

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

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Parliamentary Business

Education Secretary Gavin Williamson's statement to parliament on schools and colleges reopening

On Tuesday 1 September Education Secretary Rt Hon Gavin Williamson MP made a statement to parliament on the reopening of schools and colleges.

The statement largely focused on schools, but contained a section outlining the latest developments with the awarding of GCSEs, A Levels and BTECs and particularly the measures the government and universities had put in place to increase flexibility and maximise fairness in the system. Shadow Education Secretary Kate Green MP asked Gavin Williamson what support could be provided to universities that had lost students, and whether the government planned to delay the 2021 exam season, however, these specific points were not addressed by the Education Secretary. During a response to a question from a Patrick Grady MP (SNP), Gavin Williamson stated he was working closely with Universities UK on the support needed to help universities expand and that his team was working across the devolved administrations to "ensure that the brilliant university sector continues to prosper in the future".

The statement can be read [here](#).

Question to Health Secretary on guidance to universities on the return of students

On Tuesday 2 September, Secretary of State for Health and Social Care Matt Hancock made a statement to the House on Covid-19. Daniel Zeichner MP (Labour), asked the minister a question on the advice the secretary of state is giving universities on students returning to university and the support his department is giving. Matt Hancock responded, "We're working closely with DfE to ensure a successful and safe return of universities in the way today we're seeing a successful and safe return of schools".

You can read the full question and response [here](#).

Education Select Committee Session with Ofqual

On Wednesday 2 September, the Education Committee questioned various representatives from Ofqual - Roger Taylor (Chair), Julie Swan (Executive Director for General Qualifications), and Dr Michelle Meadows (Executive Director for Strategy, Risk and Research). Prior to the session, Ofqual's Chair submitted a written statement to the committee which can be read [here](#).

During the session, Taylor stated that Ofqual advised the Education Secretary against cancelling exams, and that they knew there would be challenges developing any algorithm as there are large numbers of grades which do not match teacher predictions. Swan confirmed that private candidates would have to sit exams in autumn to receive a grade.

On next year's plans, Swan said that the maximum delay to exams in 2021 that could be introduced without delaying when results could be received would be about two weeks, although even that would present challenges. Taylor also admitted that there were challenges around grade inflation and competition between 2020 and 2021 A-level students applying for university and jobs next year, and that Ofqual are considering carefully how to manage this so that the 2021 cohort are not disadvantaged.

The hearing can be watched [here](#).

Forthcoming business

Education oral questions

On Monday 7 September at 2:30pm, Education ministers will answer questions from the floor of the Commons.

Virendra Sharma MP and Tanmanjeet Singh Dhese MP will ask a question on support for universities accepting higher numbers of domestic students. Patrick Grady MP and Marion Fellows MP will ask about additional funding for higher education. Felicity Buchan MP will ask a question on free speech in universities. Richard Thomson MP will ask about visas and immigration rules for international students after the transition period. Holly Mumby-Croft MP will ask a question on departmental support for universities to increase the number of places available to students in 2020-21.

You can watch the oral questions [here](#).

Immigration and Social Security Co-ordination (EU Withdrawal) Bill

On Monday 7 September and Tuesday 8 September, the House of Lords will consider the Immigration and Social Security Co-ordination (EU Withdrawal) Bill in the Committee Stages.

You can watch the day one session [here](#) and day two [here](#).

Lords question on the levelling up agenda in light of the Covid-19 pandemic

On Tuesday 8 September, Lord Blencathra will ask Her Majesty's Government what steps they are taking to deliver on their levelling up agenda in the light of the COVID-19 pandemic.

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

Lords question on entry rate into higher education of white students from state schools

On Tuesday 8 September, Lord Farmer will ask Her Majesty's Government what action they have taken, if any, in response to the finding in the UCAS End of Cycle Report 2019, published on 30 January, that white ethnic group students from state schools had the lowest entry rate to higher education.

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

Opposition debate on the 'personal role and involvement of the Prime Minister and Secretary of State for Education in this summer's exams fiasco'

On Wednesday 9 September, the House of Commons will hold an opposition debate on 'the personal role and involvement of the Prime Minister and Secretary of State for Education in this summer's exams fiasco'

You can watch the opposition debate [here](#).

Science and Technology Committee session on university research funding

On Wednesday 9 September at 2:30pm, the Science and Technology Committee will hold a session on university research funding.

Witnesses for this session include: Professor Julia Buckingham CBE, President and Chair, Universities UK; Professor Dame Nancy Rothwell, Chair, Russell Group; Professor Sir Anton Muscatelli, Principal and Vice-Chancellor, University of Glasgow

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

Lords debate on the Science and Technology Committee report on 'Science research funding in universities'

On Wednesday 9 September at 2:30pm, the House of Lords Grand Committee will debate a report from the Science and Technology Committee on 'Science research funding in universities'

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

Written Questions

Support for early career researchers

Chi Onwurah (Newcastle upon Tyne Central): To ask the Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy, what support is available for early career researchers who are unable to finish their research projects before the extension for UKRI-funded PhD students expires. [78658]

Amanda Solloway (Derby North): On 9 April, it was announced that UK Research and Innovation (UKRI) will offer a costed extension of up to six months for UKRI PhD students due to complete by 31 March 2021 whose study has been impacted by the pandemic. This includes 6,334 of 22,065 current UKRI-funded doctoral students. Those UKRI-funded students not in their final year may be granted extensions on a case by case basis.

On 24 April, UKRI issued detailed guidance to universities on how the policy should be implemented. UKRI has outlined that universities must put in place processes that are based upon the principles of ensuring all UKRI doctoral students are supported to complete their projects and that they should be treated fairly, generously and sympathetically given the disruptions caused to research programmes and individual's personal circumstances. Guidance is available here <https://www.ukri.org/files/news/implementation-guidance-training-grant-holders/>

UK Research and Innovation is engaging with the wider sector about the implementation of the extension and to identify and understand future impact, including the numbers of students it funds that are affected. The extension will be reviewed in four months' time to ensure that any further impacts to doctoral training are taken into account.

University funding from the China

Anthony Browne (South Cambridgeshire): To ask the Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy, how much funding each university in the UK has received from (a) the Chinese Government, (b) other Chinese state authorities and (c) companies based in China. [78893]

Amanda Solloway (Derby North): Universities in the UK are independent organisations. The Government does not collect data of this sort.

Higher education providers in the UK are required to submit certain categories of data to the Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA). This is published annually [here](#). This includes their overall income from a variety of sources and for a range of different activities, including teaching, research and commercial. This includes research grant and contract income from business. However, HESA data does not indicate the individual businesses concerned.

University funding from the China

Chi Onwurah (Newcastle upon Tyne Central): To ask the Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy, what support the Government makes available to help post-doctoral researchers who have left research return to the profession. [78659]

Amanda Solloway (Derby North): I refer the Hon. Member to the answer I gave her on 27 July 2020 to Question 76033.

Value for money for students during covid-19

Fiona Bruce (Congleton): To ask the Secretary of State for Education, what steps the Government is taking to ensure that students receive value for money for university courses during the covid-19 lockdown restrictions. [77565]

Michelle Donelan (Chippenham): This is a difficult and uncertain time for students, but the government is working with the higher education sector to make sure that all reasonable efforts are being made to enable students to continue their studies. We have seen some fantastic and innovative examples of high-quality online learning being delivered by providers.

The government expects universities to continue delivering a high-quality academic experience and to help students to achieve qualifications that they and employers value. We expect that higher education providers will be open for the autumn term, with a blend of online teaching and in-person tuition that they consider to be appropriate and in line with public health advice. To help providers make informed decisions about their provision in ways which minimise the risk to staff and students, the government has issued guidance for providers on reopening campuses and buildings [here](#).

The government is working with the Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education, professional bodies and the Office for Students (OfS), the higher education regulator in England, to ensure that students continue to leave university with qualifications that have real value. The OfS has produced guidance on practical ways in which students can complete their studies whilst ensuring that quality and standards are upheld. The guidance is available at the following link [here](#).

It is an OfS registration condition that providers must deliver well-designed courses that provide a high-quality academic experience for all students and that enable a student's achievement to be reliably assessed. If providers are unable to facilitate good online tuition, they should seek to avoid charging students for any additional terms that they may need to undergo as a consequence, avoiding effectively charging them twice. Whether or not an individual student is entitled to a refund of fees will depend on the specific contractual arrangements between the provider and student.

If a student is concerned about their education, they should speak to their higher education provider in the first instance. The government expects student complaints and appeals processes to be operated flexibly, accessibly and sympathetically by higher education institutions to resolve any concerns. Students who are not satisfied with their provider's final response can ask the Office of the Independent Adjudicator for Higher Education to consider their complaint if their institution is based in England or Wales.

Fee status of students from Commonwealth countries

Theresa Villiers (Chipping Barnet): To ask the Secretary of State for Education, what assessment he has made of the potential merits of treating students from Commonwealth countries the same as students from England for the purposes of university fees. [76627]

Michelle Donelan (Chippenham): To be eligible for home fee status in England, a student must have 'settled' status or a recognised connection with the UK on the first day of the first academic year of their course. This includes those who are covered by EU law, have long residence in this country or who have been granted international protection by the Home Office.

Students must normally have been resident in the UK and Islands (Channel Islands and the Isle of Man) or, in some cases, the European Economic Area and Switzerland or UK/EU Overseas Territories, for the 3 years prior to that date.

Commonwealth citizens who have the right of abode in the UK are considered 'settled' and are eligible for home fee status on that basis.

Meeting with Rosie Cooper MP and the Universities Minister on Edge Hill University

Rosie Cooper (West Lancashire): To ask the Secretary of State for Education, when the Universities Minister in his Department plans to provide a date and time for the meeting with the hon. Member for West Lancashire to discuss Edge Hill University. [76647]

Michelle Donelan (Chippenham): I am due to meet the hon. Member for West Lancashire on 1 September 2020 and look forward to discussing the matter she raised with me in person.

EHRC report on tackling racial harassment at universities

Nadia Whittome (Nottingham East): To ask the Secretary of State for Education, with reference to the Equality and Human Rights Commission's report entitled, Tackling racial harassment: Universities challenged, published in October 2019, what progress he has made on tackling racial disparities in employment at universities. [78934]

Michelle Donelan (Chippenham): Racial harassment is unacceptable, and we cannot tolerate staff and students being victims of it at our world-leading universities. There is no place in our society - including within higher education - for any form of harassment, discrimination or racism. Universities have clear responsibilities in this regard.

As independent and autonomous institutions, higher education providers are responsible for the contracts and conditions of employment that they offer to their staff. We expect universities to follow fair recruitment and employment practices in accordance with the requirements of the Equality Act (2010) to ensure that all job applicants and existing staff, regardless of race, have the opportunity to progress in their careers.

This government will continue to work closely with key partners, and the Office for Students, to drive progress on matters of racial harassment and inequality in higher education.

Nadia Whittome (Nottingham East): To ask the Secretary of State for Education, with reference to the Equality and Human Rights Commission's report entitled, Tackling racial harassment: Universities challenged, published in October 2019, what recent assessment he has made of trends in the level of racial harassment of staff in employment by universities. [78935]

Michelle Donelan (Chippenham): Racial harassment is unacceptable, and we cannot tolerate staff and students being victims of it at our world-leading universities. There is no place in our society - including within higher education – for any form of harassment, discrimination or racism. Universities have clear responsibilities in this regard.

As independent and autonomous institutions, higher education providers are responsible for the contracts and conditions of employment that they offer to their staff. We expect universities to follow fair recruitment and employment practices in accordance with the requirements of the Equality Act (2010) to ensure that all job applicants and existing staff, regardless of race, have the opportunity to progress in their careers.

This government will continue to work closely with key partners, and the Office for Students, to drive progress on matters of racial harassment and inequality in higher education.

Sector News

New Scottish government guidance for university accommodation providers

On Tuesday 1 September the Scottish government published new guidance for universities, colleges and student accommodation providers.

The main guidance included advising:

- a continuation of blended learning, with significantly reduced frequency and numbers of staff and students on campus compared to pre-COVID levels
- a requirement to keep face-to-face teaching to small groups, generally less than 30 and supported by other infection prevention control measures. Group numbers of up to 50 students may be considered in some circumstances, but only where supported by a risk assessment
- advice that face coverings should be worn in any area on campus where physical distancing cannot be guaranteed, on dedicated college and university transport and in student accommodation's indoor communal areas such as toilets, common rooms and laundry rooms
- a requirement for colleges and universities to give clear information on regulations and guidance to students arriving from outside Scotland, and to take steps to ensure international students and staff who need to quarantine comply with the law, including using appropriate disciplinary procedures

You can read the full guidance [here](#).

House of Commons Library publishes briefing on easing lockdown restrictions in FE and HE in England

The House of Commons Library has published a briefing paper on easing Covid-19 restrictions in tertiary education.

The paper is split into three sections: higher education, students, and further education. The higher education section includes information on issues around re-opening campuses, course provision in 2020, and the removal of temporary student number controls for 2020-21. The students section includes information around accommodation, supporting graduates in 2020 and tuition fee refunds. Universities UK is referred to a number of times, including UUK's [principles for emerging from lockdown](#) and our [survey](#) of members' plans for the 2020-21 academic year.

You can read the full briefing [here](#).

OfS call for evidence: Digital teaching and learning in English higher education during the coronavirus pandemic

The OfS is seeking a wide breadth of sector input and experience to understand the challenges faced, and lessons learned from remote teaching and learning delivery since the start of the coronavirus pandemic.

In particular, the OfS are seeking input on:

- the successes and advantages of remote delivery
- the challenges and limitations of digital delivery
- digital poverty
- looking ahead

The call for evidence runs from 3 September 2020 to 14 October 2020.

You can find out more information [here](#).