



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

## University APPG weekly update

23 – 27 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:

Tom Lewis | [appug@universitiesuk.ac.uk](mailto:appug@universitiesuk.ac.uk) | 0207 419 5424

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# Parliamentary business

## Department for Education – oral questions

On Monday 23 October, the Secretary of State for Education, Rt Hon Gillian Keegan MP, and her ministerial team, answered oral questions in the House of Commons.

Rosie Duffield MP (Labour) described the regular use of food banks among the student community and asked what the government were doing to support students and staff that were ‘forced to turn to food banks.’ In his reply, the Minister for Skills, Apprenticeship, and Higher Education, Rt Hon Robert Halfon MP, highlighted the freezing of tuition fees and £276 million student premium fund provided to support the student community. He also said Canterbury Christ Church University were providing a £600 bursary to students. He added that it was important to provide a system that was fair for students and the taxpayer that prioritised the most disadvantaged.

Lilian Greenwood MP (Labour) highlighted that the maintenance loan had fallen £1500 in real terms since 2020/21. She said the cost-of-living crisis was affecting students’ education and physical and mental health, and asked the Minister whether this was acceptable. In his reply, the Minister said the government were ‘doing everything possible to support the most disadvantaged.’

Matt Western MP, Shadow Higher Education Minister, highlighted the increasing level of paid work among students, and the negative impact it was having on their studies. He asked how the Minister expected students to balance paid employment with university work, and whether he acknowledged it was ‘forcing many students out of higher education.’ In his reply, the Minister highlighted record numbers of students accessing higher education and reiterated the package of support for disadvantaged students.

Carol Monaghan MP, SNP spokesperson for education, shared [HEPI analysis](#) that found free school meal recipients were less likely to complete their studies and receive a first-class degree. She asked the Minister what support was being given to students at ‘every stage of their journey.’ The Minister said the government were doing ‘everything possible’ to ensure students had good outcomes.

In her introductory remarks at topical questions, the Secretary of State said all students ‘deserve to learn without fear or harassment.’ She described evidence of students and academics supporting Hamas, and said she had written to schools, universities, and colleges to remind them of their duties under Prevent.

Bob Blackman MP (Conservative) said Jewish students at universities felt unsafe following the attacks. He said ‘glorification of the massacre’ was carried out at Warwick University, the University of Bristol, University College London, and SOAS. He said it was not acceptable for universities to tolerate this sort of activity, and asked the Minister what measures would be taken to ensure Jewish students felt safe. In his reply, the Minister said some of ‘Hamas’s useful idiots’ were operating across universities. He said it was ‘absolutely unacceptable’ and said the government expected universities to be a safe place for all Jewish students.

Aaron Bell MP (Conservative) said Jewish students at universities were reporting an equivalent of one year’s worth of antisemitic incidents in two weeks. He described how the attacks had been celebrated and how Jewish students were targeted, including receiving death threats. Aaron Bell asked the Minister whether he agreed that universities should work with the Union of Jewish Students (UJS) to publicise the welfare hotline and implement the recommendations of the [Taskforce on Antisemitism in Higher Education](#). In his reply, the Minister said antisemitism would not be tolerated and welcomed the recommendations of the taskforce. He said they ‘absolutely urge’ universities to prioritise the implementation of the taskforce recommendations.

Antony Higginbotham MP (Conservative) highlighted how a student at the University of Manchester was ‘full of pride and joy’ a day after the Hamas attack. He said this pointed to possible extremism on university campuses and asked what the government were doing to tackle this hate in educational settings. The Minister reiterated comments on ‘Hamas’s useful idiots’ and described the duties of universities to report extremism through Prevent.

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

## **Renters (Reform) Bill – second reading**

In the afternoon of Monday 23 October, the Renters (Reform) Bill received its second reading in the House of Commons.

In his opening remarks the Secretary of State for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities, Rt Hon Michael Gove MP, said that the government were acting upon the recommendations in the [Levelling Up, Housing and Communities Committee report](#), including ‘bring[ing] forward changes to ensure that the student market...is regulated in a different way.’

Clive Betts MP (Labour), Chair of the Levelling Up, Housing and Communities Committee, described exempting purpose-built student housing from the ban on

periodic tenancies as ‘entirely sensible.’ Regarding non-purpose-built student accommodation, he said landlords having the right to terminate a tenancy in line with the university year may prove a good compromise and will be further probed at Committee stage.

Mary Robinson MP (Conservative) highlighted concerns from landlords operating student lets on the abolition of fixed-term lets. She said it may prevent landlords from securing tenants ahead of time for the next academic year, taking away certainty and security for both landlords and students. She also warned that the changes could negatively impact the rental market and make it unattractive for landlords to let to students.

Paul Blomfield MP (Labour) raised the concerns of student renters, drawing on his findings as Chair of the All-Party Parliamentary Group for Students. He highlighted the approximately 45% of students who live in the private rented sector and are currently not covered by the Bill. Participants in a recent roundtable had agreed on the many positive elements of the Bill but stressed the need for it to succeed for all renters. Paul Blomfield proceeded to note the heterogeneity across the student community, urging the Minister to not ‘rush to exempt students from the protections in the Bill relating to non-fault evictions...without careful consideration of the impact on all types of students.’

Helen Hayes MP (Labour) recounted an experience of a constituent who had lost their first-year university student son to suicide. As their son had signed a tenancy for second-year accommodation with a guarantor agreement, after their son’s death the parents were pursued for rent. She said she would table an amendment to address this issue.

Caroline Lucas MP (Green) warned against excluding students from the reform, reminding the Secretary of State of the White Paper which stated, ‘it is important that students have the same opportunity to live in a secure home and challenge poor standards as others in the PRS.’

Matthew Pennycook MP, Shadow Minister for Housing and Planning, said Labour would press for clarification of the ‘new grounds for possession for students’ landlords to ensure they are not too expansive’ and ensure the complexities of the student market are reflected.

The Bill will proceed to Committee stage in the next Parliamentary session.

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

## Israel/Gaza – Lords debate

On Tuesday 24 October, the ‘situation in Israel/Gaza’ was debated in the House of Lords. Please see below for extracts relevant to higher education.

Baroness Deech (Crossbench): ‘I am sorry to say that some of the worst [hatred and anti-Semitism] is in our universities. I hear all the time of sad episodes: in Portsmouth an academic is excusing Hamas; a recent NUS report on anti-Semitism in universities is all too sadly being borne out today; there are rampages around universities; there is a motion at the University and College Union calling for “intifada until victory”; and Cambridge and UCL are calling for a mass uprising against Israel. These young people had Holocaust education. I call on the Government to start an overhaul of that education.’

Baroness Fox of Buckley (Non-affiliated): ‘Why have so many institutions, such as universities, buckled in the face of this identitarian ideology of competitive victimhood, which gives anyone claiming the label of oppressed victimhood a collective pass? We have to ask why diversity advocates, who are usually hypersensitive to alleged racist microaggressions, such as using phrases like “blacklisting”, suddenly become deaf and dumb while marching alongside groups of radicalised youth shouting, “Allahu akbar” and anti-Semitic dog whistles.’

Baroness Smith of Newnham (Liberal Democrat): ‘Lady Deech...raised concerns about two universities, one of which is my university—the University of Cambridge. I apologise if anybody feels that there is anti-Semitism stemming from the University of Cambridge. Clearly, anti-Semitism must be condemned. The spillover of anti-Semitism into this country, the rise of anti-Semitic crime, and the concerns as raised by the noble Baroness, Lady Altmann, of Jewish children going to school and university, is something that we really need to be looking to. We need to overcome anti-Semitism in this country, but we also need to avoid a spillover into Islamophobia. Both of those things are vital.’

Lord Wolfson of Tredegar (Conservative): ‘The Jewish community has learned over the past two weeks who our many friends are. We have also seen who they are not. I will give just one short example: our universities. University Jewish societies no longer publicise where they are meeting...Our universities have become centres of binary thinking, where you are either an oppressor or the oppressed...Students and their professors will write long and apparently scholarly articles explaining how words are violence and silence is violence, but they now offer no words—only silence—in the face of not just violence but a pogrom.’

Responding on behalf of the government, Lord Ahmad of Wimbledon: ‘On our universities, I acknowledge the points made by the noble Baroness, Lady Deech, and my noble friend Lord Wolfson.’

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

## **Economic Activity of Public Bodies (Overseas Matters) Bill – report stage**

In the afternoon of Wednesday 25 October, the Economic Activity of Public Bodies (Overseas Matters) Bill was debated in the House of Commons at its Report stage.

Several MPs from across the House criticised the timing of the debate, with increased tensions in the Middle East as well as in communities in the UK. The Shadow Secretary of State for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities, Rt Hon Angela Rayner MP, said that bringing back the Bill at this time would only serve to exacerbate division at a time when the Prime Minister was appealing for calm and caution. Many MPs echoed this point and called for the Bill to be withdrawn or delayed.

Dame Margaret Hodge MP (Labour) said the Bill was flawed in many ways and in reality, was not designed to solve the problem of the Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions (BDS) movement, but rather to score a ‘crude political point’ against the Labour Party. She added that it would only inflame community tensions seen on university campuses and in workplaces in recent weeks. Theresa Villiers MP (Conservative) said that it was the perfect time to tackle the BDS movement, saying that the campaign was driving the recent rise in antisemitism in the UK. She added that BDS actions only focused on division and highlighted how the organisation behind the movement had condemned peace building activities such as those between Palestinian and Israeli universities.

Former Secretary of State for Education, Rt Hon Kit Malthouse MP (Conservative), spoke to his amendment that sought to exempt universities from scope of the Bill. He said that elements of the Bill would run contrary to recently passed government legislation aiming to uphold freedom of speech at universities, as well as the work of the newly appointed Office for Students Free Speech Tsar.

Kit Malthouse said that including universities in scope could also inadvertently be another step towards universities being classed as public bodies. He explained that the Treasury had taken on significant debt when FE colleges had become public bodies and by including HE in scope, they risked taking on an even greater level of



debt from universities. He said this was something that the Treasury and the Lords would need to take a look at and so did not bring the amendment to a vote at this stage.

On Clause 4, Chris Stephens MP (SNP) said the Bill would essentially prevent elected councillors and university vice-chancellors publishing public statements indicating they would intend to act in a way that would contravene the ban, or that they would in theory intend to act in that way, if not for the ban. He added that anti-boycotts laws in other countries such as the US, had had a negative impact on freedom of expression.

Angela Rayner reiterated Labour's concerns with Clause 4, calling it a 'gagging clause' and saying they believed it was incompatible with Article 10 of the European Convention on Human Rights (ECHR) and encouraged MPs to vote for amendments to remove it, or improve it.

David Jones MP (Conservative) highlighted that the government had recently legislated to protect freedom of speech under the law in the Higher Education (Freedom of Speech) Act 2023, and that the Clause 4 provision would be an 'unacceptable constraint' on free speech. He said it was a 'deeply un-conservative measure' and should be removed from the Bill.

A number of MPs spoke about the antisemitism and Islamophobia that had resulted from the terrorist attacks on 7 October and subsequent Israeli military response.

Stephen Crabb MP (Conservative) said that it was a more than appropriate time to bring this legislation forward due to the rise in antisemitism, adding that he had recently heard from Jewish students who were afraid to give their surnames because they could give away their Jewish identity and one student had said they felt as if Jews were being 'pushed out of British universities.'

John McDonnell MP (Labour) warned against the potential division between MPs who voted for or against the legislation and labelling them as antisemitic or Islamophobic because of this. He argued that BDS actions should be seen as an overall tactic rather than solely in the current Israel/Palestine context, citing BDS actions throughout history including for apartheid South Africa, and more recently for Russia and Iran.

MPs from both sides of the House raised concerns that the only states and territories explicitly named on the face of the Bill, were Israel, the Occupied Palestinian Territories (OPTs), and the Golan Heights. Angela Rayner said that this showed how the government were failing to treat Israel like any other state or nation, despite the Secretary of State previously claiming the Bill would be non-country specific. She

highlighted how the Bill would apply as much to China, Myanmar and North Korea, as it does to Israel and this would have significant impact on the ability for communities to support Uyghur minorities in China, for example.

George Eustice MP (Conservative) said that including the OPTs and the Golan Heights alongside Israel on the face of the Bill could send a signal that the UK had changed its longstanding position of a two-state solution and that the Israeli settlements in the occupied territories were illegal and warned the government against equating Israel with those territories.

Angela Rayner outlined her amendment which would allow public bodies to produce a document setting out their policy on procurement and human rights. She said this could ensure that ethical considerations could be applied equally to all countries rather than singling out individual nations, adding consistency and avoiding the critique from some around Israel having special treatment.

Kit Malthouse outlined his cross-party amendment which sought to remove the prohibition on the government specifying Israel, the OPTs or the Occupied Golan Heights as a country or territory to which the prohibition on boycotts does not apply. He said that this was seeking to ensure that Israel was treated like any other country in the world and avoid adding fuel to the argument that it receives special treatment, which he said gave rise to antisemitism.

Responding on behalf of the government, the Secretary of State for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities, Rt Hon Michael Gove MP, said he appreciated the debate came at a sensitive time, but that where there was disagreement, the House was united in their ‘horror of terrorism, their desire for peace and belief in a two-state solution.’ He also wanted to reiterate that the Bill followed through on a manifesto commitment, made prior to the current conflict in the Middle East.

The Secretary of State said that a number of legitimate concerns had been expressed during the debate but that these did not actually reflect what was in the Bill and what it intended to achieve. He said that the Bill did not prevent any individual from articulating their support for the BDS campaign, rather it prevented public bodies and public money being used to advance that case. On free speech, he said the Bill would not affect individuals right to free speech, rather public bodies themselves making their own foreign policy. Finally, he said that the Bill did not prevent human rights considerations from being taken into account by public bodies, and that the Bill made it clear that legitimate human rights considerations, provided that they are non-country-specific, should be taken into account.

Several amendments were put to a vote and subsequently rejected. The unamended Bill will now proceed to the House of Lords for further scrutiny in the next Parliamentary session.

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

## **Prorogation**

On Thursday 26 October, Parliament was prorogued ahead of the King's Speech on Tuesday 7 November.

All relevant legislation has been given a carry-over motion which allows a Bill to continue its progress from one parliamentary session into the next.

# Forthcoming business

## **Prorogation**

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# Written Questions

## Immigration

**Ben Lake MP:** To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department, whether her Department consulted with university researchers when developing its policy on migration. [UIN 203572]

**Robert Jenrick MP:** The Home Office regularly engages with a range of stakeholders when developing policy.

We keep all our immigration policies under constant review to ensure they best serve the UK and reflect the public's priorities.

## University of Cambridge: Overseas Students

**Daniel Zeichner MP:** To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department, what steps she is taking to ensure clarity on (a) new student visa rules which will affect international PhD students in Cambridge listed in their first year as Not at first registered and (b) the right of such students to bring their families on a student visa. [UIN 203859]

**Robert Jenrick MP:** For courses starting from 1 January 2024, students will only be able to bring dependants if they are on a PhD, other doctoral qualification, or a research-based higher degree, or in receipt of a full government scholarship. If a student is unsure of what level their course is, they should check with their sponsor or the course details on their Confirmation of Acceptance for Studies (CAS).

Our guidance products are regularly updated to reflect changes to the immigration rules and such an update was published following the rules changes of 17 July 2023. The Home Office regularly engages with stakeholders regarding policy changes.

## Genomics: China

**Catherine West MP:** To ask the Secretary of State for Science, Innovation and Technology, pursuant to the Answer of 18 September 2023 to HL9736 on University of Cambridge: China, what advice the Research Collaboration Advice Team has given to universities on partnering with Chinese genomics companies. [UIN 203888]

**George Freeman MP:** The Government wants to enable collaborative international research, while ensuring universities engage with all companies, including Chinese genomics companies, in a way that takes account of national security concerns and is compliant with the UK's security policies and regulations. As part of our proactive engagement with academia, the Research Collaboration Advice Team (RCAT) provides tailored advice to universities on national security risks in international collaborations. All advice is provided in confidence and is specific to the context and needs of each university. RCAT advice is informed by the NPSA's Trusted Research campaign and the UK Biological Security Strategy.

## **Higher Education: Buildings**

**Matt Western MP:** To ask the Secretary of State for Education, what guidance her Department has issued to the higher education sector on RAAC since 1 August 2023. [UIN 200881]

**Robert Halfon MP:** The higher education sector is independent from government; it is therefore for individual providers to determine and address any estate issues.

While mindful of the sector's independence, we have requested information on this issue from higher education (HE) providers and their representative bodies to gain a wider understanding of the situation and to provide advice. The department contacted Universities UK on 14 June 2023 to direct HE providers to relevant RAAC guidance from the Institution of Structural Engineers and the departmental RAAC guidance for state-funded education buildings.

This was followed by a similar email to all the HE mission groups on 6 September. A third communication was sent to all the HE mission groups on 29 September, again referring HE providers to the Institution of Structural Engineers RAAC guidance and clarifying that the departmental RAAC guidance is to support those responsible for state funded education buildings.

The department is continuing to work with the sector to ensure that all HE providers have access to the right guidance and are taking action to ensure students are protected.

## **Universities Policy Engagement Network**

**Ben Lake MP:** To ask the Secretary of State for Science, Innovation and Technology, if she will meet with representatives of the Universities Policy Engagement Network to

discuss the implications for Departments of the Ref 2028 requirement that universities demonstrate (a) impact and (b) engagement. [UIN 203573]

**George Freeman MP:** The design and implementation of the REF 2028 is being carried out by the devolved funding bodies of the UK nations, including Research England in England. During this process the funding bodies have engaged widely with stakeholders, including many of the members of the Universities Policy Engagement Network (UPEN), on the design of the next REF. This engagement, including a currently open opportunity to provide written comments, will continue through the autumn and the final design of the REF will take full account of stakeholders' contributions to the engagement process.

## Students: Public Transport

**Matt Western MP:** To ask the Secretary of State for Education, what estimate she has made of the number of domestic students commuting to university campuses in each of the last five years. [UIN 200900]

**Robert Halfon MP:** The Office for Students Size and Provision dashboard offers the closest approximation of commuter students available. It shows the proportion of full-time undergraduate entrants (domestic and international) that were local to their higher education (HE) provider prior to entry has remained around one in four between 2018/19 and 2021/22.

Number of students entering HE that were local to their HE provider prior to entry		
Full-time, undergraduate degrees only		
All domiciles		
English providers only		
Academic year	Number	% (where home address and study location are known)
2018/19	127,490	25.5%
2019/20	136,410	25.8%
2020/21	148,940	27.0%
2021/22	138,600	25.4%

Source: <https://officeforstudents.org.uk/data-and-analysis/size-and-shape-of-provision-data-dashboard/data-dashboard/>.

## Universities: Mental Health Services

**George Eustice MP:** To ask the Secretary of State for Education, with reference to the letter from the Minister for Skills, Apprenticeships and Higher Education to all Higher Education leaders of 5 June 2023, what proportion of the university leaders that he wrote to (a) attended and (b) sent a delegate to the online Charter Question and Answer session on 19 June 2023. [UIN 203270]

**Robert Halfon MP:** It is a priority for this government that students are provided with the mental health support they need. We are taking an approach based on three pillars:

- Funding vital services and innovative projects via the Office for Students, with £15 million allocated for the 2022/23 academic year to support students starting university for the first time and enable effective partnerships between higher education (HE) providers and local NHS services. £3.6 million was invested to launch Student Space in 2020 which has since provided nearly 3000,000 students with free online mental health resources and confidential support.
- Spreading and implementing best practice consistently across providers.
- Clear responsibilities for providers and protection for students, with solutions developed by the Student Support Champion, Professor Edward Peck.

On 5 June 2023, the department wrote to all HE providers asking for their strongest possible commitment to the mental health of our students, including by showing ownership of mental health at an executive level. We set a target for universities to sign up to Student Minds' University Mental Health Charter by September 2024 so that they take a whole-university approach to mental health and wellbeing and follow the principles set out in the Charter.

Student Minds ran two Q&A sessions for universities considering joining the University Mental Health Charter Programme. The session on 16 of June had 68 attendees. The session on 18 of June had 53 attendees.

61 universities had joined the Programme by the 2022/23 academic year. Following my letter and the Q&A sessions, a significant number of universities applied during the summer 2023 application window. The department can confirm the Programme now has 96 members for the 2023/24 academic year, which represents excellent progress towards the target in a short amount of time. The full list of members can be



found here: <https://hub.studentminds.org.uk/charter-programme-members-23-24/>(opens in a new tab).

The department also had a good response on the back of my letter, with nine HE providers writing back. I continue to raise the value of Charter Programme membership with universities and sector representatives and will be hosting a roundtable on the mental health of students with university leaders later this year.

Going further, the Higher Education Mental Health Taskforce is looking at the adoption of best practice on higher mental health more broadly. With leadership from Professor Edward Peck, it includes representatives from students, parents, mental health experts and the HE sector. It will deliver a final report by May 2024.

## **STEM Subjects: Higher Education**

**Chi Onwurah MP:** To ask the Secretary of State for Education, what steps she is taking to help encourage entrepreneurship amongst STEM higher education students. [UIN 203485]

**Robert Halfon MP:** The government has established a supportive framework to empower universities in equipping students with the essential skills required for success.

The department is investing in STEM education at all levels to ensure people have access to high-quality STEM teaching and can access STEM career opportunities. We are investing around £750 million of additional funding over the three-year period from 2022/23 to 2024/25 in high-quality teaching and facilities, including in science and engineering, in subjects that support the NHS, and in degree apprenticeships. This includes the largest increase in government funding for the higher education (HE) sector in over a decade and will support students and teaching.

The National Careers Service also provides free, up to date, impartial information, advice, and guidance on careers, skills, and the Labour Market in England. The service provides support to individuals studying STEM subjects in HE, relating to entrepreneurship and helps industry sectors, including STEM sectors, to disseminate key information and updates to ensure careers advisers in the community are up to date with the latest information when supporting customers.

The HE Business and Community Interaction (HE-BCI) survey showed that the number of graduate start-ups increased by 5% (from 4,528 in 2020/21 to 4,735 in 2021/22), the highest annual figure in the survey's history[1].

[1] [Chart 1 - Spin-offs and start-up companies 2014/15 to 2021/22 | HESA](#)

## **Educational Institutions: Finance**

**Bridget Phillipson MP:** To ask the Secretary of State for Education, what recent discussions she has had with the Chancellor of the Exchequer on (a) his Department's capital funding and (b) the adequacy of funding for (i) maintenance and (ii) other capital projects in (A) schools, (B) sixth forms, (C) further education colleges, (D) universities, (E) nurseries and (F) other settings where childcare and early years education is provided; and if she will make a statement. [UIN 200961]

**Nick Gibb MP:** It is the responsibility of those who run education settings to manage the safety and maintenance of their estate and to alert the Department if there is a serious concern with a building. It has always been the case that where the Department is made aware of a school building that may pose an immediate risk, immediate action is taken.

The Department will spend what it takes to keep children and young people safe. The Department will fund emergency mitigation work needed to make buildings safe, including installing alternative classroom space where necessary. Where schools and colleges need additional help with revenue costs, the Department expects all reasonable requests will be approved. The Department will then also fund refurbishment projects, or rebuilding projects, to rectify the RAAC issue for the long term. The Department will set out further details for affected schools and colleges in due course. The higher education (HE) sector is independent from Government and it is therefore for individual providers to determine and address any estate issues.

The Department will work with the relevant responsible body, which will depend on the type of school or college with confirmed RAAC. Every case will be different, and the Department is working closely with affected settings to understand and support their needs, including with capital funding.

Our immediate support for schools and colleges will be managed from unallocated departmental budgets. This will not have an impact on existing programmes. The Department will provide further information about funding at relevant points in due course.

The 2021 Spending Review announced a total of £19 billion of capital funding to support the education sector. As part of this, the Department's capital budget is £7 billion in 2023/24. The Department has announced £1.8 billion in both 2022/23 and 2023/24 to improve the condition of the school estate, and is transforming schools across the country through our School Rebuilding Programme. Over £2.8 billion in capital funding is being invested in skills over this spending review period.

The Department reviews how it allocates its capital budget on an ongoing basis and will reflect on current and future funding requirement as part of our preparations for the next Spending Review. Ministers and officials have regular discussions with colleagues from HM Treasury and other Government Departments on a range of issues.

The Department will always put the safety and wellbeing of children and staff in education settings at the heart of its policy decisions.

## **Higher Education: Student Wastage**

**Matt Western MP:** To ask the Secretary of State for Education, what recent assessment she has made of trends in the level of non-continuation rates at higher education institutions; and whether her Department has analysed the reasons for the proportions of students who do not complete degree courses; and if she will make a statement. [UIN 200870]

**Robert Halfon MP:** Figures on non-continuation following year one of entry to higher education (HE) are published by the Higher Education Statistics Agency for full-time first-degree entrants starting courses between 2015/16 and 2019/20. Further information is available in Table T3 at: <https://www.hesa.ac.uk/data-and-analysis/performance-indicators/non-continuation>(opens in a new tab).

More recent information on continuation rates (which are the inverse of non-continuation) for first year full-time degree entrants entering HE are published by the Office for Students (OfS). This is available at: <https://www.officeforstudents.org.uk/data-and-analysis/access-and-participation-data-dashboard/data-dashboard/>(opens in a new tab).

For further information on the percentage of students that dropped out of the first year of their university course between 2015 and 2023, I refer the hon. Member for Warwick and Leamington to the answers of 13 September to Questions 197774([opens in a new tab](#)) and 197775([opens in a new tab](#)).

Limited sources of research are available highlighting reasons for non-continuation for students within HE. However, some older research covering this issue was released in 2014 and is available here:

<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/learning-from-futuretrack-dropout-from-higher-education>(opens in a new tab).

This study suggests that most students who drop out of university cite ‘personal’ reasons, while others say they have decided they do not want to go to university.

The government believes every student should receive education of high quality, equipping them for future careers. Continuation rates are an important indicator of quality, alongside completion and progression to professional employment or further study. Since October 2022, the OfS has monitored whether HE courses at registered providers are meeting new minimum thresholds for student outcomes, including course continuation and completion rates, as part of the B3 condition of registration. The OfS examines the data to identify courses which fail to meet the minimum expected standards for student outcomes. It has launched 18 investigations to consider whether there have been breaches of condition B3 and we expect the results to be published in the near future. These investigations consider the reasons for providers' data. On 17 July, we announced a package of reforms aimed at improving the quality of HE provision across the sector. The Prime Minister said then, and in his speech to the Conservative Party Conference, that the government will stop universities offering low value ‘rip-off degrees’.

## **Students: Cost of Living**

**Matt Western MP:** To ask the Secretary of State for Education, what estimate she has made of (a) changes in the level of the cost of living for students in the (i) last and (ii) next 12 months and (b) the rate of inflation for students. [UIN 200865]

**Robert Halfon MP:** The government recognises the additional cost of living pressures that have arisen this year which have impacted students. The Government publishes Equality Impact Assessments of changes to student finance each year. More information can be found at: <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/higher-education-student-finance-2023-to-2024-equality-analysis>(opens in a new tab).

The department has not directly assessed the impact of changes in the cost of living on higher education (HE) students, but closely monitors the evidence produced by other organisations and uses this to inform decision-making. For example, the Office of National Statistics (ONS) published research from interviews with students named

‘ONS student voices research’ and Wonkhe, along with Pearson, have published research on connections between students' financial struggles, wellbeing, and academic progress titled ‘Financial struggles make it harder for students to connect and engage in their university community’. A link to the latter publication can be found here: <https://wonkhe.com/blogs/financial-struggles-make-it-harder-for-students-to-connect-and-engage-in-their-university-community/> (opens in a new tab).

Having considered reports such as these, the department has made available £276 million of Student Premium and Mental Health funding for the 2023/24 academic year, to support students who need additional help including disadvantaged students. This funding will complement the help universities are providing through their own bursary, scholarship and hardship support schemes.

We have frozen maximum tuition fees for the 2023/24 and 2024/25 academic years to deliver better value for students and to keep the cost of higher education under control. By 2024/25, maximum fees will have been frozen for seven years.

Additionally, the Government has continued to increase living costs support each year with a 2.8% increase for the 2023/24 academic year. Decisions on student finance had to be taken alongside other spending priorities to ensure the system remains financially sustainable and the costs of HE is shared fairly between students and taxpayers, not all of whom have benefited from going to university.

The government is considering options for loans and grants for living and other costs for the 2024/25 academic year and will be making an announcement in due course.

## **Horizon Europe: Universities**

**Matt Western MP:** To ask the Secretary of State for Education, if she will make an assessment of the potential impact on the (a) finances and (b) reputation of individual universities of not having participated in the Horizon programme for two years; and if she will publish details of the 10 most affected universities. [UIN 200863]

**Robert Halfon MP:** The government has maintained a lifeline for UK researchers and businesses, by guaranteeing the funding of bids into the Horizon Europe programme.

The Horizon Europe Guarantee scheme has meant no UK researchers have been left out of pocket. It has issued over 2,600 grant offers worth £1.39 billion to the end of September 2023.

On 7 September 2023 my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister announced a new UK-EU agreement on the UK's association to Horizon Europe. This means that UK businesses and researchers can participate confidently in the world's largest programme of research cooperation. Information on the UK's Horizon Deal can be found at: <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/overwhelming-support-for-uks-horizon-deal>(opens in a new tab).

The Office for Students (OfS) is the independent regulator for the higher education sector in England, and is responsible for monitoring and reporting on its financial sustainability. The Secretary of State, departmental officials and I continue to work closely with the OfS and various parties including mission groups, providers, and other government departments as appropriate, to understand the ongoing impacts and changing landscape of financial sustainability in the sector.

## **Overseas Students: Visas**

**Bridget Phillipson MP:** To ask the Secretary of State for Education, what assessment she has made of the potential impact of the change in the cost of visa fees for students from 4 October 2023 on the (a) financial sustainability and (b) resilience of higher education institutions; and if she will make a statement. [UIN 201011]

**Robert Halfon MP:** The UK is home to some of the world's top universities, who benefit from strong international ties. We have educated 55 current and recent world leaders and have four out of the top 10 universities globally.

The Government has been successful in delivering our International Education Strategy ambition of hosting at least 600,000 students per year by 2030 for the last two years, and fully expects that the UK will continue to be an attractive destination for international students.

The Government is increasing fees across a range of immigration routes, including for people coming here to live, work and study. It is the Government's policy that those who use and benefit most from the immigration system should contribute towards the cost of operating the system, reducing the burden on the UK taxpayer. This will in turn, allow more funding to be prioritised elsewhere in the Home Office.

Our visa fees are broadly competitive when compared with the fees charge by comparative countries globally and there is little evidence that fee increases to date have significantly affected demand on work, study and tourism routes.

## Students: Housing

**Matt Western MP:** To ask the Secretary of State for Education, what assessment she has made of the adequacy of the provision of on-campus accommodation at higher education institutions for this academic year; and if she will publish details of institutions at which there is insufficient supply of such accommodation. [UIN 200864]

**Robert Halfon MP:** As universities and landlords are private, autonomous bodies, the government has no role in the provision of student accommodation, nor a remit to intervene in how it is allocated.

We expect universities and private landlords to review their accommodation policies to ensure they are fair, clear, and have the interests of students at heart. This includes making accommodation available at a range of affordable price points where possible.

The department cares about the experience of students in their accommodation and has created three landlord Codes of Practice to ensure standards are maintained and students have a route for any complaint.

## Higher Education: Buildings

**Sarah Owen MP:** To ask the Secretary of State for Education, whether her Department is taking steps to assess the safety of (a) university and (b) other higher education buildings. [UIN 201236]

**Robert Halfon MP:** The higher education (HE) sector is independent from Government and it is therefore for individual providers to determine and address any estate issues. The Government has liaised with a number of HE sector representative groups to communicate with HE providers about the relevant guidance from the Institution of Structural Engineers.

## Unit for Future Skills

**Seema Malhotra MP:** To ask the Secretary of State for Education, what meetings the Unit for Future Skills has held with external stakeholders in the last 12 months.

**Robert Halfon MP:** Since its launch in May 2022, the Unit for Future Skills (UFS) has proactively set out to be outward facing and has met and worked with a wide variety

of stakeholders across the skills system. As well as working across government departments to bring together data and evidence, the team have liaised with research and academic organisations, businesses and employer groups, training providers and local government.

The UFS External Advisory Group, chaired by Sir Ian Diamond, National Statistician, meets every quarter to provide challenge and external views to the UFS's work, as well as expert support and guidance. The group has nine members including representatives from the West Midland Combined Authority, Unifrog, LinkedIn, Universities UK, the Association of Colleges, British Chamber of Commerce, the British Academy and two expert academics. The UFS also runs quarterly meetings with members of the devolved administrations who are working on similar skills and data issues.

The UFS regularly discusses its findings at the Department of Education's Business meeting, involving MakeUK, the Federation of Small Businesses, British Chambers of Commerce and the Institute for Directors.

The UFS engages with target users on the development of its products. For example, the team set up working groups with Employer Representative Bodies to support in the development of the local skills dashboard.

The team also regularly meets with a variety of stakeholders on a one-to-one basis, as well as through events and conferences, including businesses and employer representative bodies, academics and research organisations, training providers and local and regional skills bodies.

## **Students: Cost of Living**

**Tulip Siddiq MP:** To ask the Secretary of State for Education, what steps her Department is taking to help support PhD students with the increased cost of living. [UIN 201365]

**Robert Halfon MP:** The Government introduced doctoral loans in the 2018/19 academic year. These loans, which offer up to £28,673 for courses starting in 2023/24, are a contribution to the costs of study, and are the first direct government funding for doctoral study available to students on an open to all basis. For example, available to all eligible students who have gained a place on an eligible programme of study.



The government is considering options for doctoral loans for the 2024/25 academic year and will be making an announcement in due course.

The government recognises the cost-of-living pressures that have impacted students. That is why the department asked the Office for Students to maintain Student Premium and Mental Health funding for the 2023/24 financial year at the same levels as the previous year.

The department has made available £276 million of Student Premium and Mental Health funding for the 2023/24 academic year to support students who need additional help. This funding will complement the help universities are providing through their own bursary, scholarship and hardship support schemes.

## **Universities: Student Wastage**

**Alison McGovern MP:** To ask the Secretary of State for Education, pursuant to the Answer of 13 September 2023 to Question 197775 on Universities: Student Wastage, what assessment her Department has made of the implications for her policies of the withdrawal rate from higher education providers in England remaining above 15,000 since 2018/19. [UIN 199957]

**Robert Halfon MP:** The government wants to make sure that all students, regardless of background or circumstances, see a positive return on their significant investment in higher education (HE). This means they must achieve good quality qualifications, which equip them with the skills they need to achieve their potential.

Students are more likely to continue and complete their courses if they are of high quality. On 17 July, we announced a package of reforms aimed at improving the quality of HE provision across the sector. The Prime Minister said then, and in his speech to the Conservative Party Conference, that the government will stop universities offering low value “rip-off degrees”. The OfS has already introduced a more rigorous and effective quality regime, including new minimum thresholds for student outcomes and has begun a new programme of investigations, the first reports of which were published on 12 September. Further information is available at: <https://www.officeforstudents.org.uk/news-blog-and-events/press-and-media/ofs-publishes-first-reports-of-quality-assessment-visits/> (opens in a new tab).

The department intends to ask the OfS to limit student recruitment where a provider is found to have breached student outcomes requirements, and would like to see consideration of future earnings made part of the regulatory regime.

The government is also focused on supporting students in practical ways. We have made £276 million of student premium and mental health funding available for the 2023/24 academic year to support successful outcomes for students, including for disadvantaged students. We have frozen the maximum level of tuition fees and we are trying to minimise the debt burdens for graduates wherever we can.

Those students struggling with their mental health can access Student Space, a mental health and wellbeing hub funded with £3.6m by OfS and the HE Funding Council Wales. This resource provides a dedicated online platform for students providing vital mental health and wellbeing resources. Over 450,000 students have accessed the platforms resources since its launch in August 2020.

We have asked the OfS to distribute £15 million of funding to providers in 2023/24 to support student mental health, including providing additional support for transitions from school/college to university, with a particular focus on providing counselling services for students. This funding will also allow providers to continue to develop better partnerships with local NHS services to ensure that students are able to access support in a timely manner, and not slip between the gaps in university and NHS provision. Partnership working between HE providers and the NHS will improve the care of students experiencing poor mental health by ensuring a more joined up approach to the delivery of mental health support.

I expect these combined efforts to have positive impacts on degree continuation and completion rates, as well as rates of progression into professional employment and further study.

# Sector News

## **House of Lords Industry and Regulators Committee – inquiry launch**

The House of Lords Industry and Regulators Committee has published a call for evidence into its new inquiry into UK regulators.

The Committee has previously examined the work of several specific regulators, including Ofgem, Ofwat and the Office for Students. Building on these conclusions, the Committee is now launching a short and cross-cutting inquiry into UK regulators as a whole, with a specific focus on roles, remit, independence and accountability.

The inquiry will examine whether regulators as a whole have been given a clear job to do and whether their roles and remits are sufficiently discrete from one another. The inquiry will also examine whether regulators are appropriately independent of Government, including whether the right balance is being struck between strategic and political input from government and preserving regulators' operational independence. The inquiry will further examine how regulators should be held to account for their performance, and by whom – including the respective roles of the Government and of Parliament.

Lord Hollick, Chair of the Industry and Regulators Committee, said: 'The committee has recently conducted scrutiny of regulators including Ofwat, Ofgem, and the Office for Students. A common area of concern arising from all these inquiries is the relationship between the regulator and the Government, and the level of independence and accountability regulators have. Many regulators are public bodies funded by the taxpayer and have significant powers; it is therefore vital that they are scrutinised and held to account.'

The Committee invites contributions to its inquiry by Friday 1 December 2023. The Committee will be holding public evidence sessions between October and Christmas and aims to report to the House in the new year.

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

## **Is the UK developing global mindsets? – International Higher Education Commission**

On Tuesday 24 October, the International Higher Education Commission (IHEC) published a report titled ‘Is the UK developing global mindsets?’

The report highlights a decline in the international diversity of UK campuses with the loss of incoming Erasmus+ exchange students and UK students' decline in foreign language studies being contributing factors.

To address this issue, the report provides several recommendations to enhance the advantages of internationalisation at home, including strengthening capacity and capability across various aspects of internationalisation.

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

## **Updated guidance on promoting good relations in higher education – AdvanceHE**

On Tuesday 24 October, Advance HE revised guidance on promoting good relations in higher education.

The guidance provides an overview of the ways in which higher education Institutions (HEIs) can prevent intolerance and develop a culture where relationships between diverse groups and individuals enhance the learning experience, protect freedom of speech and academic freedom, tackle harassment, and contribute to an inclusive society.

It supports institutions to take a proportionate approach in decision making and suggests immediate, medium and long-term strategies for promoting good relations within the present legal framework. Instead of advocating a ‘one size fits all’ approach, this guidance outlines good principles of process and practice that institutions should consider in their particular context.

It is recommended that institutions should consider any incidents of hate and intolerance or situations where free speech and good relations intersect on a case-by-case basis within the framework of agreed policies, seeking specific legal advice where necessary.

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

## **How higher education can boost people-powered growth**

On Tuesday 24 October, the Economy 2030 inquiry published a report titled ‘How higher education can boost people-powered growth’, written by Lord Willetts.

The report highlights the successes of higher education and counters the claim that there are ‘too many university degrees.’ It encourages reforms to the system to make higher education properly funded and to support new innovative universities into the market.

The report recommends the following reforms:

- There should be an open, evidence-based debate about the calibration of the graduate repayment scheme so the system is adjustable and reflects changing political judgements. That could be achieved through a quinquennial review of fees and loan terms so that the system could be modified without tearing it all up and starting again.
- Banks could be invited to partner with universities to buy the debt of a university’s graduates off the Student Loans Company.
- The Department for Education could launch a competition inviting applications to create a new university with a particular focus on places that do not currently have one.

You can [read the full report](#) and [accompanying Conservative Home article](#).

## **The Future of Quality in England – QAA report**

On Wednesday 25 October, the Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education published its latest policy paper in the ‘Future of Quality in England’ series.

This paper, titled ‘Instilling international trust in English higher education - a quality perspective’ argues that England’s higher education sector’s international reputation is integral to its role as one of the UK’s biggest assets. It highlights that this reputation is built on trust, which is at risk of being undermined by divergence from international commitments in quality, unhelpful political rhetoric, and a lack of collaborative global outlook.

The briefing contends that, if steps aren't taken to reinforce international trust, there are potential risks to international student recruitment, international research funding and mutually beneficial international partnerships.

To reinforce international trust, the paper recommends that:

- Policymakers should publicly champion the higher education sector on the world stage.
- The Government should adopt a collaborative global outlook.
- Make changes to England's external quality system to increase international trust.

Eve Alcock, QAA's Director of Public Affairs said: 'We hope this paper serves as a practical resource for policymakers who want to preserve and protect the excellent reputation that the UK has earned as a world-leading destination for students.'

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

## **Regional Innovation Fund grant allocations for 2023 to 2024**

On Wednesday 25 October, a letter to vice-chancellors and principals in England was sent from UK Research and Innovation (UKRI) detailing Regional Innovation Fund (RIF) grant allocations for 2023-24.

The RIF grant allocated to England is £48.8 million which has been provided by the Department for Science, Innovation, and Technology (DSIT).

The letter notes that all Higher Education Providers (HEPs) in receipt of a Higher Education Innovation Funding (HEIF) allocation for 2023 to 2024 will receive a RIF allocation. It lists the allocation by region and by institution.

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

## **Student accommodation costs across 10 cities in the UK – HEPI and Unipol report**

On Thursday 26 October, the Higher Education Policy Institute (HEPI) and Unipol published a report examining student accommodation.

The report includes data voluntarily submitted by both universities and the 10 largest providers of Purpose-Built Student Accommodation operating across ten major regional university cities who collectively manage more than 125,000 beds in those cities.

Key findings:

- The average maintenance loan received by English students this current academic year is officially expected to be £7,590, versus the average rent in England of £7,566, meaning rents swallow up virtually 100% of the average loan.
- The highest rents and increases are in the most undersupplied cities. The survey suggests Bristol has the UK's highest average annual rent at £9,200 per year, with Exeter at £8,559 and Glasgow at £7,548.
- It warns the upcoming Renters (Reform) Bill could push more landlords to exit the student market for shared houses causing it to shrink further and ultimately putting university-owned and Purpose-Built Accommodation under more strain.

Key recommendations include:

- Major reform of the student maintenance system.
- Financial support and introduction of affordable room options.
- Facilitating more supply.

Nick Hillman, Director of HEPI, said: 'Compared to years gone by, we are now in a crisis. Across most of the UK, the official levels of maintenance support simply do not cover anything like most students' actual living costs.'

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

## **2024 Cycle Applicant Figures – 16 October Deadline UCAS data**

On Thursday 26 October, the Universities and Colleges Admissions Service (UCAS) published data from the 16 October deadline. This is the first statistical release of the 2024 undergraduate cycle, detailing applicant numbers for higher education courses with an early October deadline, which includes applicants to medicine, dentistry, and

veterinary degrees, as well as for all courses at the University of Cambridge and the University of Oxford.

Key findings include:

- The total number of UK 18-year-olds who have applied to Medicine is 11,750, which is down by 7% since last year (12,700), but up by 8% since the October deadline for 2020 entry (10,930).
- The total number of international students (all ages) who have applied is 20,850, which is down from 2023 (20,970) but up from 2019 (20,280).
- The USA and Singapore have had the largest growth in applicants since last year, with applicants from USA increasing by 9% and Singapore by 6%.
- There has been a 6% increase in UK domiciled applicants declaring receipt of free school meals. This is in the context of rising numbers of pupils in England receiving free school meals.

Interim CEO at UCAS, Sander Kristel, said: ‘It’s encouraging to see a record number of young students from the most disadvantaged areas aiming high with their choices for next year. The narrowing of the disadvantage gap, against the backdrop of a global pandemic, shows the effort we have made as a sector, to ensure everyone in society can aspire to study the most competitive courses.’

You can [examine the data](#).

## **Participation measures in higher education – DfE data**

On Thursday 26 October, the Department for Education (DfE) published data on participation in higher education by the age of 25.

Headline facts and figures for 2021/22 include:

- 48.6% higher education entry rate by the age of 25 (up from 47% in the previous cohort)
- 54.1% higher education entry rate by the age of 25 for women (10.8 percentage points higher than for males at 43.3%)
- The South West had the lowest regional higher education entry rate by the age of 25 (44.5%) and London recorded the highest rate (61.4%).





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