

Political Affairs Digest

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14 – 18 November 2022

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

Higher Education (Freedom of Speech) Bill

On Monday 14 November, the Higher Education (Freedom of Speech) Bill was considered in the House of Lords Grand Committee.

The proposed tort in Clause 4 received criticism from Peers on all sides, including Rt Hon Lord Grabiner (Crossbench), Rt Hon Lord Willetts (Conservative), Rt Hon Lord Johnson (Conservative), and Rt Hon Lord Collins (Labour). The amendment was not put to a vote, however, Rt Hon Earl Howe, speaking on behalf of the government, indicated that concerns would be taken seriously and that attempts would be made to address these ahead of the report stage.

Responding to amendments from Lord Willetts and Lord Stevens (Crossbench) on specifying the route which complaints must go, Baroness Barran MBE, Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Education, said that she anticipated that the Office for Students (OfS) would consult on the rules to follow. She added that Schedule 6A clearly sets out what is within scope for the OfS to decide.

Responding to Lord Collins and Rt Hon Lord Blunkett's (Labour) amendments seeking to ensure that free speech complaints were considered alongside other competing freedoms such as the Equality Act, the minister reiterated that the Bill did not dictate that freedom of speech duties would override other duties. Instead, the Bill would need to be read consistently with other legislation.

In response to Lord Johnson's amendments on including international tuition fees in OfS monitoring, the minister said these were unnecessary and potentially overly bureaucratic. In her response, she highlighted that providers were already required to submit data to the OfS on course fees by broad domicile, broken down by UK, EU and non- EU.

With respect to Lord Willetts' amendment that sought to increase the thresholds for overseas funding reporting, the minister didn't adjust the £75,000 threshold, but did say that there would be exemptions for lower-risk countries set out in regulations.

Regarding Labour's amendments on the appointment process of the OfS Free Speech director, the minister clarified that the director would be appointed in the same way as other members of the OfS board, by the Secretary of State under the Higher Education and Research Act 2017. She added that the involvement of the higher

education sector in the appointment would risk threatening the independence of the role. She confirmed that the appointment of the director will be in line with the usual public appointments processes, and there would be ongoing oversight of the role.

On the sunset clause tabled by Lord Collins, the minister said that it would not be right or appropriate to include a sunset clause in the Bill.

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

National Security Bill

On Wednesday 16 November the National Security Bill was debated in the House of Commons chamber for its third reading.

Rt Hon Tom Tugendhat MP, Minister for Security, outlined the progress of the National Security Bill, thanking the efforts of the Foreign Affairs Select Committee in calling for the [Foreign Influence Registration Scheme \(FIRS\)](#).

Sir John Hayes MP (Conservative) cited potential confusion of the primary and secondary tiers of the FIRS and requested for the minister to write to the Intelligence and Security Committee (ISC). The minister agreed to write to the committee but summarised the tiers by stating that the primary tier was connected to political activity whereas the enhanced registration was intended for a wider range of activities that depended on the specific foreign power.

Rt Hon Dr Julian Lewis MP (Conservative) noted concern in the time lag for a country to be designated as hostile and fall under secondary designation. The minister replied that there was an inherent delay but that it was important to recognise that some countries and entities required enhanced awareness.

Maria Eagle MP (Labour) asked about the practicality of placing countries on the enhanced part of the scheme. She said the requirement for secondary legislation would make it diplomatically challenging. In his reply, the minister reassured the House that he would be tough against hostile states.

Rt Hon Kevan Jones MP (Labour) said he believed the second part of the Bill would never be used because of the diplomatic fallout. He further cited concern over how the provision fitted with the Higher Education (Freedom of Speech) Bill.

Anthony Higginbotham MP (Conservative) noted the lack of any kind of exemption for academia in the FIRS, as was present in similar US legislation. He said he had spoken

to Universities UK who were concerned at the enhanced tier proposed in the FIRS and the impact it could have on UK R&D and competitiveness.

Rt Hon Stewart Hosie MP (SNP) echoed previous concerns of the enhanced tier in the FIRS. He said it was not yet clear which countries would be included in the list and how swiftly the list would be updated.

You can [read the transcript of the session here](#) and a [full list of amendments here](#).

Higher Education (Widening Access and Participation) Bill

On Wednesday 16 November, the Higher Education (Widening Access and Participation) Bill, tabled by Lord Griffiths (Labour), had its first reading in the House of Lords.

The Bill is intended to make provision in relation to widening access to and participation in higher education.

You can [read more about the Bill here](#).

Autumn Statement

On Thursday 17 November, the Chancellor of the Exchequer, Rt Hon Jeremy Hunt MP, delivered the Autumn Statement to the House of Commons.

The Chancellor said that being “pro-education” was “pro-growth”. He celebrated the background of Secretary of State for Education, Gillian Keegan MP, who left school at 16 and took the apprenticeship route. He announced that Sir Michael Barber would advise the Treasury and Department for Education on the implementation of the [skills reform programme outlined in the January 2021 white paper](#).

The Chancellor noted that the UK was home to three of the top ten global universities and called the UK a “science superpower”. He announced a new approach to Investment Zones which would be refocused to centre around universities in left behind areas. Sir Patrick Vallance, the government’s Chief Scientific Adviser, would advise on how the government could use its Brexit freedoms to diverge from EU regulations in digital, life sciences, green industries, financial services and advanced manufacturing.

He called it a “profound mistake” to cut the R&D budget, confirming that the budget would be increased to £20 billion by 2024/25, as planned.

You can [watch the session here](#) and [read the full Autumn Statement here](#).

Higher Education Investigations – Written statement

On Thursday 17 November, Minister for Skills, Apprenticeships, and Higher Education, Rt Hon Robert Halfon MP, made a written statement in the House of Commons.

This statement said he was laying regulations under section 71 of the Higher Education and Research Act 2017 to enable the Office for Students (OfS) to charge a fee for the investigation of providers’ compliance with quality and other requirements, where the investigation results in certain regulatory action or specified outcomes. These regulations will come into effect on the 8th of December 2022.

You can [read the written statement here](#).

Forthcoming business

Levelling up Select Committee

On Monday 21 November from 4:15pm, the Levelling Up, Housing, and Communities Select Committee will take evidence from Rt Hon Michael Gove MP, Secretary of State for Levelling Up, Housing, and Communities.

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

House of Lords Communications and Digital Committee

On Tuesday 22 November from 11:45am, the Communications and Digital Committee will hear evidence as part of their ongoing inquiry into “a creative future”. Witnesses include:

- Rt Hon Robert Halfon MP, Minister for Skills, Apprenticeships and Higher Education
- Kevin Hollinrake MP, Parliamentary Under Secretary of State at Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy
- Julia Lopez MP, Minister of State for Media, Data and Digital Infrastructure

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

House of Lords Debate - Youth Unemployment Report

On Wednesday 23 November, the [Youth Unemployment Committee report](#) titled “[Skills for every young person](#)” will be debated in the House of Lords. The debate has been tabled by Lord Shipley (Liberal Democrat) and Baroness Barran (Conservative).

The report, published in November 2021, examines the high youth unemployment rate and explanations for it. It considers the skills gap, careers education, further education, and apprenticeships.

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

Written Questions

Students: Cost of Living

Damien Moore: To ask the Secretary of State for Education, what support her Department is providing to students in university accommodation with the cost of living. [UIN 77588]

Robert Halfon: The department recognises the additional cost of living pressures that have arisen this year, which have impacted students. Many higher education (HE) providers have hardship funds that students can apply to for assistance.

There is £261 million of student premium funding available this academic year to support disadvantaged students who need additional help. The department has worked with the Office for Students (OfS) to ensure universities support students in hardship, using both hardship funds and drawing on the student premium.

In addition, all households will save on their energy bills through the Energy Price Guarantee and the £400 Energy Bills Support Scheme discount. Students who buy their energy from a domestic supplier are eligible for the energy bills discount. The Energy Prices Bill introduced on 12th October 2022 includes the provision to require landlords to pass benefits they receive from energy price support, as appropriate, onto end users. Further details of the requirements under this legislation will be set out in regulations.

Students whose bills are included in their rent, including energy charges, will typically have agreed their accommodation costs upfront when signing their contract for the current academic year. Businesses, including those that provide student accommodation, are covered by the Energy Bill Relief Scheme, which provides energy bill relief for non-domestic customers in the UK. A Treasury-led review will be launched to consider how to support households and businesses with energy bills after April 2023.

The department has continued to increase living costs support with a 2.3% increase for maximum loans and grants for living and other costs for the current 2022/23 academic year. Students who have been awarded a loan for living costs for the 2022/23 academic year that is lower than the maximum, and whose household income for the 2022/23 tax year has dropped by at least 15% compared to the income provided for their original assessment, can apply for their entitlement to be reassessed.

The government is reviewing options for uprating maximum loans and grants for the 2023/24 academic year, and an announcement will follow in the autumn. We need to ensure the HE student finance system remains financially sustainable and the costs of HE are shared fairly between students and taxpayers, not all of whom have benefited from going to university. At a time of tight fiscal restrictions we will need to consider spending on student finance alongside other priorities.

Higher Education: Finance

Matthew Offord: To ask the Secretary of State for Education, what assessment his Department has made of the financial sustainability of the Higher Education sector. [UIN 77385]

Robert Halfon: The Office for Students (OfS) is the independent regulator of higher education (HE) in England. The OfS monitors the financial viability and sustainability of providers registered with them, to ensure they have an up to date understanding of the sustainability of the sector.

The latest report published by the OfS stated that, despite the many operational and financial challenges arising from the COVID-19 pandemic, the overall aggregate financial position of universities, colleges and other registered HE providers remains sound. However, there continues to be significant variation in the financial performance and strength of individual HE providers. The environment remains challenging, and providers will need to adapt to uncertainties and financial risks to protect their longer-term sustainability.

Departmental officials meet regularly with the OfS to oversee the overall financial sustainability for HE providers and identify emerging risks and issues for the English HE sector as a whole.

The department will continue to work closely with the OfS and other parties, including a variety of universities, mission groups and other government departments to understand the ongoing impacts and changing landscape of financial sustainability in the HE sector.

Students: Finance

Cherilyn Mackrory: To ask the Secretary of State for Education, what assessment he has made of the impact of the rise in the cost of living on the finances of students. [UIN 74923]

Robert Halfon: Decisions on student support are taken on an annual basis. The department recognises the additional cost of living pressures that have arisen this year and that have impacted students. Many higher education (HE) providers have hardship funds that students can apply to for assistance. There is £261 million of student premium funding available this academic year to support disadvantaged students who need additional help. The department has worked with the Office for Students to ensure universities support students in hardship, using both hardship funds and drawing on the student premium.

In addition, all households will save on their energy bills through the Energy Price Guarantee and the £400 Energy Bills Support Scheme discount. Students who buy their energy from a domestic supplier are eligible for the energy bills discount. The Energy Prices Bill introduced on 12th October 2022 includes the provision to require landlords to pass benefits they receive from energy price support, as appropriate, onto end users. Further details of the requirements under this legislation will be set out in regulations.

The department has continued to increase living costs support with a 2.3% increase for maximum loans and grants for living and other costs for the 2022/23 academic year. Students who have been awarded a loan for living costs for the 2022/23 academic year that is lower than the maximum, and whose household income for the 2022/23 tax year has dropped by at least 15% compared to the income provided for their original assessment, can apply for their entitlement to be reassessed.

In addition, maximum tuition fees, and the subsidised loans available to pay them, remain at £9,250 for the 2022/23 academic year in respect of standard full-time courses.

The department is also freezing maximum tuition fees for the 2023/24 and 2024/25 academic years. By 2024/25, maximum fees will have been frozen for seven years. As well as reducing debt levels for students, the continued fee freeze will help to ensure that the HE system remains sustainable, while also promoting greater efficiency at providers.

The department is reviewing options for uprating maximum loans and grants for the 2023/24 academic year, and an announcement will follow in the autumn. We need to ensure the HE student finance system remains financially sustainable, and the costs of HE are shared fairly between students and taxpayers, not all of whom have benefited from going to university. At a time of tight fiscal restrictions we will need to consider spending on student finance alongside other priorities.

Students: Anxiety

Rosie Duffield: To ask the Secretary of State for Education, what steps her Department is taking to increase attendance in post-16 education for students with anxiety. [UIN 74842]

Robert Halfon: The mental health and wellbeing of young people is a priority for this government, and we know post-16 providers can play a critical role in this. Colleges that take an effective whole-college approach are best placed to promote and support learners' mental health and wellbeing, which can in turn can improve attendance.

The department has coordinated several programmes that are available to colleges to support the mental health of post-16 learners, including those with anxiety. This has included the opportunity for all colleges in England to access senior mental health leads training by 2025, and a £79 million boost to young people mental health support, including expanding Mental Health Support Teams, to bring colleges closer with mental health professionals in their local area.

Colleges funded through the £5.4 million College Collaboration Fund developed new creative ways to support learner mental health and wellbeing, with resources available to all Further Education (FE) providers online, while the Challenge Competition Fund has delivered project funding which has involved FE colleges, such as the University of Keele's project to integrate a 'whole community' approach to mental health, including both FE and higher education providers in the region.

As part of our commitment to a long-term education recovery plan, the department is investing over £800 million across the next three academic years to fund an average of 40 additional learning hours for band 5 and T Level students in 16 to 19 education. The additional hours can be used to support areas where there are barriers for learners to effectively access and engage with teaching and learning, which can include their mental health.

Rented Housing: Students

Christopher Pincher: To ask the Secretary of State for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities, if he will make an assessment of the potential impact of repealing Section 21 of the Housing Act 1988 on the student housing market. [UIN 78714]

Felicity Buchan: The Department continues to monitor private rent levels using the Office for National Statistics ' Index of Private Rents and biannual publications on absolute rent levels by local authority and number of bedrooms. The Department also tracks the stock of private rented properties using the English Housing Survey and other market data to assess the availability of private rented accommodation and financial resilience of unwaged renters. People who need help to make their rent payments may be eligible for a range of financial support through the welfare system. The government has maintained the Local Housing Allowance at its increased rate for 2021/22 and 2022/23, and for those most in need Discretionary Housing Payments are available to help meet a shortfall in housing costs and the Household Support Fund has been extended to help with the cost of essentials.

The Government's commitment to abolish Section 21 evictions will mean tenants enjoy greater security and feel empowered to challenge poor practice and unreasonable rent rises. We want as many tenants as possible to benefit from these reforms, including students living in the private rented sector . We expect most students will continue to move in-line with the academic year. We will continue to consider the impact of our reforms as we move towards legislation and will publish an impact assessment in due course. The Government's 'A Fairer Private Rented Sector ' White Paper set out our intention to bolster national oversight of local councils' enforcement, including by exploring requirements for councils to report on their housing enforcement activity and sharing of best practice.

The 2021 National Audit Office report into regulation of the private rented sector (PRS), and the subsequent Public Accounts Committee report set out several recommendations to improve the PRS, including a number concerning landlords, to which the department has responded. We are also currently assessing the recommendations from the 2019 Independent Review into the effectiveness of selective licensing and will respond in due course. We will work with local authorities to gather more information about their selective licensing schemes to ensure they are continuing to deliver the intended outcomes and to help share best practice. There are additional regulatory standards for HMOs than other privately rented accommodation. Duties for the landlords of HMOs are set out in HMO management regulations. We reformed HMO licensing in 2018, requiring that HMOs with five or more tenants must be licensed.

Research

Jonathan Lord: To ask the Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy, what steps he is taking to support the UK's research and development sector. [UIN 71058]

George Freeman: At the 2021 Spending Review, the Government announced an increase in public expenditure on R&D, including a commitment to £20 billion per annum by 2024/2025.

R&D investment supports delivery of the Innovation Strategy, by creating the conditions to grow private sector investment. To develop R&D strengths across the country, Government is increasing domestic public investment in R&D outside the Greater South East by at least 40% by 2030. We have also committed £800 million to the Advanced Research and Invention Agency, a new science and research funding agency, to fund research that will develop new technologies.

Research: Finance

Jim Shannon: To ask the Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy, whether he has had recent discussions with the Chancellor of the Exchequer on the Government's target for investment in research and development to be 2.4 per cent of GDP by the 2026-27 financial year. [UIN 72267]

George Freeman: My Rt Hon Friend the Secretary of State has regular discussions with Ministerial colleagues on a number of issues.

Government remains committed to increasing the UK's R&D intensity; hitting or exceeding the 2.4% target. Increased public research and development (R&D) spending, alongside other measures put forward in the Innovation Strategy, will contribute to growth in private sector investment in R&D by creating the conditions for all businesses to innovate and giving them the confidence to do so. This will support the Government's aim of raising economic growth by boosting productivity and thus improving living standards across the country.

Higher Education: Research

Matthew Offord: To ask the Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy, what assessment he has made of the adequacy of the private sector

research and development opportunities available for research in the Higher Education sector. [UIN 78677]

George Freeman: Data on university income from private business is collected annually by the Higher Education Statistics Authority. The latest data from the 2020/21 academic year shows that higher education institutions received £5.1 billion from the main sources of private sector funding. This includes £1.4 billion for contract research and £1.8 billion for collaborative research.

In addition, there are several government programmes that require or encourage collaboration between higher education and the private sector, such as the UK Research Partnerships Investment Fund, which has provided £900m to higher education institutions that has been matched by twice as much private investment.

Overseas Students

Matthew Offord: To ask the Secretary of State for Education, what proportion of students registered in English Higher Educational establishments were overseas students in each of the last five years. [UIN 77386]

Robert Halfon: The Higher Education Statistics Agency collects and publishes statistics on enrolments and qualifications obtained at UK higher education (HE) institutions. Latest statistics refer to the 2020/21 academic year.

Visas: Overseas Students

Matt Western: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department, pursuant to the Answer of 3 November 2022 to Question 73114 on Visas: Overseas Students, whether her Department records the number of recipients of international student visas that are accompanied by five and six dependents. [UIN 79326]

Robert Jenrick: The Home Office does not routinely publish data on the number of recipients of international student visas who are accompanied by dependants.

Information on our immigration routes is available as part of our transparency data and can be found at: [Visas and Citizenship data: Q2 2022](#).

Education: Access

John McDonnell: To ask the Secretary of State for Education, what steps his Department is taking to ensure the widest possible access to education in the UK. [UIN 82156]

Robert Halfon: Education is a devolved matter, and the response outlines the information for England only.

The government is investing £1.6 billion through the National Skills Fund over the next three years, to help adults gain the skills that are sought by employers. The fund will make sure adults, at any age, can upskill to reach their potential and transform their lives.

As part of this investment, we have introduced the Free Courses for Jobs scheme, which enables learners without a level 3 qualification, or learners with any qualification level who are unemployed or earning below the National Living Wage, to gain a level 3 qualification for free.

Those who want to upskill in their role, are looking for a job, or are changing career, can take part in Skills Bootcamps. Skills Bootcamps are free, flexible courses of up to 16 weeks, giving people the opportunity to build up sector-specific skills and fast-track to an interview with an employer. Skills Bootcamps are currently available across England, offering training in digital, technical (including engineering and manufacturing), construction, logistics (HGV driving), and green skills (including heat pump engineer and electric vehicle charging point installation), and have the potential to transform the skills landscape for adults and employers.

We are on track to deliver 16,000 Skills Bootcamps training places in the 2021/22 financial year. The department will continue to significantly expand Skills Bootcamps further following the announcement of up to £550 million additional funding across financial years 2022 to 2025, including up to £150 million in financial year 2022/23.

The department is continuing to invest in education and skills training for adults through the Adult Education Budget (AEB). The AEB fully funds or co-funds skills provision for eligible adults aged 19 and above from pre-entry to level 3, to help them gain the skills they need for work, an apprenticeship or further learning. In the academic year 2022/23 this funding totals £1.34 billion.

Apprenticeships are accessible to people of all ages and can support people to re-train and upskill throughout their lives. We are increasing investment in apprenticeships to £2.7 billion by 2024/25.

In November 2021, the department issued guidance to the Office for Students, tasking them to refocus the access and participation regime to create a system that supports young people from disadvantaged backgrounds throughout their education. Higher education providers should be working meaningfully with schools to ensure that pupils from disadvantaged backgrounds are encouraged and supported to achieve the highest possible grades to succeed, whether that be an apprenticeship or higher technical qualification, or a course at another university.

Mature Students: Loans

Fleur Anderson: To ask the Secretary of State for Education, if she will make an assessment of the potential impact of the age limit for student loans for master's degrees on the ability of people over the age of 60 to (a) pursue their interests and values in their career and (b) contribute to (i) society, (ii) culture and (iii) the economy. [UIN 80921]

Robert Halfon: The student finance system has to be both fair and sustainable, and ensure that costs are split fairly between graduates and the taxpayer.

In determining the current postgraduate master's loan eligibility criteria, the department consulted widely on the proposed terms of the new loan and considered its duty under the Equality Act 2010 . A copy of that analysis can be found here: https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/526274/bis-16-289-postgraduate-masters-loans-equality-analysis.pdf.

The upper age limit of 60 years old was put in place to ensure that the overall scheme remains affordable to the taxpayer and offers value for money. The age limit is designed to restrict eligibility to those statistically most likely to continue in long-term employment and be able to repay the loan. The department believes that the current age restriction strikes the right balance between addressing the repayment challenge of older students and encouraging a broad range of individuals to undertake postgraduate study.

The department is closely monitoring take up of the loan and the response by students, the sector and employers. However, at present there are no plans to amend the loan eligibility criteria or undertake any impact assessments.

Overseas Students: EU Countries

Matt Western: To ask the Secretary of State for Education, whether he plans to designate Europe as a priority market in any upcoming adjustments to the International Student Strategy. [UIN 80834]

Robert Halfon: In February 2021 and in May 2022, the Department for Education and the Department for International Trade jointly published updates to the International Education Strategy. These re-committed to the ambitions to increase the value of our education exports to £35 billion per year, and to continue to host at least 600,000 international students in the UK per year, both by 2030.

The target to attract 600,000 international students per year to study here has already been reached, and we are now focusing on bringing in £35 billion from our education exports by 2030.

The February 2021 update also confirmed Europe as an important regional market for Sir Steve Smith, the International Education Champion, who was appointed to develop strong international relationships in new and established markets.

Overseas Students

Matt Western: To ask the Secretary of State for Education, what plans he has to update the International Student Strategy 2019. [UIN 80833]

Robert Halfon: In February 2021 and in May 2022, the Department for Education and the Department for International Trade jointly published updates to the International Education Strategy. These re-committed to the ambitions to increase the value of our education exports to £35 billion per year, and to continue to host at least 600,000 international students in the UK per year, both by 2030.

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Sector News

Sector calls for protection of R&D

Ahead of the Autumn Statement, University Alliance coordinated an open letter calling on the government to recommit £20 billion annual investment in R&D by 2024/25. The letter was signed by Universities UK, Russell Group, and business leaders.

The letter recognised that “difficult decisions will need to be made to protect our economy” but called for the Chancellor to “put faith in the ingenuity and invention of our people, institutions and communities and invest in innovation for growth”.

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

Professor Paul Boyle, vice-chancellor of Swansea University and research policy lead at Universities UK, wrote in the Financial Times, saying: “Innovation is the vital ingredient in creating new products and high-skilled, high-paying jobs. Despite all the immediate pressures Hunt faces this week, he should hold to [the 2.4% R&D commitment].”

You can [read the full article here](#).

International Higher Education Commission launch

On Monday 14 November, former Universities Minister, Rt Hon Chris Skidmore MP, launched the new [International Higher Education Commission](#).

The commission is formed of institutional representatives from across the UK. It will meet virtually and in-person in a series of roundtable discussions. The commission will produce a new ‘International Education Strategy 2.0’ to be submitted to the Department of Education. Support for the commission, including the secretariat, is being provided by Oxford International Education Group.

You can [watch the launch event here](#).

National Union of Students cost of living report

On Wednesday 16 November, the National Union of Students (NUS) published research on the cost of living crisis facing students. A total of 4,524 students contributed. Key findings include:

- 9 in 10 students' mental health impacted by cost of living.
- 42% of students are living off less than £100 per month after covering rent and bills.
- 77% of students said the cost-of-living crisis had affected the income of someone who supports them financially.

The NUS has called for a cap on student rent, a boost to hardship funds and adjusted maintenance loan thresholds to reflect changes to family income. In the long term, NUS is campaigning for a return of maintenance grants, more affordable housing, and the abolition of tuition fees.

Chloe Field, NUS Vice President Higher Education, said: "The Government must take action urgently to relieve the pressure and implement our proposals. Until they do, institutions must step in to support their students with the cost of food, rent, and energy. Students are our future nurses, teachers, and other key workers, and we need support now to protect everyone's future."

You can [read the full report on the NUS website](#).

Rt Hon Robert Halfon MP Times Higher Education speech

On Wednesday 16 November, Minister for Skills, Apprenticeships and Higher Education, Rt Hon Robert Halfon MP, delivered his first higher education speech at the Times Higher Education Conference.

The Minister began by expressing disappointment at comments in the media regarding the number of disadvantaged students' being admitted to Oxbridge. He said the focus should instead be on ensuring all higher education institutions meet the needs of young people.

He outlined that the purpose of university is to:

- Meet the skills needs of the economy.

- Provide quality qualifications that lead to well-paid jobs.
- Advance social justice by helping disadvantaged applicants onto the first rung of the ladder of opportunity.

He noted that only 10% of adults aged 20-45 hold a Higher Technical Qualification as their highest qualification, compared to around 20% in Germany, and as many as 34% in Canada. Boosting degree apprenticeships and Higher Technical Qualifications can help meet this gap.

Regarding value, he noted that a minority of institutions have in the past, got away with poor provision which is why he has asked the OfS to investigate concerns about quality of provision, including where there might be over-reliance on virtual learning.

He welcomed the increase in disadvantaged pupils and those from ethnic minority backgrounds, securing a place at university this year but called for more to be done. He noted that schools and colleges “shouldn’t have to do all the heavy lifting to deliver ‘oven-ready’ students to universities.”

He mentioned improving pastoral support for students and as part of this has asked Professor Edward Peck to work with families of students who’ve lost their lives to suicide.

You can [read the full transcript here](#).

Education Select Committee Chair announced

On Wednesday 16 November, it was announced that Robin Walker MP was elected as Chair of the Education Select Committee, securing 228 votes. Caroline Ansell MP, David Simmonds MP, and Jonathan Gullis MP also ran in the election.

Responding to the announcement, Robin Walker said: “Nothing can be more important for the future of our country than how we educate and support our children. I pay tribute to the excellent work of my predecessor. I am grateful for the support of esteemed colleagues in all parts of the House in allowing me to follow in his footsteps.”

Sector responds to Autumn Statement

Following the Autumn Statement numerous higher education bodies responded.

Vivienne Stern MBE, Chief Executive of Universities UK, said “This is an extraordinary statement from government of its clear commitment to protecting research and innovation, in the midst of tough choices. This investment will pay dividends in jobs, growth, and extending our competitive edge worldwide”.

Dr Tim Bradshaw, Chief Executive of the Russell Group, said: “The government’s recommitment to grow investment in R&D is a clear signal of intent. It is a huge, and well-deserved, vote of confidence, underlying the potential of an ideas-driven economy to boost growth, create high value jobs and crowd-in other investments in skills and infrastructure.

Vanessa Wilson, Chief Executive of University Alliance, said: “We are delighted that the Chancellor of the Exchequer has recommitted to growing the Research and Development budget to £20 billion by 2024/25. Universities stand ready to play a vital role in unleashing the power of innovation and delivering economic opportunity and prosperity in regions right across the UK”.

Scale of UK HE transnational education report

On Thursday 17 November, Universities UK International, in partnership with the British Council, published a report on transnational education (TNE) during the 2020-21 academic year. Key findings include:

- In 2020–21, UK TNE was reported in 228 countries and territories, with 510,835 students studying via UK TNE – a 12.7% increase from the previous year.
- Asia continued to be the top host region for UK TNE students in 2020–21, with 252,845 students.
- China was the top host country for UK TNE (61,495 students: 12.0% of the total).
- Student numbers in the EU increased by 24,825 (+44.7%) between 2016–17 and 2020–21.

You can [read the full report here](#).