

Throughout 2016/17 the APPG has tackled many subjects of great importance to the sector. The group held seven meetings, hearing from speakers with a wide range of expertise. It also produced five briefings on Brexit, the Higher Education and Research Act, the impact of social media on the mental health of staff and students, the government's industrial strategy and how employers and universities can collaborate to improve graduate outcomes.

In addition to meetings and briefings, the group also published over 30 updates for members which set out relevant parliamentary business and sector news, and included forewords from Roberta Blackman-Woods MP, Chair of the University APPG and a number of vice-chancellor members.

The Higher Education and Research Act 2017

Possibly the biggest development for the sector over the past year was the Higher Education and Research Bill which gained Royal Assent in April 2017. Many of the group's parliamentary members were heavily involved in its passage, across the Commons and the Lords. The piece of legislation, which was the first major regulatory reform to the UK higher education sector in 25 years, is primarily concerned with the creation of two new bodies to regulate and fund higher education providers: The Office for Students (OfS) and UK Research and Innovation (UKRI).

At a [meeting in November](#), the APPG had an opportunity to discuss the then proposed legislation, hearing from parliamentarians and vice-chancellors, with presentations from Professor Andrew Wathey and Jo Johnson MP, Minister for Universities, Science, Research and Innovation. With Jo Johnson MP returned to his ministerial brief following the election in June 2017, the focus now turns to the implementation of the Act. For further information on how this will be delivered, including the new bodies established and the Teaching Excellence Framework, you may find the paper ['Implementation of the Higher Education and Research Act 2017'](#) by Universities UK useful.

Brexit

The biggest challenge for parliament and universities alike will be the delivery of the Brexit vote back in June 2016. The University APPG, back in 2015, had discussed what a vote to leave could mean for the sector, and [returned to this topic in October 2016](#). Attendees had the opportunity to hear from Professor Paul O'Prey and Professor Philippe Moreillon, a Swiss academic from the Université de Lausanne.

At the end of March 2017, following the Prime Minister's formal triggering of Article 50, the group published a paper which looked at how the recruitment of international staff and

students must not be interrupted and that support for research must continue. A cross-party piece of work, [‘The Higher Education sector and Brexit’](#) was written by, the group’s Chair, Labour MP for the City of Durham Roberta Blackman-Woods, Scottish National Party MP for Glasgow Central Alison Thewliss, and former Conservative MP for Portsmouth South Flick Drummond. Brexit will be a continuing piece of work for the sector over the coming years, and it is highly likely that the group will return to this topic as the negotiations progress. Universities UK has produced a number of documents which members may find useful to help understand the challenges and opportunities:

- [Policy priorities to support universities to thrive post-exit](#)
- [Can free trade agreements enhance opportunities for UK higher education after Brexit?](#)
- [International research collaboration after the UK leaves the European Union](#)

The industrial strategy

At the local and regional level, universities support growth by providing and creating jobs, and leading on local economic and social issues. The engagement by higher education institutions reaches across the globe and into local communities, spanning multinational companies, the world’s best researchers, local businesses of all sizes, and employers. You may be interested to see [briefings](#) on the impact of universities across each region of the UK.

In [January 2017](#) the group heard from Professor Quintin McKellar, Universities UK Innovation and Growth Policy Network Chair, and Steven Wilson from the Greater Cambridge Peterborough Enterprise Partnership. Both speakers used the University APPG platform to show how universities have a central role to play in the development of the government’s modern industrial strategy, across all proposed pillars; their health, and strength essential to its success.

Delegations from Egypt and Myanmar

In a new development for the group, this year meetings were arranged for parliamentary members to meet with higher education delegations from Egypt and Myanmar. Arranged in partnership with the British Council, attendees appreciated the chance to share information, best practice, and to build relationships with colleagues from other nations. The group intends to work with the British Council again in the upcoming year and offer opportunities for more members to meet incoming delegations.

Social mobility

Over the last few parliamentary sessions the group has included meetings on the equality agenda throughout its programme. Following the publication of the Social Mobility Advisory Group's report '[Working in partnership: enabling social mobility in higher education](#)', the group chose to focus its [latest meeting](#) on this agenda on how employers and universities can work together to improve graduate outcomes. Hearing from Shirley Atkinson, Nik Miller, and Andy Youell from the Higher Education Statistics Agency who set out the changes that they hoped would be made to the Destinations of Leavers from Higher Education survey.

Some key themes emerged from both the Advisory Group's report and the APPG meeting discussion. These included:

- The need for a rigorously evidence-based approach to social mobility
- The importance of evaluation to inform and shape future work
- The need to move away from the perception that people only have one chance for university study, at the age of 18
- Sustained change can only be achieved through collaboration and partnership between universities, schools, colleges and employers

Mental health

Half of all school leavers are now going to university. This is a significant number of young people, with potential vulnerabilities due to their age and the challenges of moving from home to independent living. It is clear that good mental health will help these students to fulfil their individual potential and bring wider benefits to our society and economy.

In December 2016, Universities UK established a programme of work on mental health in higher education to ensure that wellbeing and mental health are a strategic priority for universities - working in partnership with Public Health England, the Higher Education Funding Council for England, expert voices from student services and activist charities such as Student Minds. The programme aims to build on previous work including the '[Student mental wellbeing in higher education: good practice guide](#)'.

A hugely topical subject which was raised frequently throughout the 2017 general election campaign, the University APPG meeting heard from Professor Steve West, Universities UK Health Education and Research Policy Network Chair and [Dr Anne Haase](#), a researcher in mental health and social media from the University of Bristol.

The meeting focused on the impact of social media on the mental health of staff and students. Attendees discussed the challenges that universities faced in offering the

correct support and appropriate training. They used the opportunity to inform parliamentarians of the work already ongoing on campuses across the country and shared experiences and best practice. For more information, a note of the meeting is [available](#) online.

Looking ahead to 2017/18

The Queen's Speech was delivered last month with the legislative agenda focused strongly on Brexit. For higher education, science and research, three Bills will be of particular interest: the Repeal Bill, the Immigration Bill and the Space Industry Bill. In addition, the Government's non-legislative programme was also made public, which includes a Counter-Terrorism Review and Mental Health Reform.

We are waiting for clarity on the Government's plans for these Bills, but it is likely that various consultations will be announced. Therefore we will ensure that the forward planning of the group's programme reflects the sector's priorities and provides an opportunity to discuss and challenge the Government's legislative programme. Our first meeting of the session will take place on Tuesday 31 October, with the topic for discussion - 'Safe Speech or Free Speech?'

More information about the group can be found at www.universityappg.co.uk or by following [@universityappg](https://twitter.com/universityappg) on Twitter.