



# All-Party Parliamentary University Group

## Weekly update

02 – 06 March 2026

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 2 March, 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.

A number of exchanges were relevant for universities, particularly on student finance, freedom of speech and extremism on campus.

**David Chadwick MP** (Liberal Democrat) and **Mohammad Yasin MP** (Labour) asked about the effectiveness of the student loan system and what steps the Department is taking to improve it. Responding for the Government, **Josh MacAlister MP** said ministers would consider ways to make the system fairer, following recent concerns about the burden of student debt. He pointed to measures the Government says it has already taken, including reintroducing maintenance grants and raising the repayment threshold above average graduate salaries, but did not set out any firm proposals for wider reform. When pressed on whether the Government would scrap the planned repayment threshold freeze, he said a range of options were being considered but stressed that any change would need to be paid for, noting that the freeze raises £5.9 billion next year.

A number of MPs pushed further on the pressures facing graduates under plan 2 loans. **Graham Stuart MP** (Conservative) raised the case of a constituent whose original borrowing had grown despite years of work, arguing that interest rates were excessive. **Helen Hayes MP** (Labour), Chair of the Education Committee, also referred to wider concerns about unilateral and unexpected changes to repayment terms and the use of CPI-linked repayment conditions, asking when the Government would set out proposals to make plan 2 loans fairer. In response, MacAlister again said the Government would publish further details “soon”, but gave no timetable or indication of the likely direction of reform. The overall exchange suggests that ministers recognise the political pressure around student finance, but are not yet ready to commit to concrete changes.

Universities were also raised in relation to free speech and campus extremism. In topical questions, **Laura Trott MP** (Conservative) criticised what she described as a “two-tier system” on campus, claiming that gender-critical feminists had been removed from university platforms while an ayatollah was being celebrated at University College London. Bridget Phillipson responded that universities should be places of open discussion and dialogue, where views can be challenged and

questioned, but said there could be no place for hate speech or intimidation on campus and that those involved in such activity should face consequences. Later in the session, **Suella Braverman MP** (Reform UK) raised similar concerns about a reported pro-ayatollah student society event at UCL. The Secretary of State again said that the strongest possible action should be taken where hate speech or illegal activity occurs, whether on campus or elsewhere, and that any such cases should be fully investigated by those responsible for enforcing the law.

There was also a further exchange on implementation of the Higher Education (Freedom of Speech) Act 2023. **Sir Ashley Fox MP** (Conservative) asked when the Government would commence section 8 of the Act, which would establish the complaints scheme intended to protect academics and others from censorship and silencing on campus. In response, Bridget Phillipson said the Government intended to do so “shortly”. She reiterated that universities should be places of open discussion where academics can operate freely and said that many of the Act’s provisions had already been commenced in order to uphold and safeguard free speech and academic freedom. While no precise timetable was given, this appears to be the clearest indication in the session that ministers do intend to move ahead with the remaining parts of the legislation, including the complaints mechanism

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

## Spring Forecast

On 3 March the Chancellor, Rachel Reeves, delivered the ‘Spring Forecast’. Whilst the main fiscal event in Westminster is the Autumn Budget, the statement in spring gives the opportunity for the Chancellor to deliver a speech on the trajectory of the economy, to the House of Commons, facing lengthy scrutiny from MPs with the Office for Budget Responsibility (OBR) to follow up, publishing its economic and fiscal outlook.

Prior to the Labour Government, a ‘spring statement’ was also considered a ‘mini budget’ with new fiscal policy announcements, however since Labour entered office Reeves announced the spring statement would not count as a major fiscal event.

### Spring Forecast

Reeves addressed how she believes Labour’s economic plan is the best option and the “right plan” for a world “that has become yet more uncertain,” a nod to the recent conflict in Iran — and spiralling energy prices in particular.

Reeves opened the statement acknowledging the armed forces, she talked about being proud to be the Chancellor that is delivering the biggest uplift in defence spending since the Cold War **reminding the House of Defence funding she has provided including:**

- £650 million committed in January to upgrade Typhoon fighter jets
- A new Royal Navy frigate launched from Rosyth last week
- A £1 billion helicopter deal with Leonardo secured on Monday this week

Whilst there were no new major fiscal policy announcements, the spring forecast did provide an indication of how much room the Chancellor has in the Treasury reserves for future moves, via the OBR's forecast.

Whilst the OBR's forecast showed that inflation is heading down, the recent Middle East crisis means such predictions are out of date as the world faces the threat of a new energy crisis. Many MPs following the statement dismissed Reeve's claims of economic growth and raised issues around the knock-on effect of the regional crisis to the cost of living in the UK- which had already been driven up due to the Ukraine war- as gas prices have surged this week.

There seemed to be an offer from the government to young people. Reeves turned to youth employment in her statement, referencing the number of young people not in education, training or employment which she said has "increased by 113,000" over the last five year, pledging that "this government will not leave an entire generation of young people behind".

Liberal Democrat Treasury Spokesperson used her time to argue that "graduates are being ripped off... they are facing eye-watering repayment costs and struggling". She set out the **Lib Dem plan to support students including ending the repayment threshold freeze** which she said would put £100 back into students' pockets in the first year and £210 in the third.

On student loans and debt, Education Secretary Bridget Phillipson has said she wants a fairer system and her department is in talks with the Treasury. Politico have reported that two different Labour-aligned think tanks close to the government are currently preparing work on the various options the Treasury and DfE could go for on reforming student loans. The Good Growth Foundation has work on interest-rate reform set for release soon, while a different leftie think tank has been modelling options to determine cost and effect."

## Secretary of State for Science, Innovation and Technology – Science and Technology Committee oral evidence session

On Tuesday 3 March, the House of Lords Science and Technology Committee had an oral evidence session on the work of the Secretary of State for Science, Innovation and Technology.

Witnesses included:

- The Rt Hon Liz Kendall MP, Secretary of State at Department for Science, Innovation and Technology
- The Lord Vallance of Balham KCB, Minister of State at Department for Science, Innovation and Technology
- Emran Mian, Permanent Secretary at Department for Science, Innovation and Technology

Liz Kendall used her opening remarks to set out DSIT's central political message, arguing that the department's purpose is to use science and technology to drive economic growth, spread opportunity across the country and improve public services. She pointed to the Government's AI growth zones, the launch of a first "tech town" in Barnsley, work on online safety and plans to use AI tutors to help tackle educational disadvantage.

A substantial part of the session focused on UKRI's funding reforms and the concern they have created across the research community. Lord Vallance insisted that the Government remains committed to protecting and growing curiosity-driven, investigator-led research, and said overall allocations for this kind of research are set to increase over the spending review period. He described recent pauses across research councils as transitional rather than ideological, citing examples including changes to BBSRC, EPSRC and MRC schemes.

Committee members repeatedly pressed ministers on the level of concern being expressed by universities and the wider research sector, arguing that this pointed to a serious communications failure. Lord Vallance accepted that UKRI's communications had been poor and acknowledged that uncertainty had caused real anxiety. He suggested that much of the current pressure was centred on STFC, where the combination of major facilities costs and international commitments has created particular strain.

He stressed that investigator-led research should not bear the cost of resolving these pressures.

The Committee also examined whether the Government's new "three buckets" approach to research funding risks undermining the Haldane principle by giving ministers greater influence over what research is supported. Lord Vallance argued that decisions on individual projects in the first two buckets would remain for experts, and said any stronger industrial strategy steer would apply only to the more mission-led parts of the portfolio, not to core curiosity-driven research.

He maintained that the new framework is intended to improve transparency, though both he and Liz Kendall accepted that the current transition has been confusing and unsettling for the sector. Liz Kendall said UKRI had committed to producing a high-level mapping between the old and new presentations of funding, which DSIT would share with the Committee when available.

Universities were raised directly in discussion of research sustainability and financial pressure. Lord Vallance accepted that falling international student numbers have intensified pressure on university finances and linked this to wider concerns about the resilience of the research base. He referred to the post-16 white paper as part of the Government's response, pointing in particular to greater collaboration and sharing across institutions, while also emphasising the importance of maintaining the UK's attractiveness to international students.

The session also examined AI and the future of work. Committee members pressed Liz Kendall on the pace of labour market change, including sharp falls in graduate vacancies and high levels of youth unemployment. She said the Government should not be passive in the face of this transition, arguing that AI will both create and displace jobs and that policy must actively shape the outcome. She highlighted free AI skills provision, a target to upskill 10 million people by 2030, support for AI adoption by businesses and a new cross-government future of work unit. Emran Mian added that DSIT wants to lead this agenda openly with employers, unions, academics and other departments, rather than treat it as an internal exercise.

On economic growth and scale-up, Lord Vallance argued that the key barriers and opportunities sit across government, including procurement, regulation, skills and access to private capital. He pointed to a more joined-up approach involving R&D tax credits, share option reforms, advanced market commitments and work to improve procurement for innovation. Both Lord Vallance and Liz Kendall stressed the need for a greater tolerance of risk and failure if the Government is serious about helping more science and technology firms scale. She also supported a more coherent "single

front door” across Innovate UK, the British Business Bank and the National Wealth Fund.

The Committee raised broader questions about strategic autonomy, including the risk of UK science and technology becoming too dependent on US platforms and finance. Liz Kendall pointed to pension reforms, sovereign AI capability, defence procurement and talent attraction as tools to retain and grow UK capability, while also signalling a desire to work more closely with European allies and other middle powers. She argued that the UK should aim to lead in selected areas rather than accept a secondary position.

Later exchanges covered quantum, life sciences, ARIA and intellectual property. Lord Vallance signalled further announcements on quantum and stressed that the next challenge is scaling firms into production. On life sciences, he pointed to the sector plan and the 10-year health plan, arguing that the UK needs stronger “pull-through” from innovation into NHS uptake. On ARIA and IP, Liz Kendall said that although science is international, DSIT must ensure the UK secures economic benefit from publicly backed innovation and should be willing to revisit safeguards where necessary.

In the closing section, the Committee considered AI governance and the use of AI in government. Liz Kendall praised the AI Security Institute as a world-leading body on frontier model risks and suggested strong continuity in its role. Emran Mian gave examples of how DSIT is seeking to apply AI in public services, including a Gov.UK AI chat interface and AI tutors in schools. She Kendall also pointed to the Online Safety framework and Ofcom’s enforcement powers, saying the Government is prepared to act against non-UK platforms where necessary to ensure compliance with UK law.

You [can watch the session](#).

## **Scientific Research Funding - Science, Innovation and Technology Committee oral evidence session**

On Wednesday 4 March from 9.00 am, the House of Commons Science, Innovation and Technology Committee heard oral evidence on Scientific Research Funding.

Witnesses included:

- Professor Jon Butterworth, Professor of Physics, University College London

- Professor Catherine Heymans, Astronomer Royal for Scotland and Professor of Astrophysics, University of Edinburgh
- Dr Simon Williams, Postdoctoral Research Associate, Institute for Particle Physics Phenomenology, Durham University
- Professor Michele Dougherty, Executive Chair, Science and Technology Facilities Council (STFC)

Committee members examined growing concern about funding pressures at STFC, particularly the impact on astronomy, particle physics and nuclear physics. Academic witnesses said the scale of the problem had become clearer over time, with early signs of pressure emerging last year before more serious concerns crystallised in early 2026. They described cuts of around 30% to parts of the grants line as potentially catastrophic for major UK science programmes, especially for postdoctoral researchers, technicians and engineers.

Witnesses argued that these pressures had not arisen solely from within the research communities affected, but reflected a wider combination of flat cash settlements, rising operational costs, staff pay increases, inflation and the higher cost of running large facilities. Professor Butterworth suggested that these wider pressures had increasingly been absorbed by the smaller part of the STFC budget that supports university grants, while Professor Heymans said uncertainty was already forcing projects to prepare for multiple cut scenarios, with serious risks to the UK's role in international collaborations and to its scientific reputation.

The Committee repeatedly returned to the issue of poor communication. Witnesses said the scale and implications of the pressures had not been communicated clearly or early enough, either within the system or to the wider research community. They argued that this had worsened uncertainty and made it harder for institutions and researchers to plan. Professor Dougherty accepted that communications had not been good enough and said the way the news had been conveyed to the community had been poor. She explained that she had been forced into rushed communication after information intended for staff was shared externally, and said she was unhappy with how the situation had been handled.

Early-career researchers were a major focus throughout the session. Dr Williams said that postdoctoral researchers had been among the first to feel the impact, with the lack of available positions acting as the clearest warning sign that cuts were taking effect. He argued that early-career researchers are the most exposed part of the system and that current pressures risk wiping out an entire intake, damaging the UK's long-term research base and international standing. Other witnesses agreed that short-term and

volatile postdoctoral funding lines were often the easiest area to reduce, even though they are essential to sustaining scientific capability.

Committee members also explored the effect on international partnerships, particularly CERN and the proposed LHCb upgrade. Witnesses stressed the importance of CERN to the UK research system and said withdrawal of promised support for the upgrade would risk damaging the UK's reputation as a reliable international partner. Professor Butterworth described CERN as central to frontier particle physics and wider technological development, while Professor Dougherty said the decision on infrastructure funding had been taken at cross-UKRI level rather than by STFC alone. She maintained that the UK remained committed to CERN overall, including through its annual subscription, but accepted that the decision had the potential to weaken the UK's standing if not handled carefully.

The session also examined whether the STFC situation is unique or part of a wider problem across UKRI. Academic witnesses suggested that other councils are also experiencing uncertainty, including concern about how the new bucket-based funding system is operating and what it means for curiosity-driven research. While some saw potential advantages in the new approach, they argued that the transition has been poorly managed and that the loss of the old system before the new one is fully clear has created significant anxiety across the research base.

When questioned directly, Professor Dougherty said she became aware of a projected financial shortfall when she took on the STFC chief executive role in January 2025. She estimated the shortfall at around £100 million to £150 million and said it reflected a combination of factors, including inflationary pressures, increased operating costs, staff salary increases and what she described as an overabundance of ambition in taking on new projects that the financial environment could not sustain. She said it had become clear that STFC could not continue on the same basis without intervention and that difficult choices would be unavoidable.

On decision-making and governance, Professor Dougherty said STFC would run a prioritisation process over the next three months, looking at the implications of 10%, 20% and 30% cuts, with input from the Science Board and the research community. Those options would then be shared with UKRI, with final decisions made at UKRI level. She also suggested that the current pressures had reopened longer-standing questions about where particle physics, astronomy and nuclear physics funding should sit within the wider system, and whether stronger safeguards are needed to protect these areas from being squeezed by other costs.

The Committee pressed Professor Dougherty on whether more could be done to use new UKRI funding structures to ease the transition and retain skilled staff. She said there was still insufficient clarity about how the new quantum, AI and computing

funding would operate, limiting what STFC could do in the short term. However, she said STFC was seeking representation on the relevant programme boards and believed that some of the people currently at risk could potentially move into new roles if the transition were managed better. She also said discussions were continuing with UKRI, DSIT and international partners about whether there might still be ways to mitigate the worst effects of the cuts.

You [can watch the session](#).

## The National Insurance Contributions (Employer Pensions Contributions) Bill

Summary of the Bill:

- This bill mainly limits the National Insurance (NI) advantage of pension **salary-sacrifice** arrangements by introducing a **£2,000 annual cap** on contributions that can be exempt from NI. Above that level, the sacrificed amount would count as earnings for NI purposes.
- Graduates and students were discussed in the debate because **student loan repayments are calculated using the same earnings definition as NI**. This means that if salary sacrificed above £2,000 is treated as earnings, some graduates with student loans could end up **repaying slightly more each month**, since those amounts might be counted as income for loan repayments.
- However, the impact would mainly fall on **higher-earning employees who make larger pension contributions**, and most early-career graduates would be unaffected because they are unlikely to exceed the £2,000 cap.
- As a result, the bill is largely a **tax and pensions measure rather than a higher-education policy**, and while universities may want to note the potential effect on some graduates and their own staff pension arrangements, it is **unlikely to have a major direct impact on the university sector or current students**.

### Peer contributions on Students/Graduates

- Baroness Neville-Rolfe (Con)

“graduates on the plan 2 loan are being hit particularly hard. **This amendment would help to limit the blow that this policy would otherwise exact upon them**. The student loan repayment arrangements are very unsatisfactory, as I know from talking to

members of our own team. We must not further penalise people for striving, and **the amendment would help, in a concrete way, those graduates who are trying to save into a pension.** Should my noble friend wish to test the opinion of the House on this matter, we will be pleased to support him”

- **Lord Fuller (Con)**

*By far the most affected group are youngsters at the start of their careers—graduates, people making a start on their working lives... Graduate programmes have been bombed out by the jobs tax and dynamited by the rise in the minimum wage which reduces the incentive for employees to train up the newbies... As the Spectator’s leader last week asked, is it still worth going to university? When the world’s oldest magazine starts questioning the value of higher education, you have to wonder for our economy, our society, the future prosperity of our nation and what it says about aspiration in these islands... All students and graduates want is for the Government to give them a break—but instead they are being broken and this Bill is the final straw*

- **Baroness Kramer (LD)**

“The Government have recognised—that the Bill unintentionally puts serious additional costs on to graduates. I find it absolutely ridiculous that, having recognised that there is an unintentional impact and that it is problematic, the Government are not correcting it in this Bill. As far as I can understand, they are waiting for some future piece of legislation to make that change...

Graduates are paying the 8% additional in NICs but, on top of that, because it pulls them into scope of having to make repayments at the margin, the impact is 17%. It has a huge impact on graduates who are now just beginning to reach the level where they would have anticipated they would start to repay, and they suddenly hit this really serious spike”

- **Lord Leigh of Hurley (Con)**

I wish to test the opinion of the House because I do not think students can wait for subsequent legislation to be brought forward to this House, and there is a risk it might not be. Students need absolute clarity that they are not going to be punished unfairly by this Bill.

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

# Forthcoming business

## Department for Work and Pensions - Oral Questions

On Monday 9 March, at 2.30pm the Secretary of Department for Work and Pensions, Rt Hon Pat McFadden MP, and his ministerial colleagues will answer oral questions in the House of Commons.

You [can watch the session](#).

## The draft Higher Education (Fee Limits and Fee Limit Condition) (England) (Amendment) Regulations 2026 - Third Delegated Legislation Committee Debate

On Tuesday 10 March, the Third Delegated Legislation Committee will consider the regulations to raise tuition fees in England. The accompanying explanatory material confirms that this is the parliamentary vehicle for the planned tuition fee uplift, as it would increase the maximum tuition fee limits for undergraduate and accelerated courses in England in the 2026/27 and 2027/28 academic years, including the main full-time cap.

The regulations would preserve the fee limits that currently apply to academic years beginning on or after 1 August 2019 and before 1 August 2026, as well as the separate fee limits for lower-fee foundation years beginning on or after 1 August 2025.

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

# Written questions and statements

## Department for Science, Innovation and Technology: Science: Research

**Catherine West (Labour) (Hornsey and Friern Barnet):** (113201) To ask the Secretary of State for Science, Innovation and Technology, what steps her Department is taking to help (a) retain early-career researchers in experimental particle physics and (b) support the wider scientific research sector.

**Kanishka Narayan (Labour) (Vale of Glamorgan):** The Department for Science, Innovation and Technology (DSIT) has committed to £58.5 billion investment in R&D over the next 4 years. This includes at least £5 billion to support research talent, including early career researchers, as well as £14 billion allocated to applicant-led, curiosity-driven research in UKRI that underpins long-term scientific capability and economic growth.

The Science and Technology Facilities Council (STFC) within UKRI is currently working with the sector to model different spending scenarios for its portfolio in particle physics, astronomy and nuclear physics (PPAN). No final spending decisions relating to STFC's PPAN portfolio have been made. The impacts of different modelled scenarios will be considered alongside feedback from the sector when taking final decisions.

More generally, DSIT has asked UKRI to ensure that its allocation decisions are informed by meaningful consultation with the scientific research community and a robust assessment of potential consequences for the UK's scientific capability and international standing.

[Source](#)

## Department for Education: Teachers: Workplace Pensions

**Jess Brown-Fuller (Liberal Democrats) (Chichester):** (105556) To ask the Secretary of State for Education, what steps she is taking to reduce delays for members of the Teacher's Pension who have submitted their remedial service statement.

**Georgia Gould (Labour) (Queen's Park and Maida Vale):** Recalculating benefits for retired members is a complex process. For those members retiring, these cases are relatively straightforward as no benefits are already in payment. For retired members, additional complications around tax, interest rules and system functionality required extensive consultation.

Capita, as the Teachers' Pensions Scheme (TPS) administrator, are processing Remediable Service Statement (RSS) choices and aim to complete payments as quickly as possible.

The issuing and payment of members' RSS choices is a high priority and the department is continually exploring ways to improve payment times with Capita, which includes recruiting additional staff and automating functions wherever possible. Members' original pension benefits will continue to be paid until their choice has been implemented.

In summer 2026, administration of the TPS will become the responsibility of Tata Consultancy Services (TCS). The department is working with TCS to finalise the timeline for issuing all RSSs and any subsequent payments.

Source

## **Department of Health and Social Care: Medicine: Research**

**Martin Rhodes (Labour) (Glasgow North):** (908024) To ask the Secretary of State for Health and Social Care, what steps he is taking with Cabinet colleagues to support higher education institutions with health research.

**Zubir Ahmed (Labour) (Glasgow South West):** The Department, through the National Institute for Health and Care Research (NIHR), is the United Kingdom's largest funder of health and care research training. NIHR delivers a comprehensive research career pathway, from internships and predoctoral fellowships through to research professorships, for the full range of clinical and non-clinical academics, providing the skilled research workforce in universities to lead research. The NIHR invests over £220 million each year in research training programmes.

Furthermore, the Department is working with the devolved administrations, other funders, and wider stakeholders to implement the recommendations from the recent Office for the Strategic Co-ordination of Health Research reports, to ensure there is a comprehensive, clear, and rewarding career pathway for clinical academics in health

and care research. This includes the introduction of Clinical Future Leaders Fellowships, which will expand national support for clinical academic careers.

The Department, through the NIHR, invests in centres of excellence and collaborations, services, and facilities to enable and deliver research in England. Collectively these form the NIHR infrastructure. NIHR infrastructure helps to support and deliver research across the National Health Service and wider health and care system, including universities. The NIHR infrastructure supports patients and the public to participate in high quality research. The Department is committed to ensuring that all patients have access to cutting-edge clinical trials and innovative, lifesaving treatments.

By investing in research across public health and social care, NIHR enables universities to address wider determinants of health, support independence, reduce inequalities, and inform local decision-making. Dedicated NIHR programmes and infrastructure work alongside Higher Education Institutions to conduct research in community, local authority, and other non-clinical settings, ensuring evidence is generated where it is most needed and can be translated into meaningful improvements in care and services.

Source

## **Department of Health and Social Care: Medicine: Students**

**Claire Young (Liberal Democrats) (Thornbury and Yate):** (115020) To ask the Secretary of State for Health and Social Care, what discussions he has had with the Secretary of State for Education on the adequacy of clinical placement provision for final year medical students in relation to location and accessibility.

**Karin Smyth (Labour) (Bristol South):** No such discussions have taken place. NHS England provides funding to National Health Service providers for undergraduate medical placements that are in scope of the NHS Education and Training (E&T) tariffs. The undergraduate medical tariff price includes a nationally mandated sum as well as regional weighting through the Market Forces Factor. The E&T tariff guidance is reviewed and published annually.

From year five of an undergraduate course and year two of a graduate-entry course, eligible medical students can also claim reimbursement towards travel and dual accommodation costs during practice placement through the NHS Bursary scheme.

The 10-Year Health Plan, published on 3 July 2025, committed to reforming the undergraduate and postgraduate medical tariffs. We will ensure the system drives clinical placement activity in the right professions and settings, especially community settings, and that it harnesses innovative approaches like simulated learning.

Source

## Department for Education: Overseas Students: Fees and Charges

**Mike Wood (Conservative) (Kingswinford and South Staffordshire):** (113603) To ask the Secretary of State for Education, with reference to the press release entitled Young people from all backgrounds to get opportunity to study abroad as UK-EU deal unlocks Erasmus+, of 17 December 2025, whether EU students will pay different levels of university fees compared to UK students studying in the UK.

**Josh MacAlister (Labour) (Whitehaven and Workington):** Both inbound and outbound students on an Erasmus+ placement are exempt from tuition and registration fees at their host institution.

As the UK has left the EU, EU nationals are treated as international students when having started courses on or after 1 August 2021. This provides clarity as to which persons are eligible to access home fee status and student finance.

For EU, other EEA and Swiss nationals and their family members covered by citizens' rights under the Withdrawal Agreements, they will continue to have access to student support and home fee status in England for the duration of their course, subject to meeting the residency requirements.

Grouped Questions: 113598

Source

## Department for Education: Students: Loans

**Liz Jarvis (Liberal Democrats) (Eastleigh):** (113975) To ask the Secretary of State for Education, what assessment she has made of the potential impact of the student loan repayment system, including interest accrual, on borrowers who take extended periods out of the labour market due to caring responsibilities; and whether her Department has made an assessment of the potential differential impact of this system on women.

**Josh MacAlister (Labour) (Whitehaven and Workington):** Interest accrues on loan balances until the loan has been repaid in full or cancelled, but interest rates do not impact monthly repayments made by borrowers.

Borrowers on Plan 5 student loans only accrue interest at Retail Price Index (RPI) (currently 3.2%) meaning graduates will not repay more than they borrow in real terms. Borrowers on Plan 2 terms have interest applied at RPI only if earnings fall below the repayment threshold, or when out of the labour market, such as with caring responsibilities, ensuring that the loan's debt value will not grow in real terms. Additionally, borrowers, regardless of their plan, earning under the repayment threshold are not required to make repayments.

Graduates only begin repaying once their earnings exceed the earnings threshold, paying 9% of income above that level. If a graduate becomes disabled and permanently unfit for work, loan balances, including interest may be written off.

For all borrowers, any outstanding loan, including interest accrued, will be cancelled after the loan term ends, and debt is never passed on to family members or descendants.

Grouped Questions: 113967

[Source](#)

## **Department for Education: Erasmus+ Programme: Apprentices**

**Ben Coleman (Labour) (Chelsea and Fulham):** (114748) To ask the Secretary of State for Education, what steps her Department is taking to encourage and support applications from apprentices to Erasmus+.

**Josh MacAlister (Labour) (Whitehaven and Workington):** We will work closely with institutions and our young people to maximise take-up, particularly among disadvantaged groups.

A UK National Agency will be appointed to administer the programme, with a dedicated website and guidance issued well ahead of the 2027 funding call which opens in November 2026.

On 17 December 2025, the department published on GOV.UK a page providing information about the Erasmus+ programme and the available opportunities.

There will also be a broad range of sector outreach activities to increase awareness and engagement, such as webinars and targeted communications to eligible organisations.

Grouped Questions: 114744

Source

## Department for Education: Education: Standards

**Richard Holden (Conservative) (Basildon and Billericay):** (93781) To ask the Secretary of State for Education, with reference to the OECD Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) 2022 scores, what steps she is taking to reduce the performance gap between the UK nations and (a) Singapore, (b) Japan and (c) Vietnam; and what assessment she has made of the potential impact of the scores on the UK's (i) overall productivity, (ii) skills base and (iii) international competitiveness.

**Georgia Gould (Labour) (Queen's Park and Maida Vale):** Education is a devolved matter, and the response outlines the information for England only.

High and rising standards across education, from early years to adulthood, are key to unlocking stronger outcomes and a better future for children and young people.

To drive high standards across the PISA subjects of mathematics, reading and science, the government has committed £27.7 million this financial year, supporting the teaching of phonics, early language and reading for pleasure via the English Hubs programme. We will also introduce a new reading assessment in year 8 to check progress. Following the Curriculum and Assessment Review's recommendations, we will revise the maths curriculum from key stages 1 to 3 to support mastery and ensure a strong foundation for all children. Regional improvement for standards and excellence teams also work closely with Maths and English Hubs to share best practice.

PISA rankings look at the relative position between the different countries, however, the scores provide an absolute measure of performance in a country and are comparable over time.

Source

## Treasury: Students: Loans

**David Reed (Conservative) (Exmouth and Exeter East):** (115946) To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer, how many and what proportion of people with Plan 2 student loans had an effective marginal deduction rate of at least (a) 51 per cent and (b) 71 per cent as a result of the combined effects of Income Tax, employee National Insurance contributions and Plan 2 student loan repayments in the 2024-25 tax year.

**James Murray (Labour) (Ealing North):** The Plan 2 Student Loan Scheme was introduced in 2012 under the Conservative and Liberal Democrat Coalition Government.

The student finance system is heavily subsidised by government, and lower-earning graduates will always be protected, with any outstanding loan and interest cancelled at the end of the repayment term. It is right that those who are able to repay loans do so.

We will continue to keep the terms of the system under review to ensure the system protects taxpayers and students now and in the future.

Source

## Sector news

### **Student loans: cutting interest won't ease monthly squeeze, repayment changes would**

New analysis from the Institute for Public Policy Research (IPPR) sets out the trade-offs facing ministers as pressure mounts to reform student loan repayments for post-2012 graduates.

With repayment thresholds frozen from 2026/27, more graduates are having 9 per cent of their earnings above £29,385 automatically deducted. This means that by 2029/30, people earning £30,000 will pay £55 a year more, while those earning £40,000 or above will pay £170 more.

IPPR modelling reveals that under the current system, once tax, national insurance and pension contributions are included, graduates face effective deduction rates of between 42 per cent (for those earning between £28,470 and £50,270) and 76 per cent (for those earning between £100,000 and £125,140). This makes the case for reform more urgent than ever.

The think tank highlights that most Plan 2 borrowers will never fully repay their loans. As a result, analysis of potential changes focuses on take-home pay now rather than what many middle earners repay overall.

#### **Reducing interest rates**

Due to high interest rates, over three million graduates see their debts rise each year despite making regular monthly repayments.

However, because repayments are income-contingent rather than balance-based, reducing interest rates would not change monthly deductions. The only beneficiaries would be higher earners likely to repay in full, and the gains would materialise only after many years.

#### **Increasing the repayment threshold**

Increasing the repayment threshold would mostly benefit those earning just above it. For example, IPPR analysis shows that raising the threshold from £29,385 to £35,000 would mean someone earning £30,000 would gain £138 a year, while someone earning £35,000 would gain £588.

Beyond £35,000, the benefit remains the same in cash terms. This means it falls as a proportion of total earnings but still provides identical cash gains to many middle and upper-middle earners, limiting its progressivity.

### Reducing the repayment rate

Reducing the repayment rate from 9 per cent to 4.5 per cent would have the most predictable effects. Someone earning £40,000 would save £519 a year, while someone earning £100,000 would benefit by six times as much in cash terms (a boost of £3,219). In total, this would put £5.8 billion into people's pockets in 2026/27.

This could be made more targeted to lower earners — and more affordable for the government — by halving the repayment rate to 4.5 per cent up to £50,000, but tapering at 9 per cent for earnings above that level. This would cap the maximum cash benefit at £969 a year for those earning £50,000 or more.

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

## GuildHE Creative HE Strategy Call for Evidence

The GuildHE Creative HE Strategy Call for Evidence is the sector's opportunity to provide crucial insights for developing a roadmap that will secure the pipeline of talent, strengthen the sector's impact on regional growth, and ensure better policy support for creative higher education.

The UK's creative industries are a significant success story, defining culture and providing a fast-growing economic sector. Projected to be the largest high-growth employment sector from 2025-2030, according to Skills England - and currently expanding at twice the rate of the wider economy - the sector heavily relies on university graduates; 75% of its workforce holds a degree, compared to the UK average of 51%. Higher education supports research and innovation for the industry, while creative HE institutions act as anchors for cultural and community exchange across the country.

GuildHE is gathering evidence across three key themes:

- Curriculum, Skills, and Student Experience
- Research and Innovation
- Regions, Engaged Citizenship, and Civic Responsibility

### How to respond to the Call for Evidence:

The deadline for submissions is **Tuesday 31 March 2026**.

Download a [pdf of the Call for Evidence here](#).

Responses to the Call for Evidence can be submitted [through this survey](#). Additional evidence can also be submitted to: [CreativeHE@guildhe.ac.uk](mailto:CreativeHE@guildhe.ac.uk)

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

## **All-Party Parliamentary Group for FE and Lifelong Learning inquiry into adult education in England**

The APPG for FE and Lifelong Learning announced it will hear evidence on adult education from learning providers, leading education organisations, and think tanks over the spring and summer, before presenting recommendations to the government in autumn 2026. The Association of Colleges is supporting this inquiry in its role as secretariat to the APPG.

Five inquiry sessions, each chaired by a member of the APPG, will cover economic growth, skills and workforce needs, social mobility and inclusion, health, wellbeing and community resilience, policy, funding and the future of lifelong learning and learning from across the UK and beyond. An online call for evidence is also now live [here](#).

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

## **UKRI shares first detailed comparisons of past and future spending under new ‘bucket’ model**

Professor Sir Ian Chapman, Chief Executive of UKRI, has written to the Committee Chair, Dame Chi Onwurah, to provide previously unavailable information about its new 'bucket'-led approach to funding research.

This letter follows up on several points raised in the Chief Executive's appearance in front of the committee in February 2026, providing a detailed comparison of previous and planned spending for the first time. The letter includes a graph which 'roughly'

shows how previous funding maps onto the new 'buckets' of research funding being introduced by UKRI and Science Minister Lord Vallance.

The Chief Executive caveated these comparisons by saying that the changes to funding are 'not a simple reclassification,' and that UKRI is implementing 'fundamental change in how money flows through the organisation and is invested.'

In the letter, the Chief Executive also confirmed that UKRI will produce and publish a new single delivery plan for the 2026/7 financial year. This follows repeated requests from the committee for greater clarity over the metrics used to measure UKRI's progress and performance.

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

## **Home Office announced visa brake imposed on four countries**

[Visa brake imposed on 4 countries after widespread visa abuse - GOV.UK](#)

## **New inquiry: FCDO's approach to higher education and research partnerships**

The International Development Committee has [launched an inquiry](#) exploring the FCDO's approach to higher education and research partnerships as part of its development strategy.

- [New inquiry: FCDO's approach to higher education and research partnerships](#)

The inquiry aims to examine how the department's approach may shift in response to a reduced aid budget and in light of the new International Education Strategy.

The Terms of Reference also invite evidence on the medium to long-term benefits of higher education and research partnerships to the UK's international development goals.

As the international development budget is set to be cut from 0.5% of the UK's Gross National Income to 0.3% in 2027, the Government has set out 'four essential shifts' in its development agenda, including moving from grants to expertise.

Published in January, the International Education Strategy outlines the Government's plans to use the UK's research and education system to create mutually beneficial

partnerships. These would see the UK support upskilling and capacity-building in partner countries by sharing expertise.

### Call for evidence

The Committee is interested to hear a range of views on some or all the following questions. They would be keen to hear from: stakeholders who can talk about case studies; Government leaders and officials; academia; think tanks; civil society organisations working on the ground; administrators or leaders of higher education or research-related programmes that receive UK ODA.

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

## **New report advises universities to act now on GenAI – and to put human competency at the centre**

A new report from the Higher Education Policy Institute (HEPI), *Being indispensable: Capabilities for a human-AI world*, the 'FUTURES' framework, argues that universities should take more robust approaches to GenAI integration, as the technology becomes more embedded in everyday and academic life.

Written by Dr Doug Specht and Professor Gunter Saunders of the University of Westminster, the report says strengthening human competencies must be the top priority for higher education institutions in order to harness the greatest benefits from GenAI.

The authors note 75% of young people aged 13 to 18 have already used GenAI, with similar patterns visible across higher education. This rapid uptake brings major opportunities: GenAI can personalise learning, reduce staff workload and widen access to support. However, the risks are substantial. GenAI models can reflect bias within their training data, access to the most capable systems may deepen inequalities and an uncritical reliance on GenAI can weaken independence, originality and authentic learning. Concerns around environmental impact add an additional layer of complexity.

The report argues universities need a dual approach to GenAI-enabled learning. It calls for curricula that embed human-AI collaboration while ensuring that ethical reasoning, critical thinking and wellbeing remain central to academic development. New approaches must also include practical governance, staff and student training and equitable access to tools.

To support this, the authors introduce the FUTURES framework, a practical model designed to help institutions integrate GenAI effectively while strengthening the human capabilities that AI cannot replace. The framework spans seven domains:

1. Fluency in AI and Digital Systems
2. Understanding Self and Wellbeing
3. Technology Ethics and Responsibility
4. Understanding others and Social Intelligence
5. Resilience and Adaptability
6. Emerging Technology Awareness
7. Society and Professional Engagement

The FUTURES framework offers universities a concrete way of turning high-level AI principles into day-to-day educational practice. By using FUTURES alongside tools such as Jisc's *AI Maturity Framework*, institutions can design modules, assessments and professional development that deliberately build the human capabilities needed to work critically and creatively with GenAI, ensuring that technological adoption is firmly anchored in pedagogical values and student success.

Going forward, the report argues that sector bodies should provide clearer guidance on assessment in an AI-enabled environment and government should invest in capability building to ensure students and staff thrive in an AI-rich world. By adopting FUTURES, universities can strengthen human potential while navigating the opportunities and risks of AI.

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

## **Global Talent and Innovator Founder visas - Migration Advisory Committee open call for evidence**

The Migration Advisory Committee (MAC) is reviewing how the immigration system could best be used to attract global talent to the UK.

As part of this work, they are launching a call for evidence on the [Global Talent](#) and [Innovator Founder](#) visa routes.

This is part of the MAC's [review](#) to assess how the immigration system could be used to attract top talent to the UK.

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

## Reform UK publishes Welsh Manifesto

[Reform's manifesto for the upcoming elections in Wales](#) promises to put Welsh universities on a "sustainable financial footing," with tuition fee levels aligned with England for the foreseeable future and a review of capital funding.

The party says it would recognise universities as "central to Wales' economic future" but also act to ensure that degrees are value for money and equip graduates for the workplace. The manifesto also confirms that Reform would bring in free speech legislation, and says that "institutions that curtail open debate will not be rewarded with public funding."

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

## Home Secretary's speech on immigration

In a [speech on migration reforms](#), Home Secretary Shabana Mahmood announced that the **new student refugee route** would open "this autumn", for arrivals in autumn 2027.

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