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:

Issy Cooke
issy.cooke@universitiesuk.ac.uk
0207 419 5434

Click on the items in the Table of Contents to go straight to the debates, answers, forthcoming business, etc.
Table of Contents

Parliamentary Business .................................................................................................................. 3
Forthcoming business ..................................................................................................................... 3
Written Questions.......................................................................................................................... 3
Coronavirus: support for universities ............................................................................................ 3
Coronavirus: higher education institution closures ......................................................................... 3
Coronavirus: accommodation free charges ................................................................................... 4
Coronavirus: consultation on apprenticeships and technical education ......................................... 4
Coronavirus: food for international students .................................................................................. 4
Coronavirus: apprenticeships ......................................................................................................... 5
Coronavirus: apprenticeship recruitment ....................................................................................... 5
Coronavirus: apprenticeships and adult education ......................................................................... 6
Christ Church College: Criminal Investigation ............................................................................. 6
Sector News – Coronavirus............................................................................................................. 7
Extension of moratorium on unconditional offer-making to 20 April ............................................. 7
OfS guidance on quality and standards ........................................................................................... 7
Ofqual guidance on A-level assessments (England only) ............................................................... 7
Scottish Qualifications Authority guidance on Higher assessments (Scotland only) .................. 7
Qualifications Wales guidance on A-levels (Wales only) ............................................................. 8
Government scaling up testing programmes .................................................................................. 8
Student Loans Company FAQs .................................................................................................... 8
UCAS Facebook Live Q&A with Michelle Donelan ..................................................................... 8
New QAA guidance ...................................................................................................................... 8
Scottish government introduces package of financial support for students .............................. 9
Michelle Donelan message to the sector ....................................................................................... 9
Sector News.................................................................................................................................... 9
Labour leadership election .......................................................................................................... 9
Shadow cabinet announced ......................................................................................................... 9
Parliamentary Business

Parliament is in Easter recess.

Forthcoming business

Parliament is in Easter recess.

Written Questions

Coronavirus: support for universities

**Dan Jarvis (Barnsley Central):** To ask the Secretary of State for Education, what steps his Department is taking to support universities during the covid-19 outbreak. [32182]

**Michelle Donelan (Chippenham):** The higher education (HE) sector is facing challenges during these unprecedented times. The government’s priority is the safety and wellbeing of students and staff. On Friday 20 March, I wrote to HE providers to thank them for the huge amount of work they have done to mitigate the impact of COVID-19 and to outline the steps that the department is taking to support them. On Thursday 26 March, I wrote a second letter to HE providers, giving further government advice on key issues.

We are ensuring that information-flows between the department and providers are as strong as possible. We are actively supporting the Universities UK-led Sector Coordination Group and providing guidance on GOV.UK relating to all educational settings. Working with the Office for Students (OfS), as the regulator in England, we will supplement this general guidance with more HE-specific information and have suspended a number of regulatory reporting requirements for the duration of the crisis, so providers can focus on doing their best for students.

We will do all we can to support our HE system. The department is working closely with the Home Office, the Student Loans Company, UCAS and Ofqual, as well as equivalent bodies in the devolved administrations, on measures designed to mitigate the impact of COVID-19 on the HE sector. We are also working closely with the OfS to ensure that we understand the potential financial implications of COVID-19 on the sector and to keep abreast of developments.

The latest guidance for schools and other educational settings can be found here.

Coronavirus: higher education institution closures

**Stephanie Peacock (Barnsley East):** To ask the Secretary of State for Education, when his Department plans to issue advice to schools and high education institutions on possible closures as a result of covid-19. [31597]

**Nick Gibb (Bognor Regis and Littlehampton):** The Department sends a daily email to schools, colleges and other education providers, which gives updates and new guidance. All advice is on GOV.UK and is frequently updated in line with developments.

The Department is also working closely with the English higher education sector to ensure they have the latest guidance from Public Health England (PHE) and other relevant Government departments.

Vice chancellors and college principals will make decisions about their own institutions using the latest PHE guidance. The Department is working closely with the sector to facilitate this.
Advice continues to be that campus accommodation should remain open unless advised otherwise by PHE. Many universities are home to international students, care leavers and students who are estranged from their families – all of whom might not have anywhere else to go.

**Coronavirus: accommodation free charges**

*Ms Angela Eagle (Wallasey):* To ask the Secretary of State for Education, what his policy is on universities charging accommodation fees for students while they are closed as a result of the covid-19 outbreak. [33432]

*Michelle Donelan (Chippenham):* We expect universities to communicate clearly with residential students on rents for this period and administer accommodation provision in a fair manner. I have written to vice-chancellors and set out this expectation to them.

**Coronavirus: consultation on apprenticeships and technical education**

*Baroness Garden Of Frognal:* To ask Her Majesty's Government what consideration they have given to postponing the consultation by the Institute for Apprenticeships and Technical Education on changes to the funding recommendation process during the COVID-19 pandemic. [HL2939]

*Baroness Berridge:* This is a matter for the Institute for Apprenticeships and Technical Education. I have asked its Chief Executive, Jennifer Coupland, to write to the noble Lady and a copy of her reply will be placed in the Libraries of both Houses when it is available.

**Coronavirus: food for international students**

*Lord Bourne Of Aberystwyth:* To ask Her Majesty's Government what steps they have taken to provide meals to student resident at hostels in the higher education sector who are unable to return to their home countries. [HL2925]

*Baroness Berridge:* The government is grateful for the huge amount of work being done across the higher education sector to mitigate the impacts of COVID-19 on our students and institutions.

There will be many students – international students, along with students estranged from their parents and care leavers, among others – who remain in university-owned, or private university accommodation at present, particularly now government advice is for students to remain in their current residence, and not to return home. Higher education (HE) providers should aim to ensure that sufficient institutional accommodation is available to these students.

In addition, the government has reminded HE providers of their responsibility to support services for students who remain on campus. This includes practical support to ensure students can access sufficient food and medical and cleaning supplies. HE providers have been asked to ensure catering staff are available to support on halls management, even in the event of wider university closure.

It is particularly important that universities who rely on outsourced staff, such as catering, who maintain the delivery of critical services and infrastructure, take appropriate measures to protect the health, safety and welfare of their staff.

The government is also working to improve joint continuity planning between HE providers and Local Resilience Forums to consider how to ensure availability of supply of food and medicines.

We stand ready to support HE providers in any discussion that is needed to ensure they have access to the right resources to care for their students. It is essential that students are reassured that their provider will continue to support them through these difficult and unsettling times.
Coronavirus: apprenticeships

**Lord Aberdare:** To ask Her Majesty's Government what steps they are taking to ensure that apprentices, including those on higher and degree courses, will have their courses funded to completion, during the COVID-19 pandemic. [HL2905]

**Baroness Berridge:** We understand that apprentices, including those undertaking higher level and degree apprenticeships, may face disruption to their learning as a result of the Covid-19 pandemic.

We are supporting employers and training and assessment providers to make use of distance-learning tools, wherever it is possible and practicable to do so, to enable as many people as possible to continue with and complete their apprenticeships.

We recognise that some apprentices may be unable to undertake training at present and that training providers may not currently be able to deliver it. We have therefore temporarily changed the funding rules to allow employers and providers to initiate a break in learning of over 4 weeks to ensure that apprentices can promptly resume their learning when they can do so.

Funding remains available for all apprentices continuing their apprenticeships, including higher level and degree apprenticeships.

Further guidance for apprentices, employers and providers can be found here.

We are keeping this guidance under review and will publish updates as the situation evolves.

**Lord Aberdare:** To ask Her Majesty's Government whether they intend to provide funding to public sector training providers for the breaks in learning caused by the COVID-19 pandemic as opposed to these funds being drawn from employers' levy funding. [HL2906]

**Baroness Berridge:** We are working with training providers, end-point assessment organisations and external quality assurance organisations during this challenging time to support employers and apprentices.

We are encouraging training providers to deliver training to apprentices remotely and via e-learning as far as it is practicable. Where that is not possible and a break in learning of more than 4 weeks is necessary, payments to the training provider will be suspended for the duration of the break in learning. For levy-paying employers, this means that payments from their apprenticeship service accounts will be paused. Further guidance for employers and training providers is available here.

Where the COVID-19 outbreak results in loss of income due to ceased or reduced delivery of training, training providers should consider their eligibility and apply for the wide range of financial support that HM Treasury has announced for businesses. Full details of this substantial package of support can be found here.

Coronavirus: apprenticeship recruitment

**Baroness Garden Of Frognal:** To ask Her Majesty's Government what incentives and support they plan to provide to encourage employers to continue to recruit apprentices in the coming months. [HL2938]

**Baroness Berridge:** This is a difficult time for apprentices, employers and providers of apprenticeship training, assessment and external assurance. We are committed to supporting apprentices and employers so that we can continue to build the skills capabilities that the country needs. While we recognise that many employers will not feel that they are in a position to recruit apprentices during a period of considerable uncertainty, a comprehensive package of support remains available to those that do.
Employers can still use the apprenticeship service to find a suitable provider, advertise vacancies and manage the recruitment of apprentices. In January 2020, we began rolling out all aspects of the service to smaller employers that do not pay the levy, giving them more control over accessing funding for their apprenticeship choices. This roll-out is continuing, with smaller employers able to reserve funding for new apprenticeship starts through the apprenticeship service.

We provide financial incentives to businesses interested in recruiting apprentices, including paying 95% of training costs for employers that do not pay the levy. The government meets the full cost of training for the smallest employers (those with under 50 employees) for 16 to 18 year old apprentices and some 19 to 24 year old apprentices. We also provide additional payments of £1,000 to both the employer and provider for hiring and training 16 to 18 year olds and for 19 to 24 year olds who have an Education, Health and Care Plan.

Guidance on the measures that we are taking to help employers retain their apprentices and plan with more certainty can be found here.

This will continue to be updated as the situation develops. We are also planning a number of campaigns to stimulate employer interest in the recruitment of apprentices during the period of economic recovery from COVID-19.

**Coronavirus: apprenticeships and adult education**

*Emma Hardy (Kingston upon Hull West and Hessle)*: To ask the Secretary of State for Education, what recent discussions he has had with the Chancellor of the Exchequer on guaranteeing the income of the (a) Adult Education Budget, (b) apprenticeship and (c) other study programmes during the covid-19 outbreak. [31646]

*Gillian Keegan (Chichester)*: There is urgent work under way in the department, the Education and Skills Funding Agency and with the Greater London Authority (GLA) and Mayoral Combined Authorities (MCAs) to ensure that we have the appropriate policy response in place to respond to the impact of Covid-19 on the Further Education sector and its adult learners.

We are also looking at how we can help to mitigate the impact on the activity-based funding model for apprenticeships . On 16-19 funding, we do not anticipate that the closure will affect 2019/20 or 2020/21 funding for which education institutions’ allocations have already been calculated. We are looking at the implications for future years and will clarify as soon as we are able to.

**Christ Church College: Criminal Investigation**

*Lord Myners*: To ask Her Majesty’s Government what discussions they have had with the Charity Commission about any investigation of the governance of Christ Church College, University of Oxford. [HL2963]

*Baroness Berridge*: There have been no discussions. Registered higher education (HE) 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, and if providers fall short the OfS has powers to intervene.

All HE providers, whether registered or not, are autonomous and self-regulating, and the government can only intervene where statute allows.
Sector News – Coronavirus

Extension of moratorium on unconditional offer-making to 20 April

On Friday 3 April, the Office for Students Chief Executive Nicola Dandridge wrote a letter to providers on the extension of the moratorium on changing offers until 20 April, except in limited circumstances. The OfS also published guidance on the moratorium, including a short Q&A on whether the moratorium applies to postgraduate and international students, and offers based on interview, portfolios or auditions.

While the moratorium is extended, unconditional offers will now be allowed in limited circumstances, including for international and domestic students who have already achieved the requisite qualifications, for example mature students.

You can find the letter from the Office for Students here and the guidance here.

OfS guidance on quality and standards

On Friday 3 April, the OfS also published further guidance on how it will approach the regulation of quality and standards during the period of disruption resulting from the coronavirus pandemic. This guidance is in place until further notice.

The guidelines note that during this period there will be two primary mechanisms to ensure it is able to identify cases about which it may have regulatory concerns. First, OfS requires providers to report when they intend or expect to cease teaching some or all of their courses to one or more groups of students. Second, OfS will continue to encourage students and other third parties to notify it of any concerns about the arrangements put in place by an individual provider.

You can find the guidance here.

Ofqual guidance on A-level assessments (England only)

On Friday 3 April, Ofqual published guidance for England which details how GCSEs, AS and A-levels will be awarded this summer along with further guidance for teachers, students, parents and carers.

The guidance outlines the process for schools and colleges to submit grades to the exam boards, including a list of the evidence teachers should use to make their decision.

To ensure that grades are fair, a process of standardisation will be developed and consulted on. Final grades will be expected on or before the August results day.

You can read the press release here, guidance here and the letter to students here.

Scottish Qualifications Authority guidance on Higher assessments (Scotland only)

The Scottish Qualifications Authority published guidance on the approach to how schools and colleges in Scotland should grade National 5, Highers and Advanced Highers and includes guidance for learners.

You can find the guidance for schools and colleges here and the guidance for learners, parents and carers here.
Qualifications Wales guidance on A-levels (Wales only)

Qualifications Wales has also published its guidance on A-level grades in Wales. It sets out the evidence that teachers should use to grade students and includes FAQs and guidance for teachers and learners.

You can find the guidance for centres here, a message for learners here and FAQs here.

Government scaling up testing programmes

On Saturday 4 April, the UK government published a policy paper outlining how it intends to scale up testing programmes, including information on how universities will be supplying lab space, equipment and skilled people to maximise Covid-19 testing capacity.

You can read the policy paper here.

Student Loans Company FAQs

On Monday 6 April, the Student Loans Company (SLC) announced the decision to temporarily close its contact centres. SLC is therefore providing updated information to students, graduates, universities and colleges with answers to frequently asked questions.

You can find the FAQs here.

UCAS Facebook Live Q&A with Michelle Donelan

On Tuesday 7 April, UCAS hosted a Facebook Live Q&A with universities minister Michelle Donelan, the Chief Executive of UCAS, Clare Merchant and Ofqual’s Director of Policy and Strategic Relationships for General Qualifications, Richard Garrett. The Q&A was aimed at students and offered a reassuring message for those students hoping to attend university next academic year.

You can watch the full Q&A here.

New QAA guidance

On Tuesday 7 April and Wednesday 8 April, the QAA published four new sets of guidance.

Securing academic standards and supporting student achievement: including key information on exams and assessments in the current environment, communication and consultation with students, the ‘safety net’ or ‘no detriment’ approach to grading, credit volume and progression, degree algorithms, the use of externals, whether certificates or transcripts should be marked to indicate the special circumstances of this year, and advice on resits and appeals.

Practice and lab-based assessment: including advice for the creative arts, music and performance, as well as laboratory and simulated clinical environments, with key guidance on topics such as alternative modes of assessment and student support.

Accelerated degrees: focusing on topics including alternative assessments, progression, learning outcomes, student deferrals and delays.
Work-based learning (including placements / partnerships / apprenticeships / study abroad): providing guidance on professional and optional placements, study and work placements abroad, apprenticeships and partnership working.

You can find the guidance here.

**Scottish government introduces package of financial support for students**

On Wednesday 8 April, the Scottish government announced it is offering a £5m package of emergency financial support to help students facing hardship as a result of Covid-19, including a £2.2m fund for higher education students specifically. Students will be able to apply for this fund directly to their institution.

You can find more information here.

**Michelle Donelan message to the sector**

On Wednesday 8 April, universities minister Michelle Donelan, wrote a message to the sector in Research Fortnight, thanking the sector for its rapid response to the Covid-19 pandemic, while acknowledging some of the financial and staffing challenges faced.

You can read the message here.

**Sector News**

**Labour leadership election**

On Saturday 5 April, the Labour party announced that Keir Starmer MP has been elected Leader of the Labour Party and Angela Rayner has been elected Deputy Leader of the Labour Party.

You can find out more information here.

**Shadow cabinet announced**

On Monday 6 April, the shadow cabinet was announced.

Key appointments include:
- Rebecca Long-Bailey, Shadow Education Secretary
- Ed Miliband, Shadow Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy Secretary
- Anneliese Dodds, Shadow Chancellor of the Exchequer
- Lisa Nandy, Shadow Foreign Secretary
- Nick Thomas-Symonds, Shadow Home Secretary

You can find the full list of shadow cabinet positions here.