Political Affairs Digest

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13 – 17 November 2023

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

Renters (Reform) Bill – committee stage

On Tuesday 14 and Thursday 16 November, oral evidence was heard for the Renters (Reform) Bill.

At the first sitting, Matthew Pennycook MP, Shadow Housing Minister, probed whether there was evidence to suggest that there would be an exodus of landlords from the sector as a consequence of the Bill. In his reply, Ben Beadle (Chief Executive, National Residential Landlords Association (NRLA)) said that some amendments would be necessary to give landlords confidence to deal with the reforms in the Bill. He pointed to evidence from the Bank of England which found that landlords were exiting the market. He said members were telling the NRLA that they were reducing their supply, rather than investing.

Ben Beadle said that the proposed ground for possession for House in Multiple Occupation (HMO) landlords did not fully protect the cyclical nature of the student rental market. The NRLA are instead proposing an initial six-month moratorium period in which tenants cannot give notice, provided no breach of tenancy has occurred. After the moratorium period ends, tenants can give two months’ notice, resulting in a minimum tenancy duration of eight months. Ben Beadle explained that this would provide for a fixed period which would deal adequately —but not fully, with the need to keep the cyclical nature of the student market.

Lloyd Russell Moyle MP (Labour) questioned why students should not have the right to give notice after 2 months if their circumstances change or if a property does not meet expectations. In his reply, Ben Beadle said that if a student leaves a property, and that property is re-leased to a family, for example, the landlord loses their status as an HMO, and they must reapply, typically through article 4. He said this was a heavily regulated area.

Timothy Douglas (Head of Policy and Campaigns at Propertymark) argued that the simplest and easiest way would be to retain fixed-term tenancies as an option for any household that is either a student or mixed student household, to give that flexibility as a fixed term for 12 months as an option.

At the fourth sitting, Chloe Field (Vice-President for Higher Education at the National Union of Students (NUS)) gave evidence. She noted that the Bill did not recognise the diversity of students’ needs and raised concerns about retaining fixed-term tenancies
for students. However, if fixed term tenancies were retained then this must be curated to fit the student rental market. On the proposed ground for exemption, she welcomed the acknowledgement of term times, but noted this does not capture the diversity of courses term dates. She suggested that students could be exempt in relation to their council tax status.

You can read transcripts of the session.

**Treasury oral questions**

On Tuesday 14 November, the Chancellor of the Exchequer, Rt Hon Jeremy Hunt MP, and his ministerial team answered oral questions in the House of Commons.

Laurence Robertson MP (Conservative) raised the difficulties for graduates to pay off their student loan given the high interest rates. He asked what the government were doing to support graduates.

Laura Trott MP, Chief Secretary to the Treasury, said freezing tuition fees helped the affordability for future graduates. She also highlighted the support that the Department for Education (DfE) were providing to current students.

You can watch the session and read a transcript.

**King’s Speech – science, technology, media and culture debate**

On Tuesday 14 November, members of the House of Lords debated the King’s Speech focusing on elements relating to science, technology, media, and culture.

Lord Clement-Jones (Liberal Democrat) said he welcomed the UK’s rejoining to Horizon Europe but added that he was disappointed that there was no mention of getting international research cooperation ‘back to where it was.’ He also criticised the increases to visa fees, meaning top researchers coming to the UK would face costs ten times higher than other leading science nations.

Lord Patel (Crossbench) highlighted the ‘punitive cost of visas and health charges’ and noted that to become a ‘genuine science superpower’ the government would need to go further. He highlighted the declining Quality-Related (QR) funding and Charity Research Support Funding (CRSF) that universities had for research activity and called on the Minister to indicate what plans the government had to increase this. Finally,
Lord Patel probed whether it would be more appropriate for universities to fall under the Department for Science, Innovation, and Technology (DSIT).

Viscount Chandos (Labour) raised the Lords Industry and Regulators recent report on the financial sustainability of the higher education sector. He asked the Minister whether he agreed that there was a ‘systemic risk to the HE sector’s financial viability.’

Lord Rees of Ludlow (Crossbench) warned of the financial pressure that current students were under at university as well as the difficulty to find affordable accommodation near campus. He warned that academia was becoming ‘less alluring as a career’ with people increasingly associating it with ‘years of precarity and undue financial sacrifice.’

Lord Bilimoria (Crossbench) praised the collaboration between universities, governments, and business which allowed for discoveries and innovations. He praised the record number of international students at UK universities and called for international students to be removed from net migration figures.

Viscount Stansgate (Labour) highlighted the damage caused by delays to the Horizon Europe announcement and asked what practical progress had been made towards making the programme a success. He also asked the Minister to comment on the increases to visa fees and health surcharges for international students.

Baroness Fox of Buckley (Non-affiliated) said she disagreed with the decision of the Secretary of State for DSIT, Rt Hon Michelle Donelan MP, to call on UK Research and Innovation (UKRI) to close its equality, diversity, and inclusion committee. While acknowledging that she found the statements made by those academics ‘disgusting’, she said interference with academic freedom ‘made a mockery’ of the Higher Education (Freedom of Speech) Act.

Baroness Morgan of Huyton (Labour) raised the importance of long-term commitment from government and ambitious targets for R&D spending. She also noted the necessity of longer cycles to provide stability for researchers, innovators, and investors.

Lord Storey (Liberal Democrat) said that in order to be a science and technology superpower, the UK required ‘a first-class education service that values and rewards its teachers and lecturers and provides schools, colleges and universities with the resources they need.’ He highlighted the rising number of lecturing staff employed on fixed-term contracts and the financial dependency on overseas students.
Responding on behalf of the government, Lord Parkinson of Whitely Bay, Parliamentary Under Secretary of State for Arts and Heritage and DCMS Lords Minister, said they were keeping visa arrangements under review and would ‘continue to strike a balance between reducing overall net migration in the long-term and welcoming the talented people who can contribute to our scientific and creative endeavours.’

You can watch the session and read a transcript.

**DSIT oral questions**

On Wednesday 15 November, Science, Innovation, and Technology oral questions took place in the House of Commons.

Alistair Strathern MP (Labour) said he was ‘incredibly proud’ of the role of Cranfield University in leading Net Zero research and commercialising technology. He asked the Minister what further support could be offered to capture the economic impact locally in the future.

Andrew Griffith MP, the newly appointed Minister of State at the Department for Science, Innovation, and Technology (DSIT), said he shared the member’s pride in Cranfield University. He said the government were providing £1.6 billion in funding to Catapults.

Chi Onwurah MP, Shadow Minister for Science, Research, and Innovation, welcomed the Minister to his new role. She said Labour would champion university clusters and spin-outs as engines of sustainable regional growth. However, she said that spin-outs and start-ups were ‘bogged down in Tory red-tape’. She asked if the government would support a Regulatory Innovation Office (RIO) to address this.

In his reply, the Minister said he shared his predecessor’s determination for science including the work in Net Zero.

You can watch the session and read a transcript.

**House of Lords recess**

On Wednesday 15 November, the House of Lords rose for Autumn recess. It will return on Monday 20 November.
Forthcoming business

Pay and financial support for healthcare students – Westminster Hall debate

On Monday 20 November from 4:30pm, e-petitions 610557, 616557 and 619609, relating to pay and financial support for healthcare students will be debated in Westminster Hall. The debate will be led by Marsha De Cordova MP (Labour).

You can watch the session. The House of Commons Library has published a research briefing ahead of the session.

Response to the Independent Review of UK’s Research, Development and Innovation Landscape

On Monday 20 November from 2:30pm, House of Lords will discuss the response to the Independent Review of the UK’s Research, Development and Innovation Organisational Landscape.

You can watch the session.

Renters (Reform) Bill – committee stage

On Tuesday 21 and Thursday 23 November, the Renters (Reform) Bill will continue its committee stage.

You can watch the sessions (Tuesday 9:25am + 2:00pm and Thursday 11:30am + 2:00pm).
Written Questions

Higher Technical Qualifications

Seema Malhotra MP: To ask the Secretary of State for Education, how many applications to study Higher Technical Qualifications there were in each of the last 12 months. [UIN 817]

Robert Haflon MP: Higher Technical Qualifications (HTQs) were taught for the first time in September 2022. A HTQ will usually take one to two years to complete.

The department does not collect data on the number of HTQ applicants. We do collect data on course enrolment, which is published as part of the Higher Level Learners in England official statistic. The data for the 2022/23 academic year will be published in May 2024.

Universities: Mental Health Services

George Eustice MP: To ask the Secretary of State for Education, with reference to the Answer of 25 October 2023 to Question 203270 on Universities: Mental Health Services, how many and what proportion of Higher Education leaders received the letter on mental health services from the Minister for Skills, Apprenticeships and Higher Education on 5 June 2023. [UIN 149]

Robert Halfon MP: On 5 June 2023, the department wrote to the accountable officers at every higher education (HE) provider registered with the Office for Students, asking them to prioritise mental health at an executive level. 417 HE providers were registered at that time.

In this letter, a target was set for all universities to join the University Mental Health Charter Programme by September 2024. Providers who do not have degree-awarding powers are not eligible but can still follow the Charter’s principles. In addition, there is an Association of Colleges Mental Health & Wellbeing Charter for colleges.

Students: Housing

Mike Amesbury MP: To ask the Secretary of State for Education, if she will make an assessment of the (a) cost and (b) availability of student accommodation. [UIN 440]
**Robert Halfon MP**: Student accommodation is a busy part of the housing market. As universities and landlords are private and autonomous bodies the government has no role in the provision of student accommodation, nor a remit to intervene in how it is allocated.

The department expects universities and private landlords to review their accommodation policies to ensure that they are fair, clear, and have the interests of students at heart. This includes making accommodation available at a range of affordable price points.

Since 2006, the interests of students have been protected by three government-sponsored accommodation Codes of Practice, so that if a student believes their accommodation provider is treating them unfairly, they can raise a complaint under the relevant code of practice.

**STEM Subjects: New Businesses**

**Chi Onwurah MP**: To ask the Secretary of State for Education, if her Department will take steps to produce a strategy on increasing entrepreneurship among STEM higher education students. [UIN 1138]

**Robert Halfon MP**: The Government has established a supportive framework to empower universities in equipping students with the essential skills required for success.

The department is investing in science, technology, engineering and mathematics (STEM) education at all levels to ensure students have access to high-quality STEM teaching and STEM career opportunities. The department is investing approximately £750 million of additional funding over the three-year period from 2022/23 to 2024/25 in high-quality teaching and facilities. This includes additional funding in science and engineering, in subjects that support the NHS, and in degree apprenticeships. This includes the largest increase in government funding for the higher education (HE) sector in over a decade to support students and improve teaching.

The Higher Education Business and Community Interaction (HE-BCI) survey showed that the number of graduate start-ups increased by 5% (from 4,528 in 2020/21 to 4,735 in 2021/22), which is the highest annual figure in the survey's history.
The National Careers Service also provides free, up to date, impartial information, advice, and guidance on careers, skills, and the Labour Market in England. The service provides support to individuals studying STEM subjects in HE, and helps industry sectors to disseminate key information and updates.

Students and taxpayers invest tens of thousands of pounds in HE. This must lead to good quality qualifications, which equip students with the skills they need to achieve their potential.

**Universities: Equality**

**Chi Onwurah MP:** To ask the Secretary of State for Science, Innovation and Technology, what steps her Department is taking to (a) monitor and (b) collect information on the Gender Equality Plans in UK Universities; and how many full-time equivalent officials work on policies arising from the policy paper entitled Research and development people and culture strategy, published on 22 July 2021. [UIN 1128]

**Andrew Griffith MP:** Gender Equality Plans (GEPs) are an eligibility criterion for any organisation applying to any part of Horizon Europe funding. Responsibility for the establishment, monitoring and data collection of GEPs, is a matter for UK Universities and for the European Commission.

Policies from the R&D People & Culture Strategy since its launch over two years ago span many areas of my Department, therefore it is not possible to give an exact number for the full-time equivalent officials working on this endeavour.

**Research: Wales**

**Ben Lake MP:** To ask the Secretary of State for Wales, whether he plans to take steps to promote research in Welsh universities in the context of the Welsh universities showcasing event held on 17 October 2023. [UIN 397]

**David T C Davies MP:** I was delighted to welcome all eight of the universities in Wales and the Open University to an event showcasing the sector at Lancaster House on 17 October 2023. The event highlighted the strength and breadth of Welsh university research and its ability to deliver tangible benefits to communities in Wales, the UK and across the world. I am committed to ensuring Welsh universities play a vital role in positioning the UK at the forefront of research and development, and I firmly believe the event has helped make progress towards this goal. Senior representatives from each of UKRI’s research councils were present at the event and had the
opportunity to see just some of the research excellence found across Wales’ areas of academic strength.

The UK Government is committed to supporting the higher education sector, demonstrated by our ongoing investment of £39.8 billion in research and development between 2022 and 2025. Moreover, the Department for Science, Innovation and Technology (DSIT) recently announced a £60 million Regional Innovation Fund to support regions that have lower levels of research and development investment. As part of this, the Welsh Government will receive £3.4 million in Barnett consequentials. I hope this will be invested in the Welsh higher education sector.

Wales is already leading the way in areas as diverse as MedTech, AgriTech and Net Zero and also has a world-leading compound semiconductor cluster based in South Wales. I will continue to champion the strengths of the Welsh university sector. My officials regularly meet with their counterparts in DSIT and the Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities (DLUHC). Discussions with the Wales Innovation Network (WIN) are ongoing on how to build on the momentum created by the event held at Lancaster House on 17 October 2023.

Student Loans

Chi Onwurah MP: To ask the Secretary of State for Education, whether her Department plans to take steps to adjust maintenance fees for students in line with inflation. [UIN 1142]

Robert Halfon MP: We have frozen maximum tuition fees for the 2023/24 and 2024/25 academic years to deliver better value for students and to keep the cost of higher education (HE) under control. By 2024/25, maximum fees will have been frozen for seven years.

The government is considering options for maximum loans and grants for living and other costs for the 2024/25 academic year and will be making an announcement in due course.

Decisions on student finance have been taken alongside other spending priorities to ensure the system remains financially sustainable and the costs of HE is shared fairly between students and taxpayers, not all of whom have benefited from going to university.
The government recognises the additional cost of living pressures that have arisen this year and that are impacting students. For the 2023/24 academic year we have made £276 million of student premium and mental health funding available to support successful outcomes for students including disadvantaged students. This funding will complement the help universities are providing through their own bursary, scholarship and hardship support schemes.

Science and Technology

Chi Onwurah MP: To ask the Secretary of State for Education, what progress her Department has made on developing a science and technology skills dashboard. [UIN 793]

Robert Halfon MP: The Department’s Unit for Future Skills (UFS) is working to improve the quality of jobs and skills data, which will support a better understanding of current skill mismatches and future demand across key sectors, including those related to science and technology. More information on the UFS is available at: https://www.gov.uk/government/groups/unit-for-future-skills(opens in a new tab).

As part of cross-government work to cement the UK’s status as a science and technology superpower by 2030, the UFS is developing a Department for Education Skills Dashboard to understand the supply and demand of science and technology skills. More information on cross-government work is available at: https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/uk-science-and-technology-framework/the-uk-science-and-technology-framework(opens in a new tab).

This dashboard will be publicly available by the end of 2023.

Investment Zones: Loughborough University

Jane Hunt MP: To ask the Secretary of State for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities, if he will make an assessment of the potential merits of (a) creating an Investment Zone at Charnwood Campus and Loughborough University Science and Enterprise Park and (b) extending his plans for an Investment Zone for the proposed East Midlands Mayoral Combined County Authority to include Charnwood Campus and Loughborough University Science and Enterprise Park. [UIN 952]

Jacon Young MP: At the Spring Budget on 15 March 2023, the Chancellor announced 12 Investment Zones (IZs) across the UK. We have invited eight areas in England to
co-develop proposals with the Government. We will keep the list of Investments Zones under review subject to the overall fiscal envelope of the programme.

Places invited to co-develop an Investment Zone proposal with government have been selected based on a transparent and robust methodology, published in full on gov.uk. Further guidance on the co-development process was published in the Technical Document in July.

Investment Zones are locally led and, recognising local leaders know their areas best, all stages of co-development has allowed flexibility and autonomy for each place to identify and select the best mix of interventions for their proposal - and where that funding is spent. Decision making regarding how and where to spend this envelope ultimately resides with the proposed East Midlands Mayoral Combined County Authority (EMMCCA).

Universities: Antisemitism and Islamophobia

Dan Jarvis MP: To ask the Secretary of State for Education, what assessment she has made of the adequacy of provisions to ensure the safety and wellbeing of (a) Jewish and (b) Muslim students on university campuses. [UIN 1569]

Robert Halfon MP: It has been deeply concerning to see the rises both in antisemitism and in Islamophobia since the 7 October terrorist attacks against Israel. Universities should be welcoming and inclusive environments. Higher education providers have a responsibility to take a zero-tolerance approach to any form of racial or religious harassment. They have clear responsibilities under the Equality Act 2010 to adopt robust policies and procedures that enable them to investigate and swiftly address reports of racism.

Given the particularly severe impact on Jewish students, the Secretary of State and I wrote to all schools, colleges and universities, urging them to respond swiftly to hate-related incidents and actively reassure Jewish students that that they can study without fear of harassment or intimidation. On 5 November we published a five-point plan detailing further action to protect Jewish students in higher education, the details of the plan can be found here: https://educationhub.blog.gov.uk/2023/11/05/how-were-protecting-jewish-students-on-university-campus/.

The department continues to engage both with Jewish and with Muslim groups, including the Union of Jewish Students and Tell MAMA, and actively monitors incidents affecting both communities. The department also welcomes the guidance

The department has reminded providers of their obligations under the Prevent duty, where they should be working to prevent people from being drawn into or supporting terrorism. Department officials have assessed evidence of antisemitism and racial hatred linked to incidents at English universities. There is an online "Reporting Extremism" form where members of the public can raise concerns to the Department directly. Where concerns arise, officials have reached out to relevant universities to understand what actions they have taken, including reporting issues to the police where appropriate.

**Students: Loans**

**Jonathan Gullis MP:** To ask the Secretary of State for Education, if she will consider the potential merits of introducing a minimum requirement to qualify for student loans of (a) grades EEE at A-level and (b) equivalent grades at (i) T-level and (ii) Level 3 Diploma. [UIN 539]

**Robert Halfon MP:** The government consulted on whether there was a case, in principle, for a Minimum Eligibility Requirement for access to student finance for degree-level study. In the Higher Education (HE) Reform policy statement of 17 July, the department made an announcement to not proceed with such a requirement at this time.

The government is delivering on its manifesto commitment to drive up quality and tackle pockets of poor provision in the HE sector. The department has worked with the Office for Students (OfS) to set stringent minimum thresholds for student outcomes and the OfS has introduced face to face investigations where there is a risk of breach of these expectations.

The department wants to see recruitment limits used to reduce the growth of low-quality courses, and graduate earnings to be part of the quality regime, so that students can be confident in the quality of the course that they have chosen.
Sector news

Government reshuffle

On Monday 13 November, the Prime Minister, Rt Hon Rishi Sunak MP, initiated a Cabinet reshuffle which also led to changes to junior ministerial positions.

Minister for Science, Research and Innovation, George Freeman MP, announced his departure from the Department for Science, Innovation and Technology. His resignation letter posted on X stated that the time had come for him to focus on ‘health, family wellbeing and life beyond the front bench’. It also noted that the departure had been agreed in September, and that he was leaving with a ‘heavy heart’. He was replaced by Andrew Griffith MP, who has served as Economic Secretary to the Treasury since October 2022.

Rt Hon Gillian Keegan MP and Rt Hon Michelle Donelan MP remained as Secretary of State for Education and Secretary of State for Science, Innovation and Technology, respectively.

New Adjustment Planner – DWP

On Wednesday 15 November, the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) announced a new Adjustment Planner that would be rolled out to all universities and higher education colleges across UK.

The planner collects key information about a student’s adjustment needs which can be easily shared with prospective employers and many disabled university and higher education students are expected to benefit from it. The planner follows a successful pilot at the University of Wolverhampton, Manchester Metropolitan University, and King’s College London

Minister for Skills, Apprenticeships and Higher Education, Rt Hon Robert Halfon MP, said: ‘Ensuring that people with disabilities have access to the same opportunities to climb the ladder of opportunity is crucial if we are to build a world-class skills nation that benefits everyone.’

You can read the full press release.
Equality in higher education – Advance HE

On Wednesday 15 November, Advance HE published its 2023 equality statistical reports covering staff and student data for the academic year 2021-22.

Key headlines include:

- Student mental health conditions are the fastest growing disability which is also mirrored in staff data.
- More than half of undergraduates and postgraduate research students are female, and there is evidence to suggest that this is slowly contributing to improved representation of female professors and Heads of Institution.
- The narrowing of the ethnicity degree awarding gap has not been sustained, returning to pre-pandemic levels.
- The proportion of first degree undergraduates awarded a first or 2:1 has decreased.
- There has been a significant fall in the number of EU students in UK HE.

Amanda Aldercotte, Head of Knowledge and Research at Advance HE, said: ‘We have the opportunity to draw insights from these statistics and use this information to reshape practice and ensure that everyone’s journey is one of belonging and success.’

You can read the full report.

Universities improving graduate employment – UUK

On Tuesday 14 November, Universities UK (UUK) published a series of case studies illustrating the graduate employment benefits of attending university.

As part of this exercise, UUK interviewed eight university careers service teams that have seen a significant improvement in graduate employment.

Responses from the careers service teams fell under three themes:

- Whole university approach
- The importance of work experience
- **The value of confidence in graduates**

The case studies include University of Chichester, Heriot-Watt University, University of Huddersfield, University of Leicester, Liverpool John Moores University, Regent’s University London, University of Winchester, and York St John University.

You can read the case studies.

**Research Excellence Framework 2028 update**

The four UK higher education research funding bodies posted an update on the timelines for decisions on the 2028 Research Excellence Framework. Planned next steps are:

- December 2023: in advance of the publication of the summary report from the initial decisions consultation, announce the issues emerging from the analysis of responses and plans for progression of these. This is likely to include consideration of:
  
  o The use of HESA data for calculating volume measures.
  
  o Confirmation of the Unit of Assessment structure.
  
  o Thresholds for the sliding scale for impact case studies.
  
  o Participation qualifications and guidance around demonstrating a substantive link between individuals and institutions.
  
  o Minimum and/or maximum outputs per individual and connected policy.

- January 2024: announce the successful bidder for the people, culture and environment indicators tender and outline how that work will progress.

- Spring 2024: publish Further Decisions report.

You can read more here.
The Future of Quality in England - QAA policy paper


The policy paper titled ‘Realigning the UK higher education system: Learning from the devolved nations’ argues that the English quality system can maintain internationally agreed and UK-wide principles of quality while still operating a risk-based quality approach.

The paper contends that the absence of UK sector-wide standards from the English regulatory framework weakens comparability in the quality and standards of higher education across the UK and may create additional burden for providers operating across multiple nations of the UK.

In considering these challenges, the paper reflects on a number of key lessons to be learned from the quality arrangements of the devolved nations.

Eve Alcock, QAA’s Director of Public Affairs said: ‘As an organisation with a UK-wide remit, we have the unique ability to facilitate cross-nation learning when it comes to quality. With conversations about the future of higher education ongoing in England, we hope this paper serves as a useful reference point for policy makers in serving the best interests of UK higher education.’

You can read the full policy paper.