



All-Party Parliamentary University Group

Weekly update

13 – 17 January 2025

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

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



Contents

Parliamentary business	3
Innovation, growth and the regions – SIT Committee oral evidence	3
Renters’ Rights Bill – HoC remaining stages	3
The Work of the Department for Education – Education Committee oral evidence	4
Higher education regulatory approach – HoC ministerial statement	5
Forthcoming business	8
Demand for the revival or replacement of the Erasmus programme – HoL oral question	8
National Insurance Contributions (Secondary Class 1 Contributions) Bill – HoL committee stage	8
Written questions and statements	9
Universities: Boys	9
Qualifications	9
Research: Migrant Workers	10
Students: Loans	10
Apprentices: Finance	11
Help to Grow Schemes: Universities	11
Sector news	13
AI Opportunities Action Plan – DSIT publication	13
AI Opportunities Action Plan: government response – DSIT publication	13
AI opportunities action plan: responding to the UK Government launch – US press release	14
Russell Group responds to the AI Opportunities Action Plan – Russell Group press release	14
Access to Higher Education and Regional Inequality: who is missing out? – NEON report	15
Wellcome Annual Report 2024 – Wellcome report	16



Government reaffirms commitment to Free Speech in universities – DfE press release	16
Sector responses to the Higher Education (Freedom of Speech) Act 2023 announcement	17
2030 Strategy – IHE publication	18
NCUB in 2025 – NCUB report	18
What the OfS is doing to help universities and colleges ensure their long-term financial sustainability – OfS blog	18
Foreign Secretary launches UK Soft Power Council - FCDO and DCMS press release	19

Parliamentary business

Innovation, growth and the regions – SIT Committee oral evidence

On Tuesday 14 January, the House of Commons Science Innovation and Technology Committee held their first evidence session as part of their inquiry ‘innovation, growth, and the regions’.

Witnesses included Professor Irene Tracey CBE (Vice-Chancellor at The University of Oxford), Dr David McBeth (Vice-Principal (Enterprise & Economic Transformation) at Dundee University), Professor Ashutosh Tiwari FREng (Deputy Vice-President for Innovation at The University of Sheffield) and Professor Lou Cordwell OBE (Professor of Innovation and Chair of Greater Manchester Business Board (LEP) at The University of Manchester).

Topics covered include the role of universities in commercialising research through spin-outs and supporting regional growth, how universities support regional economic growth through innovation, and how this can be better diffused across the country, and how the Government can support further innovation-led growth.

You can [read a transcript when it becomes available](#) and [watch the session](#).

Renters’ Rights Bill – HoC remaining stages

On Tuesday 14 January, MPs debated the Renters Rights' Bill during Report and Third reading.

Several government amendments were passed including a new rule specifying that Ground 4A – which allows landlords to evict students between June and September – will not be applicable if the tenancy period, starting from the day the tenancy was entered into and ending when the tenant was entitled to possession, is six months or less. Students will therefore no longer be locked into an agreement more than six months in advance of moving in. This aims to prevent tenants from feeling pressured to sign a lease for a new house early into an academic year, discouraging landlords from pressuring students into early commitments. Other measures which could affect students include new rules to cap advance rent payments at one month's rent.

The Bill will receive its second reading in the House of Lords on 4 February.

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

The Work of the Department for Education – Education Committee oral evidence

On Wednesday 15 January, the Secretary of State for Education, Rt Hon Bridget Phillipson MP, gave oral evidence to the Education Select Committee as part of regular accountability sessions on the work of the Department for Education. In relation to higher education, she was questioned on financial sustainability, upcoming reforms and widening participation.

Darren Paffey MP (Labour) asked about financial sustainability and plans for reform, pointing to the OfS' estimate that even with the tuition fee uplift 3/4 of institutions could be in deficit next year. Phillipson spoke positively of the sector's local, economic and international value and emphasised the need for financial sustainability, pointing to the government's refocus of the OfS and the fee uplift as action taken to stabilise the sector's finances. Phillipson said Jacqui Smith was engaging with stakeholders to develop the package of reforms and they aim to share more information in the summer.

Paffey asked what the government expects from universities in terms of widening participation and access as part of the upcoming reforms. Phillipson highlighted completion rates as a challenge for young people from disadvantaged backgrounds which the government wants to do more work on and ask more of the sector to work together and share best practise among institutions. She used care experienced students as an example of a group that needs tailored support.

Amanda Martin MP (Labour) asked about cost-of-living pressures, saying young people are having to work full-time to afford to move away for university and Portsmouth students she has spoken to are paying more than the maximum student loan allowance in rent costs. Phillipson agreed it is worrying that students are taking decisions based on their financial and family circumstances and recognised that the trend in students working more to afford to study impacts their ability to undertake internships or further study. She said this was something that is being considered in the long-term reforms and highlighted her decision to increase maintenance support in the meantime.

On student rentals, Phillipson acknowledged that students are often paying a lot for poor quality housing and said this was something Labour's reforms to the private rented sector aimed to tackle. She said this is an area where universities need to have long term planning to ensure there is appropriate housing for incoming student numbers. Even where universities are not directly responsible for providing housing, they should be working with local councils to ensure there is adequate provision.

You can [read a transcript when it becomes available](#) and [watch the session](#).

Higher education regulatory approach – HoC ministerial statement

On Wednesday 15 January, the Secretary of State for Education, Rt Hon Bridget Phillipson MP, delivered a ministerial statement on higher education regulatory approach to the House of Commons.

Phillipson announced that the following key provisions of the Higher Education (Freedom of Speech) Act 2023 will be brought into force:

- The duty on higher education providers to take reasonably practicable steps to secure and promote freedom of speech within the law.
- The duty on higher education providers to have robust codes of practice to ensure the protection of free speech, which will be enforced by the Office for Students (OfS).
- The ban on non-disclosure agreements on cases of bullying, harassment or sexual misconduct on campus, which will be upheld by the OfS.
- The duty on the OfS to promote freedom of speech and the power to give advice and share best practice.

The following provisions are not proportionate or necessary and will be returned to Parliament for repeal:

- Duties on Students' Unions- as SUs are not equipped to regulate Freedom of Speech and are already regulated by the Charity Commission. Phillipson added that she expects SUs to protect lawful free speech regardless of if they agree with the views expressed.
- The statutory tort will be removed as costly litigation risks diverting money away from students.

The following provisions are not workable in their current form and will be returned to Parliament for amendment:

- The complaints scheme with the OfS will be retained but made proportionate so the OfS has the power to consider complaints rather than a duty to assess every complaint.
- The “confusing” duplication of complaints schemes for students will be removed as the Office for the Independent Adjudicator (OIA) already considers student freedom of speech complaints.

Phillipson announced she will take more time to consider implementation of the overseas funding measures, but she remains fully committed to tackling interference from overseas governments and the wider measures in the Act with strengthened protections.

Phillipson also confirmed that Dr Arif Ahmed will remain in post as Director for Freedom of Speech and Academic Freedom at the OfS and said she has complete confidence in him. She went on to highlight Sir David Behan's recommendation that appointments to the OfS should be independent and said she would make a decision on this shortly.

In her speech, Phillipson emphasised the value of the university sector and the importance of academic freedom and freedom of speech to protect universities' 'excellence'. She highlighted the worrying rise in antisemitism on campuses and the importance of getting Freedom of Speech legislation right to protect minority groups.

Phillipson confirmed she will draft a policy paper to set out the proposals in more detail, to be returned to the House when it is complete.

Shadow Secretary of State for Education, Rt Hon Laura Trott MP, claimed pausing implementation of the Act was a mistake, citing the letter to the Times signed by academics, Nobel prize winners and public figures. She pointed to academics that have faced legal fees as a result of the Act being paused. She asked whether the Secretary of State had received legal advice on the delay and called on her to publish it. She raised concerns that without the tort universities would not face enough consequences for failing to protect free speech. She questioned the timing of considering changes to the overseas funding element after the Chancellor of the Exchequer's visit to China.

Liberal Democrat Spokesperson for Universities and Skills, Ian Sollom MP, questioned the necessity of the Act, pointing out that universities already operate within legal frameworks and have taken significant action to improve their freedom of speech practises. He highlighted Universities UK's reissued and expanded guidance and its regular discussions with higher education providers to support their work in this area. He called for a statutory duty of care as an alternative to protect minority students.

A further 16 MPs asked questions covering the following topics:

- Academic freedoms and freedom of speech in the higher education sector.
- The welfare of minority groups at university.
- The rise in antisemitism at universities.
- The exclusion of student unions from the legislation.



- Repeal of the tort due to risk of diverting resources from students.
- Retaining complaints system in the Office for Students.
- Whether Vice-Chancellors are doing enough.
- Questions over necessity of the Higher Education (Freedom of Speech) Act.
- Financial situation facing universities; increase of tuition fees.
- Establishment of new APPG on freedom of speech.
- Diversity in the higher education sector.
- Mental health support for young people at university.

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

Forthcoming business

Demand for the revival or replacement of the Erasmus programme – HoL oral question

On Monday 20 January, there will be an oral question in the House of Lords on the demand for the revival or replacement of the Erasmus programme. This question was tabled by Lord Balfe (Conservative).

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

National Insurance Contributions (Secondary Class 1 Contributions) Bill – HoL committee stage

On Tuesday 21 January, the National Insurance Contributions (Secondary Class 1 Contributions) Bill committee stage will have its first day of committee stage in the House of Lords.

The following relevant amendments will be discussed:

- Lord Storey and Lord Sharkey (Liberal Democrat): for early years settings and universities to continue to pay contributions at current rates.
- Baroness Neville-Rolfe and Lord Altrincham (Conservative): to increase the employment allowance for persons employed in a university from £10,500 to £20,000.
- Baroness Neville-Rolfe and Lord Altrincham (Conservative): to require a review of the impact of the measures in this Act on certain sectors within six months of the day on which it is passed.

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

Written questions and statements

Universities: Boys

Mims Davies MP (Conservative): To ask the Secretary of State for Education, what steps she is taking with Cabinet colleagues to increase the number of white working-class boys attending university. [UIN 21651]

Minister for Children and Families, Janet Daby MP: This government will act to address the persistent gaps for different groups and break down the barriers to opportunity. Opportunity should be available to all but too many people across our country do not get the chance to succeed.

Whilst many higher education (HE) providers have demonstrated positive examples of supporting all working-class students, including targeted outreach, on course bursaries and mentoring, we are keen to see the sector to go further. By summer, we will set out our plan for HE reform and we expect providers to play an even stronger role in improving access and outcomes for all disadvantaged students.

Qualifications

Abtisam Mohamed MP (Labour): To ask the Secretary of State for Education, with reference page 36 of the publication entitled Plan for Change: Milestones for mission-led government, published on 5 December 2024, what level of qualification will be considered higher-level. [UIN 21749]

Minister for Children and Families, Janet Daby MP: The Plan for Change sets out the government's long-term plan to improve the lives of working people and deliver a decade renewal across our country through ambitious, but achievable, milestones by the end of this Parliament.

As part of the Plan for Change, the government will build skills for opportunity and growth so that every young person can follow the pathway that is right for them. Whether through high-quality apprenticeships, colleges or universities, skills give people the power to seize opportunity. The department will measure progress through the proportion of young people in education or employment with training, and through the number achieving higher-level qualifications. Higher-level qualifications covers qualifications which are at level 4 and above.

Research: Migrant Workers

Charlotte Cane MP (Liberal Democrats): To ask the Secretary of State for Science, Innovation and Technology, whether he has had recent discussions with the Secretary of State for the Home Department on the potential impact of visa restrictions on the research sector. [UIN 21805]

Minister for AI and Digital Government, Feryal Clark MP: The UK's immigration offer enables talented scientists, researchers and innovators to come to the UK through a number of visa routes such as the Global Talent visa, the High Potential Individual visa and the Skilled Worker visa, and we continually keep our policies under review.

The Department for Science, Innovation and Technology has regular discussions with the Home Office, and with other Government Departments, to ensure that the UK's world-class science, research, technology and innovation sectors are supported.

UKRI allows researchers coming to the UK who are working at least 50% of their time on a UKRI grant to claim the cost of their visa from the grant. Many other research funders operate a similar policy. Researchers in receipt of Horizon Europe grants are also allowed to claim the cost of their visa from their grant.

Students: Loans

Olly Glover MP (Liberal Democrats): To ask the Secretary of State for Education, if she will make an assessment of the potential merits of either (a) removing the margin or (b) capping the interest rate on student loans. [UIN 22506]

Minister for Children and Families, Janet Daby MP: Student loans are subject to interest to ensure that those who can afford to do so contribute to the full cost of their degree. The government does not make a profit from the student loan repayment system.

The department is determined that the higher education (HE) funding system should deliver for our economy, for universities and for students and the government is committed to supporting the aspiration of every person who meets the requirements and wants to go to university. We will set out this government's longer-term plan for HE reform by summer 2025.

Interest rates on student loans do not affect monthly repayments made by borrowers. Regular repayments are based on a fixed percentage of earnings above the applicable student loan repayment threshold, not on the amount borrowed or the rate of interest. If a borrower's income drops, so does the amount they repay. If income is below the relevant student loan repayment threshold, or a borrower is not

earning, then they do not have to make repayments at all. Any outstanding debt, including interest built up, is written off after the loan term ends (or in case of death or disability) at no detriment to the borrower.

Interest rates are set annually in relation to the Retail Price Index. The government caps maximum student loan rates when needed to ensure that student loan interest rates do not exceed market rates for comparable unsecured personal loans.

A full equality impact assessment of how student loan reforms may affect graduates, including detail on changes to average lifetime repayments under Plan 5, was produced and published in February 2022 and can be found here: <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/higher-education-reform-equality-impact-assessment>.

Apprentices: Finance

Daisy Cooper MP (Liberal Democrats): To ask the Secretary of State for Education, when her Department plans to publish a decision on which apprenticeships will be impacted by cuts to Level 7 apprenticeship funding. [UIN 22081]

Minister for Children and Families, Janet Daby MP: This government is committed to spreading opportunities and economic growth supported by a strong skills system.

This government has an extremely challenging fiscal inheritance. There are tough choices that need to be taken on how funding should be prioritised in order to generate opportunities for young people that enable them to make a start in good, fulfilling careers. The department will therefore be asking more employers to step forward and fund a significant number of level 7 apprenticeships themselves outside of the levy-funded growth and skills offer.

The department is taking advice from Skills England, who engaged with employers on funding for level 7 apprenticeships over the autumn, and the department expects to make a final decision on affected apprenticeships shortly.

Help to Grow Schemes: Universities

Caroline Dinenage MP (Conservative): To ask the Secretary of State for Business and Trade, when the next phase of Help to Grow Management Programme funds will be available to universities. [UIN 23304]

Minister for Services, Small Business and Exports, Gareth Thomas MP: In the Autumn Budget, 2024 the Chancellor demonstrated the government's commitment to



continue the Help to Grow: Management Course throughout 2025-26, maintaining its existing scale and reach as part of our growth strategy. Help to Grow: Management will continue to help thousands of small businesses across the UK to improve their productivity and drive small business growth. Funding for 2025-26 will continue to be made available to university business schools through the Chartered Association of Business Schools from April 2025.

Help to Grow: Management is delivered by the UK's leading business schools. DBT provides annual grant funding to the Chartered Association of Business Schools (CABS). DBT will extend its existing grant agreement with CABS once the business planning round is completed in March 2025. CABS will then contract with individual business schools to deliver the training to SMEs, allowing the programme to continue without a break in funding.

Sector news

AI Opportunities Action Plan – DSIT publication

On Monday 13 January, the Department for Science, Innovation and Technology (DSIT) published the independent AI Opportunities Action Plan: recommendations for the government to capture the opportunities of AI to enhance growth and productivity and create tangible benefits for UK citizens.

Relevant recommendations include:

- **Recommendation 1** - Setting out a long-term plan for AI infrastructure needs with a 10-year investment, backed by universities and industry.
- **Recommendation 14** - Accurately assess the size of the skills gap.
- **Recommendation 15** - Support Higher Education Institutions to increase the numbers of AI graduates and teach industry-relevant skills.
- **Recommendation 16** - Increase the diversity of the talent pool.
- **Recommendation 17** - Expand education pathways into AI (through FE and apprenticeships).
- **Recommendation 18** - Launch a flagship undergraduate and masters AI scholarship programme on the scale of Rhodes, Marshall, or Fulbright for students to study in the UK.
- **Recommendation 19** - Ensure the government’s lifelong skills programme is ready for AI.
- **Recommendation 21** - Explore how the existing immigration system can be used to attract graduates from universities producing some of the world’s top AI talent.

You can [read the full Action Plan](#).

AI Opportunities Action Plan: government response – DSIT publication

On Monday 13 January, the Department for Science, Innovation and Technology (DSIT) published the government’s response to the AI Opportunities Action Plan.

The response highlights the positive role of universities in Artificial Intelligence, with Keir Starmer’s foreword recognising “[v]ast resources of talent in our universities and scientific institutions” and AI’s role in “pushing the boundaries of scientific discovery in our universities”.

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

AI opportunities action plan: responding to the UK Government launch – US press release

On Monday 13 January, Universities Scotland published its response to the UK Government's announcement of the AI Opportunities Action Plan.

Claire McPherson, Director of Universities Scotland said:

Scottish universities are at the forefront of AI research, with world-leading capabilities in natural language processing, robotics, computational modelling, big data analytics, and statistical methods. Our research in these fields has already contributed to the improvement of public services in Scotland, AI-enabled interdisciplinary research into complex global challenges, and successful collaborations with industry. It is heartening to see the UK Government's Action Plan acknowledgment that the university sector is vital in realising its ambitions.

AI Growth Zones offer the potential to support close links with industry and attract investment to Scotland, utilising our existing research and AI cluster capabilities. Scotland is an ideal location for a future Growth Zone due to its energy capacity, and the strong ties between our university research sector and thriving AI industry. We're very keen to pursue this opportunity with the UK Government, alongside others arising from the new Industrial Strategy.

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

Russell Group responds to the AI Opportunities Action Plan – Russell Group press release

On Monday 13 January, the Russell Group published its response to the AI Opportunities Action Plan.

Dr Tim Bradshaw, Chief Executive of the Russell Group, said:

We are pleased to see today's AI Opportunities Action Plan includes a focus on building the UK's compute capacity – including a welcome boost to the UK's processing power via a new supercomputer – and removing barriers to AI infrastructure planning.

Through multi-disciplinary expertise, a pipeline of academic talent and well-established industry partnerships, research-intensive universities are already harnessing AI technologies for public good and attracting significant external investment.

However, for some time the UK has been lacking a clear strategy on AI, leaving us vulnerable to falling further behind our global competitors. We therefore welcome this new, ambitious plan to maximise the potential benefits of AI that could boost productivity, improve public services and drive economic growth.

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

Access to Higher Education and Regional Inequality: who is missing out? – NEON report

On Tuesday 14 January, the National Education Opportunities Network (NEON) published a report looking in-depth at progression to higher education for young people from free school meals (FSM) backgrounds across regions and local areas in England from 2005/06 to 2022/23.

Key findings in the report include:

- The percentage of state school pupils in receipt of FSM progressing to higher education by age 19 declined for the first time year on year since records began, from 29.2% in 2021/22 to 29% in 2022/23.
- The number of FSM state school pupils progressing to higher education increased by 2,754, which is the biggest annual increase since records began in 2005/06, but the number of non-FSM learners progressing to higher education increased by 6,645.
- The number of areas where FSM learners have less than a one-in-four chance of progressing to higher education declined slightly in 2022/23 compared to 2021/22, from 43 to 36, but the number of areas below the national average (29.2% in 2021/22 and 29% in 2022/23) stayed relatively unchanged (101 in 2021/22 and 100 in 2022/23).
- Westminster was the local authority area with the highest percentage of FSM state school pupils progressing to higher education at 63.8%, while the area where progression was the lowest was County of Herefordshire at 12.2%.

- Over the last 10 years the gap between London and the rest of England has widened, and by 2022/23 the gap between London and the South West was over 30 percentage points.

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

Wellcome Annual Report 2024 – Wellcome report

On Tuesday 14 January, Wellcome published its annual report for 2023/24. In the 2023/24 period, Wellcome invested £1.6 billion in research, focusing on projects in science, health and wellbeing, while addressing urgent global health challenges.

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

Government reaffirms commitment to Free Speech in universities – DfE press release

On Wednesday 15 January, the Department for Education (DfE) published a press release on the announcement that key provisions from the Higher Education (Freedom of Speech) Act 2023 will be brought into force, whilst burdensome provisions will be scrapped.

Education Secretary Bridget Phillipson said:

Academic freedom and free speech are fundamental to our world-leading universities and this government is committed to protecting them.

These changes protect free speech but avoid implementing excessive and burdensome provisions which could have exposed struggling universities to disproportionate costs, diverting money away from students to pay lawyers.

The decisions we are making about the Act demonstrate that we were right to pause commencement and to review its impact before making decisions on its future.

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

Sector responses to the Higher Education (Freedom of Speech) Act 2023 announcement

Vivienne Stern MBE, Chief Executive of Universities UK, said:

As bastions of academic freedom and free speech, our members welcome today's announcement from the secretary of state. The removal of the Tort, which risked creating undue legal and financial burden for universities, is absolutely essential in order for institutions to continue their world-leading education and research.

We look forward to working with government, the Office for Students and other sector bodies as this legislation is enacted, while our universities continue to champion free thought and discussion on campuses across the country.

Arif Ahmed, Director for Freedom of Speech and Academic Freedom at the Office for Students, said:

Freedom of speech and academic freedom are fundamental to a successful higher education system, and we welcome the government's decision to proceed with measures to protect and promote them in universities and colleges across England.

We will now plan for the aspects of our new role that will come into force soon. In doing so we will ensure that the protections offered by the new provisions are as strong and effective as possible. And we look forward to Parliament's decisions about the remaining provisions in due course.

Amira Campbell, National Union for Students President, said:

We're delighted to see this culture wars legislation dropped by the new government. After years of campaigning from students' unions, the Freedom of Speech Act is now truly focusing on freedom of speech. With the threat of complex legal responsibilities and new regulation no longer hanging over them, our member students' unions can get back to doing what we all do best: supporting students to thrive, debate ideas and take part in campus life.

Dr Tim Bradshaw, Chief Executive of the Russell Group, said:

The government's decision to pause the implementation of the Higher Education (Freedom of Speech) Act last summer was the right one, allowing time to understand its impact and ensure new legislation is fit for purpose and proportionate. We are supportive of the revisions announced today, in

particular the removal of the statutory tort, which risked cooling rather than encouraging debate given the potential for vexatious claims and costly legal action.

Our universities continue to take matters relating to freedom of speech very seriously and are committed to creating an environment on campus where all ideas, especially the controversial ones, can be expressed and debated. We will work closely with government and the Office for Students as they implement the revised legislation and regulation, to ensure we continue to protect free speech and academic freedom on our campuses.

2030 Strategy – IHE publication

On Wednesday 15 January, Independent Higher Education (IHE) published its 2025-2030 strategy setting out what they aim to achieve as an organisation and the ways in which they will support members to thrive and succeed.

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

NCUB in 2025 – NCUB report

On Thursday 16 January, the National Centre for Universities and Business (NCUB) published a summary of the upcoming priorities in the 2025 policy calendar.

These include:

- Industrial Strategy and Spending Review
- Future of Higher Education
- Monitoring the State of the Relationship

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

What the OfS is doing to help universities and colleges ensure their long-term financial sustainability – OfS blog

On Thursday 16 January, the Office for Students (OfS) published a blog by Director of Regulation, Philippa Pickford, on the steps it is taking to better understand the financial position of English higher education providers to protect students' interests.

Changes to their approach include:

- More timely information on finances
- Scaling up engagement
- A deeper understanding of financial management

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

Foreign Secretary launches UK Soft Power Council - FCDO and DCMS press release

On Friday 17 January, the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office (FCDO) and Department for Culture, Media and Sport (DCMS) launched a Soft Power Council to help boost UK economic growth and security by bringing together experts from across culture, sport, the creative industries and geopolitics.

Foreign Secretary David Lammy said:

Soft power is fundamental to the UK's impact and reputation around the world. I am often struck by the enormous love and respect which our music, sport, educations and institutions generate on every continent. But we have not taken a sufficiently strategic approach to these huge assets as a country. Harnessing soft power effectively can help to build relationships, deepen trust, enhance our security and drive economic growth.

That is why I have created the Soft Power Council to channel British expertise as we look to re-imagine Britain's role on the world stage, reinvigorate alliances and forge new partnerships.

Relevant members of the UK Soft Power Council include:

- Sir Peter Bazalgette, Royal College of Art
- Professor Helen McCarthy, Queen's University Belfast
- Vivienne Stern MBE, Universities UK
- Dr Linda Yueh, University of Oxford

You can [read the full press release](#) and [list of members](#).