



The All-Party Parliamentary **University Group**

University APPG weekly update

17 – 21 July 2023

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

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

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Parliamentary business

Education oral questions

On Monday 17 July, the Secretary of State for Education, Rt Hon Gillian Keegan MP, and her ministerial team, answered questions in the House of Commons.

Barry Sherman MP (Labour) said good apprenticeships and training provision came from a blend of universities with further education colleges. He asked whether the government would develop more high-class universities and polytechnics. In her reply, the Secretary of State said the government were investing in 21 Institutes of Technology (IoTs) which she described as a ‘great addition to the landscape.’

Margaret Ferrier MP (Independent) welcomed the funding for space systems engineering degree apprenticeships and asked what plans the government had to fund similar apprenticeships in emerging sectors. The Secretary of State praised the many routes into the space industry and called on employers to work with the Institute for Apprenticeships and Technical Education (IfATE) to develop apprenticeship standards.

Joanna Cherry KC MP (SNP) raised recent UUKi/HEPI data that found the net benefit of international students was £170.8 million in her constituency. She said the government were making the UK less attractive to international students which would harm the economy and educational institutions. The Minister for Skills, Apprenticeships, and Higher Education, Rt Hon Robert Halfon MP celebrated the number of international students in the UK and said it needed to work for the UK taxpayer.

Sir Geoffrey Clifton-Brown MP (Conservative) said there were shortages of graduates with digital skills in the UK. He asked whether the Home Office would facilitate greater visas for international students developing these skills. The Minister said it was a matter for the Home Office and outlined the work of the government to equip skills within the UK.

Martin Docherty-Hughes MP (SNP) raised the recent rhetoric and crackdown on ‘low-value’ courses in higher education. The Minister said it was not right that young people were taking significant loans without strong continuation, completion, and progression rates. He celebrated the record number of disadvantaged young people attending university.

Matt Western MP, Shadow Minister for Higher Education, raised the regulatory duplication which needed to be addressed in lifelong learning. The Minister said lifelong learning would be transformative and confirmed the government were looking to reduce regulatory burden.

John McNally MP (SNP) raised the significant debt that students were accruing. He asked whether the Minister agreed that his policies were 'pushing students into debt and out of university'. The Minister said the funding system had to be fair for students and taxpayers.

Miriam Cates MP (Conservative) said she warmly welcomed the efforts to tackle low quality courses. She asked whether the government could go further to identify whole universities that could be transformed into higher technical and vocational institutions. The Minister said IoTs were addressing this issue.

Jamie Stone MP (Liberal Democrat) raised accessibility issues with the Turing Scheme. He asked whether the Secretary of State would commit to bringing forwards decisions to make the scheme accessible to all students. The Secretary of State said disadvantaged students made up 66% of the cohort and said she would work with the sector to address issues.

Christine Jardine MP (Liberal Democrat) raised the difficulties for students awaiting results due to the industrial action. She said this was particularly hard for international students who were told to re-apply for visas. She asked whether the Department for Education and Home Office were looking to facilitate students to take up their places without the classifications. The Minister said students will be able to extend permissions while they wait for results and said he would write to the member with further detail.

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

Higher education reform statement – Commons

On Monday 17 July, the Secretary of State for Education, Rt Hon Gillian Keegan MP, made a statement to the House of Commons on higher education reforms.

She highlighted the positive work of universities but said there were pockets of higher education which did not meet the expected continuation, completion, and progression thresholds. She proceeded to outline the government's drive to improve skills in the UK including lifelong learning and degree apprenticeships.

The Secretary of State said there were 66 providers where fewer than 60% of graduates progressed to high skilled employment or further study which she described as 'unacceptable.' She confirmed she would be issuing statutory guidance to the OfS setting out that they should impose recruitment limits on provision which didn't meet their quality requirements for positive student outcomes. The government will also ask the OfS to consider how it can incorporate graduate earnings into its assessment of quality. On franchise provision, she made it clear that this should be of the same quality as direct provision.

She described an explosion in the growth of foundation years with limited evidence they were in the best interests for students. The Secretary of State clarified that they were not reducing the fee limits for high-cost and strategically important courses such as veterinary and medicine. The government would also not be imposing a minimum requirement of academic attainment to access student finance, but this would be kept under review.

She concluded her remarks by warning that the government would consider all levers if the quality reforms did not result in sufficient improvements.

The Shadow Secretary of State for Education, Bridget Phillipson MP, accused the government of imposing fresh barriers to opportunity and said the statement showed the Conservatives saw universities as a 'political background', not a 'public good'. She warned against measuring the value of a course in purely economic terms and asked the Secretary of State to clarify which courses she considered to be 'low value.' Gillian Keegan outlined the government's focus on 'quality rather than quantity' which extended throughout the education system.

Sir Peter Bottomley MP (Conservative) highlighted that many graduates contributed significantly to society but were not higher earners. He wanted to ensure the government did not allow an algorithm to rank universities and courses. The Secretary of State said it was 'difficult' to assess value but said it was not acceptable that for some courses, graduates were earning less than £18,000 5 years after graduation.

Rt Hon Valerie Vaz MP (Labour) asked for clarification on what constituted a 'low value' degree. The Secretary of State highlighted B3 quality metrics (continuation, completion, and progression) which informed their assessment of 'low value' degree. She said the OfS were investigating 18 providers on these metrics.

Robin Walker MP (Conservative), Chair of the Education Committee, said he welcomed the focus on choice and quality in higher education. He said it was crucial that it was understood that all universities were selling a 'premium product' and said it would be wrong to discriminate between different institutions in the system. Gillian Keegan noted the global reputation of the higher education sector but reiterated the importance of knowing the return on investment for students.

Barry Sheerman MP (Labour) outlined the diversity of the sector and the strength across all universities. He called on the government to not 'throw the baby out with the bath water' and do damage to the sector. Gillian Keegan celebrated the sector but said it was important to protect the 'brand image' of the sector with quality.

Rt Hon Kit Malthouse MP (Conservative) called for protections for courses that do not offer immediate commercial advantage but are socially useful. He also hoped that the reforms would allow for innovation in the sector and experimentation in its offering. Gillian Keegan said she was encouraging all universities to innovate and work with industry.

Munira Wilson MP, Liberal Democrat Spokesperson for Education, suggested there was nothing new in the statement. She called on the government to invest in universities through restoring maintenance grants and joining Horizon Europe. Gillian Keegan clarified that there were some new announcements including information on foundation degrees and statutory guidance to the OfS.

Esther McVey MP (Conservative) welcomed the statement and asked whether international students would be banned from bringing dependants to do 'low quality' courses. The Secretary of State said the government's work to tackle 'low quality' courses would be felt by both domestic and international students. On dependants, she outlined the recent announcement to limit dependants on taught masters' courses.

Daniel Zeichner MP (Labour), Chair of the All-Party Parliamentary University Group, asked whether the policy was narrowing participation in higher education. The Secretary of State said the government's policy would increase access and choices for people.

Sir Bill Wiggin MP (Conservative) described the UCU marking and assessment boycott as 'disgusting and cruel.' He asked the Secretary of State to use the reforms to ensure universities could issue degrees. In her reply, Gillian Keegan said students had invested in their degrees and it was only right for them to be marked.

Rt Hon Sir Julian Lewis MP (Conservative) suggested that quality could be addressed by paying university administrators less and university lecturers more.

Dr Rupa Huq MP (Labour) said the policy 'reeked of academic snobbery'. She called on the government to address matters that constituents really care about, citing contact hours and 'crippling student debt.' The Secretary of State reiterated her comments on the importance of having data to measure quality.

Barbara Keeley MP (Labour) raised concerns over the impact on creative arts courses. She warned that value metrics failed to account for the working patterns of many in the creative industries and asked what assessment the Secretary of State had made of the impact on these courses. Gillian Keegan explained that the OfS would consider value metrics which was why she had not introduced a blunt tool.

Jonathan Gullis MP (Conservative) raised the recommendation of the New Conservatives to extend the closure of the dependant route to students enrolled on one year research masters degrees. He asked whether the Secretary of State would consider this. In her reply, Gillian Keegan said it was kept under review but said it had only recently changed.

Tim Farron MP (Liberal Democrat) raised the importance of universities having a duty of care to students and asked the Secretary of State whether she thought universities needed a statutory duty of care to students. The Secretary of State said universities were being instructed to sign up to the Mental Health Charter.

Rachael Maskell MP (Labour) said higher education funding was in 'crisis' which was having a significant impact on the functions of universities. She asked if the review by the OfS would cover the funding model. In her reply, Gillian Keegan outlined that 18 providers were currently investigated for quality related issues.

Helen Morgan MP (Liberal Democrat) raised concerns over the data. She said many graduates studying agriculture related courses would progress to good jobs, but the jobs were classified by the ONS as 'unprofessional.' She asked the Secretary of State to review the data and occupation classifications. In her reply, Gillian Keegan said she would look into this issue.

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

DSIT oral questions

On Wednesday 19 July, the Secretary of State for the Department of Science, Innovation, and Technology, Rt Hon Chloe Smith MP, and her ministerial team answered questions in the House of Commons.

Janet Daby MP (Labour) highlighted that the delay in Horizon Europe association meant the UK lost out on hosting 400 European Research Council grants. She asked whether the Secretary of State was concerned by these ‘failings.’ In her response, Chloe Smith said it was the EU that had caused the delays for association and added it was ‘more important to get the right deal than to get a fast deal.’

Gerald Jones MP (Labour) said the government’s inaction on Horizon Europe had ‘seriously damaged’ the UK’s international science pedigree. He asked how much longer scientists, researchers, and universities would have to wait for association. The Secretary of State said the government had continued to support the sector through its guarantee and reiterated the importance of getting the ‘right deal.’

Wera Hobhouse MP (Liberal Democrat) warned that universities were losing talent from Europe with a proposed 66% increase in visa fees. She asked the Secretary of State how this aligned with the government’s mission to attract the ‘best and brightest’ to the UK. The Secretary of State repeated her previous replies.

Sir Oliver Heald MP (Conservative) highlighted the importance of association to Horizon Europe and stressed the need for this to be done swiftly. The Secretary of State said the government were working ‘consistently and steadily’ to get the right deal for UK science. She added that she looked forward to the House being updated ‘very soon.’

Chi Onwurah MP, Shadow Minister for Science, Research, and Innovation asked whether the Secretary of State understood that the negotiations rested with the Prime Minister. The Secretary of State said that the government had been consistent in working hard to get the ‘correct deal for UK taxpayers and UK science.’

During topical questions, Drew Hendry MP (SNP) cited statistics from the Royal Society showing researchers entering via the Global talent system were paying six times the cost of international competitors. The Secretary of State said the UK had a strong science and technology sector.

Sir Michael Fabricant MP (Conservative) said world-class universities are based in the West Midlands. He asked what plans the government had to support regional innovation clusters. George Freeman MP, Minister for Science, Research and

Innovation, said the government were extensively funding regional innovation clusters.

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

Higher education reform statement – Lords

On Thursday 20 July, Baroness Barran, Minister for the School System and Student Finance, made a statement on higher education reform. The Minister repeated the speech made by the Secretary of State for Education in the House of Commons. This focused on the measures the government were taking to address quality in higher education and the work to improve skills through lifelong learning and degree apprenticeships.

Baroness Twycross (Labour) probed on the purpose of higher education. She said the government's focus was too narrow on the economic outcomes which overlooked the wider value of higher education. She noted that the policy would limit opportunity and choice for young people. She also highlighted the existing powers of the Office for Students (OfS) and cited the high levels of satisfaction among graduates.

Baroness Smith of Newnham (Liberal Democrat) stressed the importance of humanities, social sciences, and the arts, particularly highlighting the role of modern languages. She said many students have an 'intrinsic love' of a subject and a financial metric could not be imposed on that. On foundation courses, she said the policy risked diminishing participation in higher education.

Baroness Barran said higher education was an 'incredible route to opportunity and social mobility', but stressed it was not the only route available to students. She clarified that the definition used for quality was focused on continuation, completion, and outcomes (B3 conditions). She said the information available through the Discover Uni website was important to 'empower' prospective students. Turning to creative arts degrees, she acknowledged reduced earning potential and clarified that the government were only concerned when courses fell below the B3 metrics. On foundation years, she singled out business and administrative studies which had grown significantly and warranted greater focus.

Baroness McIntosh of Pickering (Conservative) asked for reassurance that institutions and prospective students would be given sufficient notice of the phasing out of a course. In her reply, Baroness Barran said the imposition of recruitment limits by the

OfS would only happen after a course had not met the B3 conditions. The recruitment limits would be at the discretion of the OfS.

Baroness Blackstone (Labour) probed on the criteria used to measure low value. She described it as 'ludicrous' that level of earnings was a factor in this measurement. Drawing on her experience at Birkbeck College, she said the drop-out rate needed to be contextualised and is a poor proxy of the quality of the course. In her reply, Baroness Barran clarified that the measurement used to measure value were based on B3 conditions. She said she understood the importance of contextualising and reiterated that the government were concerned when a particular course at a particular institution appeared to be an outlier.

Baroness Lawlor (Conservative) said humanities and social sciences 'trained the mind' which was a relevant skill for many professions. She reiterated previous remarks on the importance of contextualising completion rates and the responsibility of universities to select suitable students.

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

House of Commons recess

On Thursday 20 July, the House of Commons rose for Summer recess. It will return on Monday 4 September.

Forthcoming business

House of Commons recess

On Thursday 20 July, the House of Commons rose for Summer recess. It will return on Monday 4 September.

House of Lords recess

On Wednesday 26 July, the House of Lords will rise for Summer recess. It will return on Monday 4 September.

Written Questions

Universities: Drugs

Lord Farmer: To ask His Majesty's Government what assessment they have made of reports that the Universities UK strategic advisory panel involves students from Sensible Drug Policy UK; and what assessment they have made of the implications of this involvement for illegal drug use on university campuses. [UIN HL9168]

Baroness Barran: The department is clear there is no safe way to take illegal drugs. These drugs can devastate lives, ruin families, and damage communities. The government welcomes activity by universities and other organisations to raise awareness of the harms of illicit drugs and discourage drug misuse. This includes focusing on the health, safety and wellbeing of students, while working with public health and law enforcement agencies.

This government has invested a record £780 million to rebuild the national drug treatment and recovery system, to improve treatment and provide wider support, such as employment and housing, that people need to rebuild their lives.

Universities: Industrial Disputes

Dr Rupa Huq: To ask the Secretary of State for Education, whether her Department has issued guidance to universities on pay deductions during marking boycotts. [UIN 193020]

Robert Halfon: Unlike some education sectors where the government has taken part in negotiations with trade unions, universities are autonomous. They are therefore responsible for the pay and pension provision of their staff. While government plays no formal role in such disputes, there is concern about the potential impact of the marking and assessment boycott. The government hopes all parties can reach an agreement that delivers good value for students, staff and universities, so further industrial action can be avoided.

On 22 June 2023, I met with Universities UK (UUK), the Russell Group and UCEA to better understand the impact of this boycott. I have also written to the Russell Group and UUK, encouraging them to continue to do everything within their powers to protect the interests of students during this phase of industrial action.

On 27 June 2023, I met with a number of higher education (HE) representative groups to discuss the marking and assessment boycott, including the mitigating actions HE institutions are taking.

On 12 June 2023, the Office for Students (OfS) wrote to institutions affected by the boycott to reiterate its expectations in relation to its conditions of registration. The OfS will continue to monitor this ongoing situation through their normal regulatory mechanisms.

My officials and I will continue to engage with the HE sector over the coming weeks to help better understand the boycott's impact and the mitigating actions HE institutions are taking.

Pharmacy: Higher Education and Training

Simon Jupp: To ask the Secretary of State for Health and Social Care, what steps he is taking to increase pharmacist (a) training and (b) university places. [UIN 193209]

Neil O'Brien: The NHS Long Term Workforce Plan (LTWP), backed by over £2.4 billion to fund additional education and training places over the next five years, sets out the steps the National Health Service and education providers need to take to deliver an NHS workforce that meets the changing needs of the population over the next 15 years. The ambition is to increase training places for pharmacists by nearly 50% to around 5,000 by 2031/32, and to grow the number of pharmacy technicians.

The LTWP also commits to extend the success of the Additional Roles Reimbursement Scheme, which has delivered an additional 29,000 multi-professional roles in primary care. This expansion will consider the additional capacity required to staff roles across primary care, including community pharmacy. NHS England have committed to undertake and publish a review of the scheme by the end of 2023.

Overseas pharmacy professionals must meet the same standards as United Kingdom pharmacy professionals. The General Pharmaceutical Council has recently written to accredited educational providers to highlight the demand for places from overseas professionals and students, and a limited number of additional places have been created.

The Community Pharmacy Contractual Framework (CPCF) 2019-24 five-year deal ends at the end of March 2024. We are currently consulting Community Pharmacy England on the implementation of the pharmacy proposals in the delivery plan for recovering access to primary care. The funding for those proposals covers 2023/24

and 2024/25. There are regular discussions with NHS England about NHS funding. No discussions have been had with Community Pharmacy England about CPCF funding from March 2024.

Overseas Students: Visas

Tanmanjeet Singh Dhesi: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department, whether she plans to introduce concessions to enable students currently residing in the UK on a student visa to apply for a new student visa without departing the UK when an award for their current course has been deferred as a result of the University and College Union marking and assessment boycott. [UIN 193678]

Robert Jenrick: The marking boycott is the result of a dispute between education institutions and their employees. The impacts at individual institutions vary and it is not possible for the Home Office to estimate the number of students affected.

Universities: China

Lord Leong: To ask His Majesty's Government what assessment they have made of the funding being received by British universities from Chinese companies, including Huawei. [UIN HL8992]

Baroness Barran: The government is committed to supporting academia to engage with international partners in a way that reflects the UK's values and takes account of national security concerns and wider risks.

We have strengthened sector support considerably in recent years, launching the National Protective Security Authority's 'Trusted Research' campaign, and supporting Universities UK to develop guidelines on tackling security risks. The Department for Science, Innovation and Technology also provides the Research Collaboration Advice Team, which gives tailored advice to research institutions to help them manage the risks in international collaboration.

The Department continues to talk to universities to ensure advice and measures on tackling security risks when engaging internationally remain relevant and proportionate. This helps to promote safe, sustainable, and legally compliant international collaboration.

The Higher Education (Freedom of Speech) Act 2023 will give the Office for Students powers to monitor the overseas funding of registered higher education (HE)

providers in England, their constituent institutions, members, and staff in order to assess the extent to which such funding arrangements present a risk to freedom of speech and academic freedom in HE.

Degrees

Christine Jardine: To ask the Secretary of State for Education, what assessment she has made of the implications for her policies of students graduating from universities without receiving their degree classification. [UIN 906018]

Robert Halfon: Unlike some education sectors, where the government has taken part in negotiations with trade unions, universities are autonomous. They are therefore responsible for the pay and pension provision of their staff. Whilst the government plays no formal role, we are concerned about the potential impact of the marking and assessment boycott on students, particularly those who are coming up to graduation, and looking to enter the jobs market or progress to further study.

The department understands that the majority of students will remain unaffected by the industrial action and, in most cases, will receive their full results on time and progress and/or graduate as normal.

The Universities and Colleges Employers Association (UCEA) has published research findings which surveyed 49% of higher education (HE) institutions in the New Joint Negotiating Committee for Higher Education Staff. These institutions provided feedback on the impact of the marking and assessment boycott on students at their institutions:

- Over 70% of HE institutions said that ‘less than 2% of students’ will be unable to graduate this summer due to the boycott.
- A further 20% were ‘unsure’ of the number.
- 4% of HE institutions said ‘between 2% and 9% of students’ would be impacted.

These research findings can be accessed at: <https://www.ucea.ac.uk/news-releases/23june23/>

On 22 June 2023, I met with Universities UK (UUK), the Russell Group, and UCEA to better understand the impact of the boycott and the mitigating actions their members are taking to protect students’ interests. I have also written to the Russell

Group and UUK, encouraging them to continue to do everything within their powers to protect the interests of students.

On 27 June 2023, I met with a number of HE representative groups to discuss the marking and assessment boycott, including the mitigating actions HE institutions are taking.

HE institutions are working on minimising disruption to students in a variety of ways, including reallocating marking to other staff members, and hiring external markers. Many HE institutions can award degrees when they have enough evidence of a student's prior attainment to do so. Others will be able to assign provisional grades to students to allow them to progress and, once all papers have been marked, degree classifications will either remain as provisionally assigned or be uplifted to reflect the student's achievements.

The government believes students should be at the heart of the HE system. This is why we set up the Office for Students (OfS) to regulate the HE sector in England, protect student rights, and ensure the sector is delivering real value for money. The OfS published guidance to students on their rights during industrial action at: <https://www.officeforstudents.org.uk/for-students/student-rights-and-welfare/student-guide-to-industrial-action/> (opens in a new tab).

On 12 June 2023, the OfS wrote to institutions affected by the boycott to reiterate its expectations in relation to its conditions of registration. The OfS will continue to monitor this situation through their normal regulatory mechanisms.

The Department continues to engage with the HE sector and we hope all parties can reach an agreement that delivers good value for students, staff and universities, so further industrial action can be avoided.

Universities: Strikes

Lord Storey: To ask His Majesty's Government what assessment they have made of the impact of the strikes relating to marking of university exams and essays on students awaiting end of year grades. [UIN HL9145]

Baroness Barran: The department understands that the vast majority of students will remain unaffected by the industrial action and, in most cases, will receive their full results on time and progress and/or graduate as normal. The Universities and Colleges Employers Association (UCEA) has published research findings which surveyed 49% of higher education (HE) institutions in the New Joint Negotiating

Committee for Higher Education Staff. These institutions provided updated feedback on the impact of the marking and assessment boycott on students at their institutions:

- Over 70% of HE institutions said that ‘less than 2% of students’ will be unable to graduate this summer due to the boycott.
- A further 20% were ‘unsure’ of the number.
- 4% of HE institutions said ‘between 2% and 9% of students’ would be impacted.

A link to these research findings can be found here: <https://www.ucea.ac.uk/news-releases/23june23/>(opens in a new tab).

On 22 June 2023, my right hon. Friend, the Minister of State for Skills, Apprenticeships and Higher Education, met with Universities UK (UUK), the Russell Group and UCEA to better understand the impact that this boycott will have on students and the mitigating actions their members are taking to protect students’ interests.

The Minister also wrote to the Russell Group and UUK, encouraging them to continue to do everything within their powers to protect the interests of students during this phase of industrial action. On 27 June 2023, the Minister met with a number of HE representative groups to discuss the marking and assessment boycott, including the mitigating actions HE institutions are taking to protect their students’ interests.

HE institutions are working on minimising the disruption to their students in a variety of ways, including reallocating marking to other staff members and hiring external markers. Moreover, many HE institutions can award degrees when they have enough evidence of a student’s prior attainment to do so. Others will be able to assign provisional grades to students to allow them to progress and, once all papers have been marked, degree classifications will either remain as provisionally assigned or be uplifted to reflect the student’s achievements.

The government believes students should be at the heart of the HE system. This is why the Office for Students (OfS) has been set up, to regulate the HE sector in England, protect student rights and ensure the sector is delivering real value for money. The OfS has published guidance to students on their rights during industrial action, available at: <https://www.officeforstudents.org.uk/for-students/student-rights-and-welfare/student-guide-to-industrial-action/>(opens in a new tab).

On 12 June 2023, the OfS wrote to institutions affected by the boycott to reiterate its expectations in relation to its conditions of registration. The OfS will continue to monitor this ongoing situation through their normal regulatory mechanisms.

Students who have complaints about their HE experience should contact their provider in the first instance. Students in England and Wales may also raise a complaint with the Office of the Independent Adjudicator, which was set up to provide an alternative to the courts and is free of charge to students. Further information is available at: <https://www.oiahe.org.uk/> (opens in a new tab).

The department will continue to engage with the HE sector over the coming weeks to help better understand the boycott's impact on students and the mitigating actions HE institutions are taking to protect their students' interests.

Pupils and Students: Cost of Living

Douglas Chapman: To ask the Secretary of State for Education, whether she has had recent discussions with her counterparts in the devolved Administrations on the potential merits of providing additional financial support for (a) school and (b) higher education students in the context of increases in the cost of living. [UIN 906020]

Robert Halfon: Last month, I met representatives from across the UK where we discussed this very topic. In England, we have put in place a significant amount of support to help students and families alike with the cost of living. This year alone, this government will spend around £37bn on cost of living support.

I take my role of giving children the very best start in life incredibly seriously. This Government spends more than £1 billion annually delivering free school meals to pupils in schools. More than one third of pupils in schools in England now receive a free meal. We have expanded the Holiday Activities and Food programme so that disadvantaged children in England will be offered free healthy meals and enriching activities over the Easter, summer and Christmas holidays. This expansion was built on previous programmes, including last summer's, which supported around 600,000 children across 152 local authorities.

I also recognise the cost-of-living pressures that have impacted students. That is why we have earmarked £276 million of student premium funding this year to support disadvantaged students who need additional help. We have continued to increase living costs support each year for English-domiciled students with a 2.3% increase to

maximum loans and grants for living and other costs for this academic year, and a 2.8% increase for the 2023/24 academic year.

In addition, we have frozen maximum tuition fees for the current academic year and also for the 2023/24 and 2024/25 academic years. By 2024/25, maximum fees will have been frozen for seven years. We believe that a continued fee freeze achieves the best balance between ensuring the system remains sustainable, offering good value for the taxpayer, and reducing debt levels for students.

As well as keeping tuition fees flat, we have introduced and boosted degree apprenticeships, where, if people want to earn and learn, they can get their degrees paid for by their apprenticeship.

Nurses: Students

Alison McGovern: To ask the Secretary of State for Health and Social Care, what the average retention rate for nursing students in the North West was as of 30 June 2023. [UIN 192584]

Will Quince: The information is not held in the format requested.

Turing Scheme

Matt Western: To ask the Secretary of State for Education, whether she plans to publish mobility data for the Turing Scheme for the 2022-23 academic year. [UIN 193270]

Robert Halfon: The second year of the Turing Scheme has provided funding for placements in the 2022/23 academic year. Mobility data will be available after the end of the second year of the programme. This includes the proportion of mobilities that are study or work placements, as well as the duration of placements. The department intends to publish this data as soon as possible, following receipt of final reports from participating organisations in the Turing Scheme and requisite analysis and quality assurance of the data.

Currently published information on the placements funded in the last two years by the Turing Scheme is available at: <https://www.turing-scheme.org.uk/>

The Turing Scheme aims to have a positive impact on the outcomes of its participants. One of the scheme's objectives is developing key skills, so that participants develop the skills sought by employers. Applications are assessed on how well they will deliver on this objective.

The department will shortly publish an independent evaluation of the Turing Scheme from its first year of operation, the 2021/22 academic year. This includes an assessment on the short-term benefits students experience in their studies in the coming months. Previous studies show that graduates who have studied or worked abroad are more likely to obtain a first-class honours or an upper second-class degree, have a job six months after graduating, and have higher earnings than their non-mobile peers. Information about this is available at:

<https://www.universitiesuk.ac.uk/sites/default/files/uploads/UUKi%20reports/Gone-Intl-2019.pdf>

Queen's University Belfast: Industrial Relations

Stephen Farry: To ask the Secretary of State for Education, what assessment she has made of the implications for her policies of the suspension of Queen's University Belfast from the Universities and Colleges Employers Association. [UIN 194256]

Robert Halfon: Education is a devolved matter. The Northern Ireland Executive is responsible for higher education policy in Northern Ireland.

The department is aware that the marking and assessment boycott is affecting students across all four nations of the UK.

Unlike some other education sectors, where the UK government has taken part in negotiations with trade unions in England, universities are autonomous. They are, therefore, responsible for the pay and pension provision of their staff.

While the government plays no formal role in such disputes, we are deeply concerned about the potential impact of the marking and assessment boycott on students, particularly those who are coming up to graduation and looking to enter the jobs market or progress to further study.

It is hugely disappointing that students, many of whom have already faced significant disruption due to the COVID-19 pandemic and strike action, are now facing further uncertainty. It is imperative that higher education institutions continue to do everything within their powers to protect the interests of their students.

On 6 July 2023, I spoke with the Vice-Chancellor of Queen's University Belfast and the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland to discuss how the University agreed a pay settlement with its staff.

I have also met with the Universities and Colleges Employers Association (UCEA), Universities UK and the Russell Group to better understand the impact that this boycott will have on students and the mitigating actions their members are taking to protect students' interests.

On 14 July 2023, the UCEA and the University and College Union held talks about resuming negotiations which would bring an end to the boycott. I was pleased to hear that these initial discussions were positive. We hope all parties can reach an agreement that delivers good value for students, staff and universities, so further industrial action can be avoided.

Sector News

Government ‘crackdown on rip-off university degrees’

On Monday 17 July, the Department for Education announced a ‘crackdown on rip-off university degrees.’

Under the plans, the government will reduce the maximum fee that universities can charge for classroom-based foundation year courses to £5,760 – down from £9,250 currently. The Office for Students (OfS) will be asked to limit the number of students universities can recruit onto courses that are failing to deliver good outcomes for students measured through the B3 conditions.

Alongside the measures announced, the government confirmed further support for people and employers to take advantage of free training options, helping to fill skills gaps.

The Prime Minister, Rt Hon Rishi Sunak MP, commented: ‘Too many young people are being sold a false dream and end up doing a poor-quality course at the taxpayers’ expense that doesn’t offer the prospect of a decent job at the end of it. That is why we are taking action to crack down on rip-off university courses, while boosting skills training and apprenticeships provision.’

In response to the announcement, Vivienne Stern MBE, Chief Executive of Universities UK, said: ‘Government should take care that political rhetoric does not damage individual life chances by putting students off going to university who would otherwise benefit. That would not be in the interests of most students, or the economic prospects of the country as a whole.’

You can [read the full press release](#) here and the [Universities UK statement](#) here.

Delays to Horizon Europe association

On Wednesday 19 July, the Financial Times reported that the Prime Minister, Rt Hon Rishi Sunak MP, had delayed the decision to associate with Horizon Europe until after the summer.

An ally of the Prime Minister is reported as saying there was still an ‘iterative’ discussion with Brussels about a possible deal, adding: ‘this has to be the right deal for the UK and the UK taxpayer.’

Vivienne Stern MBE, chief executive of Universities UK, said: “We recognise that the UK government wants to secure a fair deal, and that we need flexibility and imagination on both sides, but we do wish they would hurry up. Delay has a real cost, and the benefits of a deal go beyond the financial.”

You can [read the full Financial Times article](#) here.

The relationship between teaching and research in UK universities – HEPI report

On Thursday 20 July, the Higher Education Policy Institute (HEPI) published a report by Professor Nicola Dandridge examining the different approaches taken by higher education institutions, students, academics and policymakers towards the relationship between teaching and research.

The paper explores the ways in which the relationship between teaching and research can add significant value and have a transformative impact on students. It also notes examples where there is no obvious relationship between the two activities, and where from students’ perspectives there does not need to be.

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

Changes in graduate attainment from 2010-11 to 2021-22 – OfS data

On Thursday 20 July, the Office for Students (OfS) published a new report on final grades and degrees awarded to students between 2010-11 and 2021-22, with data presented at a sector and subject level, and for individual universities and colleges.

Key findings:

- The proportion of students awarded the first class honours degrees has more than doubled since 2010-11, reaching 32.8 per cent of students in 2021-22. This has dropped from 37.4 per cent of students in 2020-21.

- Of the 32.8 per cent of students awarded first class degrees, 16.4 per cent were unexplained after the OfS accounted for various observable factors – including students’ prior entry qualifications and subject of study – which may affect their attainment.
- Overall, there was a decrease in unexplained attainment of 4.8 percentage points for the sector as a whole.

Susan Lapworth, chief executive of the OfS, said: ‘We are encouraged to see a reduction in the proportion of unexplained top grades, but universities and colleges know that they need to continue to take the steps necessary to protect the value of their qualifications, now and over time.’

A spokesperson for Universities UK, said: ‘Universities remain committed to addressing unexplained increases in their degree classification awards...The Office for Students should intervene where they find evidence that degree classification standards have been compromised. It is in the shared interest of everyone to ensure that the value of the degree is protected.’

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