

# HE Policy Update

w/e 2 October 2020

We're in October already! This week has been busy in Parliament, and we had some Ministerial engagement too. Boris unveiled a skills pledge and Gavin Williamson made a statement regarding students returning to universities (and was subsequently slammed for inaccuracies). And angry parents have taken issue that their children might be prevented from returning home from university for Christmas if they are in isolation or caught in local lockdowns.

## BU welcomes the Minister for Universities

Michelle Donelan MP paid a short virtual visit to BU this week. You can [read more here](#). It is good that the Minister is making time to make these visits and the conversation was wide ranging and interesting. Thanks to all involved, especially as these things are always short notice and subject to last-minute change.

## Comprehensive Spending Review – and all its ramifications

No one knows quite what form (or if) the comprehensive spending review (CSR) will take. However, sector organisations continue to lobby the Government with their wish lists to be included within the CSR. The Association of Colleges have [published](#) their 37 pager much of which aligns with recent Government ambitions on skills spending, higher technical education, apprenticeships, levelling up and addressing disadvantage. Specifically they call for higher rates of FE funding, expanding provision to accommodate the 2024/25 young population surge (plus IT infrastructure investment), a 16+ pupil premium, and the favourite old chestnut – reducing oversight, bureaucracy and compliance costs.

The Institute for Fiscal Studies published [Spending Review 2020: COVID-19, Brexit and beyond](#). Pages 3-5 summarise the key findings succinctly and ultimately the report advises the Chancellor not to *plough ahead with a full Spending Review*. It concludes:

- *Even if Mr Sunak makes the sensible decision to set only one year of spending plans, the process will be fraught with difficulty, with many delicate trade-offs. Perhaps the most important question is the extent to which the extraordinary funding increases provided in response to COVID-19 need to continue into future years.*
- *[With Covid likely to] swallow up much of the increase in funding pencilled in between now and 2023–24. Whatever is left would likely be allocated to priority areas such as the NHS, schools, the police or the 'levelling-up' agenda. The Chancellor has rowed back from the spending envelope he committed to in March, but his emphasis on the need for 'tough choices' suggests that it could become less, not more, generous. Other public services could well be facing a further bout of austerity*

No one is expecting good news. And the Government's intentions following the Augar report are expected to be laid out as part of the CSR. Even HEPI warn of impending doom when they consider Augar in the context of recent events [below](#).

## Research

Chair of the Science and Technology Committee Greg Clark has written to the minister for Science, Amanda Solloway, relating to research and development investment. The letter is [available here](#). He asked for:

- Further detail for example on the terms of support for higher education institutions announced by the Government.
- The Government's plans to address research funding & cross subsidisation in the long-term to ensure that university research funding is sustainable.
- Further details on the R&D roadmap

**Match funding change:** On Thursday the Government suspended the 50:50 matched funding requirement for industrial research applications to the Aerospace Technology Institute programme. This is to mitigate the effects of Covid on the industry.

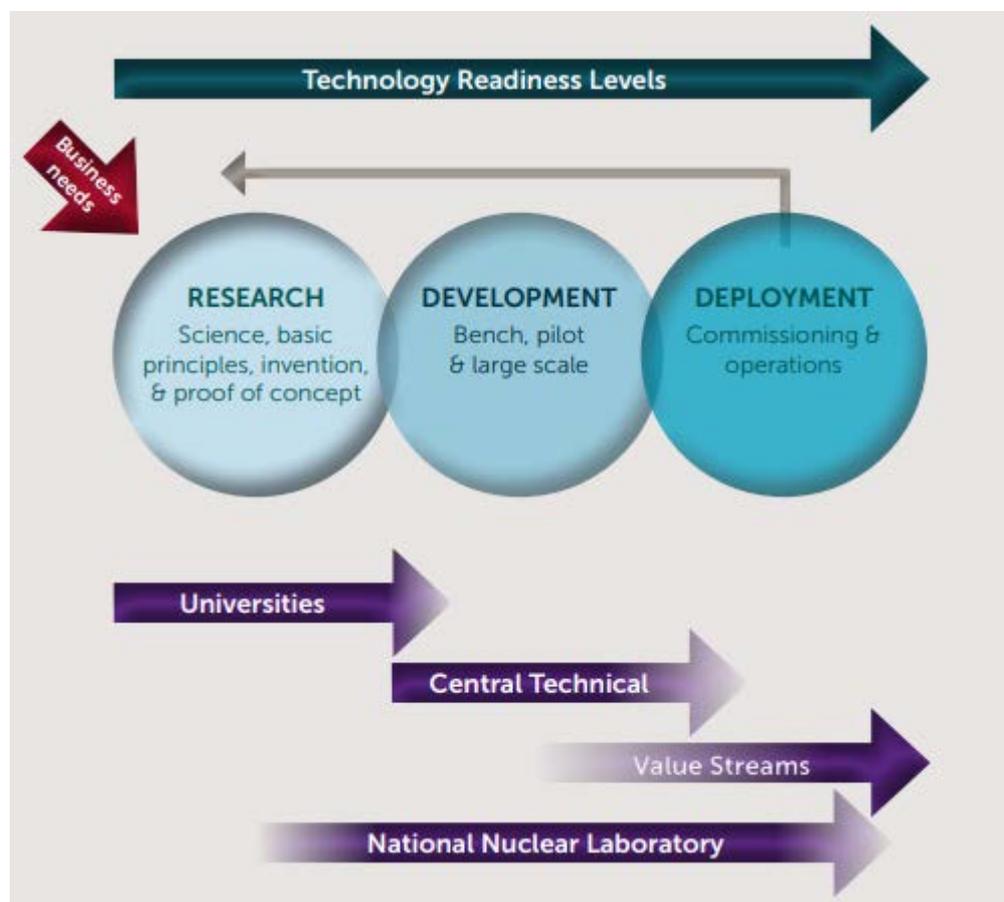
### Research parliamentary questions

- When the [Life Sciences Investment Programme](#) will launch and whether the comprehensive spending review will increase the Programme's budget. (Answer: within the year, no further funds are expected on top of the £200 million already committed.)
- [Steps to support R&D](#) – implementing the roadmap; investing £236 million through strength in places fund, innovation expert group and place advisory group being set up; reducing bureaucracy; plans to leverage and increase foreign direct investment.
- Prioritising the [development and uptake of human-relevant new approach methodologies in the R&D road map; plus reducing the use of animal research](#)
- Supporting [high tech](#) industry

A selection of Wonkhe blogs relevant to research interests:

- Using the CSR to rethink research funding: [Funding the full cost of research would allow universities to renew their public mission](#)
- If the UK is to be a science super power, [policymakers must support public and non-profit research organisations as well as universities](#).
- Who is [looking after and working for the PhD students?](#)

Off topic – but interesting – Sellafield have released a report in the name of **sharing the importance of science**. It highlights how R&D has transformed their organisation & safety. Short press release [here](#), report [here](#).



## THE SCIENCE PROGRAMME

- Maintains a steady flow of new ideas through to development
- Provides highly educated post graduates with a good understanding of the nuclear industry
- Is an innovative and unconstrained workspace
- Is the first step in implementing any commercial off-the-shelf (COTS) or modified off-the-shelf (MOTS) products
- Attracts significant leverage from multiple sources
- Gains access to expertise from the wider scientific community



## PM's Lifetime Skills Guarantee

Boris announced the Lifetime Skills Guarantee scheme (full speech [here](#), press release with stakeholder support [here](#)). Main points:

- The Lifetime Skills Guarantee is a system where every student will have a flexible lifelong loan entitlement to four years of post-18 education. Boris stated this will promote real choice - *at the moment many young people feel they have to go for the degree option. They feel they have only one chance to study, and to borrow. They might as well go for the maximum, and get a degree.* It launches April 2021 in England and is paid for through the National Skills Fund.
- Adults without an A-Level or equivalent (a level 3) will be offered a free, fully funded college course, to learn skills (those valuable to employers) and *the opportunity to study at a time and location that suits them.* The list of courses is expected to be released shortly.
- The funding model will change with more flexibility to study in bursts (so an individual can spread it across their life period) and easy access to loans for higher technical as well as degree programmes. [Politico](#) state there will be a *push to massively expand vocational courses. The government will provide finance for shorter-term studies in areas such as coding to help train workers for jobs of the future, rather than the typical three or four year university studies.*
- Alongside studying in segments students should be able to build up credits and transfer between different providers both colleges and universities. This in itself is expected to enable more part time study.
- Boris pledged to:
  - invest in skills & FE (£1.5 billion for college capital works)
  - expand apprenticeships (as mentioned above) and make them more portable to move from company to company
  - expand digital boot camps (£8 million, programmes in four new locations)
  - from 2021 boot camps will also be available for construction and engineering – supporting the national Industrial Strategy

- 62 additional courses will be added to the free online Skills Toolkit
- end the *pointless, nonsensical gulf... between the so-called academic and the so-called practical varieties of education... now is the time to end this bogus distinction between FE and HE.* (Not all Conservatives agree with this – see this [blog](#) in Conservative Home.)

Boris also said:

- *The post-18 educational system is not working in such a way as to endow people with those skills...lab technicians, skilled construction workers, skilled mechanics, skilled engineers, and we are short of hundreds of thousands of IT experts*
- *...And look I don't for a second want to blame our universities. I love our universities, and it is one of this country's great achievements massively to have expanded higher education.*
- *But we also need to recognise that a significant and growing minority of young people leave university and work in a non-graduate job, and end up wondering whether they did the right thing.*
- *Was it sensible to rack up that debt on that degree? Were they ever given the choice to look at the more practical options, the courses – just as stimulating - that lead more directly to well-paid jobs? We seem on the one hand to have too few of the right skills for the jobs our economy creates, and on the other hand too many graduates with degrees which don't get them the jobs that they want.*

Kate Green MP, Labour's Shadow Education Secretary, [commented](#): *A week ago Labour called for a National Retraining Strategy fit for the crisis Britain faces, but what the government proposes is simply a mix of reheated old policies and funding that won't be available until April. By then many workers could have been out of work for nearly a year, and the Tories still think that they will need to take out loans to get the training they will need to get back in work. These measures will not reverse the devastating impact of a decade of cuts, and will not give workers the skills and support they need in the months ahead.*

**Association of Colleges** [responded](#) to the PM's speech:

- *We believe that colleges should play a bigger part in a more collaborative education and skills system that allows people to train and retrain throughout their lives. Today's speech is a strong sign that this thinking will form much of the foundation for the upcoming FE white paper and develop a system that works for all adults and not just those fortunate enough to go to university.*
- *A new entitlement to a fully-funded Level 3 qualification and more flexibility built into L4 and L5 are important steps forward as the government begins to implement the Augar Review. There is a lot more to do to stimulate demand from adults and employers and to support colleges to have the capacity to meet needs.*
- *We must get this right to ensure our education and skills system is fit for purpose – I hope the Prime Minister's words are just the beginning on the road to a fairer and more accessible post-16 system for everyone who needs it.*

**The Institute of Economic Affairs** is less convinced:

- *...The speech lacks specifics.*
- *The Prime Minister has made a time-honoured distinction between 'academic' and 'practical' skills, although there is little here to explain how exactly this shift will occur. Successive governments have made the same noises.*
- *Extra funding for people without A-levels may be sensible, but it is not clear that there will be a massive demand for lower-level qualifications from either students or employers.*
- *The offer of more flexible support for higher education and spreading study over longer periods is welcome in principle, but again there is little to suggest how this will work in practice. There is no evidence of a more fundamental change, such as linking a university's funding to the success of its graduates, which might incentivise new forms of provision.*
- *This speech is worthy, but it amounts to neither a convincing response to rising unemployment nor to a radical change in adult education.*

## Skills Productivity Appointment

With the FE sector and skills focus holding significant traction within Government a new appointment is significant. Stephen van Rooyen will head up the Skills and Productivity Board. His Chairmanship will have an influential role in driving forward the Government's FE reform programme. The Board is responsible for advising on the skills that employers need for the future and that will help grow our economy post C-19, alongside how to ensure the courses and qualifications are high-quality. Stephen's background is [here](#), including his support for apprenticeships.

Stephen stated: *The work of the SPB will be carried out by a panel of five leading skills and labour market economists, supported by Department for Education officials. The panel will undertake independent research and analysis in response to questions set out by the Secretary of State and Chair. Applications for panel members closed earlier this month and appointments will be made in due course.*

## Education Committee session

Following Boris' pledge the Education Committee [session](#) focussed on adult learning schemes and mechanisms questioning Gillian Keegan Parliamentary Under Secretary of State for Apprenticeships and Skills. Direct HE relevant content was limited to whether there would be any maintenance grant support for more disadvantaged students. Keegan replied that there were already discretionary funds to support disadvantaged students, or those facing additional barriers to learning.

Robert Halfon, Chair of the Education Committee pointed out there was nothing on community learning in Boris' announcements. Keegan responded that the announcement was focused on economic outcomes for individuals, and, that the focus is on learners and helping them access more modular and flexible training. While this isn't about HE it reveals the depth of emphasis the Government is placing on flexible learning at all levels and that adult and skills budgets aren't altruistic - just like Government intent for HE - support focuses on the key skills needs for the country to support economic prosperity. So no fluffiness on the route to levelling up!

Keegan also showed interest in the concept of a skills tax credit to incentivise employers to provide training to low skilled employees, however, she conceded it hadn't worked well in other countries.

On the social care sector the Government intend to professionalise this employment area initially through T-Levels and apprenticeships. Keegan felt this might be a route to higher pay in the sector.

## Lifetime Skills Guarantee and Post-16 Education

On Thursday Gavin Williamson, Education Secretary, made another oral statement, this time on the Lifetime Skills Guarantee and Post-16 Education. There was much overlap with and reiteration of Boris' Skills Guarantee speech with a little additional detail.

Here are the key points in brief:

- A White Paper will be published later this year on how to re-balance further and higher education.
- FE has been overlooked for decades resulting in lost opportunities and businesses with unfulfilled skills gaps.
- Everyone must have the opportunity to upskill and retrain – both young people who do not want to attend university and those who are forced to retrain following redundancy.
- Linking with Boris' skills pledge speech from Tuesday he called for closer alignment of FE and HE and re-announced the lifetime skills guarantee and greater flexibility in the educational system for people of all ages. There will be a consultation on the flexibility and transferability of credits during 2021 and the Government will legislate as needed in this Parliamentary session.
- Williamson stated that these announcements will support the country's recovery from Covid, however, they are also a continuation of the commitment to levelling-up. He reminded that the

skills guaranteed means adults without A levels can re-train. He also reiterated that there would be funding for alternatives to degrees e.g. loans for higher technical education.

- The apprenticeships programme will be expanded and barriers that employers face in taking on apprentices addressed. This will include allowing larger businesses to transfer their unused levy to fund smaller employers and ensuring redundant apprentices have the opportunity to continue their education.
- T-levels (equivalent to 3 a-levels) have now commenced (in autumn 2020).
- Williamson also announced funding of £111 million for the expansion of traineeships, £32 million for recruiting careers advisers, and £17 million for work academies in England. He restated previous funding commitments of £170 million which intends to establish 12 Institutes of Technology (IoT), with £120 million following on to develop a further 8 IoTs. The funding competition for the next 8 IoTs will open shortly.

### Skills Gaps

Incidentally The Migration Advisory Committee [published](#) a review of the shortage occupation list this week. The key reasons given for wanting to be on the SOL were:

- A lack of a suitably skilled workforce in the UK
- An unwillingness of the UK workforce to consider certain roles due to: physical demands; unsocial hours; an unwillingness to relocate; or seasonality of these roles;
- That training alone is not a viable solution due to the time it takes and lack of long term certainty.

The Committee also [warned Ministers](#) to urgently address low pay in the social care sector in order to avoid a staffing crisis in January.

### Augar Review

Having detailed the rise and Government zeal for FE and technical skills alongside the announced flexibility in funding and the comprehensive spending review speculation we'd be remiss if we didn't mention Augar, particularly the fees aspect. Fortunately HEPI covers the interpretation of Augar within the recent context in a discursive manner [here](#). The blog is titled: [As the Government begins implementing the more popular elements of the Augar report, we shouldn't forget the rest of it \(including what it said on fees\)...](#)

Excerpts:

- *...no one could have predicted how much change would happen between then and now. When the Augar report was published, Philip Augar said it was a take-it-or-leave-it package. In other words, he said it was a carefully calibrated model, not a pick-and-mix. I suspect the goal was to disincentivise policymakers from banking any proposed savings and then rejecting the counterbalancing proposed new spending.*
- *after the COVID crisis began...[Augar]... writing in [the Financial Times](#) that his most high-profile recommendation – reducing the headline full-time undergraduate fee cap from £9,250 to £7,500 – should perhaps be junked while others should still be implemented.*
- *Now it has been [confirmed by the Prime Minister](#) that some of those other recommendations are indeed now to be implemented. For example, the Augar report's first two recommendations were for 'a single lifelong learning loan allowance' and access to student finance 'for modules of credit', and these ideas have now been accepted. The devil will be in the detail...*
- *But such tweaks cost money and, now that the Treasury is beginning to finalise its plans for the [Spending Review](#), it is time to focus again on that most famous of all of the Augar report's recommendations, the one on fees... In the COVID crisis, we may all have paid too little attention to the fact that the actual proposal for a lower fee cap remains on the table... There will be voices urging the Treasury in the run up to the Spending Review to cut spending on universities (either to reduce*

*borrowing or to spend more on other priorities, including other educational priorities)... Cutting fees could play well in the culture war. It would be at one with some of the negative coverage of universities in recent times. And universities are typically in larger towns and cities that are less likely to be represented by a Conservative MP... But cutting the income of universities now is an objectively terrible idea... it nonetheless seems clear that severe cuts to the main income stream for universities in the midst of a crisis, while failing to replace the lost income, would make [the Institute for Fiscal Studies's dire warnings](#) about the number of universities that could go bust during the pandemic much more likely to come true.*

## Student loans

In a week where there has been a constant focus speculating on the CSR and with the Government making announcements about flexibility in student loans and new spending pledges fresh attention has fallen on the student loan outlay figures which were published at the end of last week.

The Government changed the way it accounts for certain things, including the student loan, in the last Parliament and we now have the RAB – the Resource Accounting and Budgeting charge which predicts the proportion of loans that have been paid out to students that are expected to never be repaid back into the Treasury.

The RAB has now hit a whopping 53%, yet the DfE target for unpaid loans is much lower at 36%. Uncomfortable figures particularly with the Government's claims that not enough students are accessing graduate level jobs at the end of their degree and that too many young people are choosing to go to university over other routes. And all within the landscape of unprecedented Government borrowing to fund the pandemic and economic needs (and dare I mention it – Brexit). In addition, there is also the forthcoming population boom to consider with 2030 expected to require a significant increase in availability of provision – all of which would have to be paid for. However, the Government may be hoping to redirect some of this boom demand into more technical or hop on - hop off higher level provision.

A current forecast suggests the Government will have a £20 billion outlay by 2024-25 for student loans.

## The great annual migration

Gavin Williamson made a [statement](#) and responded to questions regarding students returning to universities. Below follows a summary of the main points in the full statement and questions session. For a shorter version you can read the press release which just covers Williamson's statement [here](#).

- **Students will be able to return home for Christmas** should they wish to. The Government will work with universities to ensure this can occur safely. DfE Guidance will follow however it may include ceasing face-to-face contact two weeks early to provide time for students to self-isolate before returning home. Universities must ensure students who wish to remain within their university accommodation over the Christmas period are safe and well looked after. However, Williamson didn't directly address a later question by Mark Harper MP who asked for reassurance students would *not be trapped in their university accommodation for the period of self-isolation*. *[Many have pointed out that this ignores the fact that many students go home (or elsewhere) much more regularly than this...]*
- Labour (Yvette Cooper MP) asked if the Government was proposing all students self-isolate at the end of term to return home and pressed for **mass testing** instead. Williamson stated that different cases, local circumstances and term end dates mean they envisage the self-isolation will *cover only a very small number of universities*. Later Hilary Benn pressed Williamson on whether students may go home to isolate again. He responded: *We will be setting out clear guidance in terms of students and making sure that that fits within the broader guidance right across the country that is available for the wider population as well.*

- **Blended learning** should continue with face-to-face contact where possible. Teaching should not be solely online. The 11 September tiered approach guidance balancing learning requirements against the C-19 risk and local restrictions continues to apply.
- **Students who isolate must be properly cared for** and the university should ensure they can access food, medical and cleaning supplies. Confirmed that universities are doing this. Students living outside of the campus or university housing should also have access to advice and support. Williamson was challenged during the questions by Sir Edward Leigh who was opposed to an enforced whole halls of residence lockdown. Williamson stated: *Students follow the same rules as those in society and: We always want to ensure that there is a sensible and proportionate response to ensure that students are able to go about their business and continue their learning online and, importantly, face to face.*
- Universities need to provide **additional mental health** and practical support to students during these difficult times, particularly those new starters. The Minister stated he was pleased with universities efforts in this regard - *Many universities have bolstered existing mental health services and offer alternatives to face-to-face consultations. Once again, I would like to thank staff at universities and colleges who have responded so quickly and creatively to the need to transform those essential services.*
- Later Damian Hinds MP planted a friendly question asking Williamson to talk about the *great work done by universities and the likes of Student Minds* – the support available and how it is being stepped up. Williamson responded: *An amazing amount of work is done by every single university, but there has also been a recognition by the Office for Students that there may be gaps. That is why the Office for Students has stepped in to ensure that where students find that there is not that type of provision, something is provided for them, so that no student is in a position of not being supported. It is incredibly important that all students understand that support is available to them for them to be able to enjoy their time at university and succeed in their studies.*
- Acknowledged Universities hard work to make **reopening as safe as possible**. Feels both universities and students have followed the guidance. Students only subject to the same restrictions as the community in that area. Stated C-19 cases occurring in universities is inevitable, just as it is in the wider community, however, he believes **universities are well prepared to handle outbreaks as they arise**. Expressed that he was impressed with the way universities have worked with local authorities and local public health teams to safeguard students and staff.
- The Department for Health and Social Care are working to make sure **testing capacity** is sufficient and appropriate for universities. They continue to make more tests available, more local testing sites and more processing laboratories. However, demand outstrips supply so staff and students should only request a test if they have symptoms or are advised to by an official.
- *Universities are also able to call on £256 million provided by the Government for hardship funding for students who have to isolate.* Williamson also mentioned this money later in relation to chi Onwurah MP's question which stated *the only financial support the sector has received is to address the shortfall in scientific research funding, which is critical but does not have an impact on the learning experience.* [The £256 million isn't additional or new money and actually it was decreased in May from its original allocation so this has been criticised as misleading – see below]
- *The Government have taken a conscious decision to prioritise education...We will never be in a position where we can eliminate all risk, but we will not condemn a generation of young people by asking them to put their lives on hold for months or years ahead. We believe that universities are very well prepared to handle any outbreaks as they arise.*

Later in the discussion he stated that: *We must not forget, however, that hundreds of thousands – almost a million – students have safely returned to university over the last few weeks. They will start their studies and benefit from a brilliant, world-class university education.*

During the questions the Government was critiqued for:

- **Not doing things sooner** - *why did it take the Secretary of State and the Health Secretary until last Wednesday to write to local directors of public health about the return of university students?* (Kate Green). Answer: they were updating from the last advice SAGE produced, acting on the issues and suggestions made by SAGE.
- **Test & trace ineffective** - self-isolating students live in particularly difficult circumstances (e.g. room size, no family support, living with a group that are practically strangers). (Kate Green). Later others used the *shambolic privatised test and trace system* to press for students to have access to tests to travel home safely (Tanmanjeet Singh Dhesi).
- **Remote learning** – students without digital access or a device; and additional support for students with SEN. This is where Williamson got himself in hot water. He stated: *The hon. Lady raises an important point about digital access. I am sorry that she missed the announcement that we have made £100 million available for universities to use to ensure that youngsters have digital access, including students from the most deprived backgrounds, who would perhaps not be in a position to access courses. It is vital that if we are in a situation where people will have blended learning, all students are able to access it. We are taking seriously some of the challenges that all students and universities will face, which is why we have made £256 million available to make sure that where students are facing real hardship, universities can access funding to help them.* [However, the £100m for digital access was for schools, so he has been criticised for that too as well as the £256m claim]
- Lilian Greenwood MP picked up on **disabled students accessing equipment and support** again. Williamson stated it was the universities responsibility: *under equalities legislation there is a duty on universities to ensure that there is proper and fair provision for all students. That is what we would expect from all universities.* He also mentioned the £100m fund again (which is for schools).
- Williamson side stepped and didn't respond directly to Carol Monaghan's call to address the **fee-paying** structure of (English) higher education by reducing fees and increasing Government funding to universities. Williamson stated: *I thank the hon. Lady for putting forward policy suggestions for future Conservative party manifestos. We want to ensure that universities are properly funded, so that they are able to have world-class facilities that can beat other universities anywhere in the world.* Laura Trott MP also addressed **fees** - *in some cases students will be paying full fees for what are now only online courses* – and she called on the Minister to advise and ask the OfS to confirm that university bonuses not be paid unless fees were lowered. Williamson stated: *I will be asking the Office for Students to look at this and give very strong and clear steers on this matter to ensure that no bonuses are going out as a result of this crisis.* [Incidentally if you can stomach more on the fee refund debate Wonkhe have an excellent article debating the latest [here](#). ]
- Dame Cheryl Gillan MP called on Williamson to champion **two-year degree courses**. Williamson sorted the accelerated offer and reiterated there were other routes apart from university, including apprenticeships.
- And on **white working class boys** (following a question from Robert Halfon, Chair Education Select Committee) Williamson stated: *On why not enough youngsters on free school meals or white working-class boys are going to university, that is a real issue. We need to see change. We need to look at different options to ensure that those youngsters realise that they can succeed as well at university as all the other youngsters who choose to go. We will ensure that we deliver it as we level up across the country over the coming years.*
- The session concluded with Williamson confirming if Covid student numbers rose substantially the Government would review its position - *We will constantly work with the sector very closely to ensure that we adapt and support it if the pandemic means that we have to make changes.*

Labour issued a press release after the statement: [Williamson's blunders in the chamber further evidence serial incompetence](#). It covers the £100 million digital mistake and a second – Williamson said: *the*

"Student Loans Company also offers a system whereby extra maintenance support can be made available through individual assessment." Labour have critiqued this stating *Students can change their maintenance loan applications if there is a change in their household income, but this does not allow the Student Loans Company to provide additional maintenance support simply because of increased needs for students.* Labour raised these aspects as a [point of order](#) and called for the record to be corrected. It was refused but the Deputy Speaker acknowledged that the opposition had successfully made the point on the record.

Wonkhe dissected the statement mistakes too and added:

- That Williamson *encouraged the Office for Students to forbid the payment of bonuses to university staff - the Office for Students does not directly have this power.*
- They also clarified what we mentioned above on the £256million boost to student hardship funds. Wonkhe state: *These already existing funds were initially allocated to universities to support students from disadvantaged backgrounds as "[student premium](#)" funding, and were actually cut from £277m last year by Gavin Williamson [back in May](#).*

## NSS to LEO

With the launch of the NSS review Emma Hardy, Shadow HE Minister, [wrote](#) for Research Professional to voice concerns on alternative judgements of university quality:

- *Ditching the NSS with no replacement would put greater emphasis on Longitudinal Education Outcomes data, which only tell us how much graduates earn. This appears to fit with this government's notion of 'value for money' and 'value to the taxpayer', and this is no doubt how it will be presented. However, what it can't be said to measure is 'value to the country' or even 'value to the economy'.*
- *Covid-19 has underlined the importance of key workers and there are many graduate jobs, including those of nurses and health workers, that do not carry big salaries. LEO data may be able to tell us which graduates go into the best-paid employment but, because wage levels are geographically influenced, they discriminate against universities in deprived areas that support local economies by training the graduates those economies need.*
- *Worse, the data discriminate against higher education institutions that recruit more students from disadvantaged backgrounds, because a significant determiner of postgraduate income is still students' socioeconomic background before they attend university. As the main measure for judging universities, LEO data can only embed inequalities—the exact opposite of 'levelling up'.*

Her article goes on to suggest that this definition of value *looks like a proxy for an attack on the numbers going to university.* And after noting past cuts to technical education Emma states: *the government has tried to blame the crisis in further education on the success of our universities. Universities should not allow this to continue unchecked...*

## And the implications of the virus....

It's unlikely that you've managed to escape the tug and thrust of student Covid news over the last week. We'll cover it here as speedily and painlessly as we can.

**Mass testing** continues to be central to the Opposition's calls. Earlier in the week Kate Green (Labour's Education Secretary) pressurised the Government on [Sunday's BBC Breakfast](#) calling for a commitment to test every HE student before they return home at the end of term. She also stated we should pause the student migration now until an "*effective, efficient testing system*" is put in place.

Next in the saga was Amanda Milling MP, Co-Chair of the Conservative Party, who stated: *There are no plans to keep students at university over Christmas and Labour is deliberately creating unnecessary stress for young people to score political points.*

Finally Williamson put us out of our misery on Tuesday when his [speech](#) confirmed the Government and universities would work together to save Christmas allowing students who wish to, to return home. The details surrounding isolation and plans for those with active Covid symptoms are to follow

in DfE guidance. And in Thursday's Covid briefing the PM paid tribute to students who were *studying in these unprecedented times*.

Kate Green also wrote a [letter](#) to Gavin Williamson which included students access to **remote learning**. She stated:

*[On remote learning]...To do this, they must also have access to the right equipment, connectivity and environment. The "digital divide" has been raised with your department on numerous occasions, including in a recent report from the Office for Students which showed its impact on students from disadvantaged backgrounds. What urgent steps are you taking to bridge the digital divide...?*

*Leaving home to go to University should be a momentous and exciting step for young people and their families. It is deeply distressing that so many will now not get the university experience they deserve, and face the appalling prospect of being locked in their rooms with no chance to make new friends.*

*Universities have done all they can to prepare for students' safe return to campus, but the government has failed to play its part. You let young people down with the exam fiasco over the summer, and now many of those same students are being let down again. These young people deserve better than your incompetence.*

Previously she has stated that students should have the choice to remain in the family home:

*We do think it is important that students have a choice. If they feel they are going to be safer at home then they should be able to stay at home and conduct their learning remotely.*

**OfS Edicts:** The OfS have [commented](#) on the student situation as they return to university and expressing their expectations for the HE sector to meet:

- *Universities have worked hard to make campuses safe, and have developed programmes that mix face-to-face and online learning. However, our guidance says that is essential that they provide students with as much clarity as possible on what they can expect. Where the situation changes universities should provide regular information updates.*
- *Where students need to go into isolation, universities have to be clear about how courses will continue to operate in these circumstances and what welfare, resources and support are available. Universities should provide information about how testing can be accessed where it is expected by the health authorities and ensure that such students can access food and other essential provisions. We will be following up with individual universities and colleges where we have concerns about the arrangements they are making for teaching and academic support.*
- *Students have a right to good quality higher education – whether that is taught online, in-person or a mixture of the two. Where they feel this is not happening they can raise concerns with their university, escalating complaints to the Office of the Independent Adjudicator where a resolution cannot be found. They can also inform the OfS, and we can and will investigate if we believe that universities have not taken all reasonable steps to protect standards or where quality is slipping for groups of students.*

Finally, here is a small selection of this week's coverage on students & Covid.

**Scottish Pact:** Scotland's Universities have agreed a [Consistent Core of Care](#) – a package of 10 measures – to support student wellbeing for the first semester in response to C-19. Three measures specifically address students who are quarantined or isolating such as very regular check ins with the student/household.

**Student Spread:** The [New Statesman](#) has used Office for National Statistics local neighbourhood classifications (the granular output areas) of student areas to compare Covid cases.

They found:

- 1.15 confirmed cases per student neighbourhood in England
- compared to 0.36 cases per non-student area.
- Student areas are also more likely to be represented among those recording the highest case rates.

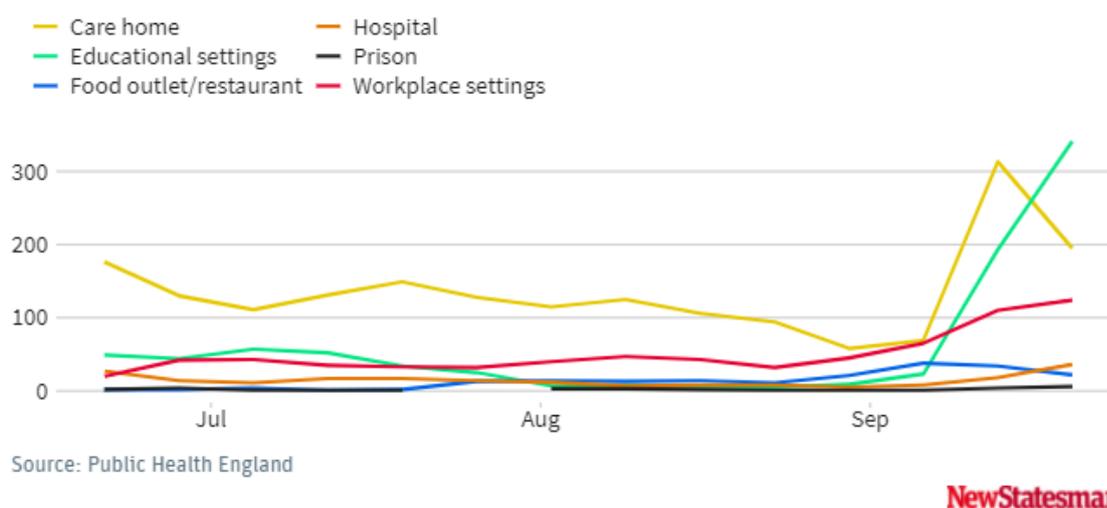
- The effect is greater within cities with substantial student districts and particularly in the north.
- The number of cases is rising faster in student areas than non-student areas.

The article acknowledges that:

- not all of the cases within the student classified areas will have been students
- *as a whole, there are still more Covid-19 cases outside of student neighbourhoods than within them*
- *Also: cases were rising in workplaces across the country before students went back to university – indicating they were not the cause of the rise in cases, but rather accelerated a pre-existing trend.*

## Respiratory outbreaks are rising in care homes and educational settings

Total number of acute respiratory infections (not just Covid-19) by institution, England



## ne Mental Health

The [Times Red Box](#) has a piece calling for immediate mass testing in every university town. They believe students and staff should be tested twice per week and look to Illinois which has a campus tracing team who support with tracking and immediate testing so no one isolates unnecessarily. They also suggest using the universities laboratory capacity to process the tests (40 in the UK have the facilities the article suggests, others could use a mobile facility on site). Acknowledging that rapid testing can be inaccurate in identifying a lower viral load makes the retesting a key part of the approach. The interesting aspect of this article is that it makes the case not just to stop the spread of the virus but for the mental health of students – it sees regular mass testing as unlocking an almost normal experience.

Research Professional have coverage of student mental health in [Top priority – How serious are universities about student mental health?](#)

LBC have a short [piece](#) on the human rights lawyer who has stated the Manchester residence lockdowns were *legally dicey*.

## Parliamentary Questions

- Will the Government introduce [mass-testing for C-19 for students who wish to return home for Christmas](#)
- Whether the Government undertook a [risk assessment prior to September, of the impact of students returning to universities](#) on the transmission of COVID-19 (this won't be answered until next week)

## Access & Participation

The BBC published [University entrance: The 'taboo' about who doesn't go](#) primarily looking at the barriers and alternate motivations of young white working class males.

The OfS has released TUNDRA data which measures the frequency with which people living in a more granular area have accessed HE over a series of years. Wonkhe have a very short blog with some [charts](#) utilising the new data.

UCAS have a new [blog](#) considering the aspects which may encourage care experienced students to disclose their care background in their application personal statement.

Lord Hunt championed several parliamentary questions on ensuring care leavers have access to the internet and a digital device this week – see [here](#), [here](#), [here](#) and [here](#).

The Sutton Trust has published a report on [school closures and lower social mobility](#)

## Exams cancelled?

The VC's of Birmingham and Sheffield Hallam have a thoughtful [piece](#) in the Times calling on the Government to cancel the 2021 A level exams:

- *Decisions need to be made now to give teachers, universities and students certainty. The coming year will be unpredictable. Local lockdowns will have a differential effect on learners who have already faced massive disruption. Making that up would be tough anyway; making it up through further local disruptions to teaching will be almost impossible. The danger is that next summer's results will be as chaotic as this year's, with students having had much less time to learn.*
- *There is a simple solution for assessment. This year, government rightly allowed teacher grades to stand. The problem was no effective grade moderation. Government should ask examination boards to use the time we now have to develop a robust moderation approach. It's a method which works in almost every other advanced educational system.*
- *Our approach would have huge benefits. It would give students certainty and remove the worry that learning would be interrupted by a local lockdown. It would give universities certainty about assessments. It would ease progression from school to university for learners whose education has been so interrupted. There is also another benefit: it would open up a route to more effective university admissions, fit for a post-Covid world.*

This parliamentary question confirms the [Government does not intend to implement predicted grades in 2020/21](#). And this one questions the steps the Government are taking to ensure schools [have clear guidance on exams in summer 2021 before students have to submit applications to UCAS](#).

NAHT also have [grave concerns](#) about the 2021 exam series, they're particularly concerned about the impact of a compressed time period with back to back exam conditions:

- *we remain concerned about proposals that next year's summer exams should be pushed back. While that initially sounds like it would help students have more time to learn and prepare, it could have a disastrous effect on students' experience. Delaying the exam series, while still needing to generate results in time for university offer deadlines, would necessitate a compression of the exam series, meaning more exams for young people in a much shorter space of time. Given how high stakes these tests are, this could only add to the unfairness and inequity of the situation, could lead to further disadvantage for some students over others, and would certainly have a negative impact on students' mental health and wellbeing.*
- *Ongoing teacher assessments could end up being crucial this year – we should be looking at how we use a range of measures rather than assuming things can be fixed by simply delaying the exams. If 2020 has shown us nothing else, it is that relying solely on a series of high-stakes exams means that we are left with no other options if things go wrong...Unfortunately there are currently few signs that the authorities who presided over this year's chaos have learned the right lessons or are acting quickly enough to avoid another mess.*

And the [TES](#) cover calls from Lord Baker to cancel the 2021 GCSE and A level exams.

Currently the media focus is on assessment methods and arrangements but over the academic year increasing focus is likely to build on universities admissions arrangements and timescales.

## PQs

- Potential implications for [suicide prevention policy](#) from the Office of National Statistics' estimate of suicide estimates (HE students)
- [Maintenance loans](#) will not be available to students enrolled on a distance learning course (this does not apply to courses currently delivered digitally due to C-19).
- Monitoring changes in the [level of drop-out rates](#) among higher education students due to the covid-19 outbreak in the 2020-21 academic year. (Answer: the HE taskforce will address this if it becomes an issue.)
- Changes to a student's loan when they [switch from living away to living at home](#)
- Students struggling to provide a [guarantor for accommodation & OfS Student Space platform](#).
- Oversight to ensure [international students are quarantined](#) upon entry to the UK
- [Increasing access to online learning](#) (spoiler – no new measures intended)
- Asked about funds to support [deep cleaning](#) in universities the Minister only referenced the support for schools.

## Inquiries and Consultations

Click here to view the [updated inquiries and consultation tracker](#). Email us on [policy@bournemouth.ac.uk](mailto:policy@bournemouth.ac.uk) if you'd like to contribute to any of the current consultations.

## Other news

**Degree Apprenticeships:** Ofsted are now solely responsible for the inspection of apprenticeship training provision at all levels – including degree apprenticeships delivered within HE providers and all level 6 & 7 provision. There is a partnership aspect in that the OfS will *continue to provide Ofsted with relevant information to inform inspection judgements*. Gavin Williamson's letter to Amanda Spielman, HM Chief Inspector, is [here](#). It also instructs Ofsted to build capacity and capability for the new responsibilities upskilling existing staff and: *the recruitment of additional inspectors with suitable expertise including knowledge and experience of higher education...Ofsted should also work closely with [Government Education] officials and the Office for Students in preparing the apprenticeships sector for this change, particularly... those providers who are not already familiar with Ofsted inspection. I expect Ofsted to work collaboratively to ensure that the circumstances of the sector are fully understood.*

**Remote working within HE Sector:** Wonkhe tell us about a new [report](#) from SUMS consultancy into higher education working practices during the pandemic finds that line management support, team cohesion and institutional communications were most important in supporting staff wellbeing during the initial stages of the pandemic.

SUMS consulting have published: [Working well – during and beyond Covid-19: A report into staff health, general wellbeing and remote working enablement in the HE Sector](#)

- *The HE sector is not on its own in having to adapt quickly to changes in work location and practice. Many of the observations set out in this report transcend industries. However, this research has specifically sought out the perspectives of those working in UK higher education...The resulting paper identified eight critical success factors to support good change management in the wake of the [Covid-19 crisis](#); and learning points for the future... This study reflects on initiatives put in place driven by remote working during the Covid-19 pandemic and poses questions around the potential for these initiatives to be sustained and embedded in the long-term employee experience.*

Wonkhe also covered the report and have highlighted: *line management support, team cohesion and institutional communications were most important in supporting staff wellbeing during the initial stages of the pandemic.*

**Engineering Careers:** a new digital platform for engineering outreach (online and in person) activities (aimed at schools) has been launched - [Neon](#).

**Levelling up:** The UK2070 Commission have published [Go big. Go local - a new deal for levelling up the UK](#). The blurb: *There are deep-rooted inequalities across the UK. These are not inevitable. However, we lack the long-term thinking and spatial economic plan needed to tackle them.* Included in the 10 point plan (page 2):

- *Creating New Global Centres of Excellence harnessing increased investment in research and development to create 'hub and spoke' networks of excellence and growth across the country comparable to the economic impact of the 'golden triangle' of London, Oxford and Cambridge*
- *Future Skilling the UK tackling the historic under-performance of the UK on skills through national plans to raise attainment levels, especially in those skills needed to achieve the levels of the best performing places.*
- *a powerful ministerially-led cross-government committee needs to be established with a dedicated team, to oversee delivery and embed levelling up, supported by spatial analysis, flexible funding and new measures of success...*
- Page 48 lists the top 24 most deprived Council areas in terms of access to services, skills and education & levels of social mobility.

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

**Travel & Transport Guidance:** The [updated guidance](#) for higher education providers in England on when and how to reopen their campuses and buildings is available here. The updates relate to travel and transport.

**International:** Wonkhe report that *The Foreign and Commonwealth Office will announce later today expanded vetting for overseas applicants to university courses relating to questions of national security. This comes amid concerns around students from China collecting information for the People Liberation Army. The Times has the [story](#).*

## Subscribe!

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**Did you know?** You can catch up on previous versions of the policy update on BU's intranet pages [here](#). Some links require access to a BU account - BU staff not able to click through to an external link should contact [eresourceshelp@bournemouth.ac.uk](mailto:eresourceshelp@bournemouth.ac.uk) for further assistance.

**External readers:** Thank you to our external readers who enjoy our policy updates. Not all our content is accessible to external readers, but you can continue to read our updates which omit the restricted content on the policy pages of the BU Research Blog – here's the [link](#).

JANE FORSTER

Policy Advisor

Follow: [@PolicyBU](#) on Twitter

|

SARAH CARTER

Policy & Public Affairs Officer

[policy@bournemouth.ac.uk](mailto:policy@bournemouth.ac.uk)