



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

## University APPG weekly update

4 – 8 December 2023

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

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# Parliamentary business

## Legal migration – Commons statement

On Monday 4 December, the Secretary of State for the Home Department, Rt Hon James Cleverly MP, gave a statement on 'legal migration' to the House of Commons.

In the statement, the Secretary of State confirmed that he had asked the Migration Advisory Committee (MAC) to review the Graduate route to 'prevent abuse and protect the integrity and quality of UK's outstanding higher education sector'. Taken together with [announcements in May](#) and those outlined below, he claimed this would result in around 300,000 fewer people coming to the UK.

Other announcements:

1. End abuse of health and care visa by stopping overseas care workers from bringing family dependents.
2. Increase the earning threshold for overseas workers by nearly 50% from £26,200 to £38,700..
3. End the 20% going-rate salary discount for shortage occupations and replace the Shortage Occupation List with a new Immigration Salary List, which will retain a general threshold discount. The Migration Advisory Committee will review the new list against the increased salary thresholds in order to reduce the number of occupations on the list.
4. Raise minimum income required for family visas to £38,700.

The Shadow Home Secretary, Rt Hon Yvette Cooper MP, said that Labour had called for (i) an end to the 20% 'unfair discount', (ii) increased salary thresholds to prevent exploitation, and (iii) a strengthened MAC. She proceeded to note that while the UK benefitted from international talent and students, the immigration system needed to be controlled and managed so that it was fair and effective. She criticised the government's approach saying that there was nothing in the statement about training requirements or workforce plans.

Chris Grayling MP (Conservative) asked if there was a case for looking at who comes to study and if they should have an automatic right to work after they complete their studies.

In his reply, the Home Secretary said that the UK's university sector was a 'global success story' and widely respected across the world. He added that higher education should be a route to study, rather than a visa route by the back door.

Jonathan Gullis MP (Conservative) welcomed the announcement and asked if future reviews would consider stopping people studying one-year research masters courses from bringing dependents.

The Home Secretary said that the measures announced included a wider review of the higher education and the Graduate route. He clarified that the government had already taken action on dependents.

Layla Moran MP (Liberal Democrat) criticised the government for 'starving' the science industry of lab technicians and other talent by introducing these new measures.

Patrick Grady MP (SNP) asked what steps the government was taking to negotiate more visa exchange programmes with the European Union and other countries that could allow the sharing of skills and experience across borders.

The Home Secretary said he had negotiated a number of youth mobility programmes to attract the 'brightest and the best'.

You can [read a transcript](#) and [watch the session](#). You can [read the Home Office press release](#).

## **Legal migration – Lords statement**

On Tuesday 5 December, members of the House of Lords had the opportunity to debate the legal migration statement.

Lord Ponsonby, Shadow Home Affairs Minister, asked the Minister a series of questions:

- (1) To outline timescales and terms of reference for the MAC's review into the graduate route.
- (2) If changes to the salary threshold for work and family visas apply to new entrants and how will this affect existing visa holders.
- (3) Clarification on what the new salary discount will be for roles listed on the proposed immigration salary list if they aren't eligible for the 20% discount.

- (4) If the government would promote a clear message that international students are welcome in the UK and reaffirm its support for the International Education Strategy.

Lord Sharpe, Parliamentary Under Secretary of State in the Home Office, said that the government would establish a new immigration salary list, which would retain the 20% discount on the general salary threshold. This means that migrants working in lower-paid salary occupations on the immigration salary list will still benefit from the minimum salary floor of 80% of the new general salary threshold of £38,700, but migrants in occupations where going rates are higher than the general salary threshold would not be subject to further salary discounts.

On international students, he reaffirmed the government's commitment to 'attracting the best and brightest global talent to support growth'. He pointed to a 'scale-up' visa, allowing those with a job offer from a recognised scale-up to qualify for a fast-track visa. He also referred to the global talent route, the global business mobility visa and the high-potential individual visa route. He said the changes being introduced to visas apply only to those who come here on new visas. That means workers with dependents already in the UK will be able to stay. He also said there will be a regulatory impact assessment and an equalities impact assessment in due course.

Lord Davies of Brixton (Labour) pointed to the impact that a fall in overseas students could have on the education provided for UK domiciled students. He urged the government to do more to encourage people to study in the UK. He warned that the measures announced would deter some international student from coming to the UK alongside proposals announced in May to ban PGT students from bringing dependants. He asked for reassurances that these factors will be considered in any impact assessments.

The Minister agreed that universities make a positive contribution the UK in many ways, including in terms of soft power. He said the MAC would review the Graduate route ensure that it is fit for purpose and prevent abuse, protecting the quality and integrity of UK higher education.

Baroness Bennett (Green) asked how much income was expected to be lost to UK universities in light of government predictions that 140,000 fewer people would come via student routes. She also asked about the regional impact of this.

The Minister said there were more than 400,000 main applicants granted visas and 152,000 dependants were granted visas—so it is the dependants who will not be coming. In terms of dependants, about half of them are adults and only half of them actually work, so the economic impact of their non-arrival would be very minimal.

Baroness Lawlor (Conservative) asked if the policy on dependents applies primarily to PhD students in laboratories or in both science and humanities subjects. She also asked if government would consider extending the review of the Graduate route to assess the impact on universities of having around 700,000 additional students.

The Minister said that PhD students would be able to bring dependents and that there is no difference in policy between people studying science and humanities subjects. He also acknowledged the pressures on accommodation and the schooling system more generally.

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

## **Education Committee – accountability hearings**

On Wednesday 6 December, the Education Committee held an accountability hearing session for the Secretary of State for Education, Rt Hon Gillian Keegan MP, and the Permanent Secretary at the Department for Education, Susan Acland-Hood.

On the Advanced British Standard, the Secretary of State said that they were being introduced to allow for (1) more time, (2) more breadth, and (3) greater parity of esteem between technical and academic qualifications. The consultation on the new qualification would be available ‘shortly.’

Noting the Education Committee inquiry into industrial action in higher education, the Chair, Robin Walker MP, asked the Secretary of State how the government’s efforts to reduce the impact of the marking assessment boycott on students had performed.

The Secretary of State described the marking assessment boycott as ‘outrageous’ and damaging to the ‘brand image’ of the sector. She urged the union and universities to work to resolve the issue. She highlighted the consultation on minimum service levels which would report if it was helpful to equip universities with an additional tool to alleviate the impact of disruption.

Her view was that ‘young people are paying a lot...and deserve a high-quality education...and part of this includes getting their work marked.’ She clarified the government were ‘one step removed’ from having the negotiations or discussions themselves.

You can [watch the session](#).

## University skills – Lords oral question

On Thursday 7 December, Lord Wigley (Plaid Cymru) asked what plans the government had for ‘increasing investment in universities to provide more opportunities for young people to acquire the skills needed to expand electricity generating capacity in the nuclear energy sector, including nuclear fusion technology.’

Lord Wigley highlighted the rapid growth in demand for skilled graduates for the fission and fusion sectors and noted that demand was outstripping supply. He asked whether the government would support the proposal from Bangor University, in partnership with the National Nuclear Laboratory, to establish a training reactor.

Baroness Barran, Minister for the School System and Student Finance, said she was aware of the shortages and pressures mentioned which were both global as well as domestic. She said she would write regarding the specific project in Bangor.

Baroness Bloomfield of Hinton Waldrist (Conservative) celebrated examples of apprenticeship schemes as well as partnerships with universities including Bangor University and the University of Manchester. However, she said the schemes ‘will not touch the sides in meeting the industry’s requirements’ and probed what more the government could do to encourage skills acquisition in this industry.

In her reply, Baroness Barran highlighted the £50 million investment to increase the number of apprenticeships in engineering and other key growth sectors. She added that more detail would be set out in the new year.

Baroness Wilcox of Newport, Labour spokesperson for Education, asked whether there were any examples of local skills innovation funds being used in the nuclear energy sector.

Baroness Barran said if the supply chain for nuclear was considered as a whole, she would be very confident they would be included in the local skills innovation funds.

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



# Forthcoming business

## Department for Education – oral questions

On Monday 11 December, the Secretary of State for Education, Rt Hon Gillian Keegan MP, and her ministerial team will answer oral questions in the House of Commons.

Relevant tabled questions include:

- What steps her Department is taking to help ensure that tertiary and technical education providers work with businesses to meet local skills needs. [Jo Gideon MP + Jack Brereton MP + Wendy Morton MP + Greg Smith MP + Ian Levy MP, Conservative]
- What recent assessment she has made of the potential impact of trends in the level of university applications from international students on the long-term sustainability of higher education institutions. [Dame Nia Griffith MP, Labour]

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

# Written Questions

## Higher Education: Freedom of Speech

**Gregory Campbell MP:** To ask the Secretary of State for Education, if she will make an assessment of the effectiveness of the provisions in the Higher Education (Freedom of Speech) Act 2023 in the context of the response to recent remarks made by the Rector of St Andrews University on the Israel - Gaza war. [UIN 4079]

**David Johnston MP:** Although the Higher Education (Freedom of Speech) Bill received royal assent in May 2023, the main provisions of the Act will not come into force until 1 August 2024. This is because the Office for Students (OfS) will need to create the new free to use complaints scheme introduced by the Act and develop guidance on how providers and students' unions can comply with their new duties, in consultation with the sector.

When in force, however, this Act will only apply to higher education providers in England registered with the OfS. The University of St Andrews will not, therefore, be in scope.

The new duties under the Act will give specific protections to academic staff and introduce routes of redress where an individual may not have clear contractual protections in place in respect of freedom of speech and academic freedom. The Act is clear that the job security of staff should not be undermined by the expression of lawful speech, including where they may question and test received wisdom, and put forward new ideas and controversial or unpopular opinions.

## Students: Loans

**Jonathan Edwards MP:** To ask the Secretary of State for Education, when the calculation formula used to determine overseas earnings thresholds for student loan repayments for English and Welsh students who live overseas or work for a foreign employer was last revised. [UIN 4390]

**Robert Halfon MP:** The repayment of student loans is governed by the Education (Student Loans) (Repayment) Regulations 2009 (as amended). The regulations set out the calculation formula to determine overseas repayment thresholds for student loan repayments. A change in the calculation formula would require a legislative amendment.

Ahead of each financial year, in line with the regulations, the department calculates the updated repayment thresholds to apply for English borrowers residing outside of the UK, including those resident in the USA, and provides these to the Student Loan Company (SLC), who administer the loan accounts.

Student loan repayments are income contingent. To take account of differences in living costs in different countries, overseas repayment thresholds are determined by each country's price level index (PLI) data, as published by the World Bank and updated annually. PLI data provides a measure of the differences in the general price levels of countries and, therefore, represents a relative cost of living between countries, enabling a fair threshold to be set.

Based on PLI data, countries are placed into different “bands” reflecting their cost of living relative to other countries and to the UK. As the relative cost of living in different countries varies over time, individual countries may move between bands following an annual threshold update. Where PLI data for a country is not available, the department may determine the applicable PLI value for that country by reference to a comparable country.

## **Research Bureaucracy Review**

**Chi Onwurah MP:** To ask the Secretary of State for Science, Innovation and Technology, with reference to page 38 of her Department's publication entitled, Government's response to the Independent Review of the UK's Research, Development and Innovation Organisational Landscape, published November 2023, for what reason her Department plans to wait until early 2024 to respond to the 2022 Independent Review of Research Bureaucracy. [UIN 4147]

**Andrew Griffith MP:** The Government is committed to addressing the issues set out in the Independent Review of Research Bureaucracy. Since the review was published last year, the government has worked with the sector to produce a government response which is in the final stages before publication. In the meantime, government departments and funding bodies have begun implementing many of the Review's recommendations and taking practical steps to reduce bureaucracy in the research system.

## Research: Finance

**Chi Onwurah MP:** To ask the Secretary of State for Science, Innovation and Technology, pursuant to the Answer of 27 November 2023 to Question 3220 on Research: Finance and with reference to the Answer of 22 February 2023 to Question 150475 on Euratom and Horizon Europe: Finance and to paragraph 4.49 of the Autumn Statement 2023, CP 977, published on 22 November, whether the £750 million of R&D spend has been drawn from the allocation made in the 2021 Spending Review for association with Horizon Europe in this financial year. [UIN 4154]

**Andrew Griffith MP:** The government is investing in wider R&D priorities through savings generated from the bespoke Horizon deal that works in the interests of UK taxpayers, and researchers and businesses. The £750 million package is funded from money allocated to Horizon and Copernicus as part of government's record 2021 Spending Review funding settlement for R&D. This package will maximise opportunities for UK researchers, businesses and innovators, including £250 million for Discovery Fellowships, £145 million for new business innovation support and funding to support a new National Academy of mathematical sciences. This funding comes on top of our commitment to deliver a multi-billion-pound package of support through the existing Horizon Europe Guarantee scheme.

## Huawei: Universities

**Lord Alton of Liverpool:** To ask His Majesty's Government what assessment they have made of the finding in the Civitas report, *The Strategic Dependence of UK Universities on China – and where should they turn next?*, that Huawei Technologies and its subsidiaries are the single largest source of Chinese funding to British universities since 2017. [UIN HL385]

**Viscount Camrose:** The UK government's approach to China is rooted in the UK national interest. We will not accept collaborations which compromise our national security. We have taken steps to significantly strengthen the UK's protections from overseas interference in our higher education and research sector, including through our Trusted Research Campaign and the direct support offered by the Research Collaboration Advice Team. The updated International Education Strategy also advises Universities to ensure they have appropriate processes in place to manage risks associated with dependence on a single source of funding. As part of the Integrated Review Refresh, we are conducting a detailed review of the measures designed to support our academic sector to keep their research secure.

## Horizon Europe

**Chi Onwurah MP:** To ask the Secretary of State for Science, Innovation and Technology, whether universities that received Horizon Europe guarantee funding were required to meet Horizon Europe Gender Equality Plan eligibility criterion. [UIN 3805]

**Andrew Griffith MP:** In November 2021, the Government announced the Horizon Europe Guarantee to address the delays in formalising the UK's association to Horizon Europe. Eligible, successful applicants to Horizon Europe receive the full value of their funding for the lifetime of their grants. Successful awardees do not need to leave the UK to receive this funding. As of 31 October 2023, UK Research & Innovation (UKRI) has issued 2,736 Grant Offer Letters for awards of £1.43 billion.

Guarantee award winners are asked to develop and maintain gender equality plans for the project in line with Horizon Europe's standard procedures.

## Students: Employment

**Matt Western MP:** To ask the Secretary of State for Education, if she will make an estimate of how many students work more than one job. [UIN 3902]

**Robert Halfon MP:** The Student Income and Expenditure Survey for the 2021/22 academic year provides data on students' working patterns, including, for example, average hours worked and average hours worked during term time and vacations. However, the survey report does not cover the number of jobs students may have. The 2021/22 Student Income and Expenditure Survey can be found at: <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/student-income-and-expenditure-survey-2021-to-2022>.

## Students: Travel

**Matt Western MP:** To ask the Secretary of State for Education, what steps her Department is taking to support students commuting to and from university. [UIN 3905]

**Robert Halfon MP:** Where students choose to commute to university, it is important that universities, as independent and autonomous institutions, take their needs into account and ensure that students are properly supported during their studies.

This government recognises the cost-of-living pressures that have impacted students. That is why we have made £276 million of student premium and mental health funding available this academic year to support disadvantaged students who need additional help. This extra funding will complement the help universities are providing through their own bursary, scholarship and hardship support schemes.

## **Students: Working Hours**

**Matt Western MP:** To ask the Secretary of State for Education, if she will make an estimate of the average number of hours worked by students who have jobs. [UIN 3903]

**Robert Halfon MP:** The Student Income and Expenditure Survey publishes data on students' working patterns. The survey for the 2021/22 academic year asked students who were in work to state how many hours they had worked in the week prior to completing the survey. The average (mean) number of hours worked in this reference week by full-time students was 12, while the median was lower, at 8. The average (mean) number of hours worked in the previous week by part-time students was 32 while the median was higher, at 37 hours.

This published data also showed that full-time students who are in employment tend to work more hours during the summer vacation compared to term time.

The Student Income and Expenditure Survey for the 2021/22 academic year can be found here: <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/student-income-and-expenditure-survey-2021-to-2022>.

## **Higher Education: Finance**

**Matt Western MP:** To ask the Secretary of State for Education, what steps her Department is taking to support higher education providers facing financial challenges. [UIN 3906]

**Robert Halfon MP:** Our universities are autonomous, vibrant, and independent. The department values this, as does the sector. This means that, ultimately, it is for providers, as part of an autonomous and independent sector, to decide on effective business models.

The Office for Students (OfS), as the independent regulator of higher education (HE) in England, is responsible for monitoring and reporting on the financial sustainability of the sector. The department's priority is to ensure that students' best interests are protected. If a provider was at risk of an unplanned closure, the department would work with the OfS, and others where appropriate, to ensure the best outcomes for those students.

We are investing hundreds of millions of pounds in additional funding over the three-year period from 2022/23 to 2024/25 to support high-quality teaching and facilities including in science and engineering, subjects that support the NHS, and degree apprenticeships. This includes the largest increase in government funding for the HE sector to support students and teaching in over a decade.

My right hon. Friend, the Secretary of State for Education, departmental officials and I continue to work closely with the OfS and various parties including mission groups, providers, and other government departments as appropriate, to understand the ongoing impacts and changing landscape of financial sustainability in the sector.

## **Higher Education: Domestic Visits**

**Matt Western MP:** To ask the Secretary of State for Education, how many Higher Education providers she has visited in 2023. [UIN 3900]

**Robert Halfon MP:** My right hon. Friend, the Secretary of State for Education, the departmental ministerial team, and a range of officials routinely engage the sector, including universities, representative bodies and mission groups. In 2023, my right hon. Friend, the Secretary of State for Education, alongside meetings and attendance at sector events, has visited Northumbria University, Exeter University, Queen Mary University and the following colleges with higher education provision: Mid Kent College, City of Liverpool College, Stafford College and Darlington College.

The government highly values our world class higher education system, recognising its role as a catalyst for economic growth and innovation, and as a crucial foundation for fostering social mobility by empowering individuals with the essential skills for success.

## **Office of the Independent Adjudicator for Higher Education**

**Matt Western MP:** To ask the Secretary of State for Education, how many times she has met the Office of the Independent Adjudicator for Higher Education in 2023. [UIN 3898]

**Robert Halfon MP:** My right hon. Friend, the Secretary of State for Education, has not met the Office of the Independent Adjudicator for Higher Education (OIA) in 2023. However, departmental officials meet staff from the OIA on a regular basis.

## **Office for Students**

**Matt Western MP:** To ask the Secretary of State for Education, how many times she has met the Director of Free Speech of the Office for Students since his appointment. [UIN 3901]

**Robert Halfon MP:** The Secretary of State met with Susan Lapworth, CEO of the Office for Students (OfS), and Lord Wharton, Chair of the OfS on 25 January 2023.

In my capacity as the Minister for Skills, Apprenticeships and Higher Education, I have also met with the CEO once, and Chair of the OfS twice, in 2023. My noble friend Baroness Barran has also met with the CEO once.

My Right hon. Friend, The Secretary of State for Education has not met with Arif Ahmed, Director of Free Speech and Academic Freedom of the OfS, since his appointment in June 2023. The Rt Hon Claire Coutinho MP, the previous Minister responsible for freedom of speech in the department, met with Arif Ahmed once in 2023 following his appointment.

## **Research: Migrant Workers**

**Baroness Jones of Whitchurch:** To ask His Majesty's Government, further to the answer by Viscount Camrose on 20 November (HL Deb col 594), what percentage of people working in research and development (R&D) are expected to be recruited from overseas by 2027; and what immigration constraints apply to those seeking to work in the R&D sector in the UK. [UIN HL474]

**Viscount Camrose:** The Government does not hold any data on or set a specific target for the percentage of R&D talent it expects to have recruited from abroad by 2027.



The Government's immigration policy applies to R&D talent wanting to locate to the UK. The Government aims to improve the UK's attractiveness to overseas R&D talent, subject to meeting wider objectives on overall net migration to the UK.

The UK's points-based immigration system continues to work well. For example, the Global Talent visa has seen a 76% increase in visas issued for the year ending June 2023.

## Higher Education

**Charlotte Nichols MP:** To ask the Secretary of State for Education, with reference to her Department's press release entitled Crackdown on rip-off university degrees, published on 17 July 2023, on which degree courses she plans to increase controls. [UIN 3368]

**Robert Halfon MP:** The department wants to ensure that all students, regardless of their background, benefit from high quality, world-leading higher education (HE) that leads to excellent outcomes.

The Office for Students (OfS) has responsibility for monitoring quality and standards and acting where there is a breach of its conditions of registration. The OfS registration condition B3 sets minimum requirements for student outcomes, including course continuation, completion and progression onto graduate employment or further study.

Where courses perform below these thresholds, the providers could face investigation, enabling the OfS to understand the reasons for their performance. If a HE provider is found to be in breach of regulatory requirements, the OfS has the power to intervene and impose sanctions.

To date, the OfS has undertaken 18 investigations in relation to student outcomes (B3) performance. The OfS will publish the outcomes of those investigations in due course and will make decisions about whether regulatory action is appropriate. The department expects the OfS to take decisive action where there has been a clear breach of B3, including, where appropriate, through the use of recruitment limits. Recruitment limits will prevent the growth of courses that do not meet minimum expectations for student outcomes, where there is no justifiable explanation for them failing to do so.

Other sanctions available to the OfS include issuing a specific ongoing condition of registration requiring an improvement in performance, financial penalties and

ultimately the suspension or removal of the HE provider from the register (and with it, access to student finance).

## **Lifelong Education**

**Matthew Offord MP:** To ask the Secretary of State for Education, what steps she is taking to (a) promote and (b) improve lifelong learning. [UIN 3191]

**Robert Halfon MP:** The government understands the importance of lifelong learning, adult education and the need for adults to be able to train, re-train and upskill throughout their lives.

The department recognises that clear information and guidance is essential for learners, education providers and employers alike to navigate the government's skills and adult education offer.

The department has launched the Skills for Life strategy and website, which is designed to support people to access the education and training they need and signposts them to the appropriate programmes. It targets adult learners in priority sectors to help them to access the skills they need to get the job they want, whatever their stage in life. The site showcases hundreds of government-funded skills opportunities to raise awareness and boost understanding among adults and help maximise uptake across the country.

The National Careers Service provides free, up-to-date, impartial information, advice and guidance on careers, skills, and the labour market in England. It offers intensive support for low-skilled adults without a qualification at Level 3, as one of six priority groups for the service. Professionally qualified careers advisers can support customers to explore the range of learning routes to determine the best route for them and to develop a careers action plan.

The government is committed to investing £2.5 billion across the financial years from 2022 to 2025 (£3 billion when including Barnett funding for devolved administrations) as a part of the department's skills reforms to help adults learn valuable skills and prepare for the economy of the future.

The Adult Education Budget (AEB) provides £1.34 billion in the 2022/23 financial year to fund skills provision for adults to help them gain the skills they need for work, an apprenticeship or further learning. The department's 'essential skills' legal entitlements, funded through the AEB, provide the opportunity of free study for

adults who do not have essential literacy and numeracy skills up to and including Level 2 and digital skills up to and including Level 1.

Community Learning plays a vital role within AEB provision of supporting those furthest from the workplace, and in improving the health and well-being of learners. It is an important stepping-stone for learners who are not ready for formal accredited learning, or who would benefit from learning in a more informal way, particularly for (post-19) disadvantaged learners. It is a flexible and wide-ranging offer, responding to local needs and is delivered in nearly every local authority area across England through adult education services, further education colleges, Institutes of Adult Learning and Community Learning.

The Free Courses for Jobs offer gives eligible adults the chance to access high value Level 3 qualification for free, which can support them to gain higher wages or a better job. There has been strong uptake of over 45,000 cumulative enrolments between April 2021 and April 2023.

Skills Bootcamps offer free, flexible courses of up to 16 weeks, giving people the opportunity to build up sector-specific skills with a job interview upon completion. The department delivered 40,040 Skills Bootcamps starts in the 2022/23 financial year and has invested £550 million across the financial years from 2022 to 2025 to significantly expand Skills Bootcamps further with a target of 64,000 learner starts a year in the 2024/25 financial year so that more adults can get the skills they need for good jobs.

Apprenticeships are available for everyone over the age of 16 and provide a unique opportunity for people to develop the knowledge and skills needed to start, enhance, or change careers. There are high-quality apprenticeship routes into more than 680 occupations and the department is providing £2.7 billion of funding by the 2024/25 financial year to support employers to take up these opportunities. The Autumn 2023 Statement also announced a £50 million investment in a two-year apprenticeships pilot to explore ways to increase apprenticeship opportunities in growth sectors, and address barriers to entry in high-value apprenticeships.

From the 2025/26 academic year, the department will introduce the Lifelong Learning Entitlement (LLE). This is a transformation of the student finance system which will provide individuals with a loan entitlement equivalent to four years of post-18 education to use over their working lives (£37,000 in today's fees). The LLE will be available for both full years of study at Levels 4-6 as well as, for the first time, modules of high-value courses, regardless of whether they are provided in colleges or universities. Under this flexible system, people will be able to space out their studies



and learn at a pace that is right for them, including choosing to build up their qualifications over time, within both further education and higher education providers.

# Sector news

## Horizon and Copernicus programmes

On Monday 4 December, the UK's association to Horizon and Copernicus programmes was formalised in Brussels.

The Department for Science, Innovation and Technology (DSIT) announced that it would launch a campaign to maximise participation in Horizon, and that funding of up to £10,000 would be made available to selected UK researchers applying for the first time for 'pump priming', via a partnership with the British Academy and other backers.

The Secretary of State for DSIT, Rt Hon Michelle Donelan MP, commented: 'Being part of Horizon and Copernicus is a colossal win for the UK's science, research and business communities, as well as for economic growth and job creation – all part of the long-term decisions the UK government is taking to secure a brighter future.'

UUK Chief Executive, Vivienne Stern MBE, said: 'This is a momentous day. I am beyond delighted that the UK and EU have finally signed the agreement confirming the UK's association to Horizon.'

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

## Agent Quality Framework pledge

On Tuesday 5 December, British Universities' International Liaison Association (BUILA), Universities UK International (UUKi), UK Council for International Student Affairs (UKCISA) and the British Council announced the launch of the UK Agent Quality Framework Universities' Pledge.

The Agent Quality Framework Pledge is a digital marker displaying an institution's commitment to the checks and balances contained in the Agent Quality Framework. This marker provides clarity to both prospective students and agents on the expectations and responsibilities of agents operating on behalf of that institution.

The pledge shows an institution's commitment to the principles of the Agent Quality Framework, as well as a plan for setting them into practice with a set of basic quality measures. These principles include:

- Empowering student choice and enabling informed decision making.
- Ensuring good agent governance and professionalism.
- Promoting ethical agent practices, professional knowledge and competency.
- Increasing transparency and accountability.

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

## **State of the Relationship 2023 – NCUB report**

On Wednesday 6 December, the National Centre for Universities and Business (NCUB) published a new report revealing a ‘robust resurgence’ in university-business interactions since the pandemic.

The report reveals that the number of university interactions with businesses reached its highest level since the pandemic. Key findings include:

- During the pandemic, interactions declined by 1.9% but new data for 2021/22 marks the first positive shift since the pandemic.
- The total number of interactions reached 80,881 in 2021/22, a 5.1% increase on the year from 76,952 in 2020/21.
- Income from knowledge exchange (KE) activity grew in 2021/22 by 16.1%, or by more than £161m, reaching pre-pandemic levels of £1.2bn.

Dr Joe Marshall, Chief Executive of the National Centre for Universities and Business (NCUB), said: ‘We are pleased to reveal new analysis showing collaborations and partnerships between universities and businesses have reached their highest level since the pandemic began.’

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

## **Research Excellence Framework – timeline update**

On Thursday 7 December, it was confirmed that the next Research Excellence Framework (REF) has been pushed back from 2028 to 2029.

The date has changed in recognition of the complexities for higher education institutions in:

- The preparation for using HESA data to determine REF volume measures.
- Fully breaking the link between individual staff and institutional submissions.
- Reworking of institutional Codes of Practice.

You can [read more](#).

## **UCAS end of cycle data**

On Thursday 7 December, the Universities and Colleges Admissions Service (UCAS) published end of cycle data for 2023.

Key findings include:

- The number of accepted UK applicants sharing a disability increased to 103,000 in 2023, up from 77,000 in 2022 (+33.8%) and 58,000 in 2019 (+77.5%).
- Those sharing a mental health condition rose to 36,000 this year compared to 22,000 last year (+63.6%) and 16,000 in 2019 (+125%).
- The second highest number of UK 18-year-olds from the most disadvantaged backgrounds have secured a place at university or college this year.

Sander Kristel, Chief Executive of UCAS (Interim), said: 'Today's figures show growing numbers of students feel comfortable in sharing a disability or mental health condition as part of their UCAS application... This forms part of our ongoing commitment to improve the admissions process, helping to ensure that all students have available support and guidance to progress to higher education, no matter their background.'

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