



The All-Party Parliamentary **University Group**

University APPG weekly update

10 – 14 July 2023

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

If you would like more information on parliamentary business, or advice on engaging with Parliament or a parliamentarian, please contact:

Tom Lewis | appug@universitiesuk.ac.uk | 0207 419 5424

Click on the items in the Table of contents to go straight to debates, answers, forthcoming business, etc.

Contents

Parliamentary business	3
Lifelong Learning (Higher Education Fee Limits) Bill - committee stage	3
Private rented sector report and Renter’s (Reform) Bill – LUHC committee oral evidence	6
Forthcoming business	8
Education oral questions	8
DSIT oral questions	8
House of Commons recess	9
Written Questions	10
Universities: Admissions	10
Students: Health	11
Universities: Strikes	12
Students: Public Transport	14
Overseas Students: British Overseas Territories	14
Iran: Unmanned Air Vehicles	15
Universities: Assessments	16
Overseas Students: Ukraine	17
Higher Education (Freedom of Speech) Act 2023	18
STEM Subjects: Education	18
Sector News	20
UK higher education – policy, practice, and debate during HEPI’s first 20 years	20
Understanding Student Mental Health Inequalities – Student Minds	20
Widening participation in higher education – DfE statistics	21
Regulation briefing – GuildHE	21
UCAS applicant figures	21
Public sector worker pay announcement	22
Intelligence and Security Committee – China report	23

Parliamentary business

Lifelong Learning (Higher Education Fee Limits) Bill - committee stage

On Monday 10 July, the Lifelong Learning (Higher Education Fee Limits) Bill was scrutinised at Grand Committee stage in the House of Lords.

Baroness Twycross, Shadow Spokesperson for Education, opened the session to provide justifications for Amendment 1 and 4. She explained that Amendment 1 would insert sectoral consultation into the decision about whether the fee limit for a course was fixed or module based. Amendment 4 would include a similar requirement of sector consultation for credit-differentiated activity.

Baroness Garden of Frogal (Liberal Democrat) described her great concern that the number of adults over 21 accessing higher-level skills had ‘fallen dramatically’ and cited the lack of maintenance support as a reason for this decline. She asked the Minister whether the government would consider maintenance loans or grants to support the provision.

In her reply, Baroness Barran said consultations had already taken place and further engagement would continue as part of the pathway to the LLE’s delivery. She announced that in Autumn 2023, the government would publish further detail of the fee limits regulations.

Baroness Garden of Frogal spoke to Amendment 2 which would define a credit on the face of the Bill, ensuring the government could not amend the value of a credit without proper scrutiny.

Baroness Thornton (Labour) outlined Amendment 5 which intended to ensure that modules worth 20 credits or more were included in the LLE. Given some providers teach 20 credit-modules, a 30-credit minimum requirement would force learners to bundle together modules to meet the funding requirement.

Lord Johnson of Marylebone (Conservative) welcomed the introduction of a more flexible system of student finance but said the relentless erosion in the value of tuition fees had to be addressed. He described how the ‘elephant in the room’ was being ignored by political parties. Amendment 6A sought to fix the funding issue, as it would allow higher education institutions that deliver great teaching and student

outcomes, as assessed by the Teaching Excellence Framework (TEF), to raise fees in line with inflation.

In her response, Baroness Barran acknowledged it was crucial that the definition of credits in the fee limit calculation align to standard practice in the sector, but this would be detailed in secondary regulations, rather than primary legislation. Regarding Amendment 5, the Minister said a 30-credit minimum requirement for modules was in line with the recommendation in the Augar review. Responding to Amendment 6A, Baroness Barran accepted the importance of ensuring the financial sustainability of the sector and said all elements were kept under constant review. Freezing tuition fees until the start of the 2025 academic year ensured students and taxpayers continued to receive ‘value for money.’ The Minister said she was happy to meet providers to consider the ‘scale and breadth of courses’ offered and how the cost base of institutions will develop in the future.

Lord Watson of Invergowrie (Labour) spoke to Amendment 3 and 6 relating to credit differentiating between in-person and distance learning. He said it would be helpful for the Minister to confirm there would be a single per-credit fee limit that would not vary depending on the mode, subject, or method of study. He explained that currently the majority of part-time distance learning students were not entitled to maintenance support whereas those studying face-to-face would. Baroness Wilcox of Newport (Labour), Lord Addington (Liberal Democrat), and Lord Storey (Liberal Democrat) echoed remarks on the importance of extending maintenance support to distance learners.

In her reply, the Minister reassured members that the government had no intention of differentiating fee limits between distance and in-person learners. Baroness Barran said she did not think there was ‘compelling evidence’ that the absence of maintenance loans was impacting on demand for distance learning, relative to in-person learning. She highlighted the existing exemption that enables distance learners with a disability to qualify for maintenance loans and disabled students’ allowance.

Baroness Twycross spoke to Amendment 7 which would require the government to publish regular updates on the important potential impacts of the Bill. She explained that this would ensure the Bill was ‘working in practice’ to get people back into education. She highlighted that a review would examine the effect of LLE on the financial viability of institutions.

Lord Willetts (Conservative) raised the interaction between the LLE and employer spending. He praised the ability to spend some money from the loan alongside

spending from an employer. However, he said it risked some employers shedding their responsibilities. He asked the Minister to outline how the government would monitor and manage this.

Lord Storey highlighted the lack of a sharia law-compliant student finance scheme. He asked what the government were doing to address this.

Responding to the amendments requiring the government to review the impact of the Act, the Minister said the government agreed with the sentiment behind the amendments. However, she said there were already mechanism for monitoring the impact such as HESA data. On the sharia-compliant student finance product, the Minister said the government remained committed to delivering this. She said the government had met with Lord Sharkey and representatives from the Islamic community to discuss this issue.

Lord Addington spoke to Amendment 9 which would require the Office for Students to provide information to students about the changes made by the provisions of this Act. Baroness Wilcox of Newport said ‘strong information, advice and guidance campaigns targeted towards prospective students and employers’ were vital to the success of the LLE.

In her reply, the Minister said she strongly agreed with the spirit and intention behind Amendment 9 but said the government were already focused on this and could not support the amendment.

Baroness Twycross spoke to Amendment 10 which would require the Secretary of State to publish a written ministerial statement updating Parliament on how the Act affected the progress of the LLE policy. She said that this was necessary given the extremely low take-up during the pilot stage which meant the impact on the wider sector and the level of interest among the general public remained untested.

In her reply, the Minister said full and detailed impact assessments would be published when the government laid the secondary legislation to implement the LLE fully. She confirmed that the government would endeavour to publish a Written Ministerial Statement ahead of laying regulations under this Act too.

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

Private rented sector report and Renter's (Reform) Bill – LUHC committee oral evidence

On Monday 10 July, the Levelling up, Housing, and Communities Committee heard oral evidence as a follow-up on the Committee's private rented sector (PRS) report and the Government's Renters (Reform) Bill.

The first session took evidence from Richard Blakeway (Housing Ombudsman at Housing Ombudsman Service), Ben Beadle (Chief Executive at National Residential Landlords Association), and Tarun Bhakta (Policy Manager at Shelter).

The Chair, Robin Walker MP (Conservative), probed on the unintended consequences of the Renters (Reform) Bill. Ben Beadle described the Bill as 'far-reaching' and called for some changes around student accommodation.

Ben Beadle further said that open-ended, indefinite tenancies in the student market, would knock tenants' abilities to find properties and knock landlords' abilities to be able to provide properties when those tenants need them. He said he could not see what sort of problem ending fixed-term tenancies was trying to resolve. He outlined that the National Residential Landlords Association would like to mirror the moratorium period that has been suggested for landlords. This means that if landlords want to move back in or sell a house, they cannot give notice within the first six months of the tenancy. This would go 'some way' to helping the issues in student accommodation.

Tarun Bhakta stressed the diversity of the student body. He said it was important to design the legislation to capture all students. It should not exclude the various people who technically are students, but who have different living circumstances to those you 'might imagine would require the yearly cycle'. He said they needed the benefits of reforms as much as other renters.

The Chair outlined the difficulties in student accommodation supply for September 2022, citing 'horror stories' in Manchester.

Tarun Bhakta emphasized the heterogeneity across the student body and said that any move to retain fixed term tenancies would put them at risk. Ben Beadle said that ringfencing the fixed term in some way that keeps the cyclical element was important.

Bob Blackman MP (Conservative) said Scotland had already made reforms and the evidence suggested there was reduced supply in accommodation and rents were

increased. Ben Beadle offered to write to the Committee with details on student accommodation costs.

The second session heard from Rachel Maclean MP (Minister of State for Housing and Planning at the Department for Levelling up, Housing and Communities (DLUHC)), Guy Horsington (Deputy Director for Private Rented Sector issues at DLUHC), and Stephanie Kvam (Deputy Director for Private Rented Sector Standards, Enforcement and Financial Protection at DLUHC).

The Chair highlighted that lots of student accommodation provision was not in purpose-build accommodation. He said that if the government does not exempt other student accommodation from the changes and made all contracts open-ended, the supply of accommodation would decrease.

The Minister said the government needed to think ‘very carefully’ about how student accommodation was treated. She said the last thing the government wanted to do was negatively impact small private landlords who rent solely to students. On the quality of student accommodation, she said many students currently live in ‘quite shocking conditions’ which has implications on their studies. She said the government’s measures would improve the ways landlords have to operate even if there was a different cycle for repossession of the property for them.

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

Forthcoming business

Education oral questions

On Monday 17 July from 2:30pm, the Secretary of State for Education, Rt Hon Gillian Keegan MP, and her ministerial team, will answer oral questions in the House of Commons.

Relevant tabled questions include:

- What recent discussions she has had with the Secretary of State for the Home Department on the potential impact of changes to the eligibility criteria for student visas on the competitiveness of the higher education sector. [Joanna Cherry MP, SNP]
- What steps she is taking to increase partnerships between further education colleges and higher education institutions to help increase learning opportunities. [Alex Sobel MP, SNP]
- What assessment her Department has made of the potential impact of tuition fees on the social mobility of young people. [John McNally MP, SNP]
- What assessment she has made of the implications for her policies of students graduating from universities without receiving their degree classification. [Christine Jardine, Liberal Democrat]
- Whether she has had recent discussions with her counterparts in the devolved Administrations on the potential merits of providing additional financial support for (a) school and (b) higher education students in the context of increases in the cost of living. [Douglas Chapman MP, SNP]

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

DSIT oral questions

On Wednesday 19 July from 11:30am, the Secretary of State for Science, Innovation and Technology, Rt Hon Chloe Smith MP, and her ministerial team, will answer oral questions in the House of Commons.

Relevant tabled questions include:

- What recent progress she has made on securing the UK's association with Horizon Europe. [Janet Daby MP, Labour] [Gerald Jones MP, Labour]
- What her planned timescale is for negotiating the UK's association to Horizon Europe. [Wera Hobhouse MP, Liberal Democrat]

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

House of Commons recess

On Thursday 20 July, the House of Commons will rise for Summer recess. It will return on Monday 4 September.

Written Questions

Universities: Admissions

Philip Davies: To ask the Secretary of State for Education, whether her Department has made an assessment of the reasons for the difference in the number of men and women entering university. [UIN 192280]

Robert Halfon: A person's access to university should not be determined by their personal characteristics, but by their ambition and ability. We want to provide a ladder of opportunity for everyone to get the education and skills they need for job security and prosperity and to support levelling up across the country, regardless of gender, ethnicity, or socio-economic background.

There are challenges related to gender representation in higher education (HE). Data shows that more than half (50.6%) of female pupils from state-funded schools in England entered HE by age 19 by 2020/21, compared to 38.4% of males. The gap in progression rates between males and females rose from 11.4 to 12.2 percentage points between 2019/20 and 2020/21.

We know that prior attainment is a key determinant of successful participation in HE, and that is why we have asked universities to take on a more direct role in driving up the standards in schools.

Our access and participation reforms announced in 2021 are playing a pivotal role in ensuring that students are supported to access and succeed on the right course for them. As part of this refresh of the system, the Office for Students (OfS) has asked more institutions to set targets for increasing the proportion of level 4 and 5 qualifications, and higher and degree apprenticeships that they offer, so that more students can access flexible and skills-related courses.

In March 2023, the OfS launched its Equality of Opportunity Risk Register (EORR). This will empower HE providers to deliver interventions for groups of students least likely to experience equal opportunity in HE settings by highlighting 12 key sector risks and the groups most likely to experience these, including gender. We welcome the EORR as a key marker for social justice which will help ensure that no student groups are left behind.

Students: Health

Tanmanjeet Singh Dhesi: To ask the Secretary of State for Education, what assessment she has made of the adequacy of the (a) availability and (b) quality of student (i) support and (ii) wellbeing services provided by universities. [UIN 192415]

Robert Halfon: It is a priority for the government that students are provided with the mental health support they need.

We are taking an approach based on three pillars:

- Funding vital services and innovative projects via the Office for Students. £15 million has been allocated this academic year to support students starting university for the first time and enable effective partnerships between higher education (HE) providers and local NHS services. £3.6 million was invested to launch Student Space in 2020. It has since provided nearly 300,000 students with free online mental health resources and confidential support.
- Spreading and implementing best practice consistently across providers.
- Clear responsibilities for providers and protection for students, with solutions developed by the Student Support Champion, Professor Edward Peck.

The department recently conducted research on the design and delivery of mental health and wellbeing services to meet the needs of their students. This found that 99% of HE institutions provided in-house self-help resources and 97% offered in-house psychological support for those experiencing poor mental health, either face-to-face or virtual contact with a counsellor [1]. It also found a substantial increase in the proportion of higher education institutions that now have a specific mental health and wellbeing strategy in place (two thirds in 2022 compared with just over a half in 2019) A link to the report can be found here:

<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/mental-health-and-wellbeing-practices-in-higher-education>

While good progress has been made by the sector, the department is going further to protect students' wellbeing. The department wants all universities to be adopting the Mental Health Charter and following the principles it sets out for a whole university approach to mental health. 61 universities are already part of the Charter Programme. The department wants students to have confidence in the support they will receive, whatever university they have chosen to study at. The department has set a target for all remaining universities to sign up to the Mental Health Charter Programme by September 2024.

To look at further improvements in student mental health support, the department has asked the Student Support Champion, Professor Edward Peck, to lead the HE Mental Health Implementation Taskforce. The taskforce will set strong, clear, and measurable targets for the sector. The taskforce will conclude its work with a final report in May 2024, having produced an interim plan by the end of 2023.

The department is confident the HE sector will rise to meet the challenge. If the response is not satisfactory, the department will go further, and ask the Office for Students to look carefully at the merits of a new registration condition on mental health.

[1] 53% of private providers and 93% of Further Education Colleges provided in house self-help resources and 53% and 85% respectively offered either face to face or virtual contact with a counsellor.

Universities: Strikes

Sir Bill Wiggin: To ask the Secretary of State for Education, whether her Department has made an assessment of the impact of marking boycotts by university lecturers on the international reputation of English higher education institutions. [UIN 192814]

Robert Halfon: The department understands that the vast majority of students will remain unaffected by the industrial action and, in most cases, will receive their full results on time and progress and/or graduate as normal.

The Universities and Colleges Employers Association (UCEA) has published research findings which surveyed 49% of higher education (HE) institutions in the New Joint Negotiating Committee for Higher Education Staff. These institutions provided updated feedback on the impact of the marking and assessment boycott on students at their institutions:

- Over 70% of HE institutions said that ‘less than 2% of students’ will be unable to graduate this summer due to the boycott.
- A further 20% were ‘unsure’ of the number.
- 4% of HE institutions said ‘between 2% and 9% of students’ would be impacted.

These research findings can be accessed at: <https://www.ucea.ac.uk/news-releases/23june23/>

On 22 June 2023, I met with Universities UK (UUK), the Russell Group, and UCEA to better understand the impact that this boycott will have on students and the mitigating actions their members are taking to protect students' interests.

I have also written to the Russell Group and UUK, encouraging them to continue to do everything within their powers to protect the interests of students during this phase of industrial action. On 27 June 2023, I met with a number of HE representative groups to discuss the marking and assessment boycott, including the mitigating actions HE institutions are taking to protect their students' interests.

HE institutions are working on minimising the disruption to their students in a variety of ways, including reallocating marking to other staff members, and hiring external markers. Many HE institutions can award degrees when they have enough evidence of a student's prior attainment to do so. Others will be able to assign provisional grades to students to allow them to progress and, once all papers have been marked, degree classifications will either remain as provisionally assigned or be uplifted to reflect the student's achievements.

The government believes students should be at the heart of the HE system. This is why we set up the Office for Students (OfS) to regulate the HE sector in England, protect student rights, and ensure the sector is delivering real value for money. The OfS has published guidance to students on their rights during industrial action at: <https://www.officeforstudents.org.uk/for-students/student-rights-and-welfare/student-guide-to-industrial-action/>

On 12 June 2023, the OfS wrote to institutions affected by the boycott to reiterate its expectations in relation to its conditions of registration. The OfS will continue to monitor this ongoing situation through their normal regulatory mechanisms.

Students who have complaints about their HE experience should contact their provider in the first instance. Students in England and Wales may also raise a complaint with the Office of the Independent Adjudicator, which was set up to provide an alternative to the courts and is free of charge to students. Further information is available at: <https://www.oiahe.org.uk/> (opens in a new tab).

We have a world class university sector, with four institutions in the world's top 10, and the government fully expects the UK to continue to be a major destination of choice for international students.

We hope all parties can reach an agreement that delivers good value for students, staff, and universities, so further industrial action can be avoided. The Department will continue to engage with the HE sector over the coming weeks to help better understand the boycott's impact on students and the mitigating actions HE institutions are taking to protect their students' interests.

Students: Public Transport

Fleur Anderson: To ask the Secretary of State for Education, what assessment her Department has made of the effect of the cost of public transport on students' (a) finances and (b) mobility. [UIN 192203]

Robert Halfon: The department continually monitors the impact of rising prices on students. The department recognises that the availability of student accommodation has been impacted by the current financial backdrop and that this can create additional transport costs for students. This is why the government has continued to increase living costs support each year with a 2.3% increase to maximum loans and grants for living and other costs for the 2022/23 academic year, and a 2.8% increase for the 2023/24 academic year.

There is £276 million of Student Premium and Mental Health funding available this 2023/24 academic year, to support students who need additional help, including disadvantaged students. This funding will complement the help universities are providing through their own bursary, scholarship and hardship support schemes.

The department works with the Office for Students to ensure universities support students in hardship using both hardship funds and drawing on the Student Premium as higher education (HE) providers have established their own hardship funds, which allow discretionary funds to be paid to students who are in need.

Decisions on student finance will have to be taken alongside other spending priorities to ensure the system remains financially sustainable and the costs of HE are shared fairly between students and taxpayers, not all of whom have benefited from going to university.

Overseas Students: British Overseas Territories

Andrew Rosindell: To ask the Secretary of State for Education, whether her Department is taking steps to encourage more students from Overseas Territories to study at UK universities. [UIN 192035]

Robert Halfon: Since 2007, persons who have settled status on arrival in the UK, and who come to the UK from specified British Overseas Territories, have been eligible for home fee status.

Since 2022/23, the department has extended this offer so that those starting designated full time and part time undergraduate courses, are also now eligible for tuition fee loans in England if they meet the residency requirements. This requires that they have been ordinarily resident in the UK, Channel Islands, Isle of Man and/or specified British Overseas Territories throughout the three year period preceding the first day of the first academic year of the course, with at least part of that period having been spent in the British Overseas Territories.

Iran: Unmanned Air Vehicles

Stephen Crabb: To ask the Secretary of State for Business and Trade, if she will make an assessment of the adequacy of compliance with (a) sanctions and (b) restrictions on exports of the research being undertaken at universities with Iranian scientists on drone technology. [UIN 191752]

Nigel Huddleston: The Government takes all credible allegations of breaches of sanctions and export controls seriously, and the enforcement agencies will take further action if appropriate. The UK has a number of sanctions in place against Iran including against Iranian UAV manufacturers and related military individuals and executives.

Officials in my department have been leading a review of the allegations made in the recent press articles. They are working at pace with others in the Ministry of Defence, Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office, HM Revenue & Customs (HMRC), the Department for Science, Innovation and Technology, and the Office of Financial Sanctions Implementation (OFSI) to establish the facts and assess if any export controls (Military, Dual-Use, UK National) or relevant sanctions regulations may have been contravened.

The outcome of this review will determine what further action may be needed. If there has been a potential breach of the sanctions or export controls, HMRC and/or OFSI will consider appropriate enforcement action.

Universities: Assessments

James Wild: To ask the Secretary of State for Education, what recent discussions she has had with university vice-chancellors on delays in marking exams and dissertations. [UIN 191676]

Robert Halfon: The department understands that the vast majority of students will remain unaffected by the industrial action and, in most cases, will receive their full results on time, and progress and/or graduate as normal. On 23 June 2023, the Universities and Colleges Employers Association (UCEA) published research findings which surveyed 49% of higher education (HE) institutions in the New Joint Negotiating Committee for Higher Education Staff. These institutions provided updated feedback on the impact of the marking and assessment boycott on students at their institutions:

- Over 70% of HE institutions said that ‘less than 2% of students’ will be unable to graduate (on time) this summer, due to the boycott.
- A further 20% were ‘unsure’ of the number.
- 4% of HE institutions said ‘between 2% and 9% of students’ would be impacted.

A link to these research findings can be found here: <https://www.ucea.ac.uk/news-releases/23june23/>

HE institutions are working on minimising the disruption to their students in a variety of ways, including reallocating marking to other staff members and hiring external markers. Moreover, many HE institutions can award degrees when they have enough evidence of a student’s prior attainment to do so. Others will be able to assign provisional grades to students to allow them to progress.

On 12 June 2023, the Office for Students (OfS), the independent regulator of HE in England, wrote to institutions affected by the boycott to reiterate its expectations in relation to its conditions of registration. The OfS will continue to monitor this ongoing situation through their normal regulatory mechanisms and have published guidance for students affected by industrial action.

On 22 June 2023, I met with Universities UK (UUK), the Russell Group and UCEA to better understand the impact that this boycott will have on students and the mitigating actions their members are taking to protect students’ interests.

I have also written to the Russell Group and UUK, encouraging them to continue to do everything within their powers to protect the interests of students during this phase of industrial action. On 27 June 2023, I met with a number of HE representative groups to discuss the marking and assessment boycott, including the mitigating actions HE institutions are taking to protect their students' interests.

The government believes students should be at the heart of the higher education system. This is why we set up the OfS to regulate the HE sector in England, protect student rights and ensure the sector is delivering real value for money. The OfS has published guidance to students on their rights during industrial action, which is available at: <https://www.officeforstudents.org.uk/for-students/student-rights-and-welfare/student-guide-to-industrial-action/>

Students who have complaints about their HE experience should contact their provider in the first instance. Students in England and Wales may also raise a complaint with the Office of the Independent Adjudicator, which was set up to provide an alternative to the courts and is free of charge to students. Further information can be found here: <https://www.oiahe.org.uk/>

My officials and I will continue to engage with the HE sector over the coming weeks to help better understand the boycott's impact on students and the mitigating actions HE institutions are taking to protect their students' interests.

Overseas Students: Ukraine

Daisy Cooper: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department, if she will make it her policy to allow Ukrainian national students who are applying to multi-year courses in higher education to extend their leave to remain for the duration of these courses. [UIN 192900]

Robert Jenrick: Ukrainians in the UK under our Ukraine Schemes can apply for other types of leave where they are eligible, including leave as a student. If their study is ongoing after their 36 months leave, they are able to apply for a student visa to extend their leave at any time during their Ukraine scheme leave. A student visa is granted for the duration of the course, so can be applied for before the end of the three-year visa to ensure a student has the leave required to complete their course. More information can be found at Ukrainian nationals in the UK: visa support - GOV.UK (Immigration Rules - Immigration Rules: Appendix Student - Guidance - GOV.UK (www.gov.uk)). The UK Government is keeping the broader potential need for

an extension of leave, for sanctuary after 36 months, under review, in line with the developments of the situation in Ukraine.

Higher Education (Freedom of Speech) Act 2023

Paul Blomfield: To ask the Secretary of State for Education, when she plans to bring the provisions of the Higher Education (Freedom of Speech) Act 2023 into force. [UIN 191789]

Claire Coutinho: The department is working closely with the Office for Students (OfS) to determine when provisions of the Higher Education (Freedom of Speech) Act 2023 will come into force.

The timeline will involve working in collaboration with the OfS on the creation of new registration conditions and a complaints scheme dedicated to handling freedom of speech complaints, which will be operated by the OfS. The OfS will also develop guidance on how to comply with these duties, in consultation with providers, constituent institutions and students' unions.

STEM Subjects: Education

Helen Hayes: To ask the Secretary of State for Education, if she will make an estimate with Cabinet colleagues of the number of STEM degree students who (a) work in addition to their studies and (b) have children under the age of five that will not be eligible to access the expansion of the 30 hours free childcare offer in 2024-2025. [UIN 192588]

Claire Coutinho: The department does not hold data on the number of students who are ineligible for 30 hours free childcare.

In the Spring Budget 2023, the government announced a number of transformative reforms to childcare for parents, children and the economy. By 2027/28, the government will expect to be spending in excess of £8 billion every year on free hours and early education, helping working families with their childcare costs. This represents the single biggest investment in childcare in England ever.

The announcement included the expansion of the 30 hours free childcare offer, through which eligible working parents in England will be able to access 30 hours of free childcare per week, for 38 weeks per year from when their child is 9 months old,

to when they start school. The key objective of this measure is to support parental participation in the labour market, which is why the offer is conditional on work.

All students who work in addition to their studies and earn the equivalent of at least 16 hours a week at national minimum/living wage, and under £100,000 adjusted net income per year, will be eligible for this offer. If they are unable to meet this threshold, they will remain eligible for the universal 15 hours of free early education, which is available to all 3 and 4 year olds regardless of family circumstances.

The department recognises the value of parents continuing in education and provide a range of support for students in further or higher education to support them with childcare.

Support available to full-time students with dependent children includes the Childcare Grant and Parents' Learning Allowance. Entitlement to these grants is based on a student's household income.

For additional financial support, since September 2020, all eligible full-time nursing, midwifery, paramedic and other allied health profession students have been able to receive a non-repayable training grant through the NHS Learning Support Fund of £5,000 per academic year. Eligible full-time students with child dependants can also access a further £2,000 per academic year through the Learning and Support Fund. Eligible students studying part-time receive a pro-rated amount of support depending on their intensity of study compared to a full-time course.

Further information on the childcare offers available to parents can be found at:
<https://www.childcarechoices.gov.uk>

Sector News

UK higher education – policy, practice, and debate during HEPI’s first 20 years

To mark its 20th anniversary, the Higher Education Policy Institute (HEPI) published a collection of contributions by leading figures in higher education.

The report was launched at a reception in Methodist Central Hall Westminster, where the speakers included the Rt Hon. Lord Willetts (Minister for Universities and Science, 2010-14) and the Rt Hon. Dame Margaret Hodge MP (Minister for Universities, 2001-03).

The various authors featuring in the new collection consider how the practical business of policymaking has led to changes in higher education across the UK while leaving some important issues unresolved.

The topics covered include HEPI’s own story, how the relationship between government and higher education has changed, HE in FE, governance, funding, teaching and learning, research, staffing, estates, rankings – and the future.

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

Understanding Student Mental Health Inequalities – Student Minds

On Wednesday 12 July, Student Minds published a report examining student mental health experiences of part-time, distance learner and commuter students.

It highlights the ways in which universities can provide support to these communities as they engage in higher education.

It calls on universities to adopt an inclusive and intersectional approach to mental wellbeing considerations throughout their pedagogies, practices, cultures, and support structures. This will create inclusive environments that do not rely on campus-based support for mental wellbeing.

The report is inspired and co-produced by the Positive Digital Practices student panel.

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

Widening participation in higher education – DfE statistics

On Thursday 13 July, the Department for Education (DfE) published the latest statistics on widening participation in higher education, for the academic year 2021/22.

Headline facts and figures include:

- For pupils eligible for Free School Meals (FSM) at age 15, the HE progression rate by age 19 increased to 29.2% in 2021/22, the highest recorded level.
- For pupils in state-funded schools at age 15, the HE progression rate by age 19 has increased from 44.4% to 46.8% in 2021/22 and the progression rate to high tariff HE has increased from 11.4% to 13.4%.
- Progression rates vary considerably by ethnic group. White pupils were the least likely to progress to HE by age 19 at 41.8%, compared to 51.5% for Mixed, 63.5% for Black, 67.8% for Asian and 83.8% for Chinese pupils. Progression rates have increased for all five broad ethnic groups in 2021/22.

You can [read more](#) here.

Regulation briefing – GuildHE

On Thursday 13 July, GuildHE published its final briefing as part of its series on regulation. The final briefing is titled ‘reflections and recommendations.’

The briefing calls for clearer and more consistent accountability and a sharp reduction in the costs of regulatory compliance. It argues that, whilst the legislative framework doesn’t make the Office for Students (OfS) wholly independent of government, some crucial aspects of regulatory independence have been lost or compromised and need to be restored. It states that trust between the OfS and those it regulates has been badly damaged and needs to be rebuilt.

You can [read the full briefing](#) here.

UCAS applicant figures

On Thursday 13 July, UCAS provided core numbers for the 2023 June 30 application deadline.

Key findings include:

- The overall number of UK 18-year-old applicants is at the second-highest level – 319,570 in 2023.
- The number of UK 18-year-olds applicants who have declared their ethnicity as Asian, Black, Mixed or other has increased by 4.4%.
- The number of international applicants (all ages) stands at 138,050, up from 134,870 in 2022 (+2.4%) and 130,390 in 2021 (+5.9%).

In response to new data from UCAS, Vivienne Stern MBE, Chief Executive of Universities UK said: ‘As we approach results day and the beginning of a new academic year, it is heartening to see that university remains a highly attractive choice for so many people across the country, including those from the most disadvantaged backgrounds. We are still seeing near record high applications from disadvantaged students and growing demand in key areas like computing.’

You can [read more](#) here.

Public sector worker pay announcement

On Thursday 13 July, the Prime Minister, Rt Hon Rishi Sunak MP, announced that public sector workers in England are to be offered enhanced pay deals.

Asked how he would pay for increases, the Prime Minister said it would ‘mean choices - I’m not shying away from that’.

He confirmed the government would raise over £1 billion by ‘significantly’ increasing charges for migrants coming to the UK when they apply for visas and the levy they pay to access the NHS.

Rt Hon John Glen MP, Chief Secretary to the Treasury, announced to Parliament that the cost of work and visit visas would rise by 15 per cent, study visas would rise by at least 20 per cent, and the immigration health surcharge would rise to £1,035 - or £776 for students.

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

Intelligence and Security Committee – China report

On Thursday 13 July, the Intelligence and Security Committee published its report on China. This inquiry was launched in 2019 and features a whole section on ‘Chinese interference in UK academia’.

The report highlights the overreliance on Chinese student fees, intimidation faced by researchers, the activities of Chinese student groups on campus, and research collaborations with China. It alleges that some universities are ‘turning a blind eye, happy simply to take the money’ for academic research collaboration.

The Prime Minister, Rt Hon Rishi Sunak MP, published a written response to the report outlining the actions the government have taken. This highlights the work of the National Protective Security Authority, Research Collaboration Advice Team (RCAT), and Academic Technology Approval Scheme (ATAS). It also cites the Higher Education (Freedom of Speech) Act 2023 to protect campuses from threats to lawful freedom of speech.

You can [read the full report here](#) and [read the Prime Minister’s written statement here](#).