



## Political Affairs Digest

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A regular digest of House of Commons, House of Lords, and higher education sector business.

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# Parliamentary business

## **Government support for apprenticeships – Westminster Hall debate**

On Tuesday 24 January, a Westminster Hall debate titled “Apprenticeships: Government Support” was tabled by Karin Smyth MP (Labour).

Karin Smyth celebrated degree apprenticeships and highlighted the work that the University of Exeter were pioneering in their programmes. She noted that both the Minister for Skills, Apprenticeships, and Higher Education and members of the Education Select Committee were advocates of degree apprenticeships in boosting productivity and widening access for students from disadvantaged backgrounds.

Katherine Fletcher MP (Conservative) cited the degree apprenticeships offered by the University of Central Lancashire and outlined how this work enabled boosts to productivity and up-skilling in small and medium-sized enterprises.

Responding to the points raised in the debate, Rt Hon Robert Halfon MP, Minister for Skills, Apprenticeships, and Higher Education, reiterated that his “two favourite words in the English language” were “degree apprenticeships”. He noted the increase of 47,000 in degree apprenticeships with over 140,000 since they were introduced in 2014-15.

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



# Forthcoming business

## Oral question on Horizon Europe

Viscount Stansgate (Labour) has tabled an oral question on the “possibility of the UK participating in the Horizon Europe research and innovation programme in 2023” for Tuesday 31 January, from 2:30pm.

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

# Written Questions

## Students: Energy and Rents

**Julian Sturdy:** To ask the Secretary of State for Education, if he will make an assessment of the potential impact of increases in the cost of (a) energy bills and (b) rent on students in winter 2022. [UIN 120921]

**Robert Halfon:** The government recognises the additional cost of living pressures that have arisen this year which have impacted students. Decisions on student finance will have to be taken alongside other spending priorities to ensure the system remains financially sustainable and the costs of higher education are shared fairly between students and taxpayers, not all of whom have benefited from going to university.

On 11 January 2023, the department announced a one-off reallocation of funding so we can add £15 million to this year's student premium, to support additional hardship requests. There is now £276 million of student premium funding available this academic year to support disadvantaged students who need additional help. This extra funding will complement the help that universities are providing through their own bursary, scholarship and hardship support schemes. The department works with the Office for Students to ensure universities support students in hardship using both hardship funds and drawing on the student premium.

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 Act passed on 25 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 act are set out in the legislation.

The department has continued to increase maximum loans and grants for living and other costs for undergraduate and postgraduate students each year with a 2.3% increase for the current academic year, 2022/23. The department has also recently announced a further 2.8% increase in maximum loans and grants for the 2023/24 academic year starting in August 2023.

In addition, the department has frozen maximum tuition fees for the 2022/23 academic year and also for the 2023/24 and 2024/25 academic years. By 2024/25, maximum fees will have been frozen for seven years. We believe that a continued fee freeze achieves the best balance between ensuring that the system remains

sustainable, offering good value for the taxpayer, and reducing debt levels for students in real terms.

Universities and private accommodation providers are autonomous and are responsible for setting their own rent agreements. The department plays no direct role in the provision of student residential accommodation, whether the accommodation is managed by universities or private sector organisations. The Energy Bill Relief Scheme will provide a price reduction to ensure that all businesses and other non-domestic customers, including universities and private purpose-built student accommodation providers, are protected from high energy bills this winter.

## **Students: Loans**

**Darren Jones:** To ask the Secretary of State for Education, whether he has made an assessment of the potential merits of introducing an option of a repayment holiday for student loans as part of his package of cost of living support for people on low incomes. [UIN 117875]

**Robert Halfon:** The student loan repayment system incorporates a number of protections for those making loan repayments, including for those on low incomes.

Repayments are calculated as a fixed percentage of earnings above the relevant repayment threshold. This is currently £27,295 for a post-2012 undergraduate loan and £21,000 for a postgraduate loan. These do not change as a result of the interest rate charged, or the amount borrowed. If a borrower's income decreases, so does the amount they repay. If income is below the relevant repayment threshold, or a borrower is not earning, they do not have to make repayments. Any outstanding debt, including interest accrued, is written off after the loan term ends, or in case of death or disability, at no detriment to the borrower. There are no commercial loans that offer this level of protection.

To further protect borrowers, the government, by law, must cap maximum student loan rates to ensure the interest rate charged on the loan is in line with market rates for comparable unsecured personal loans. The government monitors student loan rates against the Bank of England's data series for the effective interest rates on new and existing unsecured personal loans.

## Horizon Europe

**Chi Onwurah:** To ask the Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy, with reference to the keynote speech made by the Minister for Science, Research and Innovation at Onward UK on 11 January 2023, when the Government plans to publish details of an alternative to Horizon UK. [UIN 122142]

**George Freeman:** If the UK does not associate to Horizon Europe, the Government will be ready with a comprehensive alternative, including a suite of transitional measures and longer-term programmes, funded from the budget set aside for association to European programmes.

As stated in my speech at Onward UK on 11 Jan 2023, these programmes will enable the UK to meet its global Science Superpower and Innovation Nation ambitions. Details of the transitional measures have already been published, and the Department will publish more detailed proposals on the longer-term programmes in due course.

## Innovation and Research

**Chi Onwurah:** To ask the Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy, with reference to the keynote speech made by the Minister for Science, Research and Innovation at Onward UK on 11 January 2023, when he plans to establish a unit in his Department to monitor the success of the UK's clusters of innovation; and what its (a) name, (b) budget and (c) remit will be. [UIN 122138]

**George Freeman:** BEIS analysts are using their expertise to map the UK's innovation clusters and understand trends, barriers and opportunities within them. Monitoring and evaluation are at the heart of good policy making, so we are also ensuring this is in place for all initiatives that help to support the UK's clusters to realise their potential. For example, we are establishing a monitoring and evaluation framework to assess the impact of Innovation Accelerators, which is a new pilot programme supporting Glasgow, Greater Manchester and the West Midlands to become major, globally competitive centres for research and innovation.

## Innovation and Research: Brexit

**Chi Onwurah:** To ask the Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy, with reference to the keynote speech made by the Minister for Science,

Research and Innovation at Onward UK on 11 January 2023, which post- Brexit freedoms in procurement and regulation he plans to use to grow innovation clusters and support research and development. [UIN 122139]

**George Freeman:** Leaving the EU gives us the opportunity to create our own regulations that can help to drive transparency, prosperity and growth. The Government's Procurement Bill takes up that opportunity to create the flexibility to facilitate public sector buyers procuring innovative new products and services. In addition to this the third round of the Regulators' Pioneer fund is funding projects that will help to keep the UK at the forefront of regulation and support R&D.

## **Science: Finance**

**Chi Onwurah:** To ask the Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy, how many Scientific Institutes his Department funds; and if he will list them. [UIN 123936]

This answer is the replacement for a previous holding answer.

**George Freeman:** BEIS directly funds or has contracts with a number of Scientific Institutes such as: National Physical Laboratory, Laboratory of the Government Chemist, National Engineering Laboratory, Met Office, UK Atomic Energy Authority and the National Nuclear Laboratory.

UK Research & Innovation (UKRI) also directly funds a number of research institutes, a list of which can be found here: <https://www.ukri.org/apply-for-funding/before-you-apply/check-if-you-are-eligible-for-research-and-innovation-funding/eligible-research-institutes/>

Public funding for R&D via UKRI also supports higher education providers to establish their own research institutes which generally operate independently from government.

## **Research: Expenditure**

**Lord Jones:** To ask His Majesty's Government what was the total government spend in (1) 2018, and (2) 2019, on research and development. [UIN HL4615]



**Lord Callanan:** The Office for National Statistics publishes annual data on research and development expenditure by the UK government. Their latest data up to 2020, released in April 2022, is available on the ONS website.

Worksheet 3 of that publication gives total figures of £12,765 million in 2018, £13,542 million in 2019 and £15,266 million in 2020. These figures include indicative UK contributions to EU R&D expenditure but exclude expenditure on knowledge transfer.

# Sector News

## UCU confirm dates of 18 days of industrial action

On Tuesday 24 January, the University and College Union (UCU) confirmed the upcoming dates for 18 days of industrial action.

The full dates of industrial action are:

- Wednesday 1<sup>st</sup> February
- Thursday 9<sup>th</sup> and Friday 10<sup>th</sup> February
- Tuesday 14<sup>th</sup>, Wednesday 15<sup>th</sup> and Thursday 16<sup>th</sup> February
- Tuesday 21<sup>st</sup>, Wednesday 22<sup>nd</sup> and Thursday 23<sup>rd</sup> February
- Monday 27<sup>th</sup>, Tuesday 28<sup>th</sup> February and Wednesday 1<sup>st</sup>, Thursday 2<sup>nd</sup> March
- Thursday 16<sup>th</sup> and Friday 17<sup>th</sup> March
- Monday 20<sup>th</sup>, Tuesday 21<sup>st</sup> and Wednesday 22<sup>nd</sup> March

UCU general secretary Jo Grady said: “A resolution can be reached, but that is in the gift of university vice-chancellors who need to urgently reassess their priorities and deliver a deal that benefits staff and students. From February, our union will begin rebalancing its members to allow action to continue through the rest of the academic year, should they continue to drag their feet.”

A spokesperson for Universities UK, on behalf of USS employers said: “We are disappointed to see these new plans for strike action from the UCU... We continue to meet regularly with union and USS representatives and are already working with UCU ahead of the next valuation which is due to start in March.”

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

## Royal Anniversary Trust publish net zero report

On Tuesday 24 January, the Royal Anniversary Trust published a report titled “Accelerating the UK tertiary education sector towards net zero”. The report is a

sector-led proposal for action and connected thinking, which includes a sector specific reporting framework for emissions.

It is a useful resource for universities to raise their ambitions and meet their goals for sustainability. It provides much needed guidance on what higher and further education institutions should report on carbon emissions, and how to report them.

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

## **OIA publishes Operating Report 2022 and Operation Plan 2023**

On Tuesday 24 January, the Office of the Independent Adjudicator for Higher Education (OIA) published its Operating Report 2022 and Operating Plan 2023.

The OIA received 2,850 complaints in 2022, which is a 3% increase on 2021. Despite the high volume of cases, the OIA met most of its targets for timeliness of processes.

The Operation Plan 2023 is based around the ombuds four key priorities: (1) reviewing student complaints, (2) sharing learning, (3) working effectively with others, and (4) continually developing our organisation. The Plan sets out what the OIA intends to do in 2023 to advance each of these priorities and what they aim to have achieved by the end of the year.

You can [read the press release](#) here.

## **Stakeholders warn against the abolition of fixed-term tenancies for students**

On Tuesday 24 January, a group of universities, student accommodation providers, and landlord bodies wrote to the government warning against the abolition of fixed-term tenancies for students renting privately.

The letter, co-signed by Universities UK chief executive Vivienne Stern MBE, argues that the introduction of open-ended tenancies to the student housing market, as proposed by the government, will “undermine the stability and proper functioning of the sector” which is “dependent on property being available at the start of the academic year.”

The organisations call on the government to extend the exemption from open-ended tenancies granted to Purpose Built Student Accommodation (PBSA) to all student

housing. They argue that where a landlord rents their property to a group of students a fixed term tenancy agreement should be permissible.

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

## **Sector responds to media speculation regarding international students**

On Wednesday 25 January, [the Times published an article](#) speculating on proposals devised by Rt Hon Suella Braverman MP, Secretary of State for the Home Department, to target international students.

Responding to the media speculation, Jamie Arrowsmith, Director of Universities UK International (UUKi), outlined the “huge positive contribution” of international students, urged the government to “work with the sector” to mitigate concerns over dependants, and warned that any threat to remove or limit the Graduate route would be “hugely damaging.”

Dr Tim Bradshaw, Chief Executive of the Russell Group, stressed that international students are a “UK success story” and said that introducing restrictions on international students and their dependants risks damaging the UK’s economic growth, the quality and choice for domestic students, and research and innovation capability.

You can read the [UUKi response](#) and [Russell Group statement](#) here.

## **Sutton Trust publishes cost of living report**

On Thursday 26 January, the Sutton Trust published a survey highlighting the impacts of rising living costs on students. The survey of 1,050 students was carried out across the UK by Savanta ComRes.

Key findings include:

- 33% of students from working class families say they have skipped meals to save on food costs.
- 63% of students are spending less on food and essentials as a result of the rising cost of living.
- 43% of students said they are using less electricity or gas in their homes.

The report also considers existing government support. It notes that 40% of students living in private rental accommodation had not benefitted from the energy support scheme. Moreover, if the new £15 million of additional hardship fund was split between undergraduate students in England from the most deprived areas, it would only benefit each student by £67.

Sir Peter Lampl, founder and Chairman of the Sutton Trust and Chairman of the Education Endowment Foundation, said: “It is scandalous that students are skipping meals and having to cut back on essentials, and that a staggering quarter of students say they are now less likely to finish their degree as a result of the crisis. To make sure that students can afford to fully take part in their course and wider university life, the Sutton Trust is calling for the government to urgently review the amount of funding and support available to students.”

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

## **OfS publishes summary of report on the performance of QAA**

On Thursday 26 January, the Office for Students (OfS) published a summary of its triennial report on the performance of the Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (QAA) in its role as the designated quality body (DQB).

The report states that the OfS “supports the QAA’s request to have its designation removed”. It identifies four issues with the QAA’s performance:

- Quality of assessment reports: Reports provided by the QAA following assessment of quality and/or standards for individual providers are not fit for purpose because they do not meet the OfS’s requirements for use in regulatory decisions.
- Methods for assessing quality and standards: The QAA was asked to make proposals for how it would assess quality and standards in relation to the OfS’s new conditions of registration. Despite detailed feedback, and three successive submissions, the OfS’s judgement was that the QAA’s proposals would not enable the OfS to make effective regulatory judgements.
- Conflict of interests: The QAA operates as both the DQB and as a paid-for membership organisation to which the majority of providers the OfS regulates choose to subscribe. Its membership scheme for providers in England began in August 2019 and has since significantly expanded. The OfS’s view is that this

gives rise to a conflict. The QAA has made changes to its management and governance arrangements, but these fail to resolve the issue.

- Value for money: The charging structure used by the QAA to calculate the fees it charges to providers for its work as the DQB is consistent with the requirements in section 28 of the Higher Education and Research Act 2017 (HERA). However, given the substantial concerns the OfS has identified about the QAA's capability to perform the assessment functions effectively, the OfS does not consider that the current fee levels represent value for money for individual higher education providers, the sector more broadly, or for students whose fees are likely to be contributing to these costs.

Responding to the report, QAA said: "QAA has contested the content and conclusion of OfS's triennial report and made representations against it. In QAA's opinion the final report, and the published summary, substantially misrepresent QAA's record as DQB. But we do not think it serves the interests of students or the sector for QAA to engage in a protracted public disagreement with OfS, and so we do not intend to publish a detailed rebuttal or to make further statements on this matter at this time."

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

## **OfS report on provider engagement**

On Thursday 26 January, a report on provider engagement with the Office for Students (OfS) was published.

The OfS commissioned this report to gain a more systematic and robust understanding of the diversity of views of the providers it regulates. It explores providers' perceptions about the OfS, and its current approach to communicating with the sector, with the aim of improving the quality and clarity of communications.

The research found that there are a variety of provider types with differing understanding and experience of the OfS.

Much of the clarity achieved by providers around the role of the OfS and provider obligations stemmed from successful communication channels. Personal interactions with OfS staff were reported as positive, although providers often found it difficult to find the right person to speak to.

More negative comments tended to focus on a demand for a more personalised, collaborative and supportive approach. Providers wanted more recognition of the

different circumstances in which they were working: from small and further education providers, with individuals or teams struggling to cope with the volume, speed, and nature of OfS requirements; to large established providers, who felt that some communications failed to recognise their consistent performance record and low-risk status.

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

## **Official launch of ARIA**

On Thursday 26 January, George Freeman MP, Minister for Science, Research and Innovation, announced the formal establishment of the Advanced Research and Invention Agency (ARIA).

ARIA has been designed with a level of freedom which puts trust in the decisions of experts in their field and empowers them to quickly allocate funding in support of their vision. It is a key part of the government's plans to promote innovation.

George Freeman said: "Transformational discoveries come from world class scientists and labs with the freedom to explore the unknown. We have set up ARIA as an £800 million global super lab to do just that through frontier science and technology."

Dr Ilan Gur, CEO of ARIA, said: "ARIA will make bold bets that leverage the strengths of the UK research system to drive world-changing breakthroughs."

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

## **UCEA present "full and final" pay offer**

On Thursday 26 January, the Universities and Colleges Employer Association (UCEA) presented a "full and final" pay offer to be "considered by all".

The pay offer is worth between 5% and 8% and prioritises the lower paid who are disproportionately affected by higher inflation.

Raj Jethwa, UCEA's Chief Executive said: "The sector will now urge trade unions to consult their members over this full and final pay offer rather than push them into striking that tries to target students. HE institutions urge trade union leaders to provide their own members with a realistic and fair assessment of what is achievable,

before giving them the chance to accept or refuse a pay offer that genuinely attempts to address cost of living pressures.”

Responding to the offer, UCU general secretary, Jo Grady said: “In negotiations, employers have produced a further revised offer. This is welcome and testament to the effective strike action our union has delivered... A much-improved offer on pay needs to be made alongside serious commitments to end the sector's reliance on insecure contracts and alleviate dangerously high workloads. We remain in dispute but determined to reach a negotiated settlement.”

You can [read the press release from UCEA and UCU](#) here.