All-Party Parliamentary University Group

Weekly update

16 – 20 February 2026

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

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Forthcoming business

Free speech complaints scheme run by the Office for Students – HoL Oral Question

On Monday 23 February, an oral question titled “Free speech complaints scheme run by the Office for Students” will take place in the House of Lords. This question has been tabled by Lord Skidelsky (Crossbench).

You can watch the session.

Use of post-16 education and skills white paper to promote and deliver a culture of lifelong learning – HoL Oral Question

On Tuesday 24 February, an oral question titled “Use of post-16 education and skills white paper to promote and deliver a culture of lifelong learning” will take place in the House of Lords. This question has been tabled by Lord Watson of Invergowrie (Labour).

You can watch the session.

AI Security Institute’s research into threats to economic stability arising from changes in the labour market – HoL Oral Question

On Wednesday 25 February, an oral question titled “AI Security Institute’s research into threats to economic stability arising from changes in the labour market” will take place in the House of Lords. This question has been tabled by Lord Pitkeathley of Camden Town (Labour).

You can watch the session.

Student loan repayment plans – Westminster Hall Debate

On Wednesday 25 February, there will be a Westminster Hall debate on “Student loan repayment plans”, tabled in by Jas Athwal (Labour).

You can watch the session.

Written questions and statements

Department for Education: Students: Suicide

Pippa Heylings (Liberal Democrats): (UIN110515) To ask the Secretary of State for Education, what mechanisms are in place to ensure that universities share learning from reviews of student deaths by suicide.

Josh MacAlister: Universities are expected to carry out serious incident reviews after a suspected student suicide, following sector developed postvention guidance produced by Universities UK, PAPYRUS and Samaritans, which sets clear expectations for reviewing incidents and identifying lessons for improvement.-developed postvention guidance produced by Universities UK, PAPYRUS and Samaritans, which sets clear expectations for reviewing incidents and identifying lessons for improvement.

To support sector wide learning, the department last year published the first National Review of Higher Education Student Suicide Deaths, drawing on more than 160 such reviews to provide a shared evidence base and recommendations for improvement across the sector. These recommendations are now being taken forward through the Higher Education Mental Health Implementation Taskforce, which is working with providers to embed consistent practice and strengthen postvention approaches.-wide learning, the department last year published the first National Review of Higher Education Student Suicide Deaths, drawing on more than 160 such reviews to provide a shared evidence base and recommendations for improvement across the sector. These recommendations are now being taken forward through the Higher Education Mental Health Implementation Taskforce, which is working with providers to embed consistent practice and strengthen postvention approaches.

The Taskforce is also exploring how to improve data and evidence collection so that learning from future cases can be captured more consistently and used to drive further continuous improvement across the sector.

Source

Department for Education: Students: Mental Health Services

Pippa Heylings (Liberal Democrats) (South Cambridgeshire): (110514) To ask the Secretary of State for Education, what plans she has to ask the Office for Students to introduce a regulatory condition on student mental health and wellbeing.

Josh MacAlister: The Office for Students (OfS) is the independent regulator, and any decision to introduce a new regulatory condition would be for the OfS to determine. The Higher Education Mental Health Implementation Taskforce and department are working closely with the OfS as part of our work to improve consistency and raise standards in how providers support student mental health. This includes considering regulatory options alongside other levers such as governance, assurance and strengthened good practice frameworks. We will set out our position following advice from the taskforce, which is helping identify what a clear, strong and proportionate framework should look like.

Source

Department for Education: Students: Mental Health Services

Pippa Heylings (Liberal Democrats) (South Cambridgeshire): (110516) To ask the Secretary of State for Education, what steps her Department is taking to help coordinate services between higher education institutions and NHS mental health services for students.

Josh MacAlister: Improving coordination between universities and NHS mental health services is a key priority. The Higher Education Mental Health Implementation Taskforce recently published Improving Student Mental Health through Higher Education-NHS Partnerships, which sets out evidenced models of effective collaboration and provides case studies showing how stronger partnerships working together can transform outcomes for students while delivering efficiencies for local health services. The government encourages any university not already involved in such a partnership to draw on these models and to work with their local integrated care board to identify an approach that meets local needs.

Source

Department for Education: Students: Loans

Michael Wheeler (Labour) (Worsley and Eccles): (110594) To ask the Secretary of State for Education, what estimate her Department has made of outstanding Plan 2 student loan debt in the year the first loans become eligible to be written off; and what assessment she has made of the potential impact of that debt on Government finances.

Josh MacAlister: The oldest Plan 2 loans will become eligible for cancellation in 2046. For the England-domiciled 2012/13 cohort, the first to receive Plan 2 loans, we forecast a total of £17,036 million in loan balances (including interest) will be cancelled at the end of their 30-year repayment periods.

These cancellations are accounted for at the point of loan outlay. The future cancelled debt is reflected in both the national accounts and the department's accounts in the year the loan is issued and is then updated annually. It will not result in further losses when the loans reach the end of their 30-year write-off period.

The treatment of student loans in the national accounts is in line the methodology published by the Office for National Statistics and can be found here: https://www.ons.gov.uk/economy/governmentpublicsectorandtaxes/publicsectorfinance/methodologies/studentloansinthepublicsectorfinancesamethodologicalguide.

Source

Department for Education: Students: Loans

Joshua Reynolds (Liberal Democrats) (Maidenhead): (111388) To ask the Secretary of State for Education, what assessment her Department has made of the potential impact of the repayment term for post-2012 student loans being set at 40 years on (a) graduates in lower-paid or insecure employment, (b) social mobility and (c) students from lower-income backgrounds.

Josh MacAlister: The repayment term for Plan 2 loans is 30 years. They were designed and implemented by previous governments. Students in England starting degrees under this government have different arrangements.

The student loan system is designed to protect borrowers, and repayments are determined by income, not the amount borrowed or the rate of interest. Borrowers only start repaying their student loan once earnings exceed the threshold, after which they pay 9% of income above that level. To protect lower earners, if a borrower's earnings drop, so do their repayments, and if earnings fall below the repayment threshold, then they repay nothing at all.

After 30 years any outstanding loan and interest is cancelled at the end of the loan term, and debt is never passed on to family members or descendants. A borrower on Plan 2 entering repayment at age 21 would have any outstanding loan amount written off at age 51. No commercial loan offers this level of protection.

Source

Department for Education: Students: Loans

Stuart Andrew (Conservative) (Daventry): (111114) To ask the Secretary of State for Education, what steps her Department is taking to ensure that Plan 2 student loan borrowers are informed of the changes to repayment thresholds due to take effect in April 2027.

Josh MacAlister : The government announced on 26 November 2025, as part of Autumn Budget 2025, the repayment threshold to apply to English Plan 2 student loans from April 2027 to April 2030.

The Student Loans Company (SLC) publish confirmation of the repayment threshold to apply in the upcoming financial year annually on GOV.UK. Further, SLC have extensive guidance on the operation of the student loan repayments system available on GOV.UK, including confirmation of the current repayment threshold.

Source

Department for Education: Erasmus+ Programme: Flags

Mike Wood (Conservative) (Kingswinford and South Staffordshire): (111156) To ask the Secretary of State for Education, pursuant to the answer of 2 February 2026 to Question 107710, on Erasmus+ programme: flags, whether any other Government programme in Great Britain will now be required to follow European Commission communication and visibility rules.

Josh MacAlister : Article 25 of Regulation (EU) 2021/817 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 20 May 2021 establishing Erasmus+: the Union Programme for education and training, youth and sport and repealing Regulation (EU) No 1288/2013 (“the Erasmus+ Regulation”) sets out the requirements for information, communication and dissemination which apply to the Erasmus+ programme.

Grouped Questions: 111146, 111147

Source

Department for Education: Students: Loans

Richard Holden (Conservative) (Basildon and Billericay): (108298) To ask the Secretary of State for Education, pursuant to the Answer of 6 January 2026 to Question 99801, what the estimated annual amount (a) accrued in interest and (b) repaid by British citizens with students loans was in each of the last five financial years.

Josh MacAlister: The Department for Education and the Student Loans Company (SLC) are undertaking work to improve the quality and consistency of demographic data held across their systems, to support the timely answering of parliamentary questions. Changes in the application process over time, including the transition to electronic applications, mean that demographic data held for earlier cohorts can be held differently across multiple SLC systems and repayment and interest calculations continue to include these early borrowers.

As a result, it is not currently possible to produce robust repayment figures broken down by British citizen status within the required timescales. Once this work is complete, the department expects to be able to provide more detailed information in response to such questions.

Source

Department for Education: Universities: Liability

Pippa Heylings (Liberal Democrats) (South Cambridgeshire): (110512) To ask the Secretary of State for Education, what evidence the Government has considered on whether the absence of a statutory duty of care contributes to inconsistent responses by universities to students at risk of harm.

Josh MacAlister : The department has considered a wide range of evidence in assessing the factors that contribute to variation in how higher education (HE) providers support students at risk of harm. This includes official statistics, coroners' Prevention of Future Deaths reports, and other case reviews that highlight issues with processes, communication and access to services relevant to consistency of support.

Our assessment has further drawn on extensive engagement with providers, students, bereaved families, mental health experts and sector leaders, including through provider surveys and the HE mental health implementation taskforce, where those with lived experience have shaped priorities and workstrands.

Last year, we also published the first ever national review of HE student suicide deaths, which analysed more than 160 serious incident reviews and identified operational issues such as information sharing, case management and staff training as key drivers of inconsistency. We are now working with the taskforce and the sector to embed the review's recommendations and to strengthen monitoring and institutional accountability.

Source

Department for Education: Educational Psychology: Training

Daisy Cooper (Liberal Democrats) (St Albans): (107141) To ask the Secretary of State for Education, whether she plans to increase the number of places available for educational psychology courses at universities in England.

Josh MacAlister : The department is investing £21 million to train 400 more educational psychologists over two cohorts who started their studies in 2024 and 2025 as part of the Educational Psychology Funded Training scheme. This is in addition to the £10 million already being invested in the training of more than 200 educational psychologists who began their training in September 2023.

The Higher Education Statistics Agency does not collect information on places available on courses but publishes data on student entrants across UK higher education (HE) providers. This includes data on students entering courses in different subjects, categorised using the HE Classification of Subjects system. Counts of entrants across all subjects from the 2019/20 to 2023/24 academic years are published in Table 52 of HESA's student data for all UK providers, which are detailed below.

This data was published in January 2026.

Entrants to UK higher education providers studying Educational Psychology (all modes and levels of study)

Subject	2019/20	2020/21	2021/22	2022/23	2023/24	2024/25
Educational Psychology	645	680	710	755	760	695

HE providers are autonomous institutions independent from government. This means they are responsible for the decisions that they make regarding which courses they deliver.

Grouped Questions: 107140

Source

Department for Science, Innovation and Technology: Research: Finance

Anneliese Dodds (Labour) (Oxford East): (111192) To ask the Secretary of State for Science, Innovation and Technology, what steps her Department is taking to support research institutions in the period before UK Research and Innovation budget allocations are determined.

Kanishka Narayan: In December, UK Research and Innovation (UKRI) set out how it will deliver its record £38.6 billion funding allocation over the next four years. This is part of the largest ever investment in R&D made by any UK government (£86 billion up to 2029/30) and will help drive new scientific breakthroughs, help create new industries and grow businesses faster, and deliver the growth we need for good jobs and better lives.

The Department for Science, Innovation and Technology (DSIT) has been in active dialogue with UKRI to ensure that any implications from funding decisions are fully understood and that they reflect both the UK's strategic research priorities and its global commitments. DSIT has asked UKRI to ensure that its final allocations are informed by meaningful consultation with the research community and a robust assessment of potential consequences for the UK's scientific capability.

Source

Department for Education: Students: Mental Health Services

Pippa Heylings (Liberal Democrats) (South Cambridgeshire): (110513) To ask the Secretary of State for Education, how students and bereaved families are being involved in the work of the Implementation Taskforce on student mental health and suicide prevention.

Josh MacAlister: Students and bereaved families are directly shaping the work of the higher education mental health implementation taskforce. Representatives of the LEARN network sit on the taskforce and have played a key role in agreeing its priorities and work strands, ensuring lived experience insight informs all outputs. The taskforce also includes formal student representation via the National Union of Students, and other members such as Student Minds also ensure that student voice and sector expertise underpin their programme of work.

Source

Department for Education: Erasmus+ Programme

Lee Anderson (Reform UK) (Ashfield): (103412) To ask the Secretary of State for Education, if she will make an estimate on the number of international students in British universities she expects to be part of Erasmus scheme exchanges after the UK rejoins the scheme.

Josh MacAlister: In 2018/19, there were approximately 31,000 inbound higher education student mobilities via the Erasmus+ Programme. There were approximately 16,000 outbound higher education student mobilities in the same year.

The department expects there will be a greater number of higher education mobilities on reassociation, given the expansion of the programme.

Source

Department for Education: Higher Education: Liability

Helen Grant (Conservative) (Maidstone and Malling): (109991) To ask the Secretary of State for Education, whether she intends to publish statutory guidance or a code of practice setting out the duty of care owed by higher education providers to their students.

Josh MacAlister: Universities are already required to comply with their duties under the common law and legislation such as the Equality Act 2010, which includes an anticipatory duty to make reasonable adjustments for disabled students, including those with mental health conditions which meet the definition set out within the Equality Act. The government has no plans to publish statutory guidance or a code of practice on a duty of care owed by higher education providers to their students.

Our focus is on ensuring that providers adopt consistent, evidence-based approaches to student safety and wellbeing by embedding the recommendations of the national review of higher education student suicide deaths and other best practice identified through the Higher Education Mental Health Implementation Taskforce's wider outputs and sector-led guidance.

Source

Department for Education: Students: Loans

Alex Sobel (Labour) (Leeds Central and Headingley): (110055) To ask the Secretary of State for Education, what steps Student Loans Company is taking to ensure that borrowers repaying through PAYE are not issued incorrect repayment demands.

Josh MacAlister: UK-based student loan repayments are collected by HMRC through the tax system. Employers deduct repayments for employees with a student loan when their earnings are above the relevant student loan repayment threshold. Employers will pass the collected repayments to HMRC, and HMRC pass details of the repayments to the Student Loans Company (SLC).

SLC may write to a customer directly if they have been paid more student loan or grant than they are entitled to. Overpayments are due to be repaid separately from the customer's main student loan balance, and it is right that the SLC seek repayment of such sums.

If a borrower thinks they have received a letter in error, we encourage them to engage with SLC. Customer satisfaction is important to SLC, and they continue to invest in systems to provide customers with a more intuitive and comprehensively digital service. SLC welcomes feedback from customers to further improve their service.

Source

Department for Work and Pensions: Assistive Technology: Higher Education

Martin Wrigley (Liberal Democrats) (Newton Abbot): (110545) To ask the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions, what discussions he has had with the Department for Education on assessing the potential impact of reducing assistive technology support during higher education on disabled people's employment outcomes.

Stephen Timms: The Department for Work and Pensions maintains regular dialogue with the Department for Education (DfE) to ensure disabled students are supported as they transition into the labour market. Assistive and accessible technology (ATech) is key to enabling independence, greater inclusion, and participation for disabled people. While this technology is already creating opportunities, this government believes there is potential to do much more.

The Access to Work Scheme has been operating in Great Britain since June 1994 and provides grant funding to disabled people, as well as those with a health condition.

The grant supports workplace adjustments that go beyond what would normally be expected from an employer through their duty to provide reasonable adjustments as outlined in the Equality Act 2010. The grant cap was increased in April 2024 to £69,920. To further support sustainable employment, the DWP is also investing in the "Connect to Work" initiative, which is expected to support around 100,000 disabled people and those with health conditions in 2026/2027.

Source

Department for Education: Students: Loans

Claire Young (Liberal Democrats) (Thornbury and Yate): (110564) To ask the Secretary of State for Education, what recent estimate her Department has made of the (a) proportion of Plan 2 student loans that will be fully repaid within the 30-year term and (b) average total interest accrued by a Plan 2 borrower over the lifetime of their loan.

Josh MacAlister: Based on current modelling, 32% of the 2022/23 cohort of England-domiciled Plan 2 student loan borrowers are expected to fully repay their loans within the 30 year loan term. Student loan forecasts can be found here: https://explore-education-statistics.service.gov.uk/methodology/student-loan-forecasts-for-england.

The department does not hold information on the average total interest accrued by a Plan 2 borrower over the lifetime of their loan. However, interest rates only affect the total amount repaid by high-earning borrowers and those with small balances, who will pay back all, or very nearly all, their student loans.

Source

Department for Education: Higher Education: Finance

James McMurdock (Independent) (South Basildon and East Thurrock): (111593) To ask the Secretary of State for Education, what estimate her Department has made of the cost to the public purse of funding undergraduate courses that do not lead to sustained graduate-level employment.

Josh MacAlister: All first-degree subjects typically lead to high rates of sustained employment, with Longitudinal Education Outcomes data showing that the proportion of graduates in "sustained employment with or without further study" five years after graduation ranges from 77.4% to 92.2% across subjects (in the latest available data, i.e. the 2022/23 tax year). This compares to a 68.0% employment rate among working-age non-graduates (in the latest Graduate Labour Market Statistics release, i.e. for 2024).

Current administrative data does not provide a breakdown of outcomes by whether employment is at graduate-level. Similarly, evidence is not available on the breakdown of government costs of student finance at course or subject level.

Courses with specific quality concerns related to graduate outcomes are addressed through the Office for Students quality regime.

Source

Department for Education: Student loan repayments

Rosena Allin-Khan (Labour) (Tooting): (111755) To ask the Secretary of State for Education, pursuant to her Department's answer to 108730, what assessment she has made of the potential merits of reducing the constant rate of student loan repayments from 9% to 5%.

Josh MacAlister: Plan 2 student loans were designed and implemented by previous governments. Interest rates are applied at the Retail Price Index (RPI) only, then variable up to an upper limit of RPI +3% depending on earnings. This maintains the real value of repayments over a long loan term. As an additional borrower protection, interest rates on post-2012 loans are automatically capped by the prevailing market rate for comparable unsecured personal loans, ensuring borrowers are protected if market conditions change.

Interest rates do not impact monthly repayments made by student loan borrowers. Repayments are made at a constant rate of 9% above the earnings threshold, and the 9% rate strikes a balance between affordability for graduates and fairness to taxpayers. For example, someone earning £30,000 will repay around £4 per month in the 2026/27 financial years under the repayment threshold of £29,385.

Those earning below the earnings threshold do not make repayments. Any outstanding loan including interest built up, is cancelled at the end of the loan term with no detriment to the borrower, and debt is never passed on to family members or descendants.

This is a deliberate government investment in students and the economy, and the 9% over-threshold repayment rate keeps higher education funding sustainable and ensures the costs are shared fairly between students and taxpayers.

Reducing the repayment rate to 5% would significantly increase the cost to taxpayers, many of whom have not attended university, which in turn would undermine the sustainability of higher education funding.

My noble Friend, the Minister for Skills has written to the Rethink Repayment campaign organiser via their MP regarding this issue.

Grouped Questions: 111753, 111754

Source

Department for Education: Student loan debt

Michael Wheeler (Labour) (Worsley and Eccles): (110595) To ask the Secretary of State for Education, what assessment her Department has made of the potential impact of the RPI plus 3 per cent interest rate on Plan 2 student loan debt on the ability of graduates earning the UK median wage to begin to pay down their outstanding student loan debt.

Josh MacAlister: Plan 2 interest rates vary with income when the borrower has left study and is in repayment. The lower interest threshold, below which borrowers are charged an interest rate of RPI+0%, is currently £28,470. Interest then increases on a sliding scale to RPI+3% for borrowers earning over the higher interest threshold (currently £51,245). This ensures that, post-study, only borrowers earning higher incomes are charged RPI+3 interest.

Student loan repayments are made based on a borrower's monthly or weekly earnings, not the interest rate or amount borrowed. Outstanding debt, including interest accrued, is cancelled at the end of the loan term with no detriment to the borrower.

Source

Department for Education: Maintenance grant

Sharon Hodgson (Labour) (Washington and Gateshead South): (111096) To ask the Secretary of State for Education, whether regional cost-of-living variations will be factored into proposed maintenance grant calculations.

Josh MacAlister: This government recognises the impact that cost-of-living pressures are having on students. This is why we are reintroducing means-tested maintenance grants from the 2028/29 academic year, providing students with up to £1,000 extra support each year, regardless of their location. We will also increase maintenance loans by 2.71% in 2026/27, bringing maximum amounts to £14,135 for students living away from home and studying in London, £10,830 for students living away from home and studying outside London and £9,118 for students living at home.

We are developing options to address regional disparities in entering higher education for disadvantaged students through a new Access and Participation Task and Finish Group, chaired by Professor Kathryn Mitchell, Vice-Chancellor and Chief Executive of the University of Derby. We are also working with the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government to encourage universities to collaborate with local authorities on strategic approaches to meeting student housing needs.

Source

Department for Education: Student loan repayments

Andrew Snowden (Conservative) (Fylde): (111922) To ask the Secretary of State for Education, what assessment she has made of the appropriateness of maintaining student loan repayment thresholds.

Josh MacAlister: These loans were designed and implemented by previous governments, and the department is having to make hard choices to balance taxpayer and borrower interests to ensure that the student finance system remains sustainable.

Unlike commercial loans, student loan repayments are linked to income, not to the amount borrowed or interest applied. If a borrower is earning above the repayment threshold and their income stays the same, then their repayments will remain the same.

Repayments are made at a constant rate of 9% above the earnings threshold, and the 9% rate strikes a balance between affordability for graduates and fairness to taxpayers. This is a deliberate government investment in students and the economy.

Those earning below the earnings threshold do not make repayments. Any outstanding loan including interest built up, is cancelled at the end of the loan term with no detriment to the borrower, and debt is never passed on to family members or descendants.

Source

Department for Education: Students: Loans

Claire Young (Liberal Democrats) (Thornbury and Yate): (110990) To ask the Secretary of State for Education, what assessment her Department has made of the potential impact of maintaining thresholds for Plan 2 student loan repayments on trends in the level of repayments made by graduates; and what discussions she has had with the Chancellor of the Exchequer on the potential impact of maintaining this threshold on the marginal effective tax rate for graduates earning above that threshold.

Josh MacAlister: The department produced the following analysis regarding the impact of maintaining the repayment and interest thresholds for Plan 2 student loans on the lifetime repayments made by borrowers:

Average lifetime repayments (2024/25 financial year prices)

		Baseline (£)	Post- policy (£)	Impact £	Impact %
Entire cohort Average		27,000	28,300	1,300	5
Lifetime graduate earnings decile	1	2,000	2,000	0	0
	2	4,300	4,700	400	9
	3	7,700	8,100	400	5
	4	11,600	13,000	1,400	12
	5	16,900	18,500	1,600	9
	6	23,100	25,200	2,100	9
	7	31,300	33,600	2,300	7
	8	41,200	43,500	2,300	6
	9	54,500	56,100	1,600	3
	10	59,100	59,500	400	1

The department will release an equalities impact assessment, including the impact on lifetime repayments, alongside other borrower impacts for the Plan 2 repayment threshold and interest threshold freeze announced at the Autumn Budget. Published results may differ from those provided due to model and data updates.

The rate of repayment for undergraduate student loans remains at 9% on all income above the relevant threshold. Other factors, including any reliefs, pension contributions, or receipt of certain means-tested welfare benefits could adjust an individual's effective tax rate.

Source

Department for Education: Students: Loans

Perran Moon (Labour) (Camborne and Redruth): (111509) To ask the Secretary of State for Education, what assessment she has made of the potential impact of compound interest on the long-term balances of student loan borrowers including those with intermittent or low earnings.

Josh MacAlister: It is important that student loans are subject to interest, to ensure that those who can afford to do so contribute to the full cost of their degree. Lower earning borrowers, and those who do not go on to repay their loan in full, are protected. The regulations provide that at the end of the loan term any outstanding loan debt, including interest accrued, will be cancelled at no detriment to the borrower. Debt is never passed on to family members or descendants.

Borrowers on intermittent incomes are also protected as repayments are based on earnings, not on the rate of interest or the size of debt. This means if their income drops, so do their repayments. Interest rates do not have an immediate cash impact on the cost of living for borrowers, as interest rates do not affect monthly student loan repayments.

Source

Department for Education: Students: Loans

James McMurdock (Independent) (South Basildon and East Thurrock): (111596) To ask the Secretary of State for Education, what assessment her Department has made of the potential impact of student loan repayments on recruitment and retention in NHS roles where a degree is mandatory.

Josh MacAlister: This government is committed to training the staff we need to get patients seen on time, including more medical and clinical professionals and will work closely with partners in education to do so and ensure these professions remain attractive career choices.

We now have a complete apprentice pathway for nursing, from entry level to postgraduate advanced clinical practice. A person can join the NHS as an entry level healthcare assistant apprentice with a view to eventually qualifying as a registered nurse.

For those who do take out a student loan to support their studies, unlike commercial loans, student loan repayments are linked to income, not to the amount borrowed or interest applied. And at the end of the repayment term any outstanding loan debt, including interest accrued, will be cancelled with no detriment to the borrower, and debt is never passed on to family members or descendants.

Students studying on eligible courses at English universities qualify for additional support through the NHS Learning Support Fund or NHS Bursary.

Source

Department for Education: Graduates: Pay

James McMurdock (Independent) (South Basildon and East Thurrock): (111592) To ask the Secretary of State for Education, how many undergraduate courses eligible for student loans have median graduate earnings below the repayment threshold five years after graduation.

Josh MacAlister: Under the current Plan 5 student loan system, the repayment threshold is £25,000. Nationally, graduates across all subject areas have median earnings above this, five years after graduation, with the exception of Performing Arts graduates whose median earnings are £24,500.

More detail on courses at specific providers can be found in the department‘s published LEO provider level dashboard, which contains earnings outcomes at five years after graduation for each ‘provider x subject' combination. This is available here: https://department-for-education.shinyapps.io/leo-provider-dashboard/

It should be noted that many of these combinations have outcomes suppressed due to low sample sizes, meaning it is not possible to produce a robust count of the total number of such courses.

Source

Department for Education: Students: Loans

James McMurdock (Independent) (South Basildon and East Thurrock): (111595) To ask the Secretary of State for Education, what estimate she has made of the proportion of the total value of Plan 2 student loans issued since 2012 that will be written off.

Josh MacAlister: The department does not hold an estimate of the proportion of total Plan 2 outlay since 2012 that will be written off. We forecast subsidy portions for outlay for current and future financial years.

We estimate a resource accounting and budget (RAB) charge of 34% for Plan 2 loan outlay issued in the 2025/26 academic year to English domiciled borrowers. The RAB charge represents the subsidy portion of loan outlay as recorded in departmental accounts.

Outstanding debt, including interest accrued, is cancelled at the end of the loan term with no detriment to the borrower, and debt is never passed on to family members or descendants. There are no commercial loans that offer this level of borrower protection. This cancellation/subsidy is a conscious investment in our young people and the skills capacity, people and economy of this country.

Source

Department for Education: Graduates

James McMurdock (Independent) (South Basildon and East Thurrock): (111600) To ask the Secretary of State for Education, what assessment she has made of the adequacy of the long-term career progression of graduates who are not in high-skilled employment 15 months after graduation.

Josh MacAlister: The latest higher education (HE) Statistics Agency data shows that 71.4% of UK-domiciled graduates from 2022/23 in employment were in high-skilled roles 15 months after graduation.

Latest ‘Graduate Labour Market Statistics' data show that in 2024, 79.0% of working age postgraduates and 67.9% of graduates were in high-skilled employment, an increase compared to 2023.

Further, research suggests that the majority of graduates are expected to earn a positive financial return from HE over their lifetime. Whilst employment rates for graduates remain higher than for non-graduates, we recognise that those leaving HE face challenges and are taking steps to ensure graduates are ready for work.

Source

Department for Education: Students: Loans

James McMurdock (Independent) (South Basildon and East Thurrock): (111594) To ask the Secretary of State for Education, what assessment her Department has made of the potential impact of the student loan interest rate on costs to the public purse.

Josh MacAlister: Applying interest to the loans ensures that those who benefit financially from higher education (HE) contribute towards the cost of that HE. To ensure the real value of the loans over the repayment term, interest is linked to inflation. Interest increases the face value of the student loan book, but the impact on the fair value depends on complex assumptions about lifetime repayments.

In cashflow terms, neither outlay nor repayments are affected by a higher interest rate in the short term. Only when borrowers approach the end of their repayments would there be an increase in repayments through additional interest leading to extended repayment periods up to the maximum of 30 years for Plan 2 and 40 years for Plan 5 loans.

Source

Department for Education: Graduates: Employment

James McMurdock (Independent) (South Basildon and East Thurrock): (111601) To ask the Secretary of State for Education, pursuant to Answer of 2 February 2026 to Question 108145 on Graduates: Employment, how many higher education providers are currently at risk of regulatory intervention.

Josh MacAlister: As the independent regulator of higher education, the Office for Students makes independent decisions about regulatory interventions.

Source

Department for Education: Students: Loans

The Rt Hon. the Lord Naseby PC (Conservative): (HL14447) To ask His Majesty's Government why interest rates on student loans are set using the Retail Prices Index rather than the Consumer Prices Index.

The Rt Hon. the Baroness Smith of Malvern: Interest rates on student loans have been consistently linked to a widely recognised and adopted measure of inflation. Interest rates are set in legislation in reference to the Retail Price Index (RPI) from the previous March and are applied annually on 1 September until 31 August.

The Office for National Statistics has undertaken a substantial programme of work over the past two years to enhance how inflation is measured and this will be carried over into student loans. The Office for Budget Responsibility has confirmed that from 2030 at the earliest, movements in RPI will be aligned with the Consumer Price Index (CPI). Further details are available at:

https://obr.uk/box/the-long-run-difference-between-rpi-and-cpi-inflation/.

Source

Department for Education: Students: Loans

The Rt Hon. the Lord Naseby PC (Conservative): (HL14448) To ask His Majesty's Government what is preventing the implementation of the recommendation set out in the Independent panel report to the Review of Post-18 Education and Funding, published on 30 May 2019, that no student should repay more than 1.2 times their initial loan in real terms.

The Rt Hon. the Baroness Smith of Malvern: Following the review on post-18 education and funding, Plan 5 terms and conditions were introduced for new students in England who started their studies from the academic year 2023/24.

Interest on Plan 5 student loans is charged at the Retail Price Index (RPI) inflation only (currently 3.2%), meaning graduates will not repay more than they borrow in real terms. As an additional borrower protection, interest rates are automatically capped by the prevailing market rate for comparable unsecured personal loans, ensuring borrowers are protected if market conditions change.

It is reasonable to ask those graduates who do benefit financially from higher education to contribute towards the cost of their studies. Borrowers earning below the repayment threshold of £25,000 per year are not required to repay anything. Any outstanding loan including interest built up is cancelled at the end of the loan term with no detriment to the borrower, and debt is never passed on to family members or descendants.

Source

Department for Education: Universities: Freedom of Expression

The Lord Alton of Liverpool (C/B): (HL14406) To ask His Majesty's Government what action they have taken to protect academic freedom and free speech on university campuses.

The Rt Hon. the Baroness Smith of Malvern: This government is absolutely committed to freedom of speech and academic freedom. The department commenced the following provisions, which came into force from 1 August 2025:

- Strengthened higher education (HE) provider duties in relation to securing and promoting the importance of freedom of speech and academic freedom.
- A requirement for HE providers to put in place effective codes of practice on freedom of speech and academic freedom.
- A ban of non-disclosure agreements in HE for staff and students where there is a complaint about bullying, harassment and sexual misconduct.
- A requirement for the Office for Students (OfS) to promote free speech, and enable the OfS to give advice and guidance on it.

The OfS has also issued extensive guidance to HE providers on commencement of their duties.

We are seeking a suitable legislative vehicle to amend and repeal elements of the Higher Education (Freedom of Speech) Act 2023 at the earliest opportunity.

Source

Department for Education: Higher Education and Research: China

The Lord Alton of Liverpool (C/B): (HL14405) To ask His Majesty's Government, in regard to the King's College London report 'The China question': managing risks and maximising benefits from partnership in higher education and research, published in March 2021, what action they have taken to reduce risks to intellectual property, academic freedom and financial stability; and what plans they have to improve management of those risks.

The Rt Hon. the Baroness Smith of Malvern: We must distinguish between allegations of foreign interference and the positive impact that partnership and students from China bring to our higher education (HE) sector, economy and society as a whole.

HE providers are autonomous bodies, independent of government, and we expect the sector to be alert to security risks when collaborating with international partners, ensuring their compliance with relevant legislation and regulations.

Providers must also continue to make the appropriate financial decisions to ensure their long term sustainability, with the Office for Students (OfS) monitoring the risk of over reliance on overseas income at a sector level.

The department commenced strengthened duties on providers and on the OfS in relation to free speech and academic freedom. These duties have been in effect since 1 August 2025, and the Office for Students has also issued extensive guidance to HE providers on what they should do to ensure they effectively protect and promote free speech and academic freedom as per these duties.

The Department for Science, Innovation and Technology provides robust support to the UK's research sector on managing the risks of collaboration, including tailored advice from the Research Collaboration Advice Team, and the National Protective Security Authority and National Cyber Security Centre's ‘Trusted Research' guidance.

Grouped Questions: HL14404

Source

Department for Education: Students: Loans

Liz Jarvis (Liberal Democrats) (Eastleigh): (111894) To ask the Secretary of State for Education, what assessment she has made of the (a) adequacy and (b) clarity of the information provided to prospective students about the terms of Plan 2 student loans at the point of application.

Josh MacAlister: Plan 2 loans were designed and implemented by previous governments. Prospective students had access to a wide range of information across a range of platforms before they submit their loan application.

Student loan terms and conditions make clear that the conditions of the loan may change in line with the regulations that govern the loans. Students sign these terms and conditions before any money is paid to them.

The student finance system is designed to function differently to a commercial loan. Repayments are calculated solely on earnings, not on amount borrowed or the rate of interest applied. Crucially, Plan 2 student loans are cancelled after 30 years, regardless of outstanding balances.

Source

Home Office: Freedom of Expression

Oliver Dowden (Conservative) (Hertsmere): (111720) To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department, what steps her Department is taking to protect free speech.

Sarah Jones: Free speech is a fundamental right and a defining value of our open and diverse society. Our legislation reflects this, enabling individuals to engage in robust debate. However, freedom of speech is a qualified right. It does not extend to language that incites violence, hatred, or criminal behaviour.

In November 2025, the Home Secretary announced an independent review of public order and hate crime legislation, led by Lord Macdonald of River Glaven KC. As part of its work, the Review will assess whether existing police powers remain effective, proportionate and used consistently, including in relation to lawful protest, helping to ensure that the legal framework supports the protection of free speech while maintaining public order.

The Home Secretary has also announced that non-crime hate incidents (NCHIs) are to be replaced in their current form with a more common-sense approach. The review of NCHIs, led by the College of Policing and the NPCC, includes consideration of how to best protect the fundamental right to freedom of expression. A publication of the findings from the College and NPCC is expected in March 2026.

Grouped Questions: 111719

Source

Ministry of Defence: Defence: Higher Education

James McMurdock (Independent) (South Basildon and East Thurrock): (112084) To ask the Secretary of State for Defence, with reference to his Department's press release entitled Student skills investment to boost UK defence industry, published on 5 February 2026, what are the key performance indicators that his Department will use to measure the success of the Defence Universities Alliance.

Luke Pollard: The Defence Universities Alliance was announced as part of the Defence Industrial Strategy in September 2025 to create a strategic network of UK universities who are publicly committed to partnering with the Ministry of Defence (MOD) and the defence industrial sector.

It aims to advance high quality defence research, encourage more skilled graduates to consider careers within the defence sector and strengthen and promote the partnership between the MOD, academia and defence industry. We are in the process of establishing the Alliance and will work with its founding members to establish a baseline and measure its success. Further details will be announced in due course.

Source

Department for Work and Pensions: Employment: Graduates

James McMurdock (Independent) (South Basildon and East Thurrock): (112078) To ask the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions, what proportion of graduates supported by Jobcentre Plus enter roles classified as graduate-level employment.

Diana Johnson: We do not capture data on the number of graduates entering graduate schemes or graduate-level employment. The latest published DfE data shows that the unemployment rate for graduates is lower than non-graduates. A link to this data can be found here.(opens in a new tab)

Grouped Questions: 112076, 112077

Source

Treasury: Student Loans

Shivani Raja (Conservative) (Leicester East): (112435) To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer, what was the evidential basis for the decision to freeze the student loan repayment threshold for graduates; and what assessment he has made of the potential impact of this on graduates' disposable incomes.

James Murray: The fiscal situation this government inherited means we've had to make tough but fair choices, including on student loan repayment threshold freezes.

Student loan borrowers repay a portion of their income (typically 9%) above the repayment threshold. A Plan 2 graduate earning £30,000 will repay only around £4 a month in FY2026–27. The student finance system is heavily subsidised by government, and lower-earning graduates will always be protected, with any outstanding loan and interest cancelled at the end of the repayment term. It is right that those who are able to repay do so.

The Department for Education has published analysis of the impact of the repayment threshold freeze on total repayments here.

Source

Treasury: Student loan repayments

Liz Jarvis (Liberal Democrats) (Eastleigh): (112300) To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer, whether her Department has undertaken analysis of how student loan repayment arrangements affect (1) borrowers' disposable income and (2) their ability to access mortgages.

James Murray: Student loan repayments are taken into account as part of affordability assessments for mortgage applications, but student loans are very different from a mortgage or credit card debt as repayments are determined by income, not the amount borrowed. For example, a Plan 2 graduate earning £30,000 will repay only around £4 a month in FY2026–27.

The most sustainable long-term method to improve housing affordability and help people into homeownership is to increase the supply of housing. This Government has recommitted to delivering 1.5 million homes over this Parliament.

The government is committed to making home ownership more accessible by supporting first-time buyers, and welcomes clarifications from the Financial Conduct Authority (FCA), which should allow customers to borrow around 10% more on the same income.

Source

Department for Education: Students: Loans

Perran Moon (Labour) (Camborne and Redruth): (111508) To ask the Secretary of State for Education, what hardship protections are available to student loan borrowers experiencing financial pressure, and what assessment the Department has made of the potential impact of the absence of interest freezes or repayment relief during such periods.

Josh MacAlister: The student finance system is designed to function differently to a commercial loan. Borrowers are protected if they see a reduction in their income for any reason. Weekly or monthly student loan repayment amounts are based on a borrower's monthly or weekly income, not the interest rate or amount borrowed, and no repayments are made for earnings below the relevant student loan repayment threshold. Any outstanding debt, including interest built up, is cancelled at the end of the loan term with no detriment to the borrower. No commercial loans offer this level of protection.

Source

Department for Education: Higher education financial support

Tanmanjeet Singh Dhesi (Labour) (Slough): (112458) To ask the Secretary of State for Education, what recent assessment has she made of the adequacy of financial support available to university students.

Josh MacAlister: The government needs to ensure that the student funding system is financially sustainable, and funding arrangements are reviewed each year.

We are increasing loans for living costs each year in line with forecast inflation with students from the lowest income families receiving the largest year-on-year cash increases in support. Maximum loans for living costs will increase by 2.71% for the 2026/27 academic year.

We are also reintroducing maintenance grants of up to £1,000 per year for full-time students from low-income households studying courses aligned with the government's missions and Industrial Strategy from the 2028/29 academic year.

The department will also provide extra support for care leavers, some of the most vulnerable in our society, who will automatically become eligible to receive the maximum rates of loans for living costs from the 2026/27 academic year.

Source

Department for Education: Higher education: National security

The Lord Alton of Liverpool (C/B): (HL14403) To ask His Majesty's Government, further to the comment of the universities Minister, Baroness Smith of Malvern, that UK education has become "a prime target for foreign states", whether they will publish the details of the threats posed by foreign states to UK universities, and how individual universities have responded to those threats.

The Rt Hon. the Baroness Smith of Malvern: It is the long-standing policy of successive UK governments not to comment either on individual cases or operational intelligence.

The world-class reputation of our universities makes them a prime target for foreign states and hostile actors, who seek to erode that reputation by promoting, shaping or censoring what universities can offer.

We are working together across government and with universities themselves to defend the UK's thriving academic environment. By working together and sharing information, we will foster the confidence needed to stand strong in the face of foreign pressure.

To tackle this enduring threat, MI5 and cyber security services delivered a rare briefing to over 70 Vice Chancellors. The government is also investing £3 million to bolster existing support and access to expert advice on national security risk management, including a new Academic Interference Reporting Route and new guidance.

Grouped Questions: HL14402

Source

Department for Education: Higher Education: National Security

The Lord Alton of Liverpool (C/B): (HL14407) To ask His Majesty's Government what action they are taking in response to the warning by MI5's director general that hostile states are shaping research and teaching content, including the use of professional networking sites and financial incentives to form relationships with academic staff and students; and whether they plan to introduce a public register of corporate and personal financial interests of universities and staff.

The Rt Hon. the Baroness Smith of Malvern: The government is investing £3 million to bolster existing support for higher education providers and access to expert advice on national security risk management, alongside a new Academic Interference Reporting Route and new guidance.

The Office for Students has already been clear universities should resist any external state threats to academic freedom, and they have extensive powers to require information from providers and investigate any breach.

We keep all our protections under review, working closely with universities to assess existing approaches to managing foreign interference, to ensure that any new requirements are proportionate and add value to existing protections.

Source

Sector news

The financial impact of government policy decisions on universities - UUK

The government has announced a number of policy changes affecting how universities are funded and the costs they face.

UUK's analysis shows that government policy decisions lead to an estimated £3.7 billion reduction in funding to higher education providers in England from 2024-25 to 2029-30.

This assessment includes the annual impact of tuition fee uplifts announced in the government's Post-16 Education and Skills White Paper, along with the continued impact of cuts, tax increases, the international student fee levy, and the ongoing loss of income from recent immigration policies.

Analysis findings

- Taken together, government policies lead to a worsening of universities' aggregate financial position in every year to 2028-29. A small improvement in 2029-30 depends strongly on continued fee uplifts. It is currently unclear how many universities this will affect: from 2028-29, the government has indicated its intention to link fees to judgments on quality, with further detail yet to be announced.
- Within this, we see an estimated £5.5 billion cumulative increase in income over the period from uplifts in domestic tuition fees, compared to counter factual of no fee uplift over the period.
- In practice, uplifts in the tuition fee will keep fee income at the same level in real terms, rather than addressing historical real-terms erosion of the tuition fee.
- These fee increases are offset by an estimated increase in costs of £9 billion from cuts, tax increases, the proposed levy on international student fees, and a reduction in income from international students due to more restrictive immigration policies, over the period to 2029-30.
- Of this, 42% is associated with income lost due to immigration policies, 24% with increased pension and employment costs, and 28% from changes to

government grants and funding for teaching and research that have been announced to date.

- In 2029-30, the international student levy accounts for 20% of the estimated loss of income the sector will face from government policies.

You can read the full analysis.

UKRI CEO updates the research community on areas of uncertainty

Following an open letter of 1 February, Sir Ian Chapman responded to feedback and provides an update:

"I acknowledge that there is anxiety in the research and innovation community around the changes we are enacting at UK Research and Innovation (UKRI) and I am very sorry for that. I am writing to you now in the hope of providing more reassurance.

Thank you to everyone who has contacted us and met with me since my open letter two weeks ago to explain genuine concerns you have about the future. We're taking your feedback on board about how we can better engage with you. I know full well that being a researcher is tough. When you are trying to do things that have never been done before, many things you try won't work at first. That means that researchers and entrepreneurs have to endure plenty of defeat and disappointment, and you need great resilience to persevere in the face of that adversity. Uncertainty about funding is an unhelpful overlay when already faced with great challenges.

With that in mind, I recognise we have been running at pace and we need to engage with you more concertedly. In December, we outlined the high-level distribution of our budgets, but the detailed programmes beneath can only now be developed.

Having heard from many of you over the last couple of weeks, I think it's right we take more time to engage. To that end, we commit to consulting widely over the next few months about precisely how we implement these new programmes. I also commit that in the future, UKRI will be much clearer about the pipeline of opportunities coming.

More detail will come about that, but for now, I wanted to make three other things clear.

Firstly, our approach to applicant-led research, what essentially used to be called ‘responsive mode' grants, is not changing. Within curiosity-driven research we will continue to support the breadth of ideas that we always have.

Moreover, budget allocations for applicant led research will grow over the Spending Review (SR) period. In the current financial year, we allocated £737 million to our responsive-mode grants. Meanwhile for the next four years, our total UKRI applicant-led budget will be:

- £815 million in financial year 2026 to 2027
- £821 million in financial year 2027 to 2028
- £836 million in financial year 2028 to 2029
- £866 million in financial year 2029 to 2030

Curiosity-driven research is protected overall, both in scale and in scope, and this is something that is really important to us. That said, we are absolutely keen to ensure that we use this budget in the best way, so we commit to listening to your ideas about how we use this protected budget.

The second point concerns specific instances where funding opportunities have been temporarily paused. All of them are only short pauses that we occasionally undertake.

More specifically:

- within the Biotechnology and Biological Sciences Research Council, we are moving to an ‘always open' applicant-led system to make applying easier, but had to enact a short pause while we made the necessary behind the scenes changes
- within the Medical Research Council, a pause in applicant-led mode until early summer means that applicants will have visibility of funding opportunities that will come from Bucket Two rather than applying without the full picture
- finally in the Engineering and Physical Sciences Research Council, we paused the Prosperity Partnership funding opportunity for a few weeks, so that cross-UKRI input is included to broaden the scope to other industrial strategy areas

At other councils, funding opportunities continue as before, with new funding opportunities opening regularly. We have a record settlement to invest in research this year, and the academic community should soon see significant activity across the board.

Finally, I would like to acknowledge that we do have cost pressures to address specifically across the Science and Technology Facilities Council's (STFC) portfolio, but also to be clear that this situation is unique among UKRI's councils. We have identified the scale of cost reductions that we need to target and are presently in the process of soliciting input on the implications of a series of possible actions to reduce costs before any decisions are taken later in the year.

The majority of STFC cost savings across the SR period will be borne by UKRI internally, putting more pressure on our internal delivery portfolio, operational efficiency and revenue generation, to protect the wider community as much as possible. However, it is important for all of our research and innovation programmes that having anticipated a cost pressure, we must take the necessary steps to deal with it. As we do this, we commit to taking the time to consult widely with the community, naturally including our various advisory bodies and technical experts, before we make any decisions.

As I said at the start, we know that more engagement and information about future opportunities is needed, and we expect to be able to say more soon. Going forwards, UKRI will be sharing a regular forward-looking planner outlining expected funding opportunities on a quarterly basis. My team is progressing this at pace, and we'll share more with you as soon as it's ready.

In the meantime, please keep sharing your suggestions and concerns with me and my team, either through your usual contacts or directly to me at ceo@ukri.org"

Reform UK unveils members of shadow cabinet as party prepares for government

On 17 February, Reform UK has unveiled its first members of the Shadow Cabinet.

Reform UK Shadow Cabinet Announcements:

- Shadow Chancellor - Robert Jenrick MP
- Shadow Home Secretary (with Justice) - Zia Yusuf
- Shadow Business, Trade and Energy Secretary - Richard Tice MP
- Shadow Education Secretary - Suella Braverman MP

UKRI simplify research translation and commercialisation funding

UK Research and Innovation (UKRI) is streamlining its research translation and commercialisation funding opportunities to make it clearer and more consistent.

This update affects only the naming of UKRI funding opportunities and not existing remits, funding modes and processes.

UKRI translation and commercialisation funding opportunities have begun to adopt one of four harmonised titles.

New nomenclature:

UKRI Translation: Prosperity Partnership

Funding opportunities that support or enable collaborative R&D between researchers and external partners to develop, deliver, adopt and commercialise transformative technologies, products, processes and services.

UKRI Translation: Impact Acceleration

Funding opportunities to unlock impact and value from research through engagement, knowledge exchange, exploratory translation and early commercialisation activities.

UKRI Translation: Proof of Concept

Funding opportunities that advance the development of new or improved products, processes, services and technologies by increasing technical or commercial readiness, including through other knowledge exchange and translation activities.

UKRI Translation: Entrepreneurship

Funding opportunities to support and build the expertise and confidence researchers need to translate and commercialise their research into market-ready solutions.

Transparent, user-friendly and future-proof

This new nomenclature forms part of UKRI's work to create a more transparent, user-friendly and future-proof funding ecosystem.

Proof of Concept funding opportunity

As part of this harmonised funding landscape, UKRI has today pre-announced the next round of its discipline-agnostic Proof of Concept (PoC) funding opportunity.

This is a pre-announcement only.

The full funding opportunity will be available on the UKRI funding finder from 4 March 2026.

This PoC funding provides targeted support for academic researchers to accelerate the translation of existing research into new products, services, processes or spinout companies including social ventures.

Critical early-stage support

Working across all disciplines, this proof-of-concept funding from UKRI will provide critical early-stage support to academic commercialisation projects.

Designed to enhance the readiness of new products and services developed through research, the initiative will help set the stage for successful commercial launches.

It will help researchers bridge the gap between the development of a new concept for new products, processes and services and up to the next stage of the commercialisation journey.

This might include licencing or setting up a new venture, before attracting private investment.

In turn, this will help incubate the most promising opportunities for commercialisation within the academic environment.

The importance of Proof of Concept

Proof of Concept funding is critical to reducing the risks associated with premature venture creation or attempts to commercialise through other routes without sufficient evidence of efficacy and market need.

It will help foster innovations that have the potential to significantly improve societal wellbeing and economic outcomes, supporting the translation of ground-breaking research into solutions that enhance lives and communities.

Tony Hickson's report on strengthening university-investor links, published earlier this month recommends an increase in proof of concept and pre-seed funding. This discipline-agnostic PoC programme, the recently opened Arts and Humanities Research Council (AHRC) PoC programme and support including the Higher Education Innovation Fund, in part addresses this recommendation.

You can read the full announcement.

Bold bet on AI to keep UK at forefront of science and research breakthroughs from healthcare to better public services

The **Department for Science, Innovation and Technology** and **UK Research and Innovation (UKRI)**, has launched the first-ever **AI Strategy** for UKRI. This is framed as a significant investment in artificial intelligence aimed at ensuring the UK remains competitive in global science and research. The strategy is positioned around translating AI research into real-world benefits in areas such as healthcare, energy, public services and economic growth. It reflects both long-standing strengths in computing and a response to recent global momentum on AI investment and adoption.

Under this strategic framework UKRI will direct **£1.6 billion of funding targeted at AI between now and 2030** — its largest single area of investment for the period. This funding builds on recent spending review commitments and is complemented by other AI research funding embedded across the wider UKRI budget. The strategy also sets out priorities for skills, infrastructure, responsible AI and sector-specific missions.

The government describes this strategy as an opportunity to harness the UK's research excellence and longstanding heritage in computing to create scientific breakthroughs that have clear societal impact. It includes commitments on talent development, better research tools and infrastructure, and closer integration between academia, industry and government.

Key announcements and commitments from the strategy include:

- UKRI's **£1.6 billion targeted investment** in AI research and innovation through to 2030, marked as the largest focused investment area for the organisation.
- A strategic framework with **six priority areas**: advancing core AI technology, transforming research with AI, building AI skills and talent pathways, accelerating innovation for societal benefit, championing responsible and trustworthy AI, and strengthening world-class data and compute infrastructure.
- Support for AI-enabled scientific discovery, including **up to £137 million under DSIT's AI for Science initiative**, with early focus on drug discovery and new treatments.

- **£36 million funding to upgrade the University of Cambridge's DAWN supercomputer** to support research in healthcare, environment and other domains reliant on high-performance computing.
- Expanded doctoral and fellowship opportunities in AI research, co-designed with industry, and recognition of research software engineers, data scientists and ethics specialists as critical for future innovation.
- A focus on ensuring AI research delivers **practical societal benefits** — such as earlier detection of diseases like Alzheimer's through AI-driven imaging tools, improving public services, and supporting economic growth across regions.

The announcement was framed to coincide with an international AI summit (the AI Impact Summit) where government ministers, including Deputy Prime Minister David Lammy, highlighted the role of this funding and strategy in sustaining the UK's AI leadership.

UUK's response to the international student levy technical consultation

UUK has responded to the Department for Education's (DfE) consultation on the technical detail of the International Student Levy.

UUK has engaged with expert representatives across the sector, and encourage government to take note of the responses of organisations such as BUFDG, HESPA, BUILA and other sector bodies, whose policy and technical expertise in the areas of institutional finance, strategic planning and data, and international recruitment will provide further valuable insights.

Background

The details of the International Student Levy were set out at the Autumn Budget. This consultation seeks views on the technical design of the levy, including:

- clarity on the providers and students in scope
- potential impacts on provider and student behaviour due to its design
- administration including calculation of students, timing and payment of the levy

Summary of UUK's response

The government intends the international student levy to fund the introduction of maintenance grants in academic year 2028/29. UUK welcomes the government's commitment to introduce maintenance grants, which we have called for over many years to support some of the most disadvantaged students to succeed. However, funding maintenance grants through an international student levy risks exacerbating existing financial vulnerabilities in the sector at a time when universities face the cumulative effect of other financial sustainability challenges.

Given these risks to universities, and consequently their ability to deliver on key priorities for government and their wider communities, government must take the time to get its design and implementation of the international student levy right so that risks are mitigated.

UUK calls for a delay to the introduction of the levy until the government has:

- Committed to an impact assessment of the levy including how price elasticity will affect international student demand and the subsequent impact on universities.
- Confirmed it will invest excess levy funds on supporting students in higher education.
- Legislated for the annual automatic domestic tuition fee uplift.

In implementing the levy, UUK recommends that the government:

- Assess the evidence by committing to regular reviews of the levy and the take up of grants.
- Mitigate financial risk by increasing the levy-free allowance from 220 to 500 students and reducing the levy for institutions with over 20% of students from free school meals (FSM) backgrounds.
- Legislate for sunset clause so that the levy does not become a permanent feature in a changeable market.
- Exempt students from the levy whose participation:
    - Directly supports UK Government policy objectives, including international mobility, research and partnership schemes.
    - Generates limited or no tuition fee income for institutions.
    - Conflicts with the levy policy intent.
- Resolve a technically complex process including:

- Providing clarity and further consultation on data collection methods, future-proof the levy to adapt to future changes.
- More appropriately aligning payment with institutional cashflow.
- In addition, The Office for Students (OfS) must provide further information on how it will ensure transparent and robust data verification processes that mitigate the risk of errors and double counting students that attract the levy.

You can read the full response.

Postgraduate research experience up to highest level of satisfaction in more than 10 years

Levels of satisfaction with the PGR experience across participating institutions are the highest reported in over a decade.

Postgraduate research students across the UK and Australia are reporting their highest levels of satisfaction in more than 10 years, according to the Advance HE 2025 Postgraduate Research Experience Survey (PRES).

More than 35,000 postgraduate researchers (PGRs) took part in the annual survey representing 93 institutions, including four in Australia.

Key findings:

- Overall satisfaction among PGRs has risen to **83%**, continuing a clear upward trend over the past five years and marking the highest score since 2011.
- **Nearly two thirds** of PGRs **(65%)** say they feel a sense of belonging at their institution – a slight uplift since the question was introduced in 2023. Sense of belonging shows the strongest link to overall student satisfaction. **-thirds**
- Ratings of supervision (**89%** and increasing) and resources are very high.
- Some progress has been made on research culture with **more than six in 10** (**63%)** saying they are satisfied. However, this remains one of the lower performing areas in the survey.
- An **11-point gap** in overall satisfaction persists between PGRs who report a disability and those who do not, with satisfaction among disabled respondents at **74%**. In addition, **less than half** of disabled PGRs (**46%**) agreed that their institution provides the reasonable adjustments they need.

- PGRs remain particularly concerned about cost-of-living challenges impacting on their studies, an issue that is particularly pertinent among those who came to the UK from abroad.

You can read the full results.

Liverpool City Region and Oxford to create innovation super-power to tackle global challenges

The University of Liverpool, the University of Oxford, Oxfordshire County Council and the Liverpool City Region Combined Authority (LCRCA) signed a landmark agreement, forging a powerful new partnership designed to fast-track UK innovation and address some of the world's biggest challenges.

The Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) lays the foundations for a major new programme to help drive UK economic growth by bringing together the Liverpool City Region - with its world-leading innovation strengths and highly developed industry-academic collaborations - and Oxford - one of the world's premier academic powerhouses.

The agreement will link breakthrough research, venture creation and scale-up capability, helping more firms to grow, commercialise and stay rooted in the UK, as well as attracting foreign direct investment (FDI).

It will also maximise collaboration between the UK's two primary national research and innovation campuses, both operated by the Science & Technology Facilities Council (STFC).

STFC Daresbury Laboratory in the Liverpool City Region is home to the Hartree Centre with the UK's most powerful supercomputer dedicated to solving industrial problems, while STFC Harwell, near Oxford, is home to the Diamond Light Source - the UK's national synchrotron.

The unique partnership underpins Mayor Steve Rotheram's ambition to more than double investment in Research and Development (R&D) by 2030 to £2bn a year, which if achieved could create an additional 40,000 jobs.

The MoU was signed at the University of Oxford's Schwarzman Centre for the Humanities by Professor Tim Jones, Vice-Chancellor of the University of Liverpool; Professor Irene Tracey, Vice-Chancellor of the University of Oxford; Mayor of the Liverpool City Region Steve Rotheram; and Councillor Liz Leffman, Leader of Oxfordshire County Council.

Celebrating a strong record of collaboration, leaders highlighted the national opportunity to deepen joint work on global challenges — from climate resilience to health innovation — with shared strengths in chemistry and materials science, vaccine development, infection prevention and control, neurosciences and women's health.

The partnership will also unlock new work across the heritage, creative and social science sectors, and accelerate entrepreneurship through shared programmes, events, and student and academic-led venture creation.

By connecting the complementary strengths of Oxfordshire and the Liverpool City Region, the agreement aims to create a seamless new inter-regional innovation ecosystem capable of attracting investment, generating high-value jobs and securing UK leadership in globally competitive industries.

You can read the full announcement.