a **recent letter** by the UK Statistics Authority to the Department for Education which raised concerns about the department’s use of statistics. This included the use of departmental-wide figures (including spending on higher education) to support statements about school funding specifically.

During the oral question session, the Chair of the Economic Affairs Committee Lord Forsyth also raised concerns about how student loans are currently accounted for in government deficit figures. You can read the question session on Hansard **here**.

Written questions

Unconditional offers

Jim Cunningham: To ask the Secretary of State for Education, what assessment he has made of the effect on A-Level grade attainment of the increase in the number of students receiving unconditional offers from universities; and if he will make a statement.

Jim Cunningham: To ask the Secretary of State for Education, what discussions he has had with universities on the use of unconditional offers for undergraduate places.

Sam Gyimah: I am concerned about the increase in unconditional offers and any adverse impact they may be having on students' A level grades. That is why I'm looking closely at the practice and have asked the regulator, the Office for Students (OfS), to review the practice, and in particular, to assess the impact it might be having on attainment. If negative impacts on students are highlighted through this review, I will expect the OfS to take robust action, in accordance with its powers set out in legislation.

Student mental health

Luciana Berger: To ask the Secretary of State for Education, how many meetings his Department held with stakeholders to explore the opt-in requirement for universities to have permission to share information on student mental health with parents or a trusted person since June 2018.

Luciana Berger: To ask the Secretary of State for Education, what progress his Department has made on setting up a working group on the transition students face when going to university as part of his measures to support student mental health.

Sam Gyimah: Work on supporting students in making the transition into university and on exploring disclosure agreements has continued to progress in the period since formal announcement of these policy areas was made in June.

Stakeholders from across the sector have been involved in this work and will continue to be called on to contribute in the specific areas where their expertise can add most value. We shall also be working with parents and carers, and legal and health experts as well as sector partners in the specific area of developing advice on disclosure and consent, as highlighted in the suicide prevention guidance published on 5 September by Universities UK.

Access to Erasmus+

David Simpson: To ask the Secretary of State for Education, what his policy is on ensuring that UK students have opportunities to attend universities abroad for a year through (a) the Erasmus Programme and (b) other programmes once the UK leaves the EU.

Sam Gyimah: The government has made clear that we value international exchange and collaboration in education and training as part of our vision for a global Britain. We support initiatives for our young people to gain international experience, both through study and work placements abroad, to increase their language skills and cultural awareness, and improve their life chances and employability.

Under the terms of the Withdrawal Agreement, the UK will continue to benefit from all EU programmes, including Erasmus+, until the end of the current budget plan. In the government's white paper on the future relationship between the UK and the EU we propose that the UK and the EU should continue to give young people and students the chance to benefit from each other's world leading universities. The UK is therefore open to exploring

participation in the successor scheme to Erasmus+, on the basis of a fair ongoing contribution.

Ultimately, future UK participation in the successor Erasmus programme is a matter for negotiations to come about our future relationship with the EU.

Disadvantaged students: North West region

Angela Eagle: To ask the Secretary of State for Education, what proportion of (a) all pupils and (b) pupils from disadvantaged backgrounds in (i) The North West (ii) Merseyside and (iii) Wallasey Constituency entered university in each of the last 10 years.

Sam Gyimah: The department publishes information on the percentage of 15 year old pupils from state-funded and special schools who entered higher education by the age of 19 by free school meal status, local authority and region.

Figures for the North West can be found in Table 2a of the following file: [here](#).

Figures are not available for Merseyside or Wallasey Constituency on this basis.

An alternative source of data for entry to higher education is the Universities and Colleges Admissions Service (UCAS) End of Cycle Report 2017. UCAS publishes data on the proportion of 18 year olds entering full-time undergraduate higher education by parliamentary constituency. However, figures are not available for students from disadvantaged backgrounds.

The figures show that the proportion of 18 year olds entering full-time undergraduate higher education from Wallasey was 23.4% in 2006 and 31.1% in 2017.

Higher education: youth work courses

Cat Smith: To ask the Secretary of State for Education, pursuant to the Answer of 11 September 2018 to Question 169504, what recent assessment he has made of trends in the level of youth work courses offered by higher education institutions; and what steps he is taking to encourage more students to take up those courses in higher education.

Sam Gyimah: Higher education institutions (HEIs) are independent and have autonomy over which courses to deliver (such as Youth Work courses). It is the government's role to help ensure that the higher education (HE) sector as a whole is responsive to, and able to, deliver demand for HE provision.

Whilst we do not hold accurate course figures, first degree entrants into Youth Work studies at UK HEIs have decreased by 26% between the period 2013 to 2014 and the period 2016 to 2017.

Through our regulatory reforms, we have established the Office for Students (OfS). This is a new regulator for the HE sector, and it has student choice at the heart of its agenda. OfS has introduced tools like the Teaching Excellence and Students Outcomes Framework and Longitudinal Education Outcomes data. These tools will put more information into the hands

of prospective students. They will also allow students to better understand which course is right for them and the outcomes delivered by various courses at different institutions.

Post-study work

George Howarth: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department, what discussions his Department has had with representatives of Universities UK on the UK's post-study work system for international students have completed their study at a UK university.

Caroline Nokes: We have regular discussions with Universities UK, as a key stakeholder representing a number of Tier 4 sponsors, on a range of issues including the UK's post-study work offer for international students.

University students: childcare

David Simpson: To ask the Secretary of State for Education, whether his Department has a policy on helping students with children to study at university while providing childcare support

Sam Gyimah: The government recognises the value of parents continuing in, or returning to, education and provides support to those enrolled on recognised education courses.

Eligible student parents may be able to claim a Childcare Grant, which offers support with up to 85% of their childcare costs, depending on their household income.

The maximum Childcare Grant for the 2018 to 2019 academic year is: Up to £164.70 a week for one child, up to £282.36 a week for two or more children.

Parents' Learning Allowance is additional funding to help students who are also parents. This can be used for everyday costs of study, such as books, study materials and travel.

Modern slavery survivors: higher education

Stephanie Peacock: To ask the Secretary of State for Education, what recent discussions he has had with the Secretary of State for the Home Department on ensuring that adult survivors of modern slavery are able to access further and higher education.

Anne Milton: We recognise that modern slavery is extremely serious, and we strive to ensure that our policies are able to support survivors to move forward in their lives.

While the Home Office is responsible for determining an individual's immigration status, the Department for Education is responsible for setting the criteria for accessing 16-19 and adult (19+) education and higher education funding.

The criteria for accessing 16-19 and adult education are set out in funding rules, which further education providers refer to when assessing eligibility. Depending on individual circumstances, survivors of modern slavery who meet the eligibility criteria will be able to access further education. Officials at the Department for Education, working with Home Office officials, regularly keep these rules under review. They do everything possible to

ensure that those who are entitled to access further education can do so without unnecessary bureaucracy.

Similarly, eligibility for higher education student support is set out in the relevant regulations. It depends on a number of factors, including immigration status. Generally, to be eligible for higher education student support, a student should be resident in England, have 'settled' status or have a recognised connection with the UK and have been a resident of the UK and Islands (Channel Islands and the Isle of Man) for the three years prior to the start of the course. Residence in the UK and Islands must not have been wholly or mainly for the purpose of receiving full-time education.

Universities: animal experiments

Kerry McCarthy: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department, what guidance his Department has issued to universities engaged animal testing on the implementation of the principles of the 3Rs, Replacement, Reduction and Refinement.

Ben Wallace: The Home Office has published guidance on the Operation of the Animals (Scientific Procedures) Act 1986. The guidance includes information on the implementation of the 3Rs and is available at [here](#).

The Home Office regulator for the use of animals in science has recently signed a Memorandum of Understanding with the NC3Rs. The Memorandum of Understanding is published and available at: [here](#).

Degree apprenticeships: mental health nurses

Paula Sherriff: To ask the Secretary of State for Education, how many mental health nursing students have started degree apprenticeships in the 2018-19 academic year.

Anne Milton: In the 2017/18 academic year reported to date (from August 2017 to April 2018), 260 apprenticeship starts were recorded for the standard 'Registered Nurse'. This is the level 6 degree apprenticeship approved for delivery on 9 May 2017. Mental health nursing remains an optional element within the nursing apprenticeships.

Additionally, there have been 640 apprenticeship starts reported to date (from August 2017 to April 2018) for the standard 'Nursing Associate' (level 5 apprenticeship standard, approved for delivery on 20 November 2017; note that we class apprenticeships at level 6 and above as 'degree-level'). There were no starts on these standards in the 2016/17 academic year. Full final year data for the 2017/18 academic year will be available in November 2018 and data covering 2018/19 will be available in January 2019.

In England, there have been 64,830 apprenticeship starts in the Health, Public Services and Care sector subject area reported to date in the first three quarters of the 2017/18 academic year (August 2017 to April 2018). This data can be accessed at the following link: <https://www.gov.uk/government/collections/further-education-and-skills-statistical-first-release-sfr>.

We want to increase the number of nursing apprenticeships and now have a complete apprentice pathway from entry level to postgraduate advanced clinical practice in nursing. This will support people from all backgrounds to enter a nursing career in the National Health Service (NHS).

We are working closely with employers, Health Education England and ministers in the Department of Health and Social Care to make sure the NHS is fully supported to recruit apprentices, both in nursing and in a range of various occupations.

Sector news

Information Commissioner rules on Brexit freedom of information case

On Tuesday 9 October, the Information Commissioner's Office (ICO) published its decision on a recent complaint related to a freedom of information (FOI) request by Chris Heaton-Harris MP to the University of Worcester.

In October 2017, the MP had written to request the publication of all email correspondence held by the vice-chancellor of the university, Professor David Green, which mentioned the word 'Brexit'. A similar letter was sent by Chris Heaton-Harris to vice-chancellors in many UK universities.

In response to this letter, the University of Worcester had denied the request due to concerns about the publication of confidential staff correspondence which was not in the public interest. Following its investigation, the ICO supported this view and found in the university's favour, citing institutional exemptions under section 36 of the Freedom of Information Act 2000.

The ICO judgment can be read in full [here](#). Institutions may find this document of interest to inform their own institutional policies while noting the specifics of this particular case.

Home Office written statements on the health surcharge and EU settlement

On Thursday 11 October, the Immigration Minister Caroline Nokes published two written statements on immigration issues.

The **first written statement** confirmed the government's intention to double the Immigration Health Surcharge (IHS) to £400 per year (or £300 per year for students). This will be implemented via the Immigration (Health Charge) (Amendment) Order 2018 which is subject to affirmative parliamentary procedure (i.e. the statutory instrument has to be approved by both the Commons and Lords).

The **second written statement** announced the next stage of the roll-out of the EU Settlement Scheme for resident EU citizens and their families to obtain UK immigration status. This will take the form of a further pilot to scale up the testing of the scheme, involving staff in the higher education, health and social care sectors. This follows an initial pilot scheme involving universities and NHS trusts in the North East region.

The second written statement also covered issues related to refugee family reunification and changes to how evidence for visa applications and extensions is handled by UK Visas and Immigration.