



The All-Party Parliamentary **University Group**

University APPG weekly update

12 – 16 June 2023

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

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Parliamentary business

Education Oral Questions

On Monday 12 June, the Secretary of State for Education, Rt Hon Gillian Keegan MP, and her ministerial team, answered oral questions in the House of Commons.

Rt Hon Sir David Evennett MP (Conservative) said he welcomed the freeze on tuition fees which he described as positive for students and the country. The Secretary of State said she was committed to ensuring value for money for students and highlighted the increase to degree apprenticeship provision which allowed students to ‘earn and learn.’

Angela Crawley MP (SNP) described the financial deficit at universities and asked whether the recent dependants announcement risked jeopardising the income stream of universities. The Secretary of State said the offer to international students remained competitive which would not be affected by the recent announcement.

Matt Western MP, Shadow Higher Education Minister, raised the recent dependants announcement and noted the Home Office view that any indirect impact of the visa policy would be proportionate to the aims. The Minister asked how this could be known given an impact assessment had not been conducted. In her reply, the Secretary of State said she supported the reduction in the number of dependants and highlighted the aims of the International Education Strategy to welcome the ‘best and brightest’ to UK universities.

Carol Monaghan MP, SNP Spokesperson for Education, repeated previous remarks from the Secretary of State in which she acknowledged changes to student visas would reduce the ability to attract international students. She asked if the Secretary of State stood by her previous remarks. Gillian Keegan said she was keen to maintain the Graduate Route visa which made the UK an attractive destination.

Carol Monaghan noted that international students were temporary migrants and asked whether only international students that stayed in the UK after graduation should be counted in the migration figures. The Secretary of State acknowledged that the vast majority of international students returned to their home country after completing their studies but highlighted that the Office for National Statistics (ONS) was responsible for migration figures.

Cat Smith MP (Labour) said the recent dependants announcement meant universities would be looking to China for the recruitment of international students. She asked the Secretary of State whether she was confident that the policy would 'end well'. In her reply, the Secretary of State highlighted the growing international appetite for UK higher education.

Derren Henry MP (Conservative) raised the campaign to establish a statutory duty of care for higher education providers. He asked the Minister what action the Department were taking with universities to prioritise student mental health. Rt Hon Robert Halfon MP, Minister for Skills, Apprenticeships, and Higher Education, highlighted the £15 million funding from the Office for Students to support universities with mental health, urged universities to sign up for the Mental Health Charter by September 2024, and noted the independent review of student suicides.

Angela Richardson MP (Conservative) quoted a recent interview with the Shadow Secretary of State for Education in which she said Labour could reduce the monthly repayments of graduates without adding to government borrowing or taxation. She said this sounded 'too good to be true' and asked whether the Secretary of State had made an assessment of Labour's proposals. The Secretary of State said the proposals would either mean graduates would pay back at a lower income threshold or would be paying for additional years.

Anum Qaisar MP (SNP) quoted HESA data that revealed first class female graduate salaries were £2,000 lower than their male counterparts. She asked what steps the Minister was taking to improve female progression in the workplace. In his reply, the Minister said graduates were coming out of university with good wages and a record number of disadvantaged students were attending university.

Janet Daby MP (Labour) noted the impact of cost of living pressures on student mental health. She said the government had 'failed students so far' and asked what action the Minister was taking. In his reply, Robert Halfon highlighted the £276 million Office for Students (OfS) grant to support disadvantaged students and the 2.8% increase in maintenance loan.

Lia Nici MP (Conservative) raised the impact of the UCU marking and assessment boycott. She asked what students should do to ensure they attained the qualifications they deserve. In his reply, Robert Halfon said he had been discussing these issues with Universities UK and highlighted the reassurance he had been given that only a minority of students would be affected, and many universities had implemented alternative marking arrangements.

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

Welsh Affairs Committee – University research funding

On Tuesday 13 June, the Welsh Affairs Committee continued their inquiry into ‘university research funding’. The Committee heard evidence from: Professor Ian Walsh (Provost of Swansea and Cardiff Campuses at University of Wales Trinity Saint David), Dr Ben Calvert (Vice-Chancellor at University of South Wales), Professor Maria Hinfelaar (Vice-Chancellor and Chief Executive at Wrexham Glyndwr University), and Professor Cara Aitchison (President and Vice-Chancellor at Cardiff Metropolitan University)

The Chair, Rt Hon Stephen Crabb MP (Conservative) began by probing on the historic contribution of European Structural and Investment Funds (ESIF) to the research activity at universities. Dr Calvert described the contribution as ‘significant’, citing the ability to conduct long-term, strategic, and collaborative research activity. Regarding the real-world outcomes of the funding, Professor Hinfelaar highlighted the impact of the [Centre for Photonics Expertise](#) which received £7.3 million in funding and supported SMEs.

Professor Walsh described the unique Welsh economic context with a focus on SMEs. He explained that the funding universities received through ESIF worked effectively for this context. On successes of the ESIF, Professor Walsh highlighted the collaborative [Accelerate Wales project](#) which delivered support for companies seeking to develop medical products and connecting them with the health service.

The Chair asked the panellists whether universities were facing a ‘cliff-edge’ following the removal of ESIF. In his reply, Professor Walsh clarified that it would better be characterised as a ‘steep and rapid transition’ which required support for universities to adjust.

Professor Aitchison highlighted the geographical and longer-term scale of ESIF which allowed activity to be more meaningful and impact across Wales. She explained that there would be a challenge for certain projects, such as [Project Helix](#), to be funded by the UK Shared Prosperity Fund (UKSPF) given the shorter-time horizon and narrower geographical focus.

On engagement with officials on these issues, Professor Aitchison explained that there was an understanding of the problems, but more focus was needed on mechanisms and processes. She said there was a 95% difference in funding between the UKSPF and ESIF under their forecasts. Professor Hinfelaar added that UKSPF allocated to different projects than ESIF.

Rob Roberts MP (Independent) probed on some of the disadvantages with ESIF. Professor Hinfelaar explained that the advantage of the UKSPF was its focus across the whole of Wales, but the flaw was the allocation through 22 individual local authorities which didn't allow for cohesion. She suggested the best elements of both schemes could be adopted.

Dr Calvert outlined the difficulties with UKSPF being disaggregated to local authorities with local priorities. The panellists raised the lack of a coordinating function to ensure all parties shared a similar agenda.

Virginia Crosbie MP (Conservative) asked whether the panellists understood UKSPF to be a 'replacement' to ESIF. Professor Aitchison said it was not a direct replacement but a 'progression from one funding stream to another'. The panellists reiterated the difference in focus between the two funding streams and the importance of maintaining momentum during the transition.

Virginia Crosbie probed on the experience of working with local authorities in the allocation of the UKSPF. Professor Walsh celebrated the work of local authorities but highlighted the primary focus on local issues and warned of additional bureaucracy.

Regarding lessons learnt from the first round of the UKSPF, Professor Hinfelaar stressed the importance of dialogue with local authorities and understanding their priorities. The UKSPF was described as strong in its social, community, and skills focus but 'light' on the applied research support. Professor Walsh encouraged the Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities (DLUHC) to recalibrate the UKSPF for this deficit. Professor Aitchison noted the shift towards securing funding from UK Research and Innovation (UKRI) and highlighted that they could both be secured.

Rob Roberts probed the £71 million bridging funding request from Universities Wales and asked whether the panellists had detected any willingness from government to address the concern. Professor Walsh stressed that universities were adapting to the new funding model but highlighted the challenges associated with this transition. Dr Calvert raised the importance of hearing the voices of industries that were negatively affected by this change. Professor Aitchison raised the unique context that universities in Wales operated in, and the funding difficulties associated with this.

Rob Roberts raised the potential conflict between local authorities and universities and whether the UKSPF could be reformed to resolve this. Professor Aitchison noted the civic mission of the university which had overlap with local authorities but also stressed the international focus of universities. Dr Calvert noted the desire of local authorities to have direct impact which could conflict with the experimental nature of university research.

Simon Baynes MP (Conservative) asked what support Welsh universities required to secure a greater proportion of UKRI funding. Dr Calvert said Welsh universities were directing more attention to UKRI funding, but acknowledged it was more competitive than ESIF. Professor Hinfelaar said there needed to be a mechanism to broker new connections between universities with similar focus and capacity to prepare competitive bids. Professor Aitchison highlighted the need to recruit and retain international staff as well as difficulties relating to the increase in issues the university is addressing with a reduced real-terms tuition fee.

Virginia Crosbie asked whether students at Welsh universities were being ‘shortchanged’ compared with their peers in England. Professor Aitchison highlighted the positive work at Cardiff Metropolitan University but reiterated the difficulties to increase provision without a corresponding increase to funding. Dr Calvert highlighted the student satisfaction at Welsh universities and echoed Professor Aitchison’s comments.

Ruth Jones MP (Labour) asked what measures the Welsh government could take to support universities. Dr Calvert stressed the importance of a conversation on sustainable funding for higher education which covers research, teaching, skills, civic mission etc., Professor Hinfelaar called for a strategic policy debate on how universities could support the government’s agenda in the longer term. Professor Walsh highlighted the importance of ensuring the offer to students remained attractive. Professor Aitchison called on more emphasis on the role of universities as a foundation to the society and economy.

Ruth Jones continued with questions on the return to face-to-face and the impact of the recent dependants announcement. All panellists said their universities had returned to face-to-face teaching and highlighted the digital tools to enhance learning. Professor Aitchison explained the transition in international student recruitment which meant students were bringing more dependants. The panellists said the policy change may have some impact, but the impact was limited by the ability of universities to expand provision. Professor Hinfelaar stressed the importance of retaining the Graduate visa route to ensure international competitiveness.

Simon Baynes asked about university collaboration with the private sector, particularly on commercialising research. Professor Aitchison noted the closeness of Welsh universities to the market but stressed the labour-intensive nature of this work. Professor Walsh noted the collaboration and shifting to STEM focus. Professor Hinfelaar highlighted the support to graduates wanting to establish a start-up as well as the space for spin-outs.

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

DSIT Oral Questions

On Wednesday 14 June, Rt Hon Chloe Smith MP, interim Secretary of State for Science, Innovation, and Technology, and her ministerial team, answered questions in the House of Commons.

Wendy Morton MP (Conservative) asked the Science Minister, George Freeman MP to bring forward individual regional targets for rebalancing R&D funding, as recommended by a House of Lords Committee report. The Minister said that in autumn, the government would be publishing a digital cluster map, showing all the private and public funding in R&D, and how the government intended to increase it by region.

John Trickett MP (Labour) said that in his constituency in the Yorkshire coalfields, there were 20 times fewer people employed in science and technology than in Cambridge. He asked why the golden triangle was so preferred. George Freeman responded by stating that the Oxford-Cambridge-London triangle was golden for a reason, highlighting that it was home to two of the world's top three universities and five of the top fifteen. He added that DSIT's central mission was to ensure R&D economy grew across the whole of the UK and cited several R&D clusters in Yorkshire.

SNP spokesperson for Science, Innovation and Technology, Carol Monaghan MP, praised the Fraunhofer Centre for Applied Photonics at the University of Strathclyde as a key strength in the national quantum strategy. She said that despite this, the UK government had not provided any core funding for the Centre and asked what discussions the Minister had had with Treasury to provide this. The Science Minister said they had recently set out plans for a £2.5 billion quantum strategy and that they were investing in the Glasgow cluster.

Chris Stephens MP (SNP) asked what assessment the government had made of Brexit's impact on the science and technology sector. George Freeman said that the UK had seen "extraordinary growth" in investment since 2016, suggesting the UK had nearly 20 times more venture capital than in 2011.

Sir Oliver Heald MP (Conservative) asked about UK-EU cooperation and noted its importance for universities and businesses. George Freeman agreed it was important and said that was why the government were negotiating to rejoin Horizon for a fair price.

The Shadow Minister for Industrial Strategy, Science and Innovation, Chi Onwurah MP noted that it had now been 127 weeks since the UK was taken out of Horizon Europe. She said that universities and businesses had "paid the price" in lost jobs and investment and asked the Minister to confirm or deny reports that negotiations to rejoin had stalled due to the government pushing for a discounted fee. In response, George Freeman spoke about the government's funding guarantee for all Horizon programmes and that they were actively negotiating to make sure a good deal was made.

Chair of the Science, Innovation and Technology Select Committee, Rt Hon Greg Clark MP asked about £150 million of funding for the University of Oxford's Pandemic Sciences Institute, which was promised to the University by the former Prime Minister Boris Johnson. He cited evidence given to the Select Committee from the Institute's Director Sir Peter Horby, who said that no money had yet been received. The Secretary of State agreed to meet with Greg Clark to discuss this further.

Chris Green MP (Conservative) asked what more the government could do to give science and technology technicians more recognition, status and funding. Minister for Tech and the Digital Economy, Paul Scully MP said that they were increasing investment in further education and skills by £3.8 billion over the course of this parliament, as technicians needed access to high-quality training.

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

Forthcoming business

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

In the afternoon of Monday 19 June, the Lifelong Learning (Higher Education Fee Limits) Bill will receive its second reading in the House of Lords.

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

National Security Bill – consideration of Commons amendments

In the afternoon of Wednesday 21 June, the National Security Bill will return to the House of Lords to consider amendments made in the House of Commons.

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

Written Questions

Africa: Higher Education

Chi Onwurah: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Affairs, what steps he is taking with Cabinet colleagues to utilise UK research collaborations with African universities to support social and economic development on that continent. [UIN 188519]

Andrew Mitchell: UK research collaborations with African universities support extensive development on the continent. We partner with other Government Departments to deliver a whole of UK approach across a broad range of issues. On energy, we collaborate with the Department of Science, Innovation and Technology to support UK-Africa research partnerships to develop clean energy solutions to address energy poverty on the continent. On health, we work with the Hygiene Hub at the London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine, alongside Africa CDC, the Centre for Infectious Disease Research in Zambia and the Malawi University for Business and Applied Sciences to prevent the spread of transmissible diseases including covid-19 and cholera.

Visas: Research

Chi Onwurah: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department, what recent assessment she has made of the (a) speed of processing and (b) adequacy of the visa application process for overseas research partners visiting UK universities. [UIN 188518]

Robert Jenrick: UKVI encourages all customers to apply in good time ahead of intended travel dates. Customers can also make use of UKVI's optional priority visa services for visit visas in certain locations.

UKVI is currently operating inside all published service standards for straightforward Visit visa applications. These are:

- Super Priority (24 hours)
- Priority (5 working days)
- Standard (3 weeks)

UKVI updates any changes to its current wait times regularly on .GOV-
<https://www.gov.uk/guidance/visa-processing-times-applications-outside-the-uk#visit-visas>

UKVI regularly reviews its processes throughout the year using feedback from a variety of sources. It is also continuing to invest in a programme of transformation and business improvement initiatives which will speed up and simplify decision making, reduce the time people spend in the system and decrease the number of people who are awaiting an interview or decision.

University of Gibraltar: British Students Abroad

Andrew Rosindell: To ask the Secretary of State for Education, whether her Department provides (a) support and (b) financial assistance to UK students who wish to study at the University of Gibraltar. [UIN 187073]

Robert Halfon: The department does not provide support or financial assistance to UK students who wish to study at the University of Gibraltar. We are exploring the options for financing English students to study in Gibraltar, whilst ensuring that those students receive an education, and that they benefit from safeguards which are broadly comparable with those in the England.

Teachers: Workplace Pensions

Lloyd Russell-Moyle: To ask the Secretary of State for Education, whether her Department plans to take steps to support Higher Education institutions with the cost of (a) staffing and (b) course provision to cover potential increases in Teachers' Pension Scheme employer contributions. [UIN 188351]

Robert Halfon: The Teachers' Pension Scheme (TPS) is one of the best pension schemes available. It is a defined benefit scheme, which means that members receive an index-linked income in retirement, that it has a large employer contribution element, and that it is underwritten by HM Treasury.

The arrangements for valuing public service pension schemes, like the TPS, recognise that there are a wide number of factors that affect the cost of providing the benefits involved, and those factors are subject to regular change, including longevity, member behaviour and economic performance. Reviewing those factors every four

years, which is in line with practice for similar pension schemes, is necessary to ensure that the contribution rate employers pay reflects a reasonably up-to-date view of costs, including for higher education (HE) providers. There would be limited value in seeking to forecast likely costs beyond that because of the potential for the wide range of factors involved to change, and therefore there are no plans to make such forecasts currently.

In recognition of the cost pressure a potential increase to employer contribution rates would bring to existing departmental budgets, on 30 March 2023 the Government announced its commitment to providing funding for employers whose employment costs are centrally funded. HE providers are not covered by this commitment. This is consistent with the decision to not fund a similar TPS cost increase in 2019. The Department expects the 2020 TPS valuation to be completed and revised employers' contribution rates to be confirmed in September 2023. At this point it will be possible for HE providers to accurately assess how any changes in employers' contribution rates may affect budgets.

The Department recognises that, while the Office for Students' annual report on financial sustainability finds that university finances generally remain in good shape, there remains a wide spread of financial performance across the sector. The Department, along with HM Treasury, recognise the importance of this issue, and will continue discussions about the implications for HE providers. The Government will confirm its position on this issue in due course.

Students: Cost of Living

Janet Daby: To ask the Secretary of State for Education, what assessment she has made of the potential impact of increases in the cost of living on students. [UIN 905322]

Robert Halfon: The government recognises the additional cost of living pressures that have arisen this year which have impacted students. The department has not directly assessed the impact of increases in the cost of living on Higher Education (HE) students. The department closely monitors the evidence produced by other organisations and uses this to inform decision-making. For example, the Office for National Statistics' work on the behaviours, plans, opinions and well-being of students related to the cost of living from the Student Cost of Living Insights Study (SCoLIS) and the Office for Students' brief, 'Studying during rises in the cost of living'.

Having considered reports such as these, on 11 January 2023, the department announced a one-off funding boost of £15 million to this year's student premium. There is now £276 million of student premium funding available this academic year to support disadvantaged students who need additional help. This extra funding will complement the help universities are providing through their own bursary, scholarship and hardship support schemes.

Decisions on student support for HE courses are taken on an annual basis and changes for the 2023/24 academic year were made through regulations laid in January 2023. The department has continued to increase maximum loans and grants for living and other costs on an annual basis, with a 2.3% increase for the 2022/23 academic year and a further 2.8% increase for 2023/24.

Furthermore, students who have been awarded a loan for living costs for the 2022/23 academic year that is lower than the maximum, and whose household income for the tax year 2022/23 has dropped by at least 15% compared to the income provided for their original assessment, have been able to apply for their entitlement to be reassessed.

Decisions on student finance have had 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.

Students: Fees and Charges

Dr Philippa Whitford: To ask the Secretary of State for Education, what assessment her Department has made of the potential impact of tuition fees on the social mobility of young people. [UIN 905321]

Robert Halfon: The introduction of tuition fees has not resulted in fewer people going into Higher Education (HE). The 18-year-old entry rate for disadvantaged students from England increased from 14.4% in 2011 to 25.1% in 2022, and in 2022 we saw record numbers of disadvantaged 18-years-olds going to HE.

Disadvantaged entry rate - English 18-year-olds

	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022
Disadvantaged entry rate	14.4%	14.4%	15.6%	17.0%	18.0%	18.9%	19.9%	20.2%	21.7%	24.0%	24.5%	25.1%

Notes: Disadvantage measured using POLAR, a measure of educational disadvantage.

From August 2023, interest rates for new student loan borrowers will be reduced to RPI only. Under these new terms, no one will repay more than they originally borrowed when adjusted for inflation.

Degree apprenticeships also offer a unique opportunity for people to earn while they learn, achieving degrees from some of our best universities without incurring tuition fees. We've seen year-on-year growth of degree-level apprenticeships (Levels 6 & 7) with over 185,000 starts since their introduction in 2014/15 academic year.

Overseas Students:

Baroness Randerson: To ask His Majesty's Government what assessment they have made of the report by Universities UK International and the Higher Education Policy Institute, The costs and benefits of international higher education students in the UK, published on 16 May, which suggested a total net benefit of £37.4 billion to the UK economy associated with international students during the years 2018–19 and 2021–22; and what plans they have to further support universities to recruit internationally. [UIN HL8054]

Baroness Barran: The government recognises the significant contribution that international students make to the UK higher education (HE) sector and to the UK economy as a whole.

Attracting the brightest students from around the world is good for our universities, delivers growth at home and supports the creation of more places for UK students.

As my right hon. Friend, the Secretary of State for Education, outlined in her speech at the Education World Forum on 8 May 2023, the department is hugely proud to have met its international student recruitment ambition two years running by attracting more than 600,000 international students. International mobility helps us build global relationships and makes an important contribution to UK science and research, supporting the cutting edge of global discoveries and emerging technologies.

The department wants to continue to attract students from around the world to benefit from British HE. That is why, on 23 May 2023, the department reaffirmed its commitment to the International Education Strategy, which is vital for ensuring that the UK remains competitive in the global HE market.

Students: Care Leavers

Lord Watson of Invergowrie: To ask His Majesty's Government, further to the ambition outlined in their *Stable Homes, Built on Love: Implementation Strategy and Consultation*, published in February, to "increase the number of care leavers going to university", what steps they will take to support access to safe and secure housing for care leavers when they are at university. [UIN HL8175]

Baroness Barran: The department gave a commitment in 'Stable Homes Built on Love' to work with the sector to develop a gold standard accreditation scheme for further education (FE) and higher education (HE) institutions. This covers all aspects of support for care experienced young people, including access to affordable year-round accommodation. Furthermore, local authorities are under a legal duty to ensure that any care leaver in full time residential FE or HE has suitable accommodation if they need it during a vacation.

As set out in 'Stable Homes, Built on Love', the government is also committed to seeing an increase in the number of care leavers in safe, suitable accommodation. The department is providing £99.8 million to local authorities in this Spending Review period to increase the number of care leavers that remain with their former foster families in a family home up to the age of 21, through the 'Staying Put' programme. We are also providing £53 million in this Spending Review period to increase the number of young people leaving care through the 'Staying Close' programme, providing an enhanced support package including an offer of move-on accommodation for young people leaving children's homes and other forms of residential care.

Higher Education: Liability

Tobias Ellwood: To ask the Secretary of State for Education, if she will make it her policy to legislate for an additional statutory duty of care for students in higher education. [UIN 187074]

Robert Halfon: It is a departmental priority that students are provided with the mental health support they need so that everyone, regardless of the challenges they face, is given the opportunity to thrive.

The department understands the arguments for a statutory duty of care and shares the aims of those calling for this, which are to protect those who study at university and to prevent future tragedies. If creating a statutory duty of care in this space was

the right way to achieve this, it would have the government's full backing. However, the department believes creating such a duty for higher education (HE) providers is not the most effective way to improve outcomes for students.

Currently, a duty of care exists in common law as part of the law of negligence. This legal position is recognised in Universities UK guidance. The department is aware that the decision in *Abrahart v. University of Bristol* is being appealed in the High Court and will be monitoring this closely.

There are other relevant legal protections that already apply. The Equality Act 2010 imposes a duty on providers to make reasonable adjustments where students with a mental health disability would otherwise be put at a substantial disadvantage. Providers must also fully observe health and safety obligations and requirements to safeguard vulnerable adults, as well as contractual obligations.

There may be unintended consequences of legislating at this time. There is a risk that a one-size-fits-all prescriptive approach might stifle new and innovative practices, given there is no consensus yet on which interventions are most effective. While HE providers need to provide excellent pastoral services, we must be careful not to place a duty on them which requires them to provide services the NHS has more specialism in delivering.

The department believes there are more effective solutions to improve outcomes for students in the near term. Our approach is focussed on three pillars:

- Funding and resourcing vital services
- Spreading and implementing best practice
- Clear responsibilities for providers and protection for students.

As part of the first pillar, the department has asked the Office for Students (OfS) to distribute £15 million this academic year so support can be targeted towards students who are starting university for the first time. This funding will also enable effective partnerships between providers and local NHS services so students can better navigate the pathways for mental health provision.

Through our second pillar, we are challenging the sector to deliver on supporting student mental health, including by setting a target for all eligible universities to sign up to the Mental Health Charter by September 2024. The department is confident the sector will rise to the challenge, having made great progress with the production of robust frameworks for best practice over recent years. If we do not see a proactive

and positive response from the sector, the department will not hesitate to ask the OfS to explore targeted regulation to protect student interests.

We have also made clear to the sector that we expect all relevant providers to follow broader best practice guidance shared with them by Universities UK and mental health experts.

Through work with the LEARN Network, the Student Support Champion Professor Edward Peck has identified areas for further improvement, which forms the third pillar of our approach. To deliver on this, Edward Peck will Chair a Higher Education Mental Health Implementation Taskforce, which will produce a plan for better early identification of students at risk, a University Student Commitment on dealing with students sensitively on disciplinary issues, and a set of clear targets for improvements in practice by providers. The Taskforce will include parent and students, mental health experts, and sector representatives. An interim plan is expected to be put in place later this year, with a final report to follow by May 2024.

The department wants to ensure all universities can learn from tragic instances of suicide by ensuring lessons are shared across the sector. A National Review of University Suicides will be commissioned, to be carried out by an independent organisation.

We owe it to our students to do even more to protect their mental health and wellbeing. This can only be achieved by the government, the sector, experts, parents, and students working together collectively towards this shared goal.

Childcare: Fees and Charges

Matt Western: To ask the Secretary of State for Education, what assessment she has made of the potential impact exclusion of postgraduate researchers from the extension to government childcare subsidies announced in the Spring Budget 2023 on (a) access to higher education, (b) participation in higher education and (c) economic growth. [UIN 188621]

Claire Coutinho: 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 apprentices and students, including postgraduate researchers, 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 government is not currently planning to extend the income criteria for 30 hours free childcare. The department recognises the value of parents continuing in education and provides a range of support for students in further or higher education to support them with childcare.

For example, support available to full-time students includes the Childcare Grant and Parents' Learning Allowance. These schemes are available for full-time students with dependent children.

For additional financial support, since September 2020, all eligible full-time nursing, midwifery, paramedic, and other allied health profession students can 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. Eligible students studying part-time will receive a pro-rated amount of support, depending on their intensity of study compared to a full-time course.

The government introduced new support packages for students starting postgraduate master's degree courses from the 2016/17 academic year onwards and postgraduate doctoral degree courses from 2018/19 onwards. These loans are not based on income and are intended as a contribution to the cost of study. They can be used by students according to their personal circumstances to cover the costs of fees and living costs, including childcare. The new support packages have provided a significant uplift in support for postgraduate students while ensuring the student support system remains financially sustainable.

Students studying on postgraduate courses can apply for loans towards their course fees and living costs, up to £11,836 in 2022/23 for new students undertaking

postgraduate master's degree courses and up to £27,892 in 2022/23 for new students undertaking postgraduate doctoral degree courses.

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

Office for Students: Freedom of Expression

Matt Western: To ask the Secretary of State for Education, what discussions she has had with the Office for Students on its preparedness for implementing the Free Speech Complaints Scheme; and what her timeline is for that Scheme to be operational. [UIN 187492]

Claire Coutinho: The Higher Education (Freedom of Speech) Bill received Royal Assent on 11 May 2023. The Office for Students (OfS), the independent regulator, is responsible for implementing key measures in the legislation. Officials at the OfS and the department are liaising about implementation of the Act. It is for the OfS to determine how it plans to implement specific measures introduced by the Act, including the new complaints scheme.

Overseas Students

Matt Western: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department, what recent assessment she has made of the potential impact of limiting the ability for international students not on a research postgraduate course to bring dependents on women's (a) access to and (b) participation in higher education in the UK. [UIN 187433]

Robert Jenrick: We consider our Public Sector Equality Duty in the development of all policy, and an Equality Impact Assessment was produced and considered in developing this package of reforms.

We consider any indirect impact to be proportionate in achieving our overall aim of reducing net migration and only allowing dependants to a specific cohort of students with the types of skills the UK is specifically seeking to attract to assist economic growth.

We keep all our immigration policies under constant review to ensure they best serve the UK and reflect the public's priorities.

Students: Debts

Richard Burgon: To ask the Secretary of State for Education, what estimate she has made of the median level of student debt. [UIN 186795]

Robert Halfon: The median amount that full time undergraduate higher education students starting their studies in the 2021/22 academic year are expected to borrow over the course of their studies is £ 41,300. For part time students the corresponding median amount is £6,300.

This forecast covers borrowers who received loans as English domiciled students studying in the UK, or as EU domiciled students studying in England. Students who do not receive a student loan are not included in the median calculation. The forecast is based on Student Loan Company actual loan outlay data from August 2021 to April 2022. The median contains forecasted loan amounts from April 2022 to July 2028.

Students will accrue interest on their loans that is not included in the median figure. Repayments are made based on a borrower’s monthly or weekly earnings, not the interest rate or amount borrowed. If a borrower’s income is below the relevant repayment threshold, or a borrower is not earning, repayments will stop. Any outstanding debt, including interest accrued, is written off at the end of the loan term with no detriment to the borrower.

Full details on the median amount coverage can be found in the table below. Previous forecasts for the mean average total loan amount can be found in Table 1.3 of the ‘Student Loan Forecast for England’ publication, which is available at: <https://explore-education-statistics.service.gov.uk/find-statistics/student-loan-forecasts-for-england>. These forecasts will be updated to use the same data as described above at the end of June 2023.

	Median Loan Outlay Amount
Full time Undergraduate	£41,300
Part time Undergraduate	£6,300

Foot notes:

1. Tuition fee cap has been frozen up to and including academic year 2024/25 in these forecasts

2. Coverage: Borrowers who received loans as English domiciled students studying in the UK or as EU domiciled students studying in England
3. Students who do not receive a student loan are not included in the median calculation
4. The forecast is based on actual Student Loan Company loan outlay data from August 2021 to April 2022. The median contains forecasted loan outlay from April 2022 to July 2028.
5. These figures are restricted to higher education undergraduate loans and do not include Advanced Learner Loans
6. Figures have been rounded to the nearest £100.

Office for Students: Freedom of Expression

Justin Madders: To ask the Secretary of State for Education, if she will publish the criteria used by the Office for Students to assess the suitability of candidates for its new Director for Freedom of Speech and Academic Freedom post. [UIN 187730]

Claire Coutinho: The role of Director of Freedom of Speech and Academic Freedom was advertised on the Times Higher Education website.

Officials at the department managed the recruitment process. The essential and desirable criteria against which applicants were assessed were included in the job advert, which can be sent to any members interested. The department received 16 applications for the role.

An interview panel was chaired by Hannah Sheehan (Director of Higher Education Quality in the department) and joined by Lord Wharton of Yarm (Chair of the Office for Students) and Robert Colvile (Director of the Centre for Policy Studies), who joined as an independent panellist.

The Director was appointed by my right hon. Friend, the Secretary of State for Education, in the same way that other board members of the Office for Students are appointed under the Higher Education and Research Act 2017.

Sector News

Addressing the ethnicity degree awarding gap – TASO report

On 11 June, the Centre for Transforming Access and Student Outcomes in Higher Education (TASO) published a new report titled ‘addressing the ethnicity degree awarding gap.’

Staffordshire University were commissioned to carry out the project, which involved three distinct phases:

- A review of Access and Participation Plans (APPs) to produce the initial typology of approaches.
- Interviews with a range of sector stakeholders to gain further understanding of institutional infrastructure, attitudes, barriers, and enablers around these approaches.
- Recruitment of an Expert Reference Group to support the development of the final outputs.

Key findings include:

- While the report shows a real commitment to addressing the gap, HE providers need to do more to consider approaches based on contextual factors – such as institutional student data – to bring about meaningful change.
- One-of-a-kind individuals were hailed as catalysts for effective progress when addressing the gap therefore there is concern that meaningful work may stagnate or cease if these individuals were to move roles.
- The sector has a good awareness of the need for evidence-informed practice, and the need to evaluate approaches to addressing the gap. However, capacity and capability for evaluation vary greatly between HE providers.

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

Creative Industries Sector Vision

On Wednesday 14 June, the Department for Culture, Media and Sport (DCMS) published its plans to grow the creative industries by £50 billion and support a million additional jobs by 2030.

The vision outlines three goals it hopes to achieve by 2030:

1. Grow creative clusters across the UK, adding £50 billion more in Gross Value Added (GVA).
2. Build a highly-skilled, productive and inclusive workforce for the future, supporting 1 million more jobs across the UK.
3. Maximise the positive impact of the creative industries on individuals and communities, the environment and the UK's global standing.

Rt Hon Lucy Frazer MP, Secretary of State for Culture, Media, and Sport said: "This Sector Vision is about driving innovation, attracting investment and building on the clusters of creativity across the country. And from first days at school to last days of work, we will nurture the skills needed to build a larger creative workforce to harness the talent needed for continued success."

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

Diversification and strengthening international recruitment practices – UUK report

On Wednesday 14 June, Universities UK (UUK), published a report highlighting the sector's efforts to achieve sustainable growth and diversity in recruitment of international students while maintaining very high levels of immigration compliance.

The report sets out key findings from a survey of UUK's members, which aimed to get a clearer picture of the sector's recruitment practices in relation to international students.

Key Findings from the report:

- 90% of respondents revealed that their university is currently diversifying international student recruitment.

- Almost all (96%) respondents told us that their university required deposits from at least some international students.
- Two thirds (67%) of respondents who use agents in recruitment said their university uses the UK Agent Quality Framework, a voluntary tool that supports best practice in work between higher education and agents.

Jamie Arrowsmith, Director of Universities UK International said: ‘It is important that, as a sector, we are committed to continuously improving our recruitment practices to ensure that we sustain our exceptionally high levels of compliance with visa and immigration requirements. This report highlights the important work being done by university professionals to share and learn from best practice. This is key to diversifying recruitment and creating new opportunities for international talent to study in the UK, while maintaining confidence in the student immigration system.’

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

UCU marking and assessment boycott and teaching training – guidance

On Wednesday 14 June, the Department for Education published information on changes to the Initial Teaching Training (ITT) assessment as a result of the UCU marking and assessment boycott.

This year, to make sure that candidates can start their ITT in September, universities and school-led ITT providers that offer ITT will be able to recruit trainees whose degree status has not yet been confirmed because they have been impacted by the UCU marking and assessment boycott.

Later on, before candidates are able to formally complete their ITT and are awarded qualified teacher status (QTS), the provider will need to make sure that the degree has been awarded.

This means that candidates will only be able to complete ITT once their graduate status has been confirmed. Universities must make this clear to candidates starting the ITT.

Minister for Skills, Apprenticeships and Higher Education, Rt Hon Robert Halfon MP said: ‘This cohort of students have been hugely impacted by strike action over the course of their time at university. This boycott is just the latest example of the UCU’s disregard for the damage they are causing to young people, many of whom already

struggled through the covid pandemic. We're monitoring the situation closely and have provided guidance directly to providers of teacher training.'

You can [read further information on the Education Hub website](#).

Powering London: how universities drive growth – London Higher report

On Wednesday 14 June, London Higher published a report highlighting the contribution of London's universities and businesses to the city and the rest of the country.

The report looks at the role universities play in four main areas:

- Teaching a diverse population of students and filling skills gaps.
- Providing world-class research and innovation.
- Contributing to their local communities.
- Acting as a fundamental component of the city's global appeal.

The report has been compiled in discussion with KPMG's London Leaders' Circle and hosts case studies from London Metropolitan University, University of East London, The Royal Veterinary College, Brunel University London, and Imperial College London.

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

Department for Education consultation on AI in education

On Wednesday 14 June, the Department for Education launched a consultation, seeking views and experiences of the use of generative AI tools in educational settings in England. This includes tools such as:

- ChatGPT
- Google Bard
- Claude
- Midjourney

You can read more about the [consultation here](#).

UCAS personal statement – HEPI policy note

On Thursday 15 June, the Higher Education Policy Institute (HEPI) published a policy note examining how UCAS personal statements are used by admissions professionals.

A survey of 113 higher education admissions professions from over 30 higher education providers showed:

- The average time spent reading a UCAS personal statement is two minutes.
- Only 51% of respondents agree that the UCAS personal statement impacts significantly on admissions decisions.
- The UCAS personal statement is more likely to be considered important for admissions decisions in vocational or highly selective courses.

The Policy Note proposes two short questions focussing on:

1. ‘motivation and academic potential’ (such as ‘Please describe one topic that is related to your course(s) and discuss what you have learnt about this topic’)
2. ‘other activities and experiences’ (such as ‘Please describe one other activity or experience and discuss what you have gained and how this is relevant to your course(s)’)

Tom Fryer, the lead author of the report, said: ‘The fact that four-in-ten UCAS personal statements are read for one minute or less underlines the importance of reform in this area. The UCAS personal statement is a stressful, ambiguous, and lengthy process for many applicants, and this simply cannot be justified if the majority of statements are skimmed quickly by admissions staff.’

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

Protecting students as consumers – OfS insight brief

On Friday 16 June, the Office for Students (OfS) published an insight brief on how students’ rights are protected by consumer law during the application process and throughout their studies.



The brief also explores how the OfS' regulatory approach helps ensure these rights are upheld in practice.

You can [read the insight brief here](#).