



The All-Party Parliamentary **University Group**

University APPG weekly update

24 – 28 April 2023

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

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Parliamentary business

The UK's Exit from the EU – Westminster Hall debate

On Monday 24 April, the 'UK's Exit from the European Union' was debated in Westminster Hall. This debate was scheduled following e-petition 628226 and was led by Martyn Day MP (SNP).

Martyn Day highlighted that the many of the positive aspects of the Erasmus programme had not been adequately replaced by the Turing scheme. These were echoed by Layla Moran MP (Liberal Democrat) who said the Turing scheme received £20 million less funding than Erasmus.

Martyn Day proceeded to highlight the sharp drop in the number of new EU students enrolling in UK universities. He shared the words of Charley Robinson, Head of Global Mobility Policy at Universities UK International (UUKi), who said that new figures showed 'very clearly the impact of the sort of loss of freedom of movement'. He said this was impacting the research talent in the UK.

Stephen Farry MP (Alliance) celebrated the UK's status for internationally renowned research and development but noted the loss of opportunities for funding and collaboration by not being part of Horizon Europe.

Calls to associate with Horizon Europe were also made from Layla Moran, Alyn Smith MP (SNP), and Stephen Doughty MP (Labour).

Hywel Williams MP (Plaid Cymru) further raised the loss of EU funding for the universities sector in Wales with 1,000 high-skilled jobs at risk.

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

Lords Industry and Regulators Committee 'the work of the OfS'

On Tuesday 25 April, the Lords Industry and Regulators Committee continued their inquiry into 'the work of the OfS'.

The first session heard evidence from Anthony McClaran (Chair of GuildHE).

Probed on the statutory duties of the OfS, Anthony McClaran said the duties of the OfS as set out in the Higher Education and Research Act 2017 were appropriate and

intended to protect students and provide reassurance for taxpayers and stakeholders. The benefits of this type of statutory regulation had meant there was clarity and provision for sanctions. The regulatory framework for the OfS had grown and become more complex and disproportionate in its demands, especially for smaller and specialist higher education providers which faced the full range of regulatory burdens but didn't have the same level of resourcing that larger universities had.

Anthony McClaran cited concerns about the burden of regulation and how this was managed. He particularly highlighted the challenging volume and complexity of data. The original risk framework had 44 separate indicators which universities had to manage, analyse, and report on but now the risk framework has been reduced to 11 indicators. The simplification and reduction of this data capture had been helpful.

On value for money, Anthony McClaran said this concern had become increasingly important given the large cost of tuition fees paid by students. Measuring the value for money by looking at graduate outcomes and graduate premiums was important but measuring this accurately was difficult. The original vision was a system where universities would have varying fees and could offer better value for money based on different courses. However, this had not transpired as universities all chose to charge the maximum fees from the offset.

The committee asked Anthony McClaran about the engagement the OfS had with students. In his reply, he said the OfS engaged strongly with students and ensured the student perspective was captured in every opportunity. However, he noted that students weren't routinely involved with reviews, which didn't match international standards, and this needed to be addressed. At individual university level there were network relationships with student representatives and curriculum committees which also helped represent student views.

Probed on the financial sustainability of the sector and the role of the OfS to monitor this, Anthony McClaran explained that the regulator had published a [report on financial sustainability](#) which described their sector-based approach to finances. This showed the OfS had a legitimate and well thought out plan in place. He said there was a lot of merit in identifying good practice and rolling that out, as institutions didn't always need regulations to deal with emerging issues. He proceeded to explain that flexibility in courses was important and shorter university courses could help relieve the financial burden of higher education.

Finally, on business models for higher education, Anthony McClaran said that there was significant financial oversight by OfS of universities and higher education

providers. He said universities worked in highly controlled and regulated markets, and they were limited in how much they could flex their business models.

The second session heard from Vicki Stott (Chief Executive of the Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (QAA)), and Professor Simon Gaskell (Chair of the QAA).

The witnesses were first asked on the decision to demit the QAA as the designated quality body (DQB). Professor Gaskell explained that this decision was based on the QAA's suspension from the European Quality Assurance Register for non-compliance of international standards of good practice. Vicki Stott said the work done by the QAA around the UK and internationally formed 75% of the QAA's income and it helped to satisfy the charity requirements of the group. As a prerequisite for the work the QAA carried out, it was important the QAA was registered with the European Quality Assurance register, as it allowed the QAA to operate internationally. She explained that the suspension was because of concerns about the QAA's independence and inability to publish independent reviews. The QAA had continued to have discussions to query this suspension and was appealing this decision.

Regarding the performance report, Professor Gaskell said the negative report was not a surprise, but it contained errors in facts and details. The QAA had submitted rebuttals which were supported by evidence to query this performance report. There were no philosophical differences in belief about quality and standards but there were differences in opinions about how assessment functions should be covered and carried out and this was the core reason for these issues with the OfS.

Probed on the conflict of interest of the QAA, Vicki Stott said the QAA was a membership body which provided consultative services and oversaw the same members from a regulatory perspective. She clarified that this did not pose a conflict of interest because the variety of QAA's work allowed it to gain experience and the necessary ethical understanding that enabled it to be a very knowledgeable and respected organisation. The QAA also had complete separation of its functions and there was no crossover in areas where there could potentially be a conflict. Professor Gaskell said it would be disingenuous not to think that this claim of a conflict of interest was created to justify the suspension of the QAA. Professor Gaskell said it was in the best interests of English higher education and its associated students for there to be an independent advisory body on quality and standards. The QAA was eminently suited to that role and was keen to see a restoration of that role for itself with the OfS relying on an independent advisor on quality and standards, as was clearly stated in the Higher Education and Research Act 2017.

To conclude the session, Vicki Stott noted the devolved nations had not raised any concerns about working with the QAA. The QAA had a different relationship with those nations as they had a different approach to higher education. They valued quality enhancements, and the QAA was seen as an integral partner offering quality assessments.

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

Office for Students – Westminster Hall debate

On Wednesday 26 April, the ‘Office for Students’ was debated in Westminster Hall. This debate was tabled by Emma Hardy MP (Labour).

Emma Hardy began the debate by clarifying that the higher education sector was unanimous in recognising the need for effective and proportionate regulation to improve standards and maintain the sector’s world-leading reputation.

She proceeded to outline the increasing concerns over the current regulatory environment.

Emma Hardy said the cost of regulation for providers should be an important concern for the OfS and the regulator themselves must represent value for money. She noted the significant consultations running simultaneously in 2022 and the burden on institutions to respond to them. She highlighted how one Universities UK (UUK) member had reported 10 full-time equivalent staff supporting regulatory compliance at an approximate staff cost of £444,000. Another institution estimated the cost of regulatory activities to be £1.1 million in 2022-23. She noted this cost was particularly acute for small providers and those offering degree apprenticeships given the large number of regulations in addition to the OfS.

Regarding regulatory burden, Emma Hardy said that it was ‘ridiculous’ that providers were expected to retain five years of all student assessment. She highlighted the estimates from Universities UK that digitalising and storing work could cost institutions between £270,000 and £1,000,000 a year. Specifically on data returns, Emma Hardy said that one member of Universities UK had reported a total of 99 data returns required by the OfS and other professional, statutory, and regulatory bodies.

Emma Hardy raised concern over the de-designation of the Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (QAA) as the designated quality body. She noted how the QAA had relinquished its role because the work it was being asked to undertake in England on behalf of the OfS was no longer compliant with internationally recognised quality

standards. She said the sector was waiting for clarification on how the OfS would replace the QAA's role in terms of breadth and activity beyond investigations.

On the remit and priorities of the OfS, she explained that the duties set out in the Higher Education and Research Act 2017 were already 'wide-ranging and too broad' but over the past five years it had increasingly expanded its responsibilities. She acknowledged that tackling harassment and sexual misconduct were 'vital' but questioned whether it was an appropriate role for the OfS to perform.

Emma Hardy said the OfS was disproportionately influenced by ministerial pressure. She noted how the OfS did not appear to be an independent regulator, driven by the needs of the student, but rather, driven by the desires of the government of the day. She explained that when a Minister mentioned a problem within the sector, the OfS 'jumps to it', citing the interest in vice-chancellors' salaries in 2018. Emma Hardy challenged the fact that the Chair of the OfS, Lord Wharton, retained the Conservative party whip.

On engagement that the OfS had with students, Emma Hardy highlighted the evidence that former members of the OfS had given to the Lords Industry and Regulators Committee. Their opinion was that the OfS made decisions that were opposite to the advice and views gathered through student surveys and consultations and that it then buried the outcomes of those consultations by combining student feedback with feedback from all other stakeholders. That was particularly evident on freedom of speech, which they felt was a government priority and not a student priority.

Emma Hardy highlighted the financial concerns for the sector and the inadequate role of the OfS in assessing financial risks. She noted risks including rising pension costs, inflation in the face of frozen tuition fees, and government policy affecting international student recruitment. The OfS did not focus on assessing the level of risk that these pose to the sector or students.

On the investigations undertaken by the OfS, she said that UUK had raised issues over the lack of clarity for investigations, inconsistent methodologies, the absence of expected timescales, and delays in responses from the OfS. She said this was undermining trust in the regulator when these requests have been felt to be 'fishing exercises' and adds to the time cost and burden of the work.

Matt Western MP, Shadow Minister for Higher Education, began his contribution by stressing the importance of 'good, fair-minded, and proportional regulation'. He explained that no-one he has met in the sector had ever 'questioned the need for

regulation’, with UUK stating it ‘supports the objective of the OfS and believes its statutory duties are clear and proportionate’. However, he reflected on the fact that the mission groups had written to the Education Committee and the Lords Industry and Regulators Committee had launched an inquiry, to suggest something had ‘clearly gone awry’.

He spoke on the importance of trust in order for a regulator to exercise a proportionate degree of authority. He broadly welcomed the OfS’s provider refresh strategy but noted that the mistrust stems from a perception that the OfS is not a sufficiently independent regulator. This was seen most evidently in the appointment of Lord Wharton as Chair of the OfS.

Matt Western raised the comments of the witnesses at the recent Lords Industry and Regulators Committee who noted the student voice was ‘actively suppressed’ when trying to counter aims and policies that appeared to be political in nature. He said that if the OfS was truly a regulator for students, they would be given greater priority in decision making and greater oversight.

He proceeded to echo previous concerns over the regulatory burden and data gathering. He asked the Minister to update on the HE data reduction taskforce to alleviate this burden.

In his concluding remarks, the Shadow Minister celebrated the important work that the regulator had done in some areas such as the access and participation plans and in publishing case studies about how it is managing financially precarious institutions.

Responding on behalf of the government, the Minister for Skills, Apprenticeships, and Higher Education, Rt Hon Robert Halfon MP, opened his remarks by outlining his vision for higher education and the skills agenda.

Turning to OfS regulation, the Minister commended the activity of the OfS, for the most part, in registering providers and delivering the regulatory framework. He said it was important that the benefit of regulation outweighs the burden, including for small providers. The cost of regulation at £13 per student was described as offering ‘value for money’. He said the government was considering OfS registration fees and would update in due course.

On the QAA, the Minister said they chose to withdraw consent for designation. If the English system was not in line with the European standard, it was because England does not have cyclical reviews, which the government considered disproportionate in terms of regulation.

Robert Halfon said he was ‘absolutely supportive of student representation’ and described the work of the student panel as ‘incredibly important.’ If it is used properly and listened to, the Minister said it was the best conduit for ensuring that student voices were heard.

Responding to the question from Matt Western on the HE data reduction taskforce, the Minister said it had met in June 2022 and there had been subsequent meetings of arms-length bodies to discuss progress and identify areas of work to take forward.

The Minister emphasized the importance of students seeing returns on their investment in higher education. He cited data from the Institute for Fiscal Studies which estimated that 25% of male graduates and 15% of female ones will take home less money over their careers than peers who do not get an undergraduate degree. He said the OfS played a critical role in ensuring information on continuation, completion, and progression could inform student choice.

Specifically on the regulation for degree apprenticeships, the Minister said he had ‘some sympathy’ with this issue and said work would be conducted in that area.

Finally, on political influence, the Minister said he did not recognise this characterisation and said that everyone involved was committed to ensuring the continuation of a world-class university system.

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

Recess

The House of Commons rose for May Day recess on Thursday 27 April and will return on Tuesday 2 May.

Forthcoming business

Recess

The House of Commons will return from May Day recess on Tuesday 2 May and rise on Wednesday 3 May for Coronation recess.

The House of Lords will rise for Coronation recess on Wednesday 3 May.

The House of Lords and House of Commons will both return from Coronation recess on Tuesday 9 May.

Lords Industry and Regulators Committee ‘the work of the OfS’

On Tuesday 2 May, the Lords Industry and Regulators Committee will continue their inquiry into ‘the work of the OfS.’ The committee will take evidence from:

- 10:30am:
 - o Nicola Owen (Deputy Chief Executive (Operations) at Lancaster University, and Chair at Association of Heads of University Administration)
 - o Erica Conway (Chief Financial Officer at University of Birmingham, and Chair at British Universities Finance Directors Group)
- 11:30am:
 - o Mack Marshall (Education Officer at Newcastle University Students’ Union)
 - o Rania Regaieg (Chair of the Board of Trustees, Director and President of the Students’ Union at University of the West of England)

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

Higher Education (Freedom of Speech) Bill – Consideration of Lords Message

In the afternoon of Tuesday 2 May, the House of Commons will consider the Lords message of the Higher Education (Freedom of Speech) Bill.

You can [read a full list of amendments](#) and [watch the session](#) here.

Department for Science, Innovation, and Technology – Oral questions

On Wednesday 3 May from 11:30am, Rt Hon Chloe Smith MP, acting Secretary of State for the Department for Science, Innovation and Technology (DSIT), and her ministerial team will answer questions in the House of Commons.

Relevant tabled questions include:

- What recent progress she has made on negotiating the UK's association to Horizon Europe. [Dame Diana Johnson MP (Labour)]
- What steps her Department is taking to support the international competitiveness of the science and technology sector. [James Sunderland MP (Conservative) + Mark Menzies MP (Conservative)]
- Whether she plans to support the creation of regional innovation clusters. [Paul Howell MP (Conservative)]

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

National Security Bill – Consideration of Lords amendments

In the afternoon of Wednesday 3 May, the National Security Bill will return to the House of Commons for consideration of Lords amendments.

You can [read a full list of amendments](#) here and [watch the session](#) here.

Lifelong Learning (Higher Education Fee Limits) Bill – remaining stages

In the afternoon of Wednesday 3 May, the Lifelong Learning (Higher Education Fee Limits) Bill will proceed to report stage and third reading in the House of Commons.

You can [read a full list of amendments](#) here and [watch the session](#) here.

Written Questions

Universities: Neurodiversity

Simon Lightwood: To ask the Secretary of State for Education, what steps her Department is taking to support neurodiverse university students; and whether she supports mandatory neurodiversity training for university staff. [UIN 181115]

Robert Halfon: This government believes it is important that all students, including those with neurodiverse conditions and/or disabilities, receive an appropriate level of support wherever and whatever they choose to study. The government is committed to ensuring that all students receive the support they need to enable them to study alongside their fellow students on an equal basis.

The government expects all higher education (HE) providers to fulfil their responsibilities under the Equality Act 2010 to be making reasonable adjustments for all students, including students with neurodiverse conditions and disabled HE students, not just those in receipt of Disabled Students' Allowance (DSA).

In terms of funding, DSA is available in addition to the standard support package to help students with the additional costs they may face in HE because of their disability, including long-term health conditions, mental health conditions, or specific learning difficulties such as dyslexia.

DSA is not means tested and does not have to be repaid. It is available to full-time and part-time students at undergraduate and postgraduate level, alongside support available from HE providers, and in line with the recommendations of the student's DSA Needs Assessment. There is no list of approved disabilities: to receive DSA, any student must be eligible for the main support package and disabled in line with the definition contained in the Equality Act 2010.

Wherever possible, disabled students and students with neurodiverse conditions should expect to have their needs met through inclusive learning practices and individual reasonable adjustments made by their HE providers.

Higher Education: Health and Safety

Dr Rupa Huq: To ask the Secretary of State for Education, what assessment she has made of the potential merits of introducing a statutory duty of care for higher

education institutions on student (a) mental health, (b) safety and (c) well-being. [UIN 181273]

Robert Halfon: The mental health and wellbeing of young people is a high priority for this government. It is crucial that students get the effective mental health and wellbeing support they need to allow them to flourish at university.

The department is determined to provide students with the best mental health support possible at university. If creating a statutory duty of care in this space was the right way to achieve this, it would have the government's full backing. However, this government believes creating a statutory duty of care for higher education providers is not the most effective way to improve outcomes for students.

Putting a duty of care on a statutory basis would not necessarily make a difference in practice to what providers have to do or the consequences if their actions mean a student's wellbeing is harmed. This is because we consider that a duty of care already exists in common law as part of the law of negligence, and it is therefore not necessary to put it on a statutory basis.

There are also other relevant legal protections that already apply. Students with disabilities, including mental health conditions, are protected under the Equality Act 2010, which prohibits unlawful discrimination and harassment because of a disability. It also imposes a duty on providers to make reasonable adjustments where disabled students, including those with mental health conditions, would otherwise be put at a substantial disadvantage.

The government also believes that there are more effective solutions to improve outcomes for students in the near term. It is our view that the most effective way to support student mental health is through a two-pronged approach of funding vital and innovative services and working with mental health experts and the sector to implement best practice.

The department has made clear our ambition for all providers to back the University Mental Health Charter by 2026. We expect universities to create cultural change around mental health by embedding a whole-university approach to support, as advocated by the charity Student Minds, with student mental health and wellbeing considered across every aspect of university life.

The department has asked the Office for Students to distribute £15 million of funding to providers in 2023/24 to support student mental health, including providing additional support for transitions from school or 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.

Students: Tristan Da Cunha

Andrew Rosindell: To ask the Secretary of State for Education, how many students from Tristan da Cunha are currently studying at Universities in the United Kingdom. [UIN 180823]

Robert Halfon: The Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA) collects and publishes statistics on higher education (HE) at UK HE providers. Latest statistics refer to the 2021/22 academic year.

Table 11 of HESA's Student Data resources shows the number of HE student enrolments by domicile and region of HE provider, and can be found at: <https://www.hesa.ac.uk/data-and-analysis/students/table-11>(opens in a new tab). The table shows that there were 20 student enrolments [1] at UK HE providers in the 2021/22 academic year who were domiciled in St Helena, Ascension, and Tristan da Cunha prior to their studies. Figures are not disaggregated specifically for Tristan da Cunha.

Students: Fees and Charges

Chi Onwurah: To ask the Secretary of State for Education, what assessment she has made of the extent to which tuition fees for home students cover the actual costs of degree delivery across various subjects for UK universities. [UIN 181542]

Robert Halfon: The Office for Students collect and publish sector-level data on income and full economic cost by type of activity including publicly funded teaching (which relates to domestic and EU domiciled students, but not international students). The latest published data can be found here: <https://www.officeforstudents.org.uk/publications/annual-trac-2020-21/>

As part of the 2019 Augur Review on Post-18 Education and Funding, the department commissioned and published a report by KPMG on the cost of undergraduate provision which looked at the variation in costs of teaching per student across

subjects and providers. The report can be found here:

<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/cost-of-undergraduate-higher-education-provision>

The department also published a related analytical note on subject variations in the cost of teaching an undergraduate, which can be found here:

<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/post-18-review-of-education-and-funding-supporting-statistics>

Students: Cost of Living

Dan Carden: To ask the Secretary of State for Education, whether her Department plans to publish a response to the report from the All-Party Parliamentary Group on Students on the impact of the cost-of-living crisis on students, published on 22 March 2023. [UIN 180273]

Robert Halfon: The government recognises the additional cost of living pressures that have arisen this year and that have impacted students.

The department is discussing the additional cost of living pressures in our regular meetings with stakeholders, including the Office for Students (OfS), Universities UK and the higher education Mission Groups. We have also consulted with the National Association of Student Money Advisers to understand the ongoing situation in relation to increased requests from students for hardship awards from their universities.

There is now £276 million of student premium funding available this academic year to support disadvantaged students who need additional help. The department works with the OfS to ensure universities support students in hardship using both hardship funds and drawing on the student premium.

The department has discussed the additional cost of living pressures in regular meetings with stakeholders, including the OfS, Universities UK and the higher education Mission Groups. We have also consulted with the National Association of Student Money Advisers to understand the ongoing situation in relation to increased requests from students for hardship awards from their universities.

The Office for National Statistics has twice surveyed students directly on the impact of cost of living pressures. The most recent report, published 24 February is available to view here:

<https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/educationandchildcare/bulletins/costoflivingandhighereducationstudentsengland/30januaryto13february2023>

On 17 March, OfS published an insight brief to better understand the impact increasing living costs are having on students. The brief discusses data and research from OfS roundtable events, a poll commissioned by the OfS, and other student surveys to explore how the cost of living is affecting students and how universities and colleges are mitigating its impact.

The department welcomes the continued efforts of the OfS and the higher education sector to look at what more can be done to support students in need of financial help.

Dentistry: Higher Education

Rachael Maskell: To ask the Secretary of State for Health and Social Care, what recent assessment he has made of the adequacy of the number of dentistry places at universities; and whether he plans to introduce incentives to help ensure dentistry graduates work in the NHS. [UIN 181443]

Neil O'Brien: We will continue to ensure that numbers of dental school places are in line with England's workforce requirements. Health Education England undertook a three-year review of education and training as part of their September 2021 Advancing Dental Care Review, which they are now implementing through their four year Dental Education Reform Programme to improve recruitment and retention.

We announced a package of changes last year which ensure dentists are more fairly rewarded for the National Health Service care that they deliver, making NHS dentistry a more attractive place for dentists and their teams to work. We know that we must go further, which is why we are again working with the sector and NHS England to consider further changes to improve the system. We will announce these changes shortly.

Research: Finance

John Healey: To ask the Secretary of State for Science, Innovation and Technology, with reference to the Integrated Review, published in March 2021, whether it remains the Government's policy to spend 2.4 per cent of GDP on R&D by 2027. [UIN 181364]

George Freeman: In the 2017 Industrial Strategy, the Government committed to increasing UK economy-wide investment in Research and Development (R&D) to 2.4% of GDP by 2027. Last year, the Office for National Statistics (ONS) updated its R&D data methodology to better represent R&D performed in small businesses and higher education institutions throughout the UK. The updated figures suggest that the UK's total investment in R&D reached 2.6-2.7% of GDP in 2019 and 2.9-3% in 2020, exceeding our "2.4% by 2027" target.

The Government is now taking time to consider a range of options.

Apprentices: Degrees

Chi Onwurah: To ask the Secretary of State for Education, whether her Department has made an assessment of the diversity of the (a) socioeconomic background, (b) ethnic heritage or origin and (c) gender of students who successfully secure a degree apprenticeship. [UIN 181540]

Robert Halfon: The department has seen year-on-year growth in the number of ethnic minority, female, and people from the most deprived areas starting apprenticeships at Levels 6 and 7.

That said, the department wants to see more people access degree level apprenticeships.

To achieve this, the department is making up to £40 million available to higher education providers to improve access to apprenticeships over the next two years, on top of the £8 million investment in 2022/23. The department is also increasing the care leavers bursary from £1,000 to £3,000 and continues to promote degree apprenticeships in schools and further education (FE) colleges to students of all backgrounds, through our Apprenticeship Support and Knowledge programme.

In addition, we are working with UCAS on the expansion of their apprenticeships service. From this autumn, young people will see more personalised options on UCAS, including apprenticeships. This will help put technical and vocational education on an equal footing with traditional academic routes.

Department for Education

Bridget Phillipson: To ask the Secretary of State for Education, how many in-person meetings she held with external stakeholders (a) in total and (b) (i) with the (A)

Minister of State for Schools, (B) Minister of State for Skills, Apprenticeships and Higher Education, (C) Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Children, Families and Wellbeing and (D) Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for the School System and Student Finance and (ii) without another Minister from her Department in attendance in the period between 25 October 2022 and 31 March 2023. [UIN 180566]

Nick Gibb: Since her appointment, my right hon. Friend, the Secretary of State for Education, has regularly met with external stakeholders in person, both with and without her Ministers, to discuss a broad range of policy issues.

Ministerial meetings are published quarterly on the GOV.UK website as part of the Department’s transparency data: <https://www.gov.uk/government/collections/dfe-ministers-quarterly-returns>

The Department appreciates the work of external partners to build a world class education system, and the Secretary of State and her Ministers will continue to engage in constructive dialogue with a range of stakeholders.

Turing Scheme

Munira Wilson: To ask the Secretary of State for Education, if she will take steps to include funding for inbound student mobility to the UK in future years of the Turing Scheme. [UIN 180637]

Robert Halfon: The Turing Scheme, the government’s global programme to study and work abroad, is going into its third year with £110 million invested for this academic year. This year, the Scheme is unlocking opportunities for more than 38,000 participants to gain international experience. This includes more than 23,400 Higher Education placements, more than 9,900 Further Education and Vocational Education and Training placements, and more than 4,900 schools placements.

The Scheme is opening up international opportunities to students who might not otherwise be able to access them. 51% of the international placements being made available across 160 countries all over the world have been earmarked for participants from disadvantaged backgrounds.

The department will confirm the delivery approach for the fourth year of the Turing Scheme in the coming months. Dependent on the delivery approach, any assessment criteria for bids will be designed proportionately and appropriately.

Funding for the 2025/26 academic year and beyond can only be agreed as part of future Spending Reviews.

The Turing Scheme is an outward mobility scheme for UK participants and there are currently no plans to fund inbound mobility. The Turing Scheme prioritises opportunities for UK students to study and work abroad, and we expect other countries to make their own arrangements for their students. The UK continues to be an attractive destination for international degree students, with international student enrolments rising by 12% to 679,970 in the 2021/22 academic year.

The Turing Scheme does not provide funding directly to participants. It is the responsibility of grant recipients, largely education providers, to make timely requests for payments in line with their planned placements and to disburse funding to their participants.

Some organisations have experienced issues navigating the process for claiming Turing Scheme funds, including providing the correct evidence on projects, which has led to delays in payment being processed. The Turing Scheme delivery partner, Capita, has already taken steps to help organisations better understand the process. This includes video instructions, written guidance and one to one telephone support when requested. Departmental officials are also working with Capita to review how it can improve the overall customer experience while obtaining assurance that Turing Scheme funds are being appropriately spent, within the grant terms.

All Turing Scheme applicants are required to apply on an annual basis. This is because UK government funding must be used within the period for which it has been allocated to keep in line with UK government spending requirements. The annual application window gives eligible organisations across all sectors, all over the country, the opportunity to access available funding and tailor their application for their cohort for the relevant academic year.

Apprentices: Degrees

Jonathan Lord: To ask the Secretary of State for Education, what steps her Department is taking to increase the uptake of degree apprenticeships. [UIN 180004]

Robert Halfon: There were over 43,000 starts at levels 6 and 7 in the 2021/22 academic year, which is an increase of 10.3% on the previous year. [UIN 180004]

The department wants to see continued growth year-on-year in degree-level apprenticeships, and want to ensure that these opportunities are accessible to young people from all backgrounds. To support this, over the next two years the department is making up to £40 million available to higher education providers through the Strategic Priorities Grant, to grow their degree apprenticeship provision and form new employer partnerships, on top of the department's £8 million investment in 2022/23.

We are also promoting apprenticeships in schools and further education colleges to students of all backgrounds through our Apprenticeship Support and Knowledge programme. The department has published the Higher and Degree apprenticeship vacancy listing, which highlights over 350 vacancies across the country that are available for young people to apply for in 2023 and 2024. This listing is available here: <https://amazingapprenticeships.com/app/uploads/2022/11/Higher-Degree-Listing-FEB-2023.pdf>(opens in a new tab).

In addition, the department is working with UCAS on the expansion of their apprenticeships service. From this autumn, young people will see more personalised options on UCAS, including apprenticeships. This will help put technical and vocational education on an equal footing with traditional academic routes.

Alongside this, the department continues to work on a programme of 'simplification', exploring ways we can remove unnecessary bureaucracy, complexity, and barriers to engagement for apprentices, employers, and providers.

Sector News

Rt Hon Chloe Smith MP approved as Secretary of State for DSIT

On Monday 24 April, HM King Charles III formally approved Rt Hon Chloe Smith MP as Secretary of State for Science, Innovation, and Technology while Rt Hon Michelle Donelan MP departed for a short maternity leave.

Chloe Smith has been the MP for Norwich North since 2009 and previously served as Secretary of State for Work and Pensions (2022).

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

Confucius Institutes – UKCT report

On Monday 24 April, UK-China Transparency (UKCT) published a report examining Confucius Institutes (CIs) in the UK.

The UKCT studied documents and data from UK universities and found that ‘universities are operating Confucius Institutes illegally and enabling transnational repression in the UK.’

The Chinese government demands applicants for roles at CIs fill in a special form, UKCT said, that requires applicants to provide details of their ‘political characteristics’ and ‘ethnicity’; promise not to have a child whilst working abroad; have their current employer evaluate their ‘political attitude’; and be evaluated by a CCP Committee. The report highlights that ‘these practices are illegal under UK law’.

The report also alleges that the UK Home Office ‘is systematically enabling this by means of an unlawful dedicated visa route which makes the employment status of Confucius Institute staff unclear.’

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

OfS financial sustainability and market exit information

On Tuesday 25 April, the Office for Students (OfS) published information on how they regulate financial sustainability within higher education.

The guide explains the importance of monitoring financial sustainability and outlines the work that the OfS conducts. This includes:

- Gathering data and intelligence to identify risk across the sector and for different types of providers.
- Monitoring the current and future financial position of individual higher education providers.
- Taking regulatory action to protect students' interests where providers fall into financial difficulty.

The OfS also published a document containing examples of cases where a provider has been at risk of ceasing the provision of higher education, including one case where a market exit occurred. It includes the key issues, the actions the OfS took, and the legislative basis for their decisions.

You can [read more on the regulatory approach](#) and [read the case studies](#) here

UCU letter to MPs

On Tuesday 25 April, the University and College Union (UCU) published a letter sent to members of parliament with universities in their constituencies.

The letter, sent by UCU General Secretary Jo Grady, highlights the threats from universities to dock up to 100% of staff wages for taking part in marking and assessment boycotts. It urges the MPs to write to their local vice-chancellor to discuss their response to the industrial action.

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

International association of universities publish joint statement on internationalisation

On Tuesday 25 April, the major convening associations of universities from Australia, the UK, USA, New Zealand, Canada, and Germany published a joint statement on the need to achieve 'safe, secure, and sustainable' internationalisation.

The statement notes that they will work towards:

- Individually and collectively making the positive case for safe, secure, and sustainable internationalisation in higher education – and the value this brings to higher education, research, and the wider communities that host our institutions.
- Sharing experience and insights between signatory organisations and our respective memberships, to help inform the development of policy and practice regarding internationalisation in higher education in our domestic systems.
- Supporting appropriate and proportionate action within our systems to promote and support safe, secure, and sustainable internationalisation of our respective research and education enterprises.
- Actively seeking opportunities to enhance research and higher education cooperation between the institutions we represent.

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

UK and India sign research agreement

On Wednesday 26 April, the UK signed an agreement to collaborate on science and innovation, following a meeting between the UK Minister for Science, Research, and Innovation, George Freeman MP, and Indian Minister of State for Science and Technology, Dr Jitendra Singh.

The agreement intends to remove red tape as a barrier to major collaborations and enable new joint research schemes to deliver progress on big issues such as climate change, pandemic preparedness, and AI.

It includes a programme of UK-India university partnerships, including one between Aston University and CSIR Dehradun on sustainable biofuels.

George Freeman commented, ‘Today’s agreement is part of our program of deepening UK collaboration with other global science superpowers on ground-breaking innovation and research, to help tackle shared global challenges. This partnership will grow the sectors, companies, and jobs of tomorrow for the benefit of both our countries and the globe.’

You can [read more](#) here.

Commons Science and Technology Committee renamed

On Wednesday 26 April, the House of Commons Science and Technology Committee was renamed to the Science, Innovation, and Technology Committee following the machinery of government changes and the creation of the Department for Science, Innovation and Technology. As part of the change, the Committee adds to its remit scrutiny of the expenditure, administration and policy of the Science, Innovation and Technology Department and its associated public bodies.

Chair of the Science, Innovation and Technology Committee, Rt Hon Greg Clark MP (Conservative), commented: 'We are pleased to officially take on the scrutiny of the Department for Science, Innovation and Technology from today. Of course, science and technology touches many areas that go beyond this Department. So, we are delighted to maintain our longstanding remit to examine the policies and applications of science and technology across all departments of government and beyond.'

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

Small, specialist and practice-based universities – HEPI report

On Thursday 27 April, the Higher Education Policy Institute (HEPI) published a report examining the state of small and special-focused universities.

With small and special-focus universities now representing 40% of providers in England, this report makes the case for major policy, structural and regulatory changes to increase competition, innovation, and sector diversity in higher education.

Report findings include:

- Small and special-focus providers need help to overcome diseconomies of scale, capital investment and research requirements.
- Policymakers need a firmer grasp of size, specialism, and practice-based education, as the sector broadens with new market entrants and access to degree-awarding powers.
- Specific aspects of higher education should be de-regulated to address barriers to entry and growth for small providers and overlooked disciplines.

- Mergers are a major risk to identity and specialism. Small provider clusters need structural support for lower risk alliances, including shared services, managed networks, consortia, strategic alliances, and joint ventures.

Sandra Booth, Director of Policy & External Relations at Council for Higher Education Art & Design, commented: ‘My hope is that the recommendations within the report enable the collaborative efforts of those with a ‘quieter voice’ in the sector to be understood on their own terms as potential policy makers rather than policy takers.’

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

Homes Fit for Study 2023 report – SOS report

On Thursday 27 April, the Students Organising for Sustainability (SOS) published updated research examining student experiences of the private rented sector, and their experiences with energy. The research was conducted with funding, and in partnership, with Universities UK.

Over 800 students were consulted for the research. Key findings include:

- 61% of students are satisfied or very satisfied with their current accommodation.
- 70% of those surveyed said they limit the length of time they have their heating on to save money on energy bills.
- 49% reported that their accommodation was poorly insulated / draughty.

You can [read the full report](#) here and [read an accompanying blog](#) here.