



The All-Party Parliamentary **University Group**

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University APPG weekly update

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 14 March, the Secretary of State for Education, Rt Hon Nadhim Zahawi and his ministerial team took questions on the floor of the House.

Chris Stephens MP (SNP) asked about the impact of the Russian invasion of Ukraine on Ukrainian students in the UK, and for UK students in Ukraine. The Secretary of State responded that his department were working across government to support Ukrainian students in the UK by introducing a new humanitarian route, and referred to a forthcoming statement from the Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities confirming that students would be provided with an opportunity to extend their leave to remain or switch to graduate visas. The Secretary also confirmed that Ukrainian students in the UK on a temporary student visa would be able to bring family to the UK.

Education Committee Chair, Robert Halfon MP, followed up by drawing attention to an LBC investigation on “pro-Putin propaganda” at universities. He listed three examples and asked the Secretary of State to contact them. The Secretary confirmed that the Universities Minister had already contacted the universities in question.

Several members asked questions on the recent higher education reforms, Universities Minister, Michelle Donelan MP, said the changes would mean a fairer deal for students, graduates and the taxpayer and stressed that no student would pay back more in real terms than borrowed.

Conservative MP, Andrew Bowie, asked what steps had been taken to support young people from deprived backgrounds to access higher education. The minister responded that disadvantaged 18-year-olds were 82% more likely to go to university than 10 years ago. She said the government wanted universities to take a greater role in improving access and was asking universities to raise standards in schools and colleges, offer flexible and skills-based courses, tackle dropout rates and support students throughout university and into graduation.

On minimum entry requirements, the minister said that too many young people had been pushed on to courses that they were not ready for, which is why they were capping the cost of foundation years and introducing the Lifelong Loan Entitlement.

Finally, Patrick Grady MP (SNP) drew attention to the strike action taking place at the University of Glasgow and asked the ministers to encourage university employers to engage with staff and trade unions to reach a negotiated settlement. The minister responded that students had “suffered unbelievably” during the pandemic, and the last thing they need is strike action and further disruption.

You can read a transcript of the questions [here](#).

Michael Gove update on new sponsorship scheme for Ukrainian refugees

On Monday 14 March, the Secretary of State for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities, Rt Hon Michael Gove MP gave an update to the House of Commons on a new sponsorship scheme for Ukrainian refugees. The Secretary of State outlined that the ‘homes for Ukraine’ scheme, will allow Ukrainians with no links to the UK to be sponsored by UK citizens or organisations to stay for up to 3 years, with access to unrestricted social support. He added that sponsors will have to provide accommodation for 6 months, with monthly payments offered at £350 per person. A webpage for interested sponsors can be found [here](#).

The Secretary of State also provided further updates on visas, specifically the extended family route for Ukrainian nationals, including the announcement that from 15 March they will be able to apply for visas online. In response, the Shadow Secretary of State for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities Lisa Nandy MP criticised the fact there was still a need for such a visa, and that with “50-page forms” to be completed online, this would be a very difficult challenge for those fleeing war.

On support for Ukrainian students, the Secretary of State outlined that for those students without leave to remain, the government would seek to “regularise” their immigration status and noted that both the Home Secretary and the newly appointed Minister for Refugees, Lord Harrington were already working to make this happen. Tim Loughton MP (Con) asked if there would be a shared responsibility scheme for families, if a family member does not have free accommodation for the whole year, such as university students. The Secretary of State said he would look to take this forward.

Dr Julian Lewis MP (Con) praised the work of the Council for At-Risk Academics (CARA) who he said had been rescuing scholars and coordinating sponsorship from a whole network of universities. He highlighted his concern of a possible disconnect with the new government scheme and asked that an official point of contact be made. The Secretary of State responded saying that he would make sure this happened and would follow-up shortly with an official contact for this work.

You can read a transcript of the statement and debate [here](#).

Lords Science and Technology Committee inquiry session on ‘delivering a UK science and technology strategy’

On Tuesday 15 March, the Lords Science and Technology Committee held a session on ‘Delivering a UK science and technology strategy’.

The Chair, Baroness Brown of Cambridge, asked what the role of the new science and technology unit in the Cabinet Office would be. Louise Dunsby, deputy director of the Office for Science and Technology Strategy (OSTS), replied that the new unit was established in 2021 after the publication of the Integrated Review, to sit independently within the Cabinet Office and to play a holistic role in delivering in terms of identifying priority outcomes, critical technologies and how government might optimise the system more strategically and effectively. Andrew McCosh, director-general of the OSTs, added that the department would consist of 45 individuals at full capacity.

Viscount Hanworth (Lab) asked how increased budgets may help support the new strategy. Andrew McCosh replied that R&D was funnelled through BEIS, UKRI and the relevant individual departments, such as the MoD and DfT. He hoped to see younger academics, less bureaucracy and more scientists and engineers across all departments.

Lord Mitchell (Lab) asked what strategies the governments had taken to encourage the commercialisation of discoveries and innovations. Dr Ami Appelbaum, Chairman of the Board at Israel Innovation Authority, and Chief Scientist at Ministry of Economy and Industry (Israel) answered that the Israeli government had focused on funding research in areas that the private sector believed worthy of development, as well as setting up prestigious funds issuing calls for applied research and translational activities and bringing researchers and industry reps together. Dr John Holdren, Research Professor of Environmental Policy at Harvard University’s Kennedy School of Government added that the US had created innovation hubs, pushing the idea that researchers should be prepared to fail to achieve the most interesting results.

Lord Krebs asked what the panel believed to be the strengths and weaknesses of the UK landscape. Dr Holden replied that the UK was already a science superpower, a bastion of strong science and innovation. Dr Appelbaum added that to maintain this status meant utilising regulation in more creative ways in the future. Dr Marga Gual Soler, International Science Diplomacy Expert at SciDipGlobal, concluded that the UK should maintain its diplomatic and academic links with Europe and the rest of the world, rather than adding layers of bureaucracy that might put off talent looking to work in UK science and innovation.

You can read a transcript of the committee session [here](#).

Home Affairs Committee on the policy for Ukrainian refugees

On Wednesday 16 March, the Home Affairs Committee held a session on the Home Office policy on Ukrainian refugees.

The committee questioned witnesses on the Ukrainian Family Scheme and the Homes for Ukraine scheme, visa requirements and checks, as well as support offered to local authorities for hosting Ukrainian refugees.

Stuart McDonald MP (SNP) asked about students who might struggle to meet the criteria to switch visas. The Minister for Safe and Legal Migration, Kevin Foster MP, responded that no-one would need to return to Ukraine for immigration reasons and that visas would either be extended or potentially use periods of 'exceptional assurance'.

Clive Betts MP (Lab) asked whether a student's loan or grant entitlement would be affected if parents took part in the 'Homes for Ukrainian Scheme' and if money received would appear as part of family income. The Minister for Refugees, Lord Harrington, responded that he had been assured that money received as part of the scheme would not be seen as family income.

You can read a transcript of the committee session [here](#).

Science and Technology Committee session on 'Diversity and inclusion in STEM'

On Wednesday 16 March, the House of Common's Science and Technology Committee held a session on 'Diversity and inclusion in STEM'.

The committee heard evidence on diversity and inclusion in STEM. Session one discussed early education, Teach First, teaching shortages, disadvantaged areas, salaries, PGCEs, bursaries, the curriculum, resources, government reform and diversity, and an approach to diversification.

The Chair opened the second session by asking for a perspective of the panel on the groups they represented in higher education. Professor Rachel Oliver FREng, University of Cambridge and The Inclusion Group for Equity in Research and STEM, stated it had been identified that women, ethnic minorities, and disabled people were less likely to apply for funding and when they did apply for funding, the amount received was smaller than white male counterparts. The research funding system, she continued, was pushing up the white male majority demographic system.

When asked by the Chair for a diagnosis of the causes, Professor Oliver responded that there was bias in the system, including unconscious biases that impacted decision making processes and a lack of knowledge about the issues and people handling the questions in the research councils.

Carol Monaghan MP (SNP) asked Professor Narender Ramnani, Professor of Neuroscience, Royal Holloway University of London, to give an overview of findings from Freedom of Information (FOI) requests to UKRI. Professor Ramnani stated that the FOI requests found that ethnic minorities were underrepresented in research committees. Committee places taken up by an ethnic minority ranged from 3 percent to 13 percent, in comparison to the Royal Society report which showed that in 2018 to 2019 that the ethnic make-up of the STEM workforce was 18.7 percent. He added that across all five years and all research councils, 8 percent of committee places were taken up by ethnic minorities.

He insisted that UKRI needed to do the work to answer why any of the meetings were devoid of ethnic minority representation. Only the ESRC explicitly mentioned the requirement to consider ethnic balance, whereas most included the requirement for gender balance, it was concluded.

Rebecca Long-Bailey MP (Lab) asked what UKRI's response was to the findings. Professor Ramnani said that the response from UKRI was disappointing. He claimed that there was a lack of strategy in UKRI when dealing with EDI and there was no drive coming from the top into research councils for evidence-based EDI targets.

When asked by Carol Monaghan MP for an outline of the issues surrounding short term contracts in universities and how they impacted diversity in the workplace, Professor Oliver replied that precarity was problematic for a number of represented groups who were not able to move from institutions as required. There was a need to cope with an axe hanging over one's head that their job would end soon and having to find another one, she affirmed.

Dehenna Davison MP (Con) asked for a view on the best way to address the issue of diversity. Professor Oliver answered that positive action needed to break down the barriers to progression of minority groups, such as having funders to use the financial handles they held to provide incentives to put forward more ethnic minority or female candidates. Professor Ramnani inferred that funders needed to incentivise diversification. UKRI started funding schemes, he continued, where more people from ethnic minorities were encouraged into PhD's.

Finally, Professor Oliver claimed a solution to the prejudice found in funding bodies would be a separate income stream which offered a small grant to everybody which had reached a certain level, named the Universal Basic Research Income. It would have cut up the red tape which was tying up researchers away from research and strangling progress on diversity, and ensuring that those people recruited in UK universities had money to get work done, she insisted.

When asked by Aaron Bell MP (Con) on how much a Universal Basic Research Income would have cost, Professor Oliver responded that it was costed at £1.3bn per year, against the £8.6bn UKRI budget. She noted that the Chancellor had pledged to increase UK R&D spend to £22bn by 2026 and if more was to be spent, it needed to be spent well, fairly and effectively, which meant a greater diversity of people and ideas into the space.

You can read a transcript of the committee session [here](#).

Education Committee statement on the Education Catch-Up Programme

On Thursday 17 March, Chair of the Education Committee, Robert Halfon MP (Con), opened a select committee statement on the Committee's new report, entitled 'Is the Catch-up Programme fit for purpose?' by paying tribute to all the teachers and support staff around the country who had done everything possible to keep children learning, and to the children and young people themselves, who had had to deal with extremely difficult circumstances.

He noted that to date, the government had spent almost £5bn on the catch-up programme, but, as the report pointed out, more targeted efforts were needed to help children to recover from the pandemic. The impacts of school closures were devastating for most of them, and many now faced an epidemic of educational inequality, a widening attainment gap, worsening mental health, an increase in their safeguarding risks, and an adverse effect on their lifetime chances.

He outlined the four key findings of the report: first, it noted that disadvantaged pupils had been the worst hit; secondly, rates of persistent absence remained high, but without up-to-date data from the department there was no way to know how many "ghost children" continued to experience severe levels of absence; thirdly, Randstad and the national tutoring programme were not delivering for the most disadvantaged pupils; finally, the department needed to do more to support young people's mental health.

He outlined the education committee's recommendations to ensure that the catch-up programme delivered for the most disadvantaged: to gather more reliable and up-to-date data to establish the full effect of the pandemic on children and young people; to end the spaghetti junction of catch-up funding; to launch a pilot scheme in the country's most disadvantaged areas to explore the benefits that a longer school day could bring to pupils' educational attainment and mental health recovery; and to address the issue of persistent and severe absence by working with schools and local authorities proactively and appointing attendance practitioners to work with parents, local authorities and schools to return these children safely and quickly into school.

Labour Shadow Minister for Social Care, Karin Smyth MP, asked how Labour could support the government in unravelling this spaghetti junction and recognising that schools were the only people to be able to lead this recovery, with the proper governance structures.

Robert Halfon MP responded that the government said that they believed in school autonomy and suggested that the funds go direct to the schools so that they could spend them on the catch-up programme as they saw fit.

Labour Shadow Minister for Higher Education, Matt Western MP, said that the catch-up programme had been shambolic and was at risk of catastrophic failure.

You can read a transcript of the statement [here](#).

Forthcoming business

Public Accounts Committee session on financial sustainability in higher education

On Monday 21 March at 4pm, the Public Accounts Committee will be holding a session on 'Financial sustainability of the higher education sector in England.'

Witnesses for the session include:

- Susan Acland-Hood, Permanent Secretary
- Paul Kett, Director General Higher Education and Further Education Group, at Department for Education
- Nicola Dandridge, Chief Executive at Office for Students

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

Education Committee session on universities and higher education

On Tuesday 22 March at 10am, the Education Committee will be holding a session on 'Universities and higher education'

Witnesses for this session will include:

- Nicola Dandridge, Chief Executive at Office for Students
- Clare Merchant, Chief Executive at UCAS
- Professor Quintin McKellar CBE, Vice President for UUK and Vice-Chancellor at University of Hertfordshire at Universities UK
- Professor Debra Humphris, Chair Professor at University Alliance
- Hillary Gyebi-Ababio, Vice President for Higher Education at National Union of Students

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

Health and Social Care Committee session on workforce: recruitment, training and retention

On Tuesday 22 March at 10am, the Health and Social Care Committee will be holding a session on 'Workforce: recruitment, training and retention in health and social care'.

Witnesses for this session include:

- Wayne Jaffe, Plastic and Reconstructive Surgeon at University Hospital of North Midlands NHS Trust

- Dr Vishal Sharma, Consultant Cardiologist at Royal Liverpool and Broadgreen University Hospital NHS Trust, Chair at BMA Consultants Committee, and Chair at BMA Pensions Committee
- Professor Dame Clare Gerada, President at Royal College of General Practitioners, Medical Director at NHS Practitioner Health, and Chair at Doctors in Distress
- Professor Carol Atkinson, Professor of Human Resource Management at Manchester Metropolitan University
- Jacqui McBurnie, Senior Program Manager and Chair at NHS England and NHS Improvement Menopause Group
- Professor Carol Woodhams, Professor of Human Resource Management at University of Surrey
- Prema Fairburn-Doraim Director at Primary Homecare in Suffolk
- Nina Hemmings, Researcher in Health Policy at Nuffield Trust
- Shilpa Ross, Policy Fellow at The King's Fund
- Dr Wen Wang, Associate Professor in Human Resource Management, Data Analytics and Interpretation at University of Leicester

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

Lords Science and Technology Committee inquiry session on ‘delivering a UK science and technology strategy’

On Tuesday 22 March, the Lords Science and Technology Committee held a session on ‘delivering a UK science and technology strategy’.

Witnesses for this session include:

- Sir Patrick Vallance, Government Chief Scientific Adviser
- George Freeman MP, Minister for Science, Research and Innovation at Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy

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

Written Questions

Visas for international students who have been living in Ukraine

Catherine West: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department, if she will issue visas for international students who had been living in Ukraine but have had to leave as a result of the Russian invasion of that country. [136629]

Kevin Foster: The Home Office has indicated that it will not be possible to answer this question within the usual time period. An answer is being prepared and will be provided as soon as it is available.

Funding for NHS-university partnerships

Chi Onwurah: To ask the Secretary of State for Health and Social Care, with reference to page 174 of the Levelling Up White Paper, which NHS- university partnerships will receive the £30 million in additional funding; and what the criteria is for the allocation of that funding. [119568]

Maria Caulfield: The open competition for the National Institute for Health Research 's (NIHR) Biomedical Research Centres (BRCs) is continuing. The National Health Service and university partnerships which will receive NIHR BRC designation and funding levels will be confirmed in May 2022.

An independent international selection committee will review applications received from partnerships and provide assurance to the Department that designated and funded NIHR BRCs demonstrate the capability to meet the aims of the scheme. It will review applications and make recommendations on the basis of the following selection criteria:

- the strength of the strategic plan including a clear demonstration of patient and public involvement and plans to deliver improvements in research culture;
- existing research capacity and capability and plans for increasing capacity including through the provision of training which supports diverse career paths and promotes equality, diversity and inclusion;
- the quality and breadth of world leading experimental medicine and early translational research, with a proven ability to translate findings from discovery research into translational and clinical research to benefit patients and the public, the health and care system and for broader economic gain;
- the strength of the strategic partnerships, including those with industry, charities, and other NHS organisations/universities, NIHR-funded research infrastructure and a demonstrable track record of collaborative working;
- the contribution of the research portfolio to the health of patients and the public, including a demonstration that research is following patient need and reflects the diversity of the population (including support for research activities being conducted in areas with the greatest disease burden in collaboration with local investigators); and
- value for money.

Covid-19 asymptomatic testing programme

Matt Western: To ask the Secretary of State for Health and Social Care, what private sector bodies are involved in the operation of the higher education covid-19 asymptomatic testing programme. [114884]

Maggie Throup: Over 200 higher education institutions are involved in the UK Health Security Agency's asymptomatic testing programme, operating within the Standard Operating Procedures. Due to the diversity of organisations on the programme, there is scope within the Standard Operating Procedures for institutions to engage private sector bodies in the delivery of their testing programmes.

Universities transition to net zero

Ruth Jones: To ask the Secretary of State for Education, what assessment he has made of the University of Exeter 's progress to becoming net zero by 2050. [135648]

Michelle Donelan: No specific assessment is made by government departments of individual educational institutions to assess their progress to becoming net zero by 2050. This includes the University of Exeter.

We have supported the Queen's Jubilee Challenge for the FE and HE sector to accelerate a sector-led review, so that by 2024 all FE and HE settings will be reporting their emissions via a standardised framework.

Olivia Blake: To ask the Secretary of State for Education, what steps he plans to take to support universities in the transition to net zero.[136700]

Michelle Donelan: In November 2021 we set out a draft Sustainability and Climate Change Strategy for the education sector. Within this we have set out our strategic aim for net zero. We have been engaging with higher education to seek their feedback on the draft ahead of publishing a final strategy in April 2022.

As part of this work, we have supported the Queen's Jubilee Challenge for the further education (FE) and HE sectors to accelerate a sector-led review, so that by calendar year 2024 all FE and HE settings will be reporting their emissions via a standardised framework.

Reforms to the student loan system

Lord Stevens of Birmingham: To ask Her Majesty's Government, further to the speech by the Minister for Higher and Further Education on 24 February regarding their response to Dr Philip Augar's Review of Post-18 Education and Funding, published in May 2019, what proportion of their modelled overall reduction in future costs to taxpayers from student loans arises from (1) the new proposals themselves, (2) changes to the discount rate, or (3) other factors.

Baroness Barran: The fiscal impacts of the student loan reforms announced on Thursday 24 February 2022 are detailed in full in the equality impact analysis (EIA) published alongside the announcement, which is available [here](#).

Updates to the Resource, Accounting, and Budgeting (RAB) charge, that result from the change to the discount rate, announced by the government on 13 December 2021, are provided in Annex B of the EIA linked to above. The proportion of loan outlay issued is not expected to be repaid in present terms. Forecasts of the savings that will result from the reforms, set out in Tables 11 and 12 of the EIA, use the updated RAB as a baseline, meaning the discount rate change does not account for any of these savings.

The forecast savings are wholly attributable to the two-year tuition fee freeze and changes to student loan repayment terms, as set out on page 13 of the higher education policy statement & reform consultation, and do not incorporate other elements of the reform package. The consultation is attached.

The savings do include the changes to the Plan 2 repayment threshold for 2022/23 financial year, announced on 28 January 2022, prior to the announcement of the whole reform package.

Leveraging private sector investment in research and innovation

Chi Onwurah: To ask the Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy, with reference to the Government's press release entitled £260 million to boost healthcare research and manufacturing, published on 2 March 2022, stating that the Life Sciences Innovative Manufacturing Fund will help ensure the UK continues to be an attractive investment destination, whether his Department is taking steps to ensure that fund leverages in at least twice as much private sector investment to be consistent with the ambition stated in the Levelling Up White Paper. [133175]

George Freeman: The fund seeks to leverage £300 million of gross private sector manufacturing investment by March 2025, more than four times the public investment of £60 million. Applicants will undergo an economic assessment to ensure that their proposal provides a sufficient level of private sector investment. Applications will also be assessed on their alignment with the fund's objectives of boosting health resilience, deploying innovation and minimising environmental impact.

Sector News

Government announces plan for R&D budget

On Monday 14 March, the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy (BEIS) announced it will allocate its £39.8 billion research and development (R&D) budget to partner organisations for the financial years 2022-2023 through to 2024-2025. More detailed allocations, including split by UKRI council, will be published in due course.

The overall UK Research and Innovation (UKRI) allocation is over £25 billion across the SR period, providing UKRI with its a multi-year settlement across all parts of its budget. UKRI funding will reach over £8.8 billion in 2024-2025.

To support delivery on the 4 pillars of the Innovation Strategy, BEIS are increasing funding for core Innovate UK programmes by 66% to £1.1 billion in 2024-2025.

BEIS have allocated £6.8 billion over the SR towards Horizon Europe and other EU programmes. If the UK is unable to associate to Horizon Europe, the funding allocated to Horizon association will go to UK government R&D programmes, including those to support new international partnerships.

You can find out more [here](#).

Education written ministerial statement

On Monday 14 March, the Minister for School Standards, Robin Walker MP, published a ministerial statement on tutoring, the Oak National Academy and with the Education Endowment Foundation.

The statement noted that to support schools further and meet increasing demand, the eligibility criteria for recruiting Academic Mentors into schools had been updated, with minimum A level requirements replacing the requirement for a degree, along with increasing the rate of pay for all graduate mentors looking to enrol and support the programme.

You can read the ministerial statement [here](#).

Funding for Horizon Europe applicants extended

On Tuesday 15 March, the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy (BEIS), along with UKRI, announced an extension to the support provided to Horizon Europe applicants launched in November 2021. This ensures that eligible successful UK applicants for grant awards will continue to be guaranteed funding.

The guarantee will now be in place for awards expected to be signed by the end of December 2022, while efforts continue to associate to Horizon Europe, as both the UK and the EU agreed under the Trade and Cooperation Agreement (TCA) last year.

The funding will continue to be delivered through UK Research and Innovation, and details regarding the scope and terms of the extension to the guarantee will be made available on their website shortly.

You can read announcement [here](#).

OfS launch review of blended learning

On Thursday 17 March, the Office for Students launched a review of blended learning, amidst concerns that the poor quality of the online experience for some students during the pandemic has undermined the positive potential of mixing in-person and online course delivery.

The review will consider how some universities are delivering blended learning. A report in summer 2022 will set out where approaches represent high quality teaching and learning, as well as approaches that are likely to fall short of the OfS's requirements.

You can find more information [here](#).

National Strategic Development Fund rollout

On Thursday 17 March, the Education and Skills Funding Agency (ESFA) announced its intention to publish a prospectus inviting applications for the Strategic Development Fund (SDF) for the 2022 to 2023 financial year.

Applications will open on 1 April 2022, with £85m in total funding available for SDF activity in 2022-23 (£50m capital and £35m revenue). Independent training providers, sixth form colleges, institutes of technology and universities can be included in the SDF bids, and can receive funding, but they cannot lead an application.

You can find more information [here](#).