



The All-Party Parliamentary **University Group**

University APPG weekly update

15 - 19 April 2024

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

If you would like more information on parliamentary business, or advice on engaging with Parliament or a parliamentarian, please contact:

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Parliamentary business

DSIT – oral questions

On Wednesday 17 April, the Secretary of State for the Department for Science Innovation and Technology (DSIT), Rt Hon Michelle Donelan MP, and her ministerial colleagues answered oral questions in the House of Commons.

During topic questions, the Shadow Secretary of State for DSIT, Peter Kyle MP, probed on the integrity and professionalism of the Secretary of State in light of her actions over the UKRI EDI expert advisory group member.

In her reply, the Secretary of State said she was alerted to a tweet by an official in the Department and wanted to share her concerns with UKRI. She clarified that on receipt of the letter, UKRI itself said it was deeply concerned and launched an investigation.

Tonia Antoniazzi MP (Labour) asked what evidence the Secretary of State based her decision on to write to the UKRI chief executive regarding the EDI expert advisory group member. The Secretary of State clarified that an official had alerted her to the concerns. She saw the tweet herself and asked the Department for further advice.

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

Economic Activity of Public Bodies (Overseas Matters) Bill – committee stage day 2

On Wednesday 17 April, Peers debated the Economic Activity of Public Bodies (Overseas Matters) Bill at Committee Stage (Day 2).

Lord Wallace of Saltaire (Liberal Democrat) raised concern about the Bill's potential impact on international partnerships at universities. While he had been assured by some individuals in the university sector that these would constitute private functions, he called for more detailed guidance from the government.

Speaking to amendment 14, Baroness Chapman of Darlington (Labour) raised concern over the distinction between public and private activity of universities. She read out a hypothetical example provided by Universities UK regarding a transnational education

partnership board decision. She said she hoped the example would tease out some of the ‘grey areas’ that universities might be forced to consider.

Responding on behalf of the government, Baroness Neville-Rolfe began by noting that ‘public body’ was a general term with no single legal definition. She said that the ‘Bill’s Short Title provid[ed] a general indication of the subject matter of the Bill, and it is not unusual for the Short Title to use different terminology from the Bill’s substantive provisions.’

Lord Wallace intervened by highlighting that the term ‘public body’ was used by the Office for National Statistics. He said that whether hybrid public authorities were defined as public bodies mattered a ‘great deal’, particularly to the university sector.

The Minister said they would return to this point at a later stage of Committee.

The Minister said that acts that higher education providers must carry out as ‘part and parcel of its functions providing higher education’ would be public functions, while commercial activity, such as ‘providing conference facilities or maintaining office space’, may be private activity. The Minister also confirmed that she would ‘come back’ to the hypothetical example, offered by Baroness Chapman, during the university amendment on 7 May.

Baroness Randerson (Liberal Democrat) probed where the University of Buckingham would lie in the government’s conception of hybrid public authorities. She explained that it is a ‘private university but one which is fulfilling exactly the same functions as all other universities in the UK.’

Lord Wallace raised the potential chilling effect if a large number of bodies were not sure how far they came within the scope of the Bill. He warned that they would be very nervous about doing things that they would otherwise do. On universities, he said they were most concerned by whether or not the student loan book is included in the Treasury’s calculation of national debt.

The Minister said that private universities, such as the University of Buckingham, would be captured to the extent that they perform a public function. However, she stressed that they were unlikely to perform functions of a public nature in scenarios where they are captured as hybrid public authorities.

On amendment 16 to remove Wales, Scotland, and Northern Ireland from the territorial application of the Bill, several peers spoke in favour, noting the lack of legislative consent from the Senedd and Scottish parliament.

The Minister said she disagreed with this set of amendments on two grounds. Firstly, she explained that ‘removing Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland would be out of line with the devolution settlement and undermine one of the main aims of the Bill— one UK foreign policy decided by the UK Government.’ Secondly, the Minister highlighted that BDS campaigns were a UK-wide problem and cited several examples from devolved nations.

She said the government was ‘disappointed that the Senedd and the Scottish Parliament have refused to give their consent to apply the ban to their Ministers and the respective departments and agencies.’ The Minister added that the government would ensure that the interests of the devolved Administrations were fully taken into account, and she would meet with them in the ‘coming weeks’ to discuss it further.

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

Forthcoming business

Higher Education (Student Finance and Skills Shortages) Bill – second reading

On Friday 19 April, the Higher Education (Student Finance and Skills Shortages) Bill put forward by Lia Nici MP (Conservative) is due to be considered in the House of Commons. The second reading is not guaranteed if other Private Members' Bills are selected.

You can [read the full text of the Bill](#) and [watch the session](#).

DLUHC – oral questions

On Monday 22 April from 2:30pm, the Secretary of State for the Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities (DLUHC), Rt Hon Michael Gove MP, and his ministerial colleagues will answer oral questions in the House of Commons.

You can [view the full list of tabled questions](#) and [watch the session](#).

Plans to increase the number of medical student places in England – HoL oral question

On Monday 22 April from 2:30pm, Baroness Merron will ask an oral question about plans to increase the number of medical student places in England in the House of Lords.

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

DHSC – oral questions

On Tuesday 23 April from 11:30am, the Secretary of State for the Department for Health and Social Care (DHSC), Rt Hon Victoria Atkins MP, and her ministerial colleagues will answer oral questions in the House of Commons.

What assessment she has made of the adequacy of the availability of undergraduate dental training in the East of England. [Jeremy Mayhew MP, Conservative]

You can [read the full list of tabled questions](#) and [watch the session](#).

Minimum income thresholds for partner and spousal visas – Westminster Hall debate

On Tuesday 23 April from 9:30am, there will be a Westminster Hall debate on minimum income thresholds for partner and spousal visas. This debate was tabled by Paul Blomfield MP (Labour).

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

Disabled students' allowance – Education Select Committee oral evidence

On Tuesday 23 April from 10:00am, the Education Select Committee will hear oral evidence on the disabled students' allowance from:

- Tara Chattaway, Head of Education, Thomas Pocklington Trust
- Lesley Morrice, Chair, National Network of Assessment Centres
- Sarah Todd, Chair, National Association of Disability Practitioners
- Laura Blackman, Managing Director of Education Programmes, Capita
- Glenn Tookey, Managing Director, Study Tech
- Baroness Barran, Minister for School System and Student Finance
- Chris Larmer, CEO, Student Loans Company
- Anne Rimmer, Deputy Director Student Funding Policy and Student Loans Company Sponsorship, Department for Education

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

Renters (Reform) Bill – remaining stages

On the afternoon of Wednesday 24 April, the Renters (Reform) Bill will have its report stage and third reading in the House of Commons.

You can [view publications for the Bill](#) and [watch the session](#).

Importance of educational trips and exchanges – HoL short debate

On Thursday 25 April from 1:00pm, the House of Lords will debate the importance of educational trips and exchanges. This debate was tabled by Baroness Coussins (Crossbench).

Speakers currently include:

- Baroness Barran (Conservative)
- The Earl of Clancarty (Crossbench)
- Baroness Garden of Frognal (Liberal Democrat)
- Lord Hannay of Chiswick (Crossbench)
- Lord Mann (Non-affiliated)
- Lord Storey (Liberal Democrat)
- Baroness Wilcox of Newport (Labour)

You can [view the full list of speakers](#) and [watch the session](#).

You can [read the House of Lords Library briefing](#).

Written Questions

Technology: Research

Robert Buckland MP (Conservative): To ask the Secretary of State for Science, Innovation and Technology, how she plans to promote research into new models of (a) assessment and (b) support. [UIN 19864]

Andrew Griffith MP (Conservative): The government's November 2023 *'Response to the Independent Review of the RDI Organisational Landscape'* announced the creation of a new Metascience Unit, jointly run across the Department for Science, Innovation and Technology and UK Research and Innovation (UKRI), with an initial funding commitment of £10m. The unit will deliver a competitive grants programme and will also conduct experiments to test and robustly evaluate the effectiveness of changes in the funding processes delivered by UKRI.

This programme of work is intended to generate evidence on more effective ways of funding and supporting scientific research.

Universities: Debts

Lord Bishop of St Albans (Bishops): To ask His Majesty's Government what assessment they have made of the levels of debt in UK universities. [UIN HL3488, Grouped Questions: HL3486, HL3487]

Baroness Barran MBE (Conservative): Higher education (HE) providers are autonomous institutions responsible for their own financial sustainability. The department's role and priority is to work with the Office for Students (OfS) and other stakeholders as appropriate to protect students' best interests.

The OfS is responsible for monitoring the financial sustainability of registered HE providers in England. Its latest report on the financial health of the sector, which was published in May 2023, found that the overall aggregate financial position of universities was sound. However, there continue to be quite significant differences between individual providers, both across the sector and within peer groups.

The department will continue to work closely with the OfS and many parties including a variety of HE providers across the sector, mission groups and other government

departments to understand the ongoing impacts and changing landscape of financial sustainability in the sector.

Higher Education: Investment and Procurement

Lord Johnson of Marylebone (Conservative): To ask His Majesty's Government what assessment they have made of the risk that higher education institutions succumb to pressure from student unions to undertake boycott divestment and sanction actions in relation to their investment and procurement decisions. [UIN HL3681, Grouped Questions: HL3680]

Baroness Neville-Rolfe (Conservative): The Government is aware that the BDS Movement has taken credit for divestments from Israeli companies carried out by universities following pressure from student campaigns. For example, the BDS Movement took credit for divestments from Israeli military suppliers by the University of Manchester in 2020 and procurement decisions by King's College London and Southampton University. The Government is also aware of recent examples of student unions passing motions to lobby their universities to boycott and divest from Israeli companies, including for example Manchester University Student Union in 2022 and Warwick University Student Union in 2023. There are concerns that these campaigns can damage community cohesion and legitimise antisemitism. There are also examples overseas of the BDS Movement pressing universities to boycott or divest from Israeli companies for example in Norway or the United States of America. The Bill rightly applies to universities and higher education providers to prevent them succumbing to student union pressure in the future and to tackle this type of divisive activity on campuses.

Visas: Graduates

Alex Sobel MP (Labour): To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department, whether UK Visa and Immigration is meeting the eight-week service standard for processing graduate visas. [UIN 19517]

Tom Pursglove MP (Conservative): We are operating within the eight-week service standard for Graduate applications.

Some applications may take longer if we have requested further information, or if their personal circumstances are complex. Further details can be found at [Visa processing times: applications inside the UK - GOV.UK \(www.gov.uk\)](https://www.gov.uk/visas-processing-times-applications-inside-the-uk).

Research: Palestinians

Kerry McCarthy MP (Labour): To ask the Secretary of State for Science, Innovation and Technology, whether her Department has made an assessment of the potential merits of providing further funding for Researchers at Risk Fellowships to be made available to Palestinian researchers. [UIN 19566]

Andrew Griffith MP (Conservative): The current Researchers at Risk Fellowship Programme aims to respond to the Russian invasion of Ukraine, which has exposed Ukraine-based researchers and their dependents to direct threats. My Department is keeping the programme, which is delivered by the British Academy, under close review.

Students: Freedom of Expression

Bridget Phillipson MP (Labour): To ask the Secretary of State for Education, in reference to the Office for Students consultation on proposed regulatory advice and other matters relating to freedom of speech, announced on 26 March 2024, what discussions (a) she and (b) the Office for Students have had on this with (i) the Secretary of State for Business and Trade, (ii) other Ministers in the Department for Business and Trade, (iii) Officials in that Department, (iv) the Secretary of State for Foreign, Commonwealth, and Development Affairs, (v) other Ministers in the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office and (vi) officials in that Department. [UIN 20614]

David Johnston MP (Conservative): Officials regularly speak on matters of mutual importance across government, particularly on cross-cutting policy and new legislation. The department's officials continue to engage with both the Office for Students (OfS) and other governmental departments (OGDs) surrounding the Higher Education (Freedom of Speech) Act 2023 (the Act).

Officials will continue to engage with the OfS and OGDs ahead of the Act coming into force, currently planned for 1 August 2024 for the main provisions, including the complaints scheme. The content of the consultation published on 26 March 2026 is a matter for the OfS.

Higher Education: Finance

Mary Kelly Foy MP (Labour): To ask the Secretary of State for Education, if she will make an assessment of the impact of the tuition fee-based funding model on the financial stability of the higher education sector. [UIN 20771]

Luke Hall MP (Conservative): As autonomous organisations, higher education (HE) providers have a high degree of financial independence and it is for them to make appropriate and necessary decisions around income, funding, spending and borrowing which ensure their continued financial viability and sustainability.

The department believes that the current fee freeze achieves the best balance between ensuring that the system remains financially sustainable, offering good value for the taxpayer and reducing debt levels for students in real terms.

The Office for Students (OfS), as the regulator of HE in England, is responsible for monitoring the financial sustainability of registered HE providers. The department continues to work closely with the OfS and other parties including providers, mission groups and other government departments to understand the ongoing impacts and changing landscape of financial sustainability across the sector.

Graduates: Visas

Alex Sobel MP (Labour): To ask the Secretary of State for Education, what assessment her Department has made of the potential impact of changes to the graduate visa route on (a) the financial sustainability of the university sector and (b) local economies. [UIN 20405]

Luke Hall MP (Conservative): The Migration Advisory Committee (MAC) has been commissioned to provide further evidence to support the government's understanding of how the Graduate Route is operating in practice. The focus of the Graduate Route review will be to prevent abuse and ensure the integrity and quality of our world-leading UK higher education (HE) sector is protected. No decisions have been made on the future of the Graduate Route and the department awaits the report of the MAC in May.

The Office for Students (OfS), as the independent regulator of HE in England, is responsible for monitoring and reporting on the sustainability of HE providers. The department works closely with the OfS to understand the impact of international student recruitment on HE provider financial sustainability.

Postgraduate Education: Overseas Students

Alex Sobel MP (Labour): To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer, what assessment his Department has made of the potential impact of the decline in international postgraduate student numbers on the UK's economy. [UIN 20406]

Laura Trott MP (Conservative): International students make a significant positive contribution to the British economy. According to a study by HEPI and Kaplan, the lifetime net economic benefit of the 21/22 cohort of international students was £37bn with each student making a net contribution of nearly £100,000 on average.

The independent Office for Budget Responsibility (OBR) make a net migration forecast to underpin their economic and fiscal forecasts, which reflects the latest data and migration policy. At Spring Budget, the OBR assessed migration to fall more sharply than the ONS net migration projections in the short-term before it reaches 315,000 at the end of the forecast period. Rising emigration and effect of policy explain their adjustment.

Disabled Students' Allowances: Overseas Students

Zarah Sultana MP (Labour): To ask the Secretary of State for Education, if she will make an assessment with Cabinet colleagues of the potential (a) merits of extending eligibility for Disabled Students' Allowance to international students and (b) impact of the existing eligibility criteria on educational inequalities in higher education. [UIN 21396]

Luke Hall MP (Conservative): The government appreciates the significant economic and cultural contribution that international students make to UK higher education (HE). The department's offer to international students remains very competitive and the department is committed to ensuring the UK remains a destination of choice for the brightest and best international students from across the globe.

To be eligible for Disabled Students Allowance, students must: (a) meet the personal eligibility criteria for student finance within the Education (Student Support) Regulations 2011 and be studying a course designated for student support; and (b) have a disability as defined in the Equality Act 2010.

Entitlement to student support and home fee status is limited to eligible students who are undertaking HE courses offered by UK institutions that are designated for support. This is to ensure that the HE student finance system remains financially

sustainable. The government has no plans to extend home fee status and student support to international students.

All HE providers must fulfil their responsibilities under the Equality Act 2010 in their support for all disabled HE students regardless of whether they are home or international students.

Higher Education: Finance

Chi Onwurah MP (Labour): To ask the Secretary of State for Science, Innovation and Technology, with reference to the to the Higher Education Statistics Authority report entitled Higher Education Provider Data: Business and Community Interaction 2022/23 published on 4 April 2024, what assessment her department has made of the reasons for the decline in higher education income from collaborative research with business from 2021-22 to 2022-23. [UIN 21664]

Andrew Griffith MP (Conservative): Higher education income from collaborative research with business dropped between 2021/22 and 2022/23 from £1.89bn to £1.78bn. However, this is still consistent with an upward trend from 2018/19.

The government supports university knowledge exchange activities business, through Higher Education Innovation Funding which is currently at its highest ever level at £260m a year with an additional £20m to support business and commercialisation activities.

Sector News

UUK 100 faces campaign launch

On Monday 15 April, Universities UK launched its 100 Faces campaign and published new research demonstrating the powerful positive impact of university for those students who are the first in their family to attend.

The research highlights that almost three quarters (73%) of ‘first-in-the-family’ (FitF) graduates agreed their degree gave them the confidence to apply for jobs without feeling like an imposter. This is despite 65% saying they thought twice about going at all, because of said imposter syndrome

However, without their main source of financial support, 4 in 10 (41%) FitF graduates couldn’t have gone to university at all. This is equivalent to around 1.1 million 24–40-year-olds in England and Wales

Vivienne Stern MBE, Chief Executive of Universities UK said:

There are those who say that too many people go to university. I disagree. These stories tell you why. In this country you are still twice as likely to go to university if you are from the wealthiest background, compared to the least wealthy. That’s not right.

The experiences of students who are the first in their families to have been to university tell a powerful story. I am amazed by how many graduates talked about having imposter syndrome – and the way that earning a degree helped to banish that feeling. I believe we have a responsibility to keep working to ensure a wider range of people in this country get access to the potentially transformative experience of going to university. For that to happen, we really do need to see an improvement in maintenance support to support those from the least privileged backgrounds.

You can [read the press release](#) and [explore the 100 Faces campaign site](#).

Health and Safety Annual Report 2023 – UCEA publication

On Monday 15 April, the Universities & Colleges Employers Association (UCEA) published their Annual Health and Safety Report for 2023. This report provides an

insight into the sector's activities in relation to health, safety and wellbeing over the last year. It provides an overview of:

- The activities of UCEA, its partner organisations, and the sector with reference to the annual Health, Safety and Wellbeing Action Plan 2023, based on the strategic priorities set out in UCEA's HE Sector Health Safety and Wellbeing Strategic Framework for 2022-25.
- Topics discussed by the UCEA Health and Safety Committee and the Higher Education Safety and Health Forum (HESH).
- Findings from UCEA's annual absence survey for the period 1 August 2022 to 31 July 2023.

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

Opportunity England: Higher technical education – AoC policy paper

On Tuesday 16 April, the Association of Colleges (AoC) published a policy paper on higher technical education. This policy paper aligns with the [Opportunity England](#) recommendation, 'a new statutory right to lifelong learning'. Their recommendations for higher technical education relate to simplified and proportionate regulation; developing and promoting HTQs; implementation of the LLE; and tertiary system.

You can [read the policy paper](#).

Third of students undecided on how they will vote at next General Election – NUS survey findings

On Wednesday 17 April, the National Union of Students (NUS) published findings from a survey of more than 5,000 students. The survey found:

- Almost a third of UK students have not yet decided which political party they will vote for at the next General Election.
- 73% of students do not think politicians value young people's views.
- 89% of students are registered to vote and 87% intend to vote.

- Cost of living is students’ number one concern heading into the election.

NUS Vice President for Further Education, Bernie Savage, said:

“The results of this survey send a clear message to politicians: students are ready to turn up at the next election, but they are desperate for politicians to offer them more.

“That 9 in 10 students are registered is really encouraging and suggests students will have a huge impact on the outcome of the next poll.

“There are more than 4.5 million students and apprentices in our universities and colleges – we’re about 10% of the voting population of the UK. If we turn up at the ballot box students will have a huge impact on the future of the country.

“Politicians and political parties should pay attention and listen to the concerns of students and young people, who represent all of our futures.”

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

Longitudinal Education Outcomes (LEO) – DfE collection

On Wednesday 17 April, the Department for Education (DfE) published a collection of information about the LEO dataset including guidance, research reports and official statistics.

The LEO standard extract connects individuals’ education data with their employment, benefits and earnings data to create a de-identified person level administrative dataset.

The LEO dataset is available for approved third party researchers to access and analyse.

You can [explore the collection](#).

Lifelong Learning Entitlement overview – DfE policy paper

On Thursday 18 April, the Department for Education (DfE) updated the timeline for the development and rollout of the Lifelong Learning Entitlement (LLE) to reflect a phased delivery in the 2025-26 academic year.

From September 2025, learners will be able to apply for LLE funding for the first time for courses and modules commencing from January 2026 onwards. When fully rolled out, the LLE will create a single funding system to help people pay for college or university courses, and train, retrain and upskill flexibly over their working lives.

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

Commission proposes to open negotiations to facilitate youth mobility between the EU and the UK – European Commission press release

On Thursday 18 April, the European Commission proposed to the Council to open negotiations with the United Kingdom on an agreement to facilitate youth mobility.

The proposal seeks to address in an innovative way the main barriers to mobility for young people experienced today and create a right for young people to travel from the EU to the UK and vice-versa more easily and for a longer period of time. The proposal sets out the conditions that would have to be met (age, maximum duration of stay, conditions of eligibility, rules for verifying their compliance) to enable young people to move without being tied to a purpose (i.e., to allow for studying, training or working), or quota-bound. For instance, under the envisaged agreement, both EU and UK citizens aged between 18 to 30 years would be able to stay for up to 4 years in the destination country.

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

Deputy Prime Minister's speech on economic security – Chatham House speech

On Thursday 18 April, the Deputy Prime Minister, Rt Hon Oliver Dowden MP, delivered a speech focused on the government's review of academic security following the Integrated Review last year.

In the speech, he said he is going to convene a roundtable with vice chancellors in the coming weeks to discuss the review's findings. Other steps proposed included: consulting on the security of researchers in sensitive areas: increasing transparency in university funding: and examining how existing laws on national security and investment could apply to universities.

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