

Political Affairs Digest

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5 – 9 September

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

House of Lords Science and Technology Committee oral evidence

On Tuesday 6 September, the House of Lords Science and Technology Committee held two evidence sessions as part of its inquiry into 'People and skills in UK science, technology, engineering and mathematics (STEM)'. Across the two sessions, the committee examined how the UK could facilitate and attract STEM talent.

The first session explored the attractiveness of the UK for STEM researchers and the lessons that could be learnt from other countries. Harry Anderson, UUK Policy Manger, spoke on successful government interventions such as the Global Talent Visa and Graduate Route but cited concerns of the up-front costs of the UK visa system as a barrier to entry. He highlighted successful examples from Singapore and Canada and said that tackling this issue required a joined up and long-term strategy.

Professor Dame Ottoline Leyser, CEO of UK Research and Innovation (UKRI) said it was critical that the UK signals long term commitments with funding to drive up research and investment opportunity across the UK economy. She added that the freedom to pursue ideas and access quality support/facilities was the main motivation for researchers rather than pay.

Professor Maggie Dallman, Vice President (International) and Associate Provost (Academic Partnerships) at Imperial College London, outlined their challenges with recruitment and cited issues such as Brexit, international competition, the cost of living in London and USS Pensions as potential reasons for a decrease in applications.

Asked by Lord Rees (Crossbench) about Horizon Europe and alternative arrangements in the event of non-association, all witnesses agreed that association remained the best outcome, but it was important to be planning for alternatives. Harry Anderson added that it was vital that the government published more details on the timelines and budgets for 'Plan B'. Professor Leyser said that UKRI were working hard to support researchers through the uncertainty. Professor Dallman highlighted that an intangible element of non-association would be the loss of influence.

Lord Rees further asked about international tensions with China and the effect on universities. Professor Dallman cited financial and talent concerns if the student pipeline was reduced, adding that the current rhetoric was worrying. Professor Leyser and Harry Anderson said that the Academic Technology Approval Scheme (ATAS)

attempted to mitigate the issue as well as offering a protection for national security but that improvements could be made. Harry Anderson further noted that recent applications from India had superseded China for the first time in a decade.

The second evidence session also covered the attractiveness of the UK for STEM researchers, with witnesses Professor Sir Robin Grimes, Foreign Secretary at Royal Society, Joanna Hunt, Director, Head of Immigration at Fieldfisher and Raj Mann, Director, Global Immigration at Vialto Partners. They echoed many of the previous witnesses' points about visas, Brexit and the cost of living.

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

National Security Bill committee

After the resignation of Stephen McPartland MP as Minister for Security, the Public Bill Committee Stage sessions scheduled for Tuesday 6 September were adjourned.

Following the appointment of Rt Hon Tom Tugendhat MP as the new Minister for Security, the Public Bill Committee returned to continue its line-by-line scrutiny of the Bill on Thursday 8 September. Several MPs requested a further day of Committee to be added for scrutiny, to which the minister replied that if time was needed, he would "talk to the Whips team about it".

The session scheduled for Tuesday 13 September has now been postponed due to the announcement of the death of Her late Majesty Queen Elizabeth II. The Committee are still to debate amendments NC11 to NC28 which will introduce a Foreign Influence Registration Scheme (FIRS) and that it is currently unclear whether will include universities within its scope.

You can read the [transcript of the session](#) here and read [the latest amendment papers](#) here.

Education committee oral evidence

On Wednesday 7 September, the Education Select Committee heard oral evidence for a one-off session on free speech and research content in English universities.

The first part of the session focused on a recent case at the University of Manchester in which a PhD student was involved in the publication of a controversial research paper with Professor Nalin Thakkar, Vice-President for Social Responsibility,

appearing on behalf of the university. The Committee members questioned Professor Thakkar on the processes of PhD applications and the publication of research at Manchester. The Chair of the Committee, Robert Halfon MP (Con) asked that the university write to the Committee with the outcome of their investigation, and the committee would decide what the next course of action would be, including the possibility of writing to the new Minister for Further and Higher Education.

The second part of the session focused on reports of “trigger warnings” and violations to academic freedom more widely. All three witnesses reiterated how important free speech and academic freedom were to the sector. Susan Lapworth, Chief Executive of the Office for Students (OfS) said that the OfS believed universities should be able to choose what they teach, and they were interested in this issue through their regulatory scope to ensure any changes to reading lists protect the quality of a course. She said that universities should be clear that courses will include things that students might find challenging but reiterated that the purpose of university is to discuss and debate difficult issues even when it makes students uncomfortable.

Professor Sasha Roseneil, Vice-Chancellor of the University of Sussex and Professor Anthony Forster, Vice-Chancellor of the University of Essex both reiterated that it was not their university policy to ban books, that students regularly read and debated challenging material appropriate to their studies, and that ‘trigger warnings’ were simply content notes.

Caroline Ansell MP (Con) asked about the evidence behind these reports. In response, Susan Lapworth said that the data was incomplete and highlighted work to educate students and student’s unions on the notification system for reporting issues to the OfS. She also suggested that her main concern was the ‘chilling effect’ of free speech issues on campus, highlighting that trigger warnings and reading lists were a small part of the picture. She raised the point that regulating on this would be impossible and not something that the OfS would want to do.

Professor Roseneil highlighted survey results from the Higher Education Policy Institute (Hepi) which found that young people appreciated content warnings. Professor Forster pointed to evidence from his own institution that found that 34 modules contained content notes out of a total of 2,200 modules and argued against using the term ‘trigger warnings’.

Questioned about the Higher Education (Freedom of Speech) Bill, both Professor Roseneil and Professor Forster highlighted the amount of legislation and duties universities must balance in this area, adding that they hoped the Bill would bring further clarity rather than adding another layer of bureaucracy. Professor Roseneil

highlighted the sectors concerns with the new Statutory Tort and how the Bill would interact with existing new laws. Professor Forster added that he was concerned with the appointment process for the new OfS Director, with the job description noting experience of the complex legal framework as desirable, not essential.

The session also covered changing the culture on campus, several related high-profile cases, and the issue of political self-censoring.

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

Women and Equalities Committee oral evidence

On Wednesday 7 September, the Women and Equalities committee took evidence on attitudes towards women and girls in educational settings.

The first line of questioning focused on the extent of misconduct on university campuses. John Edmonds, co-author of “Unsafe Spaces: Ending Sexual Abuse in Universities” criticized the lack of UK-wide survey data, while Professor Cara Aitchison, Vice Chancellor of Cardiff Metropolitan University noted that the UUK advisory group on staff-to-student sexual misconduct felt that there was enough data from small scale surveys to demonstrate the problem and the need for action. She noted that the UUK's advisory group have mapped out a series of practical actions including the need for stronger leadership and joining up systems and processes. When asked how these policies were being adopted by universities, she highlighted the shared intent and aspiration to tackle this across the sector.

On the use of non-disclosure agreements (NDAs), Professor Aitchison highlighted that all universities in Wales have agreed to ban NDAs and around half in England have pledged not to use them.

When asked about the intersectionality of sexual misconduct, Ammarah Faisal, Higher Education Research and Academic Lead for Our Streets Now, explained that some students are less likely to report incidents and that marginalized communities have lower levels of trust, including non-binary students. She recommended a shift towards education and preventative measures and the creation of healthy social norms.

Professor Aitchison noted that international students can have less knowledge about which incidents they can report or complain about, and universities therefore need to be mindful of the diversity of their student populations. Moreover, there are certain subject areas where sexual misconduct is more prevalent, for example where

proximity between staff and students is closer, e.g., lab-based courses, sports courses, music courses.

On the subject of regulation, Professor Aitchison said she believes universities will be successful in their efforts to tackle sexual misconduct but noted that it was also appropriate for the OfS to keep monitoring and intervene when appropriate, describing previous interventions such as the NDA pledge as a 'helpful nudge'. Bell Ribeiro Addy MP (Lab) asked whether the OfS' new condition of registration will lead to change. Professor Aitchison said that this could be difficult to implement in practice, and monitoring compliance is more important. On whether a charter should be implemented for holding institutions to account, Professor Aitchison said that prevention should be the focus so that we can move to a stage where intervention should not be required. John Edmonds closed the first part of the session by calling on all witnesses to work together to share information and make progress on this issue.

The second session took evidence from Dr Rachel Fenton, Associate Professor at University of Exeter Law School, Dr Melanie McCarry, Senior Lecturer of School of Social Work & Social Policy at University of Strathclyde and Richie Benson, Universities Project Lead at Beyond Equality. Topics included: cultural factors which prevent universities from taking violence against women seriously, implementation and funding of bystander intervention programmes and the importance of working with young men and boys to tackle cultural issues such as rape myths.

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

Oral question on the UK's participation in Horizon Europe

On Thursday 8 September, Viscount Stansgate (Lab) asked a question on the UK's participation in the Horizon Europe research programme.

Viscount Stansgate claimed that there would be irreparable damage to the UK's reputation if there is not association with Horizon Europe, and that "Plan B" is not the answer.

Lord Callanan, Parliamentary Under-Secretary for BEIS, replied that the UK remained ready to associate with Horizon Europe, reiterating that the EU is "holding science hostage".

Lord Patel (Crossbench) cited concern over the lack of international collaboration included in “Plan B”. Lord Callanan said the government was looking at forging collaborations with countries around the world.

Baroness Garden of Frognal (Lib Dem) sought reassurance for how the UK would remain attractive for STEM researchers to remain/move in the UK. Lord Callanan claimed that the UK is home to some of the best research universities and this would continue.

Baroness Blake (Lab) asked what assessment the government had made on the impact of uncertainty on UK's research. Lord Callanan conceded that there could be a negative impact but that the government had implemented transitional arrangements to mitigate this.

You can [watch the session](#) here and [read the transcript](#) there.

Forthcoming business

As the United Kingdom enters an official period of mourning, all scheduled parliamentary business is suspended until two days after the state funeral.

This will delay any relevant legislation going through parliament (e.g., National Security Bill, HE Free Speech Bill & Higher Education Bill) as well as potentially having an impact on the timing of an emergency budget, however, there has been some reports that emergency business will be permitted to continue through this period.

Written Questions

Universities: Remote education

Derek Thomas: To ask the Secretary of State for Education, if he will issue guidance to ensure that universities declare whether courses will be delivered (a) face-to-face or (b) virtually. [UIN 40870]

Andrea Jenkyns: The Competition and Markets Authority has published guidance for higher education providers, advising them on how to comply with consumer protection law.

This guidance sets out the 'material information' that prospective students should receive about the courses for which they are applying. This should include information about the number and type of contact hours that students can expect, including, for example, detail on the balance between teaching that is delivered face-to-face, as distinct from any teaching delivered online.

Higher Education: Public Consultation

Feryal Clark: To ask the Secretary of State for Education, what his timescale is for responding to his Department's consultation on Higher education policy statement and reform, which closed on 6 May 2022. [UIN 42258]

Andrea Jenkyns: The department is now considering the views received in the higher education policy statement and reform consultation and plans to publish a response in due course.

Research: Northern Ireland

Stephen Farry: To ask the Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy, whether his Department has plans to increase the level of UK Research and Innovation funding that is spent in Northern Ireland. [UIN 42300]

Jane Hunt: In Northern Ireland there are currently over 190 UKRI funded projects worth approximately £146 million. This includes project awards through the Strength in Places Fund, which is designed to build on existing strengths in research and innovation to support innovation-led regional growth.

UKRI and other Government R&D funders will continue to work with places across the UK, as part of the Government's mission to increase domestic public investment in R&D outside the Greater South East by at least 40% by 2030.

BTEC Qualifications: Finance

Catherine West: To ask the Secretary of State for Education, if he will make an assessment of the potential impact of the withdrawal of funding for BTEC courses on (a) Black students and (b) racial equality. [UIN 42143]

Andrea Jenkyns: An assessment of the potential equalities impacts of the removal of funding for qualifications, which includes some BTEC qualifications, was carried out as part of the qualifications review.

The department expects all students to benefit from a more rigorous qualification system, with higher quality qualifications that better equip students with the necessary skills for progression into employment or further study. Students from black and other minority backgrounds are not expected to be disproportionately impacted by the removal of funding.

The department will continue to produce assessments of potential equalities impacts.

Sector news

Ministerial announcements:

On Monday 5 September, Rt Hon Liz Truss MP was announced as leader of the Conservative Party, becoming Prime Minister on Tuesday 6 September. The following appointments were made:

- Rt Hon Kwasi Kwarteng MP – Chancellor of the Exchequer
- Rt Hon Suella Braverman QC MP – Home Secretary
- Rt Hon James Cleverly MP – Foreign Secretary
- Rt Hon Kit Malthouse MP – Education Secretary
- Rt Hon Jacob Rees-Mogg MP – Business Secretary
- Rt Hon Simon Clarke MP – Levelling Up Secretary
- Rt Hon Michelle Donelan MP – Culture Secretary
- Andrea Jenkyns MP - Parliamentary Under Secretary of State DfE
- Kelly Tolhurst MP - Minister of State DfE
- Tom Tugendhat MBE MP - Minister for Security

The new cabinet convened at 09:30am on Wednesday 7 September.

You can read a [full list of appointments here](#).

Death of HM Queen Elizabeth II:

It is with great sadness that we learnt of the death of Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth II at 6:30pm on Thursday 8 September in [an announcement from the Royal Family](#).

Professor Steve West CBE, President of Universities UK and Vice-Chancellor of UWE Bristol, said: *“Her remarkable and unrivalled reign leaves an enduring legacy for the nation and our universities. Her Majesty was an ardent supporter of universities and*

of education as a force for good.... This is a sad day for our nation, and our thoughts are particularly with members of the Royal Family at this time”.

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