



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

## University APPG weekly update

11 – 15 December 2023

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 11 December, the Secretary of State for Education, Rt Hon Gillian Keegan MP, and her ministerial team answered oral questions in the House of Commons.

Mark Pawsey MP (Conservative) highlighted a constituent whose final degree papers were not marked due to industrial action. He said the student's degree was finally issued because her mother personally visited the dean of the university and demanded action. He asked what steps the Secretary of State was taking to ensure that exam papers were marked on time in the current academic year.

In her reply, the Secretary of State said that the behaviour of the University and College Union (UCU) was 'disgraceful' and that their actions had caused distress for thousands of students. She said that although higher education was independent of government, the damaging impact of strike action could not go unchecked which was why the government was consulting on minimum service levels in the sector.

Greg Smith MP (Conservative) asked what steps were being taken to ensure that tertiary and technical education providers work with businesses to meet local skills needs.

In his reply, the Minister for Skills, Apprenticeships, and Higher Education, Rt Hon Robert Halfon MP, said that the government was transforming skills through local improvement plans, backed by £165 million and supported by business, further education and higher education, and through a £300 million investment in Institutes of Technology (IoT).

Richard Foord MP (Liberal Democrat) highlighted that the University of Exeter hosts international students who contribute £486 million to Devon's economy. He said that people in Devon did not consider these students as migrants, given their contributions to growing the local economy. He asked if the Minister would talk to the Home Office about taking students out of net migration figures.

The Minister acknowledged that international students brought a lot of income to the country. He stressed that visa matters were the responsibility of the Home Office, but he was sure there would be discussions about the issues raised.

Nia Griffith MP (Labour) asked what recent assessment the government had made of the potential impact of trends in the level of university applications from international students on the long-term sustainability of higher education institutions.

The Minister said he was pleased that the UK surpassed the target of over 600,000 international students, who remain an important source of income and a source of pride for our universities.

Nia Griffith noted that there had been fewer applications from international students in this UCAS round. She said that in light of increased competition from other countries, UK institutions could not just rely on their excellent reputation to attract international students. She asked what more could the government do to ensure that the UK remained an attractive place for international students to study.

The Minister said the government was working very closely with Sir Steve Smith, UK Government International Education Champion, and that it wants to diversify to a whole range of different countries to advertise ourselves to international students.

The Shadow Minister for Higher Education, Matt Western MP, noted that any sudden changes in the number of international students coming to the UK would put the higher education sector at risk. He asked the Minister to give his assurance that the government remained robust in their ambition to continue to attract 600,000 international students a year.

The Minister said he was committed to the target of 600,000 international students, which had been surpassed with well over 680,000 students.

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

## **Immigration (Health Charge) (Amendment) Order 2023**

On Tuesday 12 December, the Immigration (Health Charge) (Amendment) Order 2023 was considered in the Grand Committee in the House of Lords.

Lord Sharpe of Epsom, Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State at the Home Office, explained that the health charge reflected the costs to the NHS of providing healthcare to health charge payers. He said that the charge must be set at a level that broadly reflects the cost to the NHS and the current rate, introduced in 2020, did not currently cover the costs. The full rate of the charge would increase to £1,035 per person per annum, with the discounted rate for students, their dependants, those on youth mobility schemes and under-18s, increasing to £776 per person per annum.

Baroness Brinton (Liberal Democrat) highlighted the impact this would have on universities and research councils. She warned that they would struggle to recruit the ‘best international students’ due to the costs which were becoming a ‘real barrier.’ She proceeded to highlight the £41 billion contribution that international students make to the UK economy and asked the Minister how the UK would be able to attract and retain the brightest academics against this increase in surcharge fees.

In his reply, Lord Sharpe said ‘the UK continues to welcome talented individuals from around the world who want to study and work here.’ He added that visa application volumes were monitored and there remained a substantial demand for visas across the majority of the immigration routes.

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

## **Science, Innovation and Technology Committee – oral evidence session**

On Wednesday 13 December, the Secretary of State for the Department for Science, Innovation and Technology (DSIT), Rt Hon Michelle Donelan MP, and the Permanent Secretary, Sarah Munby, gave evidence to the Science, Innovation, and Technology Committee.

Stephen Metcalfe MP (Conservative) noted the strains on the existing higher education funding model and asked whether the Secretary of State had any concerns that universities would divert funds away from investing in capital projects. The Secretary of State highlighted that she worked closely with the Secretary of State for Education on this matter. She said universities were essential for research and for commercialising innovation and it was important to ensure universities were resilient with respect to finances. The Permanent Secretary added that some UKRI funding went directly to infrastructure investment which was protected.

Dr James Davies MP (Conservative) asked how the government intended to balance its drive to reduce net migration with the need to attract international talent. The Secretary of State said there was a ‘great deal of concern’ among the public about levels of migration, but it was also important to attract the ‘best and brightest’ talent in the science and technology sector. There were various routes for attracting expertise, such as the Global Talent visa or High Potential Individual visa. She said it

was also important to grow the domestic skills pipeline in the UK and the government was investing in critical technologies accordingly.

James Davies continued by noting the new salary threshold and asked whether an increase in salaries would be required to tackle this issue. The Secretary of State said there had been various exemptions in place previously and the government was in talks to discuss which of these exemptions may apply in the future. There were also a variety of visa routes for skilled workers.

Regarding the potential implications of the increased cost of visas and health surcharges on the UK's ability to attract talent, the Secretary of State highlighted that the cost of visas had not increased for a decade. She stressed that the UK remained competitive internationally and was at the 'cutting edge of science' in many respects. The fact that the UK had four of the top 10 universities acted as a 'magnet to talent.'

Tracey Crouch MP (Conservative) asked whether the two-year delay in reaching the Horizon Europe agreement had caused UK businesses to lose contract opportunities. She also asked whether any mitigations had been put in place to address such losses. The Secretary of State said the prolonged period of uncertainty for the sector had been hugely disappointing. The Horizon Europe Guarantee had helped to bridge the gap while the government had tried to reach a bespoke deal for the UK. She thought the government had managed to achieve a better deal than it otherwise would have done.

Stephen Metcalfe asked the Secretary of State to expand on a comment made in her party conference speech, in which she had referred to the 'steady creep of political correctness'. The Secretary of State said gender and sex were often conflated and academics did not feel confident about raising the issue. She said the government had enlisted Professor Alice Sullivan of University College London to lead a piece of work to produce guidance for the scientific community.

He proceeded to ask why the Secretary of State had called for UKRI's Equality, Diversity and Inclusion Expert Advisory Group to be shut down. The Secretary of State said it had been brought to her attention that due diligence and process had not taken place before people had been recruited to this panel. As such, she had suggested the panel should cease its work while an investigation took place. She stressed that the principle of equality, inclusion and diversity was written into law and was important.

Rebecca Long Bailey MP (Labour) asked how the Secretary of State viewed UKRI's response to her letter and asked when the investigation would be concluded. The

Secretary of State said this would be a matter for UKRI and she understood that the investigation was underway.

You can [watch the session](#).

## **Spiking – Westminster Hall debate**

On Thursday 14 December, a Westminster Hall debate considered the matter of ‘spiking.’ This debate was tabled by Judith Cummins MP (Labour).

Jim Shannon MP (DUP) highlighted an example of a first-year student who was spiked while celebrating a friend’s birthday. He added that this story was replicated throughout the UK and said that tackling spiking needed to be a priority for both police forces and universities. He asked if the Minister would consider a cross-departmental approach to provide protection and advice, along with policy forces targeted at student areas.

Richard Graham MP (Conservative) outlined the campaigning he had done on spiking over the past two years. He hoped that the offence of spiking would be ‘created, defined, recognised, and dealt with in the best way possible.’ Following this, focus could then be on how police forces, universities, and those working in the nightlife economy make the message clear.

Rt Hon Caroline Nokes MP (Conservative), Chair of the Women and Equalities Committee, stressed that it was not sufficient for the Home Office’s Enough Campaign to focus its activities on just universities. She said that ‘by the time a young person has reached the grand old age of 18, that horse may already have bolted’ and called for changes to the RSHE curriculum up to the age of 18.

Responding on behalf of the government, Rt Hon Tom Tugendhat MP, Minister for Security, said that his thoughts were with the victims of spiking and that a ‘strong and unequivocal message to the perpetrators’ needed to be sent. The Minister proceeded to outline that the Home Office had supported Universities UK and the Department for Education (DfE) working group on spiking to provide guidance to universities on spiking.

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

# Forthcoming business

## **Recess**

On Tuesday 19 December both Houses will rise from Christmas recess.

The House of Commons will return on Monday 8 January 2024 and the House of Lords will return on Wednesday 10 January 2024.



# Written Questions

## British National (Overseas): Visas

**Neil Coyle MP:** To ask the Secretary of State for Education, if she will make an assessment of potential merits of making people with British National (Overseas) visas eligible for student finance. [UIN 5336]

**Robert Halfon MP:** To qualify for student finance in the UK, a person must have settled status or a recognised connection to the UK.

Subject to meeting the normal eligibility requirements, British National (Overseas) (BN(O)) status holders will be able to qualify for student finance once they have acquired settled status, which is usually after five years, and have three years of ordinary residence in the UK.

The government believes that it is right that the support provided by the taxpayer should be targeted at those who have a history of a lawful and substantial residence in the UK. There are no plans to review BN(O) status holder's access to student finance.

## Schools and Universities: Antisemitism

**Margaret Hodge MP:** To ask the Secretary of State for Education, with reference to the Autumn Statement 2023, published on 22 November 2023, which organisations will receive the £7 million funding to help tackle antisemitism in schools and universities in the next three years. [UIN 5440]

**Damian Hinds MP:** Following the Autumn Statement announcement, the government is preparing to issue an invitation for interested organisations to tender, to tackle antisemitism in schools, colleges, and universities. The department encourages all interested organisations to consider submitting a bid in response to the invitation to tender.

## Students: Loans

**Baroness Thomas of Winchester:** To ask His Majesty's Government what progress they are making towards Sharia-compliant student loans. [UIN HL685]

**Baroness Barran:** The government is committed to delivering an Alternative Student Finance (ASF) product compatible with Islamic finance principles as quickly as operationally possible. To support the delivery of an ASF product, the government took new powers in the Higher Education and Research Act 2017 to enable my right hon. Friend, the Secretary of State for Education, to provide alternative payments for students to pay for tuition fees, in addition to grants and loans. The department has also carried out work with specialist advisers, the Islamic Finance Council UK (UKIFC), on the design of an ASF model.

The government is introducing the Lifelong Learning Entitlement (LLE), which will significantly change the ways students can access learning and financial support. In response to the LLE consultation, published on 7 March 2023, the department set out aims to ensure that students will be able to access ASF as soon as possible after the introduction of the LLE.

Work is underway to assess how ASF can be delivered as a product. The Islamic Finance Council UK (UKIFC) has been reappointed to support work on ASF. Furthermore, the department is also working with the Student Loans Company (SLC) to better understand timescales for delivering an ASF product.

Further information about how to develop the ASF product can be found in a blog post on ASF, and a further update on ASF will be provided later this month. The blog is available at: <https://educationhub.blog.gov.uk/2023/07/21/alternative-student-finance-how-were-making-student-finance-accessible-to-everyone/>.

## **Apprentices**

**Baroness Wolf of Dulwich:** To ask His Majesty's Government how many End Point Assessment Organisations are currently approved to carry out assessments for level 7 standards; and how many of these are (1) higher education institutions, (2) other educational institutions, (3) independent training providers, (4) awarding bodies or subsidiaries of awarding bodies, and (5) organisations that do not fall into any of those categories. [UIN HL690]

**Baroness Barran:** For an organisation to deliver apprenticeship end-point assessments, they must be recognised by their external quality assurance regulator. For level 7 apprenticeship standards, this can be Ofqual, Office for Students, or in some cases, the Institute for Apprenticeships and Technical Education.

Once approved by the regulator, the end-point assessment organisation (EPAO) is required to be on the Apprenticeship Provider Assessment Register (APAR) so that they can be selected by the training provider, and be eligible for government funding.

Currently, there are 110 EPAOs listed on the APAR offering end-point assessment of level 7 apprenticeship standards. Of these, 64 are higher education institutions, 9 are other educational institutions, 9 are independent training providers, 11 are awarding bodies or subsidiaries of awarding bodies, and 17 are organisations that do not fall into any of those categories.

## **Housing: Students**

**Nicholas Brown MP:** To ask the Secretary of State for Education, whether her Department has made an assessment of the potential merits of creating a national register of student accommodation. [UIN 4954]

**Robert Halfon MP:** Student accommodation is a busy part of the housing market. As universities and landlords are private, autonomous bodies, the government has no role in the provision of student accommodation, nor a remit to intervene in how it is allocated.

The department has no plans to create a register of student accommodation. Applicants who require student accommodation should take its availability into account when making decisions about where to study. The department expects universities and private landlords to review their accommodation policies to ensure they are fair, clear, and promote the interests of students.

## **University Jewish Chaplaincy: Antisemitism**

**Lord Wasserman:** To ask His Majesty's Government, further to their announcement in the Autumn Statement to make up to £7 million available to tackle antisemitism in schools and universities, whether they intend to allocate some of those funds to the University Jewish Chaplaincy, a charity which employs professional chaplains to provide support to Jewish students. [UIN HL639]

**Baroness Barran:** Following the Autumn Statement announcement, the government is preparing to issue an invitation for interested organisations to tender for contracts to tackle antisemitism in schools, colleges and universities. The tender process will be run in accordance with the Public Contract Regulations 2015. The University Jewish

Chaplaincy may wish to consider submitting a bid in response to the invitation to tender.

## **Students: Loans**

**Daniel Zeichner MP:** To ask the Secretary of State for Education, whether she has made an estimate of the number of students receiving a minimum loan whose parents are (a) unwilling or (b) unable to provide additional funding to support their cost of living in each of the last five years. [UIN 4694]

**Robert Halfon MP:** The student income and expenditure survey for the 2021/22 academic year provides data from a representative sample of students in England on total student income. The survey does not collect data on, nor estimate, the number of parents or carers who are unwilling or unable to contribute to their child or children's living costs, but it does show the extent to which students receive financial support from their families, alongside other sources of income. The 2021/22 student income and expenditure survey can be accessed at:

<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/student-income-and-expenditure-survey-2021-to-2022>.

# Sector news

## Education spending in England – IFS annual report

On Monday 11 December, the Institute for Fiscal Studies (IFS) published its annual report on education spending in England.

Key findings include:

- Up-front spending on teaching resources per higher education student has continued to decline steadily, standing at £9,600 per year for the 2023–24 university entry cohort. This is around £2,100 or 18% lower in real terms than in 2012–13, largely because the cap on tuition fees is now 24% lower in real terms than it was in 2012–13.
- For current students, higher-than-expected inflation has continued to erode the real value of maintenance loans. Students in 2023–24 will be entitled to borrow 11% less towards their living costs than they were in 2020–21, a cut equivalent to £107 a month for the poorest students.
- Higher education spending also has wider economic impacts on the areas in which people study. On this measure, per-capita higher education spending is highest in university towns, with by far the highest spending in Canterbury (£2,300) followed by Bath (£1,380) and Brighton (£1,280). In contrast, around a third of all travel-to-work areas in England do not have a higher education provider and therefore do not benefit directly from public spending on higher education at all.

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

## Teacher Education Manifesto – GuildHE

On Tuesday 12 December, GuildHE published its ‘Teacher Education Manifesto’ with a series of 9 proposals to address the ‘crisis’ in the supply of teachers in England.

The manifesto proposes that government, policymakers, and wider stakeholders should:

1. Provide all teacher training students with a bursary and announce bursary levels two years before students apply.

2. Provide teacher training students with additional financial support for extra placement cost.
3. Encourage universities back into teacher training and support them to deliver high quality education in partnership with schools.
4. Provide teacher training institutions with sufficient funding to cover the costs of delivering teacher education.
5. Write-off student debt for teachers who teach in state- maintained schools for a particular period of time.
6. Enable access to ongoing professional development for all teachers.
7. Ensure all early years educators are on a route to graduate status.
8. Create a new non-departmental public body to have oversight of teacher supply and quality.
9. Focus inspection on the continued improvement of teacher education rather than single grade outcomes.

Professor Jackie Dunne, GuildHE Executive Committee Member and Vice Chancellor, Birmingham Newman University said: ‘We are pleased to launch a series of practical proposals that we believe will make a real impact on recruiting enough teachers and it is crucial that government and universities work together to ensure future supply and retention of high-quality teachers in our schools.’

You can [read the manifesto](#).

## **MAC annual report**

On Wednesday 13 December, the Migration Advisory Committee (MAC) published its annual report for 2023.

The annual report notes the growth in international student recruitment and provides a review of the Graduate route.

In 2018 the MAC recommended against such a route and in this report, they assess the preliminary evidence on both the impact the route may be having on student visas and the type of students who are most likely to use the route.

Vivienne Stern MBE, Chief Executive of Universities UK, commented: ‘Universities UK looks forward to working with the Migration Advisory Committee on the forthcoming review to ensure that the Graduate route continues to deliver for students, universities, and for the UK.’

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

## **The role of transnational education partnerships in building sustainable and resilient higher education – IHEC report**

On Wednesday 13 December, the International Higher Education Commission (IHEC) published a report which aims to provide the ‘data, insight and evidence’ necessary to establish an ‘International Education Strategy 2.0.’

Building on the recently launched British Council Transnational Education Strategy 2023–25, this report details the context and dynamics of TNE and how to realise its potential to:

- Generate substantially enhanced academic, operational and financial returns for UK providers and their overseas partners.
- Augment experiences and widen access for students.
- Provide talent pipelines for industry on a global, scalable and sustainable basis.

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

## **Advanced British Standard consultation**

On Thursday 14 December, the Department for Education (DfE) launched a consultation to seek views on the design of the Advanced British Standard (ABS).

Plans for the Advanced British Standard were first announced by the Prime Minister in October 2023. Consultation responses will help inform the development of the Advanced British Standard and more detailed proposals and plans for delivery are expected to be set out in a White Paper in 2024.

The Secretary of State for Education, Rt Hon Gillian Keegan MP, commented: ‘I encourage everyone to have their say on the development of the Advanced British

Standard and help us get these transformational reforms right for business, right for education and, most importantly, right for young people.’

You can [read the full press release](#).

## **Free speech complaints scheme – OfS**

On Thursday 14 December, the Office for Students (OfS) published proposals on how students, staff and visiting speakers will be able to complain to the OfS about restrictions on their lawful free speech at a university, college or students’ union.

The free speech complaints scheme consultation proposals include:

- Who can make a free speech complaint, and what they can complain about.
- The complaints the OfS would be able to consider.
- How the OfS will review free speech complaints and actions that it could take if a complaint is upheld, including recommending financial compensation for the person who made the complaint.
- How the OfS plans to publish information about complaints that it receives.

Commenting on the consultations, the OfS’s Director for Freedom of Speech and Academic Freedom, Arif Ahmed, said: ‘We are keen to hear from students, students’ unions, the universities and colleges we regulate, and anyone else with an interest in freedom of speech, as we take this work forward. We are interested in views about our approach to regulating students’ unions on free speech matters.’

You can [read the press release](#).