

Horizon scan May 2021

Queen's Speech: Highlights below in the relevant sections

- [Link to the speech.](#)
- [BBC summary](#)
- [Briefing notes](#)
- You can read a House of Commons research paper on what may be included [here](#).

Research and knowledge exchange: government focus on “high quality” and “strategic” research and on productivity and the economy

Linked to productivity and regional economic success, there is a big focus on the “right sort” of research. We will continue to see a focus on **industry led rather than university led projects** and a **downturn in funding for humanities and social sciences research**, with priority given to projects that lead directly to **improvements in productivity and economic gain, as well as medical or health benefits** - rather than “pure” or theoretical research. The other focus is on “place” - linking research and funding to **local and regional needs**.

- The government are pressing ahead with the **Advanced Research and Invention Agency (ARIA)**. The bill will be considered in the next Parliamentary session as confirmed in the Queen's Speech ([Briefing notes](#)).
- The KEF outcomes (recently published) and REF outcomes (due in 2022) will inform this agenda. [This](#) explains how to use the KEF dashboards. You can view the dashboards for individual institutions [here](#) and compare two providers [here](#).
- The House of Commons Library have a useful research briefing: [The future of research and development funding](#) (April 2021)
- The **R&D roadmap** announced in July 2020 repeats the commitment to R&D investment of 2.4% by 2027 and public investment will be £22bn by 2020/4/25.
 - There was a consultation and the [outcomes were published](#) on 21st January 2020: *“In the coming months, we have committed to publishing a **new places strategy for R&D** and we are working across government and with the devolved administrations to develop this”.*
 - However, since then there has been a lot of concern about what would be included in this target – whether some of it would be paid to the EU for [associate membership of Horizon Europe](#), and there have been **cuts in the development budget** with an impact on research ([UKRI stated](#) most of its aid-funded research projects are unlikely to be funded beyond 31 July as a result of the Government slashing its overseas aid development budget (from 0.7% to 0.5% of gross national income (BNI) The full UKRI ODA letter [is here](#)).
 - Research Professional [report](#) that quality related (QR) funding will be cut by £60 million. This is in addition to the cuts to the research relating to the aid budget and the uncertainties surrounding how Horizon association will be funded. See [this RP article](#) for far more detail on the various cuts, changes and uncertainties to research related funding streams
- The Government [launched a new independent review](#) into UK research bureaucracy led by Professor Adam Tickell, Vice Chancellor, University of Sussex. The last time bureaucracy came up was when they attacked EU research bidding processes as part of the Brexit discussions, announced they were dropping impact statements in UK bidding and then quietly admitted they were just moving them to another bit of the form. It is unclear what new bee they have in their bonnet but anyone applying for the government restructuring funding announced in the summer of 2020 may need to demonstrate the leanness of their professional services functions and internal processes, or at least show that they are willing to tackle them once restructured.

- Amanda Solloway spoke of reforming the REF in the [Research Landscape speech](#) for the Education Policy Institute in October 2020 with an **attack on the focus on publication**. The DfE restructuring framework for universities in financial difficulties from 2020 suggests restructured universities would need to “focus resources on scientific research that is: **internationally excellent** (‘three star’) or higher, or else of **direct and demonstrable value to the national economy or to the local and regional business community**”.

Education: the Secretary of State [wrote to the OfS on 8th Feb 2021](#) with his strategic priorities.

<p>SoS letter 8th Feb 2021: The pandemic</p> <p>GW said: focus on quality and standards during the pandemic including asking the OfS to report the findings of their monitoring work</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The OfS had written to all universities in January 2021 requesting they review compliance with consumer law in relation to communication with students and delivery of programmes during the pandemic • The Office of the Independent Adjudicator for HE (OIA) have introduced additional Rules for Large Group Complaints
<p>GW said: focus on mental health initiatives in the short and long term and focus on “<i>mental health support for students transitioning from school/college to university and prioritising the most disadvantaged learners</i>”.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • OfS Insight brief published April 2021. • The OfS called for support for care-leavers in April 2021
<p>GW said: monitor financial sustainability and student protection</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The OfS have announced a new condition of registration to protect students at HE providers who may be at risk of closure. It empowers them to <i>act quickly and in a targeted way</i>. This blog explains the change. The actual regulatory framework is available here. The OfS previously consulted the sector on the new conditions following which they developed the new condition. It is understood that the consultation responses disagreed with the approach outlined for the new condition but the regulator stated that the condition was necessary. • The government’s summer 2020 restructuring regime can be found here. Many, many strings attached. OfS report Dec 2020: “<i>the likelihood of multiple providers exiting the sector in a disorderly way due to financial failure is low at this time</i>” • This was in the letter in February 2019 (from Damien Hinds, not GW) – not a priority now? “<i>I would like the OfS to continue to focus on student protection and consumer rights. In particular, to evaluate and report publicly on the strength of student protection plans and advice available on students’ consumer rights.</i>” • From an earlier letter in September 2019 - you will recall the proposal was for template student contracts with initial recommendations to the government by Feb 2020.
<p>GW said: ensure smooth admissions in 2021 that take students’ interests into account</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • OfS blog about responsible admissions, March 2021

<p>SoS letter 8th Feb 2021: Quality</p> <p>GW said: finalise and implement the new quality regime as soon as possible, and supports minimum absolute standards: “<i>The OfS should not hesitate to use the full range of its powers and sanctions where quality of provision is not high enough: the OfS should not limit itself to putting in place conditions of registration requiring improvement plans for providers who do not demonstrate high quality and robust outcomes, but should move immediately to more robust measures, including monetary penalties, the revocation of degree awarding powers in subjects of concern, suspending aspects of a provider’s registration or, ultimately, deregistration.</i>” Tells the OfS to refuse to register providers who don’t have quality and commitment to outcomes.</p>

SoS letter 8th Feb 2021: Quality

Since then:

- New Skills bill will give the OfS more powers to address low quality HE provision (presumably linked to their new quality framework) “*Strengthening the ability of the Office for Students to assess and regulate Higher Education provision in England, ensuring that they can regulate in line with minimum expectations of quality.*”
- The OfS [consultation on quality and standards](#) closed on 25th January 2021 (covered in our 20th November [policy update here](#)). BU readers can find [our response here](#). You can read the [UUK response here](#) and the one from [London Higher here](#). The consultation controversially proposes introducing minimum absolute measures for graduate outcomes (employment, salary and drop-out rates) as part of the quality framework, with no benchmarking and a focus on continuous improvement – and proposes a raft of intrusive and burdensome new data requirements. The policy seems to be based on the assumption that the only purpose of a degree was if it gets the student a good job, and that drop-outs means the government have wasted student loan subsidy, as well as implying poor student experience and course quality.
- The [interim update](#) on the Review of Post-19 Education and Funding says the government will consult in Spring 2021 on further reforms in HE linked to funding and quality, with a full response to the Post-18 Review due alongside the next Comprehensive Spending Review (expected in the Autumn unless it is postponed for the third year in a row).
- The consultation on further reforms will include consideration of minimum entry requirements, which it is expected would restrict the availability of government funding for students who do not meet the requirements. This proposal was mentioned in Augar as a possible step to take to address concerns about low value courses. It was [widely condemned](#) as a cap on ambition and a regressive step against social mobility when it was first discussed in December 2018.

GW told the OfS to “interpret the Government response to the Independent Review of the Teaching Excellence and Student Outcomes Framework” [i.e. get on with it]

Since then:

- The OfS [confirmed](#) that they will consult on a new TEF **in the Spring**, aligned to the quality review. The [Peace report](#) on the TEF and the [government response](#) were finally published on 21st January 2021. **Subject level TEF is off.** We got that wrong (thankfully) – but wrote about what else might happen in our [27th November policy update here](#). When we do get it, expect it to link to the NSS review, the OfS review of quality and the new regulatory outcomes metrics as well as possibly to the funding review outcomes.
- Current TEF awards were extended to expire in the summer of 2021, and it is not clear what the interim arrangements will be, the OfS propose to consult on this soon.

GW said: carry out a radical review of the National Student Survey (NSS).

- *I can confirm that this remains a high priority, in order to address the downwards pressure that student surveys of this sort may exert on standards. I would like the OfS to take the time it needs to ensure this review is genuinely radical, consider carefully whether there could be a replacement that does not depend on a universal annual sample, and ensure that a replacement does not contribute to the reduction in rigour and standards. It is my strong view that the NSS should play at most a minimal role in baseline quality regulation [was meant to be done by end 2020 and not run this year in the same format, although it has been]*

Since then:

- The Office for Students (OfS) [announced](#) in April 2021 that major changes in the National Student Survey (NSS) will be introduced over the next two years following the first phase of a review of the survey conducted by the regulator. They debunked the grade inflation idea.

SoS letter 8th Feb 2021: Admissions and equality of opportunity

GW said: OfS to support DfE's work on PQA consultation

- This government is pushing hard on post-qualification admissions (on 21st January 2021 [a consultation was launched](#) on this subject which closes in May 2021. Both [UCAS](#) and [UUK](#) have published papers on options for changing the admissions system). The DfE consultation sets out 2 PQ models, it is expected that there will be a change but might not be until 2023 entry at the earliest.
- The OfS had paused their review of admissions (launched before the first lockdown) so they seem to have been behind the curve on this one. Although the OfS don't have much jurisdiction over admissions, so maybe they stepped back to let the DfE take the lead. The DfE don't have jurisdiction either, but maybe they don't need it!
- Also the government has been using the issue of complaints linked to Covid-19 to push harder on student protection, student rights to information, complaints and fee refunds. They do not like offering making practices, university marketing or clearing and they are convinced that there is mis-selling.

GW said: OfS work on access and participation focusses on real social mobility and making the right choices

- (*"Encouraging more and more students onto courses which do not provide good graduate outcomes does not provide real social mobility and serves only to entrench inequality."*)
- (*"I would like the OfS to continue to consider broader factors, including socio-economic status and geographical inequality, which are likely to impact on access and participation in higher education. This should include a focus on white boys on free school meals who are currently the least likely group to progress to higher education"*)
- (*"encourage the OfS not only to promote the Turing Scheme generally, but also to take steps to ensure providers make every effort to increase participation in outward mobility activity including through providing any additional support they may need"*)

Context:

- The approach, consistent with the above is all about outcomes for students and the taxpayer. Students from disadvantaged groups who are at university must be supported to succeed (in terms of jobs and salaries, and completion), and more WP students should get into higher tariff universities (which PQA is meant to support), but WP more generally is seen as an expensive luxury, especially if students are going to "low quality" institutions or taking "low quality" courses which lead to "poor value" outcomes in terms of jobs and salary, especially if those courses are not strategically aligned.
- Note the potential impact of the minimum entry requirements on access and the focus on absolute outcomes by the OfS. The Universities Minister has now switched from talking about "those with the ability" to go to university to "those with the ability and the achievement". Also note the PQA approach which is at least in part intended to support fairness if not widening access.
- Don't expect the OfS to go soft on APPs. And differential outcomes (as seen in the TEF data) will become even more important under their new quality framework.

SoS letter 8th Feb 2021: Strategic alignment

GW said: change the name of the Teaching Grant to the Strategic Priorities Grant

Since then and context:

- Skills and Post-16 Education Bill ([Briefing notes](#)). *The main elements of the Bill are:*
 - *Putting employers at the heart of the post-16 skills system through the Skills Accelerator, by enabling employers and providers to collaborate to develop skills plans aimed at ensuring local skills provision meets local needs.*
 - *Introducing the Lifelong Loan Entitlement, which will give individuals access to the equivalent of up to four years' worth of student loans for level 4-6 qualifications that they can use flexibly across their lifetime, at colleges as well as universities.*
 - *Strengthening the system of accountability by extending existing powers for the Secretary of State for Education to intervene where colleges have failed to meet local needs, to direct structural change where*

SoS letter 8th Feb 2021: Strategic alignment

required to secure improvement, and by amending the regulation of post-16 education and training providers to ensure quality.

- *Strengthening the ability of the Office for Students to assess and regulate Higher Education provision in England, ensuring that they can regulate in line with minimum expectations of quality.*
- The Government has published the [Skills for jobs: lifelong learning for opportunity and growth](#) white paper setting out their ambition for reform to the post-19 technical education and training landscape. This includes plans for Local Skills Improvement Plans, more on the Lifetime Skills Guarantee and the Lifelong Loan Entitlement. Consultations are expected soon.
- Everything is focussed on courses supporting economic and societal need, i.e. STEM and healthcare and teaching. Expect a strong anti-humanities feel in policy developments. In their view these courses do not “lead” to productive careers in enough cases. Value for money now clearly defined in terms of the taxpayer. (Student value is addressed by looking at graduate outcomes). This was reinforced in the January 2021 announcements about teaching grant funding ([see our 21st Jan 21 policy update here](#))
- Gavin Williamson issued a [written ministerial statement](#) on FE and skills detailing the launch of a consultation on a new flexi-apprenticeship scheme and the Skills Accelerator partnerships

Content from previous GW letters that remains relevant:

- [19 January 2021](#) – this was about the teaching grant – including reducing it for some subjects, removing the London weighting, cutting funding for Uni-Connect etc. The OfS issued two consultations on funding, one relating to [capital funding for 2021-22](#) and one relating to [recurrent funding for 2021-22](#). These reflect the government’s priorities as set out in [directions to the OfS](#). The proposed changes reflect the government’s focus on strategically important subjects (medicine, sciences, IT and engineering).
- [14 September 2020](#) – £10m of additional teaching grant funding for high cost subjects to accommodate additional students as a result of the admissions issues in 2020
- [14 September 2020](#) - instructed that no further action be taken on student transfer arrangements.

The government are concerned about duplication – they are willing to have courses replaced by lower level courses including provided by FE colleges instead to replace university provision. *“it is probable that the sector in 2030 will not look the same as it does now”*. This from the restructuring document is a clear policy statement: *“Providers will need to examine whether they can enhance their regional focus”*. The government is still worried about “cold spots”. They are also likely to worry about rural provision

GW on choice and flexibility:

- *“I would like the OfS to work with the Department on the design and implementation of the Government’s flagship Lifelong Loan Entitlement and our ambition to provide greater choice and flexibility for learners, including through encouraging a move towards increased high quality modular and higher technical (Level 4 and 5) provision. I would also like the OfS to work with the Department and Institute for Apprenticeships & Technical Education on the implementation of reforms to occupationally focused higher technical qualifications.”*
- *“I would like the OfS to work with DfE and other stakeholders to consider how to support the accumulation and transfer of credit and to develop a regulatory system that is fully equipped to support radically different, flexible arrangements, measuring quality using metrics that are meaningful in the new system and interact positively with our admissions regime”*
- [OfS October 2020 business plan](#) *“We will publish an analysis of flexible higher education participation for mature learners – who they are, what they do, and how we could increase their participation in higher education.”*
- While the [14 September 2020](#) letter from GW instructed that no further action be taken on student transfer arrangements, of course the relevant issues all come back up again in the context of credit transfer and lifelong learning. This was originally in [an earlier letter in September 2019](#).
[Experimental statistics](#) November 2020

SoS letter 8th Feb 2021: Anti-Semitism

GW said: *"I would like the OfS to undertake a scoping exercise to identify providers which are reluctant to adopt the definition and consider introducing mandatory reporting of anti-Semitic incident numbers by providers. This would ensure a robust evidence base, which the OfS could then use to effectively regulate in this area. If anti-Semitic incidents do occur at a provider, the OfS should consider if it is relevant in a particular case whether the provider has adopted the definition when considering what sanctions, including monetary penalties, would be appropriate to apply."*

- Williamson is determined to champion the IHRA definition of anti-Semitism. In 2020 he gave universities until Christmas to conform and adopt the definition with the threat of action taken against those that didn't. This stops short of that, but assumes a match between non-adopters with higher levels of incidents and suggests financial penalties.
- A [parliamentary question](#) in April 2021 tells us that 91 HE providers have adopted the antisemitism definition called for by the Government

SoS letter 8th Feb 2021: Free speech

GW said:

- *"I intend to publish a policy paper on free speech and academic freedom in the near future [see below] and I would like the OfS to continue to work closely with the Department to deliver this shared agenda and ensure our work is closely aligned. I would also like it to take more active and visible action to challenge concerning incidents that are reported to it or which it becomes aware of, as well as to share information with providers about best practice for protecting free speech beyond the minimum legal requirements."*
- *"All students deserve the opportunity to receive a rigorous and high-quality education. While providers are rightly free to determine the content of their courses, university administrators and heads of faculty should not, whether for ideological reasons or to conform to the perceived desires of students, pressure or force teaching staff to drop authors or texts that add rigour and stretch to a course. The OfS should robustly challenge providers that have implemented such policies and clearly support individual academics whose academic freedom is being diminished."*

Since then:

- Announcement that there will be a new Higher Education (Freedom of Speech) Bill (Queen's Speech [Briefing notes](#)). The main elements of the Bill are:
 - Including new freedom of speech and academic duties on higher education providers and students' unions. The regulator, the Office for Students, will have the power to impose fines for breaches.
 - Ensuring that, for the first time, students' unions at universities will have to take steps to secure lawful freedom of speech for their members and others, including visiting speakers.
 - Creating a new role of Director for Freedom of Speech and Academic Freedom at the Office for Students, with a remit to champion freedom of speech and academic freedom on campus, and responsibility for investigations of infringements of freedom of speech duties in higher education which may result in sanctions and individual redress.
 - Enabling individuals to seek compensation through the courts if they suffer loss as a result of breach of the freedom of speech duties.
- [DfE policy paper](#) issued on 16th Feb 2021. With an explosive introduction by GW. It is complicated, because of the overlaps with Prevent.
 - New Free Speech champion who can investigate and recommend redress, new OfS registration condition (adds to the existing one – via the Public Interest Principles) with sanctions for breaches.
 - Will strengthen statutory framework for this by requiring HEIs to "actively promote" free speech.
 - Will introduce a direct right to compensation and extend the protection for academic freedom to recruitment and promotion.
 - The suggestion appears to be that HEIs might be responsible for compliance by SUs or else that the law will apply to them separately and even that they might be directly regulated by the OfS on this subject. Particular focus on not using security costs as a reason to cancel events.

SoS letter 8th Feb 2021: Free speech

- The OfS will: *Issue regulatory guidance on the public interest governance principles relating to academic freedom and free speech* [LATE, was expected Autumn 2020] – this has been taken out of their hands
- NB you need to demonstrate compliance with free speech principles to qualify for the 2020 government financial restructuring regime.
- The Government have published the [new Terms of Reference](#) for the Independent Review of Prevent.

SoS letter 8th Feb 2021: International opportunities and risks

GW said:

- *“International Education Strategy [restates] its commitment to the IES’ original ambition to increase international higher education student numbers to at least 600,000 by 2030”*
- *“At the request of the Minister for Universities, Universities UK produced important guidelines and recommendations to help providers manage risks in internationalisation. I would like the OfS to monitor the adoption of these recommendations by providers”*

Since then and context:

- The [Turing website](#) launched and deadlines were extended.
- The Home Office [confirmed](#) that the new Graduate route will open to international students for applications on 1 July 2021
- DfE’s [research](#) on [the effect of Brexit on HEIs](#) and impact assessment [here](#)
- The DfE published the [2021 update to the International Education Strategy](#) including measures to boost international study and global opportunities. Immediate priorities are India, Indonesia, Saudi Arabia, Vietnam and Nigeria.
- The [September 2019 letter](#) also asked the OfS to make “public transparent data on the outcomes achieved by international students, including those studying wholly outside the UK, such as it does for domestic students”

SoS letter 8th Feb 2021: Risk based regulation and reducing bureaucracy

GW said:

- Still need to take action on MD’s instructions from 14th September 2020 on reducing bureaucracy
- *“In my view, to date, the OfS has not been sufficiently risk-based. A risk-based approach to regulation should consider the overall regulatory burden faced by providers, including data gathering, reporting and monitoring, not just the application of conditions of registration. It is my view that there are further opportunities for the OfS to ensure that providers with consistently strong performance face minimal regulatory burden. I would like the OfS to implement a markedly more risk-based model of regulation, with significant, meaningful and observable reductions in the regulatory burden upon high quality providers within the next 12 months”*
- Content from previous GW letter that remains relevant: [14 September 2020](#) –
 - asked the OfS to reduce its enhanced monitoring because of the burden on providers and suggested using specific licence conditions instead – and asked for a report within 3 months
 - supported specific changes to TRAC and transparency data
 - Asking the OfS to review its own efficiency and save registration fees by 10% in 2 years.
- The OfS have committed in recent comms to reducing bureaucracy and the burden for universities. Those looking at the many consultations opened over the end of the year will be wondering if the OfS is going to deliver on this – in particular the massive data requirements set out in the quality consultation and the proposed changes to the [reportable events regime](#). The OfS are also consulting on [monetary penalties](#), on [publishing information](#). We are also now expecting new consultations on the TEF and surveys on the NSS as well as multiple DfE surveys on funding and other reforms.

Things that don't seem to be priorities any more? A list of things that were not in any of the letters that are now the exclusive source of guidance to the OfS:

- Accelerated degrees- from [an earlier letter in September 2019](#) but now apparently not a priority
- Grade inflation - this was a big thing in the letter of [7th June 2019](#) (from Damien Hinds, not GW) and has led to a lot of rhetoric from the OfS since. The OfS was continuing its campaign ([blog 20th November 2020](#)), and see its response to the 2020 outcomes data ([28th Jan 2021](#)). So it will be interesting to see if there is now a change of tone? There may not be, because the maintenance of value of degrees over time is a regulatory principle and features in the new draft quality framework.
- Senior executive pay was not mentioned in any of the relevant letters.
- Essay mills have been in the news, in Feb 2021 former Minister Chris Skidmore introduced a [10 Minutes Rule bill](#). It is unlikely to proceed because of other demands on Parliament. And although this featured in the letter of [7th June 2019](#) (from Damien Hinds, not GW) which asked the OfS to work with the sector and take firm and robust action, it now seems to be off the agenda.
- Voter registration - Supporting voter registration is an OfS licence condition. In November 2020, the Cabinet Office commissioned research into how HEIs are working with local councils. May come up again before May 2021 when [local elections will be taking place](#) even if it isn't a priority for GW.
- Student accommodation and living costs - the (former) Minister for Universities (Chris Skidmore) [gave a speech on students accommodation \(Jan 2020\)](#) and held some round table meetings. Very little engagement on this issue in 2020 despite the challenges for students and the sector during the pandemic.
- Harassment and misconduct: not in the letter but an OfS priority. The OfS have issued a [statement of expectations](#) on harassment and sexual misconduct. UUK published [new guidance on tackling racial harassment in HE](#), and [executive summary here](#).