



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

## University APPG weekly update

26 February – 1 March 2024

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

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# Parliamentary business

## Investigation into student loans issued to those studying at franchised higher education providers – Public Accounts Committee oral evidence

On Monday 26 February, the Public Accounts Committee heard oral evidence as part of its inquiry into student loans issued to those studying at franchised higher education providers. The witness panel consisted of:

- Susan Acland-Hood (Permanent Secretary, Department for Education (DfE))
- Julia Kinniburgh (Director General Skills, DfE)
- Susan Lapworth (CEO, Office for Students (OfS))
- Chris Larmer (CEO, Student Loans Company (SLC))

**Student loan plans:** Susan Acland-Hood said undergraduate borrowers under Plan 2 (2012-2023) would start repayment with an average debt of £45,600. Those under plan 5, with a longer repayment term, lower repayment threshold and different interest rates during study, would start repayments with an average debt of £42,900. She noted the system penalised those who took longer to repay as it was regressive. 61% of borrowers under Plan 5 were expected to repay in full; it was lower for Plan 2. DfE conducted full impact assessments when terms were set and changed.

**Fraud and abuse:** The Permanent Secretary said there were multiple risks of fraud: individual fraud risk where people claimed to be studying but were not and mis-selling where entities encouraged individuals to study to collect tuition fee payments but delivered poor education. There was collective concern about dealing with poor quality provision without inhibiting those who provided innovative education to pupils who would otherwise not access higher education. Chris Larmer said the key tools to identify fraud were data, partnerships, culture and outcomes. SLC wanted to prevent more than detect; it was indicated that SLC would prevent around £30 million in 2024 - around £20 million more than last year.

**Responsibility for preventing fraud:** The Permanent Secretary said every organisation was responsible, but responsibilities could be clearer. Julia Kinniburgh said DfE had the overall responsibility for fraud, budget, risk to public funding, and to ensure collaboration across the three partners. DfE could instruct SLC to suspend payments,

so information-sharing had to work. DfE said lead providers had a role and responsibility to ensure provision was not fraudulent. Susan Lapworth said OfS regulated registered providers; typically, the lead providers as they had to be registered to gain student funding, although franchise providers were increasingly registering. Management and governance requirements could be made clearer. Chris Larmer said the SLC was accountable for enabling opportunity through finance, protection of tax-payers money, and individual student fraud; at times, conditions could be put on students to ensure they did not get funding now or in the future. Collaboration was necessary. If patterns were showing challenges in franchise providers, this would be shared with DfE. Julia Kinniburgh said there was real transparency between DfE, SfC and SLC which enabled a collective view of an issue.

**Specific case of misconduct:** Susan Lapworth said, regarding a specific case referenced in paragraph 2.9 of the National Audit Office (NAO) [report](#), OfS concluded it would work differently in future; clear information sharing protocols were now in place. Susan Acland-Hood explained different information from the lead provider sent to OfS and SLC. Julia Kinniburgh said following the case, DfE had established a weekly intelligence and data-sharing group.

**Action taken with lead providers:** Julia Kinniburgh said OfS had written to the lead providers and DfE had met with chairs of audit committees and vice chancellors. OfS had taken regulatory action with certain providers, in full view of the rest of the sector. The next round of quality assurance by OfS would look specifically at franchise provision.

**Increase in fraud:** Susan Acland-Hood said it was difficult to know whether the increase was due to an increase of fraud or in detection. DfE had to find a balance between encouraging innovation through franchise whilst maintaining safeguards. There had been investment in SLC's detection, and some cases had been identified through pattern recognition, so that once some were found, more were likely to be found. Chris Larmer said only a small number of franchise providers had created the increase.

**Course outcomes:** Susan Acland-Hood said outcomes were worse for students at franchise providers which was partly because franchise providers tended to cater for students who would not otherwise attend HE. Susan Lapworth said there was variation; not every franchise course had weak outcomes.

**Use of agents:** Susan Acland-Hood said Universities UK had introduced the UK agent quality framework and had committed to reviewing this and updating the admissions code of practice to make it clear how it applied to students in foundation degrees.

There had been a commitment from others in the sector to abide by the updated framework. DfE had started a rapid investigation into the use of agents, domestically and internationally.

**Meaningful attendance:** Julia Kinniburgh said she agreed there should be a definition of meaningful attendance. DfE had been discussing a draft of definition of attendance and engagement with the HE sector and hoped this would be finalised quickly and would then be put out for consultation.

**Deductions for franchise arrangements:** Susan Acland-Hood said that whilst franchise providers could deduct between 12.5-30% from the loan, this was a deduction from the tuition fee amount. Julia Kinniburgh said transparency was being considered. Susan Lapworth said some of the numbers were shocking, although there was a range. OfS were concerned that this indicated less of the tuition fee payment was being spent on high quality provision; these questions were posed to vice chancellors. Susan Acland-Hood said transparency was sensible and it was under discussion with Ministers.

**Future action:** Julia Kinniburgh said since July 2023, DfE had taken various additional controls, such as information sharing, but continued to consider further steps. For example, to consider whether provision could be delivered by organisations not directly regulated. Susan Lapworth said more could be done within current powers, but a helpful measure would be the power to act pre-emptively to suspend payments and then investigate. This would need primary legislation and resources; this was being discussed with DfE. Chris Larmer said the financial crime unit had already increased and the SLC had the powers - from an individual fraud perspective - to stop payments and to issue sanctions where fraud was proven. If fraud had not yet been proven, DfE would need to instruct SLC not to pay. However, it ensured a balance that students were not penalised in a wrongful way.

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

## **Higher Education (Student Finance and Skills Shortages) – Ten Minute Rule Motion**

On Tuesday 27 February, Lia Nici MP (Conservative) presented a Ten Minute Rule Motion to introduce a Higher Education (Student Finance and Skills Shortages) Bill.

In her speech, she proposed the Secretary of State for Education introduce a “British Grad Force Agreement”, modelled after the system the armed forces uses to fund training. This Agreement would focus on training for public sector roles in which

there are skills shortages, such as doctors, dentists, teachers and Local Authority roles including social workers, speech and language therapists and physiotherapists. It is intended to incentivise students to choose the degrees the country needs.

In exchange for agreeing to complete a minimum term of employment to “pay back the country in years of service”, under the proposal, young people could have their training funded by bursaries and scholarships from a relevant public sector organisation or the government could write off student loans once the individual has worked their minimum service period. If a student drops out, they will be expected to pay back any bursary or training costs.

She proposed the government use existing skills shortage research to produce a “graduate skills shortage list” to inform this scheme. Universities would be able to apply for their courses to be accredited by the government to make them eligible for this scheme.

This Bill was presented by Lia Nici MP, Sally Ann Hart MP, Tom Hunt MP, Miriam Cates MP and Martin Vickers MP (all Conservative). The Bill passed to move on to a Second Reading, scheduled for Friday 19 April. However, bills of this nature do not usually receive Second Reading.

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

# Forthcoming business

## **Spring Budget – HM Treasury statement**

On Wednesday 6 March at 12:30pm, the Chancellor of the Exchequer, Rt Hon Jeremy Hunt MP, will deliver his Spring Budget statement to the House of Commons.

You can [watch the session](#).

## **The crucial nature of Higher Education to growth, productivity and levelling up – House of Lords debate**

On Thursday 7 March, the House of Lords will debate the ‘crucial nature of Higher Education to growth, productivity and levelling up’. This debate was tabled by Lord Blunkett (Labour).

You can [see the up to date list of speakers](#) and [watch the session](#).

You can [read the UUK briefing](#) and the [House of Lords library briefing](#).



# Written Questions

## Horizon Europe

**Dr Kieran Mullan MP:** To ask the Secretary of State for Science, Innovation and Technology, what steps she is taking to encourage UK participation in Horizon Europe. [UIN 13627]

**Andrew Griffith MP:** The Government is committed to restoring the UK’s position in Horizon Europe by ensuring that businesses and researchers feel supported to re-engage with Horizon Europe and lead consortia. My Department is promoting the opportunities, including working closely with the EU to boost participation through joint UK/EU engagement campaigns. In January, Government launched a large-scale marketing campaign to encourage UK researchers and businesses to bid for Horizon funding. My Department is delivering a Horizon Europe Roadshow around the country to drive network-building and information-sharing and is making concrete support available through a ‘pump priming’ grant scheme delivered by the British Academy.

## Overseas Students: Albania

**Sir John Hayes MP:** To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department, how many student visas were issued to Albanian nationals in each year since 2021. [UIN 13868]

**Tom Pursglove MP:** The Home Office publishes data on Student visas by nationality in the ‘Immigration Statistics Quarterly Release’. Data on the outcomes of Student visas are published in table ‘Vis\_D02’ of the [detailed entry clearance visas dataset](#). Selecting ‘Student’ from the visa type subgroup filter will output data on Student visas. Nationality and time frames can also be filtered. Information on how to use the dataset can be found in the ‘Notes’ page of the workbook. The latest data relates from 2005 up to the end of September 2023.

Information on future Home Office statistical release dates can be found in the ‘Research and statistics calendar’.

## Universities: Judaism

**Bridget Phillipson MP:** To ask the Secretary of State for Education, what steps she has taken to help ensure the safety of (a) the Jewish chaplain and (b) Jewish staff and students at the University of Leeds. [UIN 14034]

To ask the Secretary of State for Education, what steps she has taken to help ensure the safety of Jewish chaplains at universities in England. [UIN 14035]

**Robert Halfon MP:** Antisemitism, intimidation and threats of violence must never be tolerated on university campuses. University Jewish Chaplains play a vital role in supporting Jewish students and staff across the country. The disgraceful abuse targeted at the Chaplain in Leeds is appalling and extremely disturbing. The government has worked closely with West Yorkshire Police to ensure robust action is taken in relation to these matters. As the Minister for Skills, Apprenticeships and Higher Education, I have visited Leeds University, spoken to the Vice Chancellor to seek reassurances that the University is taking appropriate action in the wake of these appalling incidents and have met with the Chaplain and his wife. The department remains in regular contact with the University Jewish Chaplaincy, the Community Security Trust and West Yorkshire Police and will continue to monitor the situation closely.

Last week's report by the Community Security Trust highlights the devastating increase in antisemitic incidents in higher education. This government takes antisemitism extremely seriously and is deeply concerned about the growth in antisemitic incidents on campus since 7 October 2023. That is why, on 22 November 2023, my right hon. Friend, the Chancellor of the Exchequer, announced in his Autumn Statement an additional £7 million over three years to tackle antisemitism in education. The department has issued an invitation for interested organisations to tender for contracts to deliver a comprehensive package of measures across schools, colleges and universities and aim to have suppliers in place for the start of the new financial year. A link to the report by the Community Security Trust can be found here: [https://cst.org.uk/data/file/9/f/Antisemitic Incidents Report 2023.1707834969.pdf](https://cst.org.uk/data/file/9/f/Antisemitic%20Incidents%20Report%202023.1707834969.pdf).

My right hon. Friend, the Secretary of State for Education, wrote to all schools, colleges, and universities on 11 October 2023, urging them to respond swiftly to hate-related incidents and actively reassure Jewish students that they can study without fear of harassment or intimidation. The department wrote again to Vice Chancellors on 16 November 2023, further emphasising the use of disciplinary measures and the importance of police engagement, as well as the suspension of

student visas where the student is a foreign national. This was one of the key actions set out in the five point plan for tackling antisemitism in higher education, which was published on 5 November 2023. The plan involves:

- Calling for visas to be withdrawn from international students who incite racial hatred.
- Writing to Vice Chancellors emphasising the use of disciplinary measures, the importance of police engagement, and the suspension of student visas where the student is a foreign national (sent on 16 November 2023).
- Liaising with the Office for Students on its role in reviewing incidents and any potential actions.
- Continuing to make it clear in all discussions that acts that may be criminal should be referred to the police.
- Establishing an antisemitism quality seal, which universities will be invited to sign up to demonstrate a commitment to tackling antisemitism. This is a key element of the invitation to tender published on 6 February 2024. More information on the five point plan can be found here: <https://educationhub.blog.gov.uk/2023/11/05/how-were-protecting-jewish-students-on-university-campuses/>.

The department will not hesitate to take further action across the education estate to stamp out antisemitism and harassment of Jewish pupils, students and staff.

## **Universities: Finance (1)**

**Sir Robert Buckland MP:** To ask the Secretary of State for Education, whether her Department has made an assessment of the potential impact of the withdrawal of CPLA-linked funding in British universities on local economies. [UIN 14062]

**Robert Halfon MP:** Higher education (HE) providers are autonomous and therefore responsible for ensuring they have adequate governance and risk management procedures in place. The department expects the HE sector to be alert to risks when collaborating with any international partners.

The government's International Education Strategy makes clear that the internationalisation of the HE sector cannot come at any cost. A key element of that strategy is diversification. Universities must ensure they have appropriate processes

in place to manage risks associated with dependence on a single source of funding, whether that is from a single organisation or a single country.

The Office for Students (OfS), the regulator of HE in England, monitors the risk of over-reliance on overseas income at a sector level. The role of the OfS is not to direct how HE providers manage themselves or to limit their recruitment from a particular country of origin, but to ensure they understand where there is greater reliance and how any risks are being managed, and to take action to protect students from the consequences of unmanaged financial risk, if necessary.

## **Genomics: China**

**Catherine West MP:** To ask the Secretary of State for Health and Social Care, whether she has plans to (a) review and (b) update guidance on partnerships between private healthcare providers and Chinese genomic companies. [UIN 14261]

**Andrew Stephenson MP:** As part of the new UK Biological Security Strategy, the Government is assessing how we can minimise the risks from biological data to protect our burgeoning bioeconomy, without stifling innovation, and build confidence in sharing personal data to improve health outcomes in the United Kingdom and across the world. The Office for Life Sciences is conducting this work at pace.

The Research Collaboration Advice Team, which has been operating since March 2022 as part of the Department for Science, Innovation and Technology, provides advice to UK stakeholders about research collaborations. In 2020, Universities UK, with support from the Government, the Centre for the Protection of National Infrastructure and the National Cyber Security Centre, published guidelines to help universities tackle security risks related to international collaboration. Universities UK continues to evaluate the effectiveness of their guidelines, updating it when necessary.

## **Academic Technology Approval Scheme**

**Chi Onwurah MP:** To ask the Minister of State, Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office, what assessment he has made of the reasons for applicants for research places at Newcastle University waiting longer than five months for an Academic Technology Approval Scheme certificate. [UIN 14867]

**Mr Andrew Mitchell MP:** The UK takes seriously its responsibility towards countering the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction and advanced conventional military

technology. The Academic Technology Approval Scheme is a thorough, necessary and proportionate tool to protect UK research from misappropriation and divergence to military programmes of concern. As reflected in our guidance, processing takes at least 30 working days. While the majority of cases are processed within this time, more complex cases can take longer, in order to ensure that a thorough assessment can be carried out.

## **Universities: Research**

**Baroness Bennett of Manor Castle:** To ask His Majesty's Government what assessment they have made of any risk to the UK's status as a location for research presented by the planned closure of the anthropology department of the University of Kent, particularly with regard to ethnobotany; and what broader assessment they have made of any risk posed by the closure of significant numbers of departments and faculties at universities. [UIN HL2379]

**Baroness Barran:** Higher education providers are independent, autonomous institutions and are best placed to make decisions about the future focus of their research and their institutional strategy. Where it is necessary to reshape their activities, it is important that universities carefully consider the impact of job losses on staff and students, and the overall sustainability of teaching and research in this country.

## **Universities: Finance (2)**

**Dr Matthew Offord MP:** To ask the Secretary of State for Education, what assessment her Department has made of the financial sustainability of the university sector. [UIN 14540]

To ask the Secretary of State for Education, if she will make an assessment of the financial sustainability of Middlesex University. [UIN 14541]

**Robert Halfon MP:** The Office for Students (OfS), as the independent regulator of higher education (HE) in England, collects and analyses financial data from HE providers, as well as other intelligence, to ensure they have an up to date understanding of the sustainability of the sector. In their most recent report on the financial health of the HE sector, which was published in May 2023, the OfS stated that the overall aggregate financial position of the sector is sound.

The full report can be found

here: <https://www.officeforstudents.org.uk/media/0b7d9daa-d6c7-477e-a0b2-b90985d0f935/financial-sustainability-report-2023-updated-june-2023.pdf>.

The department continues to work closely with the OfS, HE representative bodies, as well as other government departments, where appropriate, to understand the ongoing financial sustainability in the sector.

Middlesex University's most recent financial statement can be found

here: [https://www.mdx.ac.uk/\\_data/assets/pdf\\_file/0017/770102/MDX\\_Financial\\_Statements\\_2022-2023.pdf](https://www.mdx.ac.uk/_data/assets/pdf_file/0017/770102/MDX_Financial_Statements_2022-2023.pdf).

## **Teachers: Workplace Pensions**

**Paul Blomfield MP:** To ask the Secretary of State for Education, if she will make an assessment of the potential merits of providing additional financial support to higher education institutions to help meet the cost of the teachers' pension scheme. [UIN 14554]

**Robert Halfon MP:** Higher education providers (HEPs) are autonomous bodies, and the government does not fund the cost of changes to the scheme for them in the same way as for schools and colleges. The department expects HEPs to continue to adapt to uncertainties and financial risks to protect their longer-term sustainability.

The government will continue to work with the higher education sector to explore how it can best support those providers affected, including planning effectively for implementation. The department is also keen to maintain an ongoing dialogue with HEPs.

## **Business**

**Christian Wakeford MP:** To ask the Secretary of State for Science, Innovation and Technology, what steps her Department is taking to promote (a) innovation and (b) research and development in (i) technology, (ii) green energy, (iii) healthcare and (iv) other key sectors of the economy. [UIN 14753]

**Andrew Griffith MP:** The Government is working to unleash the power of research & development and innovation across the economy - backed by the highest-ever levels of public spending on R&D, which will rise to £20 billion in 2024/25. As set out in our recent Science and Technology Framework update, the Department for Science,

Innovation and Technology is removing barriers to success in technology-led sectors such as, telecoms, life sciences, and space.

## Higher Technical Qualifications

**Seema Malhotra MP:** To ask the Secretary of State for Education, what recent assessment she has made of the adequacy of (a) public and (b) employer awareness of higher technical (i) education and (ii) qualifications. [UIN 14880]

**Robert Halfon MP:** The department has published the following data on awareness of Level 4 and 5 qualifications and Higher Technical Qualifications (HTQs):

- Awareness of Level 4 and 5 qualifications, and HTQs in the Parent, Pupil and Learner Panel:  
[https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/639219408fa8f53baa1f3f5f/PP\\_LP\\_report\\_rw4\\_june.pdf](https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/639219408fa8f53baa1f3f5f/PP_LP_report_rw4_june.pdf).
- Awareness of HTQs amongst employers as part of the Employer Skills Survey 2022:  
[https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/65855506fc07f3000d8d46bd/Employer\\_skills\\_survey\\_2022\\_research\\_report.pdf](https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/65855506fc07f3000d8d46bd/Employer_skills_survey_2022_research_report.pdf).

Introducing HTQs is central to the department's drive to increase the profile, prestige, and uptake of higher technical education. HTQs were first available for teaching from September 2022 and are now offered by over 140 providers across the country in construction and build, digital, and health and science occupations. In the 2023/24 academic year, over 140 qualifications were available. More HTQs will be available to study from September 2024.

The department is promoting HTQs as part of the Skills for Life cross-government communications and engagement campaign for young people, adults and employers. This campaign aims to raise awareness of the various skills offers, help them to decide which one is right for them (or their workforce) and increase take-up.

The department is working with stakeholders, including the National Careers Service, Careers & Enterprise Company and UCAS, to improve the support that is available to young people and adults. The department is also working with employers and professional bodies to improve their recognition of HTQs.

Finally, the department is supporting providers to increase their HTQ provision and to promote it effectively and widely. The department has announced investment of

around £115 million in funding to providers to support higher technical education provision.

## **STEM Subjects: Women**

**Mr Gregory Campbell MP:** To ask the Secretary of State for Education, what recent discussions she has had with the National Centre for Computing Education on its progress in ensuring greater female participation in STEM subjects in (a) further and (b) higher education. [UIN 15231]

**Robert Halfon MP:** The department is committed to ensuring that anyone, regardless of their gender or background, can pursue an education in science, technology, engineering and mathematics (STEM) subjects.

The department's contract with the National Centre for Computing Education (NCCE) is managed by departmental officials who meet regularly with STEM Learning, the NCCE supplier, to discuss progress. The NCCE aims to improve the quality of computing education and drive up participation in computing at GCSE and A Level, particularly amongst girls. The NCCE is primarily focused on supporting schools and colleges across England, with the expectation that an increase in participation and interest from girls with computing would coincide with an increase in female participation at further education (FE) and higher education (HE).

As part of the procurement for the second NCCE contract, the department asked bidders to design a gender insights programme, aimed at improving schools' awareness of the barriers to girls' engagement with computing and to engage schools in a sustained course of action designed to improve the take up of computer science qualifications, where girls are underrepresented. In Autumn 2023, the NCCE launched the 'I Belong' programme to schools and colleges, and early completers include a number of FE providers. The NCCE actively engages with industry, the public sector, and FE and HE institutions, to ensure that they have diverse role models, especially women, supporting the delivery of their work, including working with universities to run student outreach events and recruiting female volunteer Computing Ambassadors.

Last year, the Digital and Computing Skills Education Taskforce was established to deliver on the department's science and technology ambitions by bringing together experienced and well-respected leaders from priority digital sectors, FE and HE. The NCCE is one of the core members of the Taskforce, who are empowered to guide the group's work as well as working with other government departments and external



partners to deliver on the key actions most likely to impact on the digital skills gap. One of the three priority workstreams identified by the taskforce was “increasing the gender diversity of those taking computing and digital qualifications”. The NCCE has played an active role in the sponsorship of this workstream and the development.

The department funds the Isaac Physics programme to increase the numbers of students, particularly from typically underrepresented backgrounds, studying physics in higher education. The department also currently funds inclusion activities as part of the Science CPD contract, to increase the uptake of A Level physics from underrepresented students, including girls. Including the Stimulating Physics Network, a network of 50 schools offering specialist support to around 350 partner schools, which includes advice and guidance on how to improve progression from physics GCSE to A level, where girls are typically underrepresented.

For mathematics, the department funds the Advanced Mathematics Support Programme (AMSP) which provides support for teachers and students in state-funded schools and colleges in England. Additional support is offered in areas of low social mobility so that, whatever their location, background or gender, students can choose their best post-16 maths pathway and access high-quality teaching. The AMSP has a particular focus on supporting girls into mathematics and runs a variety of enrichment and engagement sessions specifically for girls, including Steps to University for Mathematical Students events, targeted at year 12 girls.

## **Nurses: Training**

**Lord Allen of Kensington:** To ask His Majesty's Government what assessment they have made of the underlying cause of the fall in each of the past three years in applications to university nursing courses, as reported by the Financial Times on 15 February, and what action they are taking to reverse the trend. [UIN HL2512]

**Lord Markham:** The drop in nursing applicants follows unprecedented demand for healthcare courses during the COVID-19 pandemic, and the number of applicants continues to outstrip the places on offer. Nursing training places are competitive, and lead to an attractive and important career in the National Health Service.

We are working closely with NHS England, universities and the Universities and Colleges Admissions Service to ensure everyone who wants to pursue a rewarding healthcare career in nursing has the support and opportunities to do so.

## International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance: Higher Education

**Dr Matthew Offord MP:** To ask the Secretary of State for Education, what assessment she has made of the implications for her policies of the number of higher education institutions that have not adopted the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance definition of antisemitism. [UIN 14842]

**Robert Halfon MP:** Last week's report by the Community Security Trust highlights the unprecedented increase in antisemitic incidents in higher education. All antisemitism is abhorrent and universities should have robust systems in place to deal with incidents of support for unlawful antisemitic abuse and harassment. This government takes antisemitism extremely seriously and is deeply concerned about the growth in incidents on campus since 7 October 2023. This is completely unacceptable. The department will not tolerate unlawful harassment or the glorification of terrorism. A link to the report can be found here: [https://cst.org.uk/data/file/9/f/Antisemitic Incidents Report 2023.1707834969.pdf](https://cst.org.uk/data/file/9/f/Antisemitic%20Incidents%20Report%202023.1707834969.pdf).

The government has formally adopted the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance's (IHRA) working definition of antisemitism. The department is pleased to see that as of 21 February 2024, 245 providers in England have adopted the definition, including the vast majority of universities. While adoption of the IHRA definition is not compulsory for universities, as they are autonomous, the department continues to strongly encourage providers to adopt the definition for universal clarity on what constitutes antisemitic behaviour. However, the department recognises that the IHRA definition alone is not enough. That's why the department is working to introduce the tackling antisemitism quality seal. This is a framework of measures that will allow universities to demonstrate support for Jewish students and staff. This quality seal is part of the package resulting from the Chancellor's Autumn Statement announcement of an additional £7 million over three years to tackle antisemitism in education.

The Quality Seal is an award for universities demonstrating exemplary standards in addressing antisemitism. It encompasses policies related to communication with Jewish students, training programs, and robust complaint processes. The department has invited bids from capable organisations to implement this initiative. The deadline for bids is 7 March 2024 and the department aims to appoint a contractor in April 2024. A Tackling Antisemitism Champion, respected by both the Jewish community and higher education sector, will be appointed to help universities meet these standards and strengthen universities' ability to deal with the rising levels of

antisemitism on campuses. Additionally, funding allocated for combating antisemitism in education will support universities in achieving the required benchmarks.

## **Overseas Students**

**Paul Blomfield MP:** To ask the Secretary of State for Education, what assessment she has made of the potential impact of ending funding for the UK Council for International Student Affairs on the adequacy of support available to international students. [UIN 14852]

**Robert Halfon MP:** The government appreciates the significant economic and cultural contribution that international students make to UK higher education.

The government remains committed to the ambitions set out in its International Education Strategy, including the aim to host 600,000 international students in the UK per year by 2030. The government is proud to have met this ambition two years running.

Universities also offer a range of dedicated support to their international students before they arrive in the UK, on arrival and during their studies. Organisations such as the UK Council for International Student Affairs (UKCISA) and the British Council continue to provide information to international students entering the UK.

## **Further Education: Care Leavers**

**Fleur Anderson MP:** To ask the Secretary of State for Education, what recent steps her Department has taken to support care leavers move into (a) further and (b) tertiary education. [UIN 14966]

**David Johnston MP:** In 'Stable Homes, Built on Love', the strategy for the reform of children's social care, the department gave a commitment to improve the education, employment and training outcomes of children in care and care leavers by 2027. This can be found

here: [https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/650966a322a783001343e844/Childrens\\_Social\\_Care\\_Stable\\_Homes\\_Built\\_on\\_Love\\_consultation\\_response.pdf](https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/650966a322a783001343e844/Childrens_Social_Care_Stable_Homes_Built_on_Love_consultation_response.pdf).

The department set out a number of actions to take this forward, including:

- The national rollout of £24 million of Pupil Premium Plus-style funding to looked-after children and care leavers in 16-19 education, building on an initial £8 million pilot that launched in October 2021. £10 million was allocated to local authorities in the 2023/24 financial year, with a further £14 million to be allocated in 2024/25.
- Developing an accreditation scheme for higher and further education providers that will set core standards for the support offered to care experienced students, helping increase participation and improve outcomes for this cohort. The department has previously published guidance for higher education providers on how they can ensure care leavers have the support they need to access, and succeed at, university. This can be found here: <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/principles-to-guide-he-providers-on-improving-care-leavers-access-and-participation-in-he/principles-to-guide-higher-education-providers-on-improving-care-leavers-access-and-participation-in-he>.
- Increasing the Apprenticeships Care Leavers' Bursary from £1,000 to £3,000, from August 2023, to provide greater financial security for care leavers choosing apprenticeships. This recognises that care leavers face higher living costs than their peers as they often live independently at a younger age and may not have a wider familial network for support.
- Increasing funding for the care leaver covenant by 30% in 2023/24 and 2024/25 to extend its reach and impact. Over 450 organisations have now signed the covenant, including John Lewis, Amazon and Sky, offering employment and other opportunities to support care leavers' transition to independent living.

In addition to the bursary, the department pays businesses and training providers £1,000 for every care leaver apprentice they employ or train. Employers and providers are free to use their additional funding wherever needed to support their apprentices, including contributions to travel or childcare costs, or the provision of additional mentoring.

## **Nurses: Students**

**Taiwo Owatemi MP:** To ask the Secretary of State for Health and Social Care, what discussions she has had with officials in the Department for Education on steps to support student nurses. [UIN 15376]

**Andrew Stephenson MP:** We are working closely with NHS England, the Department for Education, and universities, to ensure everyone who wants to pursue a rewarding healthcare career in nursing, has the support and opportunities to do so.

To support students training in clinical roles, we provide eligible students with a grant of at least £5,000 a year through the NHS Learning Support Fund (LSF). This includes additional incentives for priority specialisms, such as mental health, with further funding available depending on personal circumstances. The Government continues to widen access to nursing careers through blended learning and apprenticeship routes. Apprenticeships provide an alternative route for people to earn as they learn and we now have a complete apprentice pathway for nursing, from entry level to postgraduate advanced clinical practice.

The number of applicants to nursing degrees continues to outstrip the places on offer. Nursing training places are competitive, and lead to an attractive and important career in the National Health Service. There are record numbers of nurses now working in the NHS, and the first ever NHS Long Term Workforce Plan, backed by over £2.4 billion, will add 24,000 more nurse and midwifery training places by 2031.

# Sector News

## **Rapid review of the Immigration Salary List – MAC report**

On Friday 23 February, the Migration Advisory Committee (MAC) published its rapid review of the Immigration Salary List. It recommends the visa salary threshold for laboratory technicians is discounted to £30,960. A full review will take place later this year.

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

## **Areas of Research Interest – DSIT document**

On Monday 26 February, the Department for Science, Innovation and Technology (DSIT) published a document on the main research questions facing the department.

This areas of research interest (ARI) document aims to improve how government departments:

- align scientific and research evidence from academia with policy development and decision-making
- access a wide range of suppliers
- engage with researchers
- access stronger policy evidence bases at better value for money share research commissions

You can [read the document](#).

## **QAA receives commission to review pre-entry courses for international students – QAA announcement**

On Wednesday 28 February, the Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (QAA) announced it had received the commission from Universities UK (UUK) to conduct a review regarding programmes designed for international students to support their entry into UK higher education courses.

This review will compare the admissions requirements between foundation programmes for domestic students and international students, assess the standards of the courses being offered to international students as both foundation programmes and international year one programmes, and assess whether these standards are being achieved and maintained in practice.

QAA will publish the findings of this review by the end of Spring 2024.

You can [read the announcement](#), including the [commissioning letter](#) and [scoping document](#).

## **UA's asks ahead of the Spring Budget – UA briefing paper**

On Wednesday 28 February, University Alliance (UA) published its asks for the upcoming Spring Budget. They highlighted the following priorities and asks for the Spring Budget:

1. International student demand:
  - While not expressly financial, the UK government could act now to stabilise international student demand by preserving the Graduate visa on its current terms.
  - Given that previously announced policies are already constricting demand from international students, protecting the Graduate visa would not be at odds with the government's goal of reducing legal migration.
2. Managing the cost of the Teachers' Pension Scheme (TPS):
  - Provide sufficient additional funding to all higher education employers in the TPS, to allow them to manage this significant and unforeseen increase in expenditure, and prevent any detrimental impact on their services.
  - Commit to exploring options for allowing TPS and Local Government Pension Scheme (LGPS) member universities the flexibility to offer other pension schemes to their employees. Such universities currently still have a statutory obligation to participate in public sector pension schemes, despite no longer being categorised as public sector organisations by the ONS.
3. The student cost of living crisis:

- In the short-term, student maintenance loans should be uprated to keep pace with the increased cost of living. Any uprating should be linked to the minimum wage, as proposed in the Augar Review.
- In the medium-term, UA recommend the reinstatement of means-tested maintenance grants for the students who are most in need of them. This will ensure that everyone is able to access higher education in a fair and equitable way.

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

## **Funding boost to support Student Minds’ University Mental Health Charter – OfS press release**

On Wednesday 28 February, the Office for Students (OfS) announced £400,000 in funding to support the rising demand for the University Mental Health Charter.

The £400,000 funding – which will be distributed to Student Minds – will support:

- Increased staffing to support accelerated delivery, Award assessments and development of the programme.
- Investment in digital infrastructure to develop new project management software and completion of the Digital Hub space for programme members.
- Capacity for online and in-person events for members to reflect, hear from experts and connect with each other.
- Engagement with external organisations to understand how learning and insights can inform the development of the programme.

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

## **Analysis of international student enrolments in January 2024 – CABS report**

On Wednesday 28 February, the Chartered Association of Business Schools (CABS) published their analysis of international student enrolments in January 2024.

Key findings include:



- Enrolment of non-EU international students is significantly down
- Enrolment figures are also down for EU students
- Data shows declining enrolments are part of an emerging trend in the sector
- Members believe the UK is a hostile environment for international students
- Postgraduate enrolments and MBAs are particularly impacted

Commenting on the findings, CABS noted:

*“We strongly believe in the importance of international students to the health of the UK university sector and the wider economy, contributing £42bn each year and underpinning the costs of teaching and research across a broad range of subjects. The report also finds that the policy environment created by the government is diminishing the competitiveness and prestige of UK business schools internationally”*

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

## **What happens next in challenging times? A report on the outcomes of disabled graduates during 2020 and 2021 – AGCAS report**

On Wednesday 28 February, the Association of Graduate Careers Advisory Services (AGCAS), in partnership with the Shaw Trust, published a report showing the impact of the pandemic on disabled graduates.

Key findings from the research include:

- Overall, levels of disability disclosure increased year on year, at all qualification levels. However, lower levels of disclosure were seen at higher qualification levels.
- In 2019/20 and 2020/21, the majority of disabled graduates at all qualification levels reported full-time employment levels that were at least five percentage points lower than those seen for graduates with no known disability.
- Autistic graduates from first degree and postgraduate taught courses experienced lower full-time employment, higher part-time employment, and higher unemployment than any other group.

- In both 2019/20 and 2020/21, autistic graduates and graduates with mental health conditions were amongst the groups least likely to report taking a job because it fitted into their career plan, following their first degree.

You can [read the full report](#) or [read a summary paper](#).

## **A review of collaborative support for improving equality of opportunity in access to higher education – Public First report**

On Thursday 29 February, Public First published a report, commissioned by the Office for Students (OfS), reviewing higher education collaborative outreach in England.

‘Collaborative outreach’ is defined as the ways that higher education institutions work together, and with partners, to improve equality of opportunity in access to higher education. Government funding for collaborative outreach is currently provided through the Uni Connect programme.

The key findings of the report are:

- There is a strong underlying case for some form of centrally funded programme to encourage and deliver high quality collaborative research.
- Collaborative outreach programmes can be transformative for individuals and provide the ‘connective tissue’ that strengthens higher education access within regions and nationally.
- Uni Connect could be more consistently effective and impactful.
- There is evidence of several reasons for Uni Connect not consistently delivering to its potential.
- Although some stakeholder views did not always align, it is clear that the OfS can and should take some actions to strengthen the benefits of Uni Connect and maximise the value for money of a centrally funded programme in future years.

You can [read the full report](#) and an [economic analysis of Uni Connect](#).

## **Consider fee loan forgiveness for nurses ahead of the Budget – MillionPlus and RCN joint letter**

On Thursday 29 February, the Association for Modern Universities, MillionPlus, and the Royal College of Nursing (RCN) published a joint letter to the Chancellor of the Exchequer ahead of the Spring Budget, calling for a model of fee loan forgiveness for nurses who practice in the public services.

*“We urge you to seize the opportunity presented by the Spring Budget and invest in a loan forgiveness model for nursing graduates working in public services. This innovative solution holds the potential to attract and maintain a diverse and talented workforce. Removing financial barriers will entice more individuals to pursue a long-term career in nursing, bolstering the domestic workforce and ensuring its future resilience.”*

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

## **International students and fair admissions – Russell Group briefing**

On Thursday 29 February, Russell Group published a briefing on international students and fair admissions.

The briefing outlines that international students support the growth of UK places, how international student admissions works and addresses the role of recruitment agents.

You can [read the briefing](#).

## **The current landscape of the delivery and evaluation of student mental health interventions – TASO report**

On Thursday 29 February, Transforming Access and Student Outcomes in Higher Education (TASO) published a report presenting the perspectives of those involved in the delivery and evaluation of student mental health interventions in the UK.

Key findings include:

- **Resourcing needs in student mental healthcare.** There are unprecedented pressures on student services caused by changes in the student body and

student expectations. The pressures that practitioners face are complicated further by short-term funding structures that restrict the timely delivery of interventions and the possibility of evaluating and embedding them into wider systems.

- **Co-existing medical and social models of mental health.** There is no clear agreement on how it is best to refer to mental health difficulties. The debate about whether to use clinical or social models affects how interventions are designed and how they are promoted to students. The differences between clinical and social models also affect which outcomes are used to measure impact. There is, therefore, a need for guidance on evaluation methods and outcome measures that are appropriate to the context of higher education.
- **Developing networks of care.** Networks of care are key to upholding the structures that make a student mental health intervention work and these networks need to be nurtured. Findings suggest that the relationships between higher education providers and external organisations work best when they find commonality: common problems, common goals and a common language.
- **Collecting, managing and sharing data on student mental health.** Data management practices are central to each stage of an intervention’s development, from design and delivery to evaluation. The report highlights a concern that inaccurate demographic segmentation could be homogenising vastly different experiences and an awareness of cultural nuances is vital as different student groups experience mental health stigma differently, prompting disparities in disclosure rates.

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

## **SLC introduces improved Disabled Students’ Allowance service – SLC press release**

On Thursday 29 February, the Student Loans Company (SLC) announced it has introduced its enhanced Disabled Students’ Allowance (DSA) service model.

Jackie Currie, Executive Director, Business Operations at SLC, said: “We are committed to continuing to improve the service we deliver to customers. I am pleased we are launching the improved service, which is a real step change for how DSA is delivered. We are working with our suppliers, Capita and Study Tech, as well as a range of stakeholders, and from the outset, students will experience a much

smoother journey to receiving their DSA, which is the most important element of these reforms.

“This is an important milestone but there is much more work to do, with further customer improvements taking place throughout this year.”

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

## **Land based education: A foundation for prosperity – GuildHE manifesto**

On Friday 1 March, GuildHE, in partnership with Landex, published a manifesto on the role of universities in providing solutions to major land based challenges such as food security, climate change and the biodiversity crisis.

The GuildHE and Landex manifesto proposes that government, policymakers and wider stakeholders should:

1. Recognise food and environmental security as a national priority
2. Develop a national strategy to grow and upskill the workforce
3. Launch an ambitious national land based careers awareness campaign
4. Develop better ways of recognising the skilled nature of land based careers
5. Increase research funding for agri-food discovery research
6. Provide national support for demonstration farms throughout the UK
7. Continue support for the high costs of agriculture and land based subjects and specialist colleges and universities
8. Target the apprenticeship levy funding at small businesses in strategically important areas

You can [read the manifesto](#).