



All-Party Parliamentary University Group

Weekly update

01 – 05 December 2025

A regular digest of House of Commons, House of Lords, and higher education sector business.

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Parliamentary business

Department for Education - Oral Questions

On Monday 1 December, at 2.30pm the Secretary of State for Education, Rt Hon Bridget Phillipson MP, and her ministerial colleagues, answered oral questions in the House of Commons.

Ian Sollom MP, the Liberal Democrat spokesperson for Skills highlighted that the International Student Levy (ISL) is expected to raise £445 million from universities, with only around 1% allocated to the new maintenance grants. He warned that the flat-fee structure would disproportionately affect institutions recruiting higher numbers of disadvantaged students, and asked whether the policy would ultimately increase or reduce access for those learners.

In response, the Secretary of State said ISL funding would support skills provision and access to higher and further education in priority subjects, benefiting students from less affluent backgrounds. She argued that, alongside tuition fee increases intended to stabilise university finances, the policy package would improve opportunities for disadvantaged young people to enter higher education.

Sir Gavin Williamson MP (Conservative) asked the Secretary of State to reinstate a previously proposed requirement for Chinese-funded bodies to register under free speech legislation. Bridget Phillipson reiterated that national security was paramount and noted that the Office for Students already had extensive powers to request information and investigate breaches. She said any additional reporting requirements must add value without creating unnecessary burdens, and that universities were expected to identify and mitigate risks.

Nick Timothy MP (Conservative) raised concerns about reports that UK academics had been harassed by Chinese agents and pressured by universities to censor research, citing Sheffield Hallam's alleged blocking of Professor Laura Murphy's work on Uyghur people in Xinjiang. He pressed the Government on when free speech legislation would be enacted and whether Ministers would commit to closing all Confucius Institutes.

In response, the Secretary of State said she could not comment on the specific case due to ongoing investigations but stressed that intimidation or coercion of universities "will not be tolerated." She emphasised that Chinese students are welcome in the UK, but where evidence of concerning behaviour exists, universities "can and must take action."

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

The Work of the Department for Education - Education Committee oral evidence session

On Tuesday 2 December from 2:30 pm, the House of Commons Education Committee heard oral evidence as part of their inquiry into “The Work of the Department for Education”.

Witnesses included:

- Rt Hon Bridget Phillipson MP, Secretary of State at The Department for Education
- Susan Acland-Hood, Permanent Secretary at The Department for Education

Caroline Voaden MP (Liberal Democrat) questioned the Secretary of State about the Department’s updated assessment that the international student levy could deter an estimated 17,000 international students annually (going up from 7000 originally set out) in the longer term, despite the levy now being set at a lower rate than originally proposed.

Bridget Phillipson acknowledged the economic and cultural contribution of international students and said the Government had engaged extensively with the sector, but argued that the levy represented a fair mechanism to fund skills programmes and the new maintenance grant. She noted she would verify the figures, suggesting that the estimates reflected wider migration policy impacts rather than the levy alone.

Caroline Voaden also challenged the limited scope of the new maintenance grant, which will offer only £1,000 per year, targeted at a narrow group of subjects, and will not be implemented for nearly three years, compared to the former £3,000 universal grant. She asked whether such a small amount could realistically improve access for disadvantaged learners. The Secretary of State described the policy as an important first step in restoring the principle of maintenance support and emphasised that widening participation also relies on providers, regulators, and regional collaboration to ensure young people understand the opportunities offered by higher education.

Dr Caroline Johnson MP (Conservative) pressed the Secretary of State on Labour’s broader policy direction, asking whether the Government wanted more or fewer students to attend university, and highlighting the decision to raise tuition fees while freezing repayment thresholds despite Labour’s pledge that graduates would pay less. Bridget Phillipson responded that the priority was to ensure young people can choose the route, university or higher technical skills, that best suits them. She said the fee increase was necessary to stabilise a sector weakened by years of real-terms

erosion, and that alongside increased maintenance loans and the new grant, the reforms would preserve access for students from all backgrounds while giving universities greater financial security.

You [can watch the session](#).

Work of the Secretary of State for the Department for Science, Innovation and Technology - Science, Innovation and Technology Committee oral evidence session

On Wednesday 3 December, the House of Commons Science Innovation and Technology Committee heard from the Secretary of State, Rt Hon Liz Kendall MP, and the Permanent Secretary, Emran Mian.

The Chair of the Committee, Chi Onwurah MP (Labour), asked for the Secretary of State's top three priorities. The Secretary of State outlined:

1. Growth – no route to significantly better growth without science, technology, and innovation front and center. Impacts should be felt in all parts of UK and benefits people from all walks of life.
2. Transforming public services – how government itself functions inc. role of AI
3. Up skilling workforce with AI skills - government has a role to support citizens in seizing this.

The Chair asked how the Secretary of State's priorities diverged from her predecessor. The Secretary of State confirmed that priorities had aligned in many ways, and one area she's prioritising work is through the Women's Tech Taskforce to increase the number of women participating in science, innovation, and technology.

Martin Wrigley MP (Liberal Democrat) asked what success looked like and how it would be measured. In her reply, the Secretary of State noted building on the UK's world-leading status (including universities), pushing forward where more could be done, and seizing more regional benefits and those for individuals including jobs.

George Freeman MP (Conservative) asked about the £86 billion package over the spending review – he asked what time period this covered and how much went through UKRI. The Permanent Secretary clarified that £86 billion was across the 4-year period and £38.6 billion was channelled through UKRI. On the bucket approach, George Freeman said that when he attempted this approach as Minister, UKRI had 'bitterly fought back in defense of blue sky [research].'

Rt Hon Kit Malthouse MP (Conservative) raised the issue of scale up funding for UK businesses and noted there was nothing ‘transformational’ in the Budget on this issue. The Secretary of State said more needed to be done to get starts-ups to scale up. The Government was acting on this issue, including the first ever advance market commitment for AI of £100 million, and the appointment of a chair of the sovereign AI unit. In the Budget the Government also doubled eligibility for the enterprise management incentive.

Adam Thompson MP (Labour) asked how the Secretary of State intended to translate the record investment in R&D into growth. The Secretary of State highlighted the greater focus on key priorities as a government citing the IS-8 as well as the outcomes that would be expected within the bucket approach from UKRI.

Adam Thompson MP proceeded to praise 10-year funding settlements and asked how these would be allocated and measured. The Permanent Secretary highlighted that 10-year settlements gave certainty to the teams that received them, but reduced flexibility across the wider funding settlement. Government was working with four criteria that would steer their decisions: building and sustaining infrastructure, supporting the ability to form long-term industry partnerships, building skills and talent, and fostering international collaborations.

Samantha Niblett MP (Labour) asked for an update on the establishment of the Women and Tech Taskforce. The Secretary of State confirmed the first meeting of the Taskforce would take place in December 2025. She wanted to see more opportunities for women in technology as well as more technology that worked for women. She stressed that it was also in the best interest of technology and the economy to have algorithms that were developed by a diverse group of people.

You can [watch the session](#).

Oxford to Cambridge Growth Corridor - Westminster Hall Debate

On Wednesday 3 December, there was a Westminster Hall debate on the “Oxford to Cambridge Growth Corridor”, tabled in by Daniel Zeichner MP (Labour).

Daniel Zeichner MP opened the debate by stressing that the corridor’s success depends heavily on its knowledge base, citing the University of Cambridge and a network of universities across the region. He noted that Oxford and Cambridge together have produced over 400 spin-outs and that Cambridge spin-outs alone have raised more than £3 billion in private investment. He highlighted calls from the Supercluster Board – which brings together FTSE 100 companies and “Britain’s top universities” – for taskforce-style governance to coordinate government, funders,

industry and academia, and urged Ministers to develop a strategic skills plan so that local people can access high-skill roles supporting university-led research and innovation.

Several MPs underlined the importance of universities as anchors in the regional economy. Anneliese Dodds MP (Labour) pointed to Oxford's role in life sciences, AI and advanced manufacturing, welcoming recent investment in the Cowley branch line as supporting access to the city's research and innovation base. Layla Moran MP (Liberal Democrat) described the University of Oxford as a "powerhouse of innovation" at the centre of a dense science and technology cluster, arguing that local government reform must recognise the interdependence between the university and surrounding communities. Mohammad Yasin MP (Labour) characterised the arc as an "innovation engine" built on world-class universities and research institutions, while Alex Mayer MP (Labour) emphasised that universities already play a major role in attracting over 8,000 high-tech firms to the wider area.

Contributions from constituencies along the corridor also highlighted specific higher education assets and their infrastructure needs. Blake Stephenson MP (Conservative) flagged Cranfield University as a globally recognised centre for aerospace, automotive and technology research at the heart of the corridor. Pippa Heylings MP (Liberal Democrat) drew attention to the Cambridge Biomedical Campus, the Laboratory of Molecular Biology, the Wellcome Genome Campus and other research sites, warning that growth around these university-linked clusters is being constrained by under-resourced health, transport and utilities infrastructure. Rachel Hopkins MP (Labour) and others argued that East West Rail and improved regional links to Oxford and Cambridge would expand opportunities for young people to access university study, apprenticeships and graduate jobs, with colleges such as the Bedford College Group playing a key role in the skills pipeline.

Responding for the Government, Housing and Planning Minister Matthew Pennycook MP said the corridor is home to at least 10 major higher education institutions, including Cranfield University, the Open University, and the universities of Oxford and Cambridge, forming "one of the most exciting, knowledge-intensive economic clusters anywhere in the world". He reiterated the Government's commitment to delivering East West Rail in full, supporting growth around university and research hubs, and confirmed up to £400 million for the Cambridge Growth Company and an Oxford growth commission to unlock housing and commercial space that would help universities attract and retain talent. He also highlighted investment in innovation infrastructure, including an AI growth zone at Culham and a £15 million Cambridge innovation hub, and said the Government's wider housing and infrastructure plans are intended to ensure that university-driven growth in the region is environmentally and socially sustainable.

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

Forthcoming Business

Department for Work and Pensions - Oral Questions

On Monday 8 December, at 2.30pm the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions, Rt Hon Pat McFadden MP, and his ministerial colleagues, will answer oral questions in the House of Commons.

Relevant questions include:

- Michelle Scrogham MP (Labour), Perran Moon MP (Labour), James Asser MP (Labour):
What steps his Department is taking to help ensure that post-16 education provides the necessary skills to support the economy.

You [can read the full list of questions](#) and [watch the session](#).

English Devolution and Community Empowerment Bill – HoL second reading

On Monday 8 December 2025, the English Devolution and Community Empowerment Bill will have its 2nd reading in the House of Lords.

You [can watch the session](#).

Written questions and statements

Department for Education: Students: Loans

Freddie Van Mierlo (Liberal Democrats): (UIN94511) To ask the Secretary of State for Education, what assessment she has made of the fairness of calculating student loan interest at RPI rather than CPI.

Josh MacAlister: Interest rates are set in legislation in reference to the Retail Price Index (RPI) from the previous March, not the Consumer Price Index (CPI), and are applied annually on 1 September until 31 August. This ensures that over a period of years, interest rates on student loans have been consistently linked to a widely recognised and adopted measure of inflation.

The Office for National Statistics has undertaken a substantial programme of work over the past two years to enhance how inflation is measured. The Office for Budget Responsibility has confirmed that, from 2030 at the earliest, movements in RPI will be aligned with CPI as viewed here: <https://obr.uk/box/the-long-run-difference-between-rpi-and-cpi-inflation/>.

A full equality impact assessment of how the student loan reforms may affect graduates, including detail on changes to average lifetime repayments under Plan 5, was produced and published in February 2022 and can be found here: <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/higher-education-reform-equality-impact-assessment>.

Department for Education: Young People: Unemployment

James McMurdock (Independent): (UIN94070) To ask the Secretary of State for Education, pursuant to Answer of 21 November 2025 to Question 91083, on Young People: Unemployment, what assessment she has made of the reasons the UK has above-OECD average youth unemployment in the context of careers guidance pupils receive.

Josh MacAlister: The department is committed to improving careers advice in schools and colleges and to delivering two weeks' worth of work experience for every young person, with a particular focus on those from disadvantaged backgrounds. This will mean improved work readiness and clearer progression routes to ensure young people remain engaged in education, training or employment.

This is part of a package of reforms that will expand opportunity for young people including Youth Hubs, Youth Guarantee trailblazers, expanded Foundation Apprenticeships and a job guarantee for young people. Building on this, the department have asked Alan Milburn to lead an independent investigation to tackle the persistently high numbers of young people out of work, education and training.

Treasury: National Insurance Credits: Students

Bell Ribeiro-Addy (Labour): (UIN95347) To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer, whether her Department has assessed the potential merits of (a) introducing National Insurance credits for periods spent in full-time higher education and (b) allowing individuals to make voluntary National Insurance contributions for student-year gaps that fall outside the standard six-year window.

Dan Tomlinson: Qualifying years of National Insurance on an individual's NI record can be built in several ways; by paying National Insurance contributions (NICs) while working (employed or self-employed); by being credited with NI credits; or by paying voluntary NICs.

Individuals can usually pay voluntary NICs for the past six years. This time limit has been in place for over forty years and is a vital part of the National Insurance system. It is in place to prevent individuals from deferring payment until just before they are due to retire and effectively buying an enhanced pension, or a pension from scratch, which would be unfair to the majority who contribute throughout their lives.

In line with legislation, HMRC can only extend the time limit if an individual exercised due care and diligence but due to factors not in their control, they were unable to pay. If they believe exceptional circumstances stopped them from paying, they can ask us to extend the usual six-year deadline.

NI credits recognise the non-financial contributions that individuals make to society and/or the economy. There are no National Insurance credits available to protect a person's future State Pension entitlement as a result of them being in higher or advanced education.

Most individuals under the age of 50 will only need 35 qualifying years over a possible working life of 50 years to get the full rate of the new State Pension. This flexibility allows individuals to take time out of the workplace, including gap years, without harming their State Pension position.

Department for Work and Pensions: Graduates: Unemployment

Freddie Van Mierlo (Liberal Democrats): (UIN94803) To ask the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions, what assessment he has made of trends in the number of graduate (a) unemployment and (b) underemployment rates in the last five years.

Diana Johnson: The Department for Education publish yearly statistics on graduates in the labour market. This can be found here: [Graduate labour market statistics, Calendar year 2024 - Explore education statistics - GOV.UK](#). These graduate statistics are for graduates in England.

There are no official published statistics for graduate underemployment rates. However, the ONS does publish underemployment statistics for the UK here: [EMP16: Underemployment and overemployment - Office for National Statistics](#).

Department for Work and Pensions: Employment: Young People

Adam Jogee (Labour): (UIN93869) To ask the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions, what steps he has taken to support young people in (a) Newcastle-under-Lyme and (b) Staffordshire into employment, education or training.

Diana Johnson: The Government understands the negative effects of unemployment can be particularly pronounced for young people and can have longstanding implications on their future earnings potential and life chances.

That is why at Budget the Government announced that £820 million has been committed to the Youth Guarantee over the next three years to support all young people aged 16 to 24 to earn or learn. This includes the previously announced Jobs Guarantee, which will guaranteeing six-months of paid work for every eligible 18-21 year old who has been on Universal Credit and looking for work for 18 months. Under the Jobs Guarantee we will fund 100% of the wages for the six months (up to 25hrs/week at the relevant minimum wage), as well as the additional employment costs and a budget for wrap around support. Further details on the Youth Guarantee will be announced shortly.

In Newcastle-under-Lyme the DWP Employer and Partnership team is actively involved with the Newcastle Employment and Skills Group (NSEG). They work closely with stakeholders such as Aspire Housing, Keele University, and prominent employers at Lymedale Business Park, including TK Maxx, ASDA, and Radwell International. Youth Employment Programmes, such as Positive Directions and We

Mean Business, offer fully funded 5-week courses for 16–24-year-olds who are not engaged in employment, education, or training. Additionally, our outreach efforts through probation services and police provide tailored employment pathways, mentoring, and reintegration support for young people at risk of offending.

In Staffordshire, our DWP Schools Advisers have supported over 3,600 young people across in the 2024/25 academic year. This includes 220 students in Newcastle-under-Lyme at Orme Academy, St Peter's Academy, and Abbey Hill Special School. Young people have access to training in Digital Marketing, Cyber Security, Web Design, and Emergency First Aid for Mental Health through The Training Initiative.

Department of Health and Social Care: Health Professions: Students

Caroline Johnson (Conservative): (UIN94273) To ask the Secretary of State for Health and Social Care, how many (i) medical, (ii) dental and (iii) midwifery students it will fund to start studies in 2026.

Karin Smyth: In England, the Office for Students (OfS) sets the maximum fundable limit for medical school and dental school places on an annual basis. OfS will publish its intake target for the 2026/27 academic year in due course.

For the 2025/26 academic year, the OfS has published its intake target at 8,126 for medical school places and 809 for dental school places

Undergraduate training places for midwives are not centrally commissioned by the Government. Instead, they are determined by local employers and education providers who decide the number of learners they admit based on learner demand and provider capacity funding.

For the 2025/26 academic year, the number of acceptances for midwifery was 3,390. This data is from 2025 and was taken 28 days after A-level result day. It is not final data. Further information is available on the UCAS website, at the following link:

<https://www.ucas.com/data-and-analysis/undergraduate-statistics-and-reports/statistical-releases-daily-clearing-analysis-2025>

The Government is committed to publishing a 10 Year Workforce Plan which will ensure the National Health Service has the right people in the right places, with the right skills to care for patients, when they need it.

Department for Education: Students: Loans

James Naish (Labour): (UIN94380) To ask the Secretary of State for Education, whether her Department has made an assessment of the potential (a) merits of calculating maintenance loans through net rather than gross household income and (b) impact of that change on single parental income households.

Josh MacAlister: Entitlement to partially means-tested undergraduate loans for living costs is based on the income of the student's household.

The income used is the total income on which a person is charged income tax at step 1 of the calculation in Section 23 of the Income Tax Act 2007, before the deductions made by HMRC from step 2 onwards of Section 23.

The use of income charged to tax in the household income assessment applies a standard measure of income to calculate a student's entitlement to living costs support and allows all students to be assessed consistently and fairly. It also ensures that the most support is paid to students from the lowest income families, including those with single parents, who need it most and who are historically under-represented in higher education. It is not intended to be an exact calculation of disposable income for each household.

Information on income is available from HMRC and allows around 1.3 million assessments a year to be carried out quickly and efficiently each year by Student Finance England.

Maximum grants and loans for living and other costs for the 2025/26 academic year have been increased by forecast inflation, 3.1%, based on the RPIX inflation index.

Sector news

State of the Relationship report 2025 - National Centre for Universities and Business report

The [State of the Relationship 2025 report](#), published on 2 December by the National Centre for Universities and Business (NCUB), shows that while the UK's world-class research base continues to generate new ideas, companies are investing less in turning those ideas into economic impact. Collaboration income has fallen for the second year in a row, major corporate partnerships have not recovered to pre-pandemic levels, and international industry funding continues to decline.

At the same time, the UK's longstanding strength in research openness and collaborative excellence is increasingly offset by weaknesses in business-led R&D, advanced skills utilisation, and industrial translation, leaving the UK at risk of losing ground to global competitors.

Key findings include:

- 81,499 interactions between universities and businesses were recorded in 2023/24, an increase of 6.4% from the year before;
- An 8.7% rise in the number of university interactions with small-and-medium-sized enterprises (SMEs), reaching 56,755 engagements;
- A 1.3% increase in the number of large business and university interactions, bringing total engagements with large firms to 24,744
- A 2.1% real-terms decline in total income from business collaboration (excluding CPD), returning overall business collaboration income to £1.34bn.

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

UCU higher education industrial action ballot

On Tuesday 2 December 2025, the University and College Union (UCU) announced the results of its UK-wide higher education industrial action ballot. Turnout reached **39.34%** across England, Scotland and Wales, below the **50% threshold** required by law for industrial action to proceed. Of those who voted, **69.69% supported** taking industrial action and **30.31% opposed** it. Separate turnout figures were provided for Northern Ireland.

In a message to members, UCU General Secretary Jo Grady thanked staff who participated in the ballot and those simultaneously engaged in local disputes. She said the union would now analyse why turnout fell short and emphasised the need for significantly higher participation in future ballots to build effective leverage.

Grady noted differing views among members on how best to address ongoing sector issues and said the union would enter a period of reflection to develop a clearer, shared strategy.

You [can read the announcement](#).

Industrial Strategy Advisory Council launches landmark partnership to accelerate UK innovation and growth

On 3 December, the Industrial Strategy Advisory Council (ISAC) announced a new strategic partnership with the University of Manchester to strengthen the evidence base and expert input underpinning the Government's Industrial Strategy. The arrangement will give ISAC direct access to the University's research capabilities and specialist expertise, facilitated through Unit M, the University's innovation unit.

As part of the partnership, ISAC will be headquartered in Manchester, enabling closer engagement with regional institutions, innovative businesses and local leaders. The Council intends to use this collaboration to support its role in advising the Government on the development and implementation of the Industrial Strategy, particularly in monitoring progress across the eight designated growth-driving sectors, including advanced manufacturing, clean energy, digital technologies, life sciences, and creative industries.

The University-ISAC partnership is expected to provide both national-level insights and a regional perspective informed by Greater Manchester's innovation ecosystem. A formal launch event took place at the University, attended by ISAC leadership, the Minister for Industrial Strategy, and local civic representatives.

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

Civic 2:0 Programme

Civic 2:0 is a programme to engage national and regional policymakers in the economic and social role higher education institutions play in their towns, cities and regions. The programme aims to help politicians and policy makers come up with

policies and incentives which enable this positive role to expand, helping the social and economic development of towns and cities up and down the country.

Over the next three years, the programme will focus on a small number of themes and include specific practical policy recommendations to politicians and policy makers.

The programme builds on the success of the civic university movement, which was revitalised in 2018-19 by the Civic University Commission. The Commission led to over 70 universities developing Civic University Agreements co-produced with their local authorities to focus on the issues which really mattered to their local communities. It also led to the creation of the Civic University Network and NCIA, which supported best practice across the sector. Civic 2:0 is an attempt to have as much impact on policy making as the movement has had on good practice within universities.

Objectives

There are several interrelated objectives, including:

- To identify evidence and achieve no more than five signature policy shifts that require cross-Whitehall coordination to ensure universities are enabled to deliver the Government's imperative for both civic and growth missions.
- To provide the higher education sector with additional momentum, leadership and representation on this agenda – ensuring greater visibility of the civic agenda, highlighting excellent practice, developing spokespeople and case-studies for policy makers to engage with, to facilitate greater engagement between university leaders and national/ regional policymakers.
- Ensure the civic agenda remains a priority for Vice-Chancellors and other C-Suite leaders in the higher education sector.
- Over time to develop a long-term financial and membership model for Civic 2 through further support from universities, foundations and government partners for the Civic 2.0 initiatives.

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

University Financial Health and Implications in England - Innovation Research Caucus

A new report from the Innovation Research Caucus warns of significant and widening financial stress across England's universities, driven by structural deficits, declining international student demand, rising costs, and growing reliance on cross-subsidy to sustain research and innovation activity.

The study finds that a substantial proportion of institutions are now operating with persistent deficits, with many reporting that financial resilience has deteriorated over the past year. Universities expressed particular concern about volatility in international recruitment, previously a major stabilising factor, combined with escalating inflationary pressures and constraints on domestic tuition and teaching funding.

The report highlights that research and innovation activities remain heavily dependent on income from international students and other non-public sources, leaving universities exposed to any downturn in this market. Leaders reported increasingly difficult trade-offs, including reducing staff, scaling back capital investment, reviewing course portfolios and considering greater specialisation or collaboration to maintain viability.

Universities also warned of wider system-level consequences. Financial pressures are beginning to affect research capacity, regional economic contributions, and the ability to support national priorities such as skills pipelines, innovation clusters, and levelling up. Some institutions indicated that without policy change, the sector may face increased provider failures and a diminishing ability to deliver long-term research and economic growth.

The report calls for closer dialogue between government and the sector, clearer long-term funding frameworks, and recognition of universities' role in supporting innovation, regional development and national competitiveness. Further waves of research will assess how financial challenges evolve and their implications for the UK's R&I system.

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