



The All-Party Parliamentary **University Group**

University APPG weekly update

8 – 12 January 2024

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:

Tom Lewis | appug@universitiesuk.ac.uk | 0207 419 5424

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Parliamentary business

Increases in antisemitic offences – Westminster Hall debate

On Tuesday 9 January, a Westminster Hall debate took place, titled ‘increases in antisemitic offences’. This was tabled by Nicola Richards MP (Conservative).

Several universities were referenced including Queen Mary University of London, University of Glasgow, King’s College London, LSE, University of Westminster, Imperial College, University of Leeds, and Queen’s University Belfast.

Alex Sobel MP (Labour) highlighted an incident at Leeds in which Jewish students had raised concerns about a speaker who had diminished the role of Hamas being invited to an event only to be told that the room booking had to be kept due to the Freedom of Speech (Higher Education) Act 2023. Both he and a party colleague (Charlotte Nichols MP) urged the government to look again at the legislation.

Minister for Housing, Planning and Building Safety, Lee Rowley MP, highlighted ministers’ engagement with universities since 7 October and the announcement of £7 million to tackle antisemitism in education.

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

Draft Immigration (Health Charge) (amendment) Order 2023

On Wednesday 10 January, the Draft Immigration (Health Charge) (amendment) Order 2023 was debated.

Tom Pursglove MP, Minister for Legal Migration and the Border, explained that the new rate of health charge reflected the increases in healthcare expenditure and utilised the latest revised assumptions of migrant use of healthcare services. The draft order amends schedule 1 to the Immigration (Health Charge) Order 2015 and full rate of the charge will increase to £1,035 per person per annum, with a discounted rate for students and their dependants.

Stephen Kinnock MP, Shadow Minister for Immigration, highlighted the impact assessment which acknowledged that the higher charge ‘could deter some potential migrants from applying to enter or remain in the UK.’ He said that increasing costs of studying might make the UK prohibitive for many international students and

academics. He asked for reassurance that that the ‘actual effects’ of the order would be closely monitored by Ministers.

Dame Meg Hillier MP (Labour), Chair of the Public Accounts Committee, noted that students were typically a healthier population and asked if the Minister had done analysis of what the cost has been of providing healthcare to the cohort in question.

The Minister said that he would update the Committee on further analysis as well as exploring a regular review to assess the appropriateness of the level of health charge.

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

DSIT – oral questions

On Wednesday 10 January, the Secretary of State for Science, Innovation and Technology, Rt Hon Michelle Donelan MP, and her ministerial team answered questions in the House of Commons.

Dr James Davies MP (Conservative) highlighted the Government’s £60 million regional innovation fund to boost university support for regional economic growth and claimed there was no evidence that the Welsh Government had spent their £3.4 million share on its intended purpose. Andrew Griffith MP, Minister for Science, Research and Innovation, reiterated the importance of the fund ‘to harness the strength of our universities’.

Daniel Zeichner MP (Labour) pointed to a drop in international student applications representing a loss to the research sector, which he suggested will need significant private investment to offset. Andrew Griffith MP explained the Government was mobilising both public and private funding for research and development, including mobilising £2 private investment for every £1 the Government puts in.

Emma Lewell-Buck MP (Labour) asked the Secretary of State about how she is increasing access to AI skills training. In her response, Michelle Donelan said the Government has funded ‘a broad package of AI skills initiatives through the education pipeline’, including a new AI master’s conversion course.

The Minister for Science, Research and Innovation, Andrew Griffith MP, emphasised that the UK is a great place for international researchers to work and live. He mentioned the UK’s universities, public research and development budget and global research collaboration through Horizon.

Richard Foord MP (Liberal Democrat) pointed to the ability to stay and work in the UK after completion of studies being a key factor that attracts international students. He asked whether the Minister will be engaging with the Home Office ahead of the review of the graduate immigration route this year and confirm research students arriving in the UK this year will still be entitled to a period of post-study work. Andrew Griffith MP stated he regularly meets with Home Office colleagues. He dismissed Richard Foord's question by citing that 41% of postgraduate research in the UK is currently being conducted by researchers from overseas.

Layla Moran MP (Liberal Democrat) drew attention to the recently increased salary threshold of the Government's spousal visa policy forcing academics and innovators to leave, using an example from her constituency of a couple now being unable to stay together in the UK after graduating. She asked: 'Why are the Government using taxpayers' money to educate people to become highly qualified researchers if their immigration policy then forces them to leave?' Andrew Griffith responded that 'a fair immigration policy' is part of 'an open Britain' and said that it is 'right' for those from overseas to 'do their fair share in contributing to the UK economy'.

Sir Oliver Heald MP (Conservative) highlighted that rejoining Horizon and other European research programmes will attract researchers and help retain them in the UK. Andrew Griffith MP agreed and urged MPs to talk to local firms, innovators, clusters and universities in their constituencies to 'make sure the UK punches above its weight in the Horizon programme'.

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

Economic Activity of Public Bodies (Overseas Matters) Bill – third reading

On Wednesday 10 January, the Economic Activity of Public Bodies (Overseas Matters) Bill received its Third Reading in the House of Commons.

In his opening remarks, the Secretary of State for the Department for Levelling Up, Housing, and Communities (DLUHC), Rt Hon Michael Gove MP, thanked members for their scrutiny of the legislation so far and explained that the Bill was designed to uphold a principle outlined in the 2019 manifesto.

Regarding clause 3(7), he reassured the House that the clause did not 'contravene in any way [the UK's] foreign policy or inhibit in any way the UK Government's taking action if we believe there is activity in the Occupied Palestinian Territories that

requires to be called out.’ Following an intervention by Richard Fuller MP (Conservative), the Secretary of State clarified that local government pension schemes and local authorities should not be taking decisions that conflict with UK government foreign policy. He added that the legislation would permit any representative to ‘express their personal disapproval of the activities of the Israeli Government or any organisation that operates within the settlements.’

Tom Hunt MP (Conservative) and Stephen Crabb MP (Conservative) both agreed with the remarks made by the Secretary of State and raised the particular nature of boycotts against Israel.

The Shadow Secretary of State for DLUHC, Rt Hon Angela Rayner MP, moved Labour’s amendment to decline to give a Third Reading to the Bill. She explained that the Labour party ‘completely opposed a policy of boycott, divestment and sanctions against Israel’ but described the Bill as ‘containing new powers that created more uncertainty and run counter to our international obligations.’ The Shadow Secretary of State particularly highlighted equating Israel with the Occupied Palestinian Territories and the Golan Heights as ‘an unprecedented step.’

Rt Hon Kit Malthouse MP (Conservative) explained that he would be voting against the Bill and raised three broad concerns he had:

1. The separate identification in the Bill of Israel, and its conflation with the occupied territories and the Golan Heights which may contravene international law.
2. Implications on free speech, describing it as ‘incredible that we are putting elected officials and others in a position where if they just stand up in certain circumstances and say they disagree with the law, they will be committing a criminal act.’
3. The ‘sheer scale’ of the Bill’s impact and the number of organisations drawn into it e.g., universities.

Chris Stephens MP (SNP) shared the Shadow Secretary of State’s concerns that equating Israel and the occupied territories was ‘unique in any legislation’. He also noted that the legislation undermined devolution and restricted the ability of public bodies to make their own moral judgement, particularly on matters of human rights and climate consciousness.

Sir Michael Ellis MP (Conservative) highlighted his support for the Bill and described the ‘chilling and racist effects’ of the boycott movement. He assured the House that the Bill would not apply to individuals or private organisations where they are not carrying out public functions.

Shadow Minister for Higher Education, Matt Western, raised potential contradictions with the Higher Education (Freedom of Speech Act) 2023. This concern was addressed in the Secretary of State's closing comments.

Nicola Richards MP (Conservative) applauded the Secretary of State's comments and noted the significant rise in antisemitic offences. Among various other cases she mentioned that 'Jewish students had been boycotted, with university societies and Sunday league football clubs refusing to play against Jewish players and societies.' She described the Bill as an opportunity to 'reassure the Jewish community and show them our support.'

Alison Thewliss MP (SNP) criticised clause 4's 'gagging effect' and described the 'sweeping powers' to the Secretary of State and the Treasury to request information from the devolved Administrations as 'a huge overstep.'

In his closing remarks, the Secretary of State sought to 'address one misconception' that the Bill had a gagging clause on free speech. He highlighted that the explanatory notes state that individuals are in no way prohibited from expressing their view, it is only public authorities that are to be governed by the Bill. Responding to the Shadow Minister's intervention on free speech on campus, Michael Gove said 'it is not a direct assault on the principle of free speech.'

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

Forthcoming business

Home Office – oral questions

On Monday 15 January from 2:30pm, the Secretary of State for the Home Department, Rt Hon James Cleverly MP, and his ministerial colleagues will answer questions in the House of Commons.

Relevant tabled questions include:

- What assessment he has made of the potential impact of proposed changes to visa income thresholds on the university sector. [Richard Thomson MP, SNP]

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

Written Questions

Medicine: Education

Ruth Cadbury MP: To ask the Secretary of State for Health and Social Care, what steps she is taking to help ensure that medical students who study in the UK have access to NHS foundation jobs at the end of their studies. [UIN 7951]

Andrew Stephenson MP: The UK Foundation Programme Office (UKFPO) facilitates the operation and continuing development of the UK Foundation Programme. The UKFPO is jointly funded and governed by NHS England and the four United Kingdom Health Departments.

The UKFPO confirmed on 1 September 2023 that all eligible applicants in the application process will be allocated a place on the UK Foundation Programme in 2024. UKFPO estimates the UK number of eligible applicants to be approximately 9000 for 2024.

The NHS Long Term Workforce Plan, which covers the workforce, education and training in England contained a commitment to ensure there is adequate growth in foundation placement capacity, as students begin to graduate from the expanded number of medical school places in England, and a commensurate increase in specialty training places that meets the demands of the NHS in England in the future. We will work with stakeholders to ensure this growth is sustainable and focused in the service areas where need is greatest.

Future workforce growth in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland, including future foundation programme and speciality training places is a matter for each of the Devolved Administrations.

Students: Energy

Matt Western MP: To ask the Secretary of State for Education, what assessment she has made of the impact of increases in energy prices on university students living in private rented accommodation. [UIN 7381]

Robert Halfon MP: The Student Income and Expenditure Survey 2021/22 suggests that a third of students live in privately rented accommodation with friends. Over the period 2022/23 to 2024/25, the government will have provided support worth £104

billion to help families throughout the UK with the cost of living including to meet increased household energy costs. This will have eased the pressure on family budgets and so will in turn enabled many families to provide additional support to their children in higher education to help them meet increased living costs.

Students in private rented accommodation who are provided energy through a commercial entity may also benefit from the Energy Bills Discount Scheme (EBDS), which provides a baseline discount on energy bills for non-domestic users locked into high fixed price tariffs. Any non-domestic user who benefits from the EBDS must ensure the benefit is passed through to the end user, such as students in private rented accommodation.

More information on students' expenditure on housing can be found in the 2021/22 Student Income and Expenditure Survey which can be found here:
<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/student-income-and-expenditure-survey-2021-to-2022>.

Immigration: Overseas Students

Wendy Chamberlain MP: To ask the Minister for the Cabinet Office, for what reason international students studying in the UK are included in overall immigration statistics. [UIN 7418]

John Glen MP: The information requested falls under the remit of the UK Statistics Authority.

A response to the Hon Members Parliamentary Question of 18th December is attached.

Institutes of Technology: Facilities

Seema Malhotra MP: To ask the Secretary of State for Education, how many Institutes of Technology have specially built facilities. [UIN 7573]

Robert Halfon MP: The department is delivering 21 Institutes of Technology (IoTs), which exceeds the manifesto commitment of 20, of which 19 are already open.

The department is providing up to £300 million of capital funding to the IoT programme to ensure that learners have access to high quality premises and industry

standard equipment. The following capital funding has been provided since the programme commenced:

	Wave 1	Wave 2
2019/2020	£21,836,758	
2020/2021	£60,772,151	
2021/2022	£38,932,896	£706,258
2022/2023	£38,655,887	£5,822,800

For Wave 1, this funded 47 new facilities, which comprised of 19 new builds and 28 refurbishments. 52 IoT partners received funding for specialist equipment. Wave 2 is comprised of 30 new facility projects, including 7 new builds and 23 refurbishments. 37 partners will receive funding for specialist equipment.

IoT's are funded for participating learners in the same way as further education colleges and higher education institutions.

The number of full-time equivalent staff working at IoT's is a matter for the individual IoT's and their constituent partners. The department does not hold the information requested on how many IoT's have specially built facilities.

Sector news

Higher long-term interest rates and the cost of student loans – IFS report

On Tuesday 9 January, the Institute for Fiscal Studies (IFS) published a report examining how the cost of student loans including financing costs have changed as a result of increases in government borrowing costs over the past two years.

Key findings:

1. The cost of government borrowing as measured by the 15-year gilt yield has risen from 1.2% to 4.0% over the past two years. Relative to expected RPI inflation, this is a 3-percentage point increase. As the interest rate on student loans is now the rate of RPI inflation, this means that the government can expect to pay 1.6 percentage points more in interest on its debt than the interest rate it charges on student loans.
2. This increase in government borrowing costs translates to an increase in the expected cost of student loans including financing costs of more than £10 billion per year.
3. Concerningly, this extra cost is not reflected in either of the government's official measures of the cost of student loans. The ONS measure does not take the cost of government borrowing into account at all. The DfE measure that underlies the so-called RAB charge uses a backward-looking measure of borrowing costs, which does not yet capture the sharp rise in gilt yields over the last two years.

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

Impact of industrial action on university students – Education Committee call for evidence deadline extension

In November, the Education Committee launched an inquiry into the impact of industrial action on university students.

The committee's inquiry is focusing on how students have been impacted by various forms of industrial action in recent years, with particular focus on the marking and assessment boycott.

Since the original press release, the deadline for submitting evidence to the inquiry has been extended from Friday 5 January to Monday 5 February 2024.

You can [read the original press release](#) and the [call for evidence](#).

Evaluation of the higher education short course trial – OfS report

On Wednesday 10 January, the Office for Students (OfS) published a report presenting the findings from the evaluation of the higher education short course trial which was conducted by the Career Research and Advisory Centre (CRAC).

Key findings include:

- All the funded providers developed short courses and 96 were offered to potential students (almost all the courses originally proposed for 2022-23). To date, 17 courses have been launched (with intakes of students) across 10 different providers, out of the 96 offered in total, with demand from students insufficient to launch most of the other courses offered.
- Employer engagement during course development was strong, mostly in advisory and guiding roles rather than 'hands on' development work. Of the 16 employers who provided such feedback, 13 reported that they were satisfied with their experience.
- 240 applications in total were reported (including some to courses that were offered but did not launch due to insufficient cohort size), leading to 125 enrolments across the 17 courses.

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

Franchised higher education providers – Public Accounts Committee inquiry

On Wednesday 10 January, the Public Accounts Committee launched an investigation into student loans issued to those studying at franchised higher education providers.

Higher education providers can create partnerships, or ‘franchises’, with other institutions to provide courses on their behalf. These franchised providers are not required to register with the Office for Students (OfS), which regulates higher education. Lead providers keep responsibility for teaching quality and protecting students’ interests.

Based on a [National Audit Office \(NAO\) study](#) on the controls over loans issued to students at franchised higher education providers, the committee will take evidence from the DfE, OfS and the SLC on subjects including effective oversight of the sector, and fraud detection and prevention.

You can [submit evidence to the committee](#) before Sunday 11 February 2024.

Financial sustainability of the UK Higher Education sector – PwC

On Friday 12 January, PricewaterhouseCoopers (PwC) released a report, commissioned by Universities UK (UUK), examining the financial sustainability of the UK’s Higher Education sector.

The report analyses and runs sensitivities on the 2022/23 regulatory financial forecasts of 84 UUK members across England, Northern Ireland and Scotland who chose to participate by providing their Office for Students and Scottish Funding Council returns.

It highlights that while the UK Higher Education sector is internationally recognised as being one of the best places to study in the world, over the past decade it has been facing increasing financial pressures, given that the fee cap for domestic students has been frozen since 2012 (with a small uplift for providers with a Teaching Excellence Framework award in 2017), despite increasing inflationary cost pressures. The analysis explores this future outlook in further detail and highlights the risks to the sector if these financial conditions persist.

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