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

Update from Michael Gove on negotiations with the European Union

On Monday 19 October, Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster and Minister for the Cabinet Office gave an update to the House on the Government’s negotiations with the European Union on our future trading relationship and the work of the UK/EU Joint Committee established under the withdrawal agreement.

Labour MP Lloyd Russell-Moyle asked whether the government would consider a separate track to negotiate Erasmus and Horizon entry. Michael Gove responded reiterating that government would like to continue participation in both programmes but that it depended to a significant extent on ongoing conversations.

You can read a full transcript of the debate here.

Westminster Hall debate on the ‘role of colleges in a skills-led recovery from Covid-19’

On Tuesday 22 October, there was a Westminster Hall debate on the role of colleges in a skills-led recovery from the covid-19 outbreak.

Members from across the house highlighted positive examples of the collaboration between universities, colleges and businesses in their constituencies. Labour members called on the government not to pit universities and colleges against each other but to assist them to work collaboratively through a properly resourced Department for Education.

Conservative MP Ben Bradley claimed that in many cases higher education outcomes are not a good as hoped and that there is an opportunity for further education, technical and vocational skills to give young people better qualifications and earning power than they would get from higher education.

In response to the debate Parliamentary Under Secretary of State for Apprenticeships and Skills Gillian Keegan MP spoke of the £290 million capital funding to establish 20 Institutes of Technology. She highlighted the need to increase take up of higher level qualifications (level 4, 5 & 6) and said getting a loan for a high-value technical course should be as easy as for a degree course. She went on to say that a new funding system will ensure further education providers have the same access to funding as universities do and ‘remove the bias’ towards universities rather than technical education.

You can read a full transcript of the debate here.

Backbench Business: General Debate on Covid-19

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

Health Minister Matt Hancock MP announced that the government have begun the roll-out of lateral flow tests to universities, which do not require a lab or a machine and give a result within minutes. Shadow Health Minister, John Ashworth MP responded that the minister should ‘invest in our great universities’, which are developing some of this saliva-based testing.

Conservative MP Greg Smith spoke of his constituent whose son has started university but ‘been treated worse than a prisoner in his halls of residence’ and that the impact of the isolation led him to
return home. Dr Rosena Allin-Khan, Shadow Mental Health minister also raised that students were being treated like prisoners. Conservative Andrew Mitchell MP expressed his disagreement with students in Nottingham being fined £10,000 each for breaching rules, noting the effect the pandemic has had on opportunities for young people.

You can read a full transcript of 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 held 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

The transcript of this debate is not yet available. An overview of this session will be included in a future digest.

You can find out more information and watch the session here.

**EU Services Sub-Committee session on the future UK-EU relationship in research and education**

On Thursday 22 October, the EU Services Sub-Committee held a session on ‘the future UK-EU relationship in research and education’. The committee questioned witnesses on the impact of Brexit on UK research funding and education, with particular emphasis on Horizon Europe and Erasmus and potential UK replacements.

When questioned on whether the UK should seek third-country affiliation with Horizon Europe and Erasmus+ programmes all the witnesses agreed. Vivienne Stern, Director of Universities UK International (UUKi), said Horizon Europe would be difficult to replicate and impossible in the short term and that the government should prioritise affiliation with Erasmus due to the correlation between study abroad and employment outcomes.

On priorities for future research funding if the UK did not affiliate with Horizon Europe, Sir Richard Catlow, Foreign Secretary of the Royal Society said funding should be directed to developing an alternative to the European Research Council (ERC) and other collaborative networks. Vivienne Stern agreed an ERC replacement should be prioritised and the Discovery Fund was a good start.

Lord McNally asked how important the free flow of data and EU data adequacy was for the UK education and research sector. Catherine Guinard, Policy and Advocacy Manager at the Wellcome Trust said data was the lifeblood of research and cross-border flows of research were particularly important in collaboration. She went on to say that if no alternative was found to the EU GDPR legislation there would be a significant impact on the UK’s research output.

The committee members concluded by asking the witnesses what key messages should be taken away. Sir Richard Catlow said continued participation to EU programmes is vital to the UK. Catherine Guinard said no-deal would be hugely disruptive in the short-medium term and stressed the need to associate with Horizon Europe and Erasmus, Hillary Gyebi-Ababio, Vice-President (Higher Education) at the NUS agreed. Vivienne Stern said a funding commitment to an Erasmus alternative and a visa regime which allowed for student exchange was needed.
A full transcript of the session has not yet been published but you can find details of the session [here](#).

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**Forthcoming business**

The House of Commons is in recess between 23 October – 2 November.

There is currently no business relevant to higher education scheduled in the Lords next week.

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**Written Questions**

**Covid-19 testing capacity for students and staff at universities**

**Dan Jarvis (Barnsley Central):** To ask the Secretary of State for Health and Social Care, what steps he is taking to (a) increase covid-19 testing capacity and (b) reduce waiting times for results for (i) students and (ii) staff at universities. [105371]

**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.

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**Decolonising the history curriculum**

**Baroness Eaton:** To ask Her Majesty’s Government what assessment they have made of steps taken by some universities to decolonise the history curriculum; and what plans they have to issue guidance to universities on making the history curriculum as previously taught available to students. [HL8921]

**Lord Parkinson Of Whitley Bay:** Universities are autonomous institutions and it is for them to determine the scope and content of their curricula. The government has therefore made no such assessment and has no current plans to issue any guidance on this issue.

However, the government maintains its commitment to upholding academic freedom — and the freedom of speech, which universities and higher education institutions have a legal duty to uphold — so that people studying at them can engage with a wide range of ideas and arguments.

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**Covid-19 response university stakeholder group**

**Lord Watson Of Invergowrie:** To ask Her Majesty's Government whether they have formed a COVID-19 response University stakeholder advisory group; and if not, why not. [HL8958]

**Lord Parkinson Of Whitley Bay:** On 18 August, the government launched a Higher Education Taskforce comprising various representatives of the sector, initially to advise on higher education admissions and acceptances. Membership of the taskforce includes representatives from Universities UK, the Universities & Colleges Admissions Service and a wide range of groups representing the Vice-Chancellors of a broad range of higher education providers.

This group has continued to meet as the autumn term has begun and has discussed other challenges higher education providers are facing in light of COVID-19. We will look to review its terms of
reference and membership in due course, in order to ensure that it remains the right means of advising on the challenges faced by higher education providers and students.

My hon. Friend, the Minister of State for Universities, has also chaired a number of sub-groups, looking at elements of the response to COVID-19 in more detail, including winter planning and student mental health.

Alongside the Higher Education Taskforce, my hon. Friend, the Minister of State for Universities has regularly been meeting other representatives of the higher education sector, including university Vice-Chancellors, the National Union of Students, and the Union for Colleges and Universities.

Training for university students to help access online tuition

Dame Cheryl Gillan (Chesham and Amersham): To ask the Secretary of State for Education, what training is being made available to university students to help them to access their online tuition at university. [104004]

Michelle Donelan (Chippenham): English higher education (HE) providers are autonomous institutions, which means that they have the freedom to determine the way their courses are taught, supervised, and assessed. However, providers that are registered with the Office for Students (OfS) must ensure that all students, from admission through to completion, have the support that they need to succeed in and benefit from HE. The OfS has the powers to act if there are concerns.

As I set out in a letter to MPs on 9 October, the government’s expectation is that quality and academic standards must be maintained. The OfS has made it clear that all HE providers must continue to comply with registration conditions relating to quality and standards, which set out requirements to ensure that courses are high quality, that students are supported and achieve good outcomes and that standards are protected. The OfS have also set out that providers must continue to provide sufficient and appropriate facilities, learning resources and student support services to deliver a high-quality academic experience. Providers must continue to comply with their legal obligations under the Equality Act (2010), ensuring that education and learning is accessible to all students. When making changes to the delivery of their courses, providers need to consider how they support all students, particularly the most vulnerable, to achieve successful academic and professional outcomes. We recognise that the move to increased online provision may result in the support needs of some students with disabilities changing, in which case suitable alternative arrangements should be made for them.

The OfS has published information and guidance for providers and students. The Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education has also published a series of guides to support providers to secure academic standards and to support student achievement during the COVID-19 outbreak. The guidance is available here.

The OfS are taking very seriously the potential impacts on teaching and learning, ensuring they have a clear picture of what students are receiving. They published a statement on 9 October about how they are monitoring the quality of online provision.

My right hon. Friend, the Secretary of State for Education, has also commissioned Sir Michael Barber, the Chair of the OfS, to lead a review to consider how to enhance the quality of digital teaching and learning and the opportunities that digital education presents for universities in the medium and long term. The review is expected to report in spring 2021 and will also explore how HE providers can ensure that all students have access to a high-quality digital teaching and learning experience.

Compensation for students whose online tuition has been cancelled

Dame Cheryl Gillan (Chesham and Amersham): To ask the Secretary of State for Education, what compensation is available to university students who have their online tuition cancelled. [104005]
Michelle Donelan (Chippenham): This is a difficult and uncertain time for students, but we are working with the higher education (HE) sector to make sure that all reasonable efforts are being made to enable students to continue their studies. We have seen some fantastic and innovative examples of high-quality online learning being delivered across the sector and are aware of a number of universities that have increased their online teaching in response to local COVID-19 outbreaks. This is in line with government guidance, which sets out 4 tiers of restrictions for education settings, and SAGE advice.

However, the majority of universities are now open for the autumn term, using a blended learning approach which combines online teaching and in-person tuition in ways that they consider appropriate to minimise risk.

Whether or not an individual student is entitled to a refund of tuition fees will depend on the specific contractual arrangements between the HE provider and student.

If students have concerns, they should first raise their concerns with their university. If their concerns remain unresolved, students at HE providers in England or Wales can ask the Office of the Independent Adjudicator for Higher Education to consider their complaint.

Universities are autonomous and responsible for setting their own fees within the fee caps set by the government. In deciding to keep charging full fees, universities will of course want to ensure that they can continue to deliver courses that are fit for purpose and that help students progress their qualifications.

The government has been clear that it expects universities to continue delivering a high-quality academic experience and help students to achieve qualifications that they and employers value.

**Guidance on plans for the safe return of students home at Christmas**

Emma Hardy (Kingston upon Hull West and Hessle): To ask the Secretary of State for Education, when he intends to publish his plans for the safe return of students home from universities at the end of the autumn 2020 term. [105523]

Michelle Donelan (Chippenham): As my right hon. Friend, 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 well looked after. The department is working with the sector to publish guidance on students returning home safely at Christmas and expects to publish it shortly.

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

**Accessibility of counselling at support services for students**

Sarah Olney (Richmond Park): To ask the Secretary of State for Education, what steps he is taking to increase the accessibility of counselling and support services for students in higher education. [104148]

Michelle Donelan (Chippenham): Protecting the mental health of higher education students is a priority for this government and we continue to work closely with the higher education sector to promote good practice in mental health and wellbeing.
The Department for Health and Social Care (DHSC) has overall policy responsibility for young people’s mental health and we continue to work closely with them to take significant steps to support the mental health and wellbeing support for young people in higher education settings.

DHSC is committed, through the NHS Long Term Plan, to investing at least £2.3 billion of extra funding a year into mental health services by 2023-24. This will see an additional 345,000 children and young people, and adults, able to access support through NHS-funded services.

Higher education providers as autonomous bodies, independent from government, are responsible for their own decisions about how best to support their students. Whilst it is for providers to identify and address the needs of their student body, many providers have boosted 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.

The government has worked closely with Universities UK to embed the Step Change programme within the higher education sector. The strategic framework calls on higher education leaders to adopt mental health as a strategic priority and embed good mental health practices beyond student service teams. The government expects all providers to engage actively with the guidance.

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.

In addition, higher education providers have been asked 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, towards student hardship funds and mental health support.

The government has provided over £9 million to leading mental health charities to help them expand and reach those most in need. Students struggling with their mental health can also access support via the NHS and online resources from Public Health England, alongside support from the mental health charity Mind.

Support for students who care leavers and estranged from families

Thangam Debbonaire (Bristol West): To ask the Secretary of State for Education, what support his Department is providing to students who are (a) care leavers and (b) estranged from their families during the covid-19 outbreak. [102867]

Michelle Donelan (Chippenham): I wrote to universities and other higher education (HE) providers on 20 March, at the beginning of the COVID-19 outbreak, to highlight the vulnerability of care leavers and estranged students, and asked them to prioritise these groups for additional support.

Last month, I met with a group of 12 care leavers and estranged students to formally discuss the issues that they face in both entering and succeeding in HE. Following that discussion, I asked officials to make sure that the end-of-term Christmas guidance, which will be published shortly, pays particular attention to the needs of vulnerable students.

The government has worked closely with the Office for Students (OfS) to help clarify that HE providers can draw upon existing funding to provide hardship funds and support disadvantaged students impacted by COVID-19. Providers were able to use the OfS’s Student Premium funding worth around £23 million per month for April to July this year and £256 million for the academic year 2020/21, starting from August, towards student hardship funds, including the purchase of mental health support.
The government also 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.

Care leavers attending HE courses are treated as independent students when their entitlement to living costs is assessed. This means that, in nearly all cases, they will qualify for the maximum loan for living costs. Care leavers undertaking HE also qualify for a £2,000 HE bursary from their local authority.

Additional bursaries are offered by some HE providers for care leavers, and students estranged from their families.

**Limiting the spread of Covid-19 on university campuses**

**Dame Diana Johnson (Kingston upon Hull North):** To ask the Secretary of State for Education, what discussions he has had with the Secretary of State for Health and Social Care on steps the Government is taking to limit the spread of covid-19 on university campus grounds. [102703]

**Michelle Donelan (Chippenham):** My right hon. Friend, the Secretary of State for Education, has regular discussions on minimising the transmission of COVID-19 within higher education (HE) providers with his Cabinet colleagues, including with my right hon. Friend, the Secretary of State for Health and Social Care. Departmental officials and I have regular meetings and discussions with ministers and officials in the Department for Health and Social Care, and with sector representatives, on a range of measures to limit the spread of COVID-19.

The safety and wellbeing of staff and students in 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.

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 issued updated guidance for providers on reopening campuses, which provides advice on teaching, accommodation and student services. The guidance is available here.

Our system of HE tiers, as set out in guidance, intends to help universities identify the appropriate restrictions to impose on their educational provision in response to an outbreak. We have worked to ensure that all universities have outbreak plans. These plans have been shared with local Directors of Public Health and continue to be reviewed and updated based on emerging lessons and local situations.

The plans cover a range of scenarios and will ensure that HE providers are prepared to respond quickly to an outbreak in their educational setting or wider community. We are working with Public Health England to monitor those universities that have outbreaks and to make sure that universities and Directors of Public Health are working together to respond appropriately to any outbreaks.

**Grant funding for the second stage of the Covid-19 research support package**

**Chi Onwurah (Newcastle upon Tyne Central):** To ask the Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy, how much funding he plans to make available in grants during the second stage of the university covid-19 research support package that was announced in June 2020. [102797]
Amanda Solloway (Derby North): The amount of grant funding provided under the Sustaining University Research Excellence (SURE) fund will depend on income losses which at this point remain unclear - each university’s allocation is the lower of 80% of losses in international student income or the value of non-public research funding.

Spending on The Skills Toolkit online platform

Anneliese Dodds (Oxford East): To ask the Secretary of State for Education, how much money from the public purse has been spent on The Skills Toolkit online learning platform in each year since the beginning of that platform. [102155]

Gillian Keegan (Chichester): The Skills Toolkit was announced in April 2020 and the cost of developing the platform in this financial year is £798,700. This includes the launch and the two subsequent expansions of the platform. A further £325,700 has been spent on communications activities to promote the platform.

As of 4 October there have been a total of 118,011 starts of the courses on the platform and 19,564 course completions. As of 11 October, the platform had 1.2 million page views.

Number of students who have tested positive at University of Hull

Dame Diana Johnson (Kingston upon Hull North): To ask the Secretary of State for Education, how many University of Hull students have tested positive for covid-19 since the academic year began on 14 September 2020. [102702]

Michelle Donelan (Chippenham): In order to balance the need for accurate information with reducing data burdens on universities, we have asked for additional information only from universities with cumulative outbreaks of 25 or more positive student COVID-19 cases. We have received no response from the University of Hull and external sources indicate that there have been fewer than 25 positive student cases at the university so far.

From the week commencing 19 October 2020, the Office for Students will be gathering data on COVID-19 outbreaks, and we will consider how best to report that information in line with data-sharing protocols.

Potential job losses in event that institutions close

Apsana Begum (Poplar and Limehouse): To ask the Secretary of State for Education, what assessment he has made of (a) the potential for job losses in the higher education sector in the event that institutes close as a result of the covid-19 outbreak and (b) the potential effect of those job losses on the higher education sector. [99754]

Michelle Donelan (Chippenham): COVID-19 has had a significant impact on both students and higher education (HE) providers, and we welcome the resilience, innovation and dedication from staff and students over these months.

It is our aim for HE providers to continue to deliver HE provision and support the needs of students, both on and off campus. We have also committed to work with HE providers to help them access the range of measures on offer to support jobs and financial sustainability.

The government is clear that we do not want to see any students miss out on the opportunity to benefit from our excellent HE system as a result of COVID-19. We expect that access to the
business support schemes and the reprofiling of public funding should help stabilise most providers’ finances, and that should certainly be the first port of call for providers.

The department provided sector-specific guidance in April to help providers understand and access the range of government support on offer. This guidance confirmed that HE providers could access the Coronavirus Job Retention Scheme (CJRS) to help safeguard jobs.

Furthermore, on 4 May, we announced a package of measures to give further support to HE providers at this time of financial pressure. This included pulling forward an estimated £2.6 billion worth of forecast tuition fee payments to ease cashflow pressures and bringing forward quality-related research funding for HE providers in England in the current academic year by £100 million.

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, through the provision of high-quality courses aligned with economic and societal needs.

We will consider HE providers’ circumstances on a case-by-case basis, supported by expert advice, to ensure there is a robust value-for-money case for intervention, with support for restructuring in the form of repayable loans coming from public funds as a last resort, and with strict conditions attached that align with wider government objectives.

On 24 September, my right hon. Friend, the Chancellor of the Exchequer, announced additional government support to provide certainty to businesses and workers impacted by the COVID-19 outbreak. This package includes the new Job Support Scheme (JSS). This is designed to protect viable jobs in businesses which are facing lower demand over the winter months due to COVID-19. Like the CJRS, the government expects that the JSS will not be used by many public sector organisations. Where employers receive public funding for staff costs, and that funding is continuing, we expect employers to use that money to continue to pay staff in the usual fashion. This also applies to non-public sector employers that receive public funding for staff costs.

However, regardless of the unprecedented levels of government support available, HE providers are autonomous of government and they are ultimately responsible for their own staffing decisions, which we expect them to make according to their own operational needs.

**Students tested positive living in campus accommodation**

**Dame Diana Johnson (Kingston upon Hull North)**: To ask the Secretary of State for Education, if his Department will publish data on the number of university students living in campus accommodation who have tested positive for covid-19 in each local authority area in England.

[102701]

**Michelle Donelan (Chippenham)**: Universities are currently reporting to us on the number of positive student cases in their institutions and the numbers they are aware of that are self-isolating, and these are currently not broken down by local authority campus zones. From next week, the Office for Students will be gathering data on COVID-19 outbreaks and we will consider how best to report that information in line with data sharing protocols.
**Access to digital and online learning during Covid-19**

**Yasmin Qureshi (Bolton South East):** To ask the Secretary of State for Education, what steps he is taking to ensure university students have access to digital and online learning during the covid-19 outbreak. [102741]

**Michelle Donelan (Chippenham):** The government has been working closely with the Office for Students (OfS), the regulator of registered higher education (HE) providers in England, so that HE providers can draw upon existing funding to provide hardship funds and to support disadvantaged students affected by the COVID-19 outbreak.

As a result of this flexibility, providers were able to use OfS student premium funding worth around £23 million per month between April to July this year. From August, providers have also been able to use £256 million for the current academic year towards student hardship funds, including for the purchase of IT equipment. We have also 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.

As I set out in a letter to MPs on 9 October, the government’s expectation is that quality and academic standards must be maintained. The OfS has made it clear that all HE providers must continue to comply with registration conditions relating to quality and standards, which set out requirements to ensure that courses are high-quality, that students are supported and achieve good outcomes, and that standards are protected. They have also set out that HE providers must continue to provide sufficient and appropriate facilities, learning resources and student support services to deliver a high-quality academic experience.

The OfS has published information and guidance for HE providers and students. The Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education has also published a series of guides to support HE providers to secure academic standards and to support student achievement during the COVID-19 outbreak.

The OfS are taking very seriously the potential impacts on teaching and learning, and ensuring they have a clear picture of what students are receiving. They published a statement on 9 October about how they are monitoring the quality of online provision given by HE providers.

My right hon. Friend, the Secretary of State of Education, has also commissioned Sir Michael Barber, the Chair of the OfS, to lead a review to consider how to enhance the quality of digital teaching and learning and the opportunities that digital education presents for universities in the medium and long term. The review, which is expected to report in spring 2021, will also explore how HE providers can ensure that all students have access to a high-quality digital teaching and learning experience.

**Incentives for encourage young people to pursue careers in medical services**

**Stuart Anderson (Wolverhampton South West):** To ask the Secretary of State for Health and Social Care, if he will put incentives in place to encourage young people to pursue careers in front-line medical services. [99732]

**Helen Whately (Faversham and Mid Kent):** The Government has introduced a number of initiatives to encourage demand from all sectors of society, including young people, to train to pursue careers in medical, and wider healthcare professions.

The Government has funded an additional 1,500 medical school places in England, which saw five new medical schools open as part of this expansion. One of the criteria for universities securing additional training places included the need to demonstrate that these universities were widening access and increasing social mobility.
A new financial support package of at least £5,000 has been made available from September 2020 to all eligible pre-registration nursing, midwifery and most allied health students, and most allied health students, at English universities.

**Partial refunds for students impacted by Covid-19 lockdowns**

**Lord Taylor Of Warwick**: To ask Her Majesty's Government what plans they have to ensure that students who have been impacted by COVID-19 lockdowns are offered partial tuition fee refunds. [HL8777]

**Lord Parkinson Of Whitley Bay**: Universities have worked hard to put in place a wide range of measures to deliver a COVID-secure environment. These include enhanced cleaning and improved ventilation, smaller groups for in-person teaching, adjusted timetables to limit contact between groups, and changes to physical layouts to comply with social distancing guidelines.

The government expects universities to continue delivering a high-quality academic experience. It is a registration condition of the Office for Students (OfS) that institutions must deliver well-designed courses which provide a high-quality academic experience for all students and enable a student's achievement to be reliably assessed.

Universities are autonomous and responsible for setting their own fees, up to a maximum of £9,250 for approved (fee cap) institutions. In deciding to keep charging full fees, universities will of course want to ensure that they can continue to deliver courses that are fit for purpose and that help students progress their qualifications. Whether or not an individual student is entitled to a refund of fees will depend on the specific contractual arrangements between the institution and the student.

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

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

The OfS has also published guidance on student consumer protection during the COVID-19 pandemic, which is available here.

**Access to digital technology for students at University Technical Colleges**

**Lord Baker Of Dorking**: To ask Her Majesty's Government how many students at (1) secondary schools, (2) sixth forms, and (3) University Technical Colleges, did not attend in the week ending 2 October because they were isolating or quarantined; and how many of those students had access to a computer and an internet connection to facilitate remote learning. [HL8701]

**Baroness Berridge**: Keeping close track of suspected or confirmed COVID-19 cases in schools is a priority for the government. Public Health England (PHE) leads in holding data on infection, incidence and COVID-19 cases overall. PHE have published data on COVID-19 incidents by institution, including educational settings. This data can be found here.

The department is currently collecting data from schools on a daily basis, as well as gathering information from local areas and following up with individual settings to confirm that procedures
requiring pupils to isolate are well understood and that necessary decisions are made on the basis of public health advice.

The department collects data on the number of schools that have indicated that they have either sent children home due to COVID-19 containment measures or have staff shortages due to COVID-19 related absences, and have attendance data for schools that have done so. We are currently looking at the quality of that data with a view to publishing it as part of the official statistics series. The series includes published data on school openings and attendance, which shows that at a national level approximately 93% of state-funded schools were fully open on 1 October. Of all schools that responded to the survey, 7% said they were not fully open due to suspected or confirmed cases of COVID-19 on 1 October. Equivalent estimates have not been made at phase level. Approximately 90% of all children on roll in all state-funded schools were in attendance on 1 October. More information is available here.

During the summer term, the department delivered over 220,000 laptops and tablets, and over 50,000 4G wireless routers, for disadvantaged children in year 10, as well as children with a social worker and care leavers who would not otherwise have had online access, as part of over £160 million invested to support remote education and access to online social care.

The department is now supplementing this support by making 250,000 additional laptops and tablets available in the event that face-to-face schooling is disrupted as a result of local COVID-19 restrictions and children become reliant on remote education. This scheme is intended to enable schools to support disadvantaged children in years 3 to 11 who cannot afford their own laptops and tablets. Schools will also be able to order laptops and tablets for disadvantaged children across all year groups who are shielding as a result of official or medical advice, all year groups who attend hospital schools and those completing their key stage 4 at a further education college.

Merits of introducing an immigration checking service for student finance

Steve McCabe (Birmingham, Selly Oak): To ask the Secretary of State for Education, whether he has made an assessment of the potential merits of introducing an immigration checking service for Student Finance to check student eligibility similar to that of the employer checking service. [98871]

Michelle Donelan (Chippenham): Where necessary, the Student Loans Company (SLC) seeks information from the Home Office to establish whether an individual meets the personal eligibility requirements for student support. The information that the SLC requires from the Home Office varies, but often includes the individual’s immigration status (including the date of the grant) and confirmation that they have been ordinarily (lawfully) resident in the UK and Islands during a specified period. In some circumstances, a more extensive immigration history is requested.

Sector News

Welsh government announces national coronavirus ‘fire-break’

On Monday 19 October, the Welsh First Minister Mark Drakeford announced new measures aimed at preventing further spread of Covid-19 in Wales, in the form of a national coronavirus ‘fire-break’. Following a similar announcement in Northern Ireland last week, the Welsh government have ordered a fortnight-long action, beginning this Friday (23 October). The fire-break will start at 6pm on Friday 23 October and end on Monday 9 November. It will apply to everyone living in Wales and will replace the local restrictions which are in force in some parts of the country.
Universities in Wales will remain open during this two-week action, with the statement outlining that universities will continue to ‘provide a blend of in-person and online learning’ and students in Wales are also being asked to remain at their term-time address given the continuation of blended learning.

You can read the press release here.

**New Ofqual blog: Setting standards in the autumn exam series**

On Monday 19 October, Ofqual published a blog on how it will be setting standards for the AS and A level autumn exam series which started on 5 October.

This exceptional exam series was put in place to give students who were disappointed with their grade in the summer the opportunity to take an exam to try to improve their grade, and to give those private candidates who were unable to get a grade in the summer the opportunity to take an exam. The blog sets out Ofqual’s approach to setting standards for the exam series, taking into account the small number of candidates and the difference in profile of the cohorts, compared to the summer exam series.

You can read the blog here.

**NHS England produces new resources for students who are struggling**

On Monday 19 October, NHS England has published a new blog for students outlining support available to them if things are getting too much during the ongoing pandemic, with links to resources such as the NHS urgent mental health helplines.

You can read the blog here.

**Amanda Solloway speech at HEPI on ‘The Research Landscape’**

On Tuesday 20 October, Science Minister Amanda Solloway MP spoke at a HEPI webinar.

The minister spoke of how universities are well placed to help solve the challenges of the 21st century, including Covid-19, climate change, an aging society and levelling up. She reaffirmed the government’s commitment to raising spending on R&D to £22 billion by 2024/25. She used the speech to highlight the importance of evaluating research. She concluded by suggesting that the sector must ask how REF can be evolved and must work with government to ‘build an evaluation system that achieves our goals’.

The Minister has written to Research England to ask them to start working with their counterparts in the devolved administrations on a plan for reforming the REF.

You can read a full transcript of the speech here.

**Update on the spending review**

On Wednesday 21 October, the Chancellor announced his decision to conduct a one-year Spending Review rather than a full Comprehensive Spending Review.
The spending review will now only set department’s resource and capital budgets for 2021-22. The plans for the spending review will be kept under review.

You can find out more here.

**Welsh government announces additional £10million support for student wellbeing services**

On Thursday 22 October, the Welsh government announced an extra £10million of funding aimed at helping university students in Wales cope with the coronavirus pandemic. The funding support will go toward increased student mental health and support services, and student hardship funds.

In particular, the funding aims to increase capacity in students’ unions and universities to provide advice and support for both students and staff, with a focus on mental health support and suicide-safer measures. This includes online services and support in the Welsh language.

Welsh Education Minister Kirsty Williams also outlined that some of the funding will be targeted at learning support for vulnerable students and those with disabilities or caring responsibilities, including helping to address digital poverty.

The funding will be managed by the Higher Education Funding Council for Wales (HEFCW).

You can find out more here.

**Prime Minister’s statement on coronavirus (COVID-19): 22 October 2020**

On Thursday 22 October, the Prime Minister made a state Covid-19 at the coronavirus press conference.

The Prime Minister said that closing universities and going back to a full lockdown would be the wrong course of action, particularly now that we know the psychological and economic cost.

You can read the full statement here.