



The All-Party Parliamentary **University Group**

University APPG weekly update

11 – 15 September 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:

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

Contents

Parliamentary business	4
Economic Activity of Public Bodies (Overseas Matters) Bill – further consideration	4
UK support for at-risk academics – Westminster Hall debate	5
Lifelong Learning (Higher Education Fee Limits) Bill – third reading	6
Plans for the UK to join Horizon Europe – Lords oral question.	6
Forthcoming business	9
Cost of living – Westminster Hall debate	9
Recess	9
Written Questions	10
Overseas Students: Housing	10
Universities: Student Numbers	10
University of Cambridge and University of Oxford: Overseas Students	11
Universities: Antisemitism and Iran	11
Universities: Student Wastage	12
Erasmus+ Programme	12
Confucius Institutes	13
Sector News	14
Lessons from HE sector response to invasion of Ukraine – UUKi report	14
Breaking the care ceiling: how many care leavers go to university? – Civitas report	14
Plan to upskill Britain – New Conservatives report	15
Quality assessment reports – OfS	16
The China question revisited – KCL policy institute report	16
Industry and Regulators Committee report into OfS	17
How to beat a cost-of-learning crisis: universities’ support for students – HEPI report	18
New visa fees announced	19



Appendix

20

Economic Activity of Public Bodies (Overseas Matters) Bill – Committee Stage 20

Parliamentary business

Economic Activity of Public Bodies (Overseas Matters) Bill – further consideration

On Tuesday 12 and Thursday 14 September, the Economic Activity of Public Bodies (Overseas Matters) Bill continued in its Public Bill Committee stage, with line-by-line scrutiny and consideration of amendments.

Alex Norris MP, Shadow Minister at the Department for Levelling up, Housing and Communities (DLUHC), said the Bill was ‘needlessly broad, with sweeping powers and far-reaching effects’. The Shadow Minister said that Labour did not think that it was wrong for public bodies to take ethical investment and procurement decisions given the ‘long history of councils, universities and others’ taking a stance in defence of freedom and human rights. He then said that the Bill would go far beyond what the government was seeking to resolve in banning BDS actions, and ‘create a series of problems along the way’.

Anum Qaisar MP (SNP) spoke to Amendment 24 which aimed to ensure that any act or omission under the ‘gagging clause’ in Clause 4 would not conflict with the Human Rights Act 1998 (HRA) or the European Convention of Human Rights (ECHR). She said that Clause 4 was ‘simply unworkable and not practical’, highlighting criticism from Universities UK (UUK) that it contradicted duties placed on universities via the Higher Education (Freedom of Speech) Act 2023 to uphold freedom of speech and academic freedom.

Anum Qaisar also noted UUK’s concern that Clause 4 may have an impact on the promotion of academic freedom, highlighting that universities would only have to be ‘influenced by’ moral or political disapproval of foreign state conduct to be non-compliant. She said that it could, for example, deter a group of academics from researching and discussing views on a boycott or divestment decision due to the fear of potential litigation or fines for the university. This could have the unintended consequence of restricting academic freedom, especially for academics with expertise in foreign policy.

Bob Blackman MP (Conservative) said that Clause 4 was necessary to stop individuals who are making a decision from saying ‘if it was lawful to do this, I would act in this way’, as it would create problems for community cohesion. He refuted universities’ view that it would infringe on freedom of speech and freedom of research, as it

would only apply when they are making decisions about buying goods or services from Israel, or other government policies that would come into operation.

Responding to Anum Qaisar's contribution on academic freedom, the Minister shared a scenario in which a university professor was captured by the Bill, only when they said they were "speaking on behalf of" a university. Other than that scenario, she said that academics could say whatever they liked.

The Bill will now proceed to Report stage (TBC).

You can read [additional information on the Bill](#) here and watch the sessions here (Tuesday 12 September [9:25am](#) + [2:00pm](#), and Thursday 7 September [11:30am](#)).

UK support for at-risk academics – Westminster Hall debate

On Tuesday 12 September 'At-risk academics: UK support' was considered in Westminster Hall. This debate was tabled by Rt Hon Sir Julian Lewis MP (Conservative).

Julian Lewis opened the debate by acknowledging the 90th anniversary of the Academic Assistance Council (AAC) (now Council for Assisting Refugee Academics (CARA)). He noted their founding mission as 'the relief of suffering and the defence of learning and science' and said the organisation is 'busier now than at any time since the 1930s.'

He recounted his first contact with CARA in 2021 when he supported the sister-in-law of a constituent to receive a CARA fellowship at the University of Southampton. He further highlighted the positive work to support academics from Syria, Yemen, Ukraine, Turkey, Iraq, Palestine, and Azerbaijan.

Julian Lewis proceeded to raise requests to the Minister. He noted that CARA fellows recently had a 100% visa application success rate and said he hoped the Home Office and UK Visas and Immigration (UKVI) would continue to look positively on the applications. He also hoped the government would consider a longer-term follow-on scheme.

Sarah Dines MP, Parliamentary Under-Secretary for the Home Department, responded on behalf of the Immigration Minister. She noted the beneficial and enriching effect of academia, science, and research on society, describing any imposition of restrictions on this as 'profound'. She thanked CARA and the wider university sector for their contribution.

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

Lifelong Learning (Higher Education Fee Limits) Bill – third reading

On Tuesday 12 September, the Lifelong Learning (Higher Education Fee Limits) Bill received its third reading in the House of Lords.

Baroness Barran, Minister for the School System and Student Finance, responded to several concerns raised by Peers during Report stage, namely that the government do not intend to change the number of learning hours in a credit unless standards in the sector change. She said learning hours are, and should continue to be, based on sector-led standards.

The Minister also gave assurances that the government remain committed to delivering an alternative student finance product compatible with Islamic finance principles as soon as operationally possible after 2025 and will provide a further update later this year.

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

Plans for the UK to join Horizon Europe – Lords oral question.

On Wednesday 13 September from 3:00pm, an oral question on ‘plans for the UK to join Horizon Europe’ was considered in the House of Lords.

Introducing his question, Viscount Stansgate (Labour) highlighted that it had been tabled prior to association being confirmed and that he had welcomed the agreement announced on 7 September. He did, however, raise concerns about the damage caused by the delay, and said that the government should now turn their attention to the visa system. Viscount Stansgate said the Global Talent Visa system for STEM subjects in particular required reform.

Viscount Camrose, Minister for the Department for Science, Innovation and Technology (DSIT), paid tribute to Viscount Stansgate for his championing of association to Horizon Europe and agreed that it was important that the UK brought in overseas talent via the visa system to support European collaboration. He noted that there were ‘roughly 1 million’ people in the UK currently working in R&D roles and that by 2027, that would have to increase by 380,000. He recognised that overseas talent would be a very big part of that. The Minister then praised the

government's 'very welcoming' points-based visa system and said that it had seen increases of around 50%, when compared to the years before the pandemic.

Lord Wallace (Liberal Democrat) noted that the figures quoted by the Minister on the Global Talent Visa did not take account of the recent announcements on increases to upfront visa and health charges. He said that these additional costs were contradicting the government's aim to be a science superpower and asked the government to reverse the recent increases. Viscount Camrose said the Home Office had announced the increases to visa fees and the health surcharge to ensure that the costs of the border and migration system were borne by those 'who most benefitted from that system'. The Minister noted that the timing of the increase in costs had not been announced yet, and that the government would be keeping a "close eye" on the overall effects of the policy.

Baroness Warwick (Labour) said there was an 'overwhelming sense of relief' from the academic community now that the UK had rejoined Horizon Europe. She asked what would happen to researchers already funded by the guarantee and whether they could be transferred back into the Horizon programme, and whether the underspend created by the UKRI guarantee would be reinvested in UK R&D before association took place. Viscount Camrose responded saying that any open calls now were for programme 24 or outstanding for programme 23, and that those calls would be dedicated to each programme. For programme 23, for which there were not many left, these would be covered by the Horizon guarantee scheme or programme 24, which the UK now participates in. On the underspend, the Minister said that it would go towards the government's commitment to spend £20 billion a year on R&D by 2024-2025, but further details on exactly how this would be spent would be the subject of future announcements.

Lord Patel (Crossbench) was concerned that the government had chosen not to join the European nuclear research programme Euratom. He asked the Minister when the government would publish plans for a replacement for Euratom, and whether the money would be used for research. Viscount Camrose responded that the government had chosen not to join Euratom, as the fusion nuclear sector had 'strongly advised' against it. He added that £650 million would be distributed in its place and more details would be announced as soon as was "practicably possible".

Baroness Rawlings (Conservative) said that the UK had the 'finest universities in the world' and asked what plans the government had for Erasmus+. The Minister responded that the government had no plans to re-associate with Erasmus, instead relying on an 'innovative' Turing programme.



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

Forthcoming business

Cost of living – Westminster Hall debate

On Tuesday 19 September from 4:30pm, the ‘impact of increases in the cost of living on further and higher education students’ will be considered in Westminster Hall. The debate has been tabled by Paul Blomfield MP (Labour).

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

Recess

On Tuesday 19 September, the House of Commons will rise for Conference recess. It will return on Monday 16 October.

On Thursday 21 September, the House of Lords will rise for Summer recess. It will return on Monday 16 October.

Written Questions

Overseas Students: Housing

Rachael Maskell MP: To ask the Secretary of State for Education, if she will make an assessment of the potential merits of introducing a hosting scheme for overseas university students for when they first arrive in the UK. [UIN 198395]

Robert Halfon MP: Student accommodation is a busy part of the housing market and, as universities and landlords are private, autonomous bodies, the government has no role in providing student residential accommodation, nor a remit to intervene. The department expects universities and private landlords to review their accommodation policies to ensure they are fair, clear and have the interests of all students at heart. This includes making accommodation available at a range of affordable price points where possible.

As set out in the government's International Education Strategy, the department is committed to working with the higher education sector to enhance the international student experience to ensure they have an enjoyable and valuable experience whilst in the UK. The International Education Strategy can be found here:

<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/international-education-strategy-global-potential-global-growth/international-education-strategy-global-potential-global-growth>(opens in a new tab). The department is also working closely with organisations such as the UK Council for International Student Affairs (UKCISA) who offer a range of information and guidance for those in the UK. Further information is available at: <https://www.ukcisa.org.uk/>(opens in a new tab).

Universities provide a range of dedicated support to their international students before they arrive in the UK, on arrival and during their studies. Any arrangements for a hosting scheme for international students when they arrive in the UK would be for individual UK universities to consider, as part of their support provision.

Universities: Student Numbers

Rachael Maskell MP: To ask the Secretary of State for Education, what assessment she has made of the potential impact of this year's A-level grading system on home student numbers at English universities. [UIN 197561]

Robert Halfon MP: A levels, AS levels and GCSEs in England largely returned to pre-pandemic grading this summer, but with protection in place for students to recognise the disruption caused by the pandemic. This means that a student was just as likely to achieve a particular grade this year as they would have been before the pandemic.

This year, on A level and T level Results Day, 186,710 English-domiciled 18-year-olds were accepted to English higher education providers, compared to 162,680 in 2019.

Plans for grading in England in 2023 were set out by Ofqual in September 2021 and confirmed in 2022, so universities had time to take this into account when setting entry requirements and making offers. The overall number of university places available is not decided by the number of top grades, or the approach to grading.

It is important that qualifications maintain their value now and in the future, and stand the test of time. The return to normal grading helps to ensure young people make the right choices about their future, and sets them up for further study, training, or employment in the best possible way.

University of Cambridge and University of Oxford: Overseas Students

John Spellar MP: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department, how many student visas were issued to students at (a) Oxford and (b) Cambridge University in 2022. [UIN 195637]

Robert Jenrick MP: We do not routinely publish the number of student visas for individual sponsors. For details of our published data on student visas, this can be found in the available Migration Statistics on GOV.UK:

<https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/immigration-system-statistics-year-ending-june-2023/why-do-people-come-to-the-uk-to-study>

Universities: Antisemitism and Iran

Jim Shannon MP: To ask the Secretary of State for Education, what recent discussions her Department has had with student bodies on tackling (a) anti-Semitic and (b) pro-Iranian messaging in universities. [UIN 197782]

Robert Halfon MP: The government is clear that antisemitism is abhorrent and has no place in higher education (HE), and our universities should be welcoming and inclusive environments.

HE providers have clear responsibilities under the Equality Act 2010, to adopt robust policies and procedures that enable them to investigate and swiftly address reports of antisemitism. The Prevent duty requires relevant HE bodies, when exercising their functions, to have due regard to the need to prevent people from being drawn into terrorism.

Department officials meet regularly with the Union of Jewish Students to discuss our collective efforts in the ongoing fight against antisemitism on university campuses.

Universities: Student Wastage

Alison McGovern MP: To ask the Secretary of State for Education, what proportion of students dropped out of the first year of their university course between 2020 and 2023. [UIN 197775]

Robert Halfon MP: Figures on non-continuation following year one of entry are published by the Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA) for full-time first-degree entrants starting higher education courses between 2015/16 and 2019/20. The statistics published by HESA are summarised in Table 1 in the accompanying excel attachment.

More recent information on continuation rates, which are the inverse of non-continuation or drop-out rates, for first year full-time degree entrants entering higher education are published by the Office for Students (OfS). The statistics published by OfS are summarised in Table 2 in the accompanying excel attachment.

Early in-year student withdrawal notifications are published by Student Loans Company (SLC) for the academic years 2018/19 through to 2022/23, and offer a more up-to-date indication of students not continuing their studies. The most recent publication has an effective date of 31 May of each academic year. The statistics published by SLC are summarised in Table 3 in the [accompanying excel attachment](#).

Erasmus+ Programme

John McNally MP: To ask the Secretary of State for Education, what her Department's policy is on UK access to Erasmus+, in the context of the policies of the Irish Government on access to Erasmus+ in Northern Ireland. [UIN 196503]

Robert Halfon: The department understands that the Irish Government has allocated funding to allow higher education students in Northern Ireland to access the Erasmus+ Programme.

The department looks forward to continuing its collaborative work with sector stakeholders and Northern Ireland Executive officials to ensure that students in Northern Ireland are able to benefit from the opportunities available to them through the UK Government's Turing Scheme.

For academic year 2023/24, the Turing Scheme is allocating over £2.9 million to education providers in Northern Ireland to fund international placements for over 1,000 participants, more than half of whom are students from disadvantaged backgrounds.

The government does not intend to negotiate resuming participation in any aspect of Erasmus+ with the EU as a Programme Country.

Confucius Institutes

Gregory Campbell MP: To ask the Secretary of State for Education, what recent estimate she has made of the number of Chinese nationals that are working in Confucius Institutes in the UK; and how many and what proportion of these people have diplomatic immunity. [UIN 195762]

Robert Halfon MP: The employment of staff within Confucius Institutes is a matter for the UK university at which the Confucius Institute is based and their partner Chinese organisations. We do not hold data on the number of visa holders who work in Confucius Institutes.

Like other international bodies that operate in the UK, Confucius Institutes are required to operate transparently and within the law, and with a full commitment to our values of openness and freedom of expression. The government is taking action to remove any direct or indirect government funding from these institutions in the UK.

Working at a Confucius Institute does not in itself confer any privileges and immunities under the Vienna Conventions. However, it is possible that a spouse of a serving diplomat at the Chinese mission to the UK, who therefore enjoys privileges and immunities on that basis, is employed at a Confucius Institute. The government would not hold such information.

Sector News

Lessons from HE sector response to invasion of Ukraine – UUKi report

On Monday 11 September, Universities UK International (UUKi) and Halpin published a report reflecting on the work undertaken in the sector to support universities in Ukraine.

Drawing on the experiences of those closely involved, the report highlights how the UK sector was mobilised to support universities in Ukraine and sets out ways in which we might better respond to future crises, while recognising that there is no ‘one size fits all’ model.

It reflects on the policy, funding and political levers which have enabled a broad-based response and how these need to be considered when formulating a response to emerging crises at individual, institutional and sector levels.

The report sets out a framework that institutions might employ to help develop and tailor such responses, providing a practical tool that can help maximise the effectiveness and impact of university action.

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

Breaking the care ceiling: how many care leavers go to university? – Civitas report

On Monday 11 September, Civitas published a report providing new evidence on the number of care leavers who go to university in the UK.

The report finds that young people from care backgrounds leaving education have some of the worst outcomes of any group in society and are some of the least likely to get to university.

14 per cent of care leavers under the age of 19 progress onto higher education, compared to 47 per cent of all other children, a discrepancy that has hardly changed in a decade. At the top 32 universities in England, only 90 care leavers under the age of 19 started an undergraduate course in 2021/22.

The report sets out why it matters that more children who have grown up in care get into university and what can be done about it.

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

Plan to upskill Britain – New Conservatives report

On Monday 11 September, the New Conservatives published a report titled ‘Plan to Upskill Britain.’

The plan sets out ways to redirect funding from poor quality university courses and towards upskilling the country through investment in technical training in collaboration with local businesses. It claims this would ‘transform skills education, boost local economies, and help end Britain’s addiction to cheap foreign labour.’

Key recommendations for the higher education sector include:

- Introduce a minimum requirement of Level 4 grades at GCSE in English and Maths in order to qualify for student loans.
- Introduce a minimum requirement of EEE at A-Level, or equivalent T-Levels or Level 3 Diploma, in order to qualify for student loans.
- Suspend student loans for courses that fail to deliver good outcomes for graduates.
- Withdraw loan support for unnecessary foundation year courses at university.
- Require graduates to start repaying their student loan at a fixed amount of £45 per month until they earn over £31,000 following a three year ‘grace period’, allowing exemptions for graduates working in sectors of high social value, working for charity, on maternity leave, registered as a carer, etc. Repayments will be set at 9% of income over £25,000 once they earn £31,000.
- Exempt graduates who work for the NHS and in other needed sectors from loan repayments for up to three years.

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

Quality assessment reports – OfS

On Tuesday 12 September, the Office for Students (OfS) published the findings of two assessment visits focused on the quality of Business and Management courses at two universities.

The two reports outline the advice of independent academic experts who carried out assessments for OfS during the 2022-23 academic year. They included on-site visits, with the teams considering a range of evidence, including from staff and students. The OfS will now consider whether any regulatory action is appropriate.

At the University of Bolton, the assessment team found areas of concern. At London South Bank University, the assessment team found no areas of concern.

Commenting, Susan Lapworth, chief executive of the OfS, said: ‘We are grateful to the academic colleagues from across the sector who have provided us with their valuable time and expert advice. We will now carefully consider their findings as we decide whether any further regulatory action is appropriate in individual cases.’

You can [read the assessment reports](#) here.

The China question revisited – KCL policy institute report

On Wednesday 13 September, the King’s College London (KCL) policy institute published a report titled ‘The China question revisited: de-risking higher education and research.’ The report was led by former Minister for Universities, Rt Hon Lord Johnson of Marylebone.

UK institutions benefit from the higher tuition fees paid by Chinese students, while China has also become an increasingly entrenched collaborator on research, as well as a key source of doctoral students crucial to the strength of the UK’s research system, the paper says.

The paper proposes a range of measures to help with “de-risking” the UK higher education sector’s relationship with China:

- Requiring universities to publish an annual statement on their international student recruitment plans, in order to provide greater visibility of current strategies to diversify the international student population.

- Improving regulation of course quality, given high drop-out rates among students from countries such as India and Bangladesh.
- Weeding out poor-quality and fraudulent applications by charging an application fee for international students, requiring tuition fees to be paid up front and maintenance funds to be put in escrow at the start of the year.
- Maintaining a register of recruitment agents and publishing key performance indicators relating to visa refusals, to improve accountability.

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

Industry and Regulators Committee report into OfS

On Wednesday 13 September, the House of Lords Industry and Regulators Committee published a report titled ‘Must do better: the Office for Students and the looming crisis facing higher education.’

The committee’s report criticises the performance of the OfS, concluding that it is failing to meet the needs of students and is not trusted by many of the providers it regulates. It also raises concerns that the OfS lacks independence from the government, and that its actions often appear driven by the ebb and flow of short-term political priorities and media headlines. Whilst the committee welcomes the OfS’ focus on value for money for students, it questions the OfS’ approach to regulation and whether it provides value for money itself to providers, particularly when higher registration fees partly reflect the regulator’s own expanding remit.

Key recommendations for the OfS include:

- Hold discussions with providers more regularly about their financial situation and ensure it is aware of the systemic challenges facing the sector.
- Build trust with higher education institutions and adopt a more strategic, less combative approach to its work.
- Urgently align its framework for quality with international standards, including reinstating an independent Designated Quality Body.
- Conduct detailed scoping work, with students, on how it defines “the student interest,” and how this informs its work.

It also calls on the government to:

- Review how higher education is funded, setting long-term, sustainable funding and delivery models for the sector.
- Consider making it a requirement that serving politicians resign any party political whip they hold before becoming Chairs of independent regulators.
- Reconvene the Higher Education Data Reduction Taskforce to reduce unnecessary burdens on providers.

A Universities UK (UUK) spokesperson said: ‘UUK, and the sector as a whole, have always supported effective and proportionate regulation for universities and this report makes a welcome contribution to how this should be achieved. We particularly welcome the points around the deteriorating financial health of the sector, and the need to for a concerted government approach to address this. Equally, UUK recognises and appreciates the effort which has already been made by the regulator to improve relationships with the sector, and we look forward to working with the OfS to cement this.’

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

How to beat a cost-of-learning crisis: universities’ support for students – HEPI report

On Thursday 14 September, the Higher Education Policy Institute (HEPI) examining how universities are responding to the cost-of-living crisis on students. It is based on statistical analysis of 140 university responses and interviews with nearly 60 university professionals.

The report finds that higher education institutions have adopted a range of strategies to support students, through hardship funds, food and drink discounts and support with health such as sanitary products, coordinated by cost-of-living ‘working groups’, new committees not bound by the usual university processes.

Key recommendations include:

- Universities should establish a cost-of-living working group, streamline their hardship fund, launch an emergency fund, and include students throughout their cost-of-living response.

- Students' unions should mount an ambitious and practical cost-of-living campaign with their university, founded on strong evidence and excellent relationships with university staff.
- Government should establish a cost-of-living taskforce which consults regularly with students and sector leaders, and urgently review the level of maintenance support.

Josh Freeman, author of the report, said: 'Rather than leaving innovation to the laboratory, student advisors, university leaders and students' union officers have pushed boundaries to get students more help. But there is more to be done.'

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

New visa fees announced

On Friday 15 September, new legislation was laid in Parliament to increase immigration and nationality fees.

The changes mean that the cost for a visit visa for less than six months is rising by £15 to £115, while the fee for applying for a student visa from outside the UK will rise by £127 to £490, to equal the amount charged for in-country applications.

Subject to Parliamentary approval, the immigration and nationality fees will increase from 4 October 2023. These changes do not include the planned increase to the Immigration Health Surcharge (IHS) which are scheduled to be introduced later in the Autumn.

You can [read a full list of fees](#) here.

Appendix

Economic Activity of Public Bodies (Overseas Matters) Bill – Committee Stage

On Tuesday 5 September, evidence was heard on the Economic Activity of Public Bodies (Overseas Matters) Bill. This was not included in the previous edition of the Digest.

The fifth session heard from Dr Bryn Harris, Chief Legal Counsel for the Free Speech Union and Dr Alan Mendoza, Executive Director at the Henry Jackson Society.

Probed on Clause 4 and its impact on freedom of expression, Dr Harris said that it was ‘entirely right’ for the law and Parliament to say that a local authority should not be spending its money on, however, he also said it would be ‘extremely provocative’ to say that to universities. He welcomed the government’s ‘excellent’ work in protecting academic freedom but said there was another part of academic freedom, and this was the autonomy of academic institutions, and that it was ‘extremely questionable’ to challenge that.

The eighth session heard evidence from Francis Hoar, Barrister at Field Court Chambers, Andrew Tettenborn, Professor of Commercial Law at University of Swansea and Adam Tomkins, Professor of Public Law at Glasgow University.

Felicity Buchan MP, Parliamentary Under Secretary of State at the Department of Levelling up, Housing and Communities probed whether the witnesses thought it was appropriate for a wide range of public institutions like universities to be included within scope. Professor Tettenborn said it ‘probably should’ include universities, saying it was inappropriate for a university to hold corporate views on a particular matter of foreign policy. Francis Hoar said he was ambivalent about universities being in scope but said the wording around universities only being in scope when they are ‘acting as a public body’ may be an issue that the courts might have to ‘tease out’. Professor Tomkins highlighted how that under UK law, there was no single definition of the public sector, but that the Human Rights Act had been a template used for the Bill bringing universities in as ‘hybrid public authorities’, and that he was comfortable with that.

On Clause 4, Francis Hoar said he did not see why it was necessary to prohibit public bodies from saying they would like to divest if they were lawfully allowed to do so, or even if they intend to do so, and advised the House to reject the Clause. Kim

Leadbeater further probed the witnesses on Clause 4 and its potential to limit free speech. Professor Tettenborn did not agree that it would, however, he did suggest an additional subsection within Clause 4 to allay any fears that it would affect the right of any individual member of a public authority to speak in a private capacity. Professor Tomkins added that he thought Clause 4 was compatible with the EHCR as well as domestic standards on free speech.

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