



The All-Party Parliamentary **University Group**

University APPG weekly update

27 – 31 March 2023

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

If you would like more information on parliamentary business, or advice on engaging with Parliament or a parliamentarian, please contact:

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Parliamentary business

Lords Industry and Regulators Committee – the work of the OfS

On Tuesday 28 March, the Lords Industry and Regulators Committee continued their inquiry into the ‘the work of the Office for Students’.

The first session heard from Vanessa Wilson (Chief Executive of University Alliance), and Vivienne Stern MBE (Chief Executive of Universities UK).

Baroness Taylor of Bolton (Labour) began by asking if the remit for the Office for Students (OfS) was appropriate and if there had been any mission creep. In her reply, Vivienne Stern said that the remit of the OfS was clear and noted the broad support for the organisation among the sector. She said the OfS had accumulated more responsibilities as it had dealt with a "revolving door" of Ministers and handled a complex sector. The OfS' potential was being constrained by the relationship between the OfS and universities which was defined by a lack of trust on both sides.

Viscount Chandos (Labour) asked to what extent the government was dictating the day-to-day activities of the OfS. Vivienne Stern said that the OfS was not sufficiently independent from government, which was not helped by the political affiliation of the Chair. This contributed to the distrust between the OfS and the institutions it regulates. However, she did note some cases of the OfS resisting government instructions.

Viscount Chandos further questioned whether the current funding model skewed universities towards recruiting international students on higher fees. Vivienne Stern highlighted the sustained underinvestment in the UK's higher education sector. She explained that it was “wrong as a matter of strategy for the UK” to rely on external sources of income to fund domestic education and research. International students should be an extra which enriches the teaching experience, but she warned they were becoming a financial lifeline.

Lord Burns (Crossbench) raised the major risks facing the sector. Vivienne Stern said there should be an objective focus on continuation rates, completion rates and on student satisfaction. However, she added that this should not be an exclusive focus. Vanessa Wilson said the frozen tuition fees cap and the business model surrounding tuition fees was a risk. She further explained how the opportunities for diversification were often limited, for example with international students and accreditation for teacher training.

Lord Clement-Jones (Liberal Democrat) asked whether the OfS was well placed to recognise financial risks in individual institutions and if this was within the OfS' responsibilities. Vanessa Wilson noted that it was within their responsibilities and confirmed that it could be delivered. However, she noted the OfS was quite "light touch" in its existing financial regulations. She added that this was another case where trust between the regulator and the provider was important because the provider needed to be comfortable to raise a warning in advance. Vivienne Stern agreed, describing the 'fear' of providers that if they came to the OfS with financial issues, the OfS would have a 'punitive response'. She clarified that there was a lack of evidence that this would occur.

Lord Agnew of Oulton (Conservative) raised the value for money of the OfS itself. In her reply, Vanessa Wilson said that KPIs were published and there was scrutiny of OfS spending. She said that existing resources were not enough for the OfS to fulfil its function. Vivienne Stern said the absolute cost of the regulator to institutions was "probably not outrageous", however many institutions had to invest considerable resources to meet their regulatory responsibilities which was "extremely expensive". She added that the OfS had agreed to work with Universities UK on making this more manageable.

Baroness McGregor-Smith (Conservative) asked how the OfS engaged with students. Vanessa Wilson described the various panels with student representatives. She noted a lack of clarity on their engagement with the National Union of Students (NUS), particularly after the government had disengaged with the organisation following antisemitism allegations. Vivienne Stern said she was unsure that students felt their views were listened to. She gave an example of an OfS consultation where responses were completely ignored. However, she said the OfS had been increasing its focus on engagement and was trying to improve its offering.

Baroness McGregor-Smith further asked about the student experience through the pandemic and whether the views of students were accounted for. Vivienne Stern refuted the allegation that universities had not attempted to teach during the pandemic and cited examples of the measures they had taken. Specifically on the student voice, she described the mechanisms for complaints. She further noted that of the 500 complaints received by the OfS in the last 5 years, only 11 related to quality of teaching. She asked to write to the committee with a fuller answer on student experience during the pandemic. Vanessa Wilson noted how the OfS reacted well to the pandemic and were on the Ministerial taskforce.

Baroness McGregor-Smith concluded the session by asking why the sector found it difficult to work with the OfS. In her reply, Vivienne Stern raised (i) the frequency and

short deadlines of the consultations, (ii) the burdensome data collection process, and (iii) the lack of clarity over investigatory work.

The second session heard from Rachel Hewitt (Chief Executive of MillionPlus) and Alex Proudfoot (Chief Executive of Independent Higher Education).

Baroness Taylor of Bolton asked witnesses for their perspectives on the OfS, whether its remit was clear, whether there had been mission creep, and how it had developed over the last few years. Rachel Hewitt said she considered their remit as 'clear' and said some of the challenges had come from the implementation of its framework and the growing expansion into policies such as free speech. Alex Proudfoot suggested that the OfS had been given a "laundry list" of duties but noted that it was underpinned by a vision that was clear and compelling, aimed at widening student choice. He said the legislation itself was fundamentally sound, but some problems had emerged with respect to the regulatory framework and its implementation.

Baroness Bowles of Berkhamsted (Liberal Democrat) asked to what extent the OfS' activity was determined by government and whether the guidance from government was too prescriptive. Alex Proudfoot said direction from government could be positive, if it was in a coherent, strategic direction. He said problems had arisen where direction was ad-hoc and this was particularly relevant where there had been changes in government. Rachel Hewitt agreed, noting there had been seven secretaries of state since the OfS was set up. She described the "very turbulent" time since the OfS was established, citing the pandemic and cost-of-living crisis. This had led to a disruption in the long-term vision and meant guidance had become over-prescriptive at times.

Baroness Bowles questioned the witnesses on the numbers of people applying to university and the role that the OfS could have in this. Alex Proudfoot reflected on figures released by UCAS on the role it could play in managing applications which were expected to reach 1 million by 2030. He said the biggest challenge for the sector would be how it could meet that demand and expand capacity. He also described how there would be different types of students with different method of learning, but the OfS had not outlined how it would meet that demand. Rachel Hewitt said that the current models of learning may not be fit for future learners, particularly noting lifelong learning structures.

Baroness Bowles raised the prospect of new educational institutions and questioned what structures there were to support those new entrants. Alex Proudfoot said this was a crucial part of the vision Lord Johnson of Marylebone had had as Universities Minister, but this had not come to fruition. He said it was "too hard or too slow" for

new entrants into the sector. He said his organisation supported new entrants to the market, but there were concerns about the lack of transparency of the OfS process.

Lord Leong (Labour) questioned whether an organisation could partner with an established institution without OfS approval. Alex Proudfoot said that the most common way for an organisation to enter the market would be to partner with an established institution and could do so without registering with the OfS. He added that this was difficult, because there was no registry of validators and no transparency around validations.

Lord Leong asked how the OfS assessed value for money, and how this impacted current providers. In her reply, Rachel Hewitt said that value for money was currently assessed through proxies. One example of this was the national survey of students and their assessment of value for money. She further described the assessment of outcomes, whether someone was in a degree-level occupation and whether they stayed on the full length of the course. Alex Proudfoot said that the approach was data driven. He said this represented a real challenge for small providers with costs of £250,000.

Lord Gilbert of Panteng (Conservative) asked if the OfS had the correct balance between the views of policymakers and students. He paid particular attention to whether the OfS' engagement with students made a difference to how it operated. Rachel Hewitt called for greater representation of a broader range of students. She said that students with non-traditional backgrounds often had different needs and it was important those were reflected in the overall work of the OfS. Alex Proudfoot agreed and said there had never been a student from the independent sector on the OfS' student panel.

Lord Burns asked about the implications of the decision of the Quality Assurance Agency of Higher Education (QAA) not to continue as the Designated Quality Body (DQB). He asked whether the OfS had the capacity to deal with this new burden and whether a consequence of the OfS taking on the quality assurance role is that it could leave quality assurance at the mercy of political influence. Rachel Hewitt said that moving away from the QAA as the quality assurance body risked the UK's international reputation for higher education standards. She noted that despite this being mooted as a short-term fix, there was no longer-term proposal. Regarding capacity, she said this was a question better directed at the OfS but highlighted the existing bottlenecks in other new responsibilities. Alex Proudfoot said there was no information about how the OfS were going to assess quality, despite being just several days away from taking over the function.

Lord Clement-Jones asked the witnesses where they saw the financial risks in higher education and whether those applied to particular providers or whether it was an issue across the sector. Alex Proudfoot said his members routinely raised the financial risk of cashflow, particularly because of the way in which student loans meant that half of a student's annual provision was paid at the end of the course. He said smaller institutions often had to engage in commercial borrowing and all the risks that entailed. He told the panel that he was surprised that so few institutions exited the market during the pandemic.

Lord Clement-Jones continued to ask whether the financial oversight by the OfS was clear and sufficient to identify potential risks early on. Alex Proudfoot said they would like the OfS to support institutions to make themselves sustainable, through diversification and new courses that respond to student demand. He said the OfS often had a negative mindset and refused to change the rules despite them having the power to do so.

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

Lords debate – financial pressure on higher education

On Thursday 30 March, the House of Lords considered 'Financial pressures on Higher Education and the impact on local communities, the UK's science and innovation exports, and the impact on delivering the Turing Scheme.' This debate was tabled by Lord Knight of Weymouth (Labour).

Lord Knight (Labour) introduced the debate, saying that higher education was critical to the UK's success, citing research from Universities UK (UUK) that found the sector contributes £95 billion to the economy and supports 815,000 jobs. He said it was for this reason, that he was alarmed to see universities struggling financially, highlighting that in 2020-21, 43 out of 254 higher education institutions were reporting deficits and the net operating cashflow of the sector had halved. Responding on behalf of the government, Baroness Barran, Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for the School System and Student Finance, said that the finances of providers were "sound" at a sector level, saying that the income of the sector had increased significantly in recent years but recognised the sector was not uniform and some structural changes to the size and number of institutions may have also played a role in the number of providers in deficit.

Lord Knight suggested that the issues were systemic, highlighting a reduction in funding from government and the real-terms cuts to tuition fee income. He said that

this was exacerbated by the loss universities made on research, highlighting that in 2020, only 71% of research costs were recovered, meaning that income had to be made up from teaching funding and elsewhere. He said that this had also been made worse by the delay in association to Horizon Europe. However, he praised universities' capabilities for research, saying that UK universities punched well above their weight in this context. Baroness Barran said that continued fee freeze achieved the best balance between ensuring that the system remains financially stable, offering good value for the taxpayer and reducing debt levels for students in real terms, but that the government also understood that this put pressure on some providers and requires their business model to evolve. She also cited the government's commitment to increasing R&D funding.

Lord Knight then spoke about the contribution of international students, quoting figures from UUKi/HEPI research into their economic contribution to the UK. He also referenced recent polling from Public First and UUK which found that 64% of the public believed that the UK should host the same number of—or more—international students. He asked that given the continued growth in overseas students was crucial to relieving many of these financial pressures, whether the government planned to place any further restrictions on international students. In addition, he asked for a confirmation that the government was still committed to the graduate visa route and the government's International Education Strategy (IES). Baroness Barran said that she was happy to confirm that the government retained their absolute commitment to the IES, and on the issues regarding immigration, she said that DfE were working very closely with the Home Office.

Several peers spoke about the issues around the delivery of the Turing Scheme, with Lord Leong (Labour) for example, suggesting that the Turing application process was considerably more bureaucratic, the evaluation was less transparent and, as it runs on an annual basis, it was inherently less secure for planning and promotion than Erasmus. Baroness Barran said she rejected the "slightly dismissive description" of the scheme from some peers and said they were seeing some exciting partnerships emerge.

Viscount Chandos (Labour), highlighted specific issues facing specialist and smaller institutions, asking for the Minister to commit to supporting these providers at historic or higher levels. Baroness Barran cited a recent OfS review of small and specialist providers in, which confirmed that providers that were judged to be 'world-leading' would retain that status for five years. She added that the OfS intended to keep its funding allocations fixed during that period, subject to affordability.

Baroness Warwick of Undercliffe (Labour) also cited UUK figures on the impact of UK higher education and said that financial stability was required to ensure universities can maintain their worldwide reputation for excellence. She then spoke about the financial pressures facing students, and in particular maintenance loans not keeping up with these. Baroness Barran said that the government had continued to increase maximum loans and grants for living and other costs for undergraduates and postgraduate students each year. She did recognise the additional cost of living pressures that had arisen this year but said that decisions on student finance will have to be taken alongside other spending priorities.

Several peers asked the Minister what the government would do in response to a university failure. Baroness Barran said that if a provider were at risk of an unplanned closure, the government's priority would be to act with the OfS, the institution and other government departments to make sure that students' best interests were protected.

Baroness Wilcox of Newport (Liberal Democrat), highlighted UUK research that found that over the next five years, it is predicted that universities will help set up more than 20,000 new businesses and provide more than £11.5 billion of support and services to industries and not-for-profit companies. She said that the government should do everything they could to protect the "jewel in the UK's crown" instead of treating the sector as a convenient political arena for a culture war.

She then asked whether the OfS was sufficiently alive to the financial instability of many providers, and whether they saw their role as preventive or reactive. Baroness Barran said that the OfS's approach was about identifying in advance where there might exist material risk in a provider, and that they had introduced new registration conditions that facilitate that.

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

Recess

On Thursday 30 March, the House of Lords and House of Commons rose for Easter recess. Both Houses will return on Monday 17 April.

Forthcoming business

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Written Questions

Students: Death

Luke Pollard: To ask the Secretary of State for Justice, what assessment he has made of potential merits of introducing a requirement for coroners to inform universities of the death of a student enrolled on a course. [UIN 170732]

Mike Freer: Every student death is a tragedy. Where a student's death is investigated by the coroner, it may be appropriate for the higher education provider to have "interested person" status in the investigation and, where this is the case, would be provided with the Record of Inquest which includes the cause of death. Inquest hearings are public and open for anyone to attend.

In addition, coroners have a statutory duty to issue a report to prevent future deaths (a PFD report) where they consider that an investigation has identified circumstances which should be addressed to prevent or reduce the risk of future deaths. The report must be made to a person or organisation whom the coroner believes could have the power to take action, which may include higher education providers, and recipients are obliged by law to respond.

As coroners are independent judicial office holders, the way in which they conduct their investigations is entirely a matter for them. It would therefore be inappropriate to impose a duty on them to provide information to higher education providers in relation to individual student suicide cases. Moreover, coronial investigations are limited fact-finding exercises, and it cannot be guaranteed that consistent and comprehensive information on a deceased person's background will be made available to the coroner in every case.

The Government expects all higher education providers to take suicide prevention very seriously, providing information with place for students to find help, actively identifying students at risk, and intervening with swift support when needed. Where a tragedy does occur, this must be treated with the utmost sensitivity by a provider. This approach to suicide prevention is set out in the Suicide Safer Universities(<https://www.universitiesuk.ac.uk/what-we-do/policy-and-research/publications/suicide-safer-universities>) framework, led by Universities UK and Papyrus and supported by Government. Supporting mental health and ensuring action is taken to prevent future tragedies is a high priority for Government. That is why we have targeted funding at mental health support measure including

partnerships between higher education providers and NHS services to provide better pathways of care for university students.

Students: Finance

Sam Tarry: To ask the Secretary of State for Education, with reference to the Answer of 25 July 2022 to Question 37600 on Students: Finance, what progress her Department has made on delivering an Alternative Student Finance product compatible with Islamic finance principles. [UIN 167263]

Robert Halfon: The government is committed to delivering an Alternative Student Finance (ASF) product compatible with Islamic finance principles as soon as possible. To support the delivery of an ASF product to date, the government has taken new powers in the Higher Education and Research Act 2017 to enable the Secretary of State to provide alternative payments, in addition to grants and loans. We have further carried out work with specialist advisers, the Islamic Finance Council UK, on the design of an ASF model.

As set out in the answer of 25 July 2022 to Question 37600(<https://questions-statements.parliament.uk/written-questions/detail/2022-07-15/37600>), the government is introducing the Lifelong Loan Entitlement (LLE), which will significantly change the ways students can access learning and financial support.

Work is underway to assess how we can ultimately deliver an ASF product alongside the LLE. We are procuring advice from experts in Islamic finance and will be working with the Student Loans Company to better understand timescales for delivery of an ASF product.

In our response to the LLE consultation, published on 7 March 2023, we set out our aim that students will be able to access an ASF as part of the LLE as soon as possible after 2025.

Students: Mental Health Services

Hilary Benn: To ask the Secretary of State for Education, what steps she is taking to support students whose courses have been affected by the insolvency of Supporting Minds CIC. [UIN 170550]

Robert Halfon: Supporting Minds is a private organisation that neither has contracts with, nor receives government funding from, the Education and Skills Funding Agency

or the Office for Students in respect of the provision it delivers and students it has enrolled.

The department's advice to any individuals affected by the closure of this organisation is to contact the National Careers Service to seek advice about the options for enrolling onto another course with a different provider.

The National Careers Service provide careers information, advice and guidance to people of all ages and can help individuals to make decisions on learning, training and work at all stages of their career. Their website is available at:
<https://nationalcareers.service.gov.uk>.

As a private provider not receiving government funding, the department assumes it will have charged students for its provision. Affected students will need to make a claim with the insolvency practitioner to try and recover those funds.

Suicide: Students

Charlotte Nichols: To ask the Secretary of State for Justice, if he will make it his policy to require coroners to inform universities when the suicide of an enrolled student is registered. [UIN 168103]

Mike Freer: Every student death is a tragedy. Where a student's death is investigated by the coroner, it may be appropriate for the higher education provider to have "interested person" status in the investigation and, where this is the case, would be provided with the Record of Inquest which includes the cause of death. Inquest hearings are public and open for anyone to attend.

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Students: Loans

Darren Jones: To ask the Secretary of State for Education, for what reason repayment holidays are not permitted on student loans. [UIN 170682]

Robert Halfon: The repayment of student loans is governed by the Education (Student Loans) (Repayment) Regulations 2009 (as amended).

Student loans have more favourable terms than commercial loans and carry significant protections for those making loan repayments, including for lower earners and borrowers who experience a reduction in their income. Borrowers are only liable to repay after leaving study when earning over the relevant repayment threshold. At any time, if a borrower's income falls below the relevant repayment threshold, or a borrower is not earning, their repayments stop. Any outstanding debt, including interest accrued, is written off after the loan term ends (or in case of death or disability) at no detriment to the borrower. There are no commercial loans that offer this level of protection. If, at the end of the year, the borrower's total income is below the relevant annual threshold, they may reclaim any repayments from the Student Loans Company made during that year.

Repayments are calculated as a fixed percentage of earnings above the relevant repayment threshold. This is currently £27,295 for a post-2012 undergraduate loan and £21,000 for a postgraduate loan. These do not change as a result of the interest rate charged, or the amount borrowed.

Due to the unique nature of student loans, they are exempt from the Consumer Credit Directive and are not subject to regulation by the Financial Conduct Authority. Student loans, along with other specific debts, are non-qualifying debts and are therefore exempt from the Debt Respite Scheme (Breathing Space) which scheme in any event provides for a moratorium not a payment holiday. Student loans are non-provable debts in bankruptcy since 2004, and therefore repayments must continue to be made by the student.

Maximum tuition fees, and the subsidised loans available from the government to pay them, remain at £9,250 for the 2022/23 academic year in respect of standard full-time courses. We are also freezing maximum tuition fees for the 2023/24 and 2024/25 academic years. By 2024/25, maximum fees will have been frozen for seven years. The department believes that a continued fee freeze achieves the best balance between ensuring that the system remains financially sustainable, offering good value for the taxpayer, and reducing debt levels for students in real terms.

Sector News

UCAS launches national debate on access to higher education

On Monday 27 March, the Universities and Colleges Admissions Service (UCAS) launched a national debate in response to projections that there could be up to a million higher education applicants in a single year in 2030.

The ‘Journey to a Million’ will affect all aspects of how people gain a place in higher education, from the point they consider their options, to the way they connect to them, to their experiences whilst studying and entering the labour market.

UCAS, in partnership with Knight Frank and Unite Students, has invited 50 key thinkers from across the UK to give their view on tackling the challenges and seizing the opportunities. UCAS will share this broad and diverse set of essays publicly in the coming weeks culminating in a final report published in partnership in the summer.

50 key thinkers have contributed to the debate, and over the next three months will tackle key themes such as:

- How do we continue to widen participation?
- What are the answers to the imbalance of supply and demand?
- How do we support students in a more competitive environment?
- How do we promote the full range of choices to students?
- What is the future student experience?

Clare Marchant, Chief Executive of UCAS, commented: “With the increasing demand largely driven by the growing 18-year-old demographic, we can see the challenge on the horizon as this group progress through school and college. If we do not collectively act today, we risk missing a significant economic opportunity, whilst also leaving a generation behind.”

You can [read more](#) here.

Humza Yousaf elected as leader of the SNP

On Monday 27 March, Humza Yousaf was elected as the new leader of the Scottish National Party (SNP).

In his first speech, Humza Yousaf vowed to continue work to “improve the life chances of people across our country,” as well as to set out a plan to boost innovation. He subsequently announced his cabinet which included Jenny Gilruth MSP as Cabinet Secretary for Education and Skills.

Successful UK-Ukraine R&I grants awardees announced

On Wednesday 29 March, Universities UK International (UUKi) announced successful awardees for the UK-Ukraine R&I grants scheme. The announcement marks the one-year anniversary of the partnerships initiative, led by Cormack Consultancy Group (CCG) and UUKi.

The scheme, funded by Research England, offers strategic support for existing twinning partnerships to enable the transition of those agreements into practical collaboration in research and innovation. This will help ensure that the twinning scheme not only supports the needs of Ukrainian research and innovation but the longer-term strategic objectives of both institutions and nations.

You can [read more about the impact of the UK-Ukraine twinning initiative here](#) and a [full list of awardee partnerships here](#).

OfS launches a consultation on publication of the NSS

On Wednesday 29 March, the Office for Students (OfS) published a consultation on a number of proposals around the publication of the National Student Survey (NSS) and how to present the data received from students’ responses.

The 2023 NSS has been updated with revised and additional questions to gain more in-depth data about students’ perceptions of their academic experience. These updates have necessitated changes to how the NSS results will be presented.

The key proposals include:

- Replacing the agreement rate with a ‘positivity measure’ to analyse students’ responses.

- Continuing to group the questions thematically with the new questions to aid understanding and analysis of the data, with areas covering teaching on the course, academic support, mental wellbeing and, in England only, freedom of expression.
- Splitting the data with further students' personal characteristics to better understand students who are benefitting less from their educational experience than others.

Universities, colleges, students, and other organisations can now submit their views on how the NSS data will be published. The deadline for submissions is 26 May 2023.

You can [read more about the consultation](#) here.

OfS launches new Access and Participation Planning regulatory regime

On Wednesday 29 March, the Office of Students (OfS) published the first national Equality of Opportunity Risk Register (EORR) alongside other documentation relating to the new Access and Participation Planning (APP) regulatory regime.

The register sets out risks to equality of opportunity identified from research that providers should take into account when developing revised APPs - a pilot group of providers will start this process in the summer, with the remainder beginning in 2024.

Other than this adjustment to the timescale, and further information about reporting requirements, the proposals consulted on will now be implemented with no further changes.

You can [read more about the EORR](#) here.

Department for Education publishes statement on AI in education

On Wednesday 29 March, the Department for Education published a statement on the use of generative artificial intelligence (AI) in education, noting that education institutions, including universities, should “continue to take reasonable steps where applicable to prevent malpractice.”

The statement notes that generative AI has the potential to reduce workload but also makes reference to privacy and cybersecurity concerns stemming from the use of the tools.

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

Committee Chairs write to Secretary of State for DSIT

On Wednesday 29 March, a letter was published from Darren Jones MP, Chair of the Business, Energy, and Industrial Strategy Committee, and Rt Hon Greg Clark MP, Chair of the Science and Technology Committee, to Rt Hon Michelle Donelan MP, Secretary of State for Science, Innovation, and Technology. The letter was focused on the UK's participation in EU programmes on science and space.

The Chairs asked the Secretary of State the following questions:

- What are the Government's specific requests for changes to Part Five of the Trade and Cooperation Agreement (TCA) on the UK's association with EU programmes, and the two draft Protocols to give effect to them?
- With respect to the UK's financial contribution, Article 714(8) of the TCA appears to foresee an automatic reduction to the UK's overall contribution over the period to 2027 to reflect funding opportunities from which UK-based beneficiaries were effectively excluded. Would that adjustment take into account grant and procurement opportunities from the relevant EU programmes that were completed before the UK became formally associated?
- How would any adjustments to the terms of the UK's association be given effect? In particular, does the Government expect this process to require any changes or additions to Part Five of the TCA itself?
- Have detailed proposals reflecting the UK's position been shared with the EU, and has the European Commission made its own proposals which have been shared with the UK?
- What is the timetable envisaged for conducting and completing negotiations on the terms of UK association to EU programmes and their entry into force?

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

Funding for digital scholarships announced

On Thursday 30 March, the Office for Students (OfS) announced they would be awarding funding from the Department for Science, Innovation and Technology (DSIT) and Office for Artificial Intelligence (OAI) to universities to deliver the AI and data science scholarships.

In 2019 the OfS launched a funding competition that aimed to increase diversity and address digital skills gaps in the workforce. Following the success of the initial programme, DSIT has announced a funding package worth up to £17 million between April 2023 and March 2025 for up to 2,000 additional scholarships.

30 universities have been awarded a share of the funding to deliver scholarships to eligible underrepresented groups in the 2023-24 academic year, with further funding for 2024-25 subject to confirmation. The scholarship eligibility criteria has been widened to include students from lower socioeconomic backgrounds to provide further opportunities for students from this underrepresented group.

John Blake, Director for Fair Access and Participation at the OfS, said: 'This funding provides opportunities for students underrepresented in these industries to achieve their career aspirations. This funding builds on the successes of the programme's recent students and provides the UK's data science and AI sector with a wider pool of highly skilled graduates.'

You can [read more](#) here.

Humanities in the UK today – HEPI report

On Thursday 30 March, the Higher Education Policy Institute (HEPI) published a report outlining the current health of humanities in the UK for teaching and research.

The report highlights the world-leading status of humanities expertise in the UK and provides examples of good practice.

It also raises concerns about recent funding shortfalls and recommends policies that would bolster the position of humanities across the whole higher education sector. This will enable the UK to contribute even more to tackling the many problems facing the world.

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

Designated Quality Body Update

On Thursday 30 March, the Minister for Skills, Apprenticeships, and Higher Education, Rt Hon Robert Halfon MP, released a statement announcing the de-designation of the Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (QAA) as the designated quality body (DQB) for higher education in England.

The statement confirms that the de-designation will take effect from 1 April 2023. It further notes that the OfS will ‘undertake all quality and standards assessment activity on an interim basis pending further consideration of future arrangements’.

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