



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

## University APPG weekly update

27 November – 1 December 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

## Home Office – oral questions

On Monday 27 November, the Secretary of State for the Home Department, Rt Hon James Cleverly MP, and his ministerial team, answered oral questions in the House of Commons.

Wendy Chamberlain MP (Liberal Democrat) asked what assessment had been made of the potential merits of providing temporary visas to the dependants of visiting students and academics when the dependants are living in conflict zones. She raised the case of a constituent on a student visa at St Andrews University and asked the Minister to meet with her to discuss the issue.

In his reply, the Minister for Immigration, Rt Hon Robert Jenrick MP, said that he was ‘very happy to look into the case’ but added that as a general rule, migration should ‘not be the first lever to pull in the event of a humanitarian crises’.

Jonathan Gullis MP (Conservative) described the recent ONS net migration statistics as ‘completely unacceptable.’ He asked whether the Minister would support the New Conservatives’ proposal to extend the closure of the student dependant route to cover those enrolled on one-year research master’s degrees.

In his reply, the Minister accepted that the level of legal migration was ‘far too high’ and outlined the recent policy related to dependants. He believed the policy would have ‘substantive impact’ on the levels of net migration but added that the government were ‘keeping all options under review and will take further action as required.’

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

## Graduate job market – Lords oral question

On Monday 27 November, the graduate job market was discussed in the House of Lords. This oral question was tabled by Lord Londesborough (Crossbench).

In his opening remarks, Lord Londesborough highlighted the ‘swathes of overqualified graduates in jobs not requiring a degree.’ He noted the regional dimension, stating that in some regions more than half of people were overqualified in jobs not

requiring a degree. He asked the government what measures they were taking to address the mismatch between skills and vacancies.

Baroness Barran, Minister for the School System and Student Finance, said she acknowledged the regional differences in graduate opportunities but highlighted the wider skills strategy including lifelong learning that the government were pursuing.

Lord Storey, Liberal Democrat spokesperson for education, noted that fewer young people were going into teaching and suggested that tuition fees could be refunded for those training to be a teacher. In her reply, the Minister said that the government were not considering that and noted that teacher numbers were at an all-time high.

Baroness Wilcox of Newport, Labour spokesperson for education, asked why the government had cut the higher technical education skills injection fund from £32 million to £21 million. Baroness Barran said the government's skills reforms were backed by an investment of £3.8 billion and £200 million of funding had been announced for local skills innovation funds.

Lord Hunt of Kings Heath (Labour) raised the high attrition rates for nurses and doctors two to three years after graduation. He asked whether some financial incentive could be introduced to encourage people to stay in the NHS and suggested mitigating some of the student loan. In her reply, the Minister said she was less familiar with the details of the health service.

Lord Lansley (Conservative) asked what the government and universities were doing to inform young people on which degrees to pursue at university including their employability. The Minister said young people should be 'well-equipped' to understand future earning power and job satisfaction from a particular institution. She acknowledged that improvements were being made and would send further details to the member.

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

## **Renters (Reform) Bill – Committee Stage**

On Tuesday 28 November, the Renters (Reform) Bill continued its Committee Stage in the House of Commons.

In the debate, MPs considered amendment 173 which proposed to expand the scope of the mandatory landlord redress scheme to cover purpose-build student accommodation.

Jacob Young MP, Parliamentary Under Secretary of State in the Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities (DLUHC), acknowledged that the issues affecting students ‘can often be quite different from those faced by the majority of those in the private rented sector.’ He said that ‘given those differences, it is reasonable to first apply the ombudsman membership requirements to the majority of private landlords...and then consider expanding the remit of the ombudsman to more specialised accommodation.’

The Shadow Minister for Housing, Matthew Pennycook MP, thanked the Minister for the clarification and withdrew amendment 173.

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

## **Net Migration – Commons Urgent Question**

On Tuesday 28 November, the Shadow Home Secretary, Rt Hon Yvette Cooper MP, requested that the Home Secretary, Rt Hon James Cleverly MP, made a statement on the publication of net migration figures.

In his opening remarks, the Minister for Immigration, Rt Hon Robert Jenrick MP, described the measures that the government had taken to ‘tackle an unforeseen and substantial rise in the number of students bringing dependants into the UK.’

Tim Loughton MP (Conservative) asked the Minister to explain why 135,000 visas were granted to dependants last year, and highlighted particular concern over the number of Chinese students.

In his reply, the Minister acknowledged that there was a ‘very substantial number of dependants’ and there was a ‘strong argument that it is unsustainable for the country to continue to take so many dependants, who put pressure on housing, public services, school places and so on.’

Paul Blomfield MP (Labour) highlighted the £42 billion contribution of international students to the UK and said they were ‘vital to the economies of towns and cities across the country.’ He asked whether the government would consider removing international students from net migration figures in a similar way to the United States.

In his reply, the Minister said he did not consider ‘fiddling the figures’ to be the appropriate response to the challenge. He acknowledged that ‘universities and foreign students play an important part in the academic, cultural and economic life of

[the UK]' but said it was critical that 'universities are in the education business, not the migration business.' He added that 'universities need to look to a different long-term business model, and not just rely on people coming in to do short courses, often of low academic value, where their main motivation is a life in the UK, not a first-rate education.'

Sir Julian Lewis MP (Conservative) probed whether the government would have the appropriate levers to stop large numbers of Chinese students if it was decided it was against the UK's security interest.

The Minister clarified that the government controls the levers of the immigration system and added that that the current system did not discriminate between nationalities, but different levels of security vetting exist on a case-by-case basis.

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

## **Net Migration – Lords**

On Wednesday 29 November, Lord Green of Deddington (Crossbench) asked the government why net migration had risen to 745,000 and what plans they had to reduce it.

In his opening remarks, Lord Sharpe of Epsom, Parliamentary Under Secretary of State for the Home Office, noted that the government had 'introduced measures to tackle the substantial rise in students bringing dependants to the UK.'

Baroness Brinton (Liberal Democrat) highlighted that international students add £42 billion to the UK economy. She asked why the government 'constantly portray them as a drain on the UK and why are they proposing to reduce their numbers, rather than recognising their direct contribution to our economy, communities and universities.'

In his reply, the Minister said that many students stay in the UK beyond their studies and noted that the ONS will continue to include students in its net migration statistics.

Lord Hannay of Chiswick (Crossbench) said 'great care has to be taken' to not damage the 'truly world leading' higher education sector. He asked the Minister whether the government would consider removing international students from the net migration statistics.

The Minister noted that the ONS was operationally independent from government and any decision around methodology would be for the ONS. He said he was happy to associate himself with the positive remarks of the soft power and export industry of higher education.

Lord Johnson of Marylebone (Conservative) asked the Minister for assurance that there was 'no plan to axe the graduate route for international students.'

In his reply, the Minister said he had been 'very clear that there are no plans to affect the student graduate route. These measures are specifically targeted at dependants.'

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



# Forthcoming business

## **DLUHC – oral questions**

On Monday 4 December from 2:30pm, the Secretary of State for the Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities (DLUHC), Rt Hon Michael Gove MP, and his ministerial team, will answer oral questions in the House of Commons.

Relevant tabled questions include:

- What steps he is taking to reform the private rented sector. [Tony Lloyd MP, Labour]

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

## **Education Committee – accountability hearings**

On Wednesday 6 December from 9:30am, the Secretary of State for Education, Rt Hon Gillian Keegan MP, accompanied by the Permanent Secretary, Susan Acland-Hood, will give oral evidence to the Education Committee.

You can [watch the session](#).

## **University skills – Lords oral question**

On Thursday 7 December from 11:00am, investment in universities to provide young people with skills to expand electricity generating capacity in the nuclear energy sector' will be discussed in the House of Lords. This oral question was tabled by Lord Wigley (Plaid Cymru).

You can [watch the session](#).

# Written Questions

## Visas: Students

**Wera Hobhouse MP:** To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department, what steps his Department is taking to improve the application process for student visas. [UIN 900301]

**Robert Jenrick MP:** During 2023, straightforward applications were delivered within published Service Standards.

My department introduced technology for a fully digital application process for EEA customers, and customers of any nationality applying in the UK using a UK residence permit.

We are continually making improvements to processes, working closely with the education sector to support students to apply early with the correct documentation.

## Department for Education: China

**Tim Loughton MP:** To ask the Secretary of State for Education, whether senior officials from her Department have travelled to China since January 2019. [UIN 1422]

**Damian Hinds MP:** Yes, senior officials have travelled to China since January 2019.

## Research, Development and Innovation Organisational Landscape Review

**Chi Onwurah MP:** To ask the Secretary of State for Science, Innovation and Technology, with reference to the Government response to the independent report by Sir Paul Nurse entitled Research, development and innovation (RDI) organisational landscape: an independent review, published on 1 October 2021, what the (a) milestones, (b) deliverables and (c) timelines are for the review of the future of QR research funding. [UIN 3221]

**Andrew Griffith MP:** The Review of Research England's (RE) approach to Strategic Institutional Research Funding (SIRF) which includes quality-related research (QR), will assess the effectiveness of unhypothecated research funding for Higher

Education Providers. It will assess the principles and assumptions underlying current approaches and evaluate implementation. The review, set for 2024, will update the evidence on SIRF's impact, enhance transparency, and engage the Higher Education sector. RE will commission an independent review on the 'Impact of SIRF' in December 2023 and stakeholder workshops in Summer 2024. Any changes to funding approaches will not be implemented before Academic Year 2026-2027.

## **Research: Finance**

**Chi Onwurah MP:** To ask the Secretary of State for Science, Innovation and Technology, with reference to paragraph 4.49 of the Autumn Statement 2023, CP 977, published on 22 November, whether the £750 million of R&D spend is in addition to existing R&D funding. [UIN 3220]

**Andrew Griffith MP:** As a result of the UK's bespoke deal on association to Horizon Europe and Copernicus, the government has been able to announce substantive investment in wider research and development (R&D) priorities. The £750 million package is fully funded from the government's record 2021 Spending Review funding settlement for R&D. This includes £250 million for Discovery Fellowships, £145 million for new business innovation support and funding to support a new National Academy of mathematical sciences. These are transformative new programmes that maximise opportunities for UK researchers, businesses and innovators. We will also continue to deliver a multi-billion-pound package of support through the existing Horizon Europe Guarantee.

## **Visas: Graduates**

**Baroness Wolf of Dulwich:** To ask His Majesty's Government, further to the Written Answer by Lord Murray of Blidworth on 28 September (HL10391), whether they will now answer the question put, namely, what criteria and data they plan to use in assessing the extent to which the High Potential Individual visa entry route has met its stated objective of supporting the UK's growth as a leading international hub for innovation, creativity and entrepreneurship. [UIN HL263]

**Lord Sharpe of Epsom:** The Home Office are committed to evaluating visa routes to robustly identify which policies and aspects of our delivery are effective. Full details on the ways in which we evaluate visa routes can be found in the Home Office Evaluation Strategy. The findings from completed evaluations, including those evaluating the efficacy of visa routes, are routinely published on GOV.UK.

The process of commissioning an external evaluation of the High Potential Individual visa route is currently ongoing.

## **Research: Finance**

**Baroness Jones of Whitchurch:** To ask His Majesty's Government what steps they are taking to reduce regional inequalities in government-funded research and development. [UIN HL229]

**Viscount Camrose:** The Levelling Up White Paper (published in February 2022) committed to a R&D Levelling Up Mission, recognising the uneven distribution of gross R&D (GERD) spending across the UK.

DSIT is delivering this mission to increase public R&D investment outside the Greater South-East by at least 40% by 2030, and at least one-third over this spending review period.

We are making progress through investing £100 million for 3 Innovation Accelerators (Greater Manchester, West Midlands and Glasgow) for example, and investing £75 million for 10 Innovate UK Launchpads, £312 million for 12 Strength in Places Fund projects and £60 million for the Regional Innovation Fund.

## **Research Bureaucracy Review**

**Baroness Jones of Whitchurch:** To ask His Majesty's Government when they intend to implement the final report of the Independent Review of Research Bureaucracy published in July 2022. [UIN HL231]

**Viscount Camrose:** The Government is committed to addressing the issues set out in the Independent Review of Research Bureaucracy. We are working with other government departments, funders and sector representative bodies to finalise a comprehensive response to the Review and will publish it in due course. In the meantime, government departments and funding bodies have begun implementing several of the Review's recommendations. We have established a Review Implementation Network, bringing together senior representatives from across the research funding system, to deliver the recommendations of the review and maintain momentum on this issue.

## **Visas: Overseas Students**

**Cat Smith MP:** To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department, what steps his Department is taking to reduce the time taken to process (a) student visa and (b) student sponsor license applications. [UIN 2610]

**Robert Jenrick MP:** The Home Office has continually remained within published service standard for straightforward applications within the Student route. We work closely with the education sector and through public communications campaigns to encourage students to apply as early as possible and to check they have submitted the right documents, to reduce delays. Customers applying to the Student route from overseas can apply up to six months ahead of the course start date, once their education sponsor has provided the Confirmation of Acceptance for Studies (CAS). We continue to review internal processes to identify opportunities to improve the customer journey.

Student Sponsor license applications have an eight-week service standard which includes a pre-licence visit. To reduce processing times, the pre-licence visits are now undertaken by dedicated Study Compliance officers. Applications may take longer to decide where further information is required from the prospective sponsor following the visit, to confirm the licence requirements are met.

## **Holiday Accommodation: Students**

**Rosie Duffield MP:** To ask the Secretary of State for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities, whether he has made an assessment of the potential impact of provisions in the Renters (Reform) Bill on the ability of students to acquire short-term lets for the purposes of their education. [UIN 3031]

**Jacob Young MP:** Since introducing the Renters (Reform) Bill, we have heard from across the sector that the Bill would interrupt the student housing market, potentially reducing a vital supply of properties. We have listened to these concerns and recognise that further changes are needed.

We have amended the Bill to include a new ground for possession which will allow landlords of HMOs to seek possession ahead of each new academic year, facilitating the yearly cycle of short-term student tenancies. This will mean students can sign up to a property in advance, safe in the knowledge they will have somewhere to live while studying.

# Sector news

## **Enough campaign – third phase launch**

On Saturday 25 November, the third phase of the government’s ‘Enough campaign’ was launched. The campaign works with over 30 UK universities to protect women and girls on university campuses.

The campaign provides advice to anyone witnessing abuse, including students, on the safe ways to intervene if they see an incident of violence against women and girls, ranging from sexual harassment – on the street, on public transport or at work – to sharing intimate images of someone without their consent; coercive control in a relationship; or unwanted touching.

Alongside the partnership with the higher education sector, the latest phase of the campaign also contains billboard and poster advertising on public transport networks and in sports clubs, as well as social media adverts, including on platforms relevant to younger audiences.

The Secretary of State for the Home Department, Rt Hon James Cleverly MP, said ‘The Enough campaign aims to deliver a generational shift in the attitudes and behaviours which lead to abuse – everyone has a role to play.’

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

## **Response to the Industry and Regulators Committee report**

On Monday 27 and Tuesday 28 November, the Office for Students (OfS) and Department for Education (DfE) respectively published their response to the House of Lords Industry and Regulators Committee report ‘Must do better: the Office for Students and the looming crisis facing higher education.’

In their letter to the Committee, Lord Wharton of Yarm (Chair of the OfS) and Susan Lapworth (Chief Executive of the OfS) note that the report ‘delivers a strong critique of the OfS’s work’ and states that they will ‘look to act on [the Committee’s] findings.’ It highlights (i) engagement with students, (ii) relationship with the sector, and (iii) financial sustainability.

In the introduction of their response, the government states ‘their strong support for the OfS and its continuing important work to protect the interests of students.’ It acknowledges that ‘we must always look for ways that government, or its arms-length bodies, can change and improve’ and welcomes the Committee’s ‘detailed scrutiny.’ While many of the conclusions and recommendations are for the OfS to consider, it states that they have ‘shared their view where it is appropriate to do so’ and have signposted work which the ‘OfS is already undertaking to address some of the Committee’s concerns.’

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

## **Campaign to attract R&D investment launched**

On Monday 27 November, the Midlands Engine Partnership, Midlands Innovation and Midlands Enterprise Universities launched a new campaign to drive international investment into research and development across the Midlands.

The coalition of seventeen universities have published prospectuses highlighting four sectors where the region has internationally outstanding research and development investment capabilities. These showcases, produced by the ‘Universities as drivers of trade and investment Pilot’, will form the basis of a campaign from the region’s universities to working together to leverage their global connections in order to support growth in their local economies.

Roger Mendonca, Chief Executive of Midlands Engine Partnership, commented: ‘This is an important milestone in the ongoing efforts to drive high-value investment into the Midlands and champion our region’s world-leading innovation centres on the global stage.’

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

## **Minimum service levels – Secretary of State statement**

On Tuesday 28 November, the Secretary of State for Education, Rt Hon Gillian Keegan MP, made a statement [HCWS74] launching a consultation on minimum service levels in schools, colleges, and universities that would apply during strikes.

In the statement, the Secretary of State notes that ‘subject to the consultation, I intend to use powers within the Strikes (Minimum Service Levels) Act 2023 to make regulations to set minimum service levels in the event of strike action.’ The

consultation is intended to provide the Department for Education (DfE) with information on the ‘best solution for pupils, students and parents.’

The consultation will close on 30 January 2024.

A statement was also made by Baroness Barran, Parliamentary Under Secretary of State for the School System and Finance [HLWS70].

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

## **Working better together to support student mental health – Nous**

On Wednesday 29 November, the Office for Students (OfS) published a report titled ‘Working better together to support student mental health’ which had been written by Nous Group.

The report documents the main takeaways from a ten-month OfS funded action learning set (ALS) project that brought together higher education and healthcare professionals to identify and solve problems around joined-up working to support student mental health.

It identifies key challenges and proposed approaches developed by the ALS groups. The challenges include:

1. Clarifying roles and responsibilities.
2. Improving NHS-higher education communications and information sharing.
3. Addressing the diverse needs of today’s students.
4. Resources and support.
5. Lack of strategic-level approach to collaboration between higher education and NHS.

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

## **Postgraduate Taught Experience Survey – AdvanceHE**

On Wednesday 29 November, Advance HE published its Postgraduate Taught Experience Survey (PTES) 2023.



The survey drew on responses from nearly 84,000 postgraduate taught students in 101 institutions across the UK.

Key findings include:

- 83% of students were satisfied overall with their experience, up one per cent on 2022 and the highest since 2016 and 2014 when it also reached 83%.
- Satisfaction levels among non-EU overseas students have continued to increase and now exceed by a sizeable margin those of UK students across all measures of the postgraduate experience.
- 18% of postgraduate taught students had considered leaving their course and, of those, the number who cited financial difficulties increased from 8% in 2022 to 11% in 2023.

Advance HE Survey Executive and report author, Jason Leman, said: 'PTES gives a unique insight into the experiences of postgraduate students on taught courses in the UK and provides a wealth of insights to help providers consider the changing needs and aspirations of students. This year, in our commentary report, we have focussed on students' experiences based on their country of origin and we also examine why students consider leaving their courses.'

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

# Appendix one

See below for a summary of a relevant Renters (Reform) Bill Committee Stage session that took place during w/c 20 November. This summary was not included in the previous edition of the Digest.

The government's amendment which introduces a new ground for possession for HMO landlords was debated on 21 November.

Matthew Pennycook MP, Shadow Minister for Housing, asked for reassurances on the following points:

- How will landlords verify at the point the tenancy was signed that every individual who would occupy the property was a student?
- How will landlords have reasonable grounds to assume that a non-student tenant will become a student during the lifetime of the tenancy?
- Concerns that the ground could be abused to facilitate section 21 no-fault evictions.
- If it is the government's intention to ensure that there is a cyclical availability of student accommodation, then it may need to think again about how it is achieved for students whose academic year starts and finishes at times other than those specified in the amendment (i.e. between 1<sup>st</sup> June and 30<sup>th</sup> September).

He encouraged the Minister and his officials to go away and think about whether the amendment might be improved to guard against any unintended consequences.

In his response, Jacob Young MP, Parliamentary Under Secretary of State in the Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities (DLUHC), noted that a landlord will have to verify that the tenants are students, and they must do that at the beginning of the tenancy. They can be fined if they try to use these grounds without having notified the students that they are in student accommodation and that the grounds are therefore included. He also stated that everyone in a property must be a student. A landlord can reasonably believe that a student taking out a tenancy is to become one, but until they are a student, they are not technically one just yet.

He proceeded to state that the grounds are designed to cover the majority of the market. If it were available all year round, it would be less secure and would be open to greater abuse. He also said he would set out in further guidance the evidence that landlords need to show to prove they are letting to students.

The Minister also noted that the amendment tabled by Lloyd Russell Moyle MP (Labour) was not necessary. The amendment would mean grounds for possession could only take place if the property was exclusively advertised through a specified educational institution. The Minister argued this would narrow the scope of the ground significantly. Most properties are advertised on Zoopla or Rightmove rather than through a university, so the amendment would not provide the carve-out that the student market needs.

The Minister agreed to write to Matthew Pennycook and Lloyd Russell Moyle on the points they raised during the debate.

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