



The All-Party Parliamentary **University Group**

University APPG weekly update

9 – 13 October 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

Recess

On Tuesday 19 September, the House of Commons rose for Conference recess. It will return on Monday 16 October.

On Thursday 21 September, the House of Lords rose for Conference recess. It will return on Monday 16 October.

Forthcoming business

Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities – oral questions

On Monday 16 October from 2:30pm, the Secretary of State for the Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities, Rt Hon Michael Gove MP, and his ministerial team will answer oral questions in the House of Commons.

Relevant tabled questions include:

- What assessment his Department has made of the potential impact of the Renters (Reform) Bill on the private student accommodation market. [Julian Sturdy MP, Conservative]

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



Written Questions

N/A

Sector News

Public attitudes to Tuition Fees – Public First polling

On Sunday 8 October, Public First published the findings of its study into public attitudes to tuition fees.

The report – supported by think tank Progressive Britain along with the University of York; University of Manchester; University of Warwick; and Greenwich University polled 8000 adults in England, followed up by eight focus groups across the country, with the aim of working out whether Labour was right to change its position on abolishing fees – and to work out what might come next.

Key findings include:

- Tuition fees are not a popular policy; in the abstract, there is a high level of support for fee abolition. However, people also think that there are other, more pressing priorities for government spending, particularly in times of financial crisis.
- People want university to be more affordable for students in the short term e.g., reintroducing maintenance grants.
- There is a relatively high level of support for employers making a contribution to the higher education funding system.

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

25 years of university access – Sutton Trust report

On Sunday 8 October, the Sutton Trust published a report outlining the persistent access gaps for disadvantaged students over the past 25 years.

The research, using a unique dataset compiled by dataHE for the Sutton Trust, shows that despite the significant expansion of higher education, the progress that has been made in closing access gaps between state and independent school pupils has not translated into significantly more equal representation of young people from less advantaged homes.

Key findings include:

- Russell Group share of disadvantaged and low participation area students has declined since 1997 compared to the rest of the sector.
- Students from London are considerably more likely both to apply and to go on to attend higher education, with the rest of the country falling further behind each year.
- 4,700 state school students and 1,000 students from areas of the country with low historic participation were ‘missing’ from 30 most selective universities each year – these students have the required grades but don’t get places.

Recommendations include:

- Universities should make greater use of contextual offers, taking into account the wider circumstances of applicants when accessing their potential. It is also vital that universities are properly monitored and held to account on their progress in widening participation.
- In the longer-term, access issues at university level cannot be addressed without also tackling the education attainment gap earlier on in a young person’s journey. This should start from the early years onwards, with efforts made at every part of the education system to ensure all young people can fulfil their potential.

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

Labour Party Conference 2023

The Labour Party Conference was held from Sunday 8 October to Wednesday 11 October.

In the leader’s speech, Rt Hon Keir Starmer MP criticised the Prime Minister’s comments on universities, saying, ‘I never thought I would hear a modern Conservative Prime Minister say that 50% of our children going to university was a “false dream”. My Dad felt the disrespect of vocational skills all his life. But the solution is not and never will be levelling-down the working-class aspiration to go to university.’

Technical Excellence Colleges were announced in the leader’s speech. The colleges were described as having ‘stronger links to their local economies...planted firmly in

the ground of young peoples' aspiration.' They are expected to transform existing FE colleges and will have improved links to local universities.

Bridget Phillipson MP, Shadow Secretary of State for Education, did not announce any additional higher education policy during her speech, but she said that Labour would 'change the way students pay for their time at university, so none of our young people, fear the price they'll pay for the choice they'd like.' She announced that Sir David Bell, vice-chancellor of the University of Sunderland, will lead a review of early years provision.

During his speech, the Shadow Secretary of State for the Department for Science, Innovation, and Technology, Peter Kyle MP, announced that Labour would create 10-year R&D budgets allowing 'relationships with industry to build and long-term partnerships to form that leads to investment in new technology and the infrastructure that underpins it.'

He also said that Labour would increase the number of universities spinouts, accepting the recommendations of Lord O'Neill's start-up review. This would include publishing annual data on the performance of university spinout support and a new founder track, giving more flexibility to people who establish spinouts and want to keep a higher stake of the equity.

You can read the full transcript for [Keir Starmer's speech](#), [Bridget Phillipson's speech](#), and [Peter Kyle's speech \(link not published yet\)](#).

OfS free speech event

On Monday 9 October, Professor Arif Ahmed, Director for Freedom of Speech and Academic Freedom at the Office for Students (OfS), made his first speech in the role to students and academics at an event at King's College London.

Prof. Ahmed clarified that his role was non-partisan and said, 'freedom of speech is not the property of one side in any culture war'. He added that the role exists to 'protect and to promote freedom of speech within the law.'

Turning to academic freedom, Prof. Ahmed highlighted data showing academic freedom in the UK had dropped in the last 10 years, now ranking approximately 60th in the world. He used this, and polling from students, to evidence the need for such a role.

You can [read the full transcript of the speech](#).

Grading arrangements in England for 2023/24 admission cycle

On Monday 9 October, Dr Jo Saxton, Chief Regulator at Ofqual, wrote to higher education admission officers with information on the grading arrangements in England for the 2023–24 admissions cycle.

The letter notes that the 2-year transition to pre-pandemic grading is complete and normal grading arrangements will continue for GCSE, AS and A levels in 2024. This means national results in 2024 are expected to be ‘broadly similar’ to those of the summer of 2023.

Grading arrangements for vocational and technical qualifications (VTQs) will continue as normal with awarding organisations adopting the same approach for the academic year 2023 to 2024 as they did previously.

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

Letter to vice-chancellors urging support for Jewish students

On Wednesday 11 October, Rt Hon Gillian Keegan MP, Secretary of State for Education, and Rt Hon Robert Halfon MP, Minister for Skills, Apprenticeships, and Higher Education, wrote to vice chancellors following ‘evidence of a number of student societies that support Palestinians sending out inflammatory messages that show support for Hamas.’

In the letter, the Secretary of State described Hamas as a ‘proscribed terrorist organisation’ and called on universities to deal with any threats to Jewish students, incidents of antisemitic abuse, harassment, or discrimination ‘quickly and appropriately’. She also reminded higher education providers of their duties under Prevent. Universities have also been told to closely watch for invitations to external speakers on the subject who may use their platform for ‘illegal speech.’

It has also been reported in the Telegraph that Rt Hon Robert Jenrick MP, Minister for Immigration, has commissioned officials in the Home Office to consider how they could revoke visas on national security grounds where there is evidence of discrimination or support for Hamas.

Universities UK has published a statement saying, ‘Hamas is a proscribed terrorist organisation and signalling support, including moral support or expressing an opinion or belief that is supportive, is a criminal offence, as outlined in the Terrorism Act (2000). Any student or staff member found to be supporting Hamas will be in breach

of UK law, and universities treat this with the utmost seriousness. Any discrimination or intimidation against students or staff resulting from the attacks in Israel is absolutely unacceptable, and we urge any students facing antisemitism, islamophobia or harassment or discrimination of any kind to inform their university and seek support.’

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

OfS quality assessment visit – UEL

On Thursday 12 October, the Office for Students (OfS) published the findings of its assessment visit focused on the quality of Business and Management course at the University of East London (UEL).

The report sets out the advice of independent academic experts who carried out an assessment for the OfS during the 2022-23 academic year. The assessment included on-site visits, with the teams considering a range of evidence, including from staff and students. At the University of East London, the assessment team found no areas of concern. The OfS will now consider the content of the report.

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