

## **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**

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

On Monday 14 September and Wednesday 14 September, the House of Lords considered the Immigration and Social Security Co-ordination (EU Withdrawal) Bill in the Committee Stages.

Lord Hain (Labour) raised that it is very challenging for students who have left the UK for more than six months providing required proof of five year continuous residence. Baroness Hamwee (Liberal Democrat) raised that students might be more likely to miss the deadline to apply for settled status because they may not think a scheme called “settled status” is about them. Finally, Baroness Whitaker (Labour) criticised the retrospective requirement for students to have comprehensive sickness insurance whilst as a student or risk not getting settled status. The minister, Baroness Williams of Trafford clarified that where CSI has not been held by those previously here as a student that does not mean that an application for citizenship will necessarily be refused. She also clarified that there is no CSI requirement for the EU settlement scheme.

You can read the transcript of day three [here](#) and day four [here](#).

### **Education Committee accountability hearings with Secretary of State, Gavin Williamson**

On Wednesday 16 September Education Secretary Rt Hon Gavin Williamson appeared in front of the Education Select Committee as part of their regular accountability hearings. He was joined by Department for Education (DfE) Permanent Secretary, Susan Acland-Hood and Director for Qualifications, Curriculum and Extra-Curricular, Michelle Dyson.

Questions from members of the committee mainly focused on the decisions that were made by the DfE and Ofqual in the lead up to the publication of A Level results, the subsequent decision to revert to centre-assessed grades (CAGs) and which groups of students had been particularly affected. Gavin Williamson confirmed that active discussions about the timings for the summer 2021 exam series were ongoing, and that plans would be publicised in October.

The only question directly related to universities came from Labour MP Kim Johnson who urged the Secretary of State to guarantee there would be additional funding for universities next year to ensure all students that got the grades were able to enrol. Gavin Williamson responded by listing the actions taken to support universities to expand capacity, including the removal of the cap on medical and dental places and the opportunity to bid for money from a £10million capital fund.

You can watch [here](#).

### **Liaison Committee session with Prime Minister, Boris Johnson**

On Wednesday 16 September at 3:30pm, the Prime Minister, Boris Johnson, provided oral evidence to the Liaison Committee. Questions from committee members focused on testing capacity, the economic recovery, unemployment, the UK Trade Bill and relations with China.

Meg Hillier (Labour) asked whether the government planned to use of university labs for Covid-19 testing. The Prime Minister answered that they would be using facilities across the country. In response to a question on future support for freelance workers the Prime Minister said that rather than keeping people on schemes that prevent them getting on the labour market the government want to support them to get back in to work with in work training, apprenticeships and kick start schemes.

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

## **Lords question on arrangements for A-level and GCSE exams in 20/21**

On Tuesday 15 September, Lord Storey asked the Government what assessment they have made of the arrangements needed for A-level and GCSE examinations in the 2020/21 academic year. Minister Baroness Berridge responded that the government are committed to ensuring students taking A-levels and GCSEs in 2021 get the qualifications they deserve. She stated that exams are the fairest way of judging performance but recognised the disruption students have had to their education.

Baroness Smith of Newnham (Liberal Democrat) followed up by raising the possibly disparity between what A-levels students may achieve and the academic background needed for certain subjects, such as medicine. Lord Baker of Dorking (Conservative) suggested the government plan not to have exams next year or significantly reduce exam content. The minister highlighted that the Universities Minister was regularly meeting with the sector but that contingency plans were being worked on and that the Secretary of State for Education had asked OFQUAL to consider delaying exams next year.

Finally, Lord Taylor of Warwick asked what government is doing to address that pupils from BAME communities are less likely to be accepted by the Russell Group universities. Baroness Berridge noted that universities are autonomous institutions but regulated by Office for Students and are required to produce access and participation plans.

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

## **Health Secretary Matt Hancock Covid-19 update**

On Thursday 17 September, the Health Secretary Matt Hancock made a statement to the House on Covid-19. In response to a question by Shadow Health Secretary Jon Ashworth on extra testing in university towns, he said that it is important to prioritise testing for universities where it is clinically appropriate.

Lilian Greenwood (Lab) and Rachael Maskell (Lab) raised questions on support for universities with students returning and access to testing. Greenwood highlighted the months of planning universities have undertaken for a safe return but that this hard work will be undermined by an inability to get tests and results. She asked the minister to listen to and work with universities to improve the efficiency of the testing programme and authorise the allocation of Pillar 2 swab test kits. The minister said he is happy to work with universities who are doing so much to make the return of universities safe and secure.

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

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## **Forthcoming business**

### **Education Committee meeting on adult skills and lifelong learning**

On Tuesday 22 September at 10:00, the Education Committee will be holding a meeting on Adult Skills and Lifelong Learning.

Witnesses for this session include Matthew Percival, Director for People and Skills, Confederation of British Industry; Kevin Rowan, Head of Organising, Services and Skills and Director of UnionLearn, Trades Union Congress (TUC); Simon Parkinson, Chief Executive Officer, Workers' Education Association; Dr Sue Pember, Policy Director, HOLEX; Josie Fraser, Deputy Vice Chancellor, Open University.

Further details of the meeting have not yet been published but you will be able to find out more information [here](#).

### **Lords Debate on the UK's approach to negotiating the future relationship with the EU**

On Tuesday 22 September the Lords Grand Committee will hold a 3 hour debate on the United Kingdom's approach to negotiating the future relationship with the European Union. Lord True will move the motion to take note.

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

### **Committee on the Future Relationship with the European Union meeting on the progress of negotiations**

On Wednesday 23 September at 9:30am, the Committee on the Future Relationship with the European Union will hold a session on 'Progress of the negotiations on the UK's Future Relationship with the EU'.

Witnesses for this session include: Shanker Singham, Chief Executive Officer, Competere, Professor Catherine Barnard, Professor of European Union and Labour Law, University of Cambridge, Georgina Wright, Senior Researcher, Institute for Government

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

### **Science and Technology Committee meeting on 'A new research funding agency'**

On Wednesday 23 September at 2:30pm, the Science and Technology Committee will be holding an oral evidence session on 'A new UK research funding agency'. Witnesses for this session have not yet been confirmed.

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

### **Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy Committee session on post pandemic growth and the industrial strategy**

On Thursday 24 September at 10.30am the Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy (BEIS) committee will be holding a meeting on 'Post-pandemic economic growth: Industrial Strategy'.

Witnesses for this meeting include: Rain Newton-Smith, Chief Economist, Confederation of British Industry (CBI); Kate Bell, Head of Rights, International, Social and Economics, Trades Union Congress (TUC), Rt Hon Greg Clark MP, Chair, House of Commons Science and Technology Committee.

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

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## Written Questions

### University resources to respond to Covid-19

**Rachael Maskell (York Central):** To ask the Secretary of State for Education, what additional steps he is taking to ensure that universities have the resources they need to respond to the covid-19 outbreak. [86100]

**Michelle Donelan (Chippenham):** We are working closely with the higher education sector to provide both practical and financial support through the COVID-19 outbreak. On 10 September, we published updated guidance to the higher education sector on reopening buildings and campuses, which is available [here](#).

This updated guidance provides further advice on, among other topics, reopening university buildings, face coverings and social contacts, student accommodation, local outbreaks including student movement, and on NHS test and trace.

Furthermore, we announced a higher education support package in early May. HM Treasury confirmed higher education providers are eligible to apply for government business support schemes, and the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy announced its research stabilisation package on 27 June.

From the autumn, the government will provide a package of grants and no-interest or low-interest loans to cover up to 80% of a university's income losses from international students for the academic year 2020-21, up to the value of their non-publicly funded research activity.

On 16 July, we also announced further information about the higher education restructuring regime. This may be deployed as a last resort, if a decision has been made to support a provider in England, when other steps to preserve a provider's viability and mitigate the risks of financial failure have not proved sufficient.

We have also announced that, subject to parliamentary approval, we will completely remove temporary student number controls to help ensure that there are no additional barriers to students being able to progress to higher education.

We have lifted caps on domestic medicine and dentistry courses for 2020-21 and supported providers to offer places to as many students who have met the grades for their current offer as they have capacity for, and where there are clinical placements available, through additional grant funding to support the costs of this provision.

We are providing additional teaching grant funding to increase capacity in science, technology, engineering and mathematics (STEM) and other high-cost subjects which are vital to the country's social needs and economy. The Office for Students (OfS) will consult the sector on the details of how the allocations are made.

Providers will also be eligible to bid for a share of up to £10 million of funding to support capital expenditure. This funding will be used to support the infrastructure required to accommodate additional students recruited as a result of the changes to policy on A level grades. The fund will be administered by the OfS, and providers will be eligible to bid for projects that support expansion in 2020-21.

We will continue to monitor the situation and consider the effects that deferrals will have on future years. Funding decisions for future years will be taken at the Spending Review.

Lastly, and most importantly, we are supporting providers to protect students' mental health and wellbeing. This is a priority and I wrote to all higher education providers asking them to ensure they continue to support students. We have clarified that providers can use funding worth £256 million for

the academic year 2020-21, starting from August, towards student hardship funds and mental health support. Furthermore, the OfS has provided up to £3 million to fund the Student Space platform to bridge gaps in mental health support for students. Student Space is a collaborative mental health resource to support students at English and Welsh universities through the unique circumstances created by the COVID-19 outbreak.

### **Conducting Covid-19 tests on incoming university students**

**Peter Kyle (Hove):** To ask the Secretary of State for Health and Social Care, what assessment he has made of the potential merits of conducting covid-19 tests on incoming university students this winter, in areas with low current infection rates where testing has been de-prioritised. [86714]

**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.

### **Student appeals on their centre assessed grades**

**Seema Malhotra (Feltham and Heston) :** To ask the Secretary of State for Education, what his Department's policy is on appeals by students of their centre assessed grades; and if he will make a statement. [85052]

**Nick Gibb (Bognor Regis and Littlehampton) :** Ofqual has published summary guidance, agreed with school and college leaders, which makes clear what the process was for putting together centre assessment grades and the grounds of appeal which are available. The guidance can be viewed [here](#).

Any students who have evidence of bias or discrimination will be able to go through the normal complaints procedure at their school or college or complain to the exam board, which could investigate potential malpractice.

### **University admissions for private candidates and home-schooled students**

**Afzal Khan (Manchester, Gorton):** To ask the Secretary of State for Education, what estimate his Department has made of the number of (a) private candidates and (b) home schooled students who are missing out on a place at college or university, or employment, as a result of not having a centre assessment grade. [83927]

**Nick Gibb (Bognor Regis and Littlehampton) :**Where schools and colleges had accepted entries from external candidates (students who they have not taught themselves because they have been home educated or studying independently), those students should have been included in the process of producing centre assessment grades (CAGs), where the head teacher or principal was confident that they and their staff had seen sufficient evidence of the student's achievement to make an objective judgement.

Ofqual and the exam boards explored the options for those students who did not have an existing relationship with an exam centre and who needed results this summer for progression purposes. The Joint Council for Qualifications published guidance for exam centres on accepting private candidates which set out the options that would be available. Ofqual asked organisations that represent higher and further education earlier in the year to consider the steps that they could take when making admissions decisions this summer for any external candidates who do not receive a grade. Ofqual informed the Department that they believed that institutions would consider a range of other evidence



and information for these students to allow them to progress wherever possible. The Government asked universities to be as flexible as possible, and we will continue to make every effort to minimise the impact of the pandemic on young people's education and progression.

Students who were unable to receive a grade will need to sit exams, either in the autumn exam series or in summer 2021. Exams will be available in all GCSE, AS and A level subjects in the autumn. We have made clear that we expect schools and colleges that had accepted entries from private candidates in the summer to enter them into exams in the autumn where the students wish to sit an exam, and we have put in place arrangements to ensure that there are no financial barriers to them doing that.

**Afzal Khan (Manchester, Gorton):** To ask the Secretary of State for Education, what steps his Department has taken to ensure that (a) private candidates and (b) home-schooled students do not miss out on a place at college or university, or employment, as a result of not having a centre assessment grade. [83926]

**Nick Gibb (Bognor Regis and Littlehampton):** Where schools and colleges had accepted entries from external candidates (students who they have not taught themselves because they have been home educated or studying independently), those students should have been included in the process of producing centre assessment grades (CAGs), where the head teacher or principal was confident that they and their staff had seen sufficient evidence of the student's achievement to make an objective judgement.

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### **Laboratory capacity in universities and colleges secured for Covid-19 testing**

**John Spellar (Warley):** To ask the Secretary of State for Health and Social Care, what laboratory capacity in universities and colleges he has secured for covid-19 testing. [87479]

**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.

## **Support for universities to manage increased number of student places**

**Dr Luke Evans (Bosworth):** To ask the Secretary of State for Education, what progress he is making in supporting universities to manage the increased number of places available to students for the 2020-21 academic year. [86765]

**Michelle Donelan (Chippenham):** I refer my hon. Friend, the Member for Bosworth, to the answer I gave on 9 September 2020 to 84361.

## **Reduction in research funding available to universities**

**Baroness Randerson:** To ask Her Majesty's Government what assessment they have made of the reduction in research funding available to universities as a result of reduced charitable giving during the COVID-19 pandemic; and what plans they have to increase funding to compensate for any such reduction. [HL7991]

**Lord Callanan:** The UK's world-class universities will continue to play a critical role in delivering local and national economic prosperity, but of course they have been hard hit by COVID-19. That is why we have announced a range of measures to support universities at this difficult time.

From the autumn, the Government will provide a package consisting of low-interest loans with long pay-back periods, supplemented by a small amount of government grants through the Sustaining University Research Expertise Fund ('SURE') to cover up to 80% of a university's income losses from international students for the academic year 2020-21, up to the value of their non-publicly funded research activity.

The SURE fund aims to help sustain the research capacity of the university research base as a whole. Universities will be asked to demonstrate how they will use that funding to sustain research in areas typically funded by charities and business. Ultimately, we want critical university research capability, including charity-funded medical research, to be sustained and able to contribute to our future R&D ambitions.

## **Financial effect of predicted grades decision on universities**

**Baroness Ritchie Of Downpatrick:** To ask Her Majesty's Government what assessment they have made of the financial effect of the decision of examination bodies in England to allow predicted grades as a basis for students' applications on universities and the higher education sector. [HL7701]

**Lord Parkinson Of Whitley Bay :**My hon. Friend, the Minister of State for Universities, and departmental officials have been working closely with the higher education sector, through the Higher Education Taskforce, to review developments in the admissions cycle taking place in the current complex circumstances, including the reliance on centre-assessment grades. The taskforce continues to examine patterns of admissions, with expert input and information from the Universities and Colleges Admissions Service. This ongoing analysis and dialogue with the sector includes consideration of financial implications of the way in which the admissions cycle is operating in practice. My hon. Friend, the Minister of State for Universities, will continue to listen to the views raised through the taskforce.

The government understands that the sector is facing significant financial challenges and we are working closely with the sector, with the Office for Students (OfS), and across the government to understand these challenges. We will work closely with any provider affected. Providers with concerns about their financial viability or sustainability have been encouraged to contact the OfS at the earliest opportunity. They are now also able and encouraged to contact the Department for Education's Restructuring Unit directly.

The government has already put a number of financial support measures in place. We have announced a package of measures which combines different ways to give further support to providers at this time of financial pressure. We have pulled forward an estimated £2.6 billion worth of forecast tuition fee payments to ease cashflow pressure this autumn. We are also bringing forward quality-related research funding for higher education providers in England in the current academic year by £100 million.

To ensure that providers are able to offer increased capacity, the government will provide additional grant funding to support this provision which is vital to our economy and public services, as well as providing additional teaching grant funding to increase capacity in science, technology, engineering, and mathematics and other high-cost subjects. The OfS will consult the sector on the details of how the allocations are made in due course.

Providers will also be eligible to bid for a share of up to £10 million of funding to support capital expenditure. This funding will be used to support the infrastructure required to accommodate additional students recruited as a result of the changes to policy on A level grades. The fund will be administered by the OfS, and providers will be eligible to bid for projects which support expansion in 2020/21.

The government has also announced a further package of support to universities and other research organisations to enable them to continue their research and innovation activities. This includes £280 million of taxpayer funding as well as a package of low-interest loans with long pay-back periods, supplemented by a small amount of government grants. In sharing responsibility for the future of science and research with our world-leading university system, from the autumn the government will cover up to 80% of a university's income losses from international students for the academic year 2020/21, up to the value of their non-publicly funded research activity.

My right hon. Friend, the Secretary of State for Education, also announced further information about the Higher Education Restructuring Regime on 16 July. This may be deployed as a last resort, if a decision has been made to support a provider in England, when other steps to preserve a provider's viability and mitigate the risks of financial failure have not proved sufficient.

## **Financial support for students from vulnerable families**

**Lord Storey:** To ask Her Majesty's Government what financial support they intend to offer to students from vulnerable families who are unable to begin a degree course in September. [HL7824]

**Baroness Stedman-scott:** If a person has deferred commencement of the first year of a degree course, they are not treated as a student and may be able to receive Universal Credit if they satisfy all of the other conditions of entitlement.

If a person has already started their degree course and is deferring a follow on year, they are treated as a student and financial support for students comes from the system of student loans and grants designed for their needs. Exceptions are made where students have additional needs that are not met through the student support system.

## **Restructuring regime**

**Mr Steve Baker (Wycombe):** To ask the Secretary of State for Education, if he will make it his policy under his Department's restructuring regime to enable (a) Buckinghamshire New University and (b) other financially strong higher education institutions to assist nearby institutions in financial difficulty; and if he will make a statement. [85039]

**Michelle Donelan (Chippenham):** The government recognises the value of the higher education sector and that a high level of uncertainty remains around the scale of problems that higher education

providers, as a whole and individually, may face in the coming academic year. We have been working closely with the higher education sector, in the Higher Education Taskforce, as well as with the Office for Students (OfS) and across the government to understand the financial risks that providers are facing and to help providers to access the support on offer. Providers with concerns about their financial viability or sustainability have been encouraged to contact the OfS at the earliest opportunity. They can now also directly contact the department's Restructuring Unit [here](#).

My right hon. Friend, the Secretary of State for Education, announced further information about the Higher Education Restructuring Regime on 16 July and more details are available [here](#).

This may be deployed as a last resort, if a decision has been made to support a provider in England, when other steps to preserve a provider's viability and to mitigate the risks of financial failure have not proved sufficient. The overarching objectives that will guide the department's assessment of cases will be to protect the welfare of current students, to preserve the sector's internationally outstanding science base and to support the role that higher education providers play in regional and local economies through the provision of high-quality courses aligned with economic and societal needs.

We will consider providers' circumstances on a case-by-case basis, supported by expert advice, to ensure there is a robust value-for-money case for intervention. In cases where an Independent Business Review is carried out, the resulting restructuring plan may include options for a merger as well as for consolidation and services sharing between providers. The department's Restructuring Unit will work with the provider and other stakeholders to ensure that the best option forward is chosen to ensure that the overarching objectives, as mentioned previously, are met.

Regarding the circumstances of Buckinghamshire New University, the government does not comment on individual higher education providers.

## **Government discussions with the HE sector**

**Baroness Ritchie Of Downpatrick:** To ask Her Majesty's Government what recent discussions they have had with representatives of the higher education sector in (1) Northern Ireland, (2) Wales, (3) England, and (4) Scotland . [HL7702]

**Lord Parkinson Of Whitley Bay:** The Department for Education is in regular contact with representatives of the higher education system throughout the United Kingdom and has weekly interactions with Universities UK and the Office for Students (OfS).

We have also recently established a Higher Education Taskforce, which is looking at the admissions processes following recent changes to exam results. This taskforce includes representatives from UCAS, the OfS and a wide range of university groups. Following these changes, my hon. Friend, the Minister of State for Universities, has also had bilateral calls with the Vice Chancellors of many universities in England.

The Department has also had regular contact with its counterparts – both at ministerial and official level – in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland throughout the summer.

Officials from the department have weekly calls with colleagues from the devolved administrations on a number of policy areas, including on the COVID-19 response and higher education admissions.

At a ministerial level, there are both bilateral discussions on a regular basis and quadrilateral meetings between my hon. Friend, the Minister of State for Universities, and her counterparts in the home nations.

These are all supplemented with ad hoc discussions on emerging policy. To give an example, there were discussions regarding the recent results day and subsequent move to centre-assessed grades in England, which also led to the removal of student number controls, an area of interest to each of the devolved administrations.

We are also working directly with representatives of the higher education sector throughout the UK. An example of this is a recent conversation my hon. Friend, the Minister of State for Universities, had with the Vice Chancellors of Queens University, Belfast, the University of Edinburgh and Cardiff University.

## **Guidance on shared student accommodation during Covid-19**

**Lord Bassam Of Brighton:** To ask Her Majesty's Government what guidance they have made available relating to the management of student shared accommodation in areas (1) where there is a high prevalence of COVID-19, and (2) in local lockdown. [HL7749]

**Lord Parkinson Of Whitley Bay :**The safety and wellbeing of university staff and students is always our priority, and we are confident that universities are well prepared for the return of students, having taken measures to reduce the risk of transmission such as introducing social distancing on campus, limiting travel requirement for classes, and staggering teaching across extended days to reduce numbers on site. To help providers make informed decisions, the government has issued guidance on reopening campuses and buildings, which is available [here](#).

We support face-to-face teaching only where possible and if safety guidelines are followed but expect providers to reopen with a blend of online teaching and in-person tuition as they consider appropriate in line with public health advice. Providers are required to carry out risk assessments, modelled on a range of scenarios including where students are mixing across settings, and develop appropriate mitigations in response.

We are about to publish updated guidance on reopening higher education institutions – including face coverings, local lockdowns, and test and trace – based on the most up-to-date advice from the Scientific Advisory Group for Emergencies (SAGE). Everyone should be following basic guidance on COVID-19, including social distancing and maintaining good hand and respiratory hygiene.

We have also released guidance for landlords and tenants on renting and the COVID-19 outbreak. This sets out necessary public health measures to protect the health of students living together and those staff assisting them. We expect universities and other higher education providers to prioritise the health and safety of their staff and students and put in place measures that apply to their individual circumstances. The guidance is available [here](#).

## **Advice for universities located in areas under local lockdown**

**Lord Bassam Of Brighton :** To ask Her Majesty's Government what advice they have provided to universities located in areas under local lockdown areas about (1) teaching plans, and (2) measures to prevent the transmission of COVID-19. [HL7748]

**Lord Parkinson Of Whitley Bay :**The safety and wellbeing of university staff and students is always our priority, and we are confident that universities are well prepared for the return of students, having taken measures to reduce the risk of transmission such as introducing social distancing on campus, limiting travel requirement for classes, and staggering teaching across extended days to reduce numbers on site. To help providers make informed decisions, the government has issued guidance on reopening campuses and buildings, which is available [here](#).

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**Lord Bassam Of Brighton:** To ask Her Majesty's Government what advice they have provided to universities and higher education providers about steps to take in relation to students attending from areas where local lockdowns are in place. [HL7746]

**Lord Parkinson Of Whitley Bay :**The safety and wellbeing of university staff and students is always our priority, and we are confident that universities are well prepared for the return of students, having taken measures to reduce the risk of transmission such as introducing social distancing on campus, limiting travel requirement for classes, and staggering teaching across extended days to reduce numbers on site. To help providers make informed decisions, the government has issued guidance on reopening campuses and buildings, which is available [here](#).

We support face-to-face teaching only where possible and if safety guidelines are followed but expect providers to reopen with a blend of online teaching and in-person tuition as they consider appropriate in line with public health advice. Providers are required to carry out risk assessments, modelled on a range of scenarios including where students are mixing across settings, and develop appropriate mitigations in response.

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We have also released guidance for landlords and tenants on renting and the COVID-19 outbreak. This sets out necessary public health measures to protect the health of students living together and those staff assisting them. We expect universities and other higher education providers to prioritise the health and safety of their staff and students and put in place measures that apply to their individual circumstances. The guidance is available [here](#).

## **Assistance with additional track and trace facilities at universities**

**Lord Bassam Of Brighton :** To ask Her Majesty's Government what plans they have to assist with additional track and trace facilities at universities (1) located in areas, and (2) with students arriving from, areas under local lockdown. [HL7747]

**Lord Parkinson Of Whitley Bay :**The safety and wellbeing of university staff and students is always our priority, and we are confident that universities are well prepared for the return of students, having taken measures to reduce the risk of transmission such as introducing social distancing on campus, limiting travel requirement for classes, and staggering teaching across extended days to reduce numbers on site. To help providers make informed decisions, the government has issued guidance on reopening campuses and buildings, which is available [here](#).

We support face-to-face teaching only where possible and if safety guidelines are followed but expect providers to reopen with a blend of online teaching and in-person tuition as they consider appropriate in line with public health advice. Providers are required to carry out risk assessments, modelled on a

range of scenarios including where students are mixing across settings, and develop appropriate mitigations in response.

We are about to publish updated guidance on reopening higher education institutions – including face coverings, local lockdowns, and test and trace – based on the most up-to-date advice from the Scientific Advisory Group for Emergencies (SAGE). Everyone should be following basic guidance on COVID-19, including social distancing and maintaining good hand and respiratory hygiene.

We have also released guidance for landlords and tenants on renting and the COVID-19 outbreak. This sets out necessary public health measures to protect the health of students living together and those staff assisting them. We expect universities and other higher education providers to prioritise the health and safety of their staff and students and put in place measures that apply to their individual circumstances. The guidance is available [here](#).

## **Extending the duration of the graduate visa**

**Richard Thomson (Gordon):** To ask the Secretary of State for Education, what discussions he has had with Cabinet colleagues on the potential merits of extending the duration of the graduate work visa. [86772]

**Michelle Donelan (Chippenham):** Extensive engagement has taken place across the government, both at a ministerial level and official level, throughout the development of the future immigration system, including on the new graduate and student routes and other points-based routes.

The graduate route, launching in summer 2021, represents our continued commitment to support the UK's education sector and our strong desire to make a truly world-leading offer to international students, allowing new graduates the opportunity to remain in the UK to work or to look for work after their studies. This is already a substantial improvement on the UK's previous post-study work offer of 4 months (6 months under the limited pilot programme). Since we had originally announced the details of the graduate route last September, the government announced a further change, extending the post-study work period to 3 years for PhD graduates.

We believe that 2 years (3 years for PhD graduates) is a fair and generous amount of time to allow international graduates to have unrestricted access to the UK labour market, enabling them to gain valuable work experience and to kick-start their careers. We also believe this will help to ensure that the UK continues to be an attractive destination for international students. We will of course keep the operation of the graduate route under review once it has been implemented.

At the end of their leave as a graduate, international students who wish to stay and work in the UK for longer will also be eligible to switch into employment immigration routes. We are reviewing and simplifying the employment routes as part of the government's work on the future borders and immigration system to ensure that they meet the UK's needs.

The government also recently published and updated bespoke guidance for students impacted by the COVID-19 outbreak, setting out important flexibilities at this time. This includes confirming that those studying by distance/blended learning will be eligible to apply for the graduate route provided they are in the UK by 6 April 2021 and meet other requirements of the route.

We now have a world-class student visa offer befitting our world-class higher education sector, which will only improve once the student route is operational later this year and student visa processes are further streamlined.

## Classifying travel to study abroad as essential travel

**Mark Eastwood (Dewsbury):** To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Affairs, what assessment he has made of the potential merits of classifying travel to study abroad as essential travel for the purposes of his Department's foreign travel advice. [86185]

**Nigel Adams (Selby and Ainsty):** Foreign, Commonwealth & Development Office (FCDO) travel advice is to help British nationals make informed decisions about foreign travel. The Government's overriding concern is always the safety and security of British nationals. Whether travel is essential or not is a personal decision. Travellers may have urgent family or business commitments to attend to. Circumstances differ from person to person. Only individuals can make an informed decision based on the risks.

**Mr Richard Holden (North West Durham):** To ask the Secretary of State for Education, what steps his Department is taking in response to the situation of students planning to undertake a year abroad but who may be prevented from doing so as such travel is not classified as essential, thereby making insurance for universities invalid. [87707]

**Michelle Donelan (Chippenham):** The Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office (FCDO) do not make a judgement on whether any travel is essential. Their guidance is that: "Whether travel is essential or not is your own decision". This guidance is available [here](#).

Before starting a placement, students, including Erasmus+ participants, should consult with their provider to confirm details and check the living in country guide (<https://www.gov.uk/government/collections/overseas-living-in-guides>) and travel advice for the country they will be visiting, being conscious that their placement may not be able to continue as originally planned. To undertake a placement, participants should seek the agreement of their home provider and their host. There may be opportunities for it to start at a later date if the situation changes and this is feasible. Participants should be ready to comply with local isolation, testing or quarantine requirements, and will need to rely on the local health system.

We expect all higher education providers to explore alternative options for mobilities and study, whether blended or fully virtual, if appropriate, and to be flexible in their approach and be conscious of the potentially rapidly changing situation on a country by country basis. They should be ready to make quick changes to projects and mobilities, consider delaying mobilities and amending start and end dates, if feasible, as restrictions may change over time. We expect all universities, colleges, schools and other organisers managing international educational mobilities, to follow the relevant FCDO travel advice for the destination country and highlight this to their participants, being aware the situation can change rapidly.

While the government is in continual dialogue with the insurance sector, on its response to COVID-19, and is encouraging insurers to do all they can to support customers during this period, the position on the provision of COVID-19 insurance is that it is largely a commercial judgement for insurers. Cover for COVID-19 related cancellation is unlikely to be included in travel insurance policies bought or renewed after the pandemic was declared, e.g. in the event of the FCDO travel advice changing, as it is a known risk. This is in contrast to policies sold before the outbreak of COVID-19, which typically covered changes in FCDO advice.

## International student numbers

**Chi Onwurah (Newcastle upon Tyne Central):** To ask the Secretary of State for Education, what discussions he has had with the British Council on the number of international students expected to enrol in UK universities during academic years (a) 2020-21, (b) 2021-22, (c) 2022-23; and what support his Department has offered to the British Council to help attract international students for the academic year 2020-21. [86652]



**Michelle Donelan (Chippenham):** The government has been clear that our world-leading universities, which thrive on being global institutions, will always be open to international students. I have met with the British Council to discuss how we can best attract international students, including through effective communications.

Engaging closely with other government departments and the higher education (HE) sector, including the British Council, the department is working to reassure current and prospective international students that UK HE is 'open for business', remains world-class and is a safe and tolerant place to study. This includes continued work with Study UK (the government's international student recruitment campaign led by the British Council), support for the sector-led #WeAreTogether campaign and a package of bespoke communications directly targeting international students, making clear our world-leading UK offer.

As part of this communications activity, the government has also recently approved £1 million for the British Council -led Study UK campaign, to help drive the international student intake in 2020 from 16 global markets and to further promote the new graduate route, which is a significant improvement in our offer to international students that will help ensure the UK HE sector remains competitive internationally.

I have also written open letters to international students (hosted on the British Council led Study UK website) and placed contributions in overseas newspapers. Additionally, we have enlisted the support of our embassies, British Council offices and staff abroad to make clear that international students are welcome in the UK.

In addition, the government has been working with the HE sector to ensure existing rules and processes are as flexible as possible under the current circumstances to ensure that international students planning to study in the UK from autumn 2020 can do so. Speaking at the British Council's Going Global event on 5 June, I outlined measures we are taking to support international students and the HE sector against the global challenges posed by COVID-19. This includes reassuring international students who are considering study in the UK that distance/blended learning will be permitted for the 20/21 academic year, provided that students intend to transition to face-to-face learning as soon as circumstances allow.

Finally, we recognise that embarking on a course of study at a UK HE institution is a significant commitment and we are encouraged to see HE providers doing their utmost to support students during this time.

## **Plans to reform the REF**

**Owen Thompson (Midlothian) :** To ask the Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy, whether his Department plans to reform the Research Excellence Framework to (a) reduce levels of administration, (b) further incentivise collaboration and (c) focus on assessing groupings and teams. [86711]

**Amanda Solloway (Derby North) :**As recently set out in the Research and Development Roadmap, the Government will be examining the mechanisms which we use to support university research in England and the incentives that these create within the R&D system, and we will work with the higher education sector in England to agree a set of reforms to support university research and knowledge exchange to become more resilient, more efficient and ensure better outcomes from public funding.

Research England, working with the HE Funding Bodies from the Devolved Nations, are conducting a thorough evaluation of the Research Excellence Framework (REF) 2021, including on the costs of the exercise and its incentive effects on research practice. The results of that evaluation will inform the design of future exercises, which will also be subject to detailed consultation with the university research sector.

Through this assessment and any subsequent recommended reforms, we aspire to implement a REF which helps progress to a system which is fair, unbureaucratic and rewards improvement.

## **Independent review of the TEF**

**Chi Onwurah (Newcastle upon Tyne Central)** : To ask the Secretary of State for Education, what progress has been made by the Independent review into the Teaching Excellence and Student Outcomes Framework; when Dame Shirley Pearce will make a report to him; and if that report will be made publicly available. [86653]

**Michelle Donelan (Chippenham)**: The Higher Education and Research Act (2017) requires that the report of the independent review of the Teaching Excellence and Student Outcomes Framework should be laid before Parliament.

The reviewer, Dame Shirley Pearce, has submitted her report to ministers and we are considering the report's evidence and recommendations. We intend to lay the report in due course and to publish it alongside the government's response.

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## **Sector News**

### **UK government package of support for deferring students announced**

On Friday 11 September, The Department for Education published further information on the package of support available for students who had planned to study this year but were offered a deferred place for 2021/22 entry. The commitments agreed by the sector through the HE Taskforce to support and engage these students during the year is detailed on this web page, along with opportunities for deferring students to gain new skills, undertake work placements in the public, private and voluntary sectors, undertake additional learning and support their career development.

Find out more about the support package [here](#).

### **Department of Health urges universities to display QR codes to NHS app**

On Friday 11 September, the Department of Health shared a press release urging universities, along with other businesses, to display posters in communal areas to with QR codes linking to the NHS Covid-19 app. The app is due to launch on 24 September. The app will automate checking in to a location, and the notification process where an outbreak has been reported.

You can read the press release [here](#) and links to create a QR code for a venue [here](#).

### **Michelle Donelan letter on the care leaver covenant**

On Friday 11 September, Universities Minister Michelle Donelan, wrote a letter to university leaders encouraging them to sign the Care Leaver Covenant, a voluntary Government-backed initiative to support care leavers in employment and education. The government is looking at how care leavers can secure accommodation, access mental health services and overcome loneliness. The Covenant provides a way for organisations, including HEPs, to demonstrate their commitment by setting out an offer to care leavers.

You can read the letter [here](#).

## **Government response to the Petitions Committee report on the impact of Covid-19 on university students**

On Wednesday 16 September the government published its response to the Petitions Committee report on the impact of Covid-19 on university students and the accompanying committee press release. The report followed an inquiry into concerns raised by over 350,000 students who had signed a parliamentary petition that they had not received the standard of education they felt they were entitled to expect.

In its response the government:

- accepted that students should be able to take action if they are not satisfied with their university's response to the pandemic
- welcomed that the committee did not recommend a blanket refunds policy
- rejected the committee's suggestion that other ways to reimburse students that do not financially hurt universities, such as student debt write off, should be considered
- had no appetite to look at other ways to support students into the job market or further study, pointing to existing support in place
- did not support the committee's proposal that a new centralised complaints system should be set up.

You can find the response [here](#).

## **House of Commons Library briefing papers**

This week the House of Commons library published three briefing papers relating to higher education:

- Coronavirus: Financial impact on higher education which you can read [here](#).
- Higher education funding in England which can be read [here](#).
- An update on the sale of student loans which can be read [here](#).