



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

## University APPG weekly update

6 – 10 November 2023

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

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# Parliamentary business

## King's Speech

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

During the King's Speech, HM King Charles III said, 'proposals will be implemented to reduce the number of young people studying poor quality university degrees and increase the number undertaking high quality apprenticeships.'

The Economic Activity of Public Bodies (Overseas Matters) Bill and Renters (Reform) Bill both received carry-over motions.

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

## Breaking down barriers to opportunity – Commons debate

On Wednesday 8 November, the Secretary of State for Education, Rt Hon Gillian Keegan MP, led a debate on education following the King's Speech.

In her opening statement she said that Labour's 50% target of young people attending university 'favoured the most advantaged in society and only widened the gap.' She acknowledged that university is a 'brilliant choice' and 'for many, it will be the best thing they ever do.' However, in a 'minority of cases', university would be a 'ticket to nowhere, saddling students with debt and no prospects.'

Emma Hardy MP (Labour) intervened to ask what measures would be used to calculate the value of a degree and highlighted the risk of focusing on earnings data given the geographic salary disparities across the UK which did not necessarily reflect the value of a degree.

The Secretary of State proceeded to note that low value courses were 'bad for students, the taxpayer and the reputation of our universities, many of which are truly exceptional and admired all over the world.' She highlighted the significant salary differences across universities and said those 'who lose out...are not the universities but the young people who have been sold a false dream.'

Emma Hardy MP (Labour) raised recent evidence given by Lord Willetts that demonstrated that 'even accounting for institution attended and subject studied,

graduates from wealthier families earned more.’ She implied that this made purely economic assessments of the value of a degree flawed.

The Minister for Skills, Apprenticeships, and Higher Education, Rt Hon Robert Halfon MP, responded by highlighting the transformative work of institutions such as Nottingham Trent University, the University of East London, and Staffordshire University, all who took an ‘extraordinary number of disadvantaged students.’ Given that graduates from these institutions had good outcomes he posited it was good teaching rather than networks that was primarily responsible.

The Shadow Secretary of State for Education, Bridget Phillipson MP, criticised the government’s plans and said Labour would ‘reform student finance to bring fairness to a system that punishes new graduates, young workers, those starting a family and those delivering our public services—high and rising standards for all our young people throughout their education and their lives.’

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

# Forthcoming business

## **Renters (Reform) Bill – committee stage**

On Tuesday 14 and Thursday 16 November, oral evidence will be heard for the Renters (Reform) Bill. Witnesses TBC.

You can watch the sessions ([9:25am 14 November](#), [2:00pm 14 November](#), [11:30am 16 November](#), [2:00pm 16 November](#)).

## **DSIT oral questions**

On Wednesday 15 November from 11:30am, the Secretary of State for the Department for Science, Innovation, and Technology (DSIT), Rt Hon Michelle Donelan MP, and her ministerial team will answer oral questions in the House of Commons.

Relevant questions include:

- What steps she is taking with Cabinet colleagues to help support universities with research and development on net zero technologies. [Alistair Strathern MP, Labour]
- What steps her Department is taking to help attract overseas researchers, academics and innovators to the UK. [Layla Moran MP, Liberal Democrat]

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

## **House of Lords recess**

On Wednesday 15 November, the House of Lords will rise for Autumn recess. It will return on Monday 20 November.



# Written Questions

N/A

# Sector news

## **Protecting Jewish students on campus – DfE article**

On Sunday 5 November, the Department for Education (DfE) published an article titled ‘How we’re protecting Jewish students on university campuses.’

The article lists the five-point plan:

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), the independent regulator for higher education, to discuss its role in reviewing incidents and any potential action.
4. Make it clear in all discussions that acts that may be criminal 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.

It also clarifies that the Higher Education (Freedom of Speech) Act only covers speech that is within the law. It states, ‘the right to freedom of speech is not an absolute right and it does not include the right to harass others or incite them to violence or terrorism’.

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

## **University Alliance Teaching and Learning network report**

On Tuesday 7 November, the University Alliance Teaching and Learning network published a report titled ‘What works? Supporting student progression and attainment through sustainable inclusive assessment practices.’

Seven institutions from the network, led by Teesside University, carried out the research project to identify which inclusive assessment policies and practices

implemented during the COVID-19 pandemic could be applied in a post-pandemic world.

As part of the process for producing the report, each university recognised the ‘enablers’ and ‘barriers’ to inclusive assessment at their institutions. These were gathered from recurrent themes in their analysis of existing internal data, and interviews with students and staff.

The enablers and barriers were then mapped across each of the nine attributes, to reveal the challenges facing their implementation. The result is a collection of outputs that provide practical insight for other higher education institutions, showcasing the inclusive assessment attributes that work in practice, and which barriers need to be addressed.

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

## **Student loan interest cap announcement**

On Thursday 9 November, the Department for Education (DfE) announced that from 1 December 2023, the Plan 2, Plan 5 and Postgraduate loan (PGL) interest rates will be reviewed each calendar month and compared to the latest comparable prevailing market data available.

The maximum interest rates applicable to Plan 2, Plan 5, and PGL must be below or equal to the prevailing market rate. Where the interest rate on either Plan 2, Plan 5 and/or PGL is considered to be too high in comparison to the comparable prevailing market rate, the maximum applicable interest rate for the relevant plan type(s) will be capped for a set period of one calendar month (or longer, if the comparable prevailing market rate remains below the student loan rate at the next review point), as required.

Welsh borrowers with Plan 2 (undergraduate) or Plan 3 (postgraduate) student loans will also see an interest rate cap being applied and adjusted monthly when student loan interest rates are high.

Previously, interest rates were adjusted on a quarterly basis where they needed to be capped to remain equal to or below prevailing market rate. The move to monthly monitoring aims to simplify this process.

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



## **Russell Group manifesto**

On Thursday 9 November, the Russell Group published its manifesto setting out its vision for research, innovation and future skills development.

The manifesto, titled 'A Bright Future' outlines how research-intensive universities such as those in the Russell Group already add significant value to the UK, but are keen to do even more to drive sustainable economic growth, create new jobs and boost public services.

With proposals covering the economy, skills, health, the environment, and the UK as a global leader for research, ideas contained in the manifesto are designed to help create opportunities to advance knowledge and innovation, including:

- A new £400m 'Spark Fund' to support hundreds of new deep-tech spinouts from universities. This could be delivered by the British Business Bank making investments in every nation and region of the UK, and through reforms to pension rules to help funds invest in high-potential spin-outs and start-ups, to deliver an additional £1bn of public and private investment by 2030.
- A new medical training taskforce to ensure a strategic, collaborative approach to NHS workforce planning to train more doctors and other healthcare professionals and help cut waiting lists.
- A Green Boost for tried and tested R&D programmes, supporting universities working on breakthroughs which can cut energy bills and encourage businesses and universities to work together on initiatives that support the drive towards Net Zero.
- The establishment of a UK Research Security Fund to enhance university efforts to protect their world-class research and counter foreign interference.
- An ambitious new 2030 International Education Strategy which includes a supportive visa system alongside the current Graduate visa, to help universities continue attracting the best global talent to the UK. Every additional 1% market share for international students could boost the UK economy by more than £5 billion a year.

Dr Tim Bradshaw, Chief Executive of the Russell Group said: 'Supporting quality R&D and innovation and being ambitious for our research sector will be crucial to building a bright future for the UK. Get this right, and the next Government would be taking a huge step towards tackling problems like growing NHS waiting lists.'

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

## **Piloting methods to develop better evidence on student support – TASO report**

On Thursday 9 November, the Centre for Transforming Access and Student Outcomes in Higher Education (TASO) published a report titled ‘Piloting methods to develop better evidence on student support.’

The report explores the effectiveness of less commonly used evaluation methods to develop more robust evidence and understand the impact of interventions. This follows from previous work where TASO found gaps in evidence on what works to improve the employment and employability outcomes for students from disadvantaged and underrepresented backgrounds, and what works to better the outcomes for disabled students.

Recommendations on evaluation methods for higher education providers include:

- Larger providers should seek assistance from academic colleagues if internal evaluation teams lack the capacity to deliver analysis of this sort.
- Propensity score matching (PSM) offers some promise as an evaluation method which can help the sector move towards a better understanding of causal impact. However, sample size is a key consideration.
- Invest in further evaluation capacity to facilitate stronger evaluation practice across their Access and Participation portfolio to ensure they are providing students with the best possible support.

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

## **How universities should design change initiatives for success – HEPI report**

On Thursday 9 November, the Higher Education Policy Institute (HEPI) published a new report by Paul Woodgates exploring the way that internal change initiatives in universities are designed and delivered.

The report suggests that the key to improved outcomes from change projects is to focus on the design of the change process itself. Before beginning work on any change project, the report argues, universities should answer five questions:

1. Why is the change necessary? – a clear articulation of the case for moving away from what exists now.
2. What will replace the status quo? – a description of what will exist as a result of the change, and why that option is preferred to any other.
3. How will the move from the status quo to the future state be achieved? – a definition of the logical steps that need to be gone through to achieve a successful outcome.
4. What change delivery model will be employed? – covering decisions about how change will be managed in terms of speed, degree of central direction and approach.
5. What would success look like? – clearly setting out what specific outcomes would constitute a success from the change.

Paul Woodgates, the author of the report, said: ‘My proposal is that far more effort and focus needs to be applied to the design of change projects. This requires a more thoughtful analysis of what the change is for and how it will achieve its intended outcomes.’

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

## **Skills training funding announcement – DfE**

On Friday 10 November, the Department for Education (DfE) announced £200 million of funding to support colleges and universities to offer more training opportunities in key industries, such as the growing green sector.

Investment is being targeted to address the specific skills needs of each region, which local businesses and employers have identified as priority sectors in their local skills improvement plans (LSIPs), giving them access to the skilled workforce they need to grow.

The Secretary of State for Education, Rt Hon Gillian Keegan MP said, ‘This investment is about boosting local industries, building people’s skills and ultimately futureproofing our economy and the career prospects of the next generation.’

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

## **Analysis of REF 2021 impact case studies**

Research England and UK Research and Innovation (UKRI) commissioned RAND Europe to carry out qualitative and quantitative analyses of the 6,781 impact case studies submitted to the 2021 Research Excellence Framework (REF).

The report extracts common themes and messages that form evidence of the broad impact of higher education research on wider society.

The report finds that:

- Research at UK higher education institutions has had a significant and diverse impact on society and the economy.
- Impact pathways are complex, diverse, and unique.
- Research benefits many different groups.
- There is significant consistency between REF 2021 and REF 2014.

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