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

Parliament closed on Wednesday 25 March for Easter recess.

Forthcoming business

Parliament is in Easter recess.

Written Questions

Coronavirus: guidance

Lord Truscott: To ask Her Majesty's Government what plans they have to close schools, universities and colleges as a result of COVID-19; and if they have any such plans, when they intend to introduce such closures. [HL2722]

Baroness Berridge: On 18 March, the Government announced that after schools shut their gates on 20 March, they will remain closed until further notice. That will be for all children except those of critical workers and the children who are most vulnerable.

The Government are expecting early years providers, independent schools, sixth forms and further education colleges to do the same.

Many universities and other higher education institutions are already taking necessary steps to keep their staff and students safe and, where possible, keep providing education. The Department for Education is confident that vice-chancellors are making the right decisions and will continue to support them to do so.

Coronavirus: assessments

Wes Streeting (Ilford North): To ask the Secretary of State for Education, what steps he is taking to ensure that students in (a) schools, (b) colleges and (c) universities are able to sit exams this summer. [30824]

Nick Gibb (Bognor Regis and Littlehampton): As my right hon. Friend, the Secretary of State for Education, announced to the House on 18 March, the Government has taken the difficult decision to cancel all examinations due to take place in schools and colleges in England this summer, as part of the fight to prevent the spread of coronavirus.

The Department’s priority is to ensure that students can move on as planned to the next stage of their lives, including starting university, college or sixth form courses or apprenticeships, in the autumn. For GCSE, AS and A-level students, we will ensure they are awarded a grade which reflects their work. Our intention is that a calculated grade will be awarded this summer based on the best available evidence, including any non-examination assessment that students have already completed. The qualifications regulator Ofqual is working urgently with examination boards to set out proposals for how this process will work and more information will be provided as soon as possible.

The Department recognises that some students may nevertheless feel disappointed that they have not been able to sit their examinations. If they do not believe the correct process has been followed in their case, they will be able to appeal on that basis. In addition, if they do not feel their calculated grade reflects their performance, they will have the opportunity to sit an examination, as soon as is reasonably possible after the beginning of the new academic year. Students will also have the option to sit their examinations in summer 2021.
There is a very wide range of different vocational and technical qualifications, as well as other academic qualifications, for which students were expecting to sit examinations this summer. These are offered by a large number of awarding organisations and have differing assessment approaches. In many cases, students will already have completed modules or non-examinationassessment which could provide evidence to award a grade. The Department is encouraging these organisations to show the maximum possible flexibility and pragmatism to ensure students are not disadvantaged. Ofqual is working urgently with the sector to explore options and will provide more details shortly.

Universities are autonomous institutions with full control over their own assessment processes. The Department and the regulator in England, the Office for Students, are working with registered universities and other higher education institutions to help support them with their decisions, and to find the best way forward for the benefit of all students affected. Universities will contact affected students directly.

**Coronavirus: student finances**

*Dr Luke Evans (Bosworth):* To ask the Secretary of State for Education, what discussions he has had with universities on ensuring that students remain enrolled at their institution in the event (a) that they lose their part-time employment and (b) of another change in their financial situation as a result of the covid-19 outbreak. [33725]

*Michelle Donelan (Chippenham):* The government is working closely with the sector on a wide range of issues, and student wellbeing is at the heart of those discussions. It will be for universities to deal with individual students’ situations.

Universities know how best to provide support and maintain hardship funds, which can be deployed where necessary, which is especially important for students who are estranged from their families, disabled or have health vulnerabilities.

Students will continue to receive scheduled payments of loans towards their living costs for the remainder of the current, 2019/20, academic year. If they are employed or self-employed, they may also be able to benefit from the wider measures of support announced by the Chancellor of the Exchequer.

If agreed with their employer, their employer might be able to keep them on the payroll if they’re unable to operate or have no work for them to do because of coronavirus (COVID-19). This is known as being ‘on furlough’.

They could get paid 80% of their wages, up to a monthly cap of £2,500. More information can be found here.

**Coronavirus: student loan refund**

*Preet Kaur Gill (Birmingham, Edgbaston):* To ask the Secretary of State for Education, what discussions he has had with the chief executive of the student loans company on the potential merits of refunding loans for the third term of this academic year. [33730]

*Michelle Donelan (Chippenham):* The Student Loans Company (SLC) will continue to make scheduled tuition and maintenance payments to both students and providers. Both tuition and maintenance payments will continue irrespective of whether learning has moved online. This has been communicated via the SLC website. We are continuing to monitor the position.

**Coronavirus: apprenticeships**

*Emma Hardy (Kingston upon Hull West and Hessle):* To ask the Secretary of State for Education, what steps he will take to allow flexibility for apprenticeship training providers and colleges in the event of employers restricting access to their workforce in response to the covid-19 outbreak. [29999]
Gillian Keegan (Chichester): The department is very grateful to education providers who are responding to the unique challenge of COVID-19, including making provision to continue support for vulnerable children and key workers following the announcement of 18 March. Clearly, there will be a substantial financial impact on the sector, which requires a strong response.

Firstly, where there are current planned payment profiles, we are seeking to provide stability. The Education and Skills Funding Agency will continue to pay grant-funded providers their scheduled monthly payments for the remainder of the year. Allocations for 2020/21 will have been confirmed by the end of March and payments will be made as profiled. We are also looking to put in place a process for providing reimbursement for additional costs imposed by responding to COVID-19.

Secondly, we want to ensure that apprentices can continue and complete their apprenticeship, wherever possible, despite any break that they have to take as a result of COVID-19. We are committed to working with training providers, end-point assessment organisations and external quality assurance organisations to mitigate the operational and financial impacts of this disruption and maintain the integrity of apprenticeships. We have published apprenticeship guidance and this is available here. For other funding streams, we will be making decisions on where existing rules and models may need to be modified in relation to any planned reconciliation and future year allocations.

For colleges in significant financial difficulties, the existing support arrangements remain in place including through short-term solvency support through emergency funding.

My right hon. Friend, the Chancellor of the Exchequer, has also announced a series of wider measures to support employers and employees, recognising the significant impacts caused by COVID-19. Education, training and assessment providers who operate as businesses or charities are able to access the package of measures to support businesses. Details of this support are available here. We are working closely with HM Treasury to monitor how the support packages are benefitting organisations and to consider any further action which may be required.

To provide more detailed information for further education providers, we have published operational guidance available here.

Emma Hardy (Kingston upon Hull West and Hessle): To ask the Secretary of State for Education, what contractual and financial flexibilities he will put in place for training providers and colleges to ensure that the apprenticeship provider base is sustained during the covid-19 outbreak. [30001]

Gillian Keegan (Chichester): The department is very grateful to education providers who are responding to the unique challenge of COVID-19, including making provision to continue support for vulnerable children and key workers following the announcement of 18 March. Clearly, there will be a substantial financial impact on the sector, which requires a strong response.

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**Emma Hardy (Kingston upon Hull West and Hessle):** To ask the Secretary of State for Education, with reference to the covid-19 outbreak, what steps he will take to support the income of apprenticeship training providers and colleges in the event that contracts can’t be fulfilled as a result of a reduction in participation. [30004]

**Gillian Keegan (Chichester):** The department is very grateful to education providers who are responding to the unique challenge of COVID-19, including making provision to continue support for vulnerable children and key workers following the announcement of 18 March. Clearly, there will be a substantial financial impact on the sector, which requires a strong response.

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**Emma Hardy (Kingston upon Hull West and Hessle):** To ask the Secretary of State for Education, what flexibility there will be for post-sixteen training providers and colleges from Ofsted inspections during the covid-19 outbreak. [30005]

**Gillian Keegan (Chichester):** The department is very grateful to education providers who are responding to the unique challenge of COVID-19, including making provision to continue support for vulnerable children and key workers following the announcement of 18 March. Clearly, there will be a substantial financial impact on the sector, which requires a strong response.

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To provide more detailed information for further education providers, we have published operational guidance available here.

Emma Hardy (Kingston upon Hull West and Hessle): To ask the Secretary of State for Education, what steps he is taking to introduce flexibility into the process of apprenticeship observations during the covid-19 outbreak. [30006]

Gillian Keegan (Chichester): The department is very grateful to education providers who are responding to the unique challenge of COVID-19, including making provision to continue support for vulnerable children and key workers following the announcement of 18 March. Clearly, there will be a substantial financial impact on the sector, which requires a strong response.

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Coronavirus: apprenticeship levy

Laurence Robertson (Tewkesbury): To ask the Secretary of State for Education, if he will enable apprenticeship levy costs to be temporarily used to fund existing staff wages in addition to training during the time restrictions imposed due to the covid-19 outbreak; and if he will make a statement. [31426]

Gillian Keegan (Chichester): We are developing guidance in partnership with the sector to support all parts of the apprenticeship system in response to the Covid-19 outbreak which is consistent with advice issued by Public Heath England. The specifics on this will follow as soon as possible.

National Skills Fund

Baroness Redfern: To ask Her Majesty's Government whether the £3 billion national skills fund announced in the 2019 Conservative manifesto is available to small businesses for apprenticeships. [HL2644]

Baroness Berridge: Over the course of this Parliament, the government will provide an extra £2.5 billion (£3 billion including indicative Barnett consequentials) for a new National Skills Fund. The Fund is part of a dramatic rebooting of our skills system and will help workers to have the skills they need to flourish and fulfil their potential.

To decide how best to develop the National Skills Fund, the government is planning to consult widely on the National Skills Fund, to ensure the fund provides the best return on investment.

The insights gained will help to build an understanding of how to target the fund and what types of training it should cover, to ensure it best supports people to learn new skills and prepare for future changes to the economy.

Articles of faith

Preet Kaur Gill (Birmingham, Edgbaston): To ask the Secretary of State for Education, what guidance his Department provides to universities on Articles of Faith. [33644]

Michelle Donelan (Chippenham): As independent and autonomous organisations, higher education providers (HEPs) have responsibilities under the Equality Act 2010 in relation to the protected characteristics of their staff and students. These include in relation to religion and belief. We expect them to discharge their responsibilities fully and have robust policies and procedures in place to comply with the law.

HEPs are also responsible for meeting their legal obligations relating to free speech, and this includes expressing religious views. HEPs have a duty to take reasonably practicable steps to secure freedom of speech within the law for members, students and employees of the establishment and for visiting speakers.

Sector News – Coronavirus

New government partnership with airlines to fly back British citizens stranded abroad

On Monday 30 March, the Foreign Secretary, Dominic Raab, announced a new partnership with the airline industry to fly back British citizens stranded abroad due to Covid-19.

Several airlines have signed a memorandum of understanding negotiated by the Foreign Secretary and Transport Secretary with more expected to join. The Secretaries of State also published a joint
letter to the airlines. The government will take a dual approach to flying home British travellers who are resident in the UK:

- Airlines will be responsible for transporting their passengers with pre-booked tickets, through offering them alternatives where routes are cancelled, allowing them to change tickets, where permissible – including between carriers – and offering them the latest information and advice as the situation changes.
- Where commercial routes do not exist, the government will provide up to £75 million financial support to enable special charter flights – operated by the airlines – to fly to priority countries to bring back UK residents. These will be prioritised according to the number of stranded British travellers and their vulnerability. In some places, access for flights to land and the ability to move around within the country to assemble for return flights will also be decisive factors.

The FCO travel guidance on coronavirus has been updated with the latest announcement on special charter flights where commercial routes do not exist.

You can read the press release here, the letter to airlines here and the updated FCO travel guidance here.

Home Office announces temporary changes to right-to-work and landlord checks

On Monday 30 March, the Home Office announced temporary changes to the right-to-work checks that employers must carry out on their employees and the immigration checks that landlords are required to carry out on tenants.

During the coronavirus outbreak, landlords and employers will not be required to see original documents providing additional flexibility to the usual requirements.

Further details can be found on the government website here.

Shadow ministers' letter to Gavin Williamson and Robert Jenrick

On Tuesday 31st March, Angela Rayner, Shadow Education Secretary, and John Healey, Shadow Communities Secretary, wrote a letter raising their concerns on student finance and accommodation to Education Secretary Gavin Williamson and Communities Secretary Robert Jenrick. The letter asks:

1. If the government has written to universities to instruct them that it is inappropriate to charge for accommodation not being used.
2. What steps have been taken to support similar claims for refunds from students in private accommodation.
3. What wider action universities are taking to support students in financial hardship (particularly those now unable to gain money from part-time jobs they may previously have relied upon).

You can read the full letter here.

Ofqual publish further guidance on assessment

Today, Ofqual set out details for schools, colleges, students, parents & carers on how GCSEs and A levels will be awarded following the cancellation of this year’s exams.

Exam boards will be contacting schools, colleges and other exam centres after Easter asking them to submit, by a deadline that will be no earlier than 29 May 2020, the following:
• a centre assessment grade for every student in each of their subjects: that is, the grade they would be most likely to have achieved if they had sat their exams and completed any non-exam assessment.
• the rank order of students within each grade for each subject – for example, for all those students with a centre assessment grade of 5 in GCSE maths, a rank order where 1 is the most secure/highest attaining student, and so on. This information will be used in the statistical standardisation of centres’ judgements – allowing fine tuning of the standard applied across all schools and colleges.
• a declaration from the Head of Centre making the submission.

To make sure that grades are as fair as possible across schools and colleges, exam boards will put all centre assessment grades through a process of standardisation using a model being developed with Ofqual. Ofqual will consult on the principles of the model shortly.

The guidance also provides further information on assessment for private candidates.

You can find further information about the guidance [here](#).