



# The All-Party Parliamentary **University Group**

## University APPG weekly update

18 - 22 March 2024

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

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

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# Parliamentary business

## Impact of industrial action on university students – Education Committee oral evidence

On Tuesday 19 March, the Education Select Committee heard oral evidence from two panels as part of their inquiry into the impact of industrial action on university students.

The first half of the session heard evidence from Professor Adam Fagan, Vice President (Education & Student Success) King's College London; Professor Karen O'Brien, Vice-Chancellor, University of Durham; and Professor Stuart Elborn, Provost and Deputy Vice-Chancellor, Queen's University Belfast. Their contributions highlighted the diversity of responses and mitigations employed by universities during the Marking and Assessment Boycott (MAB).

Professor O'Brien outlined that Durham's response consisted of: awarding interim classifications to students with 75% of their credits; supplementary exam boards; £500 goodwill payments; engaging with their Student Union (SU); setting up a task force; and boosting 1-to-1 counselling support.

Professor Fagan said that King's had been able to classify and graduate all students as many staff had taken on additional marking duties; worked extremely closely with their SU to support students; and deducted salary payments from striking staff. Chair of the Education Committee, Robin Walker MP (Conservative) asked how King's had ensured substitute markers had the appropriate level of expertise. Professor Fagan said alumni and retired professors were used to ensure that only people with appropriate expertise marked work.

Professor Elborn expressed Queen's had implemented similar responses, including establishing a central critical incident team that met daily, and had negotiated with the University College Union (UCU) and reached a resolution. Flick Drummond MP (Conservative) asked how it had been possible to end the industrial action early. Professor Elborn explained that pressure from student protests made it vital for Queen's to find a resolution and a two percent offer was negotiated.

Caroline Ansell MP (Conservative) asked about which groups were particularly affected and what bespoke measures had been put in place for them. Panellists identified international and postgraduate students as particularly affected. Professor O'Brien noted that international students who wanted to progress to master's

programmes had been particularly affected. She highlighted Universities UK's work with UK Visa and Immigration to resolve the issues international students faced. Vicky Ford MP (Conservative) asked if the industrial action had resulted in reputational damage and led to a decline in university applications from overseas. Panellists said that they had not seen this to be the case and rather other issues, such as the cost-of-living and whether the UK is welcoming to international students, were a point of concern.

Professor Fagan noted concern for undergraduates from widening participation backgrounds and potential disengagement from higher education after experiencing disruption. Caroline Ansell asked whether a focus on international and postgraduate students had caused widening participation students to be overlooked. Professor Fagan stressed this had not been the case at King's, which had worked hard to reach different audiences.

Anna Firth MP (Conservative) asked about specific mental health support that had been offered. The panellists recognised the pressures on mental health, particularly in a cohort that had also been impacted by the Covid-19 pandemic and outlined their respective universities' packages of support. Professor O'Brien spoke on Durham's work with employers to mitigate against students losing job offers during this period.

Andrew Lewer MP (Conservative) asked how the communication with the Office for Students (OfS) had been during the action and how panellists would assess the response from the OfS. Panellists expressed that communication and support from the OfS had been clear and helpful. Professor O'Brien said she would have welcomed a more proactive approach.

Mohammad Yasin MP (Labour) asked the witnesses how satisfied they had been with the Government's response to the action. Professor Fagan acknowledged the difficulties of the broader economic climate and industrial action in other sectors. Professor O'Brien said the Department for Education (DfE) had been very clear universities were autonomous institutions and she could not point to any interventions that would have led Durham to handle things differently.

The second half of the session heard evidence from Rt Hon Robert Halfon MP, Minister of State for Skills, Apprenticeships and Higher Education, Department for Education and Patrick Curry, Director of Higher Education Oversight, Department for Education.

Robert Halfon said it was important to stress that universities were autonomous, but the DfE had done everything within its powers to use all possible levers at the time of the industrial action. He had a number of meetings with university bodies such as

Universities UK, the Russell Group and other university mission groups. He had met with universities to find out what they were doing to try to mitigate the action and where intervention had been possible. He had also written to universities to clarify their responsibilities and had some individual discussions with certain vice-chancellors. Negotiations had taken place with the Home Office to ensure international students were given exemptions in terms of those who wanted to progress to graduate work visas.

Robert Halfon stressed there was not a 'one size fits all' solution. Different courses and different universities responded differently. Some universities had had alternate markers, others had slightly weakened the regulations such as having fewer people on exam panels, some had awarded grades based on past performance.

Robin Walker noted some of the highest profile universities had experienced some of the biggest problems when it came to students not receiving their degrees on time and he asked the Minister why that was. Robert Halfon noted that some universities had had regulation that made it difficult for them to adapt and certain courses had struggled to find additional external markers. He was keen to pay tribute to the members of staff who had not only continued to work but had taken on a huge burden of extra marking work. In the event of this action happening again, Robert Halfon hoped universities would be in a stronger position to know how to respond most efficiently to mitigate the impact on students.

Robin Walker asked if there had been conversations with the OfS about clarifying the importance of getting regulations right so they could respond to these sort of crisis situations. Robert Halfon stressed there had been regular conversations with the OfS. The OfS had issued guidance to students at the time and there had been several interventions that the OfS had been able to make, such as asking Trading Standards to investigate if universities were not meeting their registration conditions. Caroline Ansell asked if the OfS should do more to clarify students' rights during industrial action. Robert Halfon acknowledged that was a debate to be had, but stressed it was the responsibility of the universities to be as transparent as possible about what student rights were and what they could expect.

Anna Firth asked the Minister if he thought students had sufficient knowledge of their consumer rights as students. Robert Halfon said students who had valid claims needed to register them with the OfS and then take them to the Office of the Independent Adjudicator (OIA) who would decide whether or not a university had breached its obligations in terms of providing a proper service. He said there needed to be greater transparency from universities regarding expectations of things such as the amount of online learning.

Mohammad Yasin MP (Labour) asked how likely it was that there would be further industrial action given that disputes regarding pay and working condition had not been resolved. Robert Halfon noted that there had been a ballot in late September/early October 2023 which had not reached the 50% threshold so he was hopeful that strikes would not happen in summer 2024.

You can [watch the session](#).

## **University Spin-out Companies – HoL Science and Technology Committee oral evidence**

On Tuesday 19 March, the House of Lords Science and Technology Committee held an ad-hoc session on university spin-out companies. The Committee heard evidence from Professor Chas Bountra (Pro-Vice Chancellor for Innovation, University of Oxford) and Dr Andrew Williamson (Managing Partner of Cambridge Innovation Capital, Chair of the Venture Capital Committee, British Private Equity and Venture Capital Association).

Baroness Brown of Cambridge (Crossbench), Chair of the Committee, asked both witnesses to outline their work on the recent independent review of university spinout companies. Dr Williamson explained that the ‘comprehensive’ review had been commissioned by government, partially prompted by the media’s specific questioning of the early years equity splits between founders, university, and investors in the spin-outs. He explained that now the baseline dataset had been gathered, it would be possible to start measuring the positive progress. Professor Bountra spoke to the successes of the university sector, outlining the work of universities in developing talent, working with industry, and the significant networks they had across the world.

On potential surprises from the review, Dr Williamson said it was clear it was not just a ‘golden triangle’ story. Professor Bountra highlighted that while the UK university spin-out sector was relatively small compared to the US, it was continuing to learn and develop.

Dr Wiliamson emphasised that benefits reached beyond the golden triangle of Cambridge, Oxford and London and disagreed with the assertion that, at 3%, university spin outs were relatively under-represented among the UK’s high growth companies. The relevant sector for comparison was the knowledge intensive sector of private growth companies, where 30-40% of high growth companies raising money were university spin outs. Within this, the most rapid growth had been within life

sciences, now being followed by deep technology. Professor Bountra outlined how universities had developed from teaching and research establishments to developing a function of addressing some of the world's problems.

Lord Strasburger (Liberal Democrat) probed on the role of government and whether there was any 'major gaps' in the government's actions in response to the review. Dr Williamson explained the review hadn't been aimed at prompting government intervention, so much as spurring best practice. Professor Bountra added that there were some areas where government intervention could help, such as in drawing innovative role models from the US to tour the UK universities to spark cultural change.

On assessing the progress in the next year, Dr Williamson said one of the initial challenges was the lack of data bases. One of the recommendations was a greater collection of data which would allow for strong performance evaluation.

Regarding bureaucracy, Dr Williamson noted that clearer sign posting was needed to help spin-outs understand the support available. He added that existing policies also needed time to bed-in. Professor Bountra agreed with the importance of culture, simplicity, and transparency.

Dr Williamson described the shifting focus on commercialisation and on spin-out activity in the past decade. He highlighted that Higher Education Innovation Funding (HEIF) was critical to tech transfer offices, as was philanthropic and corporate support. Government needed to ensure universities were appropriately funded to spin out businesses, so they didn't need to take large shares up front, thereby disincentivising other investment. Professor Bountra gave the example of the University of Oxford's £614m Venture Capital fund in spearheading change, and the culture of collaboration across sectors which had fostered the vaccine development.

Lord Drayson (Labour) probed on the different approaches that universities were taking in their culture/attitudes towards spin-outs, particularly how universities perceived their role in the growth agenda. Professor Bountra said there was varying levels of maturity in the approaches of universities as well as in the priorities of academics. He added that there was a surge in the number of 'serial entrepreneurs' among the academic community. Both Professor Bountra and Dr Williamson stressed the importance of impact at universities.

On regional investment, Professor Bountra pointed to Research England's Connecting Capability Fund and added that the University of Oxford worked with the precision health technology accelerator in Birmingham, and with Liverpool, Dundee and



Manchester. He explained that given the size of the UK, collaboration was particularly significant. Dr Williamson outlined the work of Northern Gritstone, which had government support in transforming spin-outs, and concurred that it took a while for a talent base and entrepreneurial culture to grow.

Baroness Neville-Jones (Conservative) raised scale-ups and the challenges they faced with the intellectual property and benefits moving overseas. Dr Williamson agreed with the proposition that there was a problem in foreign companies poaching spinouts, but said the UK was moving in the right direction. There was a growing talent base of entrepreneurship, and wider recognition of the skill sets needed. He welcomed the Mansion House reforms. Professor Bountra added that academics needed to learn the language of industry, government, investment.

Baroness Willis of Summertown (Crossbench) noted the career structures for spin-out founders and asked whether more could be done to improve the permeability between academia and industry. Professor Bountra said there was a real desire to work together and improve this from all sides. Dr Williamson said universities had a strength in inter-disciplinarity and the commercial sector could further embrace this.

Lord Rees of Ludlow (Crossbench) asked if there should be an increasing role for Public Sector Research Establishments (PSREs). Dr Williamson endorsed their world class work but maintained the UK lacked the national lab research system that could compete with the US.

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

## **Economic Activity of Public Bodies (Overseas Matters) Bill – committee stage day 1**

On Wednesday 20 March, the Economic Activity of Public Bodies (Overseas Matters) Bill was scrutinised at its first day of Committee Stage in the House of Lords.

Following probing by Lord Mann (non-affiliated), the Minister, Baroness Neville-Rolfe, clarified that student unions were not covered under the legislation. Lord Wallace of Saltaire (Liberal Democrat) said the question as to whether student unions were covered under the Bill would be ‘investigate[d] further.’

Baroness Chapman of Darlington (Labour) probed on the decision-maker aspect, asking whether a Chancellor of a university would be held accountable for a decision and how the judgement would be made. Lord Johnson of Marylebone (Conservative) echoed this point and said he would ‘appreciate some clarity as the Bill proceeds on

who exactly is going to be identified as the decision-maker in particular situations.’ He asked whether an individual academic, who managed a research budget, would be deemed to be part of the decision-making process captured by the Bill.

Examining why universities were under the scope of the Bill, Lord Johnson of Marylebone said, ‘I really wonder why universities as a whole are still in scope. It is not the vice-chancellors, academics or heads of department who are making these kinds of noises; it is the student unions.’

Lord Hannay of Chiswick (Crossbench) warned of the ‘chilling effect’ that this Bill would have on the conduct of university councils who may worry they ‘they were going to be liable for any of the sorts of problems that could arise under this legislation.’

Baroness Randerson (Liberal Democrat) echoed the previous warning of the impact on recruiting members to university councils. She asked the Minister to give examples of universities making ‘inappropriate decisions’ and suggested that if the Minister could not cite any examples, whether the government could provide ‘further thought’ as to why universities should fall under the scope of the legislation.

Baroness Fox of Buckley (non-affiliated) said she understood the ‘broader sense’ of why universities were included, explaining that they were ‘very often...at the cutting edge of popularising boycotts.’ However, she added that it was ‘not clear...how a Bill like this could do anything other than attack academic freedom.’ She described the decision to not include university student unions as being ‘utterly ludicrous.’

Lord Verdirame (non-affiliated) probed on the scope of the Bill. He said that under his reading of the definition of ‘procurement decision’ a collaboration with a foreign academic institution would not be included, but he asked for clarity from the Minister as to whether this would be in the scope of the ban.

Lord Wallace of Saltaire (Liberal Democrat) intervened by highlighting that a professor of law at the University of Cambridge had advised him that it is not within scope where the research funding is not public.

In response to the grouped set of amendments, the Minister clarified that ‘individuals who make the decision on behalf of the public authority will do so in accordance with the public authority’s internal policies and structures’. She added that ‘there is no personal liability for the individual.’

Turning to the rationale for why universities were under the scope of the legislation, the Minister said ‘the fact is that universities are a frequent target of the BDS

movement, and some student unions...have passed motions pressurising their universities to divest from Israeli companies. The Bill will ensure that universities cannot implement such policies in response to pressure from their student unions, as that would be divisive and could potentially contribute to rising anti-Semitism on university campuses, which is a concern.'

Baroness Chapman of Darlington asked whether the Minister could give one example where a university had ever succumbed to pressure from a student union relating to BDS. The Minister said this amendment would be discussed in due course. Following further probing, she raised examples of student union activity at the University of Warwick and Sussex University, but the university had not succumbed to pressure in those instances.

Regarding student unions, the Minister said, 'student unions are usually charities and can undertake political activity only if it can be shown to support their charitable purposes, in line with Charity Commission guidance.' She added, 'any questions as to whether political activity was appropriate would be considered in line with the Charity Commission's normal processes.'

Baroness Fox of Buckley raised an incident at the University of Warwick in which 'academics refused to sit on a panel discussing the issue of Israel.' She noted that this would not be covered by the Bill and warned that this had a 'much more damaging impact on the debate around Israel...than anything that a few people at the student union did that the university acted on.'

Lord Johnson of Marylebone said he would be much more reassured if the government could 'furnish us with examples of higher education institutions succumbing to pressure from student unions to undertake BDS-style actions in relation to their investment and procurement decisions.' The Minister clarified this would be discussed at a later stage of Committee.

Lord Mann described attempts at academic boycotts as the 'fundamental issue.' He raised the hypothetical example of a postgraduate student being told by their supervisor that they should not be researching what is happening in Israel. When it could be demonstrated that this action was motivated by antisemitism, he said it became a problem that needed to be dealt with. He explained that 'having something in the Bill that addresses that specific problem is far more relevant than the theoretics of investment decisions elsewhere.'

Lord Wallace of Saltaire emphasised that a commercial partnership would be a private act of a university. He noted that he did not think there was a significant

problem and would be ‘unhappy about the idea of bringing [commercial partnerships] within the scope of the Bill.’

Lord Johnson of Marylebone said he was sympathetic to the intention of this amendment but questioned whether it was necessary given the provisions under the Higher Education and Research Act 2017.

Responding to this amendment, the Minister clarified that ‘the prohibition in the Bill already covers higher education providers in their public functions, including when their procurement and investment decisions form part of a research collaboration. Decisions relating to a commercial partnership are, however, likely to constitute a private function—for example, a decision relating to a research partnership to develop a new product funded by a pharmaceutical company.’ She concluded by saying ‘it would be inappropriate to apply the ban to private functions, and it would take the Bill beyond the manifesto commitment.’

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

# Forthcoming business

## Recess

On Tuesday 26 March, the House of Commons will rise for Easter recess. It will return on Monday 15 April.

On Wednesday 27 March, the House of Lords will rise for Easter recess. It will return on Monday 15 April.

## Home Office – oral questions

On Monday 15 April from 2:30pm, the Secretary of State for the Home Department, Rt Hon James Cleverly, and his ministerial colleagues will answer oral questions in the House of Commons.

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

## DSIT – oral questions

On Wednesday 17 April from 11:30am, the Secretary of State for Science, Innovation and Technology, Rt Hon Michelle Donelan MP, and her ministerial colleagues will answer oral questions in the House of Commons.

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

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

On Wednesday 17 April, the Economic Activity of Public Bodies (Overseas Matters) Bill will have its second day of the committee stage.

You can [watch the session](#).

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

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

You can [view the full list of Private Members' Bills tabled](#) and [watch the session](#).

# Written Questions

## Overseas Students: Ukraine (1)

**Tanmanjeet Singh Dhesi MP:** To ask the Secretary of State for Education, what recent steps he has taken to support Ukrainian students in the UK. [UIN 17423]

**Robert Halfon MP:** The department has extended access to higher education (HE) student finance, home fee status and further education 19+ funding to those who are granted leave under one of the three Ukraine Schemes introduced by the Home Office: the Homes for Ukraine Sponsorship Scheme, the Ukraine Family Scheme and the Ukraine Extension Scheme. Following the recent Home Office announcement on the Ukraine Permission Extension Scheme, the department will be amending the student finance regulations for the 2024/25 academic year so that those granted leave under the new scheme can access support on the same basis as persons with leave under one of the existing Ukraine schemes.

Access to student support is crucial in enabling Ukrainians to attend education to improve their skills and enhance their ability to contribute to the UK, or to the rebuilding of their home country.

The department has also worked closely with the Ukrainian government and UK HE Sector to help facilitate Ukrainian HE entrance exams for students from Ukraine.

## Overseas Students (1)

**Martyn Day MP:** To ask the Secretary of State for Education, what progress her Department has made on implementing the aims of the International Education Strategy to (a) increase the value of education exports to £35 billion per year by 2030 and (b) increase the total number of international students choosing to study in the UK higher education system each year to 600,000 by 2030. [UIN 17445]

**Robert Halfon MP:** The department remains committed to progressing the implementation of the International Education Strategy and has published regular updates, most recently in May 2023, which is available at: <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/international-education-strategy-2023-update>. The strategy sets out progress to date, including total UK revenue from education related exports and transnational education activity, estimated to be £25.6 billion in 2020, and meeting the international student ambition two years running

(2020/21 and 2021/22). Since 2010, the estimated UK revenue from education related exports and transnational education activity has risen by 61.2% in current prices.

The UK's International Education Champion, Professor Sir Steve Smith, continues to promote the UK's education system in key markets, addressing barriers and creating opportunities for education exporters across the sector.

## **UK Council for International Student Affairs: Finance (1)**

**Lord Bilimoria:** To ask His Majesty's Government what current funding they provide for the UK Council for International Student Affairs to provide support for international students, and what assessment they have made of the sufficiency of this funding following the recent changes to immigration rules. [UIN HL2979]

**Baroness Barran:** The department has provided a 3 year grant to support the work of the UK Council for International Student Affairs (UKCISA) for international students in England.

The government remains committed to the ambitions set out in the International Education Strategy, including the aim to host 600,000 international students in the UK per year by 2030. The department is proud to have met this ambition two years running. The department's offer to international students remains very competitive and the department is committed to ensuring the UK remains a destination of choice for international students from across the globe.

Universities offer a range of dedicated support to their international students before they arrive in the UK, on arrival and during their studies. Organisations such as UKCISA and the British Council continue to provide information to international students entering the UK.

## **UK Council for International Student Affairs: Finance (2)**

**Lord Bilimoria:** To ask His Majesty's Government what assessment they have made of the impact of ceasing funding for the UK Council for International Student Affairs to provide international student support, following the recent changes to the student immigration rules. [UIN HL3019]

**Baroness Barran:** The government appreciates the significant economic and cultural contribution that international students make to UK higher education (HE). The



department is proud to have met its international student recruitment ambition two years running.

The department's offer to international students remains very competitive and the department is committed to ensuring the UK remains a destination of choice for the brightest and best international students from across the globe. The UK has a highly sought after HE experience, which is respected by international students. Universities are independent autonomous institutions and can offer a range of dedicated support to their international students before they arrive in the UK, on arrival and during their studies.

The changes to migration policy announced in 2023 strike the right balance between acting decisively on migration while protecting the UK's position as a world-leader in HE.

## **Universities: Antisemitism**

**Marquess of Lothian:** To ask His Majesty's Government what steps they are taking to support Jewish university students following recent increases in incidents of antisemitism on campuses. [UIN HL3156]

**Baroness Barran:** Antisemitism, intimidation, and threats of violence must never be tolerated on university campuses. The Community Security Trust 2023 annual report highlights the unprecedented increase in antisemitic incidents in higher education (HE) and this unacceptable rise is deeply concerning. All antisemitism is abhorrent and universities should have robust systems to deal with incidents of support for unlawful antisemitic abuse and harassment. We will not tolerate unlawful harassment or the glorification of terrorism.

Since the 7 October attacks, we have actively intervened to ensure that universities act swiftly and appropriately to deal with incidents of antisemitism.

The Secretary of State for Education and the Minister for Skills wrote to all universities on 11 October 2023, urging them to respond swiftly to hate-related incidents, and actively reassure Jewish students that they can study without fear of harassment or intimidation. The Minister wrote again to Vice Chancellors on 16 November 2023, emphasising that they must use disciplinary measures wherever appropriate, highlighting the importance of police engagement, and reiterating that student visas could be suspended where a foreign national is found to have committed or incited acts of racial hatred. This was one of the key actions set out in

the five point plan for tackling antisemitism in HE, which was published on 5 November 2023. The plan also involves:

- Calling for visas to be withdrawn from international students who incite racial hatred. Visas are a privilege, not a right, and we will not hesitate to remove them from people who abuse them.
- Logging specific cases and sharing them with the Office for Students for their consideration.
- Continuing to make it clear in all discussions that acts that may be criminal should be referred to the police.
- Establishing a Tackling Antisemitism Quality Seal which will be an award available to universities who can demonstrate the highest standards in tackling antisemitism.

On 22 November 2023, the department announced in the Autumn Statement an additional £7 million over three years to tackle antisemitism in education. The Quality Seal will be the cornerstone of this package for universities, providing a framework of measures that will make clear what good practice is in tackling antisemitism in HE, and making sure that our universities are a safe and welcoming space for Jewish students and staff.

The department will not hesitate to take further action across education to stamp out antisemitism and harassment of Jewish pupils, students and staff.

## **Higher Education: Antisemitism**

**Andrew Rosindell MP:** To ask the Secretary of State for Education, what steps her Department is taking to tackle anti-Semitism in higher education institutions in the South East. [UIN 17860]

**Robert Halfon MP:** Antisemitism, intimidation, and threats of violence must never be tolerated on university campuses. The Community Security Trust 2023 annual report highlights the unprecedented increase in antisemitic incidents in higher education (HE). This unacceptable rise is deeply concerning. All antisemitism is abhorrent, and universities should have robust systems to deal with incidents of support for unlawful antisemitic abuse and harassment. The department will not tolerate unlawful harassment or the glorification of terrorism.

Ever since the October 7 attacks, the department has actively intervened to ensure that universities, including those located in the South East, act swiftly and appropriately to deal with incidents of antisemitism. I have reached out to many Vice Chancellors personally when a concern has been raised about antisemitism on their campus.

Furthermore, my right hon. Friend, the Secretary of State for Education, and I wrote to all universities on 11 October 2023, urging them to respond swiftly to hate-related incidents and to actively reassure Jewish students that they can study without fear of harassment or intimidation. I wrote again to Vice Chancellors on 16 November 2023, emphasising that they must use disciplinary measures wherever appropriate, highlighting the importance of police engagement, and reiterating that student visas could be suspended where a foreign national is found to have committed or incited acts of racial hatred. This was one of the key actions set out in the five point plan for tackling antisemitism in HE, which was published on 5 November 2023. The plan also involves:

- Calling for visas to be withdrawn from international students who incite racial hatred. Visas are a privilege, not a right, and the government won't hesitate to remove them from people who abuse them.
- Logging specific cases and sharing them with the Office for Students for their consideration.
- Continuing to make it clear in all discussions that acts that may be criminal should be referred to the police.
- Establishing a Tackling Antisemitism Quality Seal, which will be an award available to universities who can demonstrate the highest standards in tackling antisemitism.

On 22 November, the government announced in the Autumn Statement an additional £7 million over three years to tackle antisemitism in education. The Quality Seal will be the cornerstone of this package for universities, providing a framework of measures that will make clear what good practice is in tackling antisemitism in HE, and making sure that our universities are a safe and welcoming space for Jewish students and staff, as for all students and staff.

The department will not hesitate to take further action across education to stamp out antisemitism and harassment of Jewish pupils, students and staff.

## Overseas Students: Ukraine (2)

**Wendy Chamberlain MP:** To ask the Secretary of State for Education, pursuant to the Answer of 11 March 2024 to Question 16899 on Overseas Students: Ukraine, whether Ukrainian students will be able to continue studying with home fee status if their leave to remain in the UK is transferred to international student status at the closure of the Ukraine Permission Extension Scheme. [UIN 17991]

**Robert Halfon MP:** Changes have been made to the Education (Fees and Awards) (England) Regulations 2007 from the 2024/25 academic year so that, where a person's Ukraine Permission Extension Scheme leave expires during their course and they are granted further leave to remain under one of the standard immigration routes, they will continue to be eligible to access home fee status in order to complete their studies.

## Schools: Universities

**Munira Wilson MP:** To ask the Secretary of State for Education, for what reason her Department has included Russell Group progression as a measure in school performance data and whether she has made an assessment of the potential impact of this inclusion on (a) schools and (b) non-Russell Group universities. [UIN 16510]

**Damian Hinds MP:** The percentage of students progressing to Russell Group universities metric provides useful information to parents and students about which schools and colleges support their students to go on to study at this group of research intensive institutions. This is a supplementary measure to the department's main headline and top-level additional destination measures. Russell Group is a term which is widely understood. Most Russell Group universities are in the top third higher education institutions.

The department keeps all measures under regular review.

## Carer's Allowance: Young People

**Tanmanjeet Singh Dhesi MP:** To ask the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions, whether he has had discussions with (a) young carers and (b) advocacy groups on amending Carer's Allowance eligibility rules for people wishing to study more than 21 hours per week. [UIN 19151]

**Mims Davies MP:** The department regularly meets with groups of carers and those representing them at both Ministerial and Official level to discuss a range of issues, including Carer's Allowance. Officials met a delegation of young carers, supported by the Carers Trust and the Learning and Work Institute, on 13 March.

Carer's Allowance was introduced principally to provide a measure of financial support and recognition for people who are not able to work full time due to their caring responsibilities.

The Government thinks it is right that people in full-time education should be supported by the educational maintenance system, via its range of loans and grants, and not the social security benefit system. That is why, as a general principle, full-time students are usually precluded from entitlement to income-related and income-maintenance benefits.

There are currently no plans to change the full-time education rules for Carer's Allowance, but carers are able to undertake part-time education and still receive Carer's Allowance.

## **Academic Freedom**

**Paul Blomfield MP:** To ask the Secretary of State for Education, if she will hold discussions with the Office for Students on ensuring that the forthcoming guidance for higher education providers on (a) securing free speech within the law and (b) publishing and maintaining a freedom of speech code of practice is published before 1 August 2024. [UIN 17725]

**David Johnston MP:** The remaining provisions of the Higher Education (Freedom of Speech) Act 2023 will come into force in two phases. The main provisions of the Act, introducing free speech duties on higher education providers, constituent institutions and students' unions, and the new complaints scheme, will come into force on 1 August 2024. The Office for Students (OfS) has already launched two consultations that will feed into new complaints scheme rules and guidance for students' unions on the OfS's approach to regulating them. These will be published before the 1 August 2024.

The second phase involves provisions relating to new conditions of registration on providers and monitoring of overseas funding. These will come into force on 1 September 2025.

The OfS expects to consult shortly on the proposed revisions to the regulatory framework, including on its approach to the recovery of costs, as well as on more detailed guidance on securing free speech within the law and on maintaining a free speech code of practice. The OfS consultations are not yet live, and the OfS will require time to run the consultation, analyse the results and publish a response before they can publish the guidance to which they relate. Precise timings on the publication of guidance are a matter for the OfS.

## **Universities: Antisemitism and Islamophobia**

**Stephen Morgan MP:** To ask the Secretary of State for Education, what steps she is taking to help reduce cases of (a) anti-Semitism and (b) Islamophobia on university campuses. [UIN 18580]

**Robert Halfon MP:** This government condemns in the strongest possible terms any form of racial or religiously motivated harassment or violence. In the context of the conflict in the Middle East, there have been unprecedented rises in antisemitic and Islamophobic incidents, which are abhorrent on every level. Universities should be welcoming and inclusive environments and higher education (HE) providers have a responsibility to take a zero tolerance approach to any form of racial or religious harassment. They have clear responsibilities under the Equality Act 2010 to adopt robust policies and procedures that enable them to investigate and swiftly address reports of racism.

The Community Security Trust has reported an unprecedented rise in antisemitic incidents, which is totally unacceptable.

To support Jewish students, the Secretary of State for Education and I wrote to all universities on 11 October 2023, urging them to respond swiftly to hate-related incidents and actively reassure Jewish students that they can study without fear of harassment or intimidation. I wrote again to Vice Chancellors on 16 November 2023, emphasising that they must use disciplinary measures wherever appropriate, highlighting the importance of police engagement, and reiterating that student visas could be suspended where a foreign national is found to have committed or incited acts of racial hatred. This was one of the key actions set out in the five-point plan for tackling antisemitism in HE, which was published on 5 November 2023. The plan also involves:

- Calling for visas to be withdrawn from international students who incite racial hatred. Visas are a privilege, not a right, and the government will not hesitate to remove them from people who abuse them.
- Logging specific cases and sharing them with the Office for Students for their consideration.
- Continuing to make it clear in all discussions that acts that may be criminal should be referred to the police.
- Establishing a Tackling Antisemitism Quality Seal which will be an award available to universities who can demonstrate the highest standards in tackling antisemitism.

On 22 November 2023, the government announced in the Autumn Statement an additional £7 million over three years to tackle antisemitism in education. The Quality Seal will be the cornerstone of this package for universities, providing a framework of measures that will make clear what good practice is in tackling antisemitism in HE, and making sure that universities are a safe and welcoming space for Jewish students and staff, as for all students and staff.

Anti-Muslim hatred is equally abhorrent and has no place in our society. No one should ever be a victim of hatred because of their religion or belief and the government is continuing to work with police and community partners to monitor and combat it.

This government is proud to have funded Tell MAMA, a service that supports victims of anti-Muslim hatred, with over £6 million since their inception in 2012. Tell MAMA's work has been recognised internationally as a good practice model in recording and monitoring anti-Muslim hate. The organisation has documented 2,010 Islamophobic incidents in the UK between 7 October 2023 and 7 February 2024. This represents a steep rise from the 600 it recorded for the same period the year previously. The government will not tolerate religious hatred towards Muslims and that is why the Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities put in place an extra £4.9 million of protective security funding for Muslim mosques, faith schools and communities.

The new Protective Security for Mosques Scheme provides physical protective security measures (such as CCTV, intruder alarms and secure perimeter fencing) in both mosques and associated Muslim faith community centres. Protective security measures are also available to Muslim faith schools. Headteachers of eligible schools were contacted directly by the Home Office in January 2023 to register their interest.

Lastly, as my right hon. Friend, Minister Buchan stated on 4 March 2024, the Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities plan to appoint a new independent adviser on anti-Muslim hatred, and it will update the house shortly.

## **Students: Cost of Living**

**Stephen Morgan MP:** To ask the Secretary of State for Education, what steps her Department is taking to help support postgraduate students with the cost of living. [UIN 18576]

**Robert Halfon MP:** The government introduced postgraduate loans as a contribution to the cost of postgraduate level study.

The maximum loan available has continued to increase each year, by 2.8% for the current 2023/24 academic year, with a further 2.5% increase announced for 2024/25.

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

Overall, support to households to help with the high cost of living is worth £94 billion over 2022/23 to 2024/25, an average of £3,300 per UK household. The government believes this will ease the pressure on family budgets and will in turn enable many families to provide additional support to their children in HE to help them meet increased living costs.

Students in private rented accommodation who are provided energy through a commercial entity may also benefit from the Energy Bills Discount Scheme (EBDS) which provides a baseline discount on energy bills for non-domestic users locked into high fixed price tariffs. Any non-domestic user who benefits from the EBDS must ensure the benefit is passed through to the end user, such as students in private rented accommodation. The EBDS runs for 12 months from 1 April 2023 to 31 March 2024.

## **Universities: Admissions**

**Stephen Morgan MP:** To ask the Secretary of State for Education, what assessment she has made of the potential impact of planned reforms to university admissions on the (a) number and (b) demographic of students applying to university. [UIN 18581]



**Robert Halfon MP:** Higher education (HE) providers are autonomous organisations responsible for their own admissions decisions. The government takes a close interest in ensuring that the HE admissions system is fair and works well for students.

UCAS have reformed the academic reference for 2024 HE admissions to provide clarity and improve fairness for applicants. UCAS have also consulted on reform of the applicant personal statement to simplify the process and ensure that universities hear from applicants in their own words.

The department will continue to work with UCAS and sector bodies to improve transparency of the university admissions process, enhance student choice, and to improve fairness for applicants of all backgrounds.

## **Overseas Students (2)**

**Stephen Morgan MP:** To ask the Secretary of State for Education, what recent assessment she has made of the impact of trends in the number of international students on higher education institutions. [UIN 18579]

**Robert Halfon MP:** The government keeps under review the number of international students attending our universities.

The government is proud of the UK's world class higher education (HE) sector and recognises the contribution made by international students to our universities. The department is proud to have met its international student recruitment ambition, as set out in the International Education Strategy in each of the past two years.

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

# Sector News

## **Universities UK respond to the government's new definition of extremism – UUK statement**

On Friday 15 March, Universities UK published its response to the government's new definition of extremism. The response raises concerns around the government's intention to extend to universities in the future and universities being referred to by government as 'non-central government institutions' in relation to the new definition. UUK urged the government to 'confirm they will not extend the application of this new approach to universities'.

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

## **Universities UK responds to Sunday Times article on recruitment of international students on pathway courses – UUK response**

On Sunday 17 March, Universities UK (UUK) published its response to the [Sunday Times article](#) about the recruitment of international students on pathway courses, Vivienne Stern MBE, Chief Executive of Universities UK said:

International students do not reduce the number of places available to home students. Although the number of international students in our universities has risen, the number of places for home students has also increased. In fact, since universities in all parts of the UK lose money teaching home students, they need other sources of income to ensure that they can continue to increase home places.

The UK is a popular destination for international students due to the fact that they are internationally recognised for their high quality. The fact that our universities attract students from around the world is unequivocally a good thing. It is good for other students, who learn alongside peers from many other countries; it is good for universities, and it is good for the economies of towns and cities right across the UK. Overall, in 2021/22 international students contributed £42bn to the UK economy, and international education is one of the UK's most successful export sectors.

International pathways are a small but important part of this picture. They support student success by helping prepare students coming into our universities from different education systems. They are not a guarantee of entry into a full degree. International students on pathway courses have to achieve the academic standards required to pass the course, and not all students manage this. Pathway providers report that, even after one year of intensive study, 20–25% of students do not progress from the pathway programme onto a full undergraduate programme at the partner university.

However, we recognise the importance of maintaining public confidence that the admissions system is fair and transparent, which is why we have commissioned an external review by the QAA into International Foundation Programmes and International Year One Programmes, including their entry requirements. This work is underway and will report in the coming months.

You can [read the response](#).

### **UCEA and UUK urge the HE Minister to address TPS funding shortfall as the sector’s financial concern – UCEA and UUK letter**

On Monday 18 March, the Universities and Colleges Employers Association (UCEA) and Universities UK (UUK) wrote to the Minister for Skills, Apprenticeships and Higher Education, Rt Hon Robert Halfon MP, to highlight concerns regarding the unfunded increase in employer contributions to the Teachers’ Pension Scheme (TPS) that is due to apply from April 2024.

The letter, which has been published online, asks for the Minister to support a review of HE participation in TPS and highlights the outstanding consultation from 2019 on HE participation in the Local Government Pension Scheme. Although the specifics of the schemes may differ, the principle remains that post-92 HEIs need greater control over the pension schemes they provide to their staff, now more than ever.

You can [read the letter](#).

### **International talent is crucial if the UK is to achieve its research intensity ambitions – CaSE briefing**

On Tuesday 19 March, the Campaign for Science and Engineering (CaSE) published an immigration briefing.

It recommends:

1. Reduce the upfront cost of UK visas.
2. Clarify eligibility for the Global Talent Visa.
3. Increase visa flexibility.
4. Support business to navigate the visa system.
5. De-risk visa sponsorship for organisations.
6. Mitigate the impact of visa changes on students and universities.

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

## **The missing link: Higher education funding and quality – QAA policy paper**

On Wednesday 20 March, the Quality Assurance Agency (QAA) published the latest in their Policy Series: The Future of Quality in England, examining the relationship between quality and the current English higher education funding landscape.

It recommends:

- The delivery of high-quality education requires a long-term sustainable funding model.
- New initiatives and government priorities need to be fully funded.
- Diversification of income streams should be supported by the policy environment.

Eve Alcock, Director of Public Affairs at QAA, said:

Given the levels of concern being voiced about the impacts of current sectoral funding uncertainties, we feel an organisational responsibility to underline the importance of the quality aspects of this situation at this crucial point for higher education in England and across the UK.

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

## **Reforming Student Maintenance – Sutton Trust report**

On Thursday 21 March, the Sutton Trust published a general election policy briefing on the student maintenance system.

The policy briefing recommends a package of proposals, with modelling that shows how one of these proposals, alongside other changes in the system, could be achieved with little or no additional costs to public finances. This involves:

- The re-introduction of maintenance grants for poorer students in England to reduce debt and better align with the approach in the rest of the UK.
- An increase in the overall amount of maintenance available, to better reflect students' costs.
- A widening of eligibility for support, by increasing the parental income thresholds used to determine how much support a student can receive – these loan thresholds have been frozen since 2016 despite rampant inflation.
- Changes to repayment terms to make the system more progressive, with lower overall repayments for lower income graduates, and higher for higher earners in the long term. However monthly repayments would reduce, meaning an effective 'tax cut' for all graduates in terms of their monthly outgoings on graduation.

Sir Peter Lampl, Founder of the Sutton Trust and Founder of the Education Endowment Foundation, said:

It's outrageous that the poorest students are racking up the highest levels of debt. These students are the most debt-averse, so under the current system this increasingly deters them from going to university.

All political parties must commit to re-introducing maintenance grants, and overall levels of maintenance should be increased, so that students can meet their basic needs without graduating with excessive debt. There's absolutely no excuse for failing to create a fairer system.

Professor Dame Sally Mapstone DBE, FRSE, President of Universities UK and Principal and Vice-Chancellor of the University of St Andrews said:

This report is a helpful contribution to the policy debate and highlights the urgency of addressing the inadequate maintenance package which disproportionately impacts students from low-income families. Without action, we run the risk of deterring disadvantaged students from attending university due to financial pressures.

Responding to the rising costs of utility bills, rent and food, universities have stepped up efforts to alleviate financial pressures during the cost-of-living crisis. However, it's imperative that the maintenance support package in England is reviewed to reflect recent rates of inflation. The below inflation maintenance uplift of 2.5% for 2024/25 means that students receiving the maximum maintenance package are around £1,900 per year worse off than they would have been if correct inflation measures were used over the last four years.

We want to prioritise reinstating maintenance grants for those who need them most and to uprate maintenance loans to reflect real rates of inflation and changes to household incomes to ensure future students have the same opportunities as those of the last decade.

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

## **£14 million degree apprenticeships funding announced by Office for Students – OfS press release**

On Thursday 21 March, the Office for Students (OfS) confirmed a second wave of investment of £14 million to increase the number of Level 6 degree apprenticeships in England.

The funding will be used to:

- Expand provision at those providers already offering Level 6 degree apprenticeships.
- Enable some providers to offer Level 6 degree apprenticeships for the first time.
- Increase the number of students on Level 6 degree apprenticeships.
- Increase equality of opportunity for students into and during Level 6 degree apprenticeships.

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

## **UK revenue from education related exports and transnational education activity – DfE data**

On Thursday 21 March, the Department for Education (DfE) published annual estimates of UK revenue from education-related exports and transnational education (TNE) activity for 2021. They show a total figure of £27.9bn in 2021. 77.9% of this was accounted for by Higher Education.

TNE activity includes education programmes that take place outside the UK, either through partner institutions, or directly through distance learning or international campuses.

Jamie Arrowsmith, Director of Universities UK International, said:

These figures underline the huge contribution international students make to the UK - adding £21.7 billion to UK exports in 2021. This is a huge achievement, and one that will no doubt be welcomed by the government.

However, the attractiveness of the UK as a study destination is under threat. The number of international choosing the UK has started to fall, with the number of study visas issued down 5.5% in 2023. The government's announcement that the Graduate route will be reviewed has added to a challenging recruitment environment, creating a great deal of uncertainty for students and universities alike. Almost half (45%) of prospective students say they would reconsider their study destination if the post-study work offer was curtailed.

Universities are key to driving growth, innovation, and prosperity. Eroding our attractiveness to international students will only undermine the contribution that our institutions – and international students – make to communities across the whole of the UK.

You can [see the data in full](#).