Political Affairs Digest

A regular digest of House of Commons, House of Lords and higher education sector business. If you would like more information on parliamentary business, or advice on engaging with Parliament or a parliamentarian, please contact:

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Parliamentary Business

Education oral questions

On Monday 12 October at 2:30pm, Ministers from the Department of Education answered questions on the floor of the house.

In response to a question by Labour MP Richard Burgon asking the government to urge all universities to move to online learning only as default (as recommended by UCU), Michelle Donelan stated it would not be right to put students’ lives on hold. She acknowledged how difficult self-isolation was for students, the importance of providing food, mental health and wellbeing support to students and praised Universities UK’s statement of commitment from the sector which is “exactly in line with what the government expects”.

Shadow Higher Education Minister Emma Hardy asked why the minister could not answer basic questions about the number of students self-isolating, the number positive with Covid-19 and when the ‘robust’ guidance on students returning home for Christmas would be published. Michelle Donelan stressed it was important to get the guidance right and that a sub-group of the Taskforce was working on this. She then explained that Public Health England (PHE) had informed her that 68 universities had outbreaks, then the department approached each institution to get the data. She added that a new data routine in conjunction with the Office for Students (OfS) would be in place next week.

Other questions asked included one on testing, to which the minister reiterated the damage that would be done to social mobility if students had had to put their lives on hold, and that her department was working with the Department for Health and Social Care (DHSC) to ensure students can access tests if symptomatic so that tracing work can kick in immediately. Another question raised the issue of charging self-isolating students for food parcels, to which the minister responded that no university should seek to profit from students self-isolating. Finally, the minister was asked whether the government would provide financial support to universities if non-completion rates were to rise despite the best efforts of students and staff. Michelle Donelan confirmed the Taskforce are looking at non-completion, but that it is imperative that students are supported to complete their courses.

You can read a transcript of the questions here.


On Monday 12 October, the Prime Minister announced a new three-tier system designed to simplify and standardise national coronavirus lockdown across England. The three-tier system will see different parts of England placed in different categories dependent on rates of infection, but in his statement, the PM reiterated that these extra measures would not include closing any shops, schools or universities.

- Medium will see the current social distancing measures such as the ‘rule of six’ and the 10pm curfew on hospitality.
- High will see the same restrictions as medium with the addition of a ban on households or support bubbles mixing. The rule of 6 will continue outdoors. Most areas with local restrictions will automatically move to the high level.
- Very high will apply where transmission rates are rising rapidly. In these areas the baseline restrictions will include prohibiting social mixing indoors and in private gardens and the closure of pubs and bars. In each area government will work with the local area on any additional measures that need to be taken. This could lead to further restrictions on hospitality, leisure, entertainment and personal care sectors. Retail, schools and universities will remain open.
Regulations will come into force on Wednesday (14 October), with the Gov.uk postcode search and NHS app showing which level applies in each area.

Boris Johnson said around £1 billion of "new financial support" will be provided to local authorities in England, adding in the Commons: "For very high areas, we will give further financial support for local test and trace and local enforcement - and assistance from the armed forces, not for enforcement but rather to support local services if desired in the local area."

Labour MP for Exeter, Ben Bradshaw asked about the strategy for containing spikes in student accommodation and preventing the need for a lockdown in the rest of the community. In response, the Prime Minister talked about the heroic role students are playing in containing the virus, following the guidance and not spreading it back to their families and home towns.

Finally, Diana Johnson MP asked whether universities should now set up their own testing facility for students, including a-symptomatic students. The Prime Minister said he will find out what the obstacle is for a testing facility at the University of Hull and said there is no reason why a university should not be testing in the way UEA and Cambridge are doing.

You can read a transcript of the statement here.

**Westminster Hall debate on exam arrangements during Covid-19**

On Monday 12 October, a Westminster Hall debate took place on exams during the pandemic. The debate was based on two petitions 'Reduce curriculum content for year 10 and 12 students who will sit exams in 2021 (320772)' and 'Review the decision to use previous data to calculate exam grades (306773)'.

In response to criticism of the government's handling of the 2020 exams series, the Minister of State for School Standards Nick Gibb said that the government had always made young people's education a priority and defended the time taken to change from the algorithm.

In regard to summer 2021 exams, the minister said that schools must reduce pressure on young people at this time and that too much teaching time had been lost. To address this, he outlined the three week delay to summer 2021 exams announced on the 12 October, and the establishment of the £1 billion "Covid catch up fund", aimed at helping to tackle the impact of lost teaching time.

Notably, the minister was asked what contingency plans were in place if exams were to be disrupted, to which he responded that he was working with Ofqual on plans and will share in good time. He also referenced that there would already be 250,000 laptops ready in case of reduced face to face teaching in schools and up to £96 million in a tuition fund for disadvantaged students, as well as the 'Covid catch up fund'.

Finally, he said that his priority was that next year's exams would be sat in person and drew attention to a letter from the National Education Union which also reiterated this point.

You can read a transcript of the debate here.

**Education Committee session on left behind white pupils**

On Tuesday 13 October, the Education Committee held a session on left behind white pupils from disadvantaged backgrounds.
The Committee discussed in detail the importance of parity of esteem between academic and technical education and the impact of this on attainment of working class white boys. Professor Matthew Goodwin, professor of politics at the University of Kent, noted the education system should not just be about funnelling students into university but encouraging and promoting vocational and technical programmes, as is done in Germany and Switzerland. This view was supported by Tom Hunt MP suggesting this has been a huge failure in our education system.

Goodwin went on to highlight the potential of mentoring schemes to help white working class students achieve their ambitions. He also said terms like “white privilege” and “toxic masculinity” signalled to poorer white communities that they were the problem. Mary Curnock Cook, former CEO of UCAS, agreed there is some systematic underprivilege for white children from poorer backgrounds but it is not generally a consequence of whiteness and it does not bear comparison with underprivilege or barriers that people of colour from similar backgrounds navigate.

Dr Diane Johnson MP asked the committee whether universities’ drive and focus to admit more students from particular other groups has disadvantaged white children. Professor Major, from the University of Essex, responded that he has seen no evidence of that and expressed concern about the idea that some groups dislodge others at university. He said that it is disadvantage outside the education system that drives much of this for all groups, irrespective of their colour or race. In particular, he spoke of multi-generational issues, where parents and grandparents have had poor experiences of education.

The chair noted that the Committee will be looking at other left-behind groups in future inquiries.

Further information about the session can be found here.

Forthcoming business

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

On Monday 19 October, the House of Commons will consider the Lords Amendments of the Immigration and Social Security Co-ordination (EU Withdrawal) Bill.

You can watch the debate here.

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

On Wednesday 21 October, the House of Lords will consider the Commons Amendments of the Immigration and Social Security Co-ordination (EU Withdrawal) Bill.

You can watch the debate here.

Backbench Business: General Debate on Covid-19

On Thursday 22 October, in the House of Commons there will be a backbench business general debate on Covid-19.

You can watch the debate here.
BEIS Committee session on Post-pandemic economic growth: Levelling up

On Thursday 22 October 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 will include Andy Burnham, Jamie Driscoll, Mayor, North of Tyne Combined Authority, Tim Bowles, Mayor, West of England Combined Authority, Steve Rotheram, Mayor, Liverpool City Region Combined Authority

You can watch the session here.

Written Questions

Accessibility of higher education for part-time mature students

Apsana Begum (Poplar and Limehouse): To ask the Secretary of State for Education, what recent assessment he has made of the accessibility of higher education for part-time mature students.

[99755]

Michelle Donelan (Chippenham): Many mature students need to study flexibly and we have taken a number of steps over recent years to encourage more flexible learning. These include greater support for part-time learners through maintenance support, and removing restrictions which had prevented students getting loan funding for part-time science, technology, mathematics and engineering undergraduate degrees if they were equivalent or lower qualifications.

The number of part-time students undertaking full undergraduate degrees has increased in recent years, but the numbers of part-time students overall (including those taking shorter courses) has declined. Therefore, we need to take much more radical steps to support lifelong learning. This is why my right hon. Friend, the Prime Minister, announced that we will introduce a flexible lifelong loan entitlement to 4 years of post-18 education, providing incentives for people to build the skills the economy needs. This will provide finance for shorter-term studies, rather than people having to study in 1, 3 or 4-year blocks. People will be able to break up their study into segments, transfer credits between colleges and universities, and take on more part-time study.

As the economy recovers from the COVID-19 outbreak, it will be even more important that individuals have opportunities to develop their skills over the course of their lifetimes. We will be consulting on the introduction of a lifelong loan entitlement in due course. This will set out proposals for how and when we will be introducing it. Where necessary, we will bring forward legislation in this Parliament.

Financial viability of smaller, specialist higher education institutions

Apsana Begum (Poplar and Limehouse): To ask the Secretary of State for Education, what recent assessment he has made of the financial viability of smaller, specialist higher education institutes.

[99753]

Michelle Donelan (Chippenham): The government recognises that the COVID-19 outbreak is bringing significant financial challenges to the higher education (HE) sector and we have been working closely with the sector, including with smaller specialist providers, the Office for Students (OfS), and other government departments to monitor the likely impacts.
The OfS as the independent regulator of HE in England monitors their financial sustainability. The OfS provides targeted allocations for world-leading specialist providers, which was £43 million for 2020/21. The OfS hopes to undertake a review of the current specialist provider funding arrangements later this year and will release further details at the earliest opportunity.

The government has also 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. In the last academic year, we also brought forward £100 million quality-related research funding support for HE providers in England.

This is on top of the unprecedented package of support for businesses already announced by my right hon. Friend, the Chancellor of the Exchequer, including the Coronavirus Job Retention Scheme and a range of business loan schemes, to help pay wages, keep staff employed and support businesses whose viability is threatened by the outbreak. HE providers are eligible to apply for these schemes.

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 government 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, 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. The overarching objectives, which will guide the department’s assessment of cases, will be protecting the welfare of current students, preserving the sector’s internationally outstanding science base and supporting the role that HE providers play in regional and local economies by offering 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. Public funds in the form of repayable loans to support restructuring will be as a last resort with strict conditions that align with wider government objectives.

Support available for of smaller, specialist higher education institutions

Apsana Begum (Poplar and Limehouse): To ask the Secretary of State for Education, what assessment he has made of the adequacy of support available to smaller specialist higher education institutes. [99752]

Michelle Donelan (Chippenham): The government recognises that the COVID-19 outbreak is bringing significant financial challenges to the higher education (HE) sector and we have been working closely with the sector, including with smaller specialist providers, the Office for Students (OfS), and other government departments to monitor the likely impacts.

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Apsana Begum (Poplar and Limehouse): To ask the Secretary of State for Education, what steps he is taking to support smaller higher education institutes who may have difficulty repaying loans during the covid-19 outbreak. [99750]

Michelle Donelan (Chippenham) : The government recognises that the COVID-19 outbreak is bringing significant financial challenges to the higher education (HE) sector and we have been working closely with the sector, including with smaller specialist providers, the Office for Students (OfS), and other government departments to monitor the likely impacts.

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Potential for higher education institutions to go insolvent

Apsana Begum (Poplar and Limehouse): To ask the Secretary of State for Education, what assessment he has made of the potential for (a) higher education institutes to go into insolvency during the covid-19 outbreak and (b) job losses as a result of that insolvency. [99751]

Michelle Donelan (Chippenham): The government recognises that the COVID-19 outbreak is bringing significant financial challenges to the higher education (HE) sector and we have been working closely with the sector, including with smaller specialist providers, the Office for Students (OfS), and other government departments to monitor the likely impacts.

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**Universities operating under Covid-19 restrictions**

*Emma Hardy (Kingston upon Hull West and Hessle)*: To ask the Secretary of State for Education, how many universities are currently operating under tier (a) one, (b) two, (c) three and (d) four covid-19 restrictions; and how many students are represented in each of those tier restriction categories. [99091]

*Michelle Donelan (Chippenham)*: Universities agree their COVID-19 outbreak plans with their local Directors of Public Health, and those plans are shared with the department.

The situation is evolving constantly as students return to higher education. So far we know that 4 universities have moved to tier three, with these decisions being made in collaboration with local public health teams. Other universities are in either tier 1 or tier 2.

**Mental health training for university lecturers**

*Colleen Fletcher (Coventry North East)*: To ask the Secretary of State for Education, what steps he is taking to improve the provision of mental health training for (a) schoolteachers and (b) university lecturers. [100429]

*Vicky Ford (Chelmsford)*: The government is committed to promoting and supporting the mental health of children, young people and the school, college and university staff who support them.

School, college and university staff cannot act as mental health experts, and they should not try to diagnose conditions. However, it is important that they are able to identify possible mental health problems, so they are able to put appropriate support in place. It is up to schools and colleges to decide what training to offer their staff, but we have put in place a range of training for them to draw on.

Training has been particularly important to give schools confidence to deal with issues that will have arisen during the COVID-19 outbreak. To ensure that staff are equipped to support wellbeing as children and young people returned to schools and colleges, we made it a central part of our guidance both on remote education and on the return to school. We supported this with a range of training and materials, including webinars which have been accessed by thousands of education staff. We have also accelerated training on how to teach about mental health as part of the new relationships, sex and health curriculum, so that all pupils can benefit from this long-term requirement.

To provide further support during the autumn and spring terms the department has worked with our partners, the Department of Health and Social Care (DHSC), Health Education England, Public Health England and key voluntary sector organisations, to launch Wellbeing for Education Return. This project, backed by £8 million, will train local experts to provide additional training, advice and resources to schools and colleges, to help support pupil and student wellbeing, resilience and recovery. It will give staff the confidence to support pupils and students, their parents, carers and their own colleagues, and know how and where to access appropriate specialist support where needed.

This specific support is building on our longer-term activity to help support teacher knowledge. As part of this, the government has successfully delivered on the 2017 commitment of my right hon. Friend, the Prime Minister, to make mental health awareness training available to all eligible secondary schools by March 2020. To help embed knowledge and practice in schools, we are now in the process of developing a bespoke senior mental health lead training programme. The training will
equip senior mental health leads with the knowledge to introduce or develop their whole school and college approach to mental health, implement effective processes for ensuring pupils and students with mental health problems receive appropriate support and to promote positive mental health within the school or college so that it becomes a key part of how schools and colleges operate. The knowledge requirements and expected outcomes for the training closely align to Public Health England’s ‘Promoting children and young people’s emotional health and wellbeing. A whole school and college approach’, which is available here.

We also remain committed to our major joint green paper delivery programme with DHSC and NHS England, including introducing new mental health support teams linked to schools and colleges, and testing approaches to faster access to NHS specialist support.

We also recognise the importance of supporting staff with their own mental health and wellbeing. This is why we are funding a £95,000 pilot project with the Education Support Partnership, to focus on leaders’ mental health, providing online peer-support and telephone supervision from experts to around 250 school leaders. This is in addition to funding of £45,000 we provided to Timewise, to provide practical support and resources on flexible working, in light of new arrangements for schools responding to the COVID-19 outbreak.

It is up to higher education institutions to decide how to support their students and what training to offer to staff. The government strongly supports the University Mental Health Charter, which aims to drive up standards in promoting student and staff mental health and wellbeing. We are also working closely with Universities UK on embedding the Step Change: Mentally Healthy Universities framework, calling on higher education leaders to adopt mental health as a strategic priority and take a whole-institution approach, embedding it across all policies, cultures, curricula and practice.

Colleen Fletcher (Coventry North East): To ask the Secretary of State for Education, what plans he has to assess the longer-term effect of the covid-19 lockdown on the mental health and wellbeing of (a) school and (b) university students. [98986]

Vicky Ford (Chelmsford): We know that across society, the COVID-19 outbreak has had an impact on wellbeing and mental health, but it has had a particular impact on children and young people. In September, Public Health England, who is closely monitoring the situation, published a report on the impacts of the COVID-19 outbreak on mental health and wellbeing. This report is available here.

The department is continuing to work with other government bodies, academics, the voluntary sector and private organisations to understand how children and young people’s wellbeing develops as they return to schools, colleges, universities, apprenticeships or to jobs with training. This will inform the department’s focus in providing further support. In particular, we will continue to publish our annual ‘State of the Nation’ report, summarising the evidence on children and young people’s wellbeing. The next report will include a consideration of the effect of the COVID-19 outbreak. Last year’s report is available here:

The evidence emerging over the spring and summer pointed to the importance of getting young people back into education for their longer-term mental health and wellbeing. To support the return to a full high-quality education programme we have put in place a range of measures, including our new £8 million Wellbeing for Education Return Programme. This will train local experts to provide additional advice and resources for schools and colleges to help support pupil and student wellbeing, resilience and recovery in light of the impact of the COVID-19 outbreak. It will give staff the confidence to support pupils and students, parents, carers and colleagues, and the knowledge of how and where to access appropriate specialist support where needed.

In higher education, the Office for Students has funded the Student Space platform which provides a range of dedicated resources to support students’ mental health. We have asked higher education providers to prioritise the mental health and wellbeing of students during this period and have enabled them to use funding, worth up to £23 million per month from April to July this year and £256 million for 2020-21 academic year starting from August, to go towards student hardship funds and mental health support.
Colleen Fletcher (Coventry North East): To ask the Secretary of State for Education, what steps his Department is taking to improve student wellbeing during the covid-19 outbreak. [98983]

Michelle Donelan (Chippenham): Protecting the mental health and wellbeing of children and young people continues to be a priority for this government. Access to mental health support is more important than ever during the COVID-19 outbreak. This government is working to promote good mental health in schools and further and higher education settings.

In July, the government announced a £1 billion COVID catch-up package, with £650 million shared across schools over the 2020/21 academic year, to support education settings to put the right catch-up and pastoral support in place.

In addition, £8 million has been invested in the ‘Wellbeing for Education Return’ project, providing schools and colleges with the knowledge and practical skills to help improve how to respond to the emotional impact of the COVID-19 outbreak. A link to this programme can be found here.

I have asked providers to boost their existing welfare and counselling services to ensure support services can be accessed. This is particularly important for those students having to self-isolate or who are affected by local restrictions.

Student Space, funded with £3 million from the Office for Students, provides dedicated support services through a collaborative online platform to help students access vital mental health and wellbeing resources. The platform bridges gaps in support arising from the COVID-19 outbreak and is designed to work alongside existing services. A link to Student Space’s website can be found here: https://studentspace.org.uk.

We have also asked higher education providers to prioritise the mental health and wellbeing of students, enabling them to use funding, worth up to £23 million per month from April to July this year and £256 million for the academic year 2020/21 starting from August, to go towards student hardship funds and mental health support.

In August, we established a cross-sector COVID Higher Education Taskforce. On 5 October, we agreed to convene a new working group, as a sub-group of the taskforce, with a specific focus on student mental health issues. The group will seek to gather direct feedback from the sector to better understand and address any systemic barriers getting in the way of good support.

The government has provided over £9 million to leading mental health charities to help them expand and reach those most in need and NHS mental health trusts are ensuring 24/7 access to crisis telephone lines to support people of all ages. Public Health England and Health Education England have also developed advice and guidance for parents and professionals to support children and young people’s mental health and wellbeing, available here.

Liz Twist (Blaydon): To ask the Secretary of State for Education, what steps his Department is taking to provide additional mental health support for students in response to covid-19 restrictions. [96993]

Michelle Donelan (Chippenham): Protecting all students', domestic and international, mental health and wellbeing continues to be a priority for this government. The disruption and uncertainty resulting from the COVID-19 outbreak has impacted all age groups, but particularly young people who are making transitions during this time.

Higher education providers are best placed to identify and address the needs of their particular student body as well as how to develop the services needed. Many providers have boosted their existing welfare and counselling services to ensure support services can be accessed, which is particularly important for those students having to self-isolate or who are affected by local restrictions.
Student Space, funded with £3 million from the Office for Students (OfS), provides dedicated support services (phone and text) for students and a collaborative online platform to help students access vital mental health and wellbeing resources. The platform bridges gaps in support for students arising from the outbreak and is designed to work alongside existing services.

The government has recently provided over £9 million to leading mental health charities to help them expand and reach those most in need. In addition, NHS mental health trusts are ensuring 24/7 access to crisis telephone lines to support people of all ages.

We have asked providers to prioritise the mental health and wellbeing of students during this period and have enabled them to use funding, worth up to £23 million per month from April to July this year and £256 million for the academic year 2020/21 starting from August, to go towards student hardship funds and mental health support.

Support for universities to provide more mental health and wellbeing support

Lord Taylor Of Warwick: To ask Her Majesty's Government what steps they are taking to support universities to provide more mental health and wellbeing support to students whilst COVID-19 restrictions are in place. [HL8612]

Lord Parkinson Of Whitley Bay: Protecting the mental health and wellbeing of all students, domestic and international, continues to be a priority for the government. The disruption and uncertainty resulting from the COVID-19 outbreak has affected all age groups, but particularly young people who are making the transition from school to university during this time.

Higher education providers are best placed to identify and address the needs of their particular student body as well as how to develop the services needed. Many providers have boosted their existing welfare and counselling services to ensure that support services can be accessed, which is particularly important for those students having to self-isolate or who are affected by local restrictions.

Student Space, funded with £3 million from the Office for Students, provides dedicated support services (by telephone and text message) for students and an online platform to help students access vital mental health and wellbeing resources. The platform bridges gaps in support for students arising from the COVID-19 outbreak and is designed to work alongside existing services.

The government has recently provided over £9 million to leading mental health charities to help them expand and reach those most in need. In addition, NHS mental health trusts are ensuring 24-hour, 7-day-a-week access to crisis telephone lines to support people of all ages.

We have asked providers to prioritise the mental health and wellbeing of students during this period and have enabled them to use funding – worth up to £23 million per month from April to July this year, and £256 million for the academic year 2020/21 starting from August – to go towards student hardship funds and mental health support.

Universities remaining operation throughout Covid-19 pandemic

Lord Taylor Of Warwick: To ask Her Majesty's Government what steps they are taking to ensure that universities remain operational throughout the COVID-19 pandemic. [HL8647]

Lord Parkinson Of Whitley Bay: Higher education providers are autonomous institutions and will make their own judgements based on the latest public health guidance, taking account of the need to minimise risk to staff and students.
On 10 September, we issued updated guidance for providers on reopening campuses, which takes account of the latest scientific advice from the Scientific Advisory Group for Emergencies. The guidance is available here.

We have worked with universities to ensure that they all have response plans in light of COVID-19, including issuing best practice guidance. All response plans have been, or are being, agreed with local Directors of Public Health. The plans cover a range of scenarios and ensure that providers are prepared to respond quickly to a COVID-19 outbreak in their university or wider community.

Affordability and availability of academic groups

Colleen Fletcher (Coventry North East): To ask the Secretary of State for Education, what assessment he has made of the effect of the (a) affordability and (b) availability of academic ebooks on the teaching content of university courses. [99635]

Michelle Donelan (Chippenham): This is a difficult and uncertain time for students, but we are working with the higher education sector to make sure all reasonable efforts are being made to enable students to continue their studies, and ensure that students receive a high-quality academic experience and help students to achieve qualifications that they and employers value.

The Office for Students has made it clear that providers must continue to provide sufficient and appropriate facilities, learning resources and student support services to deliver a high-quality academic experience.

The government has worked closely with the Office for Students to help clarify that providers can draw upon existing funding to provide hardship funds and support disadvantaged students impacted by COVID-19 outbreak. Providers were able to use the funding, worth around £23 million per month for April to July this year and £256 million for this academic year, towards student hardship funds. Course costs, including academic books, will be considered as part of the assessment of the level of hardship support provided to a student.

Financial support for a second undergraduate degree

Emma Hardy (Kingston upon Hull West and Hessle): To ask the Secretary of State for Education, if he will make an assessment of the potential merits of making financial support available to students wishing to complete a second undergraduate degree. [100524]

Michelle Donelan (Chippenham): Students studying on a strategically important course are already able to access student support for a qualification at an equivalent or lower level to one they already hold.

For other students, those who already have a qualification that is equivalent to or at a higher level than the course they wish to study, will not qualify for maintenance or fee support. This ensures that finite public funds are focussed on those studying a higher education qualification for the first time.

Potential effect of the end of the transition period on higher education

Dr Philippa Whitford (Central Ayrshire): What assessment he has made of the potential effect of the end of the transition period on (a) further and (b) higher education. [907377]
Michelle Donelan (Chippenham): The department is considering all aspects of how exiting the EU might affect further and higher education. This includes consideration of participation in EU-funded programmes, future arrangements for migration and for access to student finance support. We are committed to ensuring the country is prepared for every eventuality.

My officials also regularly engage with sector stakeholders on a range of issues, including leaving the EU and the Transition Period.

Safe home visits for students at Christmas

Liz Twist (Blaydon): To ask the Secretary of State for Education, what recent discussions he has had with the Secretary of State for Health and Social Care on safe home visits for students at Christmas 2020. [96994]

Michelle Donelan (Chippenham): My right hon. Friend, the Secretary of State for Education, has regularly discussed the reopening of higher education (HE) providers with his Cabinet colleagues, including with my right hon. Friend, the Secretary of State for Health and Social Care. The arrangements for the end of the autumn term were discussed on Monday 28 September.

As the Secretary of State for Education announced to the House on Tuesday 29 September, the department is working with universities to make sure that all students are supported to return home safely and spend Christmas with their loved ones, if they choose to do so. Where students choose to stay in their university accommodation over Christmas, universities should continue making sure that they are safe and well looked after. The department will work with universities to publish guidance on students returning home safely at Christmas, shortly.

The safety and wellbeing of staff and students in HE is always our priority, and the government is doing all it can to minimise the risks to those working and studying at HE providers in this unprecedented situation, while mitigating the impact on education.

Effect of the Covid-19 outbreak on universities

Dan Jarvis (Barnsley Central): What assessment he has made on the effect of the covid-19 outbreak on universities. [907386]

Michelle Donelan (Chippenham): We have worked across government and with the higher education (HE) sector to understand the impact of COVID-19.

In response, between April to September we have announced a suite of measures to mitigate the impact of the virus upon the HE sector and HE students and staff. This includes the HE stabilisation package, the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy’s research stabilisation package, access to business support schemes, the capital fund and the HE restructuring regime.

We have prioritised the mental health and well-being of students, emphasising our strong support for the University Mental Health Charter and continued to work closely with Universities UK on embedding the Step Change: Mentally Healthy Universities framework. We confirmed universities and HE providers were able to use Office for Students (OfS) Student Premium funding towards student hardship funds and announced the OfS funded, Student Minds Led, Student Space which has been designed to work alongside existing mental health services.

Importantly, to support universities to reopen this autumn, to enable them to provide high quality education to students in a COVID-secure environment, we have provided advice and guidance on reopening and have worked to ensure universities have robust outbreak plans in place. We will shortly also be providing additional guidance on winter planning and end of term preparation.
Risk assessment of the impact of students returning to university

Lord Taylor Of Warwick: To ask Her Majesty's Government what risk assessment they undertook, prior to September, of the impact of students returning to universities on the transmission of COVID-19. [HL8557]

Lord Parkinson Of Whitley Bay: The safety and wellbeing of staff and students in higher education (HE) is always our priority and the government is doing all it can to minimise the risks to those working and studying in our HE institutions in this unprecedented situation, while mitigating the impact on education.

As with all educational settings, we continue to monitor the situation closely and follow the latest scientific advice, adapting policies as the situation changes. Our guidance for providers on reopening campuses takes account of the latest scientific advice from the Scientific Advisory Group for Emergencies, which has been considering the risks of reopening HE institutions. The guidance is available here.

The government has drawn on the expertise of the HE taskforce that we set up for this purpose, and we have been providing robust public health advice and regular updates to the sector to help it to plan carefully to keep students and staff as safe as possible. As our guidance makes clear, we expect providers to conduct risk assessments and consider appropriate measures to ensure that they minimise risks to the wellbeing of staff and students while delivering the high quality education for which our HE providers are known.

We have worked with universities to ensure that they all have outbreak plans. These have been developed in conjunction with local Public Health Teams and all have been or are being agreed with local Directors of Public Health. The plans cover a range of scenarios and ensure providers are prepared to respond quickly to an outbreak in their educational setting or wider community.

Reported covid-19 outbreaks on campus grounds

Dame Diana Johnson (Kingston upon Hull North): To ask the Secretary of State for Education, how many universities in England have reported covid-19 outbreaks on campus grounds. [98675]

Michelle Donelan (Chippenham): The safety and wellbeing of staff and students in higher education (HE) is always our priority. The government is doing all it can to minimise the risks to those working and studying in our HE institutions in this unprecedented situation, whilst mitigating the impact on education.

Capacity for COVID-19 testing is the highest it has ever been and we are seeing significant demand. The department continues to work closely with the Department for Health and Social Care (DHSC), and with sector representatives, to ensure that any students who display COVID-19 symptoms can have quick and easy access to testing.

The government has set a target of 500,000 tests a day by the end of October. Local testing sites will be most accessible to students and have the quickest test result turnaround. DHSC plan to increase the total number of sites to 150 by the end of October, and to 400 sites by the end of January 2021. Many of these new testing sites will be located near universities. In addition, there are 258 mobile testing units. Where there is a mobile testing unit in the vicinity of the university, students and staff will also be able book a test at one of these units. We are working closely with DHSC and NHS Test and Trace towards a position in which all universities have access to testing within 1.5 miles of their campus, where possible.

We have drawn on the expertise of the HE taskforce that we set up, and we have been providing robust public health advice and regular updates to the HE sector to help providers plan carefully to
keep students and staff as safe as possible. We have updated our guidance for providers on reopening campuses, which provides advice on teaching, accommodation and student services. Our guidance takes account of the latest advice from the Scientific Advisory Group for Emergencies, which has been considering the risks of reopening higher education providers. The guidance is available here. As with all of our education settings, we continue to monitor the situation closely and follow the latest scientific advice, adapting policies as the situation changes.

We have worked with universities to ensure that they all have outbreak response plans. These have been or are being agreed with local Directors of Public Health. The plans cover a range of scenarios and will ensure providers are prepared to respond quickly to a COVID-19 outbreak in their educational setting or wider community. The situation is constantly changing, but we are working with Public Health England to monitor those universities that have COVID-19 outbreaks and to make sure universities and Directors of Public Health are working together to respond appropriately to any outbreaks.

Response to covid-19 outbreaks in university accommodation

Dame Diana Johnson (Kingston upon Hull North): To ask the Secretary of State for Education, what steps his Department has taken to respond to covid-19 outbreaks in group university accommodation. [98674]

Michelle Donelan (Chippenham): The safety and wellbeing of staff and students in higher education (HE) is always our priority. The government is doing all it can to minimise the risks to those working and studying in our HE institutions in this unprecedented situation, whilst mitigating the impact on education.

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Supplies of Covid-19 tests in university accommodation

**Dame Diana Johnson (Kingston upon Hull North):** To ask the Secretary of State for Education, what steps his Department has taken to ensure adequate supplies of covid-19 tests are available for students living in grouped university accommodation. [98673]

**Michelle Donelan (Chippenham):** The safety and wellbeing of staff and students in higher education (HE) is always our priority. The government is doing all it can to minimise the risks to those working and studying in our HE institutions in this unprecedented situation, whilst mitigating the impact on education.

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Students from Manchester University admitted to hospital with Covid-19

**Sir David Amess (Southend West):** To ask the Secretary of State for Health and Social Care, what information his Department holds on the number of students attending Manchester University who have been admitted to hospital with covid-19 symptoms since the start of the 2020-21 academic year. [96741]

**Edward Argar (Charnwood):** The data requested is not centrally collected.
Minutes from the Higher Education Taskforce

Sarah Owen (Luton North): To ask the Secretary of State for Education, pursuant to Answer of 1 October 2020 to Question 96196 on Students: Housing, if he will publish the minutes of his discussions with representatives of Unite and Unipol at the Higher Education Taskforce. [98769]

Michelle Donelan (Chippenham): The Higher Education taskforce was created to discuss and take quick actions on higher education (HE) admissions and acceptances and to discuss COVID-19 related challenges faced by HE providers and students.

The group consists of members from Universities UK, the Office for Students, the University and Colleges Admissions Service and several university groups. Unite and Unipol were invited, by exception, to a meeting where student accommodation was a focus of the agenda.

The taskforce is ongoing and, although we do not currently have plans to publish the read-outs from the meetings, we will review this in due course. The main items of discussion at this meeting included the increase in COVID-19 cases amongst young adults, COVID-secure practices and supporting students to remain on campus in cases of local COVID-19 outbreaks.

Support for remote education

Emma Hardy (Kingston upon Hull West and Hessle): To ask the Secretary of State for Education, with reference to his letter to the hon Member for Hull West and Hessle of 21 September 2020, how much of the £100 million allocated to support remote education has been (a) allocated to and (b) claimed by university students. [98753]

Michelle Donelan (Chippenham): The department invested over £100 million to help provide laptops and devices for disadvantaged children and young people so they can access education and social care services remotely.

The department distributed laptops, tablets and 4G wireless routers for disadvantaged children in year 10, children receiving support from a social worker and care leavers to ensure these children and young people could continue to access education and vital social care services online during the COVID-19 outbreak.

As part of this, we have provided devices for care leavers, including those who might be studying at university.

Information on the equipment distributed to care leavers, including those studying in higher education, is held by local authorities.

Data on the number of care leavers in higher education are included in the report ‘Children Looked After in England (including adoption), year ending 31 March 2019’. This data shows that 6% of 19 to 21-year-old care leavers were known to be in higher education. This report is available here.

The government has also worked closely with the Office for Students to help clarify that higher education providers can draw upon existing funding to provide hardship funds and support disadvantaged students impacted by the COVID-19 outbreak. Providers are able to use the funding, worth around £256 million for the academic year 2020/21 towards student hardship funds, including the purchase of IT equipment.
Implication of closed English language testing centres on visa applications

Neil Coyle (Bermondsey and Old Southwark): To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department, how her Department is making decisions on visa applications for people required to undertake English language tests as part of their application process where language test centres are closed due to the covid-19 outbreak. [100424]

Kevin Foster (Torbay): The Home Office has implemented a number of measures for visa applicants, including for those who are unable to take an English language tests due to the impact of Covid-19.

Details of all published concessions are available here.

Some specific concessions are in place on English language testing, for example, those applying to enter the UK or remain on the basis of family or private life can apply for an exemption if the test centre was closed or if they were unable to travel to a test centre due to Covid-19.

For students, Higher Education Providers (HEP) can self-assess the English ability of those studying at degree level or above and due to Covid-19, this provision has been temporarily extended to allow HEPs to self-assess the English ability of students undertaking pre-sessional courses.

The majority of Secure English Language Testing (SELT) centres have reopened in England and in a number of overseas locations outside of the UK, where local restrictions have eased.

Legal basis for the detention of students with halls of residence

Jake Berry (Rossendale and Darwen): To ask the Secretary of State for Education, what the legal basis is for the detention of students within halls of residence at Manchester Metropolitan University who are not displaying symptoms of covid-19 and have not tested positive for the disease. [96866]

Michelle Donelan (Chippenham): The safety and wellbeing of staff and students in higher education (HE) is always our priority. The government is doing all it can to minimise the risks to those working and studying in our HE providers in this unprecedented situation, while mitigating the impact on education.

Students should follow the latest health advice, meaning that they should stay in their accommodation in the event that they, or anyone in their household, develops symptoms or are otherwise required to self-isolate.

Decisions on which measures to apply should be made by the local public health team, based on the information received through NHS Test and Trace. HE providers should work with Public Health England to agree on which instructions they provide to students and should ensure that students understand what is required of them if they need to self-isolate.

Financial hardship of those on maternity leave as a result of student loan repayments

Stella Creasy (Walthamstow): To ask the Secretary of State for Education, what steps he is taking to ensure that women do not face unfair financial hardship as a result of the requirement to continue paying student loan repayments during maternity leave. [97571]

Michelle Donelan (Chippenham): The repayment of student loans is governed by the Education (Student Loans) (Repayment) Regulations (2009) (as amended).
The current system protects borrowers, including people on maternity and other forms of parental leave, if they see a reduction in their income. Repayments are made based on a borrower’s monthly or weekly income, not the interest rate or amount borrowed, and no repayments are made for earnings below the repayment threshold. Repayments are calculated as a fixed percentage of earnings above the relevant repayment threshold – if income drops, so do the repayments made. Any outstanding debt is written off at the end of the loan term with no detriment to the borrower.

If at the end of the year, the borrower’s total income is below the relevant annual threshold, they may reclaim any repayments from the Student Loans Company made during that year.

**Funding for new students to apply for digital access resources**

*Emma Hardy (Kingston upon Hull West and Hessle)*: To ask the Secretary of State for Education, pursuant to his oral contribution of 29 September 2020, official report, on students’ return to universities, whether funding is available for new applications from students or education institutions for support with digital access. [97691]

*Michelle Donelan (Chippenham)*: The department invested over £100 million to help provide laptops and devices for disadvantaged children and young people so they can access education and social care services remotely. As part of this, we have provided devices for care leavers, including those who are studying at university.

The government has also worked closely with the Office for Students to help clarify that providers can draw upon existing funding to provide hardship funds and support disadvantaged students impacted by COVID-19. Providers are able to use the funding, worth around £256 million for the academic year 2020/21 towards student hardship funds, including the purchase of IT equipment.

**Support for safe delivery of teaching and student services during Covid-19**

*Jonathan Gullis (Stoke-on-Trent North)*: To ask the Secretary of State for Education, what steps he is taking the help ensure that universities can deliver safe (a) teaching and (b) student services during the covid-19 outbreak. [97736]

*Michelle Donelan (Chippenham)*: The safety and wellbeing of staff and students in higher education (HE) is always our priority. The government is doing all it can to minimise the risks to those working and studying in our HE providers in this unprecedented situation, while mitigating the impact on education.

We have drawn on the expertise of the HE taskforce that we set up, and we have been providing robust public health advice and regular updates to the HE sector to help providers to plan carefully to keep students and staff as safe as possible.

We have also updated our guidance for providers on reopening campuses, which provides advice on teaching, accommodation and services to students. Our guidance takes account of the latest scientific advice from the Scientific Advisory Group for Emergencies, which has been considering the risks of re-opening HE providers. The guidance is available here. As with all of our education settings, we continue to monitor the situation closely and follow the latest scientific advice, adapting policies as the situation changes.

We have worked with universities to ensure that they all have response plans for the COVID-19 outbreak. These have been or are being agreed with local Directors of Public Health. The plans cover a range of scenarios and ensure that providers are prepared to respond quickly to an outbreak in their university or wider community.
Sector News

UK Government announce delays to 2021 exams in England

On Monday 12 October, the UK government announced that AS, A levels and GCSEs will be held three weeks later than usual to help address the disruption caused by the pandemic.

This means that summer exam series will now start on 7 June and end on 2 July for almost all AS/A levels and GCSEs. Results days will also change to Tuesday 24 August for A/AS levels and Friday 27 August for GCSEs.

The government also confirmed that no further subject-level changes to exams and assessments will be made for GCSEs, AS and A levels. This follows a public consultation carried out by the exams’ regulator, Ofqual, earlier this year. Ofqual has also consulted on how assessments of vocational and technical qualifications will be adapted to free up teaching time and respond to any future public health measures.

For Vocational and Technical Qualifications (VTQs), it is expected that for the majority that are taken alongside or instead of GCSEs, AS and A levels, awarding organisations will look to align timetables with 2021 exams. Students studying level 1 and 2, and level 3 VTQs instead of, or alongside, GCSEs, AS and A levels and needing their results to progress, will receive their results no later than their peers.

According to the statement from Education Secretary Gavin Williamson, more detail will be published later in the autumn, to ensure students have confidence that they will be fairly treated in terms of assessment in 2021.

The Education Secretary has also today written to Ofqual to ask the regulator to work closely with him, school and further education leaders, exam boards, unions and the higher education sector to develop these arrangements. In a separate statement, Ofqual welcomed the announcement and outlined its “strong support” for the revised timetable.

Finally, the statement highlighted the government’s £1 billion “Covid catch up fund”, aimed at helping to tackle the impact of lost teaching time. The programme includes a £650 million catch up premium to help schools support all pupils and £350 million National Tutoring Programme for disadvantaged students.

You can read the announcement here.

Northern Ireland announces new measures for universities

On Wednesday 14 October, The Northern Irish Executive agreed a range of significant time-bound interventions aimed at curbing the spread of Covid-19 in Northern Ireland.

In an announcement, First Minister Arlene Foster stated that universities and further education will have to deliver distance learning to the maximum extent possible with only essential face-to-face learning where that is a necessary and unavoidable part of the course.

The measures will come into regulatory effect on Friday 16 October and will be in place for a period of four weeks.
House of Commons Library publishes briefing on disability-inclusive responses to Covid-19

On Tuesday 13 October, the House of Commons Library published a research briefing on disability-inclusive responses to Covid-19, including those from the higher education sector. The briefing has been published ahead of a Westminster hall debate on 15 October.

The briefing brings together a range of materials, including actions that Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) have taken to support disabled students, as well as recommendations on what more universities can do and details of the experiences of disabled students through the pandemic. It also highlights some of the more positive changes that Covid-19 has created for disabled students, referencing the recent blog by UUK and AbilityNet.

You can read the briefing here and the UUK and AbilityNet blog here.

Guidance for higher education providers during the transition period.

On Thursday 15 October, the Department for Education created a webpage to bring together all the guidance higher education will providers need during the transition period and after 1 January 2021.

This includes guidance on:
- Guidance for nationals from the EU, Iceland, Liechtenstein, Norway and Switzerland.
- The new immigration system.
- Recruiting and sponsoring international students and staff.
- Overseas placements and trips.
- Information for students studying in the EU, Iceland, Liechtenstein, Norway and Switzerland.
- Running a HE provider or institution.
- Intellectual property.
- Research.

You can find the guidance here.

Next wave funding for the Future Leaders Fellowship scheme announced

On Thursday 15 October, the Minister for Science, Research and Innovation, Amanda Solloway MP, announced £109m in government funding for the next wave of Future Leaders Fellowship scheme. The funding will support the development of ‘blue sky’ solutions to global issues such as food supply, cancer diagnosis and dementia treatment.

The Future Leaders Fellowships scheme, which is run by UK Research and Innovation (UKRI), will recognise up to 550 individuals with a total investment of £900 million committed over 3 years.

You can find more information here.

Chris Green MP steps down as Department for Education Parliamentary Private Secretary
On Tuesday 13 October, MP for Bolton West, Chris Green, resigned from government after voicing concerns about local Covid-19 restrictions.

You can read his resignation letter [here](#).

**BEIS Department report on identifying and prioritising areas of emerging innovation**

On Thursday 15 October, the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy released a report on ‘the prioritisation of future innovations. The aim of the project was to generate an evidence-base to support the work of the Regulatory Horizons Council.

The Regulatory Horizons Council is an independent committee that provides the government with advice on priorities for regulatory reform to benefit the UK economy and society.

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