



All-Party Parliamentary University Group

Weekly update

17 – 21 February 2025

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

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Parliamentary business

February recess

On Thursday 13 February, the House of Commons and House of Lords both rose for February recess. Both houses will return on Monday 24 February.

You can [read more about recess dates](#).

Forthcoming business

The draft Higher Education (Fee Limits and Fee Limit Condition) (England) (Amendment) Regulations 2025 – HoL First Delegated Legislation Committee debate

On Monday 24 February from 6:00pm, the First Delegated Legislation Committee will debate the draft Higher Education (Fee Limits and Fee Limit Condition) (England) (Amendment) Regulations 2025 in the House of Lords.

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

Institute for Apprenticeships and Technical Education (Transfer of Functions etc) Bill [Lords] – HoC second reading

On Tuesday 25 February, the Institute for Apprenticeships and Technical Education (Transfer of Functions etc) Bill [Lords] will have its second reading in the House of Commons.

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

Government support for future skills programmes at universities – WH debate

On Wednesday 26 February from 4:00pm, there will be a Westminster Hall debate on government support for future skills programmes at universities. This debate was tabled by Ed Davey MP (Liberal Democrat).

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

Support for drama schools and other creative courses in higher education – HoL oral question

On Wednesday 26 February, there will be an oral question in the House of Lords on support for drama schools and other creative courses in higher education. This question was tabled by The Earl of Clancarty (Crossbench).

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

Written questions and statements

Overseas Students

Rupert Lowe MP (Reform UK): To ask the Secretary of State for Education, if she will make an assessment of the potential merits of introducing a cap on the number of international students. [UIN 27484]

Minister for Children and Families, Janet Daby MP: The government is committed to a United Kingdom that is outward looking and welcomes international students, who make a positive contribution to the UK's higher education sector, our economy and society as a whole. Universities in England receive an estimated £12.1bn annually in tuition fee income from international students, which supports provision of places for domestic students and research and development.

Universities and other higher education providers are autonomous bodies which are independent of government. As such, they are responsible for their own admissions decisions in relation to domestic and international students.

The department is reviewing the International Education Strategy to ensure that it increases the value of education exports and reflects the priorities of education organisations and businesses. This review will also consider the department's ambition on international student numbers.

The government remains committed to managing migration carefully, which is why my right hon. Friend, the Prime Minister announced in November 2024 that we will publish a White Paper on reducing migration this year.

Overseas Students: Fees and Charges

Rupert Lowe MP (Reform UK): To ask the Secretary of State for Education, if she will make an assessment of the potential merits of a study of the impact of the dependency of universities on international students on the level of fees paid by such students. [UIN 27714]

Minister for Children and Families, Janet Daby MP: The government remains committed to a United Kingdom that is outward looking and welcomes international students who make a positive contribution to the UK's higher education (HE) sector, our economy and society as a whole.

The Office for Students (OfS) is the independent regulator of English HE providers. As such, it is responsible for monitoring the financial sustainability of the sector. The department works closely with the OfS to understand the impact of the sector's changing financial landscape. In its most recent report on the financial health of the HE sector (published November 2024), the OfS assessed the risks to provider financial sustainability and overreliance on recruitment of students from particular countries was noted as a particular concern. The report models the impacts of various scenarios on provider finances, including in relation to levels of international student recruitment.

The OfS emphasised that the HE sector should be cautious of depending too much on international student fee income in their recruitment forecasts and urged institutions to have strong contingency plans to mitigate the financial risks of over-recruiting from a single country.

All providers must continue to adapt to uncertainties and financial risks. As autonomous bodies independent of government, it is for providers to decide on effective business models and to how to manage their finances. The department will continue to work closely with the OfS in order to understand the ongoing impacts and changing landscape of financial sustainability in the sector.

Students: Finance

Adam Thompson MP (Labour): To ask the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions, what assessment she has made of the adequacy of the financial support available through Universal Credit for students in full-time higher education with dependents. [UIN 29654]

Minister for Social Security and Disability, Stephen Timms MP: Whilst students are not normally entitled to Universal Credit (UC), if they are responsible for a child, either as a single person or as a couple there is an exception. Depending on their circumstances, they may also be eligible for additional Universal Credit elements, including for children.

Special Support Loans or Grants may be awarded to lone parent students who are in receipt of benefits, this is disregarded in calculations for UC. Where a student receives a grant only, some of the income may be disregarded over and above the £110 limit in each assessment period if the payment is for childcare costs.

Postgraduate Education

Rosena Allin-Khan MP (Labour): To ask the Secretary of State for Education, what steps she is taking to widen access to postgraduate education. [UIN 27220]

Minister for Children and Families, Janet Daby MP: The department will act to address the persistent gaps for different student groups and to break down the barriers to opportunity.

The government introduced postgraduate loans which, alongside other sources of funding, are a contribution to the cost of postgraduate level study to stimulate take-up.

Decisions on student finance have had to be taken to ensure the system remains financially sustainable and that the costs of higher education (HE) are shared fairly between students and taxpayers, not all of whom have benefited from going to university.

The department will set out this government's longer term plan for HE reform by summer 2025.

From 1 October 2025, UK Research and Innovation (UKRI) is increasing the minimum stipend they pay to PhD students by 8% to £20,780. This is the largest real terms increase in the stipend for UKRI funded students since 2003.

Skills England will reset the government's approach to skills in England, making sure skills are prioritised in government decision making. Shadow Skills England is currently bringing together up-to-date analysis and engagement with key partners to identify and fill skills gaps at all levels of education, including at postgraduate level, particularly for under-represented groups, with the aim of breaking down the barriers to opportunity and driving growth.

Higher Education: Disadvantaged

Scott Arthur MP (Labour): To ask the Secretary of State for Education, what steps she is taking to widen access to higher education by underrepresented groups. [UIN 29385]

Minister for Children and Families, Janet Daby MP: Education is a devolved matter, and the response outlines the information for England only.

Access to higher education (HE) should be based on ability, not someone's background. Opportunity should be available to all, and it is the department's aspiration that no one is left behind.

The department wants to close the gap in entries for disadvantaged students, by ensuring there are quality options which are flexible to their needs, with sound advice and fair and transparent admission processes.

The department is continuing with and delivering the Lifelong Learning Entitlement to provide high quality, flexible and modular education, with the new student finance system underpinning and facilitating fuller access and flexible study. From September 2026, learners will be able to apply for Lifelong Learning Entitlement funding for the first time for courses and modules starting from January 2027 onwards.

The government continues to provide means-tested non-repayable grants to low income full-time undergraduate students with children and/or adults who are financially dependent on them. The department has announced an increase to maximum dependants' grants for the 2025/26 academic year by 3.1%, based on forecast inflation using the RPIX (Retail Price Index Excluding Mortgage Interest) inflation index. We have also increased maximum non-means-tested disabled students' allowance for full-time and part-time undergraduate and postgraduate students with disabilities by 3.1% for 2025/26.

Students undertaking nursing, midwifery and allied health profession courses also qualify for non-repayable grant support through the NHS Learning Support Fund.

Additionally, the department is increasing maximum loans for living costs for the 2025/26 academic year by 3.1% to ensure that more support is targeted at students from the lowest income families. Higher rates of loan for living costs are also paid to students eligible for benefits, such as lone parents and some disabled students, as well as care leavers, who are normally assessed as low income independent students. In addition, care leavers are also entitled to a £2000 statutory bursary, paid via their local authority.

The government also provides financial support through the Office for Students (OfS) to support student access and success, including for disadvantaged students. £301 million was provided for the 2024/25 academic year.

The department recognises that there is still much more to do to expand access and improve outcomes for disadvantaged students. Too many people across our country do not get the opportunity to succeed. We will act to change this. We are calling for providers to go further and play a stronger role in expanding access and improving outcomes for disadvantaged students, making sure that they are delivering robust

and ambitious access and participation plans. By summer, we will set out our plan for HE reform and the part we expect HE providers to play in this.

Universities: Employers' Contributions

Ben Obese-Jecty MP (Conservative): To ask the Secretary of State for Education, what discussions she has had with universities on the potential impact of the rise of employer national insurance contributions on projects they fund or sponsor; stratified by individual university since July 2024. [UIN 29593]

Minister for Children and Families, Janet Daby MP: As my right hon. Friend, the Chancellor of the Exchequer, set out in the Autumn Budget 2024, raising the revenue required to fund public services and restore economic stability requires difficult decisions on tax, which is why this government is asking employers to contribute more. We strongly believe that this is the fairest choice to help fund the NHS and wider national priorities.

Higher education providers are independent of government and as such are responsible for managing their own budgets and business models. All providers must continue to adapt to uncertainties and financial risks.

This government is committed to creating a secure future for our world-leading higher education sector. The Office for Students' (OfS) refocusing on financial sustainability and the difficult decision we made to increase tuition fees demonstrate this ambition. We will set out a long-term plan for sector reform this summer.

The department continues to work closely with the OfS in order to understand the ongoing impacts and changing landscape of financial sustainability in the sector.

Disabled Students' Allowances: Assistive Technology

Joshua Fenton-Glynn MP (Labour): To ask the Secretary of State for Education, if she will take steps to launch a consultation on (a) reducing the availability of Disabled Students Allowance assistive technology packages and products and (b) removing the needs assessment element of applications for Disabled Students Allowance. [UIN 29665]

Minister for Children and Families, Janet Daby MP: The department is not intending to launch a consultation on reducing the availability of assistive technology support packages and products provided through Disabled Students' Allowance or the removal of the needs assessment element of applications.

The department has not announced any changes to these areas of the Disabled Students' Allowance.

Students: Loans

Rachel Blake MP (Labour): To ask the Secretary of State for Education, what assessment her Department has made of the adequacy of the maintenance loans system for meeting students' cost of living needs. [UIN 29178]

Minister for Children and Families, Janet Daby MP: The government has published an Equality Impact Assessment of changes to fees and student support on groups with protected characteristics for the 2025/26 academic year, which is available here: https://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukia/2025/14/pdfs/ukia_20250014_en.pdf.

The government recognises the impact that the cost-of-living crisis has had on students. However, we need to ensure that the student funding system is financially sustainable. Maximum loans and grants for living and other costs for the 2025/26 academic year will be increased by forecast inflation, which is 3.1% based on the RPIX inflation index (Retail Price Index excluding mortgage interest), with the most support paid to students from the lowest income backgrounds.

Academic Freedom

Richard Holden MP (Conservative): To ask the Secretary of State for Education, what recourse (a) academics and (b) other people will have who believe that they have had their free speech curtailed, in the context of her proposals for the implementation of the Higher Education (Freedom of Speech) Act 2023; and when that recourse will be available. [UIN 29557]

Minister for Children and Families, Janet Daby MP: For academics, staff, and external speakers, the amended Office for Students' (OfS) complaints scheme will be a route of redress through which staff, external speakers and members who believe higher education (HE) providers have breached their duties will be able to raise a complaint. It will be free at the point of use. The amendments to the provisions in the Higher Education (Freedom of Speech) Act complaints scheme will require primary legislation, and my right hon. Friend, the Secretary of State for Education will be seeking a legislative vehicle through which to return this to Parliament at the earliest opportunity. In the meantime, the HE sector will have new duties in place, as well as requirements to promote freedom of speech and put in place a code of practice in line with the Act.

Student complaints on freedom of speech will continue to be handled by the Office of the Independent Adjudicator (OIA), who already has powers to consider these complaints, and whose service is free at the point of use. The OIA is well-established and recognised by students, and already considers free speech complaints.

Existing routes of redress through judicial review and employment tribunals will also continue to exist.

We will set out the government's policy intentions on this and other policy issues in more detail as part of our policy paper, which will be published shortly.

Higher Education: Finance

Ian Sollom MP (Liberal Democrats): To ask the Secretary of State for Education, what steps her Department is taking to protect the financial viability of English universities, in the context of falling numbers of international students applying for Higher Education in England. [UIN 26979; Grouped Questions: 26977, 26978]

Minister for Children and Families, Janet Daby MP: The department acknowledges the challenging financial environment faced by the higher education (HE) sector. The Office for Students' (OfS) latest report on the HE sector's financial health, which was published in November, stated that the sector's financial context has become more challenging since its previous report in May. Their analysis suggests that up to 72% of providers could face deficit and up to 40% may have low liquidity if they do not take significant mitigating actions.

The report also found that international recruitment is significantly below the sector's previous expectations. This government has taken a different stand on international students, and we have spoken clearly about it. In my right hon. Friend, the Secretary of State for Education's first speech in July 2024, and the subsequent video messages addressed to international students, she set out that we welcome international students who make a positive impact on the UK's HE sector and our economy and society as a whole. That is why international students are offered the opportunity to remain in the UK, and contribute to the society and economy, on a graduate visa for two or three years after their studies come to an end.

Nevertheless, all providers must continue to adapt to uncertainties and financial risks. As autonomous bodies independent of government, it is for providers to decide on effective business models and to how to manage their finances. However, the department is determined to secure the future of our world leading HE sector. That is why we have taken decisive action to support the sector in moving towards a more stable financial footing.

Sir David Behan has been appointed interim Chair of the OfS to oversee the important work of refocusing their role to concentrate on key priorities, including the HE sector's financial stability. In December, the OfS announced temporary changes to its operations to allow greater focus on financial sustainability. The OfS will work more closely with providers under significant financial pressure in order to protect students' interests.

Moreover, the government has made the difficult decision to increase tuition fee limits in line with forecast inflation. The maximum fee for a standard full-time undergraduate course in the 2025/26 academic year will increase by 3.1%, from £9,250 to £9,535. The department will set out a long term plan for sector reform this summer.

The department will continue to work closely with the OfS in order to understand the ongoing impacts and changing landscape of financial sustainability in the sector.

Students: Loans

Lord Mackinlay of Richborough (Conservative): To ask His Majesty's Government, in respect of the Student Loan Company's loan book of pre-Brexit qualifying loans to EU, EEA and EFTA students, of those loans, how many and to what total value (1) have been permanently written off; and (2) are currently deemed non-performing. [UIN HL4704]

Minister for Skills, Baroness Smith of Malvern: EU students are required to repay their UK government student loans on the same terms as UK citizens, whether resident in the UK or overseas.

In respect of EU, European Economic Area (EEA) and European Free Trade Association students with pre-Brexit qualifying loans that have been permanently written off, the total count of students is 21,914. The vast majority of the 21,914 total count of write-offs can be attributed to automated trivial balance write-offs. Trivial balance write-offs occur if there is a positive or negative balance on an account of £25 or less and no contact can be established with the borrower. The total amount written off is £3,929,619.45. As repayments are income contingent, neither the department nor the Office of National Statistics have a recognised definition for a 'non-performing' student loan.

This data has been supplied by the Student Loans Company. The data is for EU and EEA domiciled borrowers eligible for tuition fee support only. The data includes student loan accounts for the 2020/21 academic year and earlier. EU, other EEA and Swiss nationals stopped being eligible for UK student loans for courses starting in the 2021/22 academic year.

Academic Freedom

Peter Bedford MP (Conservative): To ask the Secretary of State for Education, what assessment she has made of the adequacy of free speech provisions in higher-education. [UIN 30900]

Minister for Children and Families, Janet Daby MP: My right hon. Friend, the Secretary of State for Education, confirmed to Parliament on 15 January the government's plans for future of the Higher Education (Freedom of Speech) Act 2023, which will create a more proportionate, balanced and less burdensome approach to protecting academic freedom and freedom of speech.

While reviewing the Act, prior to the announcement, departmental officials and my noble Friend, the Minister for Skills, conducted a period of stakeholder engagement on the future of the Act with over 60 individuals, discussing freedom of speech policies, practices and challenges within higher education (HE). Amongst the individuals they met were academics with concerns about constraints on freedom of speech, sector representative groups like Universities UK and Guild HE, and mission groups such as the Russell Group, University Alliance and Independent HE, vice-chancellors, university administrators, unions and representatives of minority groups. This engagement informed decisions on the future of the Act.

Higher Education: Franchises

Ben Spencer MP (Conservative): To ask the Secretary of State for Education, if she will make an assessment of the adequacy of the accessibility to people who are digitally excluded of the consultation on Franchising in higher education. [UIN 29638]

Minister for Children and Families, Janet Daby MP: The department's consultation on franchising in higher education (HE) offers different alternatives to respond in order to meet the range of accessibility needs.

There is an option to respond via post by using a printed copy of the consultation document, for those who cannot respond online. A print-ready copy of the consultation document is also available to download on GOV.UK at: <https://www.gov.uk/government/consultations/franchising-in-higher-education>.

The consultation document also sets out that if anyone is having any difficulty responding online, they can contact the department using the contact details provided in the consultation document to request assistance or an alternative option to respond.

Sector news

Studying and staying: public attitudes towards international students – British Future report

On Sunday 16 February, British Future published a report that found the public recognises the importance of international students in helping to fund UK universities and supporting the national and local economies.

Key findings include:

- Six in ten Britons (61%) would prefer current levels of international student migration to stay the same or increase, while only 27% support reducing or stopping it.
- Six in ten (59%) recognise that international students bring money to local areas.
- Around half of survey respondents (49%) agreed that international students positively contribute to the UK economy, while only 12% thought that they make a negative contribution.

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

Submission to the Spending Review 2025 – Russell Group submission

On Monday 17 February, the Russell Group published its submission to the Comprehensive Spending Review.

The Russell Group is calling on government to:

- Boost UK R&D-intensity to become a G7 leader and support innovation-led growth.
- Secure a long-term funding landscape that supports universities to deliver a pipeline of skills.
- Harness research-intensive universities' global prestige and partnerships to boost UK foreign direct investment (FDI) and exports.

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

Our response to the Office for Students ‘Consultation OfS strategy for 2025 to 2030’ – UUK consultation response

On Monday 17 February, Universities UK published its response to the Office for Students ‘Consultation OfS strategy for 2025 to 2030’.

Financial sustainability

- We support the OfS’s decision to place financial sustainability and sector resilience as central to its work over the next few years. This needs to be reflected in the detail of the strategy – the OfS needs to prioritise its work, be reasonable in its expectations, and minimise any additional regulatory costs. This includes consideration of what the OfS could reasonably stop doing or deprioritise, and consideration of where OfS can work with the sector to share good practice in areas that sit beyond its primary role.

Students and opportunity

- Placing students more firmly at the heart of the strategy is a welcome development, but the broadly-framed ‘wider student interest’ risks evolving over time which could lead to a steady expansion of regulatory burden.
- We agree that equality of opportunity should run through everything the regulator does, but our view is that equality of opportunity should be included as a lead priority.

Regulatory burden

- We are concerned that regulatory burden is not more prominent in the strategy, and we maintain that new regulatory powers and requirements should only be introduced where the public benefits are clear, and costs justified. We recommend the OfS adopts a transparent consultative cost-benefit methodology to review current and proposed regulation. We welcome OfS’s commitment to reducing reliance on formal regulatory levers and working with the sector and relevant networks to share good practice in areas which may sit beyond its primary role, but the starting point must be the work already happening across the sector.

Building trust

- If the strategy is to be successful, the OfS cannot dial back on the work it has been doing to build trust. This is particularly important if seeking to engage more with providers on their financial health. We would like to see this being more prominent in the strategy.

Quality and guidelines

- We welcome the opportunity to revisit current quality arrangements and develop an integrated approach to quality with an increased focus on qualitative assessments of on-course experience and enhancement. We are committed to engaging constructively with the OfS and our members throughout 2025 to work towards this shared agenda. In particular, the suggestion to create a Quality Risk Register needs much greater elaboration and consideration.
- We strongly support the explicit commitment to consider realignment with the European Standards and Guidelines (ESG) for quality assessment.

Risks and progress

- The OfS's need for up-to-date financial data is valid in the context of its latest analysis of the sector's financial health. However, this must be balanced against a provider's financial risk profile and be done in a way that minimises additional burden. We are supportive of the OfS's intention to address contingency planning for market exit and work with providers to ensure any plans that need to be developed are credible and deliverable, recognising the serious and far-reaching impact that any disorderly exit would have.
- The combination of objectives, goals, activities, and '1 statements' makes it unclear how the OfS will measure progress on its strategy. Including a strategic objective focused on the OfS as an organisation may be one way in which this can be addressed by increasing the focus on how the strategy will be delivered and monitored.
- Given that further announcements from government on higher education funding and reform are expected this year and there are aspects of the strategy which remain subject to legislative changes, we recommend the OfS considers their new strategy as interim and in the meantime focuses on areas where the regulatory powers already exist.

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

GuildHE response to consultation on OfS strategy for 2025 – 2030 – GuildHE consultation response

On Wednesday 19 February, GuildHE published its response to the Office for Students 'Consultation OfS strategy for 2025 to 2030'.

Key points covered in their response include:

- GuildHE broadly supports the OfS's proposed strategic focus but raises crucial questions about its implementation.

- GuildHE agrees that quality processes should be reformed to ensure a more flexible and transparent approach that recognises the diverse aspirations and missions of different institutions.
- GuildHE broadly supports student-focused objectives but emphasises that students should be seen as active collaborators and partners rather than just consumers.
- A mid-term review of the strategy is needed, given the significant changes within the sector GuildHE expects to see.
- GuildHE fully supports the OfS's commitment to enhancing relationships within the sector.

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

British Academy & Skills England Roundtable: Building a roadmap for AI skills policies in the UK – British Academy summary

On Thursday 20 February, British Academy published a summary of their roundtable co-hosted with Skills England, focusing on the skills policies the UK could pursue in response to the adoption and diffusion of AI technologies across the economy.

The discussion covered three broad topics:

1. Lessons and evidence from historical parallels involving changes in technology and the emergence of related skills; reflecting on insights that might be drawn from looking to historical instances of technological change and related impacts on skills in society.
2. Future societal and policy challenges, both existing or emerging: reflecting on the challenges for AI skills policy given societal trends such as demographic changes, the pace of innovation, the need to meet sustainability goals, the need to ensure diversity and equity of access to work, and the coordination of skills strategy across sectors.
3. How to map the implementation of AI, including AI skills and the impacts of AI across the UK skills landscape, and ensure a route towards beneficial AI skills policies.

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

Student mental health in 2024: How the situation is changing for LGBTQ+ students – TASO report

On Thursday 20 February, Transforming Access and Student Outcomes in Higher Education (TASO) published a report examining student mental health in the UK in 2024, with a particular focus on LGBTQ+ students.

Key findings include:

- Bisexual students have the highest rate of mental health difficulties (30%) followed by lesbian students (29%).
- Female and state-educated students are disproportionately affected, with women twice as likely to report mental health difficulties compared to male students.
- Reports of mental health difficulties have nearly tripled since 2017, with 18% of students now reporting challenges, equating to approximately 300,000 UK undergraduates.

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

Research Staff Manifesto – UCU manifesto

On Friday 21 February, the University and Colleges Union (UCU) published a manifesto calling on university employers to sign up to five key principles with UCU:

1. To implement policies that improve the security of employment of research staff with a view to breaking the link between an individual job and a specific piece of grant funding. This would include a pooled resourcing model and the transfer of research staff to genuine open-ended contracts that are not linked to funding periods.
2. To move to a situation where genuine open-ended contracts are the norm, reducing the use of fixed-term contracts.
3. To limit fixed-term contracts to specific circumstances, such as parental leave cover.
4. To put systems in place that support the continuity of employment and minimise the risk of redundancy at the end of a funded research project. Such as redeployment, bridged funding and extended notice periods.
5. To create development opportunities and secure career paths for our research staff.

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