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 Committee oral evidence session with Gavin Williamson MP

On Wednesday 29 April, the Education Committee held a virtual session on the impact of COVID-19 on education and children’s services. The witness for this session was the Secretary of State for Education, Gavin Williamson MP.

During the session he confirmed the Department for Education’s aim was to preserve the stability of the whole university sector, and stressed his three priorities centred on supporting students, preserving the UK’s excellent research base and the role of universities in their local economies and communities.

Gavin Williamson did not confirm when the government’s response to UUK’s proposed package of measures would be issued, but repeatedly stressed he and his department were working closely with UUK.

In response to other questions, the Education Secretary confirmed that DfE was assessing the additional mental health needs of students and that universities must provide teaching and learning in order to receive tuition fee funding.

You can watch it [here](#).

Forthcoming business

Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy oral questions

On Monday 4 May at 2:30pm, BEIS Ministers will answer questions on the floor of the House.

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

Education oral questions

On Tuesday 5 May at 11:30am, Education Ministers will answer questions on the floor of the House.

This will include questions on support for the higher education sector during Covid-19 and what steps the government are taking to ensure the attainment gap does not widen.

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

Lords European Union Committee session with Michael Gove

On Tuesday 5 May at 2:30pm, the Lords European Union Committee will be holding a virtual session on ‘Progress of UK-EU future relationship negotiations’. The witness for this session is Michael Gove, Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster and Minister for the Cabinet Office.

You can watch the session [here](#).
Written Questions

Coronavirus: accommodation

Rachel Hopkins (Luton South): To ask the Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government, what discussions his Department has had with private university accommodation providers on waiving rental fees for students during the covid-19 outbreak. [38986]

Christopher Pincher (Tamworth): The Department is actively engaging with stakeholders across the student accommodation sector, including private student accommodation providers, to understand the challenges posed by the current crisis and to establish the most effective means of supporting the whole of the sector.

During this period tenants, including student tenants, remain liable for rent. Some universities and private accommodation providers have chosen to release students from their contracts early and not charge rent for students returning home. The negotiation of rent waivers and early releases from contracts is a matter between the parties concerned. However, we expect universities to communicate clearly with residential students on rents for the summer term and administer accommodation provision in a fair manner.

Colum Eastwood (Foyle): To ask the Secretary of State for Education, what discussions he has had with the Northern Ireland Executive on ensuring that students tied into private rental agreements are supported during the covid-19 outbreak. [39750]

Michelle Donelan (Chippenham): As my right hon. Friends the Prime Minister and Chancellor of the Exchequer have both made clear, the government will do whatever it takes to support people affected by COVID-19.

Housing and student maintenance loans are devolved matters, as is higher education. However, the department has been working closely with colleagues in Northern Ireland to discuss a range of higher education areas affected by the COVID-19 outbreak.

The government encourages universities and private hall providers to be fair in their decisions about rent charges for this period.

Students who are tenants with individual private landlords should discuss the possibility of an early release from their lease.

If a student thinks that their accommodation provider is treating them unfairly, they can raise a complaint under the UK accommodation codes of practice as long as their provider is a code member. The codes can be found here and here. The code of practice for the Landlords Association for Northern Ireland here.

Students with a part-time employment contract should speak to their employer about the Coronavirus Job Retention Scheme (more information here) which has been set up to help pay staff wages and keep people in employment.

Abena Oppong-Asare (Erith and Thamesmead): To ask the Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government, what plans he has to work with private student accommodation providers to offer students affected by the covid-19 lockdown measures an early release from their accommodation contract. [37962]

Christopher Pincher (Tamworth): The Department is actively engaging with stakeholders across the student accommodation sector, including private student accommodation providers, to understand the challenges posed by the current crisis and to establish the most effective means of supporting the whole of the sector.

The negotiation of early releases from contracts is a matter between the parties concerned. The Government encourages student accommodation providers, landlords, letting agencies and tenants to
Mr Barry Sheerman (Huddersfield): To ask the Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government, what assessment his Department has made of the potential merits of providing support for students in rented accommodation through Government subsidies for (a) rent holidays and (b) a freeze on rent payable during the covid-19 outbreak. [37458]

Christopher Pincher (Tamworth): We have announced a radical package of measures to protect renters, including students, affected by coronavirus. Students will continue to receive scheduled payments of loans towards their living costs for the remainder of the current, 2019/20, academic year and we understand that most universities maintain hardship funds, which can be accessed where necessary. The Government has also announced unprecedented measures to support workers, including students who are workers under PAYE, during this period by paying up to 80 per cent of their wages.

The Department is actively engaging with stakeholders across the student accommodation sector, including private student accommodation providers, to understand the challenges posed by the current crisis and to establish the most effective means of supporting the whole of the sector. The negotiation of early releases from contracts is a matter between the parties concerned. The Government encourages student accommodation providers, landlords, letting agencies and tenants to act flexibly and adopt a common-sense approach to issues that may arise in the current circumstances.

Claire Hanna (Belfast South): To ask the Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government, what guidance he is providing to (a) landlords and (b) letting agencies who rent private accommodation to students who will move out of term-time accommodation due to the covid-19 outbreak. [35060]

Christopher Pincher (Tamworth): We have published guidance for landlords, tenants and local authorities in the context of coronavirus (COVID-19) which can be found here. Landlords or letting agencies who rent private accommodation to students must continue to comply with existing legislation including, in the case of some shared accommodation, specific Houses in Multiple Occupation licensing rules. (See here)

During this period, landlord, letting agency and tenant obligations have not changed and tenants remain liable for rent. Some universities and private accommodation providers have chosen to release students from their contracts early and not charge rent for students returning home. However, in the case of private landlords and letting agencies, the negotiation of rent waivers with student tenants is a matter between the parties concerned. We encourage landlords, letting agencies and tenants to adopt a pragmatic, common-sense approach to issues that may arise in the current circumstances.

Coronavirus: tuition fees for health students

Geraint Davies (Swansea West): To ask the Secretary of State for Health and Social Care, whether final year trainee (a) doctors and (b) nurses will be charged tuition fees while working for the NHS during the covid-19 outbreak. [37381]

Helen Whately (Faversham and Mid Kent): Medical students and student nurses will continue to be required to pay tuition fees for their final term. Given the extended length of medical degrees, which can be up to six years in length, Health Education England pay medical student tuition fees from year 5 of study. As part of the Government’s COVID-19 response, current year 5 medical students are currently being graduated by their medical schools early to enable them to apply for Provisional Registration with the General Medical Council, and if they so choose to deploy into Foundation Year 1 posts. Those that do so will be contracted from the date they start their employment and employed under the 2016 terms
and conditions for doctors and dentists in training. They will also continue to get their National Health Service bursary and student maintenance loan.

Year 3 nursing students have been invited to opt in to paid placements in the NHS. All students who do opt in to support the COVID-19 response will be rewarded fairly for their hard work. Students will be getting a salary and automatic NHS pension entitlement at the appropriate band. They will also still receive their student maintenance loan and Learning Support Fund payments too.

Decisions about the NHS workforce in Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales, including the funding that they provide for students, are a matter for the devolved administrations of those countries.

**Coronavirus: grant for student nurses**

**Mr Barry Sheerman (Huddersfield):** To ask the Secretary of State for Health and Social Care, what steps his Department plans to take support student nurses that began their courses in 2017 and are therefore not eligible for the grant announced by the Government in December 2019. [37445]

**Helen Whately (Faversham and Mid Kent):** The maintenance grants announced on the 18 December 2019 are available to new and continuing Nursing, Midwifery and Allied Health Professional (NWMAHP) students from September 2020. NMWAHP students who started courses in the 2017/18 academic year and will have completed their studies will not receive backdated payments. The move from bursaries to loans in 2017 enabled the Government to increase the upfront financial support available to students while studying by around 25%.

Final year nursing students, of which the vast majority commenced their studies in 2017, have been invited to opt in to paid placements to support the COVID-19 response. We have guaranteed that all nursing students who do opt in to paid placements will be rewarded fairly for their hard work. Nursing students who opt in will be getting a salary and automatic National Health Service pension entitlement at the appropriate band. They will also still receive their student maintenance loan and Learning Support Fund payments too.

**Coronavirus: apprenticeships**

**Dan Jarvis (Barnsley Central):** To ask the Secretary of State for Education, what steps his Department is taking to provide financial support for apprenticeships delivered by independent training providers following the covid-19 outbreak. [37663]

**Gillian Keegan (Chichester):** As my right hon. Friends the Prime Minister and Chancellor of the Exchequer have both made clear, the government will do whatever it takes to support people affected by COVID-19.

We recognise the financial impact on training providers, and have been regularly liaising with the sector and working to make changes where we can. On 24 April 2020, we published details of a provider relief scheme that will offer targeted financial support for training providers. This is designed to retain capacity within the apprenticeships and adult education sector to deliver the skills we need to support economic recovery. As part of that, we want to maintain support for existing learners and employers and enable new learners to enrol. Full details of the scheme are available [here](#).

This is in addition to the series of wider measures to support employers and employees set out by my right hon. Friend, the Chancellor of the Exchequer, on 3 April. Details are available [here](#).

The full range of our latest guidance and advice for all educational settings can be found [here](#).

These are rapidly developing circumstances and we will continue to keep the situation under review and to keep Parliament updated accordingly.

**Janet Daby (Lewisham East):** To ask the Secretary of State for Education, what recent discussions he has had with the Institute for Apprentices and Technical Education on training providers to assess apprentices’ qualification based on (a) progress at work and (b) coursework results. [37912]
Gillian Keegan (Chichester): Wherever possible, we want apprentices and employers to continue apprenticeships and complete end-point assessment. We are working closely with the Institute for Apprenticeships and Technical Education (IfATE) to introduce flexibilities to mitigate the effects of disruption to assessment, training or employment caused by the Covid-19 outbreak.

End-point assessments can now be carried out remotely if they are authorised by the external quality assurance provider for the apprenticeship standard. The requirements for this are set out in the guidance published on the IfATE’s website here.

Our intention is to safeguard the quality of apprenticeships and end-point assessment is an important part of that. We do not consider that it would be appropriate to estimate an apprentice’s occupational competence by other means.

Guidance setting out how the apprenticeship programme is responding to the impact of Covid-19 is available here. We are keeping the guidance under review and will publish updates as the situation evolves.

Dan Jarvis (Barnsley Central): To ask the Secretary of State for Education, what steps he is taking to ensure students who are unable to complete apprenticeships are awarded their qualifications following the covid-19 outbreak. [37664]

Gillian Keegan (Chichester): Wherever possible, we want apprentices and employers to continue apprenticeships and complete end-point assessment. We have introduced flexibilities to mitigate the effects of disruption to assessment, training or employment caused by the COVID-19 outbreak.

We are encouraging training providers to deliver training to apprentices remotely and via e-learning as far as is practicable. This includes furloughed apprentices who are able to continue with their apprenticeship training and end-point assessment. We are also allowing the modification of end-point assessment arrangements, including remote assessments wherever practicable and possible, to enable apprentices to successfully complete their apprenticeship. Apprentices who have been made redundant are also be able to complete their training and assessment in certain circumstances. Our intention is to safeguard the quality of apprenticeships, and we believe that end-point assessment is an important part of that.

Guidance setting out how the apprenticeship programme is responding to the impact of COVID-19 is available here. We are keeping the guidance under review and will publish updates as the situation evolves.

Coronavirus: student numbers and research and innovation funding

Colleen Fletcher (Coventry North East): To ask the Secretary of State for Education, what assessment his Department has made of the effect of the covid-19 outbreak on (a) the number of (i) international student numbers and (ii) domestic student numbers intending to take up a university place in the 2020 academic year and (b) research and innovation funding. [39637]

Michelle Donelan (Chippenham): We are very grateful for the work that universities are doing in supporting students, undertaking ground-breaking research and providing specialist equipment. We are working closely with them to understand the financial risks and implications that they might face at this uncertain time.

The COVID-19 outbreak will have an impact on international students. The government is working to ensure that existing rules and regulations relating to international students, including visa regulations, are as flexible as possible under these unprecedented circumstances.

My right hon. Friend, the Chancellor of the Exchequer, has also announced an unprecedented package of support, including the Coronavirus Job Retention Scheme and a range of business loan schemes, to help pay wages, keep staff employed and support businesses whose viability is threatened by the outbreak.
We recently confirmed universities’ eligibility for these schemes, and we are working closely with the sector, the Office for Students (OfS) and across the government to understand the financial risks that providers are facing, stabilise the admissions system and help providers to access the support on offer.

The Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy and UK Research and Innovation analysts are working closely with the Department for Education, OfS and wider non-government stakeholders to undertake a rapid programme of analysis to better understand the impact of COVID-19 on a range of research institutions including universities and analyse suitable policy responses.

**Coronavirus: economic effect of covid-19 in university towns and cities**

**Colleen Fletcher (Coventry North East):** To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer, what assessment he has made of the economic effect of the covid-19 outbreak on university towns and cities. [39668]

**Kemi Badenoch (Saffron Walden):** The government continues to monitor the impact of Covid-19 on local communities across the United Kingdom, including through regular engagement with local authorities, Local Enterprise Partnerships and Mayoral Combined Authorities. In responding to these challenges, the government remains committed to levelling up opportunity in every region and nation of the UK.

**Coronavirus: access to online learning**

**Stuart Anderson (Wolverhampton South West):** To ask the Secretary of State for Education, whether he is taking steps to ensure that online access to learning is put in place for pupils and students at schools and higher education institutions that have not developed online resources; and if he will make a statement. [34409]

**Nick Gibb (Bognor Regis and Littlehampton):** The Department is committed to ensuring that children can continue to learn at home in these very difficult circumstances. We recognise that many schools and colleges have already shared resources for children who are at home, and we are grateful for this.

The higher education regulator in England, the Office for Students, has produced guidance on practical ways in which university students can complete their studies whilst ensuring quality and standards are upheld.

The Government is working closely with the Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education to ensure students continue to leave university with qualifications that have real value, reflect their hard work and allow people to progress.

The Department has issued guidance for schools which signposts to an initial list of free online resources identified by educational experts and teachers. Many other suppliers have also helpfully made their resources available for free. The guidance is available here.

The Department has also issued information, guidance and support to parents and carers of children who at home, which is available here.

Leading state schools have collaborated to open The Oak National Academy, which was launched online on 20 April. This new initiative is led by 40 teachers who have assembled video lessons and resources for any teacher in the country to make use of if they wish to do so. 180 video lessons will be provided each week, across a broad range of subjects, for every year group from Reception through to Year 10. Additionally, the BBC has developed resources for families as part of a comprehensive new education package, which is now available on TV and online.

Devices will be ordered for the most disadvantaged children who would otherwise not have access and are preparing for examinations in Year 10, for those who receive support from a social worker, and for care leavers.
Where care leavers, children with a social worker at secondary school and children in Year 10 do not have internet connections, we are working to provide 4G connectivity to them so that they can study at home.

Local authorities, trusts and other relevant organisations overseeing schools have been given guidance on how to place online orders for Government-funded and allocated devices for eligible children and young people.

The Department is also working with major telecommunications providers to exempt certain educational resources from data charges, so that this does not add to household expense.

**Peter Kyle (Hove):** To ask the Secretary of State for Education, what steps he is taking to support online learning for disadvantaged university students. [38991]

**Michelle Donelan (Chippenham):** As my right hon. Friends the Prime Minister and Chancellor of the Exchequer have both made clear, the government will do whatever it takes to support people affected by COVID-19.

Despite the significant disruption being felt across the higher education (HE) sector, students rightly deserve the appropriate support and recognition for their hard work and dedication. HE providers take their responsibilities seriously and are best placed to identify the needs of their student body as well as how to develop the services needed to support it. Many HE providers have moved rapidly to develop new ways of delivering courses through online teaching and alternatives to traditional end-of-course exams.

When making changes to the delivery of their courses, HE providers need to consider how they support all students, particularly the most vulnerable. This includes students suffering from COVID-19, students who need to self-isolate, international students and students who are either unable or less able to access remote learning for whatever reason, as well as care leavers, students who are estranged from their families and students with disabilities.

The Office for Students (OfS) has recently published guidance setting out the actions that it will take to support providers to maintain standards and teaching quality. It highlights flexible models for teaching, learning and assessment that will most likely satisfy OfS quality and standard conditions. On 23 March, the Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education published the first in a series of good practice guidance notes that are available to all UK HE providers.

HE providers should make all reasonable efforts to enable students to complete their studies, for achievement to be reliably assessed and for qualifications to be awarded securely.

Many HE providers will have hardship funds to support students in times of need, including emergencies. The expectation is that where any student requires additional support, such as access to the Internet, providers will support them through their own hardship funds.

The OfS have stated that providers are permitted to divert more of their student premium funding to their hardship funds to support students, including through the purchase of IT equipment. Providers should particularly ensure that students in the most vulnerable groups are able to access this support where needed.

**Coronavirus: university labs for testing**

**Emma Hardy (Kingston upon Hull West and Hessle):** To ask the Secretary of State for Health and Social Care, what discussions he has had with representatives of the university sector on using university labs for testing purposes for covid-19. [37805]
Ms Nadine Dorries (Mid Bedfordshire): The Department is working with a cross-section of industry and public sector organisations to increase testing capacity in line with the COVID-19 testing strategy. The Department have engaged individual universities, research institutes and Universities UK about how best to get involved and laboratories at several universities are now providing lab capacity and equipment to labs for testing purposes for COVID-19.

Coronavirus: support for final year students

Mr Richard Holden (North West Durham): To ask the Secretary of State for Education, what steps he is taking to ensure that university students in their final year receive the support they need during the covid-19 outbreak. [35058]

Michelle Donelan (Chippenham): The government is doing all it can to keep staff and students at our universities safe in this unprecedented situation, while mitigating the impact on education. I have written to students to outline the support available and we continue to work closely with the sector, putting student wellbeing at the heart of these discussions. The letter to students is available here.

My clear expectation is that universities should make all reasonable efforts to enable students to continue and complete their studies; for their achievements to be reliably assessed; and for qualifications to be awarded securely. Despite the significant disruption being felt across the higher education sector, students deserve appropriate support and recognition for their hard work and dedication - many universities and colleges have moved rapidly to develop new ways of delivering courses through online teaching and alternatives to traditional end-of-course exams. The Office for Students has also recently confirmed that providers are able to use the student premium to support students to access IT equipment and internet connectivity where needed.

Students will continue to receive scheduled payments of loans towards their living costs for 2019/20. Both tuition and living costs payments will continue irrespective of closures or whether learning has moved online.

Many students will be feeling uncertain and anxious and it is vital that students can still access the mental health support that they need. Many providers are bolstering their existing mental health services and adapting the delivery of these services to means other than face-to-face. These services are likely to be an important source of support to students during this period of isolation.

Coronavirus: financial support for students

Emma Hardy (Kingston upon Hull West and Hessle): To ask the Secretary of State for Education, what recent discussions he has had with the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions on enabling students that are unable to (a) work and (b) be furloughed to claim universal credit during the covid-19 pandemic. [37820]

Michelle Donelan (Chippenham): Students with a part time employment contract should speak to their employer about the Coronavirus Job Retention Scheme which has been set up to help pay staff wages and keep people in employment. HMRC are working urgently to get the scheme up and running and we expect the first grants to be paid within weeks.

Students suffering hardship should in the first instance contact their provider. Many universities have hardship funds to support students most in need and contact details are available on university websites.

Undergraduate students studying on full-time courses will continue to receive their maintenance loan payments as planned for the remainder of this academic year, 2019/20. Eligible students who need to undertake additional weeks of study on their course in the current academic year may qualify for additional long courses loan to help with their living costs.

Certain groups of students eligible for benefits such as lone parents will continue to qualify for Universal Credit in addition to their maintenance loans.
Tommy Sheppard (Edinburgh East): To ask the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions, when she plans to respond to Question 30815 of 17 March 2020 from the hon. Member for Edinburgh East.

Will Quince (Colchester): Students who do not ordinarily have entitlement to Universal Credit (UC) and who receive a maintenance loan or grant through the student finance system, will continue to be able to draw upon this financial support until the end of this academic year.

Those who do not receive student finance and who would ordinarily not have entitlement to UC, such as those undertaking a part-time course which would otherwise not be considered as compatible with the requirements for them to look for and be available for work, will have entitlement to UC. We have disapplied UC and both legacy and new style JSA work preparation, work search and availability requirements and related sanctions. This will initially be for a three-month period. After three months, consideration will be given as to whether a further extension is required.

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Sector News

Office for Students briefing on supporting students’ mental health

Today the OfS has published the second in a series of briefing notes designed to share the ways universities and colleges are supporting students. The briefing highlights the practical and innovative ways that universities and colleges have been changing their work to support student mental health.

Find the briefing note [here](#).

Scottish government rapid research funding

The Scottish government is providing £5m of funding to 55 rapid research projects in 15 universities and research institutions. The projects will help increase understanding of Covid-19, screen potential treatments, and support clinical trials.

Find the press release [here](#).