



Political Affairs Digest

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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

Education oral questions

On Monday 11 March, the Secretary of State for Education, Rt. Hon Gillian Keegan MP, and her ministerial colleagues answered oral questions in the House of Commons.

Matt Western MP (Labour) criticised the government for increasing maintenance loans by a 'paltry' 2.8% amid a 15% compound inflation rate. He pointed to a 3.5% increase in Wales and a £2,500 special support loan for all students in Scotland. He said: 'Across the country, students are being forced into working multiple jobs to try to make ends meet. What have this Government got against students?' The Minister for Skills, Apprenticeships and Higher Education, Rt Hon Robert Halfon MP, said that disadvantaged students were 74% more likely to go to university than they were before. He listed various forms of government support for students: increasing loans by 2.8%; freezing tuition fees; providing energy bill support and the household support fund to families; reassessing student loans if family income falls by 15%; and introducing degree apprenticeships.

Greg Smith MP (Conservative) asked what the government was doing to encourage take-up of degree-level apprenticeships. Minister Halfon said there had been 222,320 degree apprenticeship starts since their introduction in 2014-15, now across more than 170 programmes. He outlined that apprenticeships were now available on UCAS, the apprenticeship skills and knowledge network promoted apprenticeships in schools, £40 million was being spent to promote degree apprenticeships in the next two years and legislation had been strengthened to 'ensure that schools do more to promote apprenticeships and technical and vocational education'.

During topical questions, Carol Monaghan MP (SNP) asked what action was being taken 'to assure academics that they remain free to make legitimate comments on issues of concern' in light of accusations levelled by the Secretary of State for Science, Innovation and Technology at UKRI academics. Gillian Keegan stated 'academic independence and the ability to speak freely are very important' and they must be protected 'at all costs' in universities and academic institutions. She pointed to the Higher Education (Freedom of Speech) Act 2023 and free speech director in the Office for Students as examples of the government supporting universities in this area.

Sir Michael Ellis (Conservative) condemned a ‘barbaric vandal’ destroying a painting of Lord Balfour at the University of Cambridge. He said this ‘shines a light on the pernicious atmosphere faced by Jewish students at universities across the country’. He asked what action would be taken ‘to convey to university heads that they have a legal and moral obligation to stamp out antisemitism’. Robert Halfon said he and the Secretary of State had been spending time with Jewish student groups, including at the University of Leeds where the chaplain was attacked, and is working with Universities UK to address the issue of antisemitism on campuses. He pointed to £7 million package for Jewish student groups to stop antisemitism on campus, a quality seal the department will ask universities to adopt so they can properly deal with antisemitic incidents, and a meeting with the Office for Students to make clear that antisemitism is not acceptable.

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

Ministerial session: Secretary of State for Science, Innovation and Technology – HoL Science and Technology Committee oral evidence

On Tuesday 12 March, the House of Lords Science and Technology Committee took evidence from the Secretary of State at the Department for Science, Innovation, and Technology (DSIT), Rt Hon Michelle Donelan MP.

Introductory remarks:

Baroness Brown of Cambridge, Chair of the Committee, opened the session by probing on the main achievements of DSIT and what improvements were still needed.

The Secretary of State said the Department was focused on becoming a Science and Technology Framework. She said they were laser-focused on delivery, citing the first global summit on AI safety, the world-leading Online Safety Act, and a ‘bespoke’ deal for the UK to rejoin Horizon Europe. In the year ahead, there would be three key pillars: skills, the creation of the right eco-system to allow start-ups to scale up, and ‘common-sense’ regulation to boost innovation.

Turning to her recent interventions with UK Research and Innovation (UKRI), she said officials had alerted her to a tweet posted by a representative of an Equality, Diversity and Inclusion (EDI) Expert Advisory Group. The Secretary of State had been concerned about a potential process failure in the appointment of members to this board. An official letter had been sent to UKRI to seek an investigation. Subsequently, the individual concerned had clarified the intention of the tweet, after which the

Secretary of State had publicly withdrawn her concerns and, without admitting liability, £15,000 had been paid to settle the case. The Secretary of State reflected to say she could have sent the letter in confidence to UKRI and apologised for not having done so.

Horizon Europe:

The Chair asked whether an assessment had been made of the impact of the UK's withdrawal from Horizon Europe, as well as the fact that funding intended to compensate universities for the UK's absence from the programme appeared to have been returned to the Treasury.

The Secretary of State described the 'strong desire' to rejoin the programme and acknowledged that the UK's period of absence had impacted the scientific community. Regarding the funding returned to the Treasury, she said it was standard practice to return unspent money at the end of the accounting year. This financial year, no money had been returned, with the 'surplus' dedicated to programmes to help the sector e.g., fellowships.

Baroness Willis of Summertown (Crossbench) raised concerns about the flow of researchers away from the UK and its impact on collaboration.

The Secretary of State said there had been 2.3 million R&D workers in the UK in 2020, which was an increase of 12 per cent compared to 2019. The government had tried to ensure plenty of routes into the UK were available, such as the global talent visa and the high potential visa, as well as demonstrating to people that the UK was a 'beacon' leading the way in science and technology.

Industrial strategy:

Lord Drayson (Labour) asked whether the five plans set out for critical technologies were an adequate substitute for a comprehensive industrial strategy.

The Secretary of State described the Science and Technology Framework as a 'roadmap' and said her department were focused on delivery. She believed an industrial strategy would not add anything to this agenda, as in each area, the lead department could hold the rest of government to account.

Scaling up start-ups:

Baroness Northover (Liberal Democrat) noted that the UK was seen as struggling to commercialise early start-up progress, meaning that it lost out on economic benefits.

The Secretary of State said skills, scale-up and regulation would all make a difference in this area. Improvements were starting to be seen thanks to coordinated effort across government, citing the Mansion House reforms, the Long-term Investment for Technology and Science (LIFTS) scheme and the independent review of university spinouts. On demonstrating success, she said the metrics would be whether capital was flowing as well as the volume of businesses who were able to successfully scale up. The Permanent Secretary, Sarah Munby, added many metrics already existed on scale-ups, but more agile methods were needed as these technologies were fast-moving.

Skills and immigration:

Baroness Neville-Jones (Conservative) asked what the priorities of the cross-government action plan on skills would be.

The Secretary of State said she was proud of the government's work on the skills agenda, including fostering a culture of lifelong learning. She also highlighted the plans to introduce the Advanced British Standard (ABS) to enable people to study a broader range of subjects up to the age of 18.

Baroness Neville-Jones asked whether there was a good, quantified basis for policy, and about the barriers created by costs introduced as part of the immigration system.

On immigration, the Secretary of State said the UK wanted to attract the best talent from across the world but also had to be fair to taxpayers. On the NHS surcharge, she stressed that the cost had to be 'borne by someone' and reiterated the need for fairness to the British taxpayer. Probed on whether the immigration system posed a 'barrier', she reiterated that the system needed to be fair on taxpayers and DSIT were focused on attracting talent in other ways. The Secretary of State concluded by highlighting that the government had been elected on a manifesto pledge to gain control of immigration and had to honour that commitment.

Baroness Young of Old Scone (Labour) asked whether DSIT had carried out an impact assessment of the cumulative effect of barriers to immigration.

The Secretary of State did not provide additional detail from her previous answer. The Permanent Secretary said that further information could be supplied on the data DSIT uses to assess immigration.

University and research funding:

Lord Drayson asked how the 'broken funding model' for universities, under which universities were using foreign students to balance the books, was being addressed.

The Secretary of State said the government provided 80% of university funding in relation to research. The Permanent Secretary said UKRI had put out a 'helpful evidence pack' setting out the underlying funding data by different types of university. The Landscape Review was also referenced as examining and outlining the issue.

Lord Drayson continued to press on the question of whether the current arrangements were causing a growing financial crisis in university funding.

The Secretary of State said the lead department was the Department for Education, with which her department worked with 'very closely'. Probed further, the Secretary of State said the Department did not consider university funding to be in 'crisis'.

Baroness Willis said there was a shortfall in UKRI research funding for universities which created serious concerns over what could be funded in future.

The Secretary of State highlighted that scanning work was being done, led by the Department for Education. She concluded that she was confident the current set-up was still 'delivering' and universities were in a 'position to flourish'.

UKRI oversight:

The Chair probed on ministerial oversight of UKRI and whether this extended to the political views of researchers.

The Secretary of State said her track record made clear that she championed academic freedom of speech for researchers. She had raised this specific issue in her ministerial capacity given that the researcher had recently been appointed to the board.

The Chair asked whether the political views of an academic should preclude them from membership of a research council.

The Secretary of State said the key thing was process and her letter probed whether the correct due diligence had been done. The Secretary of State asked whether an investigation could be carried out, and UKRI had launched an investigation which had concluded. She had apologised for using the medium of X to communicate with UKRI publicly.

Lord Drayson asked her to comment on the role of the science minister in protecting the scientific community from political interference in the light of these events.

The Secretary of State said her actions had never been motivated by political desire but concern over whether the proper process had been followed.

Lord Lucas (Conservative) asked whether, although UKRI was independent, it could be taken to task by the Secretary of State if it were being sucked in by consensus or funding bad research.

The Secretary of State said she and her department subscribed to the Haldane Principle. One of the main reasons for UKRI was to oversee those decision-making processes. It was absolutely part of her job to raise concerns with UKRI if she spotted potentially worrying activity or areas where the correct process may not have taken place.

Viscount Stansgate (Labour) asked about the damage caused by the episode and how it might be repaired.

The Secretary of State said DSIT would carry out an internal review of processes to ensure that lessons were learned. She had apologised for tweeting the letter publicly and formally retracted her concerns.

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

Forthcoming business

Impact of industrial action on university students – Education Committee oral evidence

On Tuesday 19 March from 10:00am, the Education Select Committee will be taking oral evidence as part of their inquiry into the impact of industrial action on university students. They will be hearing evidence from:

- Rt Hon Robert Halfon MP, Minister of State for Skills, Apprenticeships and Higher Education, Department for Education
- Patrick Curry, Director of Higher Education Oversight, Department for Education

You can [watch the session](#).

University Spin-out Companies – HoL Science and Technology Committee oral evidence

On Tuesday 19 March from 10:15am, the House of Lords Science and Technology Committee will hear oral evidence as part of their inquiry into university spin-out companies. They will be hearing evidence from:

- Andrew Williamson, Managing Partner of Cambridge Innovation Capital (CIC) and Chair of the Venture Capital Committee at British Private Equity and Venture Capital Association (BVCA)
- Chas Bountra, Pro-Vice Chancellor for Innovation at the University of Oxford.

You can [watch the session](#).

Economic Activity of Public Bodies (Overseas Matters) Bill – committee stage

On Wednesday 20 March, the Economic Activity of Public Bodies (Overseas Matters) Bill will begin the committee stage in the House of Lords.

You can [watch the session](#). You can [read UUK's latest briefing document](#).

Written Questions

Skilled Workers

Rachael Maskell MP: To ask the Secretary of State for Education, what steps she is taking to help close skills gaps in the (a) public and (b) private sector. [UIN 16246]

Robert Halfon MP: The government is committed to creating a world-leading skills system which is employer-focused, high-quality and fit for the future. The department's reforms are strengthening higher and further education to help more people get good jobs and upskill and retrain throughout their lives, as well as to improve national productivity and economic growth. These reforms are backed with an additional investment of £3.8 billion over the course of this Parliament to strengthen higher and further education. The department's reforms will help equip people with the education, training and skills that employers demand both in the public and private sector.

The department has established the Unit for Future Skills (UFS), which provides decision makers in skills system with information they need to invest in the right skills to meet national and local employer needs and support economic growth. The work of the UFS aims to improve data and evidence to support a better understanding of current skill mismatches and future demand throughout the country.

Apprenticeships are crucial in driving growth and social mobility as they boost skills across the economy and improve people's earnings and career opportunities nationwide. To support growth, the department is increasing investment in apprenticeships to £2.7 billion by 2024/25, which will encourage more employers across the country to recruit new apprentices.

The department has introduced employer-designed T levels which are equipping thousands of young people with the skills, knowledge, and experience to access employment or further study in some of the most in-demand skills areas. 18 T levels are now available, being delivered through over 250 providers across all regions of the country.

The department has invested £300 million to establish 21 Institutes of Technology (IoT) across England to significantly increase the number of learners with higher level technical skills and offering an alternative route to high paid jobs. IoTs bring education and industry together to deliver world class technical education and

training in key STEM subjects aligned to the skills needs of the local economy they serve.

The department is delivering reforms to increase the profile, prestige, and uptake of higher technical education. Central to these reforms is the introduction of Higher Technical Qualifications (HTQs), which are Level 4/5 qualifications approved against employer-developed standard and quality marked by the Institute for Apprenticeships & Technical Education. This means students and employers can have the confidence that HTQs provide skills employers need. To date, 172 qualifications have been approved as HTQs across seven occupational routes and over 140 providers are approved to deliver HTQs.

The department has introduced the Free Courses for Jobs scheme which enables eligible adults to gain a high value qualification for free. In addition, the department has also introduced Skills Bootcamps, which are free, flexible courses of up to 16 weeks, giving people the opportunity to build up sector-specific skills and fast-track to an interview with an employer.

The department has established Local Skills Improvement Plans across the country, which are employer-led, locally owned plans. They have galvanised and brought together businesses, providers, local leaders and stakeholders to help better align provision of post-16 technical education and training with local labour market needs.

Overseas Students: Palestinians (1)

Rachael Maskell MP: To ask the Secretary of State for Education, what recent estimate she has made of the (a) number of students from (i) the Palestinian territories and (ii) Gaza studying in the UK and (b) the number and proportion of those students that are in the UK on British Council scholarship. [UIN 16392]

Robert Halfon MP: The Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA), now part of JISC, is responsible for collecting and publishing data about UK higher education (HE). The latest statistics refer to the 2021/22 academic year.

Table 28 of HESA's 'Higher Education Student Statistics: UK, 2021/22' reports the number of non-UK domiciled HE students by country of domicile. This data is accessible at: <https://www.hesa.ac.uk/data-and-analysis/students/table-28>.

In the 2021/22 academic year, there were 245 (1) student enrolments (2) at UK HE providers who were domiciled in the Occupied Palestinian Territories (formerly the West Bank, including East Jerusalem, and the Gaza Strip) prior to their studies. The

major source of tuition fees of five (3%) of them were recorded as 'Overseas student award from HM government/British Council'.

1: Figures have been rounded to the nearest 5, in line with HESA rounding conventions. More information on rounding and suppression strategy can be found at the following link: <https://www.hesa.ac.uk/support/definitions/students#rounding-and-suppression-strategy>.

2. Enrolments refers to students in all years of study.

Midwives: Training

Grahame Morris MP: To ask the Secretary of State for Health and Social Care, how much and what proportion of the cost of training a student midwife is paid by (a) the student, (b) the public purse and (c) other sources; and what the cost to the public purse was for training student midwives in each of the last five years. [UIN 16783]

Andrew Stephenson MP: Student loan outlay and Office for Students Strategic Priorities Grant data is not collected by the Department of Health and Social Care, and is the responsibility of the Department for Education and the Office for Students. NHS England supports the provision of clinical placements for student midwives, through the Education and Training Tariff, which is paid to placement providers. The following table shows the tariff provided for midwifery students in each of the last five years:

	2018/19	2019/20	2020/21	2021/22	2022/23
Tariff	£11,336,867	£13,856,454	£17,428,079	£21,234,754	£23,104,117

From 2017 all eligible midwifery students have received non-repayable supplementary funding support through the NHS Learning Support Fund (LSF), which since 2020 has included a non-repayable training grant of £5,000 per academic year, with further financial support available to students for childcare, dual accommodation costs, and travel. Prior to 2017, healthcare education funding for midwifery students was centrally funded by the Government. This included payment of tuition fees and an NHS Bursary. The following table shows all support paid to students undertaking education and training which would enable them to register as a midwife with the Nursing and Midwifery Council, in each of the last five years:

	2018/19	2019/20	2020/21	2021/22	2022/23
LSF and legacy bursary	£15,800,691	£9,436,016	£31,225,575	£49,035,130	£53,841,543

Midwives: Higher Education

Grahame Morris MP: To ask the Secretary of State for Health and Social Care, how many and what proportion of student midwives left their university courses in each of the last five years. [UIN 16786]

Andrew Stephenson MP: Data published by the Office for Students in the Higher Education Students Early Statistics Survey (HESES), collates figures submitted by individual higher education providers to give an indication of the number of students studying in each academic year. HESES data includes figures on undergraduate and postgraduate midwifery courses in England. The latest published data is for those starting courses in 2022. The table below gives the number of undergraduate and postgraduate starters on midwifery courses in England, each year from 2018 to 2022:

	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022
Undergraduate Starters	2,550	2,930	3,460	3,565	3,305
Postgraduate Starters	70	55	100	135	190

Source: The Higher Education Students Early Statistics Survey (HESES) 2018 to 2022.

The table below presents the latest available data published by the Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA), for the number of qualifiers from undergraduate midwifery courses in England, for the years 2019/20 to 2021/22:

	2019/20	2020/21	2021/22
Undergraduate Midwifery Qualifiers	2,055	1,945	2,445

Source: The Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA) qualifier data 2022

Note: A qualifier is defined by the HESA as a student who gained a qualification during the academic year in question.

The Department does not hold information on the proportion of student midwives who left university courses, in each of the last five years.

Charity Research Support Fund

Chi Onwurah MP: To ask the Secretary of State for Science, Innovation and Technology, how much was spent on the Charity Research Support Fund in each of the last five years for which data is available; and if she will make an comparative assessment with the money spent by charities on research in English Universities. [UIN 16803]

Andrew Griffith MP: Over the last five years £1.5Bn has been allocated to the Charity Research Support Fund. This comprises £204m allocated in each of 2019-20, 2020-21 and 2021-22 as well as £219m allocated in 2022-23 and 2023-24.

The last five years for which full data on money spent by charities in English universities is available are 2017-18 to 2021-22. During these years the following amounts were spent:

- £1,085m in 2017-18
- £1,098m in 2018-19
- £1,049m in 2019-20
- £1,078m in 2020-21
- £1,146m in 2021-22

Overseas Students: Palestinians (2)

Rachael Maskell MP: To ask the Secretary of State for Education, whether her Department is taking steps to help provide support to Palestinian university students with (a) injured and (b) deceased family in Gaza. [UIN 16396]

Robert Halfon MP: The best way to provide protection for vulnerable people in Gaza is an end to the fighting as soon as possible and the return of the hostages held by Hamas. That is why the government is calling for an immediate pause to get aid in and the hostages out, then progress towards a sustainable, permanent ceasefire, without a return to destruction, fighting and loss of life.

The UK is currently supporting non-governmental organisation and UN partners to deliver medical aid and care in the Gaza Strip. This includes support for primary healthcare, trauma and emergency care services, disease surveillance and outbreak

response, and deployment of Emergency Medical Teams. The government is also exploring further options to help meet the medical needs of Palestinians.

Universities offer a range of dedicated support to their international students before they arrive in the UK, on arrival, and during their studies. This includes both pastoral care and financial support. If a student is experiencing difficulties, they should contact the university to discuss their circumstances. Universities have their own hardship funds to support students who are going through financial difficulties, and like domestic students, international students can apply to their provider to access these funds.

The department is also an active funder of the Higher Education Scholarships for Palestinians (HESPAL) programme. This programme, facilitated by the British Council, provides young academic staff with potential in universities in the Occupied Palestinian Territories with the opportunity to complete a Masters or PhD programme in the UK. There are currently fifteen HESPAL scholars in the UK, five of which are from Gaza. The British Council has met with UK university partners to discuss the best means of support for these scholars. These conversations have covered safeguarding issues, one-to-one support to scholars and both virtual and physical platforms to enable scholars to come together and support one another. Departmental officials continue to engage with the British Council to identify further support for current and former HESPAL students.

Overseas Students: Sudan

Tanmanjeet Singh Dhesi MP: To ask the Secretary of State for Education, what support is offered to Sudanese students in the UK who (a) may be unable to return to Sudan due to safety concerns and (b) are facing financial difficulties as a result of the conflict in that country. [UIN 16962]

Robert Halfon MP: Students experiencing financial difficulties should contact their university to discuss their circumstances. Higher education (HE) providers have their own hardship funds to support students who have financial issues and, like domestic students, international students can apply to their provider to access these funds. HE providers also offer a range of dedicated support to their international students pre-arrival, on-arrival and during their studies.

In addition, the UK Council for International Student Affairs offers a range of information and guidance for international students who may be experiencing unexpected financial hardship which can be found here:

<https://www.ukcisa.org.uk/Information--Advice/Fees-and-Money/Unexpected-financial-hardship>.

Degrees

Neil O'Brien MP: To ask the Secretary of State for Education, what proportion of degrees were awarded at first class in each year since 1994. [UIN 16870]

Robert Halfon MP: The Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA), now part of Jisc, collects and publishes data on student qualifications across all UK higher education providers, including data on degree classifications. Counts of first degree qualifications by class of degree for academic years 2006/07 to 2021/22 are published in Chart 9 of HESA's Student Data, which is available at: <https://www.hesa.ac.uk/data-and-analysis/students/chart-9>.

The data includes students studying for first degree qualifications and excludes students who qualified with an unclassified first degree (mainly including degrees that do not have a classification, such as Medicine).

Counts for academic years 1994/95 to 2005/06 can be found in HESA's publication archive, and can be accessed for the relevant years via the links below:

- 1994/95 to 1998/99: <https://www.hesa.ac.uk/news/01-02-2000/sfr37-qualifications-and-examination-results>.
- 1999/00 to 2003/04: <https://www.hesa.ac.uk/news/11-01-2005/sfr82--qualifications-and-examination-results>.
- 2001/02 to 2005/06: <https://www.hesa.ac.uk/news/09-01-2007/sfr107-enrolments-and-qualifications>.

Health: Research

Rachael Maskell MP: To ask the Secretary of State for Science, Innovation and Technology, whether she is taking steps with the Secretary of State for Health and Social Care to tackle regulatory systems that slow down research. [UIN 16502]

Andrew Griffith MP: Government is committed to delivering a regulatory system that is pro-innovation, easy to navigate and facilitates commercialisation of science and technology applications, as set out in the Science and Technology Framework.

Regulatory systems for life sciences are led by DHSC, and its arms-length-body the Medicines and Healthcare products Regulatory Agency recently launched a new, streamlined process for clinical trial applicants. The Department works with DHSC wherever appropriate on regulatory matters; for example, delivering the Government Chief Scientific Adviser's life sciences review and supporting on the wider implementation of the O'Shaughnessy Review into commercial clinical trials.

Research: Visas

Rachael Maskell MP: To ask the Secretary of State for Science, Innovation and Technology, what steps she is taking with Cabinet colleagues to help ensure that (a) researchers and (b) their families are able to access UK visas. [UIN 16501]

Andrew Griffith MP: The Government's points-based immigration offer enables talented scientists, researchers and innovators and their families to come to the UK via tailored and fast-track visa routes. These include the Global Talent visa for talented individuals in science and technology, the Scale-up visa for individuals recruited by UK-based high-growth companies and the Skilled Worker visa for individuals with a job offer in certain sectors. The Government's GREAT Talent campaign and website provides accessible information on visa routes for top international talent.

Research: Finance

Rachael Maskell MP: To ask the Secretary of State for Science, Innovation and Technology, how much funding her Department has provided to research projects based in (a) York, (b) Yorkshire and (c) the UK in the last 12 months. [UIN 16829]

Andrew Griffith MP: This government is investing record amounts in R&D across the UK, rising to £20 billion per annum by 2024-25. Between January 2023 and January 2024, over £231 million was awarded to organisations based in Yorkshire and The Humber by UKRI. Awards to the York area were in excess of £35 million.

Advanced Research and Innovation Agency

Chi Onwurah MP: To ask the Secretary of State for Science, Innovation and Technology, whether her Department has plans to measure the impact of the Advanced Research and Innovation Agency. [UIN 17594]

Andrew Griffith MP: ARIA was established to focus on projects with the potential to produce transformative technological change with long-term benefits, and was set up as a flagship of the government's agenda to cut bureaucracy in research. ARIA has maximum autonomy over its research and project choice, its procedures and its institutional culture.

ARIA will be responsible for evaluating the impact of its programmes. As set out in ARIA's Framework Agreement, ARIA's performance shall be formally reviewed after 10 years of operations.

Research: Skilled Workers

Chi Onwurah MP: To ask the Secretary of State for Science, Innovation and Technology, what assessment her Department has made of the potential impact of the planned rise in the salary threshold for a skilled worker visa on UK research and development. [UIN 17577]

Andrew Griffith MP: In December 2023, the Government announced a new package of measures to curb immigration abuse and further reduce net migration. DSIT will continue to work with the Home Office on the details of the measures and make ongoing assessments of the effects on researchers, scientists and innovators.

The Government is committed to attracting and retaining the talent needed to ensure the UK remains at the cutting edge of research, development and innovation (RDI). Our Science and Technology Framework, updated in February, sets out how we will build a skilled workforce for tomorrow's industries.

Science and Technology: Research

Chi Onwurah MP: (16802) To ask the Secretary of State for Science, Innovation and Technology, what assessment her Department has made of the implications for her policies of the potential relationship of the financial sustainability of higher education institutions and delivery of the UK Science and Technology Framework ambitions. [UIN 16802]

Andrew Griffith MP: DSIT works closely with the Department for Education, UK Research and Innovation and other research funders to understand the factors that affect the financial sustainability of research and the impact that this might have on the realisation of those ambitions.

Industry: Finance

Rachael Maskell MP: To ask the Secretary of State for Science, Innovation and Technology, what steps she is taking to support economic sector clusters to bid for funding into research and development. [UIN 16832]

Andrew Griffith MP: The Department for Science, Innovation and Technology provides targeted support for innovation clusters across the UK. This includes programmes to build on local innovation strengths, such as Innovate UK's £80 million investment in 11 Innovation Launchpads, co-designed with local leaders, to support clusters across the UK to grow. Innovate UK's regional managers also support clusters by working closely with local leadership bodies to identify their strengths, build connections between national and local businesses, and provide guidance on bids for innovation support.

Higher Education: China

Alicia Kearns MP: To ask the Secretary of State for Education, whether she has had recent discussions with (a) the Secretary of State for Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Affairs and (b) representatives of higher education institutions on the potential impact of such institutions' collaboration with Chinese higher education bodies linked to the People's Liberation Army on national security. [UIN 17479]

Robert Halfon MP: The government takes the risk of foreign interference in our higher education (HE) sector extremely seriously, regardless of its source. The department has made it clear that it will not accept collaborations that compromise national security. The department recognises concerns about interference in the HE sector and regularly assesses the risks facing academia, working with partners across government. The department will continue to take steps to significantly strengthen the UK's protections from overseas interference in our HE sector, helping to safeguard intellectual property and sensitive research.

The 'Higher Education (Freedom of Speech) Act 2023' will ensure that universities in England have the tools they need to deal with interference with, and threats to, freedom of speech and academic freedom. The Act will enable the Office for Students to monitor the overseas funding of registered HE providers and their constituent institutions and student unions, and to take appropriate action.

The department expects Confucius Institutes at UK universities to operate transparently and within the law, and with a full commitment to the government's

values of openness and freedom of expression. The department has taken action to remove any direct or indirect government funding from Confucius Institutes in the UK.

The 'Integrated Review Refresh', published in 2023, committed to launching a review of legislative and other measures designed to protect the academic sector, to identify what more the government could or should be doing. This is currently underway and is led by the Department for Science, Innovation and Technology. This will include an assessment of the risks to research security as a result of collaboration with international bodies.

The department also works with the sector to improve HE providers' overall resilience and economic security. The department has encouraged Universities UK to publish a number of guidelines and case studies to enable HE providers to assess risks associated with international collaboration.

Postgraduate Education: Childcare

Chi Onwurah MP: To ask the Secretary of State for Education, what assessment her Department has made of the adequacy of childcare provision for PhD researchers. [UIN 16809]

David Johnston MP: 30 hours free childcare is an entitlement for working parents of 3 and 4 year olds. The entitlement aims to help with the costs of childcare so that parents can take up paid work if they want to or work additional hours.

The 'Childcare Bill policy statement', published in December 2015, is clear that students are not eligible for 30 hours free childcare. The department recognises the value of parents continuing in education, however, and provide a range of support other than 30 hours for those in further or higher education.

Students are eligible for the universal 15 hours of free early education which is available to all 3 and 4 year olds regardless of family circumstances.

Students who work in addition to studying are eligible for 30 hours free childcare if they meet the income requirements.

Sector News

MAC commissioned to review the Graduate Route – MAC correspondence

On Monday 11 March, the Home Secretary, Rt Hon James Cleverly MP, wrote to Professor Brian Bell, Chair of the Migration Advisory Committee (MAC), to commission a rapid review of the Graduate Route.

The Home Secretary outlined the review may include:

1. Any evidence of abuse of the route including the route not being fit for purpose.
2. Who is using the route and from what universities they graduated.
3. Demographics and trends for students accessing a study visa and subsequently accessing the UK labour market by means of the Graduate route.
4. What individuals do during and after their time on the graduate route and whether students who progress to the Graduate route are contributing to the economy.
5. Analysis of whether the Graduate route is undermining the integrity and quality of the UK higher education system, including understanding how the Graduate route is or is not, effectively controlling for the quality of international students, such that it is genuinely supporting the UK to attract and retain the brightest and the best, contributing to economic growth and benefitting British higher education and soft power – in the context of the Government's wider International Education Strategy.

The MAC is expected to report back by Tuesday 14 May.

Responding to the announcement, Jamie Arrowsmith, Director of Universities UK International, said:

We are deeply concerned by the accelerated timetable, which appears to be driven by political – not policy – concerns. The government should give the MAC the time it needs to properly review the Graduate visa, allowing the

committee to consider the full range of evidence and engage in meaningful consultation, rather than asking them to rush their response.

You can [read the full correspondence](#).

Response to consultation on OfS's new free speech complaints scheme – Russell Group consultation response

On Monday 11 March, Russell Group published its response to the Office for Students' (OfS) proposed Freedom of Speech complaints scheme, highlighting the need to allow organisations enough time to adequately investigate potentially complex complaints before they are reviewed by the OfS. The response expressed concerns that if the proposed 30-day limit is implemented, free speech complaints may be prioritised at the expense of other types of student complaint.

Recommendations put forward by the Russell Group to the OfS include:

- Adopting a 90-day window for complaints to be completed via internal processes, to bring the scheme into line with current guidance from the Office of the Independent Adjudicator (OIA).
- Mirroring, where possible, the well-established and effective processes of the OIA which has a proven record of handling complex student complaints.
- Building trust by maintaining open and clear channels of communication, making sure universities who have received a complaint are updated if an OfS review takes place.
- Consulting expert advisors on complex free speech cases, particularly in the early months of the scheme when individual cases will set precedent for future outcomes.
- Communicating clearly to students and staff when to approach OfS and when to use the existing OIA scheme, so complaints are handled efficiently and appropriately.

You can [read the full response](#).

University Alliance responds to the Office for Students free speech complaints scheme consultation – University Alliance consultation response

On Monday 11 March, University Alliance published their response to the Office for Students' consultation on their free speech complaints scheme.

In the consultation submission, University Alliance highlights several areas where members believe more detailed information is required to understand how the scheme will work in practice, including:

- How non-financial adverse consequences will be measured.
- How the scheme will apply outside the UK where national legislation pertaining to free speech may be more or less restrictive.
- How the OfS will communicate with complainants and respondents throughout the process, and indicative timescales.
- The legal and regulatory status of recommendations and suggestions issued by the OfS.

You can [read the full response](#).

The Power and Impact of Pathways – NCUK and Nous report

On Tuesday 12 March, NCUK and Nous published a report outlining why international pathways are important routes into higher education for many students, and the impact they drive for universities and the economy.

Stuart Smith, CEO of NCUK, said:

It is part of our mission and purpose as a sector to bring people from different backgrounds together on to university campuses, enhancing and enriching the student experience. International pathways support students of all abilities, empowering each student to achieve their university ambitions. Pathways are vital routes into higher education for students, widening access and supporting diversity. We should celebrate the power and impact of pathway routes in transforming lives through education.

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

New definition of extremism (2024) – DLUHC guidance

On Thursday 14 March, the Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities (DLUHC) published a document detailing an updated definition of extremism for 2024, a list of behaviours which could constitute extremist acts and additional context to understand the definition and the associated behaviours.

The DLUHC press release outlines:

The new definition provides a stricter characterisation that government can use to make sure that extremist organisations and individuals are not being legitimised or given a platform through their interactions with government. It reads:

Extremism is the promotion or advancement of an ideology based on violence, hatred or intolerance, that aims to:

1. negate or destroy the fundamental rights and freedoms of others; or
2. undermine, overturn or replace the UK's system of liberal parliamentary democracy and democratic rights; or
3. intentionally create a permissive environment for others to achieve the results in (1) or (2).

The new definition is narrower and more precise than the 2011 Prevent definition, which did not provide the detail we now need to assess and identify extremism. This new definition helps clearly articulate how extremism is evidenced through the public behaviour of extremists that advance their violent, hateful or intolerant aims.

Non-central government institutions such as arms-length bodies, higher education institutions and independent organisations (including the police and CPS), will not be obliged to adopt the definition or apply the new engagement principles 'initially.'

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

Show me the money: an exploration of the gender pay gap in higher education – HEPI report

On Thursday 14 March, the Higher Education Policy Institute (HEPI) published a report, supported by Durham University, into the persistent pay gap between genders within the higher education sector, despite notable advancements in female representation.

Key findings include:

- The UK's higher education sector has a smaller gender pay gap than the national average, with significant improvements since 2017.
- Disparities persist between institutions, with some leading the way towards gender pay equity, while others lag behind.
- The report ranks higher education institutions by their current median and mean gender pay gaps, as well as progress over time.
- Overall, progress in reducing the pay gap may be slowing, indicating the need for renewed focus and strategy. Indeed, many institutions (28) will never reach pay parity at their current rate of progression as they have been moving in the wrong direction – see Table 5 in the report. On their current trajectory and according to the most recent comparable data, the University of Leeds and Loughborough University could take over half a century to close their gender pay gaps while the University of Oxford will take 680 years to close its gender pay gap.

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

Evaluation of the Mental Health Funding Competition: Using innovation and intersectional approaches to target mental health support for students – OfS report

On Thursday 14 March, the Office for Students (OfS) published a report by external evaluator Wavehill evaluating the Mental Health Funding Competition (MHFC) programme.

Key findings include:

- Whilst innovative approaches to mental health support are important, they should complement the effective delivery of core services.
- Understanding the barriers students face is the first step to addressing them.
- Interventions such as those piloted through the MHFC must be delivered consistently, with clear expectation-setting for students from the outset.
- The projects which appear to have had the greatest impact on students were those which delivered one intervention type focused on one specific barrier or target group.
- Two academic years is not long enough to pilot interventions.

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

Complaints relating to placements – OIA casework note and case summaries

On Thursday 14 March, the Office of the Independent Adjudicator (OIA) published a casework note and some case summaries of complaints relating to placements.

Key observations include:

- There were more complaints from students undertaking placements as a compulsory requirement of a course leading to a professional qualification, for example teaching or nursing.
- It's important that providers put in place clear, agreed arrangements in advance with the placement organisation.
- Both potential applicants and students need clear and accurate information.
- Supporting students effectively on placement is important. It's helpful to give students clear information about how and where to access support.
- It's important that complex issues are investigated fairly, working with the placement organisation, and that processes are proportionate, fair and clearly explained to all involved.

You can [read the casework note](#) and [case summaries](#).