

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

Statement by Secretary of State for Health and Social Care, Sajid Javid MP

On Monday 29 November, the Secretary of State for Health and Social Care, the Rt Hon Sajid Javid MP, made a statement in the House of Commons on the new Covid-19 variant. The Health Secretary began by confirming the measures announced over the weekend. The measures were debated and voted on and came into effect on 30 November.

The measures include the additional measures at the border, including putting in place a testing regime for arrivals, requiring anyone who enters the UK to take a PCR test by the end of the 2nd day after they arrive and to self-isolate until they receive a negative result. He also confirmed that four countries were added to the red list.

The Health Secretary also announced measures to slow the spread of virus in UK, such as close contacts of anyone who tests positive for the Omicron variant having to self-isolate for 10 days, regardless of whether they have been vaccinated or not. He also confirmed face coverings will be made compulsory in shops and public transport (unless exempt)

The Health Secretary went on to confirm the changes proposed by the JCVI, including expanding the booster programme to all adults (prioritised by age group and risk) and reducing the recommended gap between the second and third dose from six to three months.

Rosena Allin-Khan MP, Shadow Minister for Mental Health, standing in for the Shadow Health Secretary, said the government's 'flip flopping' on masks has created confusion amongst schools, colleges and universities, asking him to confirm the requirements for educational settings. The Health Secretary did not respond to this question.

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

Skills and Post-16 Education Bill

Throughout the week, the Public Bill Committee met to consider the Skills and Post-16 Education Bill in the Committee Stage.

We will include a summary of the full Committee Stage in next week's digest.

You can find transcripts of the Committee debates so far [here](#).

Science and Technology Committee on 'reproducibility and research integrity'

On Wednesday 1 December, the Commons Science and Technology Committee held a session on 'reproducibility and research integrity'.

The committee heard evidence on reproducibility and research integrity. The first session discussed reproducibility models, independent verification, falsifiability, peer reviews, incentives, inadequate research practices, improving reproducibility, and commercial data. Session two explored the current state of reproducibility, positive changes, process, funding, inadequate research practices, registered reports, cross-disciplinary engagement, undergraduate training, fraud, and sanctions. Session three talked about the current state of reproducibility, countries, pressures on researchers, data sharing, peer reviews, Covid-19, pre-prints, representation, and challenging irreproducibility.

In response to a question by Mark Logan MP (Con) regarding the role of the undergraduate system, Professor Marcus Munafò, Chair of UK Reproducibility Network Steering Group stated that soft infrastructure, such as training, needed to be coordinated so that they were the same across institutions. At the undergraduate level, he said that foundational data skills should be developed by researchers brought together from quantitative biomedical disciplines to understand the basics of research. Adding that these skills would be relevant for undergraduates when going outside of

academia and staying in academia, so that they had all been trained in interoperable ways and ensured that they could adopt open research practices as they progressed through their academic career.

Aaron Bell MP (Con) asked what the biggest cause for irreproducibility was. Dr Janine Austin Clayton, associate director at the United States National Institute for Health, responded saying that an intense factor for irreproducibility was that undergraduates and scientists wanted to produce good results and that this built up throughout the system. She added that the pressure to publish, get the next grant, get promoted, and tenured, were important drivers for irreproducibility. She also suggested that as papers were examined further, more would be learned.

Mark Logan MP followed by asking the panel whether it was possible to routinely produce reproducible work due to the pressures that academics faced. Dr Ivan Oransky, co-founder, Retraction Watch stated that researchers were able to produce reproducible work, but claimed that the threat of publish or perish is a real issue. He welcomed the ban of perverse incentives offered by the impact factor in China. Dr Oransky added that sanctions were necessary but not sufficient for those who engaged in fraudulent practices. He claimed that it was important to look upstream at incentives and the UKREF.

A transcript has not yet been published but it will be published [here](#).

Forthcoming business

Education oral questions

On Monday 6 December at 2:30pm, the Secretary of State for Education Nadhim Zahawi MP and his ministerial team will be answering questions in the House of Commons.

Questions are tabled on social mobility, student loan repayments, immigration rules for international students,

You can find the list of oral questions tabled [here](#) and watch the questions [here](#).

Skills and Post-16 Education Bill

On Tuesday 7 December at 9:25am and 2pm, the Public Bill Committee will continue to consider the Skills and Post-16 Education Bill in the Committee Stage.

You can find the latest amendment paper [here](#).

You can watch the Public Bill Committee [here](#).

Education Committee on the ‘Government’s Catch-up Programme’

On Tuesday 7 December at 10am, the Education Committee will be holding a session on the ‘Government’s Catch-up Programme’. Witnesses will include:

- Professor Becky Francis, Chief Executive at Education Endowment Foundation
- David Laws, Executive Chairman at Education Policy Institute
- Nick Bent, Co-Founder and Chief Executive at The Tutor Trust

You can watch the Education Committee meeting [here](#).

Health and Care Bill – Lords Second Reading

On Tuesday 7 December, the Health and Care Bill will receive its Second Reading in the House of Lords.

You can find details of the Bill [here](#) and watch the debate [here](#).

Written Questions

Number of students on Turing Scheme placements

Munira Wilson: To ask the Secretary of State for Education, how many students are on placements on the Turing Scheme for year 2021-2; and how much his Department will spend on that Scheme in 2021-2.

Michelle Donelan: The Turing Scheme has a total budget of £110 million for delivery and grant funding this academic year. Funding has been allocated for more than 40,000 participants from schools, colleges and universities to do study and work placements across the globe during the 2021/22 academic year.

A list of all funded organisations in higher education, further education and schools, as well as all destination countries and territories, can be found on the Turing Scheme website: <https://www.turing-scheme.org.uk/project-community/funding-results/>

Support for clinically vulnerable students from Covid-19

Navendu Mishra: To ask the Secretary of State for Education, what support is available to protect clinically vulnerable students from covid-19 in higher education.

Michelle Donelan: The government's priority remains to keep students and staff as safe as possible and minimise disruption to university life. We continue to work with the higher education sector to deliver this, ensuring students are able to receive a full, enriching and enjoyable experience.

The shielding programme has ended and adults previously considered clinically extremely vulnerable (CEV) should follow the same guidance as everyone else on staying safe and preventing the spread of COVID-19, which is available [here](#). It is important that everyone adheres to this guidance, but people previously considered CEV may wish to consider taking extra precautions. There is guidance for people previously considered CEV, available [here](#). In some circumstances, people may have received personal advice from their specialist or clinician on additional precautions to take and they should continue to follow that advice.

All employers are required to take steps to reduce the risk of exposure to COVID-19 in the workplace and higher education providers should be able to explain what measures they have put in place to keep staff and students safe on campus. We would expect them to discuss any concerns that people previously considered CEV may have, including any request to change the way in which their teaching and learning is delivered.

Remote learning for clinically vulnerable students from Covid-19

Navendu Mishra: To ask the Secretary of State for Education, whether clinically vulnerable students are able to request remote learning in higher education during high infection rates of covid-19.

Michelle Donelan: The government's priority remains to keep students and staff as safe as possible and minimise disruption to university life. We continue to work with the higher education sector to deliver this, ensuring students are able to receive a full, enriching and enjoyable experience.

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Innovation loans pilot programme

Chi Onwurah: To ask the Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy, when his Department plans to publish the final report on the innovation loans pilot programme; and with reference to the press release of 21 November 2021, what criteria were used to assess that programme. [80189]

George Freeman: The Follow-On Interim Evaluation of the Pilot Innovation Loans Programme will be published shortly.

The pilot programme's interim evaluation has focused on:

1. What is the interest in, and demand for, Innovation Loans?
2. What is the nature of the businesses applying, and the projects which form the focus of the applications for funding?
3. What would have happened to the innovation projects supported if they had not been offered these loans?
4. How effective are the processes of implementation and what are the experiences of the customer journey?
5. What evidence is there of progress towards the achievement of intended outputs, outcomes, and impacts

Enterprises owned by Chinese government in receipt of UK research grants

Lord Alton of Liverpool: To ask Her Majesty's Government how many enterprises owned by the government of China (1) have contracts with Her Majesty's Government, and (2) are in receipt of UK research grants.

Lord Callanan: The Government does not make research grant awards to enterprises owned by foreign governments. UKRI takes independent decisions on the distribution of research grants between eligible UK higher education institutions and research establishments, which may themselves collaborate with international partners.

Migrants who entered the UK on a student visa

Lord Green of Deddington: To ask Her Majesty's Government how many migrants who initially entered the UK on a student visa were granted the right to settle in each of the past 10 years.

Baroness Williams of Trafford: Data is published as part of the Migrant Journey report (opens in a new tab) in dataset MJ_D02, which contains grants of settlement by initial leave category.

Details for the last 10 years for study are below:

Sum of Total
Column Labels
Row Labels
Study

2011
27,375
2012
23,364
2013
32,126
2014
25,694
2015
26,668
2016
17,663
2017
18,176
2018
26,622
2019
27,625
2020
16,764
Grand Total
242,077

Financial impact of interest-bearing loans on Muslim students

Tanmanjeet Singh Dhesi: To ask the Secretary of State for Education, what assessment his Department has made of the financial impact of interest-bearing student loans on Muslim students. [81108]

Michelle Donelan: The government undertook an assessment of the impact of interest-bearing loans on Muslim students in the impact assessment for the Higher Education and Research Act, which was published in December 2017, and can be found [here](#).

Impact assessment of potential increases to student loans on standard of living

Tanmanjeet Singh Dhesi: To ask the Secretary of State for Education, if his Department will carry out an impact assessment of potential increases to student loans contributions on graduates' standard of living. [81109]

Michelle Donelan: I refer the hon. Member for Slough to the answer I gave on 22 November 2021 to Question 74983

Tanmanjeet Singh Dhesi: To ask the Secretary of State for Education, what assessment his Department has made of the effects of increasing student loan contributions for graduates on the accessibility of higher education for people from lower-income backgrounds. [81110]

Michelle Donelan: The student loan system in England removes financial barriers for those hoping to study higher education courses, while sharing its costs between learners and the general taxpayer. In 2020, record rates of English 18-year-old state school students who were in receipt of free school meals at age 15 were accepted on full time university courses (up 1.4 percentage points to 20.3%).

These students were 74% more likely to go to university in 2020 than in 2009.

After finishing study, monthly student loan repayments are linked to income, not to interest rates or the amount borrowed. This protects lower earners, and any outstanding debt is written off after 30 years at no detriment to individual borrowers.

As part of the Review of Post-18 Education and Funding we are carefully considering a range of options to ensure that student finance continues to deliver value for money for both students and the

taxpayer. The interim conclusion of the review was published on 21 January 2021, and we will conclude the review in full in due course.

Sharia-compliant alternative student finance system

Caroline Lucas: To ask the Secretary of State for Education, what criteria his Department is using to determine whether proposals for a Sharia-compliant alternative student finance system will be included in the conclusion of the Review of Post-18 Education and Funding; if he will publish the (a) timetable for considering the recommendations made by the independent panel that reported to that review and (b) estimated date of conclusion of that review; and if he will make a statement.

Michelle Donelan: The government has been carefully considering an alternative student finance product, alongside wider reforms to the higher education system, and an update will be provided alongside the conclusion to the Review of Post-18 Education and Funding. The interim conclusion of the review was published on 21 January 2021, and we will conclude the review in full at a future date.

Sharia-compliant alternative student finance system

Damien Moore: To ask the Secretary of State for Education, when his Department plans to publish the full response to Sir Philip Augar's review of Post-18 Education and Funding.

Michelle Donelan: Further to the interim conclusion to the Review of Post-18 Education and Funding published in January 2021, we continue to carefully consider the recommendations made by the independent panel that reported to the Review. We plan to provide a full response in due course.

Steps to attract talented academics and researchers

Helen Hayes: To ask the Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy, in the context of no eligible prize holders having applied for the Home Office 's fast-track Global Talent visa in the first six months of that scheme, what steps he is taking to help ensure that the UK attracts talented academics and researchers at all stages of their careers. [81084]

George Freeman: The prize route is just one option under our Global Talent route, through which Home Office have received thousands of applications since its launch in February 2020, and this number continues to rise.

The Government is committed to making the UK the most exciting destination in the world for scientists, researchers, and innovators. The Government will continue to improve our approach to attracting global talent to the UK through the Office for Talent, and by reviewing our talent offer to make sure that our programmes are among the best and most attractive in the world.

The Government continues to work closely with the science and research sector to ensure the UK immigration system is closely aligned to the sector's needs.

Embedding digital skills in higher education

Chi Onwurah: To ask the Secretary of State for Education, what progress her Department has made on embedding digital skills within the (a) Further Education and (b) Higher Education curriculum.

Alex Burghart: The department recognises the importance of digital skills at all levels and has introduced a range of provision to give people the opportunity to acquire the digital skills they need. In 2020 we introduced a new digital entitlement that will enable adults with no or low digital skills to undertake new improved digital qualifications free of charge. These entitlements are based on new national standards, which set out the digital skills that people need in life and in work.

We have introduced skills bootcamps, which will provide flexible training for in-demand areas including software development, digital marketing, and data analytics, and a fast-track to an interview

with a local employer. Our free courses for jobs offer supports eligible adults to access over 400 fully funded level 3 courses, including digital qualifications in areas such as cyber security, coding, network architecture, and systems support.

There are now 25 digital apprenticeships, from level 3 to degree apprenticeship, covering a range of roles including cyber security, software development and artificial intelligence (AI), providing the digital skills training in the workplace that individuals and employers need. Last year the first AI data specialist apprenticeship standard was approved for delivery at level 7. This highly skilled role champions AI, its applications and promotes the adoption of novel tools and technologies. At levels 4 and 5, the first approved higher technical qualifications in digital occupations, such as cyber security technologist, will be ready for first teaching from September 2022.

For 16-19 year olds, digital T Levels offer a prestigious, high-quality technical option at level 3, supporting progression to occupations such as software development technician. It is not just occupations in the digital sector where good digital skills are needed, and relevant digital skills are built into every T Level qualification. English higher education providers are autonomous institutions, which means that they have the freedom to determine the content of courses and the way their courses are taught, supervised, and assessed.

Last year, the former Secretary of State for Education, my right hon. Friend for South Staffordshire, formally commissioned Sir Michael Barber in his capacity as Chair of the Office for Students, to lead a review following the rapid shift toward digital teaching and learning in higher education since the start of the COVID-19 outbreak. The report, which was published on 25 February, builds on lessons learned through the COVID-19 outbreak and sets out recommendations to seize opportunities for the medium to long-term future. The report included a series of recommendations for higher education providers outlining what a successful approach to building digital skills looks like, with practical suggestions for action.

Employment prospects of humanities graduates

Lord Taylor of Warwick: To ask Her Majesty's Government what assessment they have made of the Higher Education Policy Institute report *The Humanities in Modern Britain: Challenges and Opportunities*, published on 23 September; and what plans they have to ensure that humanities degrees teach professionally valuable skills to boost (1) enrolments, and (2) the employment, prospects of humanities graduates. [HL4112]

Baroness Barran: We want every university student, regardless of background, to benefit from a high quality education and go on to pursue successful careers with the skills and knowledge they have studied for.

The government is taking forward a manifesto commitment to tackle low quality higher education and drive-up standards for all students, no matter what subject they study. Our landmark Skills and Post-16 Education Bill makes clear the power of the Office for Students to take much needed action in this area, including its ability to enforce minimum standards for universities on course completion rates and graduate outcomes.

Number of overseas students in the UK

Valerie Vaz: To ask the Secretary of State for Education, if he will make an estimate of the number of overseas students in the UK, broken down by (a) nationality and (b) university. [79360]

Michelle Donelan: The Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA) collects and publishes data about students enrolled at UK higher education (HE) providers.

Statistics on the total number of overseas students at each HE provider in the UK can be found in Table 1 of HESA's Open Data tables. This data is available [here](#). Further detail, which includes the country of domicile prior to study, is available in Table 28. This data is available [here](#).

The statistics available in HESA's Open Data tables refer to the academic years 2014/15 to 2019/20. Figures for the academic year 2020/21 will be published by HESA in February 2022.

The government fully recognises the important contribution that international students make to the UK's HE sector, both economically and culturally. International students enrich the university experience for all students, including those from the UK themselves. They bring greater diversity to university and college campuses adding an international dimension to the experience of all students. We are proud that so many international students choose to study here each year and look forward to welcoming many more in the future.

The International Education Strategy update published in February 2021, reaffirms the government's commitment to the two key ambitions of the International Education Strategy to increase the value of our education exports to £35 billion per year, and to sustainably increase the number of international HE students hosted in the UK to at least 600,000 per year, both by 2030.

Sector News

Updated DfE guidance published following Prime Minister's speech on 27 November

On Saturday 27 November, the Prime Minister Boris Johnson announced new temporary and precautionary measures linked to the Omicron variant of Covid-19. Following the PM's press conference, DfE also published updated [guidance](#) for higher education providers in England. The guidance maintains that face-to-face provision should continue without restrictions but there are several other changes linked to face coverings, self-isolation requirements and overseas arrivals of relevance to higher education providers.

The main changes to the guidance are as follows:

- It is now recommended that face coverings be worn when moving around HE premises (indoors) eg, corridors and communal spaces but it is for individual providers to consider whether they mandate face coverings in workshops, labs, teaching spaces, lecture rooms etc.
- Those identified as a close contact of a suspected or confirmed case of the Omicron variant, irrespective of age or vaccination status, will need to self-isolate immediately (for a 10-day period) and book a PCR test.
- The [government's red list](#) has been reinstated and there are now 10 countries on it – Angola, Malawi, Mozambique, Zambia, South Africa, Botswana, Eswatini, Lesotho, Namibia, and Zimbabwe. Arrivals from these countries must now quarantine on arrival in the UK for 10 days in managed quarantine facilities (and take two PCR tests during that time).
- In addition, all international arrivals to the UK must now book a PCR test and self-isolate until they receive a negative test result. These must be booked before an individual travels and purchased privately from a government-approved list of providers.

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

Labour Reshuffle

On Monday 29 December, Labour leader, Keir Starmer MP, led a reshuffle of his shadow team. Relevant new appointments include:

- Shadow Secretary of State for Education: **Bridget Phillipson**
- Shadow Secretary of State for Business and Industrial Strategy: **Jonathan Reynolds**
- Shadow Secretary of State for Levelling Up, Housing, Communities & Local Government: **Lisa Nandy**
- Shadow Secretary of State for Health and Social Care: **Wes Streeting**
- **Matt Western** remained in his role at Shadow Universities Minister.

You can find a full list [here](#).

Written Ministerial Statement on the Horizon Europe

On Tuesday 30 November, George Freeman MP, Minister for Science Research and Innovation, published a written ministerial statement on a guarantee to provide a financial safety net for successful UK applicants to Horizon Europe.

The statement announced that the government will guarantee funding for the first wave of eligible, successful applicants to Horizon Europe who have been unable to sign grant agreements with the EU. The guarantee is a short-term measure intended to address the continued delays from the EU to formalise the UK's association to Horizon Europe. The funding will be delivered through UK Research and Innovation (UKRI) who will publish details on how the guarantee will work including eligibility, scope and how to apply in the coming weeks.

You can view the WMS online [here](#).

Office for Students Annual Review

On Wednesday 1 December, the Office of Students published its annual review. The review looks at the state of the English higher education landscape, as well as the work the OfS has carried out in the last year, and what it expects to prioritise in the next.

The review looks at work carried out on:

- Maintaining and raising quality during the pandemic.
- Providing degrees that last.
- Equality of opportunity.
- Not a zero-sum game.
- Financial sustainability.
- Innovation, autonomy and regulatory burden.

The listed priorities for 2022 are quality, equality of opportunity and harassment and sexual misconduct.

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

Government confirms reforms to ITT

On Wednesday 1 December, DfE confirmed reforms to initial teacher training (ITT) courses following a consultation period which closed in August.

The changes include:

- New intensive training and practice.
- New lead mentors for trainees.
- Rigorous quality assurance arrangements to ensure a high-quality experience for every trainee.
- Accrediting all ITT providers based on the new Quality Requirements.
- Utilising Teaching School Hubs to support training providers, especially locally and in disadvantaged communities.

Part 1 of the document is the government's response to the ITT market review report, setting out decisions on which of the recommendations from the report will be accepted and how they will be implemented. Part 2 summarises the feedback received in answer to each question asked in the public consultation and describes how it has informed the response set out in part 1.

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