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

Westminster Hall debate on petitions relating to university tuition fees, strikes and Covid-19

On Monday 16 November at 6pm, a Westminster Hall debate was held to consider petitions on university tuition fees, strikes and Covid-19.

Petitions Committee member Chris Evans MP opened the debate by noting that all the petitions were slightly different, but they shared a common thread: students felt they “have not had value for money from universities”. He went on to say that submissions to the inquiry highlighted struggles to engage with online learning, a lack of contact hours, a lack of connectivity with tutors and a lack of mental health support across the board. Finally, he spoke of the lengthy and complicated process through which students could individually seek reimbursement through the OIA.

Conservative MP Esther McVey asked the minister to clarify whether students or universities were responsible for dealing with these issues and whether an automatic refund could be given to those locked down. Education Committee member Kim Johnson MP also expressed that individual students should not have to request refunds and that a system should be developed to refund fees.

Shadow Universities Minister, Emma Hardy MP, criticised the decisions and indecisiveness of the government. She asked the Minister to respond to a range of issues including hardship funding, mental health support, internet access, online learning and support for students with placement requirements.

Universities Minister, Michelle Donelan MP, responded that the government set the maximum, not the minimum, fee level and it was up to universities to ensure they are providing teaching quality that justified changing the maximum amount. Rather than focusing on wide-scale refunds, the government had focused on experience outcomes. The Minister highlighted the sector working group that had been established at the recommendation of the Petitions Committee.

You can read a transcript of the debate here.

Lords question on the impact of the spread of Covid-19 of returning students

On Monday 16 November, Lord Storey asked a question on the assessment made of the impact on the spread of Covid-19 of students returning to their universities.

Members from across the house asked for assurances that there would be sufficient testing capacity for students returning home for Christmas and for students returning to university in January. Lord Clement-Jones followed up asking when the guidance for students and staff returning to universities after the Christmas break would be available. The Minister Lord Parkinson said the aim was ‘before the Christmas’ break but would depend on developments with the pandemic.

In response to a question from Baroness Fox of Buckley on face to face teaching, the minister said that moving delivery online did not automatically mean that the quality of the provision was inferior, and that the government was keen to see face-to-face teaching, particularly in those subjects where that was important.

Baroness Blackwood asked whether students would require two negative tests before returning and if there would be any liability on universities. Lord Parkinson said the guidance for England stated only one negative test was required and did not answer the point about liability.
Finally, Baroness Thornhill asked whether any financial considerations were given to towns and cities that heavily relied on university students as part of their local economies. The Minister referred to the requirement for universities to have plans in place signed off by local directors of public health.

You can read a transcript of the question [here](#).

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**Forthcoming business**

**Education oral questions**

On Monday 23 November at 2:30pm, Ministers from the Department for Education will answer questions from the house.

Douglas Chapman MP will ask a question the potential effect of the end of the transition period on higher education and Lilian Greenwood MP will ask a question on reforming the funding for healthcare higher education.

You can read a list of tabled questions [here](#) and watch the session [here](#).

**United Kingdom Internal Market Bill**

On Monday 23 and Wednesday 25 November, the House of Lords will consider the United Kingdom Internal Market Bill in the Report Stage (day 2 and 3).

You can watch the debate [here](#) (day 2) and [here](#) (day 3)

**Westminster Hall debate on value of charity funded medical research**

On Tuesday 24 November at 9.30am, Dr James Davis will host a Westminster Hall debate on ‘the importance of recognising and preserving the unique value of charity-funded medical research in the upcoming Comprehensive Spending Review’.

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

**BEIS Committee session on post-pandemic growth: levelling up**

On Tuesday 24 November at 10:30am, the Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy Committee will hold a session on Post-pandemic economic growth: Levelling up - local and regional structures and the delivery of economic growth.

Witnesses for this session include: Henri Murison, Director, Northern Powerhouse Partnership; Katherine Bennett, Chair, Western Gateway; The Lord Kerslake, Chair, UK 2020 Commission; Rachael Greenwood, Director, Midlands Engine, Marvin Rees, Mayor, Bristol City Council; Sir Peter Soulsby, Mayor, Leicester City Council; Andrew Carter, Chief Executive, Centre for Cities; Mr Duncan Simpson, Research Director, Taxpayers’ Alliance; Rokhsana Fiaz, Mayor, Newham Council

You can watch this committee session [here](#).
Financial statement: 2020 spending review

On Wednesday 25 November, the Chancellor of the Exchequer, Rishi Sunak MP, will deliver the 2020 (one year) Spending Review alongside the Office for Budget Responsibility's latest economic and fiscal forecast.

You can watch the statement here.

Scottish Affairs Committee session on Universities and Scotland

On Wednesday 25 November at 2pm, the Scottish Affairs Committee will hold a session on Universities and Scotland.

Witnesses for this session include Professor Katherine Smith, Professor of Public Health Policy, University of Strathclyde; Professor Chris Pearce, Vice Principal for Research, Dean of Research and Deputy Head of the College of Science & Engineering, University of Glasgow; Professor Rebecca Lunn MBE, Head of the Centre for Ground Engineering and Energy Geosciences, University of Strathclyde.

You can watch this committee session here.

Written Questions

Academic publishing industry pricing and licencing practices

Bambos Charalambous (Enfield, Southgate): To ask the Secretary of State for Education, if the Government will reconsider its decision not to conduct an assessment of the academic publishing industry's pricing and licensing practices for ebooks in order to improve access to ebooks for schools and universities during the covid-19 outbreak. [115769]

Michelle Donelan (Chippenham): The government brought forward the zero rate of VAT on e-publications from December. The extension of the zero rate of VAT has been introduced to provide consistency in approach between certain physical and digital publications. This will make e-publications more affordable for schools and universities. The government keeps all taxes under review, including VAT. No assessment of the effect of the academic publishing industry’s pricing and licensing practices for ebooks is currently planned.

On 1 October, the department announced a further remote education support package, to help schools and further education (FE) providers meet the remote education expectations set out in guidance and direction.

Many elements of the support package are already in place and more will be available over the coming months to schools and FE providers. These can be accessed through the remote education service on GOV.UK here.

The support package includes access to the right technology to deliver remote education, peer to peer training on how to use this effectively, and practical tools, good practice guidance and school-led webinars. This adds to existing support including the resources available from Oak National Academy, which provides video lessons across a broad range of subjects for every year group from reception to year 11 here. Oak National Academy will remain a free optional resource for the academic year 2020/21.
University accountancy and auditing contracts

Fleur Anderson (Putney): To ask the Secretary of State for Education, what the cost to the public purse is of his Department's contracts with (a) accountancy and (b) auditing for the purposes of supporting universities to access finances during the covid-19 outbreak. [115834]

Michelle Donelan (Chippenham): Higher education providers are autonomous organisations and are responsible for their own arrangements for in-house and contracted expertise to support their financial management. The Department for Education does not contract with accountancy and audit firms on behalf of providers.

On 16 July my right hon. Friend, the Secretary of State for Education, announced arrangements for the Higher Education Restructuring Regime which may be deployed as a last resort, if a decision has been made, to support a higher education provider in England at risk of financial failure, when other steps to mitigate the risks or preserve its viability have not proved sufficient.

The department will draw in accountancy and auditing expertise from external firms, on a call-off basis, to support demand-led individual casework as necessary.

Early termination of accommodation contracts

Hilary Benn (Leeds Central): To ask the Secretary of State for Education, what representations he has made to providers of accommodation on behalf of university students who wish to terminate their contracts early in order to be able to go home to study online. [114778]

Michelle Donelan (Chippenham): We are committed to ensuring students receive high-quality education. Higher education (HE) providers remain open and face-to-face teaching has continued throughout the period of national restrictions. We are only asking HE providers to move online by 9 December for the remainder of autumn term to enable students to return home prior to the winter break, safely following the national restrictions, and to still be able to continue their studies.

The government plays no direct role in the provision of student residential accommodation whether the accommodation is managed by universities or private sector organisations. We urge accommodation providers to be fair in their decisions about rent charges for this period. A number of universities and large companies waived rents for the summer term or released students early from their contracts.

If students face financial hardship and struggle to pay their rent, support is available. In the first instance, a student should speak to their landlord if they think they will have difficulty meeting a rental payment, and in this unique context tenants and landlords are encouraged to work together to put in place a rent payment scheme. 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, providers will support them through their own hardship funds.

The Competition and Markets Authority (CMA) has published guidance on consumer contracts, cancellation and refunds affected by the COVID-19 outbreak. This sets out the CMA’s view on how the law operates to help consumers understand their rights and help businesses treat their customers fairly. This guidance is available here.

Students may be entitled to refunds from certain accommodation providers depending on the terms of their contract and their particular circumstances. If students need help, organisations such as Citizens Advice offer a free service, providing information and support.

Nadia Whittome (Nottingham East): To ask the Secretary of State for Education, what discussions he is having with university representatives on students who have signed contracts for university
accommodation in relation to courses that have no in-person teaching as a result of the covid-19 outbreak. [113688]

Michelle Donelan (Chippenham): The government is committed to ensuring that students that have been living away from home are able to return home at the end of term, if they choose to do so. Higher education (HE) providers should ensure they have plans for how they support students to return home safely. As part of these plans, HE providers should plan to have moved all teaching online by 9 December, at the very latest, for a short period until the end of the autumn term. We expect providers to stagger the end of face to face provision between 3 to 9 December, both between faculties and universities in the same city (and region if possible).

Anyone who remains at university after 9 December will run the risk of having to undertake a period of isolation of up to 14 days at university, if they contracted COVID-19, or were identified as a contact of someone who had, and would therefore be at risk of not being able to travel home for the end of term break.

The government plays no direct role in the provision of accommodation, whether university or privately owned.

Officials speak regularly with representatives of private and university owned accommodation, as well as sector bodies. The government worked closely with universities to ensure they were well prepared for the return of students, and we have published guidance to help them keep students and staff as safe as possible. Protecting students’ education and wellbeing is vital, so we are supporting universities to continue delivering a blend of online and face-to-face learning where possible in a COVID-secure way. More information is available here.

Libraries and study spaces on campus should remain open to students and staff, for educational purposes, and must continue to maintain COVID-secure measures. This is important to ensure that student learning can continue as planned while the national restrictions are in place.

Students who have an accommodation contract and, because of COVID-19, think it may no longer fit their requirements, should talk directly to their housing provider.

The Competition and Markets Authority (CMA) has published guidance on consumer contracts, cancellation and refunds affected by the outbreak of COVID-19. This sets out the CMA’s view on how the law operates to help consumers understand their rights and help businesses treat their customers fairly. This guidance can be viewed here.

Students may be entitled to refunds from accommodation providers depending on the terms of their contract and their particular circumstances. If students need help, organisations such as Citizens Advice offer a free service, providing information and support.

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

Adequacy of regulation of student accommodation provision

Nadia Whittome (Nottingham East): To ask the Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government, what assessment he has made of the adequacy of regulation of student accommodation provision in the context of changing Higher Education provision as a result of the covid-19 outbreak. [112148]

Kelly Tolhurst (Rochester and Strood): The Government is committed to ensuring that every student has a safe, decent and secure place to live. The Government supports the student accommodation Codes of Practice run by Universities UK/Guild HE and Accreditation Network UK/Unipol. There are currently no plans to review the mechanism by which the Codes are
administered. The Codes of Practice set the standards for the safety of halls of residence and
purpose built student accommodation, the management of the property and the relationship between
managers and student tenants. The Department for Education has published guidance on reopening
buildings and campuses which provides additional advice on student accommodation. The
Government is also working with local authorities to raise standards in the private rented sector,
including in student accommodation, and local authorities have been given a wide range of powers to
tackle criminal landlords.

Additional support for universities without a local testing centre

Rachael Maskell (York Central): To ask the Secretary of State for Health and Social Care, what
additional support he is providing to universities in areas where there is no campus or local walk in
covid-19 testing centres. [90178]

Helen Whately (Faversham and Mid Kent): We have quickly established walk-through sites and
deployed mobile test sites so that almost all universities are within one and a half miles, allowing staff
and students to get access to tests should they develop symptoms. In cases of outbreaks we are
working with universities to deliver large batches of home test kits which can then be distributed to
students isolating in their households or halls to residence to test themselves. We also have a home
testing programme that provides access to testing to anyone, anywhere in the United Kingdom.

Key principles for additional testing in universities

Peter Kyle (Hove): To ask the Secretary of State for Health and Social Care, with reference to the
minutes of the fifty-fifth meeting of SAGE on covid-19 on 3 September 2020, if he has developed a
national strategy defining key principles for additional covid-19 testing in universities. [102131]

Helen Whately (Faversham and Mid Kent): We have quickly established walk-through sites and
deployed mobile test sites so that almost all universities are within three miles of an in-person test site
and the majority within one and a half miles, allowing staff and students to get access to tests should
they develop symptoms. In cases of outbreaks we are working with universities to deliver large
batches of home test kits which can then be distributed to students isolating in their households or
halls to residence to test themselves. The Department for Education has updated its guidance in line
with the latest public health advice from the Scientific Advisory Group for Emergencies which is
available here.

Accessibility of testing kits for students isolating in student accommodation

Rachael Maskell (York Central): To ask the Secretary of State for Health and Social Care, what
assessment he has made of the accessibility of covid-19 testing kits for students who are living in
student accommodation and isolating. [92822]

Helen Whately (Faversham and Mid Kent): We have quickly established walk-through sites and
deployed mobile test sites so that almost all universities are within three miles of an in-person test site
and the majority within one and a half miles, allowing staff and students to get access to tests should
they develop symptoms. In cases of outbreaks we are working with universities to deliver large
batches of home test kits which can then be distributed to students isolating in their households or
halls to residence to test themselves.

Tests proposed for mass testing of university students
Emma Hardy (Kingston upon Hull West and Hessle): To ask the Secretary of State for Health and Social Care, whether covid-19 tests proposed for mass testing of university students prior to Christmas will be rapid lateral flow tests manufactured by Innova Tried and Tested. [113627]

Helen Whately (Faversham and Mid Kent): The Department of Health and Social Care has indicated that it will not be possible to answer this question within the usual time period. An answer is being prepared and will be provided as soon as it is available.

Proportion of positive covid-19 tests from students in higher education settings

Mr Marcus Fysh (Yeovil): To ask the Secretary of State for Health and Social Care, what proportion of positive covid-19 test results in the last six weeks are from students in higher education settings in England, by (a) region and (b) local authority area. [107042]

Helen Whately (Faversham and Mid Kent):

Public Health England (PHE) does not publish data on COVID-19 cases in higher education settings in the format requested.

PHE publishes incidence data for educational aged cohorts here.

In week 43, there were 311 confirmed COVID-19 clusters or outbreaks in educational settings. Further information can be found here.

Steps to improve social mobility

Colleen Fletcher (Coventry North East): To ask the Secretary of State for Education, what steps his Department is taking to improve social mobility in post-16 education for people in (a) Coventry, (b) the West Midlands and (c) England. [114906]

Gillian Keegan (Chichester): True social mobility is when we put students, their needs and career ambitions first, be that through Higher Education (HE), Further Education (FE) or Apprenticeships. Our policies supporting mobility in post-16 education will benefit people across the country, including Coventry and the West Midlands.

All young people in England are required to continue in education or training until the age of 18. This was implemented because the small group of young people that were not participating included some of the most vulnerable and we want to give all young people the opportunity to develop the skills they need for adult life and to achieve their full potential.

To support students with a disadvantage to participate in post-16 education, we provide funding for disadvantaged students, aged between 16-19, via allocations to institutions. These allocations include funding to account for students’ economic deprivation (Disadvantage Block 1), and low prior attainment and/or special educational needs, using English and maths attainment as a proxy (Disadvantage Block 2).

The 16 to 19 Bursary Fund targets support at young people who most need help with the costs of staying on in post-16 education and training. It provides funding to young people, aged between 16 and 19, who need financial support with costs to stay in FE.

We also apply a disadvantage uplift through our adult funding system. This results in a funding increase for learners living in the most deprived areas of the country, as we base the uplift on the learner’s postcode. We apply this consistently across the Education and Skills Funding Agency’s ‘formula-funded’ Adult Education Budget (AEB) provision.
The AEB also provides funds to colleges and providers, to help adult learners overcome barriers that prevent them from taking part in learning. This includes Learner Support, to support learners with a specific financial hardship and Learning Support, to meet the additional needs of learners with learning difficulties and/or disabilities.

Apprenticeships offer high quality training opportunities for people of all ages and backgrounds and can be a true driver of social mobility combining a job with high quality training. To help employers offer new apprenticeships, they are now able to claim £2,000 for every new apprentice they hire under the age of 25 before 31 January 2021. This is in recognition of the particular impact that the COVID-19 outbreak has had on the employment prospects of this group. In addition, our Apprenticeships Support and Knowledge programme supports schools across England to provide disadvantaged students with information on apprenticeships.

It is more crucial than ever before that we tap into the brilliant talent that our country has to offer, and make sure that HE is available to all who are qualified by ability and attainment to pursue it, and who wish to do so, no matter where they grow up.

Latest UCAS data from 2020 admissions shows that record rates of 18 year olds from disadvantaged backgrounds are going to university. However, there is clearly more to do to make sure everyone who has the talent and potential can thrive in HE. It is not enough to just get them through the door; attention needs to be paid to retention rates and graduate outcomes. Our reforms are continuing to open routes of progression, including HE, to enable students to make informed choices.

Through Access and Participation Plans, agreed with the Office for Students (OfS), HE providers are expected to reduce the gaps in access, success and progression for under-represented groups amongst their students.

The OfS-funded Uni Connect programme delivers collaborative outreach activity to schools and colleges in areas where participation in HE is lower than expected, based on attainment levels. Uni Connect partnerships work with schools to deliver bespoke programmes to reach out to underrepresented groups in HE, and have been successful in addressing cold spots so that no young person is left behind.

**Accountability on decisions about curricula for universities who receive public funding**

**Baroness Eaton:** To ask Her Majesty’s Government how those universities which receive public funding are accountable to the taxpayer for decisions about their curricula, including decisions on whether or not to decolonise the history curriculum. [HL9829]

**Lord Parkinson Of Whitley Bay:** As autonomous institutions, it is for universities to determine the content of their curricula, but they are also required by law to uphold freedom of speech and academic freedom.

These are fundamental principles in the English higher education sector, as recognised in the Higher Education and Research Act (2017), which allow academic staff and students freely to question and test received wisdom and put forward new ideas and opinions, even if they are controversial or unpopular. These principles are also enshrined in other legislation including the Education (No. 2) Act (1986), which applies in both England and Wales and in similar provisions specific to Scotland and Wales.

Higher education providers registered with the Office for Students (OfS) must comply with the ongoing registration condition to meet Public Interest Governance Principles. Principles I and VII relate to academic freedom and freedom of speech. Ongoing Registration Condition B1 also requires that all registered higher education providers must provide a high quality academic experience for all students. The OfS has the power to investigate, sanction, and ultimately deregister providers.
The government committed to strengthening academic freedom and free speech in universities in its 2019 manifesto, and we are considering a range of legislative and non-legislative options to achieve this.

Steps for UK students studying in France to return home for Christmas

Sir Desmond Swayne (New Forest West): To ask the Secretary of State for Education, if he will take steps to arrange for UK students studying at universities in France to be tested for covid-19 to enable them to return home for Christmas without the need for quarantine; and if he will make a statement. [113462]

Michelle Donelan (Chippenham): All international arrivals and passengers travelling from a country not on the travel corridor list will need to self-isolate on their return for 14 days, and that includes UK nationals studying abroad here.

On arrival, students should adhere to Public Health England advice. Students are not exempt from wider restrictions in place when in the UK and are required to complete a passenger locator form as all other international arrivals would. The government will review these measures regularly to ensure that they are in line with the latest scientific evidence and that they remain effective and necessary.

Ability for students to return home for Christmas is very high alert areas

Zarah Sultana (Coventry South): To ask the Secretary of State for Education, what assessment he has made of the ability of students to return home for Christmas in very high local covid-19 alert areas. [107755]

Michelle Donelan (Chippenham): The government is committed to ensuring that students who wish to return home for the winter break, are able to do so. It is essential that measures are put in place to ensure this can happen as safely as possible for students, staff and the communities that they return to.

On 11 November, the department published guidance for providers on the plans for the end of the autumn term, available here.

As outlined in the guidance, we expect higher education (HE) providers to support students to return home following the period of national restrictions, whilst mitigating the risk of transmission of the virus. We are asking that students return home once the national restrictions have been lifted, in a “student travel window” lasting from 3-9 December. This should be in line with specific arrangements put in place by their HE provider, which should include a staggered end to face-to-face provision, with learning being moved online by 9 December.

We are also working closely with universities and the Department for Health and Social Care to roll out mass testing for students and we will offer this to as many students as possible before they travel home, targeting this in areas of high prevalence of COVID-19. This will help to provide further confidence that students can leave safely if they test negative. If a student tests positive before their departure, they will need to remain in self-isolation, following the relevant guidance. Moving all learning online by 9 December allows enough time for students to complete the isolation period before returning home for Christmas.
Sector News

Welsh government publish guidance on Christmas returns for students

On Tuesday 17 November, the Welsh government published its guidance for students planning to return home at the end of term.

Firstly, the 12-page document asks that students behave responsibly, reiterating the importance of considering the risks of spreading the virus in the process of returning home. It should be noted that the guidance also gives credit to students’ collective efforts to bring the number of infections in the student population down.

The guidance goes on to recommend that students with relatives who are at increased risk of serious implications from Covid-19 to take a voluntary period of reduced contact similar to a period of self-isolation. It then outlines guidance on how to self-isolate during this time.

The document also includes guidance for students who do not want or need to travel home and those who would prefer to do a little of both. It goes on to explain the exceptions to the 9 December stop date, such as clinical placements, as well as information and guidance on the lateral flow tests.

In addition, the document provides guidance on practical ways to return home safely, giving guidance on using public transport and other methods of getting home.

You can read the guidance here.

Scottish government announce move to new restrictions

On Tuesday 17 November, the Scottish Government announced that 11 local authorities are to move into the highest protection level in Scotland (level 4). The Scottish government has published this update, which states that learning and teaching in higher education ‘will be online’ in this tier, with exceptions only for the delivery of critical and time-sensitive learning, assessments and work placements that cannot be delivered remotely or postponed.

The changes to protection levels will come into effect at today (Friday 20 November) at 6pm and will remain in place for three weeks until Friday 11 December.

You can find the announcement here.

Office for Students consultation on quality and standards

On Tuesday 17 November, the Office for students released a consultation on regulating quality and standards in higher education.

The consultation makes some early proposals about how the Office for Students should set out, monitor and take action regarding the minimum baseline requirements for quality and standards, and how they would set higher numerical baselines for student outcomes.

The deadline for responses is the 12 January 2021.

You can find out more here.