



# The All-Party Parliamentary **University Group**

1 – 5 November 2021

## **University APPG weekly update**

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

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[Click on the items in the Table of Contents to go straight to the debates, answers, forthcoming business, etc.](#)

## Table of Contents

<b>Parliamentary Business</b> .....	<b>2</b>
Education oral questions.....	3
ARIA Bill Lords Second Reading.....	3
Ten-Minute Rule Motion on Schools and Educational Settings .....	4
Education Committee session with the Education Secretary, Rt Hon Nadhim Zahawi MP .....	4
<b>Forthcoming business</b> .....	<b>5</b>
Professional qualifications Bill .....	5
<b>Written Questions</b> .....	<b>5</b>
Student finance support for migrant workers .....	5
Student finance for refugees .....	5
Representations from higher education on fire and rehire .....	6
Discussions with higher education sector on fire and rehire .....	6
Reduction of student tuition fees .....	6
Adequacy of funding for higher education .....	7
Support to tackle drug spiking .....	7
Alternative student finance.....	7
Student nurse debt.....	8
Pure maths excluded as research for which R&D tax credits can be claimed.....	8
<b>Sector News</b> .....	<b>8</b>
Chair of the Social Mobility Commission approved.....	8
New report by All-Party Parliamentary University Group .....	8
Guidance for employers on apprenticeship funding.....	9
Conservative MP Owen Paterson resigns .....	9

## Education oral questions

On Monday 1 November, the Education Secretary, Nadhim Zahawi MP alongside Universities Minister, Michelle Donelan MP and Minister for Skills, Alex Burghart answered education questions from MPs.

The session began with a question from Labour MP, Chi Onwurah on the reallocation of the Office for Students' (OfS) strategic priorities grant, away from arts courses. Answering on behalf of the government, the Education Secretary said that although he recognised the 'incredible role' of arts courses in enriching young minds and inward investment and exports from the UK, that the grant was reallocated to better suit the needs of higher cost and strategically important subjects like those in STEM. He also stated that the OfS would be providing an additional £10 million in funding for specialist institutions, many of which provided arts courses.

Questions also covered digital teaching and learning provision and catch-up, with Paul Blomfield MP (Lab) asking what the government were doing to address any loss of experience for students. The Universities Minister, Michelle Donelan MP responded by commending the sector for providing high-quality online provision but said that it should 'never be a substitute for face-to-face teaching. She also highlighted that she had written to universities last week asking them to provide a 'fair deal' for students. The minister also praised the sector for supporting student transition to higher education, citing the session that was run in partnership with UUK over the summer for school leaders.

Labour's Paul Blomfield MP and Conservative Dr Julian Lewis both highlighted their concerns about the rumoured government plans to lower the payment threshold for student loans. In response, the universities minister said that more details would be announced 'shortly' in the government's response to Augar.

On USS and possible industrial action, the SNP's Education spokesperson, Carol Monaghan MP raised her concern for staff, citing UCU's messaging around the planned benefit reforms to USS. Michelle Donelan MP responded urging university staff not to strike or cause more disruption for students, adding that students deserved a 'better deal'.

Finally, on the Higher Education (Free Speech) Bill, the minister was asked how the Bill would uphold the right to freedom of speech at university campuses, in relation to recent high-profile cases of harassment. The minister did not directly address how it would address such cases but reiterated that the Bill would uphold and help promote free speech on campus more widely.

You can find a transcript of the questions [here](#).

## ARIA Bill Lords Second Reading

On Tuesday 2 November, the Advanced Research and Invention Agency (ARIA) Bill continued its passage through parliament, with its second reading in the Lords. Lord Callanan, BEIS Minister in the Lords, outlined the Bill's objectives and welcomed the broad commitment from all three main parties.

Lord Clement-Jones (Lib Dem) asked about the agency's operating model, in particular on how it would commission research and collaborate with universities. In response, the minister said that the operating model would only work if it is 'cohesive' and that it was not always necessary to legislate for these sorts of relationships. He added that ARIA's leaders would need to have good communication, openness and trust with other stakeholders across the research ecosystem and that the government were looking for these qualities when recruiting for the ARIA's CEO.

Lord Patel (Cross bench) said that ARIA grants should waive research cost-sharing with universities, saying that this had been a barrier to high-risk research and translation. The minister responded by saying that the government were considering appropriate arrangements for funding research projects that were properly costed and that costs were met to enable 'transformative' scientific research. He also added that further details on expectations for ARIA and cost sharing would be set out at a later date.

Several Lords raised their concerns that the agency will not be subject to Freedom of Information requests (Fols). The minister responded by saying that the decision to omit ARIA from the Fol Act had 'not been taken lightly', however, he added that he believed it was necessary to create an 'extraordinarily lean operating system' and that robust arrangements were in place to provide a clear picture to parliament and taxpayers about how ARIA's activities are funded and where it spends its money. Notably, he also highlighted that other bodies subject to the Fol Act, including universities would still process requests about their activities with ARIA in the usual manner.

You can read a transcript of the debate [here](#).

## **Ten-Minute Rule Motion on Schools and Educational Settings**

On Wednesday 3 November, Education Committee Chair, Robert Halfon MP, put forward a Ten-Minute Rule Motion on Schools and Educational Settings (Essential Infrastructure and Opening During Emergencies).

Robert Halfon MP brought in the Bill that would make provision for educational settings including early years, schools, colleges and universities be classified as essential infrastructure and remain open to all students during public health and other national emergencies. He noted that the majority of the country's universities switched to remote learning, with many students still not having returned to full face-to-face teaching.

The Bill was presented by Robert Halfon, Edward Timpson, Tim Loughton, Sir Iain Duncan Smith, Christian Wakeford, Tom Hunt, Brendan Clarke-Smith, Greg Smith, Siobhan Baillie, Miriam Cates, Munira Wilson and David Warburton.

Second Reading will take place on Friday 4 February 2022.

You can read a transcript of the debate [here](#).

## **Education Committee session with the Education Secretary, Rt Hon Nadhim Zahawi MP**

On Wednesday 3 November, the Secretary of State for Education, Rt Hon Nadhim Zahawi MP, and Susan Acland-Hood, Permanent Secretary, Department for Education took part in the Education Committee accountability hearing.

Committee Chair Robert Halfon spoke to his ten minute rule Bill which argued for a 'triple lock' — agreements by the children's commissioner, vote in Parliament and a three-week rolling review — to be passed before any Covid-related closures to educational settings were to be considered.

The Education Secretary, Nadhim Zahawi MP, said he would have a look at the Bill. He said his commitment to parents and teachers since being appointed was on keeping schools open and he had no plans to close schools again.

On the proposed reduction in BTECs, Robert Halfon MP relayed Education Data Lab statistics which showed that pupils taking BTECs were more likely to be in employment and earned more at age 22 than those who took A Levels. He said until T-Levels were in place every student should be able to take a BTEC.

In response, the Education Secretary confirmed the government had no plan to get rid of 'quality BTECs'. He said he wanted to focus on career outcomes whilst moving towards the T-Level system and improving the lower Level 2 qualifications. He also noted that people studying for BTECs were three times more likely to drop out of higher education. He said however that T-Levels were necessary as a fusion between BTECs and A Levels.

Susan Acland-Hood said there had never been a proposal to abolish all BTECs but the main issue was the problems of BTECs which overlapped with T Levels.

Other areas covered by the committee included SEND provision, a longer school day, work placements, levelling up and home education.

You can watch the session [here](#).

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## Forthcoming business

The House of Commons will be in recess from Wednesday 10 November to Monday 15 November.

The House of Lords will be in recess from Thursday 10 November to Monday 15 November.

## Professional qualifications Bill

On Tuesday 9 November, the House of Lords will consider the Professional Qualifications Bill [HL] in the Report Stage.

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

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## Written Questions

### Student finance support for migrant workers

**Damien Moore (Southport):** To ask the Secretary of State for Education, what steps his Department is taking to help ensure that family members of migrant workers are aware that they qualify for full student finance support. [63869]

**Michelle Donelan (Chippenham):** From the 2021/22 academic year, migrant workers from the European Economic Area and their family members who are covered by the Withdrawal Agreements, and meet the ordinary residence requirement, can access tuition fee loans, loans for living costs and targeted grants. This arrangement is set out in the department's guidance which was published in August, which you can find [here](#).

The information is also contained in the following Student Finance England publication, found [here](#).

### Student finance for refugees

**Emma Hardy (Kingston upon Hull West and Hessle):** To ask the Secretary of State for Education, pursuant to the Answer of 22 October 2021 to Question 57294, on Students: Finance, what data he holds on the number of applicants who began studies outside the UK before becoming refugees and have subsequently only been granted funding by the Student Loans Company for the years of their course that are deemed to be uncompleted; and whether he has plans to enable funding to be made available to those applicants for full courses at higher education institutions in the UK. [62822]

**Michelle Donelan (Chippenham):** The department is not able to answer the requirements in this request around the number of applicants who began studies outside the UK before becoming refugees. The Student Loans Company asks students "Have you started an undergraduate course of Higher Education in any country since leaving school?" on the application form but does not log which country the applicant studied in so cannot confirm if the studies were started outside the UK.

Generally, fee support on full-time courses is available for the duration of the course plus one extra year if needed. If a student has previous full-time higher education (HE) study at a publicly funded

provider, whether within the UK or overseas, those years will normally be deducted from the number of years of fee support available for a subsequent full-time course. These rules exist to enable us to target resources more effectively at students who have not had a chance to experience HE. The rules do not apply to maintenance support.

In addition to the standard entitlement, if a student did not complete their most recent previous course because of compelling personal reasons, an additional year of fee support may be granted in respect of the first year that the student takes of a new course. This applies equally to persons who have been granted international protection by the Home Office such as refugees and, from 1 August 2022 those relocated to the UK under the Afghan relocation and assistance policy, who will be eligible for immediate student support without needing to demonstrate three years ordinary residence in the UK and Islands before the start of the course.

There are no current plans to changes this system.

### **Representations from higher education on fire and rehire**

**Neale Hanvey (Kirkcaldy and Cowdenbeath):** To ask the Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy, what recent representations he has received from companies or organisations in the (a) aviation, (b) retail, (c) higher education, (d) further education, (e) local authorities, (f) manufacturing and (g) energy sectors on the practice of fire and rehire; and if he will make a statement. [63901]

**Paul Scully (Sutton and Cheam):** This Government has been consistently clear that we do not accept the inappropriate use by some employers of fire and rehire as a negotiation tactic.

My Rt. Hon. Friend the Secretary of State meets regularly with a diverse range of stakeholders including trade unions and employers to discuss various policy matters, across the sectors covered by the Department. The Department has also welcomed further evidence from trade unions and employers on the nature and scale of the issue.

### **Discussions with higher education sector on fire and rehire**

**Neale Hanvey (Kirkcaldy and Cowdenbeath):** To ask the Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy, what recent discussions his Department has had with companies or organisations in the (a) aviation, (b) retail, (c) higher education, (d) further education, (e) local authorities, (f) manufacturing, and (g) energy sectors on the practice of fire and rehire; and if he will make a statement. [63900]

**Paul Scully (Sutton and Cheam):** This Government has been consistently clear that we do not accept the inappropriate use by some employers of fire and rehire as a negotiation tactic.

My Rt. Hon. Friend the Secretary of State meets regularly with a diverse range of stakeholders including trade unions and employers to discuss various policy matters, across the sectors covered by the Department. The Department has also welcomed further evidence from trade unions and employers on the nature and scale of the issue.

### **Reduction of student tuition fees**

**Rachael Maskell (York Central):** To ask the Secretary of State for Education, what assessment he has made of the potential merits of a reduction in student tuition fees. [62772]

**Michelle Donelan (Chippenham):** The department remains committed to a sustainable funding model for the higher education system which supports high value provision, meets the skills needs of the country and maintains the world-class reputation of UK higher education.

We continue to consider carefully the recommendations made by the independent panel that reported to the Review of Post-18 Education and Funding. This includes their proposals relating to changes to tuition fee caps and the level of Strategic Priorities Grant funding that is paid directly to providers by the Office for Students. The department plans to set out a full conclusion to the Review in due course.

The government has announced that maximum tuition fee caps for academic year 2022/23 will be frozen at their current levels to deliver better value for students and to keep the cost of higher education under control.

### **Adequacy of funding for higher education**

**Rachael Maskell (York Central):** To ask the Secretary of State for Education, what recent assessment he has made of the adequacy of funding for higher education. [62771]

**Michelle Donelan (Chippenham):** The department remains committed to a sustainable funding model for the higher education system which supports high value provision, meets the skills needs of the country and maintains the world-class reputation of UK higher education.

We continue to consider carefully the recommendations made by the independent panel that reported to the Review of Post-18 Education and Funding. This includes their proposals relating to changes to tuition fee caps and the level of Strategic Priorities Grant funding that is paid directly to providers by the Office for Students. The department plans to set out a full conclusion to the Review in due course.

The government has announced that maximum tuition fee caps for academic year 2022/23 will be frozen at their current levels to deliver better value for students and to keep the cost of higher education under control.

### **Support to tackle drug spiking**

**Rachael Maskell (York Central):** To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department, what steps she is taking to support universities and hospitals to tackle drug spiking by (a) injection or (b) drinks. [60461]

**Rachel Maclean (Redditch):** The reports of the spiking of drinks with illegal substances, and of other attacks on individuals in night time venues, are of course concerning. This is an ongoing matter which the police are investigating. We would encourage anyone who is a victim or a witness of the offences to report the information to the police. Information about spiking has been made available on the Government's website for information about drugs, FRANK

Licensing authorities have a number of options available to them to manage the night-time economy through a range of powers to tackle existing individual premises which are causing problems including the use of conditions, licence reviews and closure powers under the Anti-social Behaviour, Crime and Policing Act 2014.

### **Alternative student finance**

**Kirsten Oswald (East Renfrewshire):** To ask the Secretary of State for Education, pursuant to the Answer of 18 October 2021 to Question 53884 on Students: Finance, what discussions he has had with the devolved Administrations on the introduction of alternative student finance. [63753]

**Michelle Donelan (Chippenham):** Discussions with officials in the devolved administrations about the provision of a student finance product compatible with Islamic finance principles have taken place, most recently with officials from the Scottish Government. As education is a devolved matter, it is up to each devolved administration to decide whether they wish to introduce a Sharia-compliant student finance solution.

## **Student nurse debt**

**Maria Eagle (Garston and Halewood):** To ask the Secretary of State for Health and Social Care, when he plans to reply to the letter on behalf of a constituent from the hon. Member for Garston and Halewood of August 10 2021 on student nurse debt and the abolition of nurses and allied trades bursaries. [61117]

**Edward Argar (Charnwood):** We responded to the hon. Member's letter on 1 November 2021.

## **Pure maths excluded as research for which R&D tax credits can be claimed**

**Chi Onwurah (Newcastle upon Tyne Central):** To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer, for what reason pure maths is not included as research for which R&D tax credits can be claimed. [67148]

**Lucy Frazer (South East Cambridgeshire):** As set out in the definition of Research & Development for tax purposes published by the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy, expenditure on mathematical techniques can qualify insofar as that expenditure is incurred as part of a research project into the physical and material universe.

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## **Sector News**

### **Chair of the Social Mobility Commission approved**

On Friday 29 October, the Women and Equalities Committee published a report approving the Government's preferred candidate Katharine Birbalsingh CBE as the new Chair of the Social Mobility Commission.

The Committee concluded that she was a 'suitable candidate for the role' and made note of her decades of experience in state-sector education and 'track record of enhancing the life chances of disadvantaged young people through education'.

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

### **New report by All-Party Parliamentary University Group**

On Monday 1 November, the All-Party Parliamentary University Group published a new report titled 'Is university worth it? Young people's motivations, aspirations and views on student finance'.

The Group commissioned this research to gather better evidence of prospective students' views on the student finance system as it stands, potential reforms to the system and the post-18 education options available to them.



The project included a poll of 1,000 17 and 18 year olds, three focus groups with prospective students conducted in Middlesbrough, Derby and Wolverhampton and six one-to-one interviews.

Across the board, the report concluded that:

- Students are clear on why they want to go to university and see it as a way to bigger and better things. When asked about motivations for applying to university the top answer across all demographics was 'to get a job in a career I want to pursue' (63%). The lifelong benefit having a degree brings was at the forefront of students' minds, particularly from those from less affluent backgrounds.
- Significant gaps exist in the resources available to help prospective students financially plan for university, with many relying on information from family and friends. 57% of those in their final year of school/college did not know how much they would need for accommodation or food.
- Over three quarters of students think the current interest rate charged on student loans is unfair. Students overwhelmingly felt the interest rate charged was unfair. 81% of students also agreed student loan debt should be wiped after 30 years.
- Less than a quarter (22%) of students agreed there should be a limit on the number of students that can go to university each year. Young people believe higher education should be open to everyone that wants to learn and takes it seriously with no cap placed on aspiration.

You can find the report [here](#).

### **Guidance for employers on apprenticeship funding**

On Monday 1 November, the Department for Education updated guidance on how government funds apprenticeships in England.

The guidance includes updates flexibilities to support current apprentices, incentive payments for hiring a new apprentice and the time period for which non-levy paying employers can reserve funds

You can find the guidance [here](#).

### **Conservative MP Owen Paterson resigns**

On Thursday 4 November, Conservative MP for North Shropshire, Owen Paterson, resigned. His resignation comes following the Commons Standards Committee concluded that he had misused his position as an MP and recommended he be suspended from the Commons for 30 sitting days.

The resignation will trigger a by-election in the North Shropshire constituency.

You can find more information [here](#).