



The All-Party Parliamentary **University Group**

University APPG weekly update

30 October – 3 November 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

Prorogation

On Thursday 26 October, Parliament was prorogued ahead of the King's Speech on Tuesday 7 November.

All relevant legislation has been given a carry-over motion which allows a Bill to continue its progress from one parliamentary session into the next.

Forthcoming business

Prorogation

On Thursday 26 October, Parliament was prorogued ahead of the King's Speech on Tuesday 7 November.

All relevant legislation has been given a carry-over motion which allows a Bill to continue its progress from one parliamentary session into the next.

King's Speech

On Tuesday 7 November, the State Opening of Parliament will take place.

The House of Lords Library has produced a [helpful set of resources on the 2023 King's Speech](#).



Written Questions

N/A

Sector news

DSIT Secretary letter to UKRI and response

On Saturday 28 October, the Secretary of State for the Department for Science, Innovation and Technology (DSIT), Rt Hon Michelle Donelan MP, wrote a letter to UK Research and Innovation (UKRI).

In the letter, the Secretary of State highlighted her ‘disgust and outrage at Research England’s appointment of individuals to an advisory group on equality, diversity, and inclusion who, since the 7 October attack, have been sharing extremist views on social media’. She noted that ‘public bodies, or those representing them, cannot be seen to take political positions let alone promote extremist ideologies.’

She described her strong preference for UKRI to ‘immediately close the group’ and ‘undertake an urgent investigation into how this happened.’

In their response, UKRI said they were taking four actions:

1. Suspending operations of the Research England Equality Diversity and Inclusion Advisory Group with immediate effect.
2. Launching an investigation into the specific areas of concern.
3. Using the findings to come to a conclusion about the ultimate future of the RE EDI advisory group, and how best to ensure its purpose is fulfilled, advised by the Research England Council.
4. The Board reviewing advisory structures to ensure that they are fit for purpose. This will include the processes for their establishment and operation.

The University and College Union (UCU) has written to UKRI calling on it to reverse its decision to suspend its advisory board on equality, diversity and inclusion within 48 hours. If it refuses to do so, the union will call on its members to resign from voluntary positions with the funding body.

You can read [Michelle Donelan’s letter](#), [UKRI’s response](#), and [UCU’s response](#).

Universities powering the NHS – UUK position paper

On Monday 30 October, Universities UK (UUK) published a position paper titled 'Universities powering the NHS'.

In the paper, UUK sets out a five-point plan to meet the objectives of the NHS Long Term Workforce Plan:

- Boosting student recruitment.
- Increasing the numbers of educators.
- Investing in new facilities and infrastructure including new technologies.
- Increasing placement capacity.
- Improving learner experience and reducing attrition.

Professor Alistair Fitt, Universities UK's health policy lead, and Vice-Chancellor of Oxford Brookes University, said: 'To develop a well-staffed and efficient NHS, the UK Government must work closely with universities to fund the plan over the next 15 years, spanning general elections and spending reviews. We must take bold decisions to ensure the conditions are right for universities to train staff adequately, including on funding and capital investment, staffing and student recruitment.'

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

Education Secretary antisemitism article – Conservative Home

Following the letter to vice-chancellors sent on 11 October, the Secretary of State for Education, Rt Hon Gillian Keegan MP, published an article in Conservative Home on antisemitism.

In the article she writes that 'no student should have to attend university in a climate of fear' and stressed the need to make university campuses safe for all.

She also noted that she will be 'writing to the Office for Students to ask them to investigate the appropriateness of the actions taken by universities when cases of antisemitism or support for proscribed terrorist groups such as Hamas occur. I will be calling on them to make full use of their powers as the higher education regulator.'

You can [read the article](#).

12 Centres for Doctoral Training in AI announced

On Tuesday 31 October, the Department for Science, Innovation, and Technology (DSIT) named the 12 Centres for Doctoral Training in AI that will benefit from £117 million in previously announced government backing through UK Research and Innovation (UKRI).

The Centres include:

- University of Surrey, partnered with Royal Holloway, University of London: UKRI AI Centre for Doctoral Training in AI for Digital Media Inclusion
- University of Oxford: UKRI AI Centre for Doctoral Training in AI for the Environment (Intelligent Earth)
- University of Lincoln, partnered with the Universities of Aberdeen and Strathclyde, and Queen’s University Belfast: UKRI AI Centre for Doctoral Training in Sustainable Understandable agri-food Systems Transformed by Artificial Intelligence (SUSTAIN)
- University of Edinburgh: UKRI AI Centre for Doctoral Training in Responsible and Trustworthy in-the-world NLP
- University of Bristol: UKRI AI Centre for Doctoral Training in Practice-Oriented Artificial Intelligence (PrO-AI)
- Northumbria University: UKRI AI Centre for Doctoral Training in Citizen-Centred Artificial Intelligence
- Heriot-Watt University, partnered with the University of Edinburgh: UKRI AI Centre for Doctoral Training in Dependable and Deployable Artificial Intelligence for Robotics (D2AIR)
- Imperial College London: UKRI AI Centre for Doctoral Training in Digital Healthcare
- University of Southampton: UKRI AI Centre for Doctoral Training in AI for Sustainability
- University of York: UKRI AI Centre for Doctoral Training in Lifelong Safety Assurance of AI-enabled Autonomous Systems (SAINTS)

- University of Manchester, partnered with the University of Cambridge: UKRI AI Centre for Doctoral Training in Decision Making for Complex Systems
- University of Edinburgh: UKRI AI Centre for Doctoral Training in Biomedical Innovation

The Secretary of State for DSIT, Rt Hon Michelle Donelan MP, commented: ‘The plans we are announcing today will future proof our nation’s skills base, meaning British people can reap the benefits of AI as it continues to develop. At the same time, we are moving further and faster to put the power of this technology to work for good across government and society.’

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

Minister Halfon antisemitism X thread

On Wednesday 1 November, the Minister for Skills, Apprenticeships, and Higher Education, Rt Hon Robert Halfon MP, published a thread on X (formerly Twitter) outlining the steps he was taking to make university campuses safe.

This included:

1. Call for visas to be withdrawn from international students who incite racial hatred.
2. Write to vice-chancellors asking that they act decisively against staff and students involved in antisemitism.
3. Meet the Office for Students (OfS) to discuss its role in reviewing incidents and any potential action.
4. Reiterate in all my discussions that criminal acts should be referred to the police.
5. Explore establishing an antisemitism charter in higher education, signing up universities which demonstrate a commitment to tackling antisemitism.

You can [read the full X thread](#).

£8.1 million funding for postgraduate AI conversion courses

On Wednesday 1 November, the Office for Students (OfS) confirmed a further £8.1 million of funding would be made available for postgraduate conversion course scholarships in artificial intelligence (AI) and data science to increase the diversity of students entering these careers.

The confirmation of funding will ensure that universities involved in the scholarship programme will be able to continue to support students from diverse backgrounds to upskill and progress into careers in the AI and data science.

Director for Fair Access and Participation at the OfS, John Blake, said: ‘This funding will continue to support this growing sector and give skilled graduates from disadvantaged backgrounds the chance to develop skills in the industry.’

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

The Future of Quality in England – QAA policy paper

On Thursday 2 November, the Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (QAA) published its latest policy paper in the Future of Quality in England series titled ‘The right ambition, the wrong solution? How the Lifelong Learning Entitlement can deliver a high-quality learning experience’.

The paper argues that the eligibility and scope of modules included within the Lifelong Learning Entitlement (LLE) is too narrow, and that pathways for progression throughout a learner’s lifetime are unclear. It outlines ways in which the learning experience will need to be adapted for modular learners and how this will impact the way quality is measured.

The paper recommends that policymakers should:

- Balance the option of working towards a full qualification with accessing a suite of standalone modules.
- Facilitate greater collaboration with the sector.
- Use evidence to determine how quality is measured.

You can [read the full policy paper](#).

REF2028: Outputs Matter – HEPI report

On Thursday 2 November, the Higher Education Policy Institute (HEPI) published a Policy Note titled 'REF 2028: Outputs Matter'. This was written by Professor Sir Nigel Thrift, the former Vice-Chancellor of the University of Warwick, and argues the Research Excellence Framework (REF) is becoming overloaded – thereby diluting its core purpose.

Professor Thrift argues:

- The REF allows research institutions to show government they are doing excellent research that deserves to be rewarded with taxpayers' money and in return a special pot of strategic institutional funding is allocated on a formula with few strings. This money is called QR (quality-related) funding because it is concerned with assessing the quality of research put forward by each institution.
- But as more things have been loaded on to the REF, its central purpose is being lost. The proposals for the latest version of the REF, due in 2028, argue for a substantial cut in the percentage of the exercise given over to qualitative assessment of research outputs via peer review.
- Research outputs are the lifeblood of university research, prompting leaps forward in science, medicine and engineering and serving as the basis of world-changing innovations. In the humanities and social sciences, new maps of how societies come together and fall apart, and of how new meanings evolve, see the light of day, as well as policies of all kinds. Without full peer-reviewed consideration of what the authors of these outputs consider to be their best work, it is difficult to understand how government can have confidence in the quality of British research.

Nick Hillman, Director of HEPI, commented: 'Britain's place as a Science Superpower depends above all on having the right research environment in place. Exactly what that should look like and whether it is best encouraged by measuring published outputs above all else or in other ways is the sort of question on which wise heads may differ, but it does need to be openly discussed.'

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

UUK response to OfS call for evidence on positive outcomes for modular study

On Thursday 2 November, Universities UK (UUK) published its response to the Office for Students' (OfS) call for evidence on positive outcomes for students studying on a modular basis.

Key points in the response include:

- Welcoming the OfS' approach to policy development.
- Agreeing with the OfS that the approach to regulation will need to change because of the LLE.
- Supporting the exploration of completion measures for modular study.
- Recognising the importance of understanding where students go after studying, whether that's through further study or employment.
- Considering how the reflective questions in the Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA) graduate outcomes dataset could inform what successful study looks like for modular learners.

You can [read the full UUK response](#).

Mental Health Annual Study 2023 – Cibyl

The 2023 annual Cibyl Mental Health Study was published this week. The study, conducted in partnership with Accenture, Imperial College London and Universities UK, explores the mental health of almost 13,000 students and graduates from more than 140 universities.

Key findings include:

- 39% of students said they experienced a decline in their mental health after starting university.
- Over 70% of students said money worries had caused a decline in their mental health.
- 58% of students said robust support provision is important to them when they choose a university, a significant increase from 45% in 2022.

The report aims to increase awareness around mental health and to enable further improvements in young people's mental health support.

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

AI Safety Institute announced

On Thursday 2 November, the Prime Minister, Rt Hon Rishi Sunak MP, announced the establishment of the AI Safety Institute.

The Institute will test new types of frontier AI before and after they are released to address the potentially harmful capabilities of AI models, including exploring all the risks, from social harms like bias and misinformation, to the most unlikely but extreme risks.

The Prime Minister commented: 'It is fantastic to see such support from global partners and the AI companies themselves to work together so we can ensure AI develops safely for the benefit of all our people. This is the right approach for the long-term interests of the UK.'

Shahid Omer, Director of Policy at Universities UK said: 'UK universities are well placed to explore both the technological and societal impacts of AI. New funding announced earlier this week will also enable our universities to continue to carry out cutting-edge research into AI, boost the UK's own AI skills base, as well as help attract talented AI researchers from overseas.'

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