

## **Political Affairs Digest**

A regular digest of House of Commons, House of Lords and higher education sector business. If you would like more information on parliamentary business, or advice on engaging with Parliament or a parliamentarian, please contact:

### **Issy Cooke**

[issy.cooke@universitiesuk.ac.uk](mailto:issy.cooke@universitiesuk.ac.uk)

0207 419 5434

Click on the items in the Table of Contents to go straight to the debates, answers, forthcoming business, etc.

## Table of Contents

<b>Parliamentary Business .....</b>	<b>3</b>
Education Committee accountability hearing with Apprenticeship and Skills Minister.....	3
Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy Committee meeting on levelling up.....	3
Skills and Post-16 Education Bill presented to Parliament .....	3
Education Committee session on left-behind white pupils .....	4
<b>Forthcoming business.....</b>	<b>4</b>
Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy Oral Questions .....	4
Lords question on ODA funding .....	4
<b>Written Questions .....</b>	<b>5</b>
London allowance .....	5
Free speech on campus.....	5
In-person graduation ceremonies.....	7
Support for international students unable to take casual work alongside studies.....	7
Exam arrangements for the 2021/22 academic year .....	8
Encouraging international students to complete PhD in UK .....	8
Cost of quarantine for international students .....	9
Capacity of the hotel quarantine system to accommodate international students .....	10
Preparations to quarantine international students in autumn 2021 .....	10
Proposed funding cuts for music and arts courses .....	10
Mental health .....	11
Loss teaching time for students on practical courses .....	13
Sharia-compliant financing in education.....	14
<b>Sector News.....</b>	<b>14</b>
Universities Minister letter to support student digital poverty .....	14
Shirley-Anne Somerville appointed Cabinet Secretary for Education and Skills .....	14
OfS publish new measure on likely job and study outcomes .....	14
Private Members' Bill ballot.....	15
LEO data published .....	15

## **Parliamentary Business**

### **Education Committee accountability hearing with Apprenticeship and Skills Minister**

On Tuesday 18 May, the Education Committee held an accountability hearing with Gillian Keegan MP, Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Apprenticeships and Skills at the Department for Education.

Members of the Committee asked witnesses questions on apprenticeships, incentives for employers to take on new apprentices, and the apprenticeship levy. The Minister denied that the Government was seeking to drive down the proportion of apprenticeship starts at level two. She also said she would not back the reinstatement of the Degree Apprenticeship Development Fund to boost uptake of degree apprenticeships by young people from disadvantaged backgrounds. When pressed by the Chair, Robert Halfon MP, on what the Government was doing to increase uptake among this group, Keegan said there was already a growth in degree apprenticeships and that there were no blockages in the system in terms of universities' incentives to work with employers to develop programmes.

The Minister said the Skills and Post-16 Education Bill being introduced in Parliament would put local skills improvement plans on a statutory footing and introduce a lifelong loan entitlement. She said the lifelong loan entitlement would allow people to use student loans in a more "modular" and "flexible" way to finance qualifications at levels four and five.

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

### **Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy Committee meeting on levelling up**

On Tuesday 18 May, the Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy (BEIS) Committee held a meeting on (i) Post-pandemic economic growth: Levelling up – local and regional structures and the delivery of economic growth (ii) Industrial Decarbonisation response to the Government Strategy.

The committee spoke to BEIS and ministers from the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government (MHCLG) on various issues such as the status of previous policies related other Industrial Strategy, the definition of levelling and key metrics, overall institutional responsibility and various related policies. Higher education was not a topic of the session.

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

### **Skills and Post-16 Education Bill presented to Parliament**

On Wednesday 19 May, the Skills and Post-16 Education Bill was introduced to the House of Lords and given its First Reading. This stage takes place without any debate.

MPs will next consider the Bill at Second Reading on Tuesday 15 June.

Read the full text of the Bill as introduced [here](#).

## **Education Committee session on left-behind white pupils**

On Wednesday 19 May, the Education Committee held a session on left-behind white pupils from a disadvantaged background.

On funding for interventions, Martyn Oliver, Commissioner, Commission on Race and Ethnic Disparities, spoke of the £800million that currently went into the wider participation activities of universities. In his opinion, part of this resource should be moved downstream to earlier aged children, so as to drive pupils into higher education. Dr Tony Sewell CBE, Chair, Commission on Race and Ethnic Disparities agreed that funding into widening participation activities universities “could be used upstream”. Chair of the Committee, Robert Halfon MP (Con), responded to say he felt it is not working and “money is going down the drain”. The Chair went on to say that a significant amount of the £800million could be used to fund apprenticeships. Dr Tony Sewell agreed.

Tom Hunt MP (Con) asked the witnesses what proportion of white disadvantaged people were going to university. In response, Dr Tony Sewell said that schools could invest more in their workforce, which would in turn allow more white disadvantaged children to go further into higher education.

Ian Mearns MP (Lab) asked if levels of aspirations were impacted on by locality or the jobs market at a regional level. Dr Tony Sewell responded that there was a generational issue in some areas where inter-generational unemployment was common. This role model then fed into the mentality of young people. In his opinion, parents were key to educating and inspiring young people to take up apprenticeships or go on to universities.

In response to a question from Kim Johnson MP (Lab) on why black people were twice as likely to be unemployed, despite achieving equally at school, Dr Tony Sewell said there was probably racism in the labour market. They found that a high proportion of Black young people went to low-tariff universities and had high dropout rates. He believed apprenticeships should be made more attractive to young Black people, so that they could acquire skills that would help them survive in the labour market.

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

---

## **Forthcoming business**

### **Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy Oral Questions**

On Tuesday 25 May at 11:30, the Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy, Rt Hon Kwasi Kwarteng MP and his ministerial team will answer questions in the House of Commons.

Conservative MP Stephen Metcalfe has tabled an oral question on support UK research and development.

You can see the questions tabled [here](#) and watch the questions [here](#).

### **Lords question on ODA funding**

On Wednesday 26 May, Baroness Sugg (Con) will ask a question in the House of Lords on progress made towards legislation to reduce Overseas Development Assistance funding.

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

---

## Written Questions

### London allowance

**Apsana Begum (Poplar and Limehouse):** To ask the Secretary of State for Education, what assessment he has made of the potential effect of the Office for Students' plans to exclude the London allowance factor in the calculation for relevant London-based higher education providers on the quality of teaching at London universities. [894]

**Michelle Donelan (Chippenham):** The Strategic Priorities Grant, formerly referred to as the Teaching Grant, plays an important role in supporting providers and students to develop the skills and knowledge needed locally, regionally, and nationally to support the economy.

We have asked the Office for Students (OfS) to reform the Grant for the 2021-22 financial year. These reforms include the reallocation of high-cost subject funding towards the provision of high-cost subjects that support the NHS and wider healthcare policy, high-cost STEM subjects, and subjects meeting specific labour market needs.

The London weighting accounts for a small proportion of London -providers' income. Providers in London received around £64 million London Weighting in the 2020-21 academic year, which is less than 1% of their estimated total income.

London universities will be able to benefit from the significant uplifts we are making to elements of the Strategic Priorities Grant, including the first real terms increase in years in per capita funding for high-cost subjects in grant funding, as well as being able to bid for capital investment to support the delivery of strategic subjects.

We have also asked the OfS for a £10 million increase to the specialist provider allocation, to support these institutions which are particularly reliant on Strategic Priorities Grant funding, many of whom are London-based. We want to ensure that our small and specialist providers, including some of our top music and arts providers, receive additional support, and that grant funding is used to effectively support students.

The OfS has now publicly consulted on these proposals, and responses from universities, students and others will be taken into account before any final decisions on allocations are made.

### Free speech on campus

**Sarah Owen (Luton North):** To ask the Secretary of State for Education, what discussions officials in his Department have had with representatives of Muslim student groups regarding freedom of speech on university campuses. [1206]

**Michelle Donelan (Chippenham):** The government is clear that the Prevent Duty should not be used to suppress free speech. It requires providers, when exercising their functions, to have due regard to the need to prevent people being drawn into terrorism. There is no prescription from the government, or the Office for Students (OfS), in regard to what action providers should take once they have had due regard. The legislation imposing the Prevent duty in relation to higher education specifically requires that providers must have particular regard to their duty to ensure freedom of speech and to the importance of academic freedom.

In the most recent published assessment by the OfS on implementation of the Prevent programme in the English higher education sector in 2019, they found no cause for concern that free speech was being undermined by Prevent in external speakers' policies and their implementation. The assessment is available [here](#).

The government also remains committed to an Independent Review of Prevent, which is why William Shawcross was appointed on 26 January 2021 as the new Independent Reviewer. The call for evidence for the Independent Review was reopened on the 24 March 2021 and will close on the 26 May 2021. The review will look at how effective the statutory Prevent duty is and will make recommendations for the future.

The department has carried out structured discussions at all stages of the policy development leading up to the Higher Education (Freedom of Speech) Bill, including student engagement through the National Union of Students and roundtables with students' unions. The department welcomes further discussions and will continue to proactively engage stakeholders with a wide range of interests and backgrounds during and after passage of the Bill, including Muslim, East Asian and South East Asian students. The department plans to meet with Muslim organisations, as well as other stakeholders, in the next few weeks and looks forward to discussing the Bill measures in detail.

**Sarah Owen (Luton North):** To ask the Secretary of State for Education, what discussions officials in his Department have had with (a) East and (b) South East Asian students regarding freedom of speech on university campuses. [1205]

**Michelle Donelan (Chippenham):** The government is clear that the Prevent Duty should not be used to suppress free speech. It requires providers, when exercising their functions, to have due regard to the need to prevent people being drawn into terrorism. There is no prescription from the government, or the Office for Students (OfS), in regard to what action providers should take once they have had due regard. The legislation imposing the Prevent duty in relation to higher education specifically requires that providers must have particular regard to their duty to ensure freedom of speech and to the importance of academic freedom.

In the most recent published assessment by the OfS on implementation of the Prevent programme in the English higher education sector in 2019, they found no cause for concern that free speech was being undermined by Prevent in external speakers' policies and their implementation. The assessment is available [here](#).

The government also remains committed to an Independent Review of Prevent, which is why William Shawcross was appointed on 26 January 2021 as the new Independent Reviewer. The call for evidence for the Independent Review was reopened on the 24 March 2021 and will close on the 26 May 2021. The review will look at how effective the statutory Prevent duty is and will make recommendations for the future.

The department has carried out structured discussions at all stages of the policy development leading up to the Higher Education (Freedom of Speech) Bill, including student engagement through the National Union of Students and roundtables with students' unions. The department welcomes further discussions and will continue to proactively engage stakeholders with a wide range of interests and backgrounds during and after passage of the Bill, including Muslim, East Asian and South East Asian students. The department plans to meet with Muslim organisations, as well as other stakeholders, in the next few weeks and looks forward to discussing the Bill measures in detail.

**Sarah Owen (Luton North):** To ask the Secretary of State for Education, what recent assessment he has made of the potential effect of the Prevent strategy on free speech on university campuses. [1204]

**Michelle Donelan (Chippenham):** The government is clear that the Prevent Duty should not be used to suppress free speech. It requires providers, when exercising their functions, to have due regard to the need to prevent people being drawn into terrorism. There is no prescription from the government, or the Office for Students (OfS), in regard to what action providers should take once they have had due regard. The legislation imposing the Prevent duty in relation to higher education specifically requires that providers must have particular regard to their duty to ensure freedom of speech and to the importance of academic freedom.

In the most recent published assessment by the OfS on implementation of the Prevent programme in the English higher education sector in 2019, they found no cause for concern that free speech was being undermined by Prevent in external speakers' policies and their implementation. The assessment is available [here](#).

The government also remains committed to an Independent Review of Prevent, which is why William Shawcross was appointed on 26 January 2021 as the new Independent Reviewer. The call for evidence for the Independent Review was reopened on the 24 March 2021 and will close on the 26 May 2021. The review will look at how effective the statutory Prevent duty is and will make recommendations for the future.

The department has carried out structured discussions at all stages of the policy development leading up to the Higher Education (Freedom of Speech) Bill, including student engagement through the National Union of Students and roundtables with students' unions. The department welcomes further discussions and will continue to proactively engage stakeholders with a wide range of interests and backgrounds during and after passage of the Bill, including Muslim, East Asian and South East Asian students. The department plans to meet with Muslim organisations, as well as other stakeholders, in the next few weeks and looks forward to discussing the Bill measures in detail.

### **In-person graduation ceremonies**

**Munira Wilson (Twickenham):** To ask the Secretary of State for Education, what plans he has to publish guidance for universities on the return of in-person graduation ceremonies as covid-19 restrictions are eased. [467]

**Michelle Donelan (Chippenham):** The government last updated its guidance for providers of higher education on 10 May [here](#). As autonomous bodies, higher education providers will make their own judgements on educational activities and the use of facilities. They should take account of government guidance, including any advice on the easing of restrictions in Step 3 of the Roadmap.

Providers may hold events, as long as they are compatible with COVID-19 regulations. In doing so, they should conduct appropriate risk assessments and take any additional measures as required, following public health advice. We expect graduation ceremonies to go ahead, either physically in person but delayed in line with the roadmap, or to be held virtually.

### **Support for international students unable to take casual work alongside studies**

**Nicola Richards (West Bromwich East):** To ask the Secretary of State for Education, what support his Department has provided to international students studying in the UK during the covid-19 outbreak to help mitigate for the diminished opportunities available to those students to undertake casual work alongside their studies. [567]

**Michelle Donelan (Chippenham):** The government recognises that the COVID-19 outbreak has had unparalleled impact on all elements of the global and UK economy, and this academic year has been difficult for all students.

To protect students at this unprecedented time, particularly those who may have been planning to undertake a part time job, we have made an additional £85 million of student hardship funding available to higher education providers in the 2020/21 academic year. This is in addition to the £256 million of government funded student premium funding already available to higher education (HE) providers to draw on for this academic year, 2020/21.

Providers have flexibility in how they distribute this funding to their students, in a way that best prioritises those in greatest need. Support can include help for students, including international

students and postgraduates, facing additional costs arising from having to maintain accommodation in more than one location or assistance to help students access teaching remotely.

The current measures aim to target support for students in greatest need, and we have been consistently clear that if an international student needs to request access to hardship funds through their provider due to the ongoing impact of the COVID-19 outbreak, they can be confident in expressing these concerns to their provider without any impact on their immigration status.

The HE sector has also led some valuable work in this area. For example, Universities UK international published guidance for universities to support international students in financial hardship, and in March they wrote to all UK-based embassies to ensure international students are aware of the support available to them if required. This guidance is available [here](#).

To further support students in finding work post-graduation, the department has worked with the HE sector to understand what more we can do to support graduates who are looking to enter the labour market at this challenging time. In response, we have developed the Graduate Employment and Skills Guide, which was published on Monday 10 May 2021 on the Office for Students website. The guide signposts graduates to public, private and voluntary sector opportunities, to help students build employability skills, gain work experience or enter the labour market, as well as providing links to further study options and resources on graduate mental health and wellbeing.

## **Exam arrangements for the 2021/22 academic year**

**Munira Wilson (Twickenham):** To ask the Secretary of State for Education, when he plans to publish arrangements for (a) SATS, (b) GCSE, (c) A-level and (d) BTEC examinations in the 2021-22 academic year. [469]

**Nick Gibb (Bognor Regis and Littlehampton):** It is the Government's policy that GCSE and A level examinations should go ahead in summer 2022. Examinations and assessments for vocational and technical qualifications should also take place, in line with the latest public health guidance, throughout the 2021/22 academic year. The Department recognises that students who will be taking examinations and assessments next year have had significant disruption to their education this year, and we will continue to support students in the face of any further disruption. We are considering with Ofqual, the awarding organisations, and wider stakeholders what we need to do to ensure that students are able to sit examinations and other assessments safely and receive grades that are fair, even if further disruption does occur. Whilst the Department remains committed to exams going ahead in 2022, we will also work with Ofqual on a range of contingencies. The Department will announce further details as soon as possible.

The Department is also planning for a full programme of primary assessments to take place in the 2021/22 academic year, and we will confirm full details for 2021/22 primary assessments in due course.

## **Encouraging international students to complete PhD in UK**

**Gill Furniss (Sheffield, Brightside and Hillsborough):** To ask the Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy, whether he plans to take steps to encourage international students to complete their PhD in the UK. [388]

**Amanda Solloway (Derby North):** We want to attract and retain the most highly skilled, globally mobile talent from around the world, and ensure the UK is a top destination for scientists, researchers and innovators.



The UK has a world-leading research base: with less than 1% the world's population, the UK accounts for more than 3% of researchers, 7% per cent of the world's academic publications, and 14% of the world's most highly-cited academic publications.

In order to encourage international PhD students to study in the UK, UKRI has increased the overall proportion of UKRI studentships available to international students from Academic Year 2021/22. All students would receive a full award, to include a stipend and fees at the home level.

The new Student route was launched by Government on 5th October as part of the UK's new points-based immigration system, streamlining the immigration process for international students. Furthermore, from summer 2021, the new Graduate route will enable students who have completed a PhD to remain in the UK after graduation to stay and work, or look for work, for up to three years. Students who have successfully completed undergraduate and master's degrees will be able to stay for a further two years after study.

The Government has implemented a number of concessions to assist visa holders in the UK who have been impacted by global travel and health restrictions. This has included offering extensions of visas for those whose leave has expired, and relaxing the rules on switching in the UK, as well as extending the deadline by which international students need to be in the UK to be eligible to apply for the Graduate route.

## **Cost of quarantine for international students**

**Matt Western (Warwick and Leamington):** To ask the Secretary of State for Education, what recent discussions he has had with the Home Secretary on the cost of quarantine for international students returning from covid-19 red countries. [827]

**Michelle Donelan (Chippenham):** I speak regularly with my counterparts across government about how various COVID-19 policies may affect students with a view to minimising burdens for students while maintaining public health, and I have remained in close contact with Department for Health and Social Care ministers responsible for the Managed Quarantine Service.

Hotel quarantine is in place to prevent the spread of potentially harmful COVID-19 variants in the UK, and there is a need to have strict rules in place to prevent the vaccine effort from being undermined.

The costs of quarantine are borne by the traveller – these costs are the same for any individual arriving in the UK from, or via a red list country.

However, we have worked closely with the sector and colleagues across government to ensure that UK residents, including international students due to their visa status, that are facing significant financial hardship will have the opportunity to apply for a deferred repayment plan when booking their managed quarantine hotel room. Travellers who access hardship will be referred to a government debt collection agency ("Qualco"), who will perform an independent financial assessment and determine an appropriate payment plan.

Any student who is experiencing financial hardship can speak with their provider about support. We have made an additional £85 million of student hardship funding available to higher education providers in the 2020/21 academic year. This is in addition to the £256 million of government funded student premium funding already available to higher education providers to draw on for this academic year, 2020/21, and this support can include help for students, including international students and postgraduates. International students can be confident in expressing these concerns to their provider without any impact on their immigration status.

## Capacity of the hotel quarantine system to accommodate international students

**Emma Hardy (Kingston upon Hull West and Hessle):** To ask the Secretary of State for Health and Social Care, what assessment he has been made of the capacity of the mandatory hotel quarantine system to accommodate incoming international students ahead of the 2021-22 academic year. [185469]

**Jo Churchill (Bury St Edmunds):** It has not proved possible to respond to the hon. Member in the time available before prorogation.

## Preparations to quarantine international students in autumn 2021

**Stephen Timms (East Ham):** To ask the Secretary of State for Health and Social Care, what preparations his Department has made for covid-19 hotel quarantine for international students from (a) India and (b) other countries in autumn 2021; and if he will make a statement. [2175]

**Jo Churchill (Bury St Edmunds):** The Department will continue to ensure that the system has enough capacity to meet the challenges of arrivals from overseas, which includes international students arriving from red-list countries. The Department of Health and Social Care and Department for Education are working together on this issue.

## Proposed funding cuts for music and arts courses

**Dr Rupa Huq (Ealing Central and Acton):** To ask the Secretary of State for Education, if he will take steps to reverse the proposed reductions in funding for music and arts courses at Higher Education level in England. [820]

**Michelle Donelan (Chippenham):** The Strategic Priorities Grant, formerly referred to as the Teaching Grant, plays an important role in supporting providers and students to develop the skills and knowledge needed locally, regionally, and nationally to support the economy.

We have asked the Office for Students (OfS) to reform the Grant for the 2021-22 financial year. These reforms include the reallocation of high-cost subject funding towards the provision of high-cost subjects that support the NHS and wider healthcare policy, high-cost STEM subjects, and subjects meeting specific labour market needs.

One of our proposals is for a 50% reduction in the rate of high-cost subject funding, which is one element of the wider Strategic Priorities Grant, for some subjects in order to enable this reprioritisation. This will help to correct discrepancies which have seen, for example, media studies funded at a higher rate than mathematics or history.

It is important to note that the Strategic Priorities Grant accounts for a relatively small proportion of the total income of higher education providers today. For the providers losing funding due to this reallocation, the income lost would account for approximately 0.05% of their estimated total income, based on the latest data available.

This important reprioritisation of taxpayers' money does not mean this government is devaluing the arts or social sciences. High-quality provision in a range of subjects is critical for our workforce, and our public services, and is culturally enriching for our society.

That is why, as part of the same reform programme, we have asked the OfS to invest an additional £10 million in our world-leading specialist providers, many of which specialise in arts provision. We want to ensure that our specialist providers receive additional support, and that grant funding is used to effectively support students.

The OfS has now publicly consulted on these proposals, and responses from universities, students and others will be taken into account before any final decisions on allocations are made.

## **Mental health**

**Ed Davey (Kingston and Surbiton):** To ask the Secretary of State for Education, what steps he plans to take to tackle the mental ill health incidence increase in university students. [2181]

**Michelle Donelan (Chippenham):** Student mental health and suicide prevention are key priorities for this government. We continue to work closely with the higher education (HE) sector to promote good practice. Universities are not only experts in their student population, but also best placed to identify the needs of their particular student body.

The Department of Health and Social Care (DHSC) has overall policy responsibility for young people's mental health. We continue to work closely with them to take steps to develop mental health and wellbeing support.

On 27 March 2021, DHSC published the 'COVID-19 mental health and wellbeing recovery action plan', which you can find [here](#). It is backed by £500 million of funding, and its aims are to address waiting times for mental health services, to give more people the mental health support they need and to invest in the NHS workforce. £13 million will be used to accelerate progress to support young adults aged 18 to 25. This group includes university students and those not in education or training, who have reported worst mental health outcomes during the COVID-19 outbreak, and who sometimes currently fall between the gaps between children's and adult services.

While it is for HE providers to determine what welfare and counselling services they need to provide to their students to offer that support, the government is proactive in promoting good practice in this area. We continue to work closely with Universities UK on embedding the Stepchange programme within the sector, which you can find [here](#).

Stepchange calls on HE leaders to adopt mental health as a strategic priority and to take a whole-institution approach, embedding it across all policies, cultures, curricula and practice. The Stepchange programme relaunched in March 2020 as the Mentally Healthy Universities programme. The University Mental Health Charter, announced in June 2018, is backed by the government and led by the HE sector, which you can find [here](#). The charter, developed in collaboration with students, staff and partner organisations, aims to drive up standards of practice, including leadership, early intervention and data collection.

Since the beginning of the COVID-19 outbreak, I have stressed the importance of protecting student and staff wellbeing. We recognise that many students are facing additional mental health challenges due to the disruption and uncertainty caused by the outbreak. I have engaged with universities on this issue and have written to Vice Chancellors on numerous occasions during the past year, most recently last month, outlining that student welfare should remain a priority. I have also convened a working group of representatives from the HE and health sectors to specifically address the current and pressing issues that students are facing during the COVID-19 outbreak.

My hon. Friend, the Minister for Children and Families and I have also convened a Mental Health in Education Action Group to drive action to mitigate the impact of the outbreak on the mental health and wellbeing of children, young people and staff in nurseries, schools, colleges and universities.

We expect HE providers to continue to support their students, which has included making services accessible from a distance whilst restrictions have been in place. We encourage students to stay in touch with the welfare teams at their HE provider, as these services are likely to continue to be an important source of support. Many providers have bolstered their existing mental health services, and adapted delivery mechanisms including reaching out to students who may be more vulnerable. Staff at universities and colleges have been proactive in supporting their students, showing resourcefulness and there are many examples of good practice.

We have worked with the Office for Students (OfS) to provide Student Space, a dedicated mental health and wellbeing platform for students. Student Space has been funded by up to £3 million from the OfS in the 2020/21 academic year. We have also asked the OfS to allocate £15 million towards student mental health in 2021/22 through proposed reforms to Strategic Priorities grant funding to help address the challenges to student mental health posed by the transition to university, given the increasing demand for mental health services. This will target those students in greatest need of such services, including vulnerable groups and hard to reach students.

**Ed Davey (Kingston and Surbiton):** To ask the Secretary of State for Education, what guidance his Department has issued to universities on the provision of mental health support to students. [2180]

**Michelle Donelan (Chippenham):** Student mental health and suicide prevention are key priorities for this government. We continue to work closely with the higher education (HE) sector to promote good practice. Universities are not only experts in their student population, but also best placed to identify the needs of their particular student body.

The Department of Health and Social Care (DHSC) has overall policy responsibility for young people's mental health. We continue to work closely with them to take steps to develop mental health and wellbeing support.

On 27 March 2021, DHSC published the 'COVID-19 mental health and wellbeing recovery action plan', which you can find [here](#). It is backed by £500 million of funding, and its aims are to address waiting times for mental health services, to give more people the mental health support they need and to invest in the NHS workforce. £13 million will be used to accelerate progress to support young adults aged 18 to 25. This group includes university students and those not in education or training, who have reported worst mental health outcomes during the COVID-19 outbreak, and who sometimes currently fall between the gaps between children's and adult services.

While it is for HE providers to determine what welfare and counselling services they need to provide to their students to offer that support, the government is proactive in promoting good practice in this area. We continue to work closely with Universities UK on embedding the Stepchange programme within the sector, which you can find [here](#).

Stepchange calls on HE leaders to adopt mental health as a strategic priority and to take a whole-institution approach, embedding it across all policies, cultures, curricula and practice. The Stepchange programme relaunched in March 2020 as the Mentally Healthy Universities programme. The University Mental Health Charter, announced in June 2018, is backed by the government and led by the HE sector, which you can find [here](#). The charter, developed in collaboration with students, staff and partner organisations, aims to drive up standards of practice, including leadership, early intervention and data collection.

Since the beginning of the COVID-19 outbreak, I have stressed the importance of protecting student and staff wellbeing. We recognise that many students are facing additional mental health challenges due to the disruption and uncertainty caused by the outbreak. I have engaged with universities on this issue and have written to Vice Chancellors on numerous occasions during the past year, most recently last month, outlining that student welfare should remain a priority. I have also convened a working group of representatives from the HE and health sectors to specifically address the current and pressing issues that students are facing during the COVID-19 outbreak.

My hon. Friend, the Minister for Children and Families and I have also convened a Mental Health in Education Action Group to drive action to mitigate the impact of the outbreak on the mental health and wellbeing of children, young people and staff in nurseries, schools, colleges and universities.

We expect HE providers to continue to support their students, which has included making services accessible from a distance whilst restrictions have been in place. We encourage students to stay in touch with the welfare teams at their HE provider, as these services are likely to continue to be an important source of support. Many providers have bolstered their existing mental health services, and adapted delivery mechanisms including reaching out to students who may be more vulnerable. Staff

at universities and colleges have been proactive in supporting their students, showing resourcefulness and there are many examples of good practice.

We have worked with the Office for Students (OfS) to provide Student Space, a dedicated mental health and wellbeing platform for students. Student Space has been funded by up to £3 million from the OfS in the 2020/21 academic year. We have also asked the OfS to allocate £15 million towards student mental health in 2021/22 through proposed reforms to Strategic Priorities grant funding to help address the challenges to student mental health posed by the transition to university, given the increasing demand for mental health services. This will target those students in greatest need of such services, including vulnerable groups and hard to reach students.

## **Loss teaching time for students on practical courses**

**Ed Davey (Kingston and Surbiton):** To ask the Secretary of State for Education, what assessment he has made of how students on practical university degree courses will be offered extra support before entering the job market to make up for lost teaching time during the covid-19 lockdown. [2179]

**Michelle Donelan (Chippenham):** Education has always been a priority for this government, and we were committed to getting all students back into university as soon as the public health situation allowed. We prioritised the return of students on practical and practice-based courses because we realised the importance of them being able to return to their studies in person.

The higher education (HE) regulator in England, the Office for Students (OfS), has made it clear that all HE providers must continue to comply with registration conditions relating to quality and standards. This means ensuring that courses provide a high-quality academic experience, students are supported and achieve good outcomes, and standards are protected, regardless of whether a provider is delivering its courses through in person teaching, remote online learning, or a combination of both.

We have worked across the sector to understand what more we can do to support graduates who are looking to enter the labour market at this challenging time. We have worked closely with the Quality Assurance Agency, professional bodies and the OfS. Our message to employers and students is that standards have been maintained and that the qualifications awarded will be of the same academic standard as in previous years.

To provide additional support, we have also developed the graduate employment and skills guide, published on 10 May 2021 on the OfS website [here](#). The guide signposts graduates to public, private and voluntary sector opportunities, to help them build employability skills, gain work experience or enter the labour market, as well as providing links to further study options and resources on graduate mental health and wellbeing. To encourage graduates to take advantage of the support and resources available, we have worked with Universities UK to develop a sector statement of support and with HE providers to produce a collection of graduate employability case studies.

As part of the government's skills recovery package 'Plan for Jobs', we are also investing an additional £32 million in the National Careers Service up to March 2022. This investment will support delivery of individual careers advice for over 500,000 people whose jobs or learning have been affected by the COVID-19 outbreak by the end of the 2021/22 financial year, representing an increase of 22%. The Service has introduced a range of new initiatives to continue to support all customers, working with a wide range of partners to offer careers guidance activities designed to support employers, furloughed workers, graduates, students, those who have recently lost their jobs and anyone whose career path has been impacted by the COVID-19 outbreak.

On 29 September 2020, we added additional courses to The Skills Toolkit covering digital, numeracy and employability skills. The new content includes a range of courses to develop 'work readiness' skills that employers report they value in their new recruits.

## Sharia-compliant financing in education

**Stella Creasy (Walthamstow):** To ask the Secretary of State for Education, what steps he has taken to implement the findings of the Government consultation into Sharia-compliant financing for education and the November 2015 Government green paper entitled, Fulfilling our potential Teaching Excellence, Social Mobility and Student Choice. [2275]

**Michelle Donelan (Chippenham):** The government took new powers in the Higher Education and Research Act 2017 to make a system of alternative payments possible. The government has been considering the Alternative Student Finance (ASF) product carefully alongside its other priorities and has decided to align a decision on implementation with the outcome of the post-18 review of education and funding. The interim report of the review was published on 21 January 2021, and the review is due to conclude alongside the next multi-year Spending Review. We will provide an update on ASF at that time.

---

## Sector News

### Universities Minister letter to support student digital poverty

On Tuesday 18 May, Universities Minister, Michelle Donelan MP wrote to all Chief Executives at local authorities in England with a Jisc Govroam connection, as part of Jisc's ongoing collaborative efforts to tackle digital poverty affecting students, staff and researchers, asking them to add Eduroam (the bespoke digital roaming network for universities) to their network at no charge. It is hoped that councils support this initiative so that students can access eduroam at a wider range of public spaces and facilities across their local area, providing much-needed connectivity at this critical time and well into the future. This builds on a joint sector letter to Education Secretary Gavin Williamson MP, written by UUK, Guild HE and Ucisa in January, calling for urgent action to support students without good quality or affordable connectivity.

Jisc's CEO Paul Feldman has also engaged the Local Government Association, writing to them in this letter to request their support in collaborating on longer-term connectivity solutions to support digital inclusion nationwide. The list of Local Authorities in scope is included in Paul's letter should you want to encourage your council to take up Eduroam. For anyone interested in supporting efforts to tackle digital poverty including engaging local MPs/councils, please contact publicaffairs@jisc.ac.uk

You can find the letter from Universities Minister, Michelle Donelan MP here and the joint sector letter to the Secretary of State for Education here.

### Shirley-Anne Somerville appointed Cabinet Secretary for Education and Skills

Shirley-Anne Somerville becomes Cabinet Secretary for Education and Skills, taking forward work on Covid recovery within the education system, as well as continuing the Government's mission to further close the attainment gap.

You can find more information on the Scottish Government's cabinet appointments here.

### OfS publish new measure on likely job and study outcomes

On Wednesday 19 May, the Office for Students (OfS) published a new measure which projects new students' likelihood of finding professional level employment or embarking on further study in the year after they graduate.

Key findings from the data shows there are substantial differences between individual universities and other higher education providers, in different subjects, and in different subjects at individual universities.

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

### **Private Members' Bill ballot**

On Thursday 20 May, the ballot for Commons Private Members' Bills for the 2021-2022 session took place. Conservative MP for Workington, [Mark Jenkinson](#) was drawn in first place. The top 7 will be guaranteed a full day of debate on their Bill.

The top 7 balloted include: Mark Jenkinson (Con), Barry Gardiner (Lab), Carolyn Harris (Lab), Dr Liam Fox (Con), Sajid Javid (Con), Kevin Brennan (Lab), Jeff Smith (Lab).

You can see the full list [here](#).

### **LEO data published**

On Thursday 20 May, the Department for Education [published the latest official statistics](#) on the employment and earnings outcomes of postgraduates, broken down by subject studied and domicile.

Employment and earnings outcomes given are for postgraduates, one, three, five and ten years after graduation. UK domiciled and International (EU and non-EU domiciled) outcomes are separated.

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