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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Parliamentary Business

Education oral questions
On Monday 2 March, Ministers from the Department for Education answered questions on the floor of the House.

Phillipa Whitford MP, and John McNally MP asked a question on UK access to EU educational and research programmes after the transition period. Carol Monaghan MP asked whether EU students will be treated as international students from 2021 in respect to fee and immigration status.

The Minister for Universities, Michelle Donelan MP, responded that the UK remains open for participation in elements of Erasmus+ on a time-limited basis, provided that the terms are in the UK’s interests. The UK will consider a relationship in line with non-EU member state participation in certain EU programmes, including Horizon Europe.

Salaine Saxby MP, Michael Fabricant MP and Matt Vickers MP all asked questions on ensuring equitable access to opportunity for young people.

The Secretary of State for Education, Gavin Williamson MP, responded that levelling up is the department’s top priority and noted the plans to reform technical education with a £500m investment in T-levels.

Shadow Education Secretary, Angela Rayner MP, asked a question on what government can do to urge universities to make a fair offer to the University College Union in relation to strike action.

The secretary of state urged both parties to resolve the matter within the next few weeks and highlighted the students who studies are being impacted.

Matt Fletcher MP, Stephen Metcalfe MP and Alexander Stafford MP asked questions about further education colleges delivering skills for the future. Duncan Baker MP asked about encouraging apprenticeship levy take up from small and medium sized businesses.

You can read the transcript of the debate here.

Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy will oral questions
On Tuesday 3 March, Ministers from the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy (BEIS) answered questions from the floor of the house.

Julian Study MP, Bin Afolami MP and Flick Drummond MP asked a question on investment in research and development and the proposed ARPA.

Secretary of State for BEIS, Alok Sharma MP, responded that the Government are already increasing public spending on R&D by £7 billion and highlighted that every pound of public expenditure on R&D leverages a further £1.40 of private investment. The government are making good progress on ARPA, engaging with a wide range of researchers and innovators, and will be setting out plans in due course.

Julian Sturdy MP and Neil O’Brian MP asked questions on the division of funding across the UK and whether there will be additional funding for research outside the South of England.

The minister responded that as part of the levelling up agenda the government want to support centres for excellence across the UK and they will be setting out a place strategy for R&D in the second half of this year.
Chi Onwurah MP asked for confirmation that the government was going for full associate membership to European research programmes.

You can read the transcript of the debate here.

Immigration bill received its first reading in the House of Commons
On Thursday 5 March, the Government introduced the Immigration and Social Security Co-ordination (EU Withdrawal) Bill to the house.

The bill received its first reading therefore no debates or amendments have yet been held or tabled. It will now move to its second reading, but the date has not yet been announced.

The bill will end free movement of EU citizens to the UK in January 2021.

You can read more about the bill here.

House of Lords debate on Educational opportunities
On Thursday 5 March, the House of Lords held a debate the ‘educational opportunities available to children and young people from working class backgrounds’.

Baroness Yardly, who introduced the debate, highlighted the correlation between parental income and educational attainment.

Lord Woollwey of Woodford noted that it is in the top universities’ self interest to acknowledge that a student with all the socioeconomic disadvantages who still gets two As and a B is probably as bright as a privileged student who has gained three As.

Lord Baker of Dorking highlighted the success of university technical colleges.

Lord Knight of Weymouth noted the need for a national debate on a new system designed for a long life of continuous reskilling. He stated universities will need to innovate to deliver lifelong learning.

Lord Livermore highlighted that a degree from a leading university is one of the surest routes to social mobility. He outlined the dramatic variation of school leavers entering higher education by socioeconomic background, particularly noting that students from disadvantaged backgrounds are less likely to receive a place at the most selective universities. He also noted that working-class students often lack the advice, guidance and support needed to navigate the university application process. He asked the government to indicate its position on contextual admissions, post-qualification applications, the evaluation of outreach activities, the number of degree and higher-level apprenticeships and the restoration of maintenance grants.

Lord Bassam of Brighton criticised the government’s decision to increase tuition fees and remove maintenance grants, suggesting they act as a deterrent to university. He also highlighted the system of predicted grades and conditional offers as unfair to students from disadvantaged backgrounds. He called for a reform to the admissions system and noted the Office for Students’ review.

Baroness Berridge, the government’s spokesperson, responded to the debate highlighting the requirement for universities to provide access and participation plans. She pointed-out a response to the Augar review is expected in the spending review. She noted the concerns raised on admissions and her hope that they will be considered by the Office for Students admissions review. Finally, she noted the ongoing and planned reforms to apprenticeships to put vocational study on a par with academic study.
Forthcoming business

Work and Pensions oral questions
On Monday 9 March at 2:30, ministers from the Department for Work and Pensions will answer questions on the floor of the house.

You can watch the debate here.

Women and Equalities oral questions
On Wednesday 11 March at 11:30, ministers from the Department for Women and Equalities will answer questions from the floor of the house.

You can watch the debate here.

Written Questions

Industrial Action
Alex Sobel (Leeds North West): To ask the Secretary of State for Education, what assessment his Department has made of the potential effect of the Higher Education (Higher Amount) (England) Regulations 2010 on industrial action at universities in England.

Michelle Donelan (Chippenham): There are currently two industrial disputes affecting higher education in England. The Universities Superannuation Scheme pension dispute relates to the scheme valuation, costs and governance. The second dispute is about pay, gender and racial pay gaps as well as contracts and working conditions. Universities are independent institutions and are responsible for their own decisions on pay, employment contracts and pension provision.

Government has made no specific assessment of the potential effect of the Higher Education (Higher Amount) (England) Regulations 2010 on these disputes. Those regulations prescribed the higher amounts of tuition fees for courses starting on or after 1 September 2012. Following the passage of the Higher Education and Research Act 2017, fee limits for prescribed courses are now provided for in the Higher Education (Fee Limits and Fee Limit Condition) (England) Regulations 2018 and the Higher Education (Fee Limits for Accelerated Courses) (England) Regulations 2019 (in those regulations where the first academic year began on or after 1 August 2019).

Alex Sobel (Leeds North West): To ask the Secretary of State for Education, what steps his Department is taking to encourage universities to financially compensate students affected by industrial action.

Michelle Donelan (Chippenham): We expect Higher Education Providers to consider their obligations under consumer law and students’ consumer rights carefully, including during industrial action. This includes ensuring that a range of appropriate remedies and mitigations are available, which may include financial compensation, to prevent and minimise the effects of any strike action upon their students.

The Office for Students, the regulator for higher education in England, has issued guidance for students affected by industrial action. It encourages students to discuss with their university or college whether it is possible to make up for any lost teaching, and whether any other loss of services and support can be rearranged to minimise the disruption that students have experienced. Where lost
teaching has had an impact on assessments or other work that has had to be submitted, students may be able to submit a claim for this to be considered as part of the university’s mitigating or extenuating circumstances process.

If the issue is not satisfactorily resolved, students can complain through the university’s complaints process; if they are unhappy with the outcome, students have the right to make a complaint to the Office of the Independent Adjudicator for Higher Education (OIA). The OIA has also published guidance on its website about its approach to complaints by students affected by the industrial action.

Olivia Blake (Sheffield, Hallam): To ask the Secretary of State for Education, what discussions he has had with Universities UK and the Universities Superannuation Scheme on the joint expert panel’s valuation of that scheme.

Michelle Donelan (Chippenham): Universities are independent institutions and are responsible for their own decisions on employment contracts and pay and pension provision. The government has no direct role in relation to the Universities Superannuation Scheme (USS) pension, beyond regulation as applied to all work-based pension schemes by The Pensions Regulator. As government has no direct role in the management of the USS pension, we have not been involved in the substance of the negotiations in the dispute.

The department welcomes the establishment of the Joint Expert Panel and the contribution they have made in seeking to secure a long term and sustainable resolution to the USS dispute. The issues involved with the valuation of USS are complex and central to the ongoing dispute. We are unable to comment on the actuarial detail of the first report of the Joint Expert Panel (JEP 1), which made an alternative valuation to the USS pension using a different set of assumptions to the previously contested USS valuation. However, we note that after sustained negotiation the recommendations of this report were not adopted in full and that the Pensions Regulator supported this decision.

The Joint Expert Panel published a second report (JEP 2) in December 2019. JEP 2 does not offer a new scheme valuation. JEP 2 makes a series of linked recommendations covering USS governance, the valuation methodology and the way forward. This includes the establishment of a new, jointly agreed purpose statement and shared valuation principles and agreement to a more appropriate valuation methodology.

The department understands that the Pensions Regulator has indicated support for the high-level recommendations of the JEP 2 report. Universities UK, USS and the UCU have all expressed support for the recommendations of the JEP 2 report and the opportunity it presents to resolve the ongoing dispute.

Olivia Blake (Sheffield, Hallam): To ask the Secretary of State for Education, what discussions he has had with (a) Universities and Colleges Employers Association and (b) Universities UK on (a) changes to the level of university staff pay, (b) the gender and BAME pay gap in higher education, (c) staff workloads in that sector and (d) the use of casual contracts in that sector.

Michelle Donelan (Chippenham): Universities are independent institutions and are responsible for their own decisions on employment contracts and pay and pension provision. We expect universities, like all employers, to give due consideration to their obligations under the Equality Act (2010) and the way their employment practices affect different sections of their communities and staff at different stages of their careers.

While respecting the independence of the sector, it is important that universities consider the impact of short-term and casual contracts on staff, students and the overall sustainability of teaching and research in this country. We also expect universities to follow best employment practices to ensure all staff, regardless of race and gender, have the opportunity to progress in their careers. Where there are disparities in pay that may be based on race or gender they must be addressed. We encourage universities to make use of tools such as the Race Equality and Athena Swan Charters to help identify and address institutional and cultural barriers that affect ethnic minority staff and students.
My right hon. Friend, the Secretary of State for Education met the General Secretary of the University and College Union (UCU) in September 2019. This meeting addressed a range of issues affecting both further and higher education, including both the pay and pensions disputes. However, as government has no direct role in the management of the Universities Superannuation Scheme (USS) pension or agreeing the employment terms and conditions of staff, we have not been involved in the substance of the negotiations in either dispute.

The quality of higher education and the learning and opportunities it offers for students are priorities for this government. The department welcomes the on-going talks that are taking place between UCU and employers on pay, working conditions and equalities as well as those looking at the long-term stability and affordability of the USS pension. We encourage all sides to redouble their efforts to find solutions that will result in a positive outcome for universities, staff and students.

Olivia Blake (Sheffield, Hallam): To ask the Secretary of State for Education, what discussions he has had with (a) Universities UK, (b) Universities & Colleges Employers Association and (c) the University and College Union on the employer’s offer and the union’s industrial action prior to the commencement of the ongoing strike.

Michelle Donelan (Chippenham): Universities are independent institutions and are responsible for their own decisions on employment contracts and pay and pension provision. We expect universities, like all employers, to give due consideration to their obligations under the Equality Act (2010) and the way their employment practices affect different sections of their communities and staff at different stages of their careers.

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Private sector higher education providers

Scott Benton (Blackpool South): To ask the Secretary of State for Education, whether he plans to support private higher education providers in (a) attracting students to their courses and (b) improving (i) their viability and (ii) the diversity of courses on offer to the higher education sector; and if he will make a statement.

Michelle Donelan (Chippenham): Under the 2017 Higher Education and Research Act, a higher education provider in England that wishes to access public grant funding and/or student support funding, is required to register with the Office for Students. This applies to those previously known as a ‘private’ or ‘alternative’ provider, as well as to existing publicly funded institutions.

Registered providers are regulated by the Office for Students and must meet regulatory requirements, which include conditions surrounding quality and financial viability. Once registered, providers are able to submit to the Student Loans Company the courses they wish to attract student support.

Scott Benton (Blackpool South): To ask the Secretary of State for Education, what assessment he has made of the effect of the ineligibility for student loans of students at private higher education institutions on the (a) financial viability of those institutions and (b) their ability to attract students.

Michelle Donelan (Chippenham): Under the 2017 Higher Education and Research Act, a higher education provider in England that wishes to access public grant funding and/or student support funding, is required to register with the Office for Students. This applies to those previously known as a ‘private’ or ‘alternative’ provider, as well as to existing publicly funded institutions.

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Funding for further education

Sir David Evennett (Bexleyheath and Crayford): To ask the Secretary of State for Education, what assessment his Department has made of the adequacy of funding for further education institutions.

Gillian Keegan (Chichester): The government’s Spending Round in August 2019 identified the need to increase funding for 16 to 19-year olds’ education to ensure that they fulfil their potential and develop the skills that the country needs. That is why we are investing an extra £400 million in 16 to 19 education in 2020-21.
We will increase the base rate of funding by 4.7%, from £4,000 to £4,188, for the academic year 2020/21. This is the biggest injection of new money into 16 to 19 education in a single year since 2010, with funding increasing faster for education for 16 to 19-year olds than in 5 to 16 schooling for 5 to 16 year olds.

Our manifesto committed to spending £1.8 billion on upgrading the further education college estate and we will make further announcements relating to this funding in due course. In addition, we have made available £38 million of capital funding to T level providers in 2020 to ensure they have the facilities and equipment they need to deliver high quality, industry relevant programmes. We have recently announced a further £95 million in capital funding for T level providers in 2021.

Apprenticeships
Sir David Evennett (Bexleyheath and Crayford): To ask the Secretary of State for Education, what steps his Department is taking to promote apprenticeships as an alternative to university.

Gillian Keegan (Chichester): Our reforms to apprenticeships have fundamentally changed what apprenticeships are. They are now longer and more rigorous with new standards being designed and driven by industry.

We are continuing to promote all apprenticeships as a genuine, high-quality alternative to traditional academic only study for people of all ages and from all backgrounds. We launched the third phase of our apprenticeships marketing campaign, Fire it Up, in January, which promotes how apprenticeships can provide opportunities for ambitious young people.

Our 13 annual National Apprenticeship Week (NAW) took place in February. Nearly 900 events were held across the country, aiming to change perceptions of apprenticeships, promoting them as a high quality alternative to academic study.

In January 2018 we introduced a legal requirement for schools to give training providers the opportunity to talk to pupils about technical qualifications and apprenticeships, so that young people hear about the alternatives to academic routes. We also offer a free service to schools through the Apprenticeship Support and Knowledge (ASK) project to ensure that teachers have the knowledge and support they need to enable them to promote apprenticeships, including higher and degree apprenticeships, to their students. In the last academic year, the ASK Programme reached over 300,000 students.

We have also worked with the Universities and Colleges Admissions Service (UCAS) to support employers to raise awareness of their apprenticeship opportunities to prospective employees through an online higher and degree apprenticeship vacancy listing. We also attended 30 UCAS exhibitions in 2019 to promote apprenticeships, engaging with around 10,000 young people, their parents and careers advisers.

Robert Halfon (Harlow): To ask the Secretary of State for Education, what steps he is taking in response to findings from National Apprenticeships week.

Gillian Keegan (Chichester): Our 13 th annual National Apprenticeship Week (NAW) took place from 3 to 7 February. The theme of this year’s NAW was ‘Look Beyond’.

Focussing on diversity, as well as quality, this year’s NAW aimed to support the widening participation agenda. It aimed to support this agenda by highlighting the diversity and value that apprenticeships bring to employers, apprentices and communities across England. Nearly 900 events were held across the country.

We are currently analysing the detail of the evaluation and further information will be available after the Easter recess.
Adult education digital skills
Chi Onwurah (Newcastle upon Tyne Central): To ask the Secretary of State for Education, pursuant to the Answer of 3 February 2020 to Question 9674 on Digital Technology, how much funding his Department has allocated to provide adults with (a) no and (b) low digital skills to undertake new digital qualifications free of charge.

Gillian Keegan (Chichester): From August 2020, we are introducing an entitlement to essential digital skills so adults with no or low digital skills will have the opportunity to undertake new digital qualifications free of charge.

The new digital skills entitlement will refocus funding from out of date qualifications to new qualifications based on new national standards. This will be funded through the £1.34 billion Adult Education Budget (AEB) which fully funds or co-funds skills provision for eligible adults aged 19 and above from pre-entry to level 3, to help them gain the skills they need for work, an apprenticeship or further learning.

The Education, Skills and Funding Agency is responsible for allocating the AEB in non-devolved areas. Colleges and training providers in non-devolved areas continue to have the freedom and flexibility to determine how they use their AEB and therefore how much they decide to spend on digital skills. They do this by working with stakeholders including Local Enterprise Partnerships and their Skills Advisory Panels to determine what the appropriate distribution of funding should be to best meet local needs. In areas where the AEB is devolved, the specified Mayoral Combined Authorities and the Mayor of London are responsible for making provision for the funding of the digital entitlement as part of their devolution deal, alongside the existing English and maths, level 2 and level 3 statutory entitlements.

Proposed immigration system and student numbers
Martyn Day (Linlithgow and East Falkirk): To ask the Secretary of State for Education, what estimate he has made of potential changes in the number of university enrolments at Scottish universities among overseas (a) undergraduates and (b) postgraduates as a result of the implementation of the proposed immigration system.

Michelle Donelan (Chippenham): EU and non-EU students make an invaluable contribution to the whole of the UK’s higher education sector, socially, culturally and financially. This is why the UK Government will continue to welcome international students, working towards the ambition set out in our International Education Strategy, to host 600,000 international students per year by 2030.

The latest Higher Education Statistics Agency data shows that there are 58,000 international students enrolled in Scottish Higher Education Institutions (HEIs), an increase of 7% from 2017/18. The number of EU-domiciled students enrolled at Scottish HEIs has remained relatively stable since 2017/18 (decreasing by 0.5%). The number of non-EU-domiciled students enrolled at Scottish HEIs has increased by 12% since 2017/18. Undergraduate and postgraduate students will be covered by the points-based immigration system. This will improve on the current system by simplifying and streamlining the student route for both students and sponsors.

To ensure the UK higher education sector remains internationally attractive, my right hon. Friend, the Prime Minister announced the new Graduate Route in September 2019. This will offer an opportunity for international students who have passed their degree to stay and work in the UK for two years post-study.

This announcement enables higher education providers to recruit for the 2020/21 academic year on the basis that their students will be eligible for the graduate route, and ensures that all existing students who meet the requirements, and have Tier 4 leave at the point that the route is introduced will be able to benefit. Education in Scotland is a devolved matter.
EU funded projects
Zarah Sultana (Coventry South): To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer, what plans the Government has for (a) universities and (b) other UK institutions to be able to participate in EU-funded projects after 2020.

Jesse Norman (Hereford and South Herefordshire): The Public Mandate states that the UK is ready to consider participation in certain EU programmes where it is in the UK's and the EU's interest that the UK does so. The Public Mandate can be found here: https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/our-approach-to-the-future-relationship-with-the-eu

The UK will consider a relationship in line with non-EU Member State participation for the following programmes: Horizon Europe, Euratom Research and Training, and Copernicus. The UK will consider service access agreements for the following programmes: EU Space Surveillance and Tracking, and the European Geostationary Navigation Overlay Service. The Government's manifesto set out its ambitious approach on research and development, including a commitment to continue collaboration internationally and with the EU on scientific research, including Horizon Europe.

The UK Government wants to ensure that UK and European universities and institutions continue to benefit from each other’s world-leading systems and expertise. The UK will consider options for participation in elements of Erasmus+ on a time-limited basis, provided the terms are in the UK’s interests. The Government is considering a wide range of options with regards to future cooperation, including potential domestic alternatives. Decisions on future budget provisions are a matter for the Comprehensive Spending Review.

The proposed regulations for programmes in the next Multiannual Financial Framework (2021-27) are still being discussed in the EU and are yet to be finalised. The UK’s future participation in these programmes and projects will be subject to negotiations on the UK-EU relationship.

Under the financial settlement the UK will continue to contribute to the EU budget in respect of the EU’s current financial planning period (the Multiannual Financial Framework 2014-20) and will continue to participate and benefit from its programmes and receive receipts for the duration of projects, which in some cases go beyond 2020.

Sector News

Department for Education announce £179million investment in PhD students
On Friday 6 March, the Department for Education announced a £179 million investment in the next generation of scientists, mathematicians and engineers. The funding will support 11,000 students through 41 doctoral training partnerships.

You can find out more about the announcement here.

£1million funding for new mental health projects
On Thursday 5 March, the Department for Health and Social Care announced £1 million of funding for new projects to support groups of students more at risk of developing mental health conditions. The money will be distributed by the Office for Students, which is inviting bidders to submit proposals that will target and help students who may be at greater risk or require more support.

You can find out further details in the press release here.

Prime Minister hosts Council for Science and Technology
On Wednesday 4 March, the Prime Minister met with the Science and Technology Council to discuss his priorities for science, research and innovation, including:

- the Government's pledge to invest in science and boost R&D funding
- the Global Talent visa for international scientists, researchers and mathematicians
- the launch of the government review to cut down bureaucracy in applications
- the necessary infrastructure required for to boost R&D, such as the new Advanced Research Projects Agency

You can find out more in the press release here.