Political Affairs Digest

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

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Parliamentary Business

Home Office Oral Questions

On Monday 23 March, Home Office Ministers answered questions on the floor of the House.

Caroline Ansell MP asked a question on the government’s plans to review the English language testing requirement for student visas as a result of the closure of overseas language test centres in response to the covid-19 outbreak.

Kevin Foster MP, Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Immigration and Future Borders, responded that they are working to ensure no foreign students are penalised unfairly by these events. The government recognise the concerns of the education sector about the impact of covid-19, and are working with it to mitigate the adverse consequences. They are also working closely with secure English language test providers to ensure that there is sufficient capacity for all those who need to take tests while prioritising the health and safety of staff and applicants.

Chris Bryant MP and Bob Blackman MP asked a question about students concerned about their immigration status and visas.

The Home Secretary, Priti Patel MP, responded that work is taking place at the Home Office right now to look at exactly that issue and the government are going to announce changes we will make very soon.

You can read the transcript of the questions here.

Emergency COVID-19 legislation - All stages - House of Commons

On Monday 23 March, the House of Commons held a debate on the emergency COVID-19 legislation.

The bill entails provisions for the closing of educational institutions at all levels including higher education, and legislation for the emergency registration of nursing and other health care professionals such as nursing students in their final year of study.

Huw Merriman MP asked whether students were still expected to attend university.

Health Secretary, Matt Hancock, responded with his surprise as the government have been very clear about universities and that there is no excuse what so ever [for students to be in attendance].

Shadow Health Secretary, Jonathan Ashcroft MP, commented on the bill and noted the amendments tabled on behalf of the opposition. He asked whether final year nursing and medical students will be able to return to learning and complete placements after the crisis is over. He also asked the government to outline how students will be fully supported while working. Finally, he asked whether students will be probably remunerated for their work.

You can read the full transcript of the debate here.
Emergency COVID-19 legislation – House of Lords

On Wednesday 25 March and Thursday 26 March, the House of Lords held a debate on the emergency COVID-19 legislation.

Providing financial support for nursing students now entering the workforce early was consistently raised by peers. Baroness Watkins asked if the government will consider debt relief for nursing students and Baroness Thornton agreed. Baroness Bennett called for an emergency grant of £15,000 to place nursing graduates in the same situation as nursing students just about to start their course who are entitled to the bursary.

Lord Balfie argued that bursary students entering the NHS should be able to return to their courses after the coronavirus (if they wish) without any penalties for leaving or interrupting their courses.

Baroness Blackstone argued that the decision to suspend GCSEs and A-Levels was ‘disproportionate’. She then acknowledged that universities will “face difficult decisions about who to admit” due to the formula for calculating final grades. She suggested that “a collapse in international student numbers could allow [universities] to admit more home students and veer towards a more generous admissions policy.”

Lord Watson observed that some staff in higher education are on causal contracts, stating that if government were to guarantee maintained funding for institutions it should be communicated by government that such casual contracts should be honoured.

He also stated that the 25,000 students on courses for qualified teacher status must have their work validated so they can start teaching in September.

Finally, he called for a more transparent timetable for the alternative approach to assessing school students.

Lord Adonis suggested universities using large reserves of their funding to ensure students are able to complete courses and gain properly graded exams.

Lord Falconer asked about using student accommodation to house homeless people in Wales during the crisis.

You can read the full transcript of the debate here.

Forthcoming business

Parliament closed on Wednesday 25 March for Easter recess, a week earlier than scheduled, due to Coronavirus.

Written Questions

Coronavirus: guidance

Mr Barry Sheerman (Huddersfield): To ask the Secretary of State for Education, what guidance his Department has issued to (a) international and (b) British students on the covid-19 outbreak and the disruption that outbreak has caused to tuition. [31438]
Michelle Donelan (Chippenham): The Department for Education has indicated that it will not be possible to answer this question within the usual time period. An answer is being prepared and will be provided as soon as it is available.

Coronavirus: support

Dan Jarvis (Barnsley Central): To ask the Secretary of State for Education, what steps his Department is taking to support universities during the covid-19 outbreak. [32182]

Michelle Donelan (Chippenham): The Department for Education has indicated that it will not be possible to answer this question within the usual time period. An answer is being prepared and will be provided as soon as it is available.

Robert Halfon (Harlow): To ask the Secretary of State for Education, what discussions he has had with the Secretary of State for Health and Social Care on support for (a) students and (b) apprentices on placements at NHS hospitals during the covid-19 outbreak. [30749]

Michelle Donelan (Chippenham): My right hon. Friend, the Secretary of State for Education and ministers at the department, are actively engaging with colleagues across government on issues raised by the covid-19 outbreak. The Department for Education is working closely with the Office for Students, the Department of Health and Social Care and other relevant parties to monitor the effects of covid-19 on registered English further and higher education providers and their students, including those on placements in NHS hospitals.

Coronavirus: student loans

Fleur Anderson (Putney): To ask the Secretary of State for Education, if he will make an assessment of the potential merits of suspending student loan repayments for people who experience reductions in income due to the covid-19 outbreak. [32740]

Michelle Donelan (Chippenham): The repayment of student loans, which includes borrowers from Wales, is governed by the Education (Student Loans) (Repayment) Regulations 2009 (as amended). Department officials are in regular contact with the Devolved Administrations and will continue to liaise with them on Student Loan Repayment policy.

The current system protects borrowers if they see a reduction in their income. Repayments are made based on a borrower’s monthly or weekly income, not the interest rate or amount borrowed, and no repayments are made for earnings below the repayment thresholds. Repayments are calculated as a fixed percentage of earnings above the relevant repayment threshold - if income drops, so do repayments made. Any outstanding debt is written off at the end of the loan term with no detriment to the borrower.

If, at the end of the year, the borrower’s total income is below the relevant annual threshold, they may reclaim any repayments from the Student Loans Company made during that year.

Emma Hardy (Kingston upon Hull West and Hessle): To ask the Secretary of State for Education, what assessment he has made of the potential merits of freezing the interest on student loans while university education is disrupted by the covid-19 pandemic. [30814]

Michelle Donelan (Chippenham): The system for setting interest rates on student loans is set out in The Education (Student Loans) (Repayment) Regulations 2009, as amended.

The current system protects borrowers if they see a reduction in their income. Repayments are made based on a borrower’s monthly or weekly income, not the interest rate or amount borrowed, and no repayments are made for earnings below the repayment thresholds. Repayments are calculated as a fixed percentage of earnings above the relevant repayment threshold. Any outstanding debt is written off at the end of the loan term with no detriment to the borrower.
If, at the end of the year, the borrower’s total income is below the annual threshold, they may reclaim any repayments from the Student Loans Company made during that year.

Ben Lake (Ceredigion): To ask the Secretary of State for Education, whether he has considered the suspension of student loan repayments in response to the covid-19 outbreak. [32722]

Michelle Donelan (Chippenham): The repayment of student loans, which includes borrowers from Wales, is governed by the Education (Student Loans) (Repayment) Regulations 2009 (as amended). Department officials are in regular contact with the Devolved Administrations and will continue to liaise with them on Student Loan Repayment policy.

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If, at the end of the year, the borrower’s total income is below the relevant annual threshold, they may reclaim any repayments from the Student Loans Company made during that year.

Ben Lake (Ceredigion): To ask the Secretary of State for Education, whether he has held discussions with the Welsh Government on suspending student loan repayments in response to the covid-19 outbreak. [32723]

Michelle Donelan (Chippenham): The repayment of student loans, which includes borrowers from Wales, is governed by the Education (Student Loans) (Repayment) Regulations 2009 (as amended). Department officials are in regular contact with the Devolved Administrations and will continue to liaise with them on Student Loan Repayment policy.

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Coronavirus: apprenticeship levy

Mr Laurence Robertson (Tewkesbury): To ask the Secretary of State for Education, if he will enable apprenticeship levy costs to be temporarily used to fund existing staff wages in addition to training during the time restrictions imposed due to the covid-19 outbreak; and if he will make a statement. [31426]

Gillian Keegan (Chichester): The Department for Education has indicated that it will not be possible to answer this question within the usual time period. An answer is being prepared and will be provided as soon as it is available.

Coronavirus: apprenticeships

Emma Hardy (Kingston upon Hull West and Hessle): To ask the Secretary of State for Education, what steps he is taking to allow awarding organisations to enable work from apprentices to be accepted as evidence by video capture and witness testimonials for the next six months during the covid-19 outbreak. [32150]
Gillian Keegan (Chichester): The Department for Education has indicated that it will not be possible to answer this question within the usual time period. An answer is being prepared and will be provided as soon as it is available.

Erasmus

Mhairi Black (Paisley and Renfrewshire South): To ask the Secretary of State for Education, what steps her Department is taking to replace Erasmus after the end of the transition period. [29977]

Michelle Donelan (Chippenham): As we set out in the UK’s approach to negotiations, we remain open to the UK participating in elements of the Erasmus+ programme, on a time-limited basis, provided the terms are in the UK’s interest.

The specific terms under which the UK could participate in the programme are subject to the future negotiations with the EU, which we hope to conclude as soon as possible.

In parallel with the ongoing negotiations, we continue to develop an alternative domestic scheme as part of preparing for every eventuality.

Antisemitism

Baroness Deech: To ask Her Majesty's Government what assessment they have made of whether universities in England and Wales (1) have breached the public sector equality duty, and (2) are compliant with the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance’s working definition of antisemitism, by permitting Israeli Apartheid Week activities to take place on their campuses. [HL2491]

Baroness Berridge: There is no place in our society - including within higher education (HE) – for hatred or any form of harassment, discrimination or racism, including antisemitism. The government will continue to work with universities to ensure we stamp out antisemitism in all its forms.

The government expects HE providers to take their responsibilities, including those under the Equality Act 2010 (including the Public Sector Equality Duty) and to promote freedom of speech, seriously. We expect HE providers to have robust policies and procedures in place to meet, and balance, their legal obligations effectively and to investigate and swiftly address reports of hate crime, including any antisemitic incidents that are reported.

We expect HE providers to have clearly set out procedures and policies for events and the hosting of external speakers, which allow for open, transparent events, challenge and debate and ensure that lawful speech can occur on campuses. Under the Education (No. 2) Act 1986, HE providers have a legal duty to take reasonably practicable steps to ensure that freedom of speech within the law is secured for their members, students, employees of the establishment and visiting speakers.

In relation to events occurring under the banner of Israeli Apartheid Week, it is crucial that HE providers handle these appropriately, taking into account their legal obligations to ensure that our values, expectations and laws are upheld.

The government strongly encourages HE providers to adopt the IHRA definition of antisemitism. It is an important tool in tackling antisemitism and a strong signal that HE providers take these issues seriously.

Upskilling

Lord Touhig: To ask Her Majesty’s Government what assessment they have made of (1) the Skill India Mission to upskill people through public-private partnerships, and (2) the SkillsFuture initiative in Singapore to provide career-long learning opportunities; and whether they have considered adopting a similar model in the UK. [HL2246]
Baroness Berridge: The government recognises that there are a number of international examples, including in Singapore and India, which provide useful insights to inform the development of our adult skills reforms.

We are also taking steps to improve productivity, employment levels and social inclusion. Programmes including Apprenticeships, funded or co-funded skills provision through the Adult Education Budget, access to Advanced Learner Loans and the National Retraining Scheme enable adults to gain the skills that they need to progress or reskill.

The government has started testing the first part of the National Retraining Scheme, Get Help to Retrain, in 6 areas across England. Get Help to Retrain is a digital service that will help users to understand their current skills, explore alternative occupations and find and sign up to training. We will continue to test and further improve the service in 2020. The government is also providing an extra £3 billion to develop a National Skills Fund that helps adults to learn new skills and to prepare for the economy of the future.

Lord Touhig: To ask Her Majesty’s Government what action they are taking to improve the statistic set out in the report by Boston Consulting Group Decoding Global Trends in Upskilling and Reskilling, published on 5 November 2019, that the number of Britons who spent a few weeks a year on learning were below the global average of those in training and work in 2019. [HL2244]

Baroness Berridge: The government recognises that there are a number of international examples, including in Singapore and India, which provide useful insights to inform the development of our adult skills reforms.

We are also taking steps to improve productivity, employment levels and social inclusion. Programmes including Apprenticeships, funded or co-funded skills provision through the Adult Education Budget, access to Advanced Learner Loans and the National Retraining Scheme enable adults to gain the skills that they need to progress or reskill.

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Lord Touhig: To ask Her Majesty’s Government what consideration they are giving to the recommendations of the report on the adult skills gap by the City and Guilds Group Missing Millions, published in February; and what plans they have to review adult education. [HL2242]

Baroness Berridge: Our adult skills system seeks to increase productivity, support employment and promote social inclusion. The Adult Education Budget fully funds or co-funds skills provision for eligible adults aged 19+ from pre-entry to level 3 and includes funding to help learners to overcome barriers which prevent them from taking part in learning.

The attached City and Guilds Group report, 'Missing Millions', states that adult skills are becoming increasingly important due to adults being economically active for longer as well as automation and technological change. The department is committed to improving the offer for adults through user research and delivering the flexibility in training that adults tell us that they need.

Moreover, over the course of this Parliament, we are providing an extra £3 billion for a new National Skills Fund to help people learn new skills and to prepare for the economy of the future.

The City and Guilds Group report also highlights the important role that employers have in investing in training their workforces.
Skills gap

**Lord Browne Of Belmont:** To ask Her Majesty’s Government what estimate they have made of the percentage of job vacancies which remain unfilled because of skill shortages among potential applicants; and what steps they are taking to introduce training courses and apprenticeships to fill that gap. [HL2253]

**Baroness Berridge:** The Employer Skills Survey 2017 identified 1,007,000 vacancies, of which 226,000 were skill-shortage vacancies (SSVs) – representing 22% of all vacancies. This percentage has remained broadly stable over several waves of the survey – 23% in 2015. Employers were most likely to report SSVs for Skilled Trades (42% of all Skilled Trades vacancies were SSVs), Machine Operatives (31% of all these vacancies were SSVs) and Professionals (30% of all these vacancies were SSVs). These proportions are also in line with 2015 percentages. We are awaiting results of the 2019 survey.

We have put in place a range of measures to tackle skills gaps. We are making apprenticeships longer, better, with more off-the-job training and proper assessment at the end, with new standards across all levels being designed and driven by the industry so they can equip people with the skills they need. We will be investing up to £500 million a year in T levels, a high quality technical alternative to A levels, which will be more rigorous than current vocational courses and involve employers in their development to ensure the qualifications have real labour market value.

We also investing up to £290 million of capital funding to establish 20 new Institutes of Technology, which will be the pinnacle of technical training offering higher technical education and training in key sectors such as digital, construction, advanced manufacturing and engineering.

We have also invested £100 million into establishing a National Retaining Scheme, which will help prepare adults for future changes to the economy, including those brought about by automation, and help them retrain into better jobs. On top of this we are investing an extra £3 billion, over the course of this Parliament, for a new National Skills Fund to help people learn new skills and prepare for the economy of the future. The fund will help ensure that businesses can find and hire the workers they need and help people fulfil their potential.

Disabled Students’ Allowance

**Mrs Sharon Hodgson (Washington and Sunderland West):** To ask the Secretary of State for Education, what assessment his Department has made of the effect on the health and wellbeing of students in higher education with visual stress of the removal of colorimetry funding for those students. [29204]

**Michelle Donelan (Chippenham):** The department is in discussion with the Association of Dyslexia Specialists in Higher Education as to whether any additional types of assistance would be appropriate for students with a diagnosis of visual stress.

**Mrs Sharon Hodgson (Washington and Sunderland West):** To ask the Secretary of State for Education, what assessment his Department has made of the potential effect on the health and wellbeing of students in higher education with brain injuries of the change in the level of disabled student allowance funding for mentoring those students. [29203]

**Michelle Donelan (Chippenham):** There has been no change to the level of funding available through Disabled Students’ Allowances (DSAs) for mentoring support. All students who are eligible for DSAs, including those with brain injuries, are assessed in respect of the type and level of support they specifically require.
Plagiarism

Lord Storey: To ask Her Majesty's Government what assessment they have made of the problem of contract cheating and essay mills. [HL2298]

Baroness Berridge: Contract cheating and the use of essay mills are global problems. A 2018 study by Swansea University of students internationally, found the number of students outside the UK who admitted to paying for assignments since 2014 equates to one in seven.

It is almost impossible to quantify how widespread the use of essay mills is, as the bespoke nature of these “paid for” assignments can make it difficult for providers to detect it is not the student’s own work. Students who engage in contract cheating are also less likely to volunteer to participate in surveys about cheating. In 2016, the Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education found there are approximately 17,000 instances of academic offences per year in the UK, although it should be noted that this figure includes all types of academic offences, not exclusively contract cheating.

In launching the Education Technology Strategy in April 2019, the government made a commitment to “Identify how anti-cheating software can be developed and improved to help tackle the problem of essay mills”. A new generation of plagiarism detection software, focused on authorship investigation, is being introduced in the UK, which will provide universities with data-backed insight into whether students are doing their own work.

Lord Storey: To ask Her Majesty’s Government what assessment they have made of the impact of essay mills and contract cheating on academic integrity in UK universities. [HL2299]

Baroness Berridge: The use of fake qualifications or plagiarised assignments is unacceptable. It not only threatens to undermine the reputation of our world-class higher education sector, but also devalues the hard work of those who succeed on their own merit.

It is vitally important that providers themselves take action to tackle essay mills, as it is their own reputations and that of the wider higher education sector that are on the line.

There are a number of initiatives currently underway or planned that aim to get to grips with this issue. This includes the Quality Assurance Agency updating guidance to support higher education providers in combatting contract cheating via education, prevention and detection. Guidance published by the National Union of Students also seeks to make students better aware of the consequences of contract cheating, sending a clear message that these services are not legitimate.

We have set a clear expectation that the Office for Student (OfS) should take a visible lead in challenging the sector to eliminate the use of essay mills. We expect the OfS to work with the members of the UK Standing Committee for Quality Assessment to ensure that the sector has the support it needs, and that it is taking firm and robust action to ensure that this threat to the integrity of our higher education system is being tackled.

Industrial Action

Alex Sobel (Leeds North West): To ask the Secretary of State for Education, pursuant to the Answer of 5 March 2020 to Question 21389 on Universities: Industrial Disputes, if he will make an assessment of the potential effect of the provisions of the Higher Education (Higher Amount) (England) Regulations 2010 on industrial disputes in universities. [30059]

Michelle Donelan (Chippenham): The 2010 Higher Amount Regulations prescribed the higher amounts of tuition fees for new students from 1 September 2012 up to and including the 2016/17 academic year. These regulations were superseded in the 2017/18 academic year.

As stated in the answer to Question 21389, Government has made no specific assessment of the potential effect of the Higher Education (Higher Amount) (England) Regulations 2010 on the current disputes. It would not be proportionate to do so at this time.
Sector News – Coronavirus

Universities minister statement: altered university offers

On Monday 23 March, the Department for Education published a statement, with supporting statements from the Office for Students and Universities UK, requesting higher education providers in England do not change their offers to students for two weeks to maintain stability. This includes changing conditional offers to unconditional offers and changing entry requirements.

The statement notes that the practice of changing offers risks destabilising the admissions system and can increase anxiety for students who may be feeling pressure to make a quick decision.

Key points:
• The request will apply to new unconditional offers being made by universities, as well as existing conditional offers being amended.
• The two-week period will allow time for further advice to be given to students and providers about how the new system of awarding A-Level grades will work, and how the admissions arrangements will work.
• Students who accept an unconditional offer will be able to release themselves as part of the UCAS self-release process to explore other options during Clearing.
• Work will continue between the Government and the higher education sector over this two-week period to provide further clarity on the best way to support applicants and HE providers to ensure that the admissions system remains fair and equitable.
• While this request applies to institutions in England, the Government would welcome other nations to follow the same approach.

You can read the full statement here.

Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy: letter to research community

On Monday 23 March, Science, Research and Innovation Minister Amanda Solloway MP wrote a letter to the research community outlining the science and research programmes that remain critical including medical research and national security. It also advises that work continues where pausing activity is not possible, or where ongoing maintenance and supervision is required.

The letter notes that BEIS has established a joint team involving UKRI, DfE and other government departments and agencies to consider what measures are necessary to support universities, the research community and research institutions. In addition, Research England and devolved Funding Bodies will be in touch with universities to establish a formal channel of communication to institutions on research issues. UKRI will also continue to engage with the range of research organisations, institutes and facilities it funds outside the HE sector.

You can read the letter in full here.

Department for Education statement: exams and awards

On Monday 23 March, Secretary of State for Education Gavin Williamson MP, published a written statement offering further clarity on how grades will be awarded and the process being taken by Ofqual, working with exam boards, to develop a consistent and fair grading system. The aim is to provide grades to students before the end of July.

You can read the full statement here.
New Home Office guidance: visas extended to 31 May 2020

On Tuesday 24 March, the Home Office has published advice for people with visas which expire between 24 January 2020 and 31 May 2020 and stresses that no visa holder will be penalised for circumstances outside of their control. Visas will be extended until 31 May 2020 for those who cannot leave the country due to the coronavirus. There are also new measures in place to allow people to apply for long-term visas from the UK until 31 May 2020.

The advice also covers those applying for UK visas from elsewhere. Most visa application centres are closed or offering a limited service.

You can read the guidance in full here.

REF 2021 on hold

On Tuesday 24 March, it was announced that REF has been put on hold until further notice to allow institutions to prioritise research in clinical and health-related fields.

The submission deadline of 27 November 2020 will no longer apply, and a new submission deadline will be announced no later than eight months prior to the deadline. Full allowance will be made for the impact of coronavirus across affected areas of submissions.

You can read the update in full here.

Updated travel guidance for education settings, including Erasmus+

Following FCO advice suggesting that all UK nationals who are abroad should return home while commercial flights are available, on Wednesday 25 March the Department for Education published updated travel guidance for education settings including for those participating in Erasmus+.

You can find the updated guidance here.

Office for Students: suspended regulatory requirements

On Thursday 26 March, the Office for Students (OfS) published slimmed down regulatory requirements during the coronavirus pandemic. OfS are refocusing its regulatory requirements on higher education to prioritise the response to Covid-19, reducing the expectation for routine reporting requirements.

The objectives are:

- Sharing information with providers to enable to respond effectively
- Identifying and managing short-term financial risk for providers and protecting students’ interests.
- Minimising long-run disruption to the sector

Providers will be expected to report on:

- issues of acute short-term financial risk
- where they cease or suspend courses without providing equivalent alternative study options
- where they are unable to award qualifications or credit as they had planned.

You can find the press release here and the letter, guidance and notice here.
Letter from the universities minister

On Thursday 26 March, the Universities Minister, Michelle Donelan MP, provided a letter to update higher education providers on developments since the Prime Minister’s announcement on Monday 23 March.

Issues covered in the letter:
- Students in halls of residence
- Student finance
- Tier 4 visas and distance learning
- Travel and exchanges
- Regulatory framework
- Finals
- Support for staff

You can find the letter here.

Education select committee inquiry

The education select committee chaired by Robert Halfon MP has launched an inquiry into the impact of Covid-19 on education and children’s services.

The inquiry will look at how the outbreak of COVID-19 is affecting all aspects of the education sector and children’s social care system and will scrutinise how the Department for Education is dealing with the situation.

It will examine both short term impacts, such as the effects of school closures and exam cancellations, as well as longer-term implications particularly for the most vulnerable children.

The terms of reference do not specifically reference higher education, but many of the aspects being explored by the committee are relevant to universities and therefore Universities UK will be submitting evidence.

You can find more information on the inquiry here.

Stay at home, save lives: public information campaign assets

New campaign resources have been developed as part of the ‘stay at home, save lives’ public information campaign. Materials and resources can be downloaded from Public Health England for use across the UK.

Find the resources here.