



The All-Party Parliamentary **University Group**

University APPG weekly update

19 – 23 June 2023

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

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Parliamentary business

Economic Activity of Public Bodies (Overseas Matters) Bill – Commons first reading

On Monday 19 June, the Economic Activity of Public Bodies (Overseas Matters) Bill received its first reading in the House of Commons.

The Bill aims to prevent “public authorities” (which include institutions that receive large public investment) from conducting their own boycotts and divestment campaigns against foreign countries or territories.

You can [read more information](#) here.

Lifelong Learning (Higher Education Fee Limits) Bill – Lords second reading

On Monday 19 June, the Lifelong Learning (Higher Education Fee Limits) Bill received its second reading in the House of Lords.

The Minister for School Standards and Student Finance, Baroness Barran, opened the second reading by saying the Bill would ‘make it easier for people to study flexibly, preventing learners being charged disproportionately for choosing to study in a way that suits them, and ultimately to acquire skills that can transform their lives.’

Baroness Wilcox (Labour) reiterated Labour’s support for the Lifelong Loan Entitlement (LLE) and the credit-based method for determining fees but said the main shortcoming of the Bill was the lack of detail. She asked the Minister what the strategic vision for modular funding within the LLE was, and if it was the intention for most modules of designated courses ultimately to be eligible for funding. She asked if per-credit fee limits would be set at different levels depending on whether a course is full time or part time, face to face or distance learning, or based on the subject or level of study.

She probed if all students would be included in the LLE from 2025, or if there would be transitional arrangements in place. She asked how the design details of the LLE would work in practice, including those on Equivalent or Lower Qualification (ELQ) rules and residual entitlements for those who already have higher education qualifications.

She asked if providers would continue to receive support from the part-time student premium to help with additional costs, adding it was important to ensure this flexibility was considered.

She concluded her remarks by stating that Labour would table amendments on these issues.

Several Peers raised concerns about potential demand for the LLE, given there was poor take up of the short courses trial. Baroness Garden of Frognal (Liberal Democrat), agreed the Bill was welcome but short on details. She said the Liberal Democrats were not convinced that large cohorts of adult learners would be keen to take on debt in the form of the LLE. They instead proposed a skills wallet for learners.

Several Peers were concerned about the effect of the Bill on distance learners. Baroness Garden noted that the Open University was among those interested in understanding how the Bill would support distance learners. Lord Stevens of Birmingham (Crossbench) pressed the Minister to reconsider the prohibition on maintenance support for distance learners. Lord Watson of Invergowrie (Labour) asked the Minister if she could say, why she and other Ministers, were apparently ignoring their own officials on this key matter.

Lord Willetts (Conservative) asked for further details on how the new third category of OfS registration, which would enable new providers to come in and supplement existing provision from established universities, would work. He further asked the Minister to reconcile the fact the policy encouraged learners to dip in and out of courses, with the OfS' "monitoring and criticising universities with high drop-out rates".

In her reply, the Minister began by addressing the credit transfer issues. She said the government would not impose credit transfer arrangements but would instead seek to facilitate credit transfer through other methods, including through a requirement for providers to produce a standardised transcript on the completion of individual modules.

She also clarified that the government did not intend to change the number of learning hours in a credit unless standards in the sector changed.

On timing of the secondary legislation, she said it would be laid by Autumn 2024 in time for implementation in 2025.

Regarding the speed of the rollout, which was raised by several Peers, she stated that the government would be taking a phased approach to modular funding, making sure that there was clear employer demand and that they addressed skills gaps.

The initial focus from the start of the academic year 2025-26 would be on modules of higher technical qualifications and modules of technical qualifications at levels 4 and 5 currently funded through the Advance Learner Loan system where there was a clear line of sight to an occupational standard and employer support.

Turning to the issues of inclusion of level 3 and 7 courses, raised by several Peers, there were three main reasons for the focus the government have announced on level 4 to 6 courses. The first related to how the LLE itself would apply to level 7 courses; the second related to the existing funding for level 3 courses, in particular; and the third related to the economic opportunities created by greater uptake of levels 4 and 5. In the longer term the government would consider how funding for level 3 provision could best work.

On level 7 qualifications, she said the LLE will be the student finance system for all study at levels 4 to 6 from 2025, across HE and FE. Integrated master's courses will also be in scope. More broadly, level 7 and above are already served by separate student finance products such as postgraduate master's and doctoral loans. In contrast, level 3 courses are funded for a range of individuals through other funding streams, such as free courses for jobs and the adult education budget. In addition, individuals will still be able to take out advanced learner loans for level 3 courses. The adult education budget includes a statutory entitlement to full funding for eligible adult learners aged 19 to 23 undertaking their first full qualification at level 3, and the free courses for jobs offer introduced in April 2021 gives eligible adults the chance to access high-value level 3 qualifications for free, which can support them to gain wages for a better job.

On the quality of provision, she said the OfS would continue to regulate providers and uphold quality. It will consult on introducing a new registration category for providers of courses that were formerly funded by advanced learner loans—including initial and ongoing conditions that would be appropriate.

On part-time learners and maintenance loans, she said the LLE maintenance offer would be available for part-time study below level 6. That was a major change and positive step forward from the current system as the vast majority of part-time level 4 and 5 courses did not currently qualify for the maintenance loans.

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

University research investigation – PMQs

During Prime Minister's Questions on Wednesday 21 June, Rt Hon David Davis MP (Conservative) asked the Prime Minister to initiate an investigation into claims made by the [Jewish Chronicle](#) that British universities were undertaking research in collaboration with Iran in areas of potential military applications.

In his reply, the Prime Minister, said the Department for Business and Trade were investigating the allegations. He also said the government were taking measures to improve the robustness of national security systems, including expanding the scope of the Academic Technology Approval Scheme.

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

Higher Education (Duty of Care) – Private Members' Bill

On Wednesday 21 June, the Higher Education (Duty of Care) Bill received its first reading in the House of Commons. The Private Members' Bill is sponsored by Tim Farron MP (Liberal Democrat).

The Bill is intended to 'provide that higher education institutions have a duty of care for their students; and for connected purposes'. The second reading is currently scheduled for 24 November 2023.

You can [read more information](#) here.

Forthcoming business

Horizon Europe – Lords oral question

On Wednesday 28 June from 3:00pm, the House of Lords will consider ‘benefits to the economy arising from scientific discoveries or advances as a result of the UK's former participation in Horizon Europe.’ This oral question has been tabled by Lord Moylan (Conservative).

You can [watch the session](#) here.

Written Questions

Students: Mental Health

Justin Madders: To ask the Secretary of State for Education, whether her Department has held recent discussions with universities on student mental health. [UIN 188735]

Robert Halfon: It is a priority for the government that students are provided with the mental health support they need. The department engages regularly with universities and the broader higher education (HE) sector in pursuit of this goal.

We have made clear to the sector that our approach to supporting student mental health has three pillars:

- Funding vital services and innovative projects via the Office for Students.
- Spreading and implementing best practice consistently across providers.
- Clear responsibilities for providers and protection for students, with solutions developed by the Student Support Champion.

I recently met with Universities UK (UUK), who represent 115 English Universities, to inform them of the department's ambitions for the sector on mental health going forward. On 5 June 2023, I wrote to all university leaders, asking for their strongest possible commitment to the mental health of our students, including by showing ownership of mental health at an executive level. The department set a target for universities to sign up to the Mental Health Charter by September 2024, so universities take a whole-university approach to mental health and wellbeing and follow the principles set out in the Mental Health Charter.

We also made clear to the sector that we expect them to follow relevant best practice guidance shared with them by UUK and mental health experts.

The department will be engaging with the sector on implementation of best practice through the Higher Education Mental Health Taskforce. I have asked Student Support Champion, Professor Edward Peck to lead this, working with the sector, parents and students, and mental health experts. The Taskforce will set strong, clear, and measurable targets on which HE providers will report. The Taskforce will conclude its work with a final report in May next year, having produced an interim plan by the end of this year.

I will be chairing a roundtable with university and wider HE leaders to explore how the sector can make further improvements on mental health support, working alongside mental health experts and government.

Confucius Institutes

Damian Green: To ask the Secretary of State for Education, whether she has made a recent assessment of the potential impact of the work of Confucius Institutes on freedom of speech at universities. [UIN 187875]

Claire Coutinho: The department recognises concerns about overseas interference in the higher education (HE) sector, including through Confucius Institutes. We regularly assess the risks facing academia. The department is taking action to remove any government funding from Confucius Institutes in the UK, but currently judges that it would be disproportionate to ban them.

Like any international body operating in the UK, Confucius Institutes need to operate transparently and within the law, with a full commitment to our values of openness and freedom of expression. Universities also have a responsibility to ensure that any partnership with a Confucius Institute is managed appropriately, and that the right due diligence is in place.

The Higher Education (Freedom of Speech) Act 2023 will ensure that universities in England have the tools they need to deal with interference with, and threats to, freedom of speech and academic freedom wherever they originate. Section 9 of the Act will require the Office for Students to monitor the overseas funding of registered HE providers and their constituent institutions, in order to assess the extent to which such funding arrangements present a risk to freedom of speech and academic freedom in HE. This includes the reporting of educational or commercial partnerships and would therefore cover arrangements with, for example, Confucius Institutes.

The department is now going further in the Integrated Review Refresh, launching a new and comprehensive review of legislative and other provisions designed to protect the academic sector, to identify what more we could or should be doing.

The government is clear that any challenges to our core values, whatever their origin, will not be tolerated.

Overseas Students: Sponsorship

Claire Hanna: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department, if she will make it her policy to consult with (a) institutions supported by the Student premium customer service for sponsors and (b) hon. Members with institutions supported by the Student premium customer service for sponsors in their constituencies on the proposed disbanding of the premium customer services team. [UIN 188407]

Robert Jenrick: The review of the charged service offering provided by the Study Premium Customer Service team was initiated in response to extensive feedback from educational institutions and sector representative bodies on the services available. We have commenced a programme of engagement on this matter with existing subscribers of the service and education sector groups including The UK Council for International Student Affairs (UKCISA), Million Plus and Universities UK.

Office for Students: Freedom of Expression

Matt Western: To ask the Secretary of State for Education, how many people applied for the Director of Freedom of Speech and Academic Freedom position at the Office for Students. [UIN 187493]

Claire Coutinho: The department received 16 applications for the role of Director for Freedom of Speech and Academic Freedom. Professor Arif Ahmed was appointed to the role on 1 June 2023, and will begin at the Office for Students (OfS) on 14 August.

The Director was appointed by my right hon. Friend, the Secretary of State for Education in the same way that other board members of the OfS are appointed, under the Higher Education and Research Act 2017. Officials at the department managed the recruitment process. The department has not conducted an assessment of the costs involved.

The Director role is a full-time executive position. It is a fixed term appointment, with the option of being extended up to a maximum of ten years. The role was advertised with a starting salary of £99,164, but this may be higher due to pay rises in some areas of the public sector in 2022. The Director's working hours and starting salary will be agreed in his contract with the OfS. The Director will be eligible to join the Civil Service Pension Scheme.

Students: Fees and Charges

Lord Taylor of Warwick: To ask His Majesty's Government what steps they are taking to review the cost of tuition fees. [UIN HL8258]

Baroness Barran: The student finance and funding system must provide value for money for all of society at a time of rising costs. It is important that a sustainable student finance system is in place, that is both fair to students and fair to taxpayers. The department is freezing maximum tuition fees for the 2023/24 and 2024/25 academic years. By 2024/25, maximum fees will have been frozen for seven years.

Maximum tuition fees, and the subsidised loans available from the government to pay them, remain at £9,250 for the current 2022/23 academic year in respect of standard full-time courses.

We believe a continued fee freeze achieves the best balance between ensuring that the system remains financially sustainable, offering good value for the taxpayer, and reducing debt levels for students in real terms.

Higher Education providers are autonomous and responsible for setting their own fees under this level. In deciding to keep charging full fees, providers will want to ensure that they can continue to deliver courses which are fit for purpose and that help students progress their qualifications.

Sector News

OfS Annual report and accounts 2022-23

On Tuesday 20 June, the Office for Students (OfS) published its annual report and accounts for 2022-23.

The report covers the regulator's fifth year of operation, and its progress in delivering against regulatory objectives. It includes statements from Susan Lapworth, chief executive of the OfS, and Lord Wharton, Chair of the OfS.

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

Value of the Humanities – University of Oxford report

On Wednesday 21 June, the University of Oxford published a report highlighting the value of humanities to future careers and wider society.

The report used an innovative methodology to understand how humanities graduates have fared over their whole careers, rather than a fixed point in time after graduation.

The report's key findings include:

- Humanities graduates develop resilience, flexibility, and skills to adapt to challenging and changing labour markets.
- The skills developed by studying a humanities degree, such as communication, creativity and working in a team, are "highly valued and sought out by employers".
- Humanities graduates have high levels of job satisfaction, and many said their primary motivation for studying their subject was not financial.

The report makes recommendations to universities, employers, and government to help young people make a transition into work:

- Offer support for a smooth transition into the workplace.
- Provide internships, focused in particular on less advantaged students.

- Support skills development in digital and working in a team and provide students with insights into the changing labour market.

Professor Dan Grimley, Head of Humanities at Oxford University, said: 'This report confirms what I and so many humanities graduates will already recognise: that the skills and experiences conferred by studying a humanities subject can transform their working life, their life as a whole, and the world around them.'

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

Student academic experience survey 2023 – HEPI/Advance HE

On Thursday 22 June, the Higher Education Policy Institute (HEPI), in partnership with Advance HE, published the 2023 Student Academic Experience Survey.

The Student Academic Experience Survey, provides comprehensive data on the academic experience of full-time undergraduates in UK institutions.

Key findings from this year's survey, to which there were over 10,000 responses, show:

- 76% of students feel that the cost of living crisis has affected their studies. 50% state that their studies were impacted "a little" and over a quarter (26%) state that their studies were affected "a lot".
- There has been a major increase in the number of students in paid employment, from 45% to 55%.
- The average number of hours per week spent in class, fieldwork or studying independently has risen from 30.7 to 33.4.
- The proportion who would choose the same course and institution again remains similar at 58%, compared to 59% in 2022.
- 37% of students said they received good or very good value for money.
- The proportion of students whose experience exceeded expectations increased from 17% to 19%.

Nick Hillman, Director of HEPI said: "Given there is an expectation of a general election in the next year or so, we urge policymakers to engage with what students

are saying via this year's results. The survey shines a spotlight on the areas of higher education that are working well and the areas working less well."

Universities UK said: "It is encouraging to see that satisfaction amongst students from underrepresented groups has improved compared to last year, and that the proportion of students rating the quality and value of their degree has gone up. However, this data definitively shows that students' university experience is being negatively impacted by the cost-of-living crisis."

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

HEPI Annual Conference

On Thursday 22 June, the Higher Education Policy Institute (HEPI) hosted its annual conference.

The conference considered the future of higher education at a time of technological revolution, changing regulation and political uncertainty. It heard from a range of speakers including Rt Hon Robert Halfon MP, Minister for Skills, Apprenticeships, and Higher Education, and Matt Western MP, Shadow Minister for Higher Education.

Robert Halfon signalled that the government would 'soon respond' to proposals in the higher education reform consultation, which included minimum entry requirements, number controls on providers or courses with poor outcomes and fees for foundation years. He reiterated the importance of universities meeting the skills need including through degree apprenticeships. He said providers should inform prospective students about the number of contact hours, how they will be provided, and the overall balance between online and face to face teaching.

In his remarks, Matt Western called for a 'mission-led' approach to higher education in government. He said that he would not countenance 'regressive' caps on student numbers. He highlighted that Labour wanted to see a 'healthy, well-regulated sector'.

You can [read more](#) here.