Universities UK

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 the team: politicalaffairs@universitiesuk.ac.uk

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Parliamentary business

Defence – Oral questions

On Monday 19 October, Secretary of State for Defence Wes Streeting MP and his ministerial colleagues answered oral questions in the House of Commons. Several questions focused on skills and the role of education providers in developing the defence workforce.

Streeting said the Government is investing **£182 million to improve STEM skills and increase capacity within the education system** as part of the Defence Industrial Strategy, alongside £50 million to support Defence Technical Excellence Colleges in England. He said the Government wants to strengthen the defence industrial skills base and create clearer opportunities for young people to enter the sector.

Jessica Toale MP (Labour) highlighted the new cyber competence centre at Bournemouth University, which provides courses in cyber-defence intelligence and autonomous systems in partnership with industry. She asked how the Government could encourage more partnerships between the defence sector and further and higher education institutions to strengthen the pipeline of skilled workers.

In response, Streeting said the Government is investing more than **£2.8 million through the Defence Strategic Priorities grant competition** to support Bournemouth University, including establishing new undergraduate courses in cyber-defence and autonomous systems, developing students' skills and strengthening collaboration with employers. He said the Government wanted to see similar partnerships between industry, universities and the UK's science and innovation base support the future defence workforce.

The session also considered the role of the defence sector in tackling the number of young people not in education, employment or training, and the expansion of Defence Technical Excellence Colleges across the UK.

You can watch the session and read the full transcript.

Machinery of government changes – Science and Technology Committee oral evidence session

On Wednesday 21 October, the Science and Technology Committee held a further oral evidence session examining the Government's decision to abolish the Department for Science, Innovation and Technology (DSIT) and redistribute its responsibilities across the Department for Business, Innovation, Science and Trade (BIST), the Cabinet Office and the Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport (DCMS).

The Committee heard evidence from Chris McDonald MP, Minister for Science, Innovation and Investment; Baroness Lloyd of Effra, Minister for Space, Cyber and Regulatory Reform; Rt Hon Kanishka Narayan MP, Minister for Artificial Intelligence; Alexandra Jones, Director General for Growth, International Science and Technology at BIST; Ollie Ilott, Director General for Artificial Intelligence and Head of the Office for the Prime Minister and Cabinet; and Sarah Connolly, Interim Director General for Digital Foundations at DCMS.

McDonald defended the abolition of DSIT, arguing that the Government's objective was to connect the UK's scientific strengths more closely with investment, industrial policy and economic growth. He said the UK performs strongly in curiosity-driven and discovery research but has historically struggled to commercialise discoveries and scale the resulting companies domestically, with businesses often turning overseas for investment and growth. The Government therefore wants to strengthen the full pipeline from scientific discovery through to commercialisation and domestic industrial capability, with the ambition of making the UK one of the world's top three places to start, invest in and scale technology businesses.

On UK Research and Innovation, Alexandra Jones said UKRI's strategy was intended to protect discovery research while also targeting investment towards priority technologies and helping innovative companies scale and remain in the UK. Around half of UKRI's budget would continue to support discovery research, and she stressed that the machinery-of-government changes had not altered how existing research budgets were allocated. She said the aim was to secure stronger economic returns from research investment without weakening the UK's core research base. The Committee also heard that it was too early to determine the total cost of the departmental reorganisation, with individual departments currently absorbing costs and the Government Internal Audit Agency expected to carry out a future assessment.

Commercialisation and procurement were recurring themes. McDonald highlighted the role of Catapult Centres in helping turn research into commercial products and

services and said the UK remained stronger at producing science than translating it into commercial success. He said UKRI was developing a greater focus on delivery and commercialisation through Innovate UK, alongside Government efforts in six frontier technologies: AI, advanced connectivity, cyber security, engineering biology, quantum technologies and semiconductors.

McDonald also acknowledged longstanding barriers facing smaller UK technology companies seeking public-sector contracts. He cited the NHS Federated Data Platform contract with Palantir as an example where domestic companies had been disadvantaged by their inability to operate at the scale required to compete for major contracts. Alexandra Jones highlighted the Commercial Innovation Hub, which has been established to help SMEs access public procurement opportunities. Ministers also argued that public procurement could play a wider role in building domestic technology markets and helping UK companies scale.

On regional innovation, McDonald said further devolution was a personal priority for the Prime Minister. He highlighted £270 million committed to Local Innovation Partnerships in mayoral areas and a further £1 billion announced for regional research and innovation clusters, which will be channelled through UKRI. He said the Government wanted to build stronger local innovation ecosystems and ensure that more regions could benefit from research investment and commercialisation.

The Committee also questioned McDonald about financial pressures at the Science and Technology Facilities Council (STFC). He said STFC was cancelling some investments and reducing activity in some areas, partly because of inflation and staffing pressures but principally because of weaknesses in previous financial management. He said key discovery research would be protected, with UKRI committing an additional £135 million, and confirmed that Diamond Light Source, ISIS Neutron and Muon Source and the Central Laser Facility would remain open.

On AI, Narayan said the technology was now sufficiently significant to economic policy and national security that the Government's central AI team had been placed directly within the Prime Minister's office. He argued that every government department would increasingly need to consider itself an "AI department", while the central team would provide overarching strategy and direction. The Committee also discussed AI safety, sovereign capability and the Government's AI for Science strategy, with ministers stressing the importance of multidisciplinary research and support for postgraduate researchers.

You can watch the session and find further information about the Committee's inquiry.

The work of the Department for Business, Innovation, Science and Trade – Business, Innovation, Science and Trade Committee oral evidence session

On Tuesday 20 October, the Business, Innovation, Science and Trade Committee held an oral evidence session examining the work of the Department for Business, Innovation, Science and Trade(BIST). The session was the Committee's first with Jonathan Reynolds MP since his return as Secretary of State and the expansion of the department's remit to include science and innovation. Amanda Brooks CBE, BIST Interim Permanent Secretary, also gave evidence.

Reynolds said BIST has an annual budget of around £17 billion and identified four overarching objectives for the department: leading place-based reindustrialisation; supporting better lives and vibrant local economies; placing science, innovation and technology at the heart of economic growth; and developing a secure and resilient trading economy. He argued that bringing science and innovation into BIST created an opportunity to connect the UK's research strengths more directly with industrial and commercial policy.

The Industrial Strategy featured prominently. Reynolds said it provided government with a clearer analytical framework for identifying where the UK has particular economic strengths and opportunities. Brooks said UKRI had already aligned around £9 billion of funding with the eight Industrial Strategy growth sectors, including approximately £4.5 billion supporting innovative firms operating within those sectors. Reynolds also reiterated the Government's commitment to placing the Industrial Strategy Advisory Council on a statutory footing.

On reindustrialisation, Reynolds said the Government's approach was not limited narrowly to traditional manufacturing, but reflected the strengths of the sectors identified through the Industrial Strategy and the foundational industries that support them. Brooks said focusing investment and policy on those sectors would also help create future employment opportunities. Reynolds argued that success needed to be visible locally rather than simply reflected in national economic statistics.

Place-based growth and devolution were also discussed. Reynolds said the Industrial Strategy contained measures relevant to both mayoral and local authorities and that BIST was considering seconding officials to local government to strengthen local economic and business-policy expertise. Brooks said the Office for Investment already had staff embedded in mayoral strategic authorities to develop investable propositions, while 30 Growth Hubs were operating across the country. Reynolds

argued that devolution should focus on giving places the tools appropriate to their economic priorities rather than simply transferring fixed funding pots.

On procurement, Reynolds said many British companies reported that it was harder to access public-sector contracts in the UK than opportunities overseas. The Government's "buy British" approach would focus on supporting jobs and economic growth while remaining consistent with the UK's international obligations. Brooks said improving transparency around future procurement pipelines should enable businesses to plan more effectively and invest in the capabilities needed to compete for contracts.

The Committee also discussed sovereign capability and emerging technologies. Reynolds argued that the UK needed greater resilience in strategically important sectors without attempting complete self-sufficiency, pointing to the Critical Minerals Strategy as an example. Brooks said BIST was examining what sovereign capability should mean particularly in relation to frontier and emerging technologies.

On AI, Reynolds said some of the most promising examples of adoption were emerging from small businesses and highlighted the SME Digital Adoption Taskforce as one means of spreading the technology more widely. On regulation, he argued that the UK's traditional strength had been regulating the application and use of technologies within individual sectors rather than establishing a single general-purpose regulatory framework. He said any future system would need to keep pace with rapidly developing technology while ensuring the UK retained access to frontier AI models in order to understand their capabilities and associated risks.

You can watch the full session.

Forthcoming business

Emerging risks of advanced AI – House of Commons debate

On Monday 26 October, the House of Commons will hold a general debate on the emerging risks of advanced artificial intelligence. The debate was scheduled by the Backbench Business Committee and will take place alongside a separate debate on the performance of Royal Mail.

The debate may be relevant to universities and the research sector through discussion of frontier AI development, AI safety, research capability and the Government's wider approach to emerging technologies.

Entrepreneurship and business – the Business, Innovation, Science and Trade Committee oral evidence session

On Tuesday 27 October, at 2.30pm, the Business, Innovation, Science and Trade Committee (BIST) will hold the first oral evidence session of its new inquiry into entrepreneurship and business.

The inquiry is examining how people start businesses, the conditions that support entrepreneurship, the effectiveness of Government policy and how BIST can use its new responsibilities for innovation policy to encourage enterprise creation. It will also explore the respective roles of education, finance and innovation in the UK's entrepreneurial ecosystem.

The first panel will include Philip Salter, Founder of The Entrepreneurs Network; Professor Mark Hart, Global Entrepreneurship Monitor UK; Professor Monder Ram, Founder-Director of the Centre for Research in Ethnic Minority Entrepreneurship at Aston University; and Jordan Dargue, Co-Founder of Lifted Ventures. Later panels will include representatives from the British Business Bank, UK Private Capital, the Venture Capital Trust Association and small business organisations.

The inquiry is particularly relevant to higher education through its focus on innovation and business formation, including the wider environment for research commercialisation, technology start-ups and university-linked entrepreneurship.

Higher education funding – Westminster Hall debate

On Wednesday 28 October, from 9.30am to 11.00am, Abtisam Mohamed MP (Labour) will lead a Westminster Hall debate on higher education funding.

The debate comes amid continuing concerns about the financial sustainability of universities, including the real-terms value of domestic teaching income, pressures on research funding and international recruitment, and the cumulative impact of recent policy changes on institutions.

Autumn Budget 2026

On Wednesday 28 October, Chancellor John Healey MP will deliver the 2026 Budget in the House of Commons following Prime Minister's Questions.

The Budget will set out the Government's latest taxation and spending measures alongside updated economic and fiscal forecasts. Debate on the Budget will begin immediately after the statement and continue on Thursday 29 October, with further debate expected when the Commons returns the following week.

Written questions and statements

Department for Education: Students: Finance

Abtisam Mohamed MP (Sheffield Central) (Lab): To ask the Secretary of State for Education, whether her Department has assessed whether the use of parental income to determine eligibility for student maintenance support remains fair and fit for purpose; and whether she plans to review those arrangements to ensure that students receive adequate support regardless of their parents' ability to contribute to their living costs. (33810) (Department for Education)

Josh MacAlister MP (Whitehaven and Workington) (Lab): The government considers the current household income assessment for living costs support to be the fairest and most consistent way of targeting support towards undergraduate students whose families have the least capacity to support them.
To help students from the most disadvantaged backgrounds progress and succeed in higher education, we have future-proofed our living costs loan offer by committing to increase them in line with forecast inflation each academic year from the 2026/27. This will ensure that students from the lowest income families receive the largest year-on-year cash increases in support and provide students with greater long-term financial certainty about the financial support available while they study.
Maximum loans for living costs have been increased by 2.71% for the 2026/27 academic year.
We will continue to keep the student finance system under review to ensure that it remains fair and financially sustainable.

Source

Department for Business, Innovation, Science and Trade : Research

Dr Scott Arthur MP (Edinburgh South West) (Lab): To ask the Secretary of State for Business, Innovation, Science and Trade, what steps his Department plans to take with UK Research and Innovation to maintain the UK's international research reputation, in the context of cuts to Science and Technology Facilities Council funding. (32679) (Department for Business, Innovation, Science and Trade)

Chris McDonald MP (Stockton North) (Lab): The Government remains committed to maintaining the UK's international research reputation through record investment in

science and innovation, including a £38.6 billion settlement for UK Research and Innovation (UKRI). The Science and Technology Facilities Council (STFC) core budget is being maintained over the Spending Review period. STFC prioritisation exercise was designed to protect long-term scientific capability, maintain world-class facilities and safeguard major international subscriptions. The UK remains committed to international scientific collaboration, including as a founding member and the second-largest contributor to CERN, and through our £327 million investment in the Square Kilometre Array Observatory (SKAO), helping to maintain the UK's position at the forefront of global science.

Source

Department for Education: Students: Loans

Mr Lee Dillon MP (Newbury) (Lib Dem): To ask the Secretary of State for Education, what consideration she has given to the potential merits of aligning the repayment cancellation terms for pre-2006 Plan 1 student loans, which are cancelled at age 65, with the 25-year cancellation period applied to borrowers from 2006 onwards. (26389) (Department for Education)

Josh MacAlister MP (Whitehaven and Workington) (Lab): Plan 1 loans, and the decisions on their design, were made by previous governments. Although both pre-2006 and post-2006 loans were labelled Plan 1, they are different types of loan. Post-2006 Plan 1 loans had a 25-year repayment term, but higher tuition fees resulted in larger loan balances. Pre-2006 borrowers benefited from lower tuition fee loans and lower balances, with loans written off at the age of 65.
When a new student loan plan is introduced, its terms, including the repayment period, are considered as a whole and are set in legislation for that specific loan type. These terms are not applied retrospectively to borrowers who took out loans under earlier plans.
In relation to the pre-2006 Plan 1 cancellation, 'The Student Loans: A guide to terms and conditions' from the academic year 1998/99 states, "Before you reach 65 you will have to make repayments until you have paid off all that you owe. How long this takes will depend on your income during your working life. Once you reach 65 your loan will be cancelled."
There are no plans to review pre-2006 Plan 1 terms, including the age 65 write-off.

Grouped Questions: 26387, 26388

Source

Department for Education: Erasmus+ Programme

Mike Wood MP (Kingswinford and South Staffordshire) (Con): To ask the Secretary of State for Education, pursuant to the answer of 7 September 2026, to Question 20870, on Erasmus+ Programme, whether the counting and definition of 100,000 participants from UK beneficiary organisations will include EU students studying at a UK-based educational institution in receipt of a grant agreement. (35582) (Department for Education)

Josh MacAlister MP (Whitehaven and Workington) (Lab): The estimation of 100,000 participants includes all eligible students studying at a UK beneficiary organisation. Participant eligibility is set out on page 55 of the Erasmus+ Programme Guide, available at: https://erasmus-plus.ec.europa.eu/sites/default/files/2025-11/programme-guide-2026_en.pdf.

Source

Department for Education: Students: Loans

Ruth Cadbury MP (Brentford and Isleworth) (Lab): To ask the Secretary of State for Education, whether her department has any plans to A.) cancel B.) pause the accumulation of interest on student loan debts when an individual is unable to work due to ill health. (34805) (Department for Education)

Josh MacAlister MP (Whitehaven and Workington) (Lab): As repayments are income-contingent, borrowers earning below the relevant repayment threshold make no repayments. For borrowers with undergraduate loans who earn no income, interest accrues at Retail Price Index, so the balance does not increase in real terms. Student loans may also be cancelled where a borrower is permanently unfit for work because of a disability and meets the relevant eligibility and evidence requirements. At the end of the loan term, any outstanding debt, including interest accrued, is written off. The government continues to look for opportunities to improve the student finance system as part of its ongoing consideration of higher education funding.

Source

Department for Education: Students: Loans

Abtisam Mohamed MP (Sheffield Central) (Lab): To ask the Secretary of State for Education, what assessment she has made of the impact on students and graduates of using the Retail Prices Index (RPI) in student finance calculations; and whether she will consider adopting the Consumer Prices Index (CPI), which is generally lower than RPI, to better reflect inflation pressures faced by students. (33809) (Department for Education)

Josh MacAlister MP (Whitehaven and Workington) (Lab): Decisions on student loan repayment arrangements must be considered alongside wider fiscal priorities, the long-term sustainability of the higher education (HE) funding system and value for money for taxpayers. The department has already taken decisive action against inflationary pressures by capping the maximum interest rates on Plan 2 and Plan 3 loans at 6% for the 2026/27 academic year, protecting borrowers from inflation shocks.
The Office for National Statistics has confirmed that it will bring the methods and data sources used to calculate the Consumer Prices Index, including owner occupiers' housing costs, into the Retail Prices Index from February 2030. The government will continue to consider the appropriate treatment of inflation measures within the student finance system as part of its ongoing consideration of HE funding and student support arrangements.

Source

Department for Education: Students: Grants

Jim Shannon MP (Strangford) (DUP): To ask the Secretary of State for Education, if she will take steps to ensure an increased gradual tapering, as household income increases, of the non-repayable maintenance grant, to help support students from families marginally above an income threshold. (33617) (Department for Education)

Josh MacAlister MP (Whitehaven and Workington) (Lab): Education is a devolved matter, and the response outlines the information for England only.
The new maintenance grants are a targeted measure designed to provide additional support to eligible students from the lowest-income households without increasing their debt. They will be introduced for new and continuing students studying subjects aligned with the Industrial Strategy and skills needs from the 2028/29 academic year. Like other means-tested elements of the student finance system, eligibility criteria are required to ensure support is targeted effectively. Students with household incomes at or below the minimum means-testing threshold of £25,000 will receive the highest level of support, with grant entitlement tapering as household income

increases towards the upper threshold at £30,000. Students with household incomes above this level will not be eligible for a maintenance grant.
Students at all levels of household income will continue to benefit from the government's commitment to increase maintenance loans every year in line with forecast inflation.

Source

Sector news

Government announces new Jobs Plans for growth sectors

On 19 October, the Government announced new Industrial Strategy Jobs Plans intended to create more than 100,000 job and training opportunities each year and establish clearer routes for young people into sectors identified as central to the Government's growth ambitions.

The first plans cover professional and business services and construction. Employers in professional and business services have committed to recruiting 22,400 new apprentices aged under 25 each year over the next five years, alongside increasing work-experience opportunities for young people by 20%. Opportunities will span areas including accountancy, business and law, AI, cyber security and data analytics. The sector will also develop measures to track recruitment and support for young people not in education, employment or training.

In construction, industry will provide 40,000 placements annually as part of a wider ambition to create 100,000 job opportunities a year. The plans include stronger national, regional and local workforce planning, new foundation apprenticeships for people entering the sector and shorter apprenticeship units intended to support rapid skills development.

The package forms part of a wider series of Jobs Plans across the Industrial Strategy's eight priority growth sectors. The Defence Jobs Plan will aim to increase the number of people supported through defence apprenticeship programmes to at least 14,000 annually by 2035, while the Government has also highlighted the importance of aligning training with local economic priorities through mayors and local skills partnerships. Jobs in the eight priority sectors currently pay around £8,000 more per year on average than jobs across the wider economy.

You can read the full Government announcement.

Policy Exchange: Engineered for Success

On 19 October, Policy Exchange published *Engineered for Success: Lessons from the New Model Institute for Technology and Engineering*, calling for the creation of a new generation of small, employer-focused technical universities to help tackle skills shortages and improve opportunities in areas with lower participation in higher education.

The report maps 57 English towns and cities with populations of at least 60,000 that do not currently have a university, representing around one in ten people in England. According to Policy Exchange, seven in ten of these places are below the English average both for adult qualification levels and for progression into higher education.

Policy Exchange presents the New Model Institute for Technology and Engineering (NMITE) in Hereford as a potential model. NMITE operates as a small, specialist and teaching-focused provider, offering compressed technical degrees developed in partnership with employers. The report argues that similar institutions could give students access to higher-level technical education closer to home while developing skills linked directly to local employer demand.

The report recommends a £50 million fund to establish up to ten NMITE-style institutions, greater powers for mayors to co-invest and bring together coalitions of local employers, and a faster route through registration and degree-awarding powers for new specialist technical providers. Policy Exchange argues that this could help address geographic gaps in higher education provision while supporting the Government's wider skills and reindustrialisation objectives.

You can read the full report.

British Academy: Fit for the future? Dual support and the sustainability of UK research

On 20 October, the British Academy launched **Higher Ground: A new ambition for universities**, a new programme examining the long-term future of higher education and research. The first report in the programme, *Fit for the future? Dual support and the sustainability of UK research*, examines whether the UK's longstanding system for funding university research remains financially sustainable.

The report looks at the dual-support system, under which university research is funded through a combination of competitively awarded project grants and recurrent institutional funding. The British Academy argues that discussions about the future of dual support have too often focused narrowly on the balance between these two funding streams, without sufficiently considering the wider financial model within which research takes place.

In particular, it highlights the relationship between teaching and research and the growing complexity of cross-subsidies within universities. Income generated through one area of activity can help meet the costs of another, meaning that changes to teaching income, student recruitment or other funding streams can have consequences for institutions' research capacity. The Academy therefore argues that

research funding policy cannot be considered separately from the wider sustainability of higher education.

Drawing on historical research and interviews with senior policymakers, funders, university leaders and research experts from across the four nations, the report identifies recurring tensions and trade-offs rather than proposing a single new funding model. These include questions around the concentration or distribution of research capacity, institutional autonomy, accountability for public funding, the relationship between teaching and research and the type of higher education and research ecosystem the UK ultimately wants to sustain.

The wider Higher Ground programme will subsequently examine issues including graduate outcomes, regional access to higher education, subject "cold spots", the responsible use of AI in research, devolved R&D funding and the future size and shape of the sector.

You can read the full report.

DCMS publishes evidence review on UK soft power

On 20 October, the Department for Culture, Media and Sport published an Ipsos evidence review examining how the UK's cultural, creative, media, sporting and civil-society sectors generate soft power and how this may contribute to economic growth and national security. The research was commissioned by DCMS between October 2025 and May 2026 and is intended to inform understanding of the UK's soft-power assets rather than represent Government policy.

The report proposes a two-stage model. UK institutions and activities can first build **affinity, legitimacy and trust** among international audiences, which can then influence decisions to consume British products, trade or invest, enter partnerships or study in the UK. It identifies three broad routes through which this can happen: cultural reach, the practical utility and expertise offered by UK institutions, and the values and perceived independence associated with UK organisations.

Higher education appears within this framework principally through the decision to study in the UK. The review argues that international exposure to British institutions, cultural programmes and recognised expertise can encourage students to choose UK education and subsequently create long-term relationships through alumni networks. These networks can support future economic, diplomatic and research relationships, particularly where former students later enter influential positions overseas.

However, the review also identifies tensions between international soft-power objectives and domestic policy. Interviewees highlighted visa restrictions, post-Brexit administrative barriers and hostile rhetoric around immigration as factors that can contradict efforts to present the UK as open and internationally collaborative. More broadly, the research finds that international partners are often attracted primarily by the individual prestige and credibility of institutions – including universities – rather than by overt UK national branding.

The review also cautions that the evidence base for measuring soft power remains limited. Many existing measures capture outputs such as visitor numbers or international reach rather than demonstrating that exposure directly causes changes in behaviour or diplomatic influence.

You can read the full evidence review.

APPG calls for reset of adult education

On 21 October, the All-Party Parliamentary Group for Further Education and Lifelong Learning published a report calling for adult education to be treated as essential national infrastructure, following a four-month inquiry supported by the Association of Colleges and involving more than 150 contributors.

The report warns that longstanding underinvestment in adult learning is limiting the ability of individuals and employers to respond to economic and technological change. It highlights skills shortages in areas including digital and AI, engineering, construction, manufacturing, health and social care, alongside continuing gaps in literacy, numeracy and digital skills. It argues that these pressures are likely to become more acute as AI, automation, the transition to net zero and an ageing workforce reshape jobs and skills requirements.

The APPG also argues that the benefits of adult education extend beyond labour-market outcomes. Evidence submitted to the inquiry highlighted links with confidence, physical and mental health, community participation and social inclusion. Three-quarters of respondents felt that the wider social contribution of adult learning was reflected in national policymaking only to a small extent or not at all.

The report proposes five broad shifts, including developing a long-term vision for adult education with national commitment and local flexibility; establishing a stable investment approach; introducing an England-wide minimum adult learning offer; removing financial and practical barriers to participation; and embedding adult learning more closely in health, community and rehabilitation policy. It also recommends strengthening ESOL and prison education and developing a better framework for measuring the economic and social impact of adult learning.

You can read more about the report and its recommendations.

Public Accounts Committee warns UK could fall behind in global technology race

On 21 October, the Public Accounts Committee published a report on UK Research and Innovation, warning that the UK risks losing ground in the global technology race unless Government and UKRI take a more active approach to capturing the benefits of publicly funded research and supporting innovative businesses to scale.

The Committee notes that, according to Government data, UK universities generate proportionately more spinout companies and patents than universities in the US. However, it argues that the UK is less effective at retaining the subsequent commercial value of this intellectual property, with British companies continuing to find it significantly harder than US counterparts to secure the investment required to grow while remaining in the UK.

The PAC argues that UKRI's approach to intellectual property and commercialisation is too cautious and calls for greater consideration of equity investment in businesses receiving public funding. It suggests that taking stakes in successful firms could allow taxpayers to share more directly in the financial returns generated by publicly funded research, alongside the existing grant and investment mechanisms operated by UKRI and the British Business Bank.

Regional disparities are another major concern. The Greater South East continues to receive around half of UKRI funding, although the proportion of UKRI spending in the North has increased from 12% to 20% over the past five years. The Committee recommends stronger targets and measures for assessing whether funding decisions contribute to regional growth and argues that current tax arrangements can discourage researchers from using infrastructure located outside their own institution, potentially reducing the efficiency of national research assets.

The Committee also raises concerns about the financial position of the Science and Technology Facilities Council, warning that current pressures could require reductions in spending on expensive international collaborative projects. It argues that decisions affecting major research infrastructure have potentially long-term consequences for the UK's scientific capability and international standing.

You can read the full report and Committee announcement.

Amnesty International: *Silencing Dissent*

On 20 October, Amnesty International UK published *Silencing Dissent: UK universities' response to Palestine solidarity on campus*, examining how universities have responded to pro-Palestinian student and staff activism since October 2023.

The report draws on 40 interviews with students, students' union officers, academics, professional-services staff and community activists from 26 universities, alongside supporting documentary evidence. Amnesty also conducted a structured review of protest policies at 132 UK universities. The research primarily covers events between October 2023 and September 2025. Amnesty notes that the individual case studies vary and that concerns identified in particular cases should not be taken as representative of every institution examined.

Amnesty argues that some universities have placed disproportionate restrictions on freedom of expression and peaceful assembly, including through disciplinary proceedings, campus bans, requirements for advance authorisation of protests and the use of civil injunctions. It says some students and staff faced lengthy disciplinary investigations without clear timelines or routes to appeal and argues that precautionary measures sometimes had the practical effect of punishment before proceedings had concluded. These are Amnesty's findings and assessments rather than regulatory findings against the institutions concerned.

The report also argues that Palestinian, Arab, Muslim and other racialised students, as well as international students, experienced particular impacts in some of the cases studied. Amnesty says concerns about possible consequences for immigration status could have an additional chilling effect for international students participating in protest.

Amnesty is calling on universities to adopt its **Defend Dissent Charter**, which sets out proposed commitments around peaceful protest, organising and freedom of expression on campus. It also makes recommendations to government and regulators on protecting lawful political expression in higher education.

You can read the full report.

MillionPlus: Making Devolution Deliver

On 21 October, MillionPlus published *Making Devolution Deliver: Three tests for skills, opportunity and economic growth*, calling for universities to have a formal and systematic role in regional skills, growth and innovation planning as further responsibilities are devolved across England and Scotland.

The briefing argues that modern universities are important anchor institutions within their local economies, particularly through widening participation, supporting key public-service workforces and connecting local people with higher-level skills and employment. MillionPlus argues that universities should therefore be involved in developing, delivering and reviewing regional plans rather than being brought in only after local priorities have already been determined.

The organisation proposes three tests for assessing whether devolved skills policy is delivering meaningful local benefits: **Access**, whether people can access higher-level skills flexibly and close to home; **Connect**, whether locally acquired skills lead to suitable local employment opportunities; and **Retain**, whether places are ultimately able to benefit from the talent they help to develop.

MillionPlus points to the particularly strong local role of modern universities. Nearly half of modern university students live at home while studying, while previous MillionPlus analysis found that 48% of modern-university graduates grew up, studied and subsequently worked in the same region, compared with 26% of graduates from pre-1992 universities. The briefing stresses that graduate mobility remains valuable, but argues that policymakers should consider whether regional economies provide sufficient opportunities for people who want to build careers locally.

The paper argues that the success of devolution should ultimately be judged by improved opportunities and stronger regional economies rather than simply by the creation of additional strategies, funding mechanisms or governance structures.

You can read the full briefing.

Simon Ridley appointed new DfE Permanent Secretary

On 21 October, the Government announced that Simon Ridley has been appointed Permanent Secretary at the Department for Education, succeeding Susan Acland-Hood, who is leaving government for a new role. Ridley will take up the position in November.

Ridley is currently Second Permanent Secretary at the Home Office and has served twice as Acting Permanent Secretary. His previous roles include leading the Cabinet Office Covid-19 Taskforce and senior positions at HM Treasury and the former Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government.

As Permanent Secretary, Ridley will become DfE's most senior civil servant and will oversee the department's work across education, skills and children's social care. Education Secretary Lucy Powell MP (Labour) said he brought a breadth of experience

and a strong record of delivery, while Ridley said he looked forward to working with the department and education leaders to deliver the Government's agenda.

You can read the full Government announcement.

OfS consults on revised Teaching Excellence Framework

On 22 October, the Office for Students launched the second stage of its consultation on a revised approach to assessing and regulating quality in English higher education, setting out further detail on how the new Teaching Excellence Framework (TEF) would operate in practice. The consultation follows the OfS's initial proposals published in June and will remain open until 28 January 2027.

Under the proposals, registered universities and colleges would receive **Gold, Silver, Bronze or Requires improvement** ratings for student experience, student outcomes, or both where sufficient data are available. Institutions could choose not to receive a TEF rating, but would instead be assessed against minimum requirements and judged as providing either satisfactory or unsatisfactory quality.

The OfS is proposing stronger incentives and regulatory consequences linked to the results. Providers rated Requires improvement could face restrictions including student recruitment limits, while institutions judged unsatisfactory under the minimum-requirements route would also face recruitment restrictions. The consultation is seeking views on the evidence used in assessments, how ratings should be determined, institutional and student submissions, how results should be communicated and what incentives should apply to institutions delivering high-quality provision.

The regulator also wants students to have a strengthened role in the assessment process. Interim Director of Quality and Access Jean Arnold said the changes were intended both to protect students from poor provision and to create stronger incentives for continuous improvement across the sector.

Alongside the TEF consultation, the OfS announced proposed reforms to the process for gaining and retaining degree-awarding powers. It intends first to tighten eligibility and suitability requirements before considering wider changes to assessment and ongoing requirements. The OfS will not accept new applications for degree-awarding powers, or award indefinite powers, while this two-stage reform process is underway.

You can read the full OfS announcement and consultation proposals.

BIST Committee launches entrepreneurship and business inquiry

On 16 October, the Business, Innovation, Science and Trade Committee launched a new inquiry examining entrepreneurship and what is needed to support people to start and grow businesses in the UK.

The inquiry will consider the conditions that support entrepreneurship, the effectiveness of Government policies intended to encourage enterprise creation and how the newly expanded BIST can combine business and innovation policy more effectively. It will examine the roles of education, finance, innovation and government policy, alongside international comparisons of entrepreneurial ecosystems.

The Committee also intends to examine a broad range of types of entrepreneurship, from technology founders and research-led businesses to sole traders, market traders and people building small businesses. A separate strand will consider entrepreneurship in skilled trades, including the factors that enable or discourage sole traders from employing staff or taking on apprentices.

The inquiry is relevant to universities through its focus on education and innovation, including the policy environment for research commercialisation, spinouts, start-ups and graduate entrepreneurship. The Committee is accepting written evidence until 12 November.

You can read more about the inquiry and submit evidence.

Prospects: What do graduates do? 2026/27

In October, Prospects published *What do graduates do? 2026/27*, its annual analysis of employment and further-study outcomes for UK graduates. This year's report examines UK-domiciled students who completed first degrees in 2023–24 and were surveyed through HESA's Graduate Outcomes survey 15 months after graduation.

The report finds that **54.8% of graduates were in full-time employment** 15 months after graduation and 13.1% were working part-time. A further 11% were combining employment and further study, while 6.1% were primarily in further study. The graduate unemployment rate increased to **6.8%**, compared with 6.2% for the previous cohort.

Among graduates in employment, **70.9% were working in professional-level roles**, down from 71.9% in the previous year. A further 8.5% were self-employed or actively working towards self-employment. The report argues that graduates entered a labour

market shaped by weaker recruitment activity, economic uncertainty and greater competition for opportunities, although most had successfully progressed into employment or further study.

Alongside detailed subject-level outcomes covering business, creative arts, humanities, science, social sciences and technology, engineering and maths, the report includes analysis of graduate work-readiness, changes to recruitment, the impact of AI and work experience, and how university careers services are adapting their approaches. It also considers how the UK Skills Explorer can support careers work within higher education.

You can read the full report and subject-level analysis.

NCCPE: Public and Community Engagement – The State of the Sector

On 22 October, the National Coordinating Centre for Public Engagement (NCCPE) published *Public and Community Engagement – The State of the Sector*, its first national snapshot of public engagement and engaged research across UK higher education.

The report draws on desk research covering 24 UK universities and interviews with 16 people working across the sector, with evidence collected primarily during the second half of 2025. It finds that public engagement has moved significantly from the margins of university activity into the mainstream over the past two decades, becoming embedded in institutional strategies, professional roles and national frameworks including the Research Excellence Framework. Almost every university included in the research articulated some form of civic mission.

However, NCCPE identifies what it describes as a cumulative "drift" in the conditions needed to sustain high-quality engagement. Financial pressures, shorter-term funding and reductions in specialist teams are gradually weakening institutional capacity, even where universities remain committed to public engagement.

The report warns that this could lead to the loss of relationships and specialist expertise that take years to establish, make engagement increasingly short-term and transactional and weaken public trust. NCCPE argues these risks are particularly significant at a time when policymakers are placing greater emphasis on devolution, civic partnerships and place-based approaches to economic and social challenges.

Alongside the report, NCCPE has published recommendations aimed at university leaders, funders, academics, engagement professionals and government, arguing that

responsibility for sustaining meaningful public and community engagement needs to be shared across the higher education system.

You can read the full report and recommendations.

Jisc secures ten-year future for Janet Network

On 22 October, Jisc announced a new ten-year agreement with Neos Networks to secure the fibre infrastructure underpinning the **Janet Network**, the UK's National Research and Education Network.

Janet provides high-capacity and secure connectivity for universities, colleges, research institutions and innovation centres across the UK, as well as connecting UK researchers with international research networks and partners. Jisc describes the network as nationally significant sovereign infrastructure operating under UK law and governance.

The new agreement is intended to provide greater long-term capacity and resilience as AI, advanced computing, cloud services and increasingly data-intensive research place growing demands on digital research infrastructure. Jisc says the scalable fibre network will allow it to expand bandwidth over the next decade as technologies including AI and quantum computing develop, while maintaining connectivity across regions of the UK.

The announcement highlights the Vera C. Rubin Observatory in Chile as an example of the scale of future data requirements. Around 25% of the data generated by the observatory is expected to be managed in the UK, with Janet transmitting large volumes of information to participating UK research sites for analysis. The network also includes built-in cyber-security protection and coordinated sector-wide threat response.

Jisc says the ten-year agreement will provide the certainty required to plan future upgrades and ensure that the network can continue supporting increasingly complex digital research and education needs.

You can read the full Jisc announcement.

Universities UK (UUK) is the collective voice of the UK's universities, bringing them together to pursue a common cause: thriving universities, serving society.

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