



All-Party Parliamentary University Group

Weekly update

9 – 13 September 2024

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

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Parliamentary business

Education – oral questions

On Monday 9 September, the Secretary of State for Education, Rt Hon Bridget Phillipson MP, and her ministerial colleagues answered oral questions in the House of Commons.

Matt Western MP (Labour) and Dan Aldridge MP (Labour) asked what assessment the Secretary of State had made of the effectiveness of the Office for Students (OfS). The Secretary of State said she had published the report of the independent review of the OfS and appointed the review's leader, Sir David Behan, as the interim chair. Under this new leadership the OfS 'will concentrate on securing the future of universities and putting students first'.

Matt Western pointed to the House of Lords Industry and Regulators Committee report which was highly critical of the OfS and asked how she planned to reset the relationship with the OfS. The Secretary of State said the government 'will support the OfS on refocusing on fewer key priorities, to do what is most important for students and universities, and to do it well'. The new interim chair would 'focus far more on the financial sustainability of the sector, and return universities to being ... engines of growth and opportunity'.

Richard Holden MP (Conservative) asked what assessment the Secretary of State had made of the adequacy of levels of academic freedom in the higher education sector. The Secretary of State affirmed the government's support for academic freedom and said the implementation of further parts of the Higher Education (Freedom of Speech) Act 2023 were paused as the legal framework must be workable. She said the Minister for Skills, Baroness Smith, and officials were speaking with stakeholders to consider all options for protecting academic freedom.

Holden raised concerns around consequences of reversing the Higher Education (Freedom of Speech) Act, such as universities' financial relationships with authoritarian regimes. Tonia Antoniazzi MP (Labour) asked about protections for female academics such as Kathleen Stock. The Secretary of State emphasised her commitment to freedom of expression and said that she wants to ensure 'good, strong, workable legislation' in this area, balancing the needs of minority communities. She said the previous Act 'opened up the potential for hate speech, including Holocaust denial, to be spread on campus'.

Alison Bennett MP (Liberal Democrats) asked what steps DfE was taking to support the mental health and wellbeing of students. Minister for Children and Families, Janet Daby MP, said the OfS was providing universities with £15 million to improve their mental health and wellbeing support. She highlighted Sir Louis Appleby's national review of higher education suicides and praised excellent engagement from the sector.

Helen Hayes MP (Labour) highlighted that the university drop-out rate of care-experienced students was 38% compared to 6% for non-care-experienced young people. She asked what steps were being taken to ensure there is consistent support at every university for care-experienced students to overcome barriers and thrive. The Minister pledged to address the 'persistent gaps when it comes to access and positive outcomes for care-experienced young people'. She said the government had issued guidance to universities and introduced statutory financial support, but acknowledged there is still much more to do.

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

Foreign Direct Investment to the UK – HoL short debate

On Tuesday 10 September, Lord Harrington of Watford (non-affiliated) asked 'what measures [the government] intend to implement to attract more foreign direct investment to the United Kingdom.'

During the debate, Lord Bilimoria (Crossbench) highlighted international students as a strong example of foreign direct investment. He praised the £42 billion contribution that international students make and welcomed the Secretary of State's commitment to retaining the two-year postgraduate work visa.

Lord Livingston of Parkhead (non-affiliated) also noted the contribution of universities stating that investment in universities and international students was a 'win-win' that needed to be further encouraged.

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

Re-joining the Erasmus+ Programme – HoL oral question

On Thursday 12 September, The Earl of Clancarty (Crossbench) asked the oral question in the House of Lords: 'To ask His Majesty's Government whether they intend to negotiate the United Kingdom rejoining the Erasmus+ Programme'.

Minister for Skills, Baroness Smith of Malvern, said the government have not proposed any plans for rejoining Erasmus+, however they were working to reset the relationship with Europe by improving their trade and investment relationship.

The Earl of Clancarty said that rejoining Erasmus+ would help reset the relationship with Europe, as reciprocity and cultural exchange was lacking from the current Turing scheme. Baroness Smith responded that the Earl 'slightly underestimates the impact of the Turing scheme, which has enabled considerable numbers of young people to go overseas to work and study'. She said the government supports the Turing scheme and wishes to develop it further.

Baroness Barran (Conservative) highlighted the three clear principles of the Turing scheme: giving disadvantaged students greater opportunities to access it; give the scheme a truly global focus; ensure value for money for taxpayers. She asked the Minister to reassure the House she agreed with those principles. Baroness Smith agreed with the principles, particularly increasing participation of disadvantaged students, and said the government will 'certainly review the success of this scheme and, in the context of the spending review, think carefully about its future'.

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

The current challenges of higher education funding – HoL debate

On Thursday 12 September, there was a House of Lords debate on the current challenges of higher education funding. This debate was tabled by Lord Krebs (Crossbench).

Lord Krebs opened the debate by drawing attention to the current crisis in higher education funding, pointing to the OfS' assessment that universities could face unplanned closures in the current financial climate. He listed tuition fee erosion; dependence on income from overseas students; and recent changes in visa rules causing a drop in overseas postgraduates as the main factors leading to this funding crisis. He continued to list other reasons universities are struggling financially: aging buildings requiring upgrading to meet net-zero requirements; reduced government grants to universities; research funding not covering full costs of research.

Lord Krebs highlighted a longer-term question the current funding crisis poses: 'is the university sector as a whole fit for purpose?' He suggested a key objective should be to encourage 'greater diversity of purpose among universities', claiming that the current funding arrangements incentivise convergence. He said the diversity of

mission among British universities should be celebrated, encouraged and supported by government policy.

Lord Howarth of Newport (Labour) urged the government to view investment in universities as capital investment in human and intellectual capital. He suggested a rescue package for HE must be drawn up with Universities UK and other stakeholders and suggested a graduate tax would be a fairer alternative to student loans.

Lord Willetts (Conservative) suggested increasing tuition fees could increase funding for teaching in universities and improve the quality of education.

Baroness Garden of Frognal (Liberal Democrats) lamented the impact of Brexit on EU student numbers and the harm of anti-immigration policies to the UK's reputation for welcoming overseas students.

Lord Rees of Ludlow (Crossbench) called for greater institutional variety in the higher education sector, including flexible learning opportunities such as part-time courses and distance learning, and emphasised that vocational education should be given equal status to university degrees.

The Lord Bishop of Sheffield highlighted the civic activities of the University of Sheffield and Sheffield Hallam University. He warned that the support universities provide to local communities were seriously threatened by the financial crisis in higher education.

Baroness Wolf of Dulwich (Crossbench) emphasised the decline in 'direct government top-up funding for high-cost subjects', the global issue of falling per-student funding and called for a reassessment of what universities should be funded for, focusing on the true costs of delivering high-quality education.

Baroness Bennett of Manor Castle (Green) criticised the marketisation of universities, including the rise of insecure staff contracts and closure of arts and humanities courses due to their perceived lack of economic value.

Lord Trees (Crossbench) questioned 'if we need all the universities that exist' and recommended focusing finite resources in an evidence-based way 'to address the strategic needs for our economic and intellectual development'.

Baroness Clark of Calton (Non-Affiliated) praised the economic contribution of universities, using the University of Dundee as an example of how universities can significantly impact local economies, citing UUK's work on wider economic impact.

She called for a more coherent and long-term strategy for the future of higher education and advocated for a Royal Commission to investigate solutions.

Baroness Warwick of Undercliffe (Labour) urged the Secretary of State urgently to talk to Universities UK to 'ensure that her longer-term ambition does not mask the need to stabilise the system now'.

Lord Johnson of Marylebone (Conservative) emphasised the current higher education funding model is the best available but needs to be inflation-proof and tied to quality outcomes. He urged the government to take the current political window to implement progressive fee increases with inflation over the new few years.

Lord Tarassenko (Crossbench) raised concerns about the decline in UK students pursuing PhDs and proposed enhancing entrepreneurship training for PhD students to encourage more spin-out companies and innovation in universities.

Lord Wallace of Saltaire (Liberal Democrat) argued for a gradual evolution towards a more varied higher and further education sector rather than a major restructuring of the current system. He highlighted the problem in maintaining the quality of pay at universities as another funding challenge for universities.

Baroness Barran (Conservative) acknowledged the challenges facing higher education are not isolated and reflect issues facing the entire economy. She called for an approach that focuses on the institutions that are financially fragile, rather than characterising the whole sector that way.

Minister for Skills, Baroness Smith of Malvern, welcomed Members' consistent recognition throughout the debate of the higher education sector as highly valuable to the UK. She emphasised the higher education sector's role as an engine for growth, creating opportunity and supporting local communities. She rejected Lord Trees' suggestion that student or university numbers should be capped.

Baroness Smith acknowledged the 'very worrying financial position in the higher education sector'. She said the government has acted quickly by refocusing the OfS onto the issue of financial sustainability, bringing in an interim chair and reviewing options to 'deliver a more robust higher education sector' that delivers for the economy, universities and students.

Baroness Smith said, in the event of a higher education provider closing, her department would work 'enormously closely' with the OfS, the provider and other government departments to ensure students' best interests were protected.



On tuition fees, Baroness Smith acknowledged the real terms reduction in their value was a challenge for the government to consider, but said this must be balanced with existing pressures on students who are particularly badly affected by the cost of living crisis.

On alternative student finance, Baroness Smith assured that the government will be restarting work on that and bringing together stakeholders to make progress.

On research funding, Baroness Smith said '[w]e are determined to work with the sector to transition to a sustainable research funding model, including by increasing grant cost recovery'.

On international students, Baroness Smith clarified the government's commitment 'to a UK that is outward-looking and welcomes international students, who make a positive impact on our higher education sector, our economy and our society as a whole'. However, she noted there were no current plans to remove the restrictions on international student dependents.

The Minister concluded by emphasising the importance of a stable funding basis and the government's commitment to 'creating a secure future for the sector'.

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



Forthcoming business

Conference recess

The House of Commons and House of Lords rose for conference recess on Thursday 12 September and Friday 13 September respectively. Both houses will return on Monday 7 October.

Written Questions

Higher Education: Freedom of Expression

John Hayes MP (Conservative): To ask the Secretary of State for Education, which external stakeholders she met with ahead of revoking the second commencement regulations made under the Higher Education (Freedom of Speech) Act 2023. [UIN 2727]

Minister for Children and Families, Janet Daby MP: The department engages with a wide range of stakeholders on policy decisions, and the views of external stakeholders from across the higher education (HE) sector continue to inform decision making on the future of the Higher Education (Freedom of Speech) Act 2023.

As set out in the Secretary of State's letter to colleagues and peers, the decision to pause implementation of the Act took account of the views of bodies representing university students and staff and also of Jewish groups, who feel that the Act is disproportionate, burdensome and damaging to the welfare of students and that it would expose HE providers to costly legal action, and that fear of sanction could push providers to overlook the safety and wellbeing of minority groups.

Ministers and officials in the department continue to meet with a full range of stakeholders representing not only HE providers, but also with academics with concerns about constraints on free speech. This engagement will feed into decision making on the future of the Act and the government's longer-term policy on free speech in the HE sector.

Migrant Workers: Vacancies

Paula Barker MP (Labour): To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department, whether her Department plans to incentivise recruitment of (a) domestic graduates from overseas and (b) overseas graduates to fill shortages in the labour market. [UIN 3195; Grouped Question: 3194]

Minister for Migration and Citizenship, Seema Malhotra MP: Overseas students who successfully complete an eligible course in the UK are entitled to remain on a graduate visa for two years after their studies end, or three for PhDs, to work, live and contribute to society.

The Home Office keeps visa fees under review but has no current plans to reduce fees for overseas graduates. The Home Office does not make a profit from fees and any income from fees set above the cost of processing are utilised for the purpose of running the Migration and Borders system. Taking this approach helps to meet the costs of maintaining an effective Migration and Borders system which benefits everyone.

The Government have also been clear that net migration is too high and must be reduced. Employers are encouraged to look to the domestic labour market to nurture and develop the skills they need where they can.

Youth Mobility Scheme: EU Countries

Neil Duncan-Jordan MP (Labour): To ask the Minister for the Cabinet Office, if he will take steps to negotiate a youth mobility scheme with the EU. [UIN 3936]

Minister for the Constitution and European Union Relations, Rt Hon Nick Thomas-Symonds MP: We will work to reset the relationship with our European friends to strengthen ties, secure a broad-based security pact and tackle barriers to trade.

We have no plans for an EU-wide youth mobility scheme and there will be no return to freedom of movement.

Research Collaboration Advice Team

Saqib Bhatti MP (Conservative): To ask the Secretary of State for Science, Innovation and Technology, what his policy is on the future of the Research Collaboration Advice Team. [UIN 4265]

Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for AI and Digital Government, Feryal Clark MP: The Department for Science, Innovation and Technology (DSIT) established the Research Collaboration Advice Team (RCAT) to provide advice to academia on national security risks in international collaborations. RCAT is central to managing research security concerns proportionately, and to supporting growth in research wherever possible.

The threats facing research are evolving and becoming increasingly complex. Therefore, DSIT is leading a review which is assessing the efficacy of all protections currently in place and considering future needs.

The outcomes of the review and future plans for RCAT will be announced in due course.

Education: Fees and Charges

Yuan Yang MP (Labour): To ask the Secretary of State for Education, if she will make an assessment of the potential merits of amending the three years eligibility period for home fees for (a) UK nationals returning from abroad and (b) British Nationals Overseas passport-holders. [UIN 3589]

Minister for Children and Families, Janet Daby MP: To qualify for home fee status in England, a person must have settled status or 'a recognised connection' to the UK, and in the case of persons with settled status, be ordinarily resident in the UK for three years.

UK nationals are settled in the UK once they return from abroad, and therefore qualify for home fee status and student finance once they have resided in the UK for three years prior to the start of their course.

The three year lawful residence rule is a long established feature of the student support system. It applies irrespective of nationality or country of origin, and it applies to all the eligibility categories in the Student Support Regulations with the exception of those with a protection based need. It ensures that the support provided by the taxpayer is targeted at those who have a substantial and recent connection with the UK.

Hong Kong British National Overseas status holders qualify for home fee status and student finance once they have acquired settled status in the UK, which is usually after five years of residence. Most persons who acquire settled status in this way will automatically meet the three year ordinary residence requirement for student finance.

Students: Loans

Andrew Cooper MP (Labour): To ask the Secretary of State for Education, if her Department will make an assessment of the potential merits of introducing measures to support students with the cost of student loans. [UIN 3524]

Minister for Children and Families, Janet Daby MP: UK higher education (HE) creates opportunity, is an engine for growth in our economy and supports local communities.

The department is committed to supporting the aspiration of every person who meets the requirements and wants to go to university. The department is determined that the HE funding system should deliver for our economy, for universities and for students.

The student loan system already supports students. Unlike commercial alternatives, student loans are available to all eligible students, regardless of background or financial history. The student loan system supports eligible students by providing up front tuition fee loans to meet the full costs of tuition. In addition, eligible students qualify for loans to contribute towards students living costs while attending university, with the highest levels of support paid to students from the lowest income families and those eligible for benefits.

Additionally after study, student loan borrowers are protected. Borrowers only make repayments when earning over the relevant student loan repayment threshold. At the end of the loan term, any outstanding loan debt, including interest accrued, will be written off with no detriment to the borrower.

Higher Education: Finance

Andrew Cooper MP (Labour): To ask the Secretary of State for Education, what steps she is taking to support a sustainable funding model for Higher Education. [UIN 3527]

Minister for Children and Families, Janet Daby MP: The government is determined that the higher education (HE) funding system should deliver for our economy, for universities and for students. The department will look carefully at all options and come forward with proposals. The department is committed to supporting the aspiration of every person who meets the requirements and wants to go to university.

The department also recognises the immediate financial strain that some HE providers are under. As such, the department continues to work closely with the Office for Students (OfS), the independent regulator of HE in England, to monitor emerging risks and to ensure there are robust plans in place to mitigate them. The department has already appointed Sir David Behan as interim chair to oversee the important work of refocusing the OfS' role to concentrate on key priorities, including the financial stability of the HE sector.

Horizon Europe

Saqib Bhatti MP (Conservative): To ask the Secretary of State for Science, Innovation and Technology, whether he plans to increase participation in Horizon Europe. [UIN 4852]

Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for AI and Digital Government, Feryal Clark MP: This Government is committed to maximising UK participation in Horizon Europe. The Government is working with key stakeholders on plans to boost UK participation and encourage the international R&D community to collaborate with UK organisations. This includes funding support (pump priming) delivered through the British Academy and Innovate UK, to encourage effective uptake in opportunities. The Government continues to raise awareness of Horizon Europe, including via the roadshow series, most recently hosted in Birmingham and Glasgow. The next event will be in Northern Ireland in October. DSIT also encourages the R&D community to actively engage in their own initiatives aimed at enhancing participation.

Apprentices: Taxation

Gareth Bacon MP (Conservative): To ask the Secretary of State for Education, whether she has had discussions with the Chancellor of the Exchequer on funding the retention of 50% of the contributions of apprenticeship levy-paying companies. [UIN 3144; Grouped Questions: 3139, 3140, 3141, 3142, 3143]

Minister for Children and Families, Janet Daby MP: The government is transforming the Apprenticeship Levy into a new Growth and Skills Levy. The new levy will build on the apprenticeships programme to create opportunities for learners of all ages, give employers of different sizes greater flexibility to address critical skill shortages in their workforces and drive economic growth.

The department is working across government to develop the design of the Growth and Skills Levy and will set out more detail in due course. This will include further information on the role of Skills England in ensuring that levy-funded training delivers value for money and meets the needs of levy paying and non-levy paying businesses.

Sector News

People's Vision for R&D – CaSE research project

On Tuesday 10 September, the Campaign for Science and Engineering (CaSE) published an exploration of the public's views through a public dialogue focused on society's stake in R&D, delivered by the National Centre for Social Research and the National Co-ordinating Centre for Public Engagement.

Key findings include:

- The public's emotional connection to R&D can be strengthened through the opportunity to learn more about, and reflect on, both R&D and involvement in it.
- The approaches and behaviours chosen by those in the R&D system can support an increased sense of public agency and ownership in R&D.

You can [read more](#).

London students' use of AI – London Higher briefing

On Tuesday 10 September, London Higher published a briefing note looking at the use of AI by London students in detail using various data sources.

Key findings include:

- London students use AI noticeably more than the UK average.
- London's uniquely international student body drives up London's averages for AI use.
- Commuter students, students with jobs and students with caring responsibilities are more likely to use AI in their studies.

You can [read the full briefing note](#).

Education: the ideas – UK 2040 Options report

On Tuesday 10 September, UK 2040 Options, a policy project led by Nesta, published a report of the most interesting, innovative policy ideas for education that have emerged during their research process.

Recommendations include:

- **Revive youth apprenticeships:** targeting apprenticeships at young people, and offering a different approach for adults upskilling and reskilling.
- **Increase the supply and demand of sub-degree qualifications:** introducing exit qualifications after each year of university study.

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

Education at a glance 2024 – OECD report

On Tuesday 10 September, the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) released a report into the state of education around the world, focusing on equity in education.

The report describes the output of educational institutions; the impact of learning across countries; access, participation and progression in education; the financial resources invested in education; and teachers, the learning environment and the organisation of schools.

The Secretary of State for Education, Rt Hon Bridget Phillipson MP, spoke at the report launch event.

You can [read the full report](#) and a [transcript of the Secretary of State's speech](#)

Research Security – Russell Group briefing

On Tuesday 10 September, the Russell Group published a briefing on research security, including how universities protect their R&D from threats ranging from cyber-attacks aimed at stealing valuable IP to organisations obscuring links with overseas militaries when proposing joint research collaborations.

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

Student smishing scams on the rise – SLC article

On Tuesday 10 September, the Student Loans Company (SLC) issued advice reminding students to be vigilant of smishing scams.

Smishing, which is fraud involving text messages, is currently the most popular form of scam, with students usually being asked to click a link to complete a task – for example verifying bank details or confirming their personal information, providing an opportunity for a payment to be diverted to a scammer’s bank account.

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

State of the Nation 2024: Local to National, Mapping Opportunities for All – Social Mobility Commission report

On Wednesday 11 September, the Social Mobility Commission published its annual report on the state of social mobility in the UK.

Key findings include:

- There appears to be a closing of the socio-economic background (SEB) gap in university enrolment between 2014 and 2022.
- Young people with low qualifications may have closed the earnings gap with their more qualified peers.

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

Stronger Together: Challenges of devolved regional economic development – HEPI report

On Thursday 12 September, the Higher Education Policy Institute (HEPI) published a report by the Director of the Arc Universities Group, considering the role that groups of universities might play in economic growth, devolution and local empowerment.

The report has three recommendations:

1. The new Government, in its formulation of a new industrial strategy, should plan for at least five years and look towards an impact over 50 years, promoting the strength in applied R&D and innovation alongside local and

regional capabilities. Due prominence should be given to the ingenuity and strength of the university sector, using every lever and mechanism (fiscal incentives, enterprise zones, matched funding, alignment of funding agencies and the like) to encourage greater collaboration and partnership.

2. University leadership should embrace the full impact they can have on other regional partners through their convening power both within region and internationally, performing a prominent and vocal role in trade missions and acting as champions.
3. Universities should build much deeper linkages with other regional partners, with a particular effort towards engagement with those who hold the greatest devolved powers, such as some of the new mayors.

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

The Graduate Gap: Up to £60,000 gap between university costs and parents' savings – Aviva research

On Thursday 12 September, Aviva published research into parents' perceptions of the cost of university.

Key findings include:

- Parents think it will cost them on average almost £40,000 to support their child through university, despite having only put aside £11,000 in savings.
- The true cost of university is up to £70,000 however, representing a £60,000 gap between actual costs and savings.
- Three in four parents (77%) are worried about the costs of their child attending university, with 90% indicating their child will be dependent on them for financial support.
- A quarter of parents (27%) expect to pay for some or all their child's costs, including tuition fees, accommodation and living expenses.
- Yet 40% of parents say they do not know what tuition fees, accommodation and living expenses will individually amount to.

You can [read more](#).

'Martyn's Law' introduced to Parliament to better protect the public from terrorism – Home Office press release

On Thursday 12 September, the Home Office announced new laws requiring many public venues to improve preparedness against attacks and bring in measures to help keep people safe.

Under the changes, a new duty will be placed on those responsible for premises and public events, requiring them to take appropriate action to strengthen public safety, with requirements reflecting the size of the venue and the activity taking place.

Home Secretary, Rt Hon Yvette Cooper MP, said:

Martyn's Law has been a long time coming.

I want to pay tribute to Figen Murray and her campaign team who have tirelessly worked to make this happen.

This legislation will strengthen public safety, help protect staff and the public from terrorism and ensure we learn the lessons from the terrible Manchester Arena attack and the inquiry that followed. It is important we now take this forward through Parliament in Martyn's memory and to help keep people safe.

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

Monthly entry clearance visa applications – Home Office statistics

On Thursday 12 September, the Home Office published statistics on visa applications for people coming to the UK for work and study.

The new statistics show that applications from main Sponsored study visa applicants in January to August 2024 (278,700) were 17% lower than January to August 2023.

You can [explore the data](#).