



All-Party Parliamentary University Group

Weekly update

26 – 30 January 2026

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

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Click on the items in the table of contents to go straight to debates, answers, forthcoming business, etc.



Parliamentary business	3
Department for Work and Pensions - Oral Questions	3
Youth Unemployment - HoC Debate	4
Forthcoming Business	7
Work of UK Research and Innovation (UKRI) -Science, Innovation and Technology Committee oral evidence session	7
Written questions and statements	8
Department for Education: Turing Scheme: Finance	8
Department for Education: Erasmus+ Programme	8
Department for Education: Students: Loans	9
Department for Education: Universities: United Arab Emirates	9
Department for Education: Higher Education: Finance	10
Department for Education: Universities: Finance	11
Sector news	12
IHE 2025 Survey and Statistics	12
Higher education student enrolments UK: 2024 to 2025 - Higher Education Statistics Agency	13
Review of English language assessment methods - Home Office	14

Parliamentary business

Department for Work and Pensions - Oral Questions

On Monday 26 January, at 2.30pm the Secretary of Department for Work and Pensions, Rt Hon Pat McFadden MP, and his ministerial colleagues answered oral questions in the House of Commons.

Jas Athwal MP (Labour) asked what steps the Department was taking to deliver on the Government's target for two-thirds of young people to be in university or an apprenticeship, so that they can gain the skills they need.

In response, the Minister said the Government had changed the way the growth and skills levy (apprenticeship levy) operates so that more funding is directed towards young people, arguing this was necessary after a reported decline in youth apprenticeship starts over the past decade.

Sir Ashley Fox MP (Conservative) questioned whether the youth employment initiative could succeed given what he described as the Chancellor's "jobs tax". He argued that payroll employment had fallen by 170,000 since the election up to November 2025, that 45% of those losses involved young people, and claimed that the Government had cost young people 150 jobs per day since coming into office. He asked how the Secretary of State's scheme would cope with that situation.

In response, the Minister said that there were 513,000 more people in work compared with the same time the previous year. Referring to the Chancellor, he said he was grateful for the £820 million funding provided for the youth guarantee, which he said would deliver training support for 300,000 young people and subsidised employment for those who had been out of work for 18 months. He said this was important to help young people develop the discipline, pride and purpose that come with having a job.

Helen Whately MP (Conservative) said that over 700,000 university graduates were out of work and on benefits, and asked what the Secretary of State would say to young people applying for jobs without success. Pat McFadden responded that the rise in graduate inactivity had occurred under the previous Government, and pointed to the youth guarantee and apprenticeship reforms as the current Government's response to rising NEET numbers.

Separately, Jack Abbott MP (Labour/Co-op) referenced local investment creating jobs “many of them for graduates” in Ipswich and asked what further steps were being taken to get young people back into training and employment. Pat McFadden said the youth guarantee and apprenticeship changes were intended to support training and local employment outcomes linked to major investments.

You [can watch the session.](#)

Youth Unemployment - HoC Debate

On Wednesday 28 January, the House of Commons held a debate on Youth Unemployment.

Helen Whately MP (Conservative) opened the debate by referring to young people leaving school, college or university and struggling to enter the labour market. She cited figures indicating that over 700,000 university graduates were claiming out-of-work benefits, arguing that many graduates were applying unsuccessfully for large numbers of jobs and facing prolonged periods of unemployment after completing their studies. She said this represented a failure to provide viable employment pathways for those leaving higher education.

During her speech, Whately later argued that some graduates were leaving university with degrees that were “not actually of any help to them” in securing employment, and suggested that higher education pathways had contributed to graduates entering the benefits system rather than work.

Responding for the Government, **Dame Diana Johnson MP (Labour)** said that alongside reforms to apprenticeships and employment support, the Government was “strengthening our world-leading universities” as part of a broader approach to skills and productivity. She also referred to the Government’s ambition for two-thirds of young people to progress into higher-level education or training, linking this to addressing skills shortages in the economy.

Johnson went on to reference the Skills White Paper, which she said set out plans for a more specialised and efficient higher education sector better aligned with labour-market needs. She also stated that the graduate economic inactivity rate was at its lowest level on record and said the Government aimed to build on this through closer alignment between skills policy, higher education and employment support.

Lewis Cocking MP (Conservative) argued that while university can be the right choice for some young people, it is not the right pathway for everyone. He reflected on earlier political targets to expand university participation, saying that past emphasis on university routes had come at the expense of apprenticeships and alternative

pathways, leaving some school leavers without clear options. He said that education policy should place greater emphasis on preparing young people for the world of work, rather than assuming university is the default route.

Cocking welcomed the Prime Minister's target for two-thirds of young people to be in higher education, apprenticeships or training, but argued that setting targets alone was insufficient without visible action. He said young people and employers did not yet see meaningful change on the ground and urged faster reform of education and skills pathways to better support transitions from school into work.

Responding for the Government, **Dame Diana Johnson MP (Labour)** said that alongside reforms to apprenticeships and employment support, the Government was strengthening universities as part of its wider approach to skills and productivity. She referred to the Government's ambition for two-thirds of young people to progress into higher-level education or training, and said this was intended to align education pathways more closely with labour-market needs.

Speaking for the Liberal Democrats, **Sarah Olney MP (Liberal Democrat)** said that the transition from university into work had become increasingly difficult for graduates. She argued that employers were less willing to recruit and train inexperienced graduates, weakening the link between higher education and employment. Olney cited conversations with students at Roehampton University, who expressed concern about the lack of entry-level roles and the expectation of prior experience, and said many graduates were returning to live with their parents after university due to limited job prospects.

Andrew Lewin MP (Labour) argued that long-term solutions to youth unemployment required sustained investment in further and higher education. Referring to his constituency, he highlighted the role of the University of Hertfordshire and said the Government's ambition was for at least two-thirds of young people to progress into college, apprenticeships or university, positioning higher education as a central pillar of economic opportunity.

Joy Morrissey MP (Conservative) referred to constituent cases involving graduates from Cambridge University and law graduates who were unable to find employment after completing their degrees. She argued that rising costs for businesses were limiting graduate recruitment and reducing opportunities for those leaving higher education.

Naushabah Khan MP (Labour) said that while university had been the route that enabled her own success, it was not necessarily the right pathway for all young people. She argued that higher education should sit alongside, rather than crowd out, other skills pathways, while stressing the importance of valuing both university and non-university routes equally.

Dame Harriett Baldwin MP (Conservative) claimed rising youth unemployment and NEET levels included many university graduates, and cited commentary that “over 700,000 university graduates” were out of work and on benefits, alongside net emigration of under-24s. She framed this as evidence of a worsening opportunity picture for graduates as well as school leavers.

In outlining Conservative policy, Baldwin also backed expanding apprenticeships while critiquing what she called “debt-trap degrees” (presented as degrees that “do not pay back”), arguing for shifting incentives away from some university routes and towards vocational pathways.

Andrew Western MP (Labour, Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State) responded that the Government’s decision to target apprenticeship funding (including the shift away from level 7 apprenticeships) was partly because there are “other routes, including a more traditional higher-education route” available instead.

You can watch the debate and read the full transcript.

Forthcoming Business

Work of UK Research and Innovation (UKRI) - Science, Innovation and Technology Committee oral evidence session

On Tuesday 3 February from 9:35 am, the House of Commons Education Committee will hear oral evidence as part of their inquiry into “Work of UK Research and Innovation (UKRI)”.

Witnesses include:

- Professor Sir Ian Chapman, CEO at UK Research and Innovation (UKRI)

You can watch the session.

Written questions and statements

Department for Education: Turing Scheme: Finance

Mike Wood (Conservative): (UIN105701) To ask the Secretary of State for Education, further to the Cabinet Office press release, Young people from all backgrounds to get opportunity to study abroad as UK-EU deal unlocks Erasmus+, of 17 December 2025, whether the Turing scheme will be continued, and whether she plans any changes to the Turing scheme's funding or scope.

Josh MacAlister: The government remains committed to international mobility. That's why we have announced the UK has agreed to join the Erasmus+ programme in 2027. The Turing Scheme continues to deliver these opportunities and is confirmed for the 2026/27 academic year.

Guidance on the Turing Scheme for the 2026/27 academic year has been published on GOV.UK, with applications for funding opening at 12:00 on Tuesday 20 January and closing at 16:00 on Monday 16 March.

The aims of the Turing Scheme for the 2026/27 academic year are to enhance transferable skills, widen opportunity and drive value for money.

We are continuing to focus the scheme's funding on students from disadvantaged and underrepresented backgrounds and those with special educational needs and disabilities.

Further details, including guidance for providers and application information, are available at: <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/turing-scheme-international-placements-2026-to-2027>.

Source

Department for Education: Erasmus+ Programme

Mike Wood (Conservative): (UIN105698) To ask the Secretary of State for Education, whether she has made an estimate of the yearly number of (a) EU students who will study in the UK and (b) UK students who will study in the EU when the Erasmus+ is fully operational.

Josh MacAlister: In 2018/19, there were approximately 31,000 inbound higher education student mobilities via the Erasmus+ programme. There were approximately 16,000 outbound higher education student mobilities in the same year. The department expects there will be a greater number of higher education mobilities on reassociation, given the expansion of the programme. We expect that over 100,000 people could benefit from mobility and partnership opportunities from participation in 2027 across all sectors.

[Source](#)

Department for Education: Students: Loans

Joe Robertson (Conservative): (UIN106035) To ask the Secretary of State for Education, whether her Department has modelled the potential impact of Plan 2 interest rates on graduate retention in key public service professions.

Josh MacAlister: The department does not provide analysis for impacts of policies on graduate retention in key public service professions.

Borrowers, including those in public services professions, remain protected as repayments are determined by income, not the amount borrowed. If a borrower's salary remains the same, their monthly repayments will also stay the same.

Borrowers only start repaying their student loan once earnings exceed the student loan repayment threshold, after which they pay 9% of income above that level. The Plan 2 repayment threshold freeze does not change that or increase borrowers' student loan balances. At the end of the repayment term any outstanding loan debt, including interest accrued, will be cancelled.

It is important that we have a sustainable student finance system, fair to students and the taxpayer. We will continue to keep the terms of the system under review to ensure this remains the case.

[Source](#)

Department for Education: Universities: United Arab Emirates

The Lord Empey Kt OBE (Ulster Unionist Party): (HL13411) To ask His Majesty's Government what assessment they have made of reports that the government of the United Arab Emirates will not provide scholarships to students seeking to attend UK

universities on the grounds that they might be subject to radicalisation by Islamic extremists on UK campuses.

The Rt Hon. the Baroness Smith of Malvern: The UK offers one of the best education systems in the world, especially teaching and research in high growth sectors of the future. We welcome high quality students from across the world, including from the United Arab Emirates (UAE).

No form of extremism has any place in our society, and we have some of the strongest laws in the world to protect our citizens from hatred and terrorism. The government maintains stringent measures to safeguard all students and our Prevent strategy, recently updated to address evolving threats, and our consistent review and proscription of extremist organisations, underline our ongoing commitment to student welfare and campus safety.

The education sector continues to play a vital role in safeguarding learners from radicalisation, being the highest contributor of referrals to the Prevent programme. To support this effort, we provide resources through the Educate Against Hate website, helping pupils and staff understand terrorism risks and challenge extremist views.

The UK and UAE have a deep and long-standing bilateral relationship and we will continue to discuss this matter with their government.

[Source](#)

Department for Education: Higher Education: Finance

The Baroness Coussins (C/B): (HL13526) To ask His Majesty's Government what discussions, if any, they have had with the Office for Students about priorities and criteria for category C1 strategic funding for university courses.

The Rt Hon. the Baroness Smith of Malvern: The Strategic Priorities Grant (SPG) is one of our main higher education funding levers and provides support for high-cost subjects. Funding is allocated by the Office for Students (OfS) based on subject classifications. Subjects are grouped into price groups (A, B, C1.1, and C1.2), which reflect the cost of delivering those courses.

As set out in the 2025/26 SPG guidance letter from my right hon. Friend, the Secretary of State for Education to the OfS, we are working with the OfS to review and reform the high-cost subject funding, including price group C1, to ensure that it

best aligns with the government's growth mission and is targeted effectively towards provision that supports the industrial strategy and future skills needs.

We are working closely with the OfS to understand the impact of any changes to SPG funding, and the department will issue guidance to the OfS in due course setting out our funding priorities for 2026/27.

[Source](#)

Department for Education: Universities: Finance

Ian Sollom (Liberal Democrats): (UIN101939) To ask the Secretary of State for Education, whether her Department keeps records of meetings with commercial lenders on the finances of higher education institutions.

Josh MacAlister (Labour): The department meets regularly with a variety of stakeholders to hear their views on the English higher education sector. This includes commercial lenders, given that the sector's external borrowing totalled £13.3 billion in 2023/24.

Grouped Questions: 101937, 101938

[Source](#)

Sector news

IHE 2025 Survey and Statistics

The 2025 Survey and Statistics report is published during a period of change across the higher education sector. It draws on responses to the 2025 Independent Higher Education (IHE) Survey from 81 self-identifying independent higher education providers, alongside official Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA) data for 2023/24, which provides contextual information to support interpretation of the survey results.

The report presents an overview of the scale, structure and characteristics of independent providers and examines how developments since the previous survey in 2019 have affected student participation, provision, and organisational sustainability.

Independent providers continue to represent a relatively small proportion of total higher education enrolments. However, patterns of growth and concentration within particular student groups suggest shifts in how these providers operate within the wider system. The analysis considers the role of independent providers in relation to system objectives such as flexibility, skills provision and lifelong learning. It also examines the prevalence of short courses and modular provision, including their potential relevance to the implementation of the Lifelong Learning Entitlement (LLE).

The survey identifies a number of common themes across provider characteristics, modes of delivery, student populations, regulatory engagement and policy priorities. These findings offer insight into current operating models within the independent sector and the factors influencing providers' capacity to respond to policy and market developments.

The report is informed by the contributions of independent providers who participated in the 2025 IHE Survey and reflects the priorities, challenges and opportunities identified through their responses.

Key findings

- Between 2018/19 and 2023/24, independent providers increased their share of total UK higher education enrolment to 3.3%, with growth concentrated among mature and part-time students.
- Mature learners account for 59% of enrolments at independent providers, compared with 41% at traditional universities.

- Independent providers account for 22% of new part-time entrants across UK higher education, despite representing less than 4% of total enrolments.
- 91% of survey respondents identify as small or medium-sized enterprises (SMEs), with most enrolling fewer than 500 students.
- Survey respondents report a range of delivery models: 57% offer online or distance learning, 45% offer blended learning, and 33% provide teaching during evenings and weekends.
- 62% of respondents currently offer short courses, with a further 12% indicating plans to do so.
- 78% of respondents report partnerships with industry, most commonly involving placements or work experience (73%), professional networking or mentoring (64%), and input into curriculum design (59%).
- 73% of survey respondents are registered with the Office for Students (OfS), with most remaining respondents indicating an intention to apply.

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

Higher education student enrolments UK: 2024 to 2025 - Higher Education Statistics Agency

The *Higher Education Student Statistics: UK, 2024/25* bulletin is published by the Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA) and presents official data on student enrolments across UK higher education providers. It covers the academic year from 1 August 2024 to 31 July 2025 and includes data on the number and characteristics of students enrolled at UK universities and other higher education institutions.

The bulletin offers an overview of total student numbers and examines trends in enrolments by level of study, study mode, and other demographic and institutional categories. It helps contextualise recent changes in overall participation and patterns of study within the sector.

Total student enrolments for 2024/25 show a modest decline compared with the previous year, while underlying patterns in undergraduate and postgraduate enrolments, as well as characteristics such as domicile and study mode, illustrate ongoing shifts within the higher education population.

The analysis identifies trends in key dimensions of the student population and provides a basis for further examination of participation, access, and the balance of study across different groups of students.

Key findings:

- Total higher education student enrolments in the UK were **2,863,180** in 2024/25, representing a **1% decrease** from 2023/24.
- Data were reported by **304 UK higher education providers** to HESA for the 2024/25 academic year.
- Undergraduate and postgraduate enrolments continue to show different trends, with variations between first-degree, other undergraduate and postgraduate study.
- The bulletin includes breakdowns by study mode (such as full-time and part-time), domicile (UK vs international), subject area and demographic characteristics.
- The statistics also cover qualifications obtained by students in the year, providing additional context for trends in awards and completions

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

Review of English language assessment methods - Home Office

The *Review of English Language Assessment Methods* was published by the UK Government on **29 January 2026** and sets out findings from a review of how English language proficiency is assessed by higher education providers (HEPs) for international students applying to degree-level and above courses. The review forms part of the Government's efforts to understand current practices and ensure that students meet the required English language standards set by the Home Office.

The review is based primarily on data from an online survey conducted between March and April 2025, to which **144 higher education providers** responded. It outlines the range of methods, tests and qualifications accepted as evidence of English language ability, describes institutional assessment processes, and identifies common challenges and barriers encountered by providers.

The analysis examines accepted formats (including Secure English Language Tests (SELTs), non-SELT tests, English subject qualifications and in-house testing) and the criteria institutions use in deciding which evidence to accept. It also considers how providers verify documentation, monitor compliance, and address issues such as fraud.

The review highlights variations in practice across the sector, reflects on the administrative processes involved in English language assessment, and identifies factors that providers consider important in maintaining the reliability, security and accessibility of assessments.

Key findings:

- **Accepted evidence:** Almost all providers surveyed accept Secure English Language Tests (SELTs), and the majority also accept non-SELT tests, international English subject qualifications and degrees taught in English as evidence of English language proficiency.
- **Test providers:** IELTS and Pearson PTE Academic UKVI were the most frequently accepted tests; other SELT providers such as LanguageCert and Trinity College London were also widely accepted. Certain non-SELT tests such as TOEFL and Cambridge English certificates were accepted by many providers.
- **Assessment criteria:** Providers reported that factors such as test quality, reliability, security and the reputation of the test provider were key considerations in deciding which tests to accept.
- **In-house testing:** Around one-third of providers reported offering their own in-house English language tests, often to provide an alternative where access to external tests is limited, to exercise greater control over the assessment process, or to improve accessibility.
- **Verification and compliance:** Most providers review the validity and security of non-SELT assessments and use online verification services or external organisations to verify documentation. Internal checks and staff training on fraud and document verification are reported by many respondents.
- **Challenges:** The most commonly reported barriers in assessing English language ability were limited accessibility to approved testing centres and difficulty in ensuring consistency across providers. Other issues noted included document verification challenges and clarity of government guidance

You can [read the full list of findings.](#)