



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

## University APPG weekly update

2 – 6 October 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

## **Recess**

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# Forthcoming business

## **Recess**

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# Written Questions

## Children: North of England

**Rachael Maskell MP:** To ask the Secretary of State for Education, what assessment she has made of the potential role of (a) further education colleges and (b) universities in tackling the level of inequality of educational outcomes for children in the North of England. [UIN 198819]

**Robert Halfon MP:** This government is focused on levelling up opportunity so that every young person, regardless of their background or geographic location, can get the skills and training needed to secure rewarding, well-paid jobs and move up the ladder of opportunity.

To help improve people's lives and boost the economy, the government's skills mission sets out an ambition for 200,000 more people to complete high-quality training in England each year by 2030. This includes 80,000 more people completing courses in areas of England with the lowest skills levels.

The department wants to make sure that it is raising skill levels in the places where they are lowest, so that more people have the skills they need to get good jobs. Skills are a crucial driver of economic disparities between people and places. Boosting skills improves human capital and is a clear way to improve the earnings potential and life chances of people who have already left school.

This government has built a new skills system from the ground up, recognising that skills are crucial in driving long-term economic growth and is taking forward major reforms set out in the Skills for Jobs White Paper: delivering T Levels, boosting apprenticeships, approving Higher Technical Qualifications, rolling out Skills Bootcamps, and introducing the Lifelong Learning Entitlement from 2025. The paper is available at: <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/skills-for-jobs-lifelong-learning-for-opportunity-and-growth>(opens in a new tab).

The department would like to see more young people from disadvantaged backgrounds accessing apprenticeships which are so crucial in driving social mobility. This is why £1,000 has been provided to both employers when they take on apprentices aged under 19, or 19- to 24-year-old apprentices who have an Education, Health and Care Plan. Apprentices that are under the age of 25 that have been in local authority care can also claim a bursary of £3,000.

In November 2021, the department issued guidance to the Office for Students, asking it to refocus the access and participation regime to create a system that supports young people from disadvantaged backgrounds throughout their education.

Prior attainment is a key determinant of successful participation in higher education. That is why the department has asked universities to take on a more direct role in driving up the standards in schools. The department wants universities to:

Work more with schools and colleges to raise standards so that students have more options and can choose the path that is right for them.

Move away from just getting disadvantaged students through the door, and instead tackle dropout rates and support students through university to graduation and into high skilled, high paid jobs.

Offer more courses that are linked to skills and flexible learning such as degree apprenticeships, higher technical qualifications, and part time courses.

The department is providing £30 million of funding to Uni Connect through the Strategic Priorities (SP) Grant for 2023/24. Uni Connect delivers targeted interventions and support aimed at increasing the number of young people from under represented areas going into further and higher education by bringing together universities, colleges and local partners.

There are several Uni Connect partnerships throughout the North of England, including Inspiring Choices in York. So far, over one million young people from underrepresented groups have engaged with the Uni Connect programme.

## **Erasmus+ Programme**

**Lord Wigley:** To ask His Majesty's Government how much funding was received by (1) Wales and (2) Scotland, under the EU's Erasmus programme in each of the years 2014, 2015 and 2016. [UIN HL10339]

**Baroness Barran:** Data published by British Council and Ecorys acting as the UK National Agency for the 2014/20 Erasmus+ Programme, is available at: <https://erasmusplus.org.uk/results-and-statistics.html>(opens in a new tab).

This data indicates that the amount of funding received by applicants in Wales in 2014, 2015 and 2016 was €5,134,268.50, €6,796,296.50, and €8,979,210 respectively. This funding covered Key Action 1: Learner and Staff Mobility in Higher education, Vocational education and training, Schools, Adult education, and Youth, as well as Key Action 2: Strategic Partnerships and Key Action 3: Youth Structured Dialogue.

Applicants in Scotland received €12,216,190 in 2014, €14,347,139 in 2015 and €15,099,037.80 in 2016 under the EU Erasmus+ Programme. This funding covered Key Action 1 and Key Action 2 only between 2014 and 2016 as no applicants from Scotland received funding for Key Action 3 during this period.

# Sector News

## **Higher Education (Freedom of Speech) Act – UUK briefing**

On Monday 2 October, Universities UK (UUK) published a briefing to support its members ahead of the implementation of the Higher Education (Freedom of Speech) Act.

The briefing sets out the legal landscape around freedom of speech and academic freedom, listing the other legal duties on universities that are relevant to freedom of speech and academic freedom. This includes the European Convention on Human Rights, the Human Rights Act 1998, the Prevent duty, the Equality Act 2010, and the public sector equality duty.

It also covers what universities may wish to consider when updating existing codes of practice on freedom of speech and academic freedom and offers suggestions of other steps universities can take to prepare for their new duties, including reviewing other governing documents.

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

## **Three Vice-Chancellors’ Manifestos – HEPI report**

On Monday 2 October, the Higher Education Policy Institute (HEPI) launched a report in which three university leaders set out their views on what the party-political manifestos should say at the next general election.

‘Election 2024: Three Vice-Chancellors’ Manifestos’ reveals the thinking of Professor Sir Chris Husbands of Sheffield Hallam University, Professor Sasha Roseneil of the University of Sussex, and Professor Adam Tickell of the University of Birmingham.

The essays all emphasise the centrality of higher education to the UK’s future success and cover a broad range of themes, including research, local partnerships, and a long-term skills strategy.

There are some areas of consensus among the authors, including on the need to tackle the cost-of-living crisis among students and the growing shortage of student accommodation. However, the three authors differ in the priority they give to asking for more public funding.



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

## **Expansion of medical school places to be accelerated**

On Tuesday 3 October, the government announced an expansion of medical school places to take place a year early, subject to consultation.

The Office for Students (OfS) has begun the process of allocating these additional 205 places and has offered them to new medical schools at Worcester Three Counties, Brunel, and Chester, which do not currently have any publicly funded medical places. It is also offering more places to the University of Central Lancashire and Edge Hill medical schools. The location of these schools will help ensure medical school places are available where they are most needed, including training much-needed additional doctors for the North West.

This comes in advance of the larger expansion across the country from 2025 onwards that will deliver the NHS Long Term Workforce Plan commitment to double medical school places by 2030 to 2031.

Rt Hon Steve Barclay MP, Secretary of State for the Department of Health and Social Care, said: ‘By setting the wheels in motion to begin delivering on the NHS Long Term Workforce Plan already, we can continue making progress cutting waiting lists and getting patients the care they need even faster.’

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

## **Consultation for minimum service levels at universities**

On Tuesday 3 October, the Secretary of State for Education, Rt Hon Gillian Keegan MP, launched a consultation on minimum service levels in universities during her conference speech.

The consultation will focus on stronger protections for final year students, key cohorts or those studying specialist subjects. If introduced, the minimum service level would aim to ensure students are protected from strike action, for example looking at how to guarantee continued services such as teaching contact hours and marking their work during walkouts.

Raj Jethwa, CEO of the Universities and Colleges Employers Association (UCEA) commented: ‘While HE institutions respect employees’ right to take lawful industrial

action, we recognise the significance of this consultation, and we will provide a considered response.’

Dr Jo Grady, general secretary of the University and College Union (UCU), said: ‘This is a spiteful attack on workers everywhere from a party that has run out of options and will soon be run out of office. We will not stand by while Tory MPs try to force our members to cross their own picket lines.’

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

## **£60 million Regional Innovation Fund to boost R&D**

On Tuesday 3 October, Rt Hon Michelle Donelan MP, Secretary of State for the Department of Science, Innovation, and Technology (DSIT), announced a £60 million Regional Innovation Fund (RIF) to boost support for universities in areas with lower levels of research and development investment. This announcement was made during her address to the Conservative Party Conference.

The RIF – relative to the size of each UK nation – will see £48.8 million go towards 110 universities across England and will be delivered by Research England. A further £5.8 million for Scotland, £3.4 million for Wales and £2 million for Northern Ireland will be allocated to devolved administrations.

In her address, the Secretary of State also announced a review into sex and gender data, to be led by Professor Alice Sullivan at University College London and scheduled to report to DSIT and the Cabinet Office by spring of 2024.

Professor Paul Boyle, Research and Innovation Policy lead for Universities UK and Vice-Chancellor of Swansea University, said: ‘The Regional Innovation Fund is a fantastic new fund and welcome step forward. It will help unleash the power of universities across England to support businesses thrive, facilitate knowledge exchange and drive innovation in partnership with the business community... Colleagues in Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland look forward to discussing plans for delivering the benefits of this funding with their administrations.’

You can [read the full press release](#) here and read [a list of FAQs](#) here.

## **Student Needs Framework – AdvanceHE**

On Wednesday 4 October, a Student Needs Framework was published by Advance HE in collaboration with the Higher Education Student Support Champion (Professor Edward Peck), Project Manager (Sandra Binns) and Project Officer (Ben McCarthy) with the support of Universities UK's Student Policy Network.

It attempts a preliminary mapping of students' needs under two headings: Individual competence, Confidence and Resilience; and Belonging and Community. It is a broad-brush categorisation of student needs and does not discuss interventions that might meet those needs, or covers the multiple ways students may manifest their individual needs.

The framework is designed flexibly to support a broad range of colleagues, especially those involved in teaching, learning and student support in strategic or in practice roles. It will be most effective if adopted at an institutional level, mapped with consideration to your institutional context and priorities to enhance practice and policy.

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

## **Prime Minister speech to Conservative Party Conference**

In his speech concluding the conference on Wednesday 4 October, the Prime Minister, Rt Hon Rishi Sunak MP said he was committed to 'stopping universities from enrolling students on courses that do nothing for their life chances.' He also described the target of 50% of children going to university as a 'false dream.'

He announced the Advanced British Standards, a new Baccalaureate-style qualification for 16- to 19-year-olds bringing A levels and T levels into a single qualification.

Universities UK Chief Executive, Vivienne Stern, responded to the speech saying: 'This political rhetoric is not in the interests of students, or the economic prospects of the country as a whole. We should be expanding opportunities and not talking down what is a national success story.'

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

## **Cyber security and universities – managing the risk**

On Wednesday 4 October, Universities UK, Jisc, and the National Cyber Security Centre (NCSC), with support from the Universities and Colleges Information Systems Association (UCISA), published guidance outlining the main cyber security threats to the sector and the impact of recent attacks against individual organisations across the UK research and education sector.

The report recommends the following actions to be taken by senior leaders in institutions:

- Review institutional security posture using the four-pillar security posture model described in the introduction.
- Business continuity: make sure everyone in your organisation knows what to do in the event of a serious security incident. Regularly rehearse scenarios with a view to continual improvement, remembering to reflect changes in the threat landscape and technology.
- Share and collaborate: Defending as one, higher education institutions should work together to share threat intelligence and expertise, which has a positive impact on the sector’s preparedness and capability to respond, both tactically and strategically.

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

## **UCU and UUK issue joint statement on restoring pension benefits to previous level**

On Thursday 5 October, the University and College Union (UCU) and Universities UK (UUK) said an agreement that will see USS benefits restored to their pre-April 2022 level by 1 April 2024 had been reached.

The agreement is expected to be ratified on 6 October and will then be subject to an ongoing consultation of scheme members.

Vivienne Stern, chief executive of Universities UK (UUK), said employers were ‘delighted to have been able to agree on an outcome for the 2023 USS valuation.’



Dr Jo Grady, general secretary of the University and College Union (UCU), said the strike action and ‘years of campaigning, protesting and lobbying have brought us to this moment.’

You can [read the joint statement](#) here.