

HUBS Executive Committee Watching Briefs – July 2021

The HUBS Executive Committee have agreed that members of the committee would take on “Watching Briefs”. The aim of this initiative is to support Objective C2 in the HUBS Constitution:

“to enable input from the Heads and Subject Leads in the HE sector into policy formulation and responses for the Society and its Member Organisations”

The role of the brief holder is to:

- Take note of items of interest in the education policy update and science policy newsletter
- Subscribe to WonkHE, and keep up to date on developments
- Engage with relevant Royal Society of Biology staff member for their brief who will share relevant education policy updates, science policy newsletter and relevant consultation responses to inform the brief
- Consult with HUBS Executive Committee and wider HUBS members, if needed, to inform a HUBS viewpoint
- Engage with relevant consultation and inquiry responses, providing a HUBS view.

Consultation responses page for formal RSB positions and responses can be found at:

<https://www.rsb.org.uk/policy/consultations/consultation-responses>

HUBS members are encouraged to open dialogue directly with authors of briefs and copy all correspondence to consultation@rsb.org.uk

Briefs will be updated at regular intervals.

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Watching Brief – Office for Students and Teaching Excellence Framework

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Office for Students

The OFS continues to provide a wide-range of both information and support to both students and providers. On the 8 February 2021 the OFS announced that Lord Wharton has been appointed as chair of the Office for Students (OfS) and in a speech to university leaders on 14 May he laid out the following priorities:

- highlighted the importance of high-quality courses, and universities' central role in levelling-up access to higher education for students from all backgrounds
- urged universities to redouble their efforts to tackle antisemitism and harassment on campus
- signalled a reduction in red tape for those universities and colleges that are delivering for students.

See for further details: <https://www.officeforstudents.org.uk/news-blog-and-events/press-and-media/new-ofs-chair-sets-out-priorities-in-first-speech/>

The OFS website continues to contain a special section which bring together materials related to the pandemic but a range of other pertinent and useful reports and communications have been forthcoming, some of which are noted below:

25/6: A report on the financial sustainability of HEIs which suggests poorer financial performance in 20/21 noting *an overall decrease in income in 2020-21 will reduce the financial operating performance. Net operating cashflow, necessary to support longer term sustainability, fell from 8.4 per cent of total income in 2019-20 to 4.2 per cent in 2020-21. This appears to be manageable in the short term, but at this level will not support sustainability in the longer term.* See

<https://www.officeforstudents.org.uk/publications/financial-sustainability-of-higher-education-providers-in-england-2021/>

10/6: Letter to providers re the TEF going forward, see TEF update.

10/6: Letter about the statement of expectations for preventing and addressing harassment and sexual misconduct affecting students in higher education. The letter notes, *we are now writing to each accountable officer, restating our invitation for you to review and update your systems, policies and procedures in line with the statement of expectations. We would ask*

that this is done in advance of the next academic year (2021-22). Full letter available at https://www.officeforstudents.org.uk/media/8f64cedf-df8f-4213-8edf-bbf3c88db502/letter-statement-of-expectations-on-harassment-and-sexual-misconduct_forweb.pdf

27/5: Improving opportunity and choice for mature students. Thy report notes that *while numbers of mature students in higher education have declined, particularly for certain types of study, there are positive signs of increasing demand. The government proposes to nurture this growth through its Lifelong Learning Entitlement, and the OfS is working for change through improved information, advice and guidance, regulation in the form of access and participation plans, and funding initiatives to encourage greater flexibility and choice.* See <https://www.officeforstudents.org.uk/publications/improving-opportunity-and-choice-for-mature-students/>

19/5: Report on a new measure that projects new students' likelihood of finding professional level employment or embarking on further study in the year after they graduate. [Procced]. One of the key findings reported, *significant differences in performance between different universities and colleges. The measure projects that over 75 per cent of entrants at 22 universities and other higher education providers will go on to find professional employment or further study shortly after graduation. At 25 universities and other education providers, less than half of students who begin a degree can expect to finish that degree and find professional employment or further study within 15 months of graduation.* See <https://www.officeforstudents.org.uk/publications/proceed-updated-methodology-and-results/>

This is just a flavor of the topics and publications covered by the OFS in the last couple of months but a range of resources, events and information on the OFS website <https://www.officeforstudents.org.uk/> and interested parties can sign up for regular briefing which are an excellent way of keeping sight of the rapidly changing HE environment. There are also regular events on a range of topics that colleagues can sign up for, see <https://www.officeforstudents.org.uk/news-blog-and-events/events/>

Teaching Excellence Framework

In the update of November 2020, it was noted that the regulator was giving consideration to the TEF for 2021. The TEF Advisory Group, chaired by Chris Millward (Director of Fair Access and Participation) is now established and developing proposals based on the Pearce review, the Governments response to it and outcomes from the subject level pilots. A letter was issued to HEIs on 10th June 2021 suggesting that more details on the proposed way forward would be forthcoming later in the summer leading into a consultation phase in the Autumn. It is noted that *“Our provisional timeline involves opening the [TEF] submission window by summer 2022 and announcing outcomes in early 2023, although this timeline will itself be subject to consultation.”*

Given that current awards are due to expire in the summer 2021 all current awards will be extended through to 2023 or presumably the date of publication of new outcomes if that date slips. It is also noted that given that current awards will increasingly become out of date the OFS is advising providers not to use their TEF awards in marketing or promotional materials from September 2021. Revised TEF branding guidelines will be available on the OfS website shortly although HEIs should make plans to remove current TEF related branding.

See letter to provider issued on 10 June 2021:

https://www.officeforstudents.org.uk/media/6de0c4ba-72f1-4624-8eb7-30423b266f0f/letter_tef_update.pdf

See OFS pages related to “Future of TEF” and associated links:

<https://www.officeforstudents.org.uk/advice-and-guidance/teaching/future-of-the-tef/>

Watching Brief – Brexit

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The UK officially left the EU on 31 January 2020, followed by a transition period that ended on 31 December 2020. The following changes have now been confirmed.

EU Settlement Scheme

EU, EEA and Swiss citizens – including family members – who arrived in the UK before 31 December 2020 were required to apply to the UK's 'EU Settlement Scheme' no later than 30 June 2021.

Those with settled or pre-settled status get continued access to education, free access to the NHS, free movement in and out of the UK, and permission to work in the UK. Applying under the EU Settlement Scheme doesn't affect the applicant's status in relation to their home nation.

Irish nationals don't need to apply for settled status as they are covered by the Common Travel Area.

Home fee status and financial support

All nations in the UK pledged that EU students could continue to access home fee status and current funding arrangements until the end of the 2020/21 academic year. However, those starting a course in 2021/22 no longer have home fee status or access to the UK's financial support. This includes students who applied to start a course in 2020/21 but deferred until 2021/22.

The two exceptions are:

- EU students registered with the EU Settlement Scheme, with settled or pre-settled status
- Irish nationals living in the UK or Ireland

They will continue to have home fee status and eligibility for tuition fee loans. Irish students who've lived in the UK for three years will qualify for maintenance loans, as will students with settled status. In some UK nations (not England), students with pre-settled status who've lived in the UK for over three years may also qualify for maintenance support.

UK nationals (or their children) living in the EEA or Switzerland may be eligible for home fee status and student finance in the UK until 1 January 2028, if they meet various residency criteria.

Visa requirements

EU students arriving in the UK after 31 December 2020 will need visas if they are on a course longer than six months. This doesn't apply to students with settled or pre-settled status under the EU Settlement Scheme, or to Irish citizens.

To facilitate the mobility of researchers, the UK is offering a Global Talent visa that allows recipients to live and work in the UK for up to five years at a time, with no limit to extensions.

Impact of Brexit on UK Enrolments

Amidst the uncertainty of 2016's Brexit referendum, UK universities are seeing an impact on revenue from EU students. Students from the EU/EEA and Switzerland will no longer have "home fee status" as of the end of the 2020/21 academic year. This means they'll not only lose access to the same tuition fees and financial support as UK students, but they'll also face stricter visa and immigration programs. Additionally, they'll no longer be eligible to participate in higher education exchange through Erasmus+.

Not all universities will be equally affected, however. While top-tier universities will almost certainly see ongoing demand, less prestigious universities may see more significant losses, many of which are already reeling in the wake of COVID-19.

The strategies universities have devised are diverse and manifold. Some universities are planning to open satellite campuses in continental Europe, to offer degree programs in trans-national education settings. A few institutions are also evaluating potential legal loopholes to charge different fees.

The UK universities have been losing revenue from EU students for five years. However, they've still seen a record number of international enrolments thanks to growth from non-EU markets, according to Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA) data shared by market intelligence resource ICEF Monitor. While the number of first-year students from EU countries dropped by two percent in a single year, the number of non-EU students spiked by 23 percent. Leading the way are international enrolments from China and India. Experts say this upward trend can be attributed to positive perceptions about the UK, including attractive post-study work options and its favourable response to the pandemic.

Erasmus and the new Turing scheme

Projects funded under the current Erasmus+ scheme will operate for the full duration of the project, even if this is after 31 December 2020.

Students in Northern Ireland can continue to participate in Erasmus after an arrangement with the government of the Republic of Ireland, however those studying elsewhere in the UK cannot.

Instead, from September 2021 the UK's new Turing scheme will offer students the opportunity for international exchanges or placements, with a particular emphasis on

widening participation. UK organisations are being invited to bid into the Turing scheme from early 2021.

Health services

Current European Health Insurance Cards are still valid for UK students who wish to travel to the EU, until the date their card expires.

After this, there may be the option of applying for a UK EHIC, or the UK's new Global Health Insurance Card, depending on your eligibility. In most cases, UK citizens living in the UK are only likely to be eligible for the GHIC. In all cases, these cards provide only for emergency healthcare support.

EU students arriving in the UK after 1 January 2021 will be required to pay an Immigration Health Surcharge. Postgraduate students who bring their family (spouse/partner and children under the age of 18), will need to pay this for each of their dependents.

Research and Horizon Europe

It was confirmed on 24 December 2020 that the UK will be associated to Horizon Europe, the EU's next seven-year research and innovation programme which runs from 2021. It's not the only associate country: 16 who were associate members of Horizon 2020 – including Switzerland and Israel – are also expected to associate to programme by the autumn of 2021, along with new applicants that may include Morocco, Australia, Canada and Japan.

UK researchers will be able to lead project consortia and participate in the same way as their EU counterparts, applying for funding from the European Research Council and several other bodies. The exception is the EIC Funds, meaning that start-ups and SMEs won't have access to loan or equity funding via the EU, although they can apply for grants from the EIC Accelerator.

In the past, the UK has been a large beneficiary of EU research and innovation funding, landing nearly a quarter of the grants awarded by the seven-year Horizon 2020 programme. With a research budget of €95.5 billion at stake (plus associate country contributions), it was reported that the EU were concerned that the UK may win more in grants than it contributes to the programme. On the other hand, after the Brexit vote the UK's success in funding applications declined.

The protocol addresses this by tying the UK in to an automatic top-up, should it win more than 8% above what it pays in for two consecutive years. Should the UK's funding success rate drop significantly, the first course of action will be to 'try and improve the level of UK participation', with the UK's contribution only being reviewed should there be a 16% imbalance.

However, one of Horizon Europe's articles states there may be 'very limited exceptional reasons' where participation may be limited to member states only, or legal entities established in specific associated or third countries. This has led to calls by the League of European Research Universities (among others) for the inclusion of the UK, Switzerland, and Israel to be included in the list of preferred partners in research and innovation, after concern that they may be excluded from quantum and space projects.

The Horizon Europe programme was formally approved on 12 May 2021, with funding applied retroactively to 1 Jan 2021. Formal associations are now in progress, although there is expected to be no further negotiation to the Trade and Cooperation Agreement agreed in principle with the UK on 24 December 2020.

References

<https://www.thecompleteuniversityguide.co.uk/sector/news/how-will-brexiteffect-universities-and-students>

<https://www.timeshighereducation.com/news/uk-lost-ps15-billion-horizon-2020-funding-after-brexite-vote>

<https://www.timeshighereducation.com/news/european-researchers-losing-interest-uk-university-jobs>

<https://www.keystoneacademic.com/news/what-does-brexite-mean-for-european-higher-education>

Watching Brief – Degree Apprenticeships

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Degree apprenticeships (DAs) continue to be under the auspices of Institute for Apprenticeships & Technical Education (IfATE; <https://www.instituteforapprenticeships.org/>). Information and several QA aspects for DAs are with the Education & Skills Funding Agency (ESFA ; <https://www.gov.uk/topic/further-education-skills/apprenticeships>). The University & Vocational Awards Council (UVAC; <https://uvac.ac.uk/>) continues to provide useful advice and information on DAs.

There are a range of DA standards at level 6 and 7 in the broad area of 'biosciences' at levels 6 and 7. At level 6 these include: Lab Scientist, Environmental Health Practitioner, Professional Forester, Psychological Wellbeing Practitioner, Agriculture/Horticulture Professional Advisor, Environmental Practitioner, Professional Arboriculturalist. At level 7 these include: Research Scientist, Bioinformatics Scientist, Sustainability Business Specialist, Ecologist.

Note that the Skills and Post-16 Education [Bill](#) was introduced to Parliament several weeks ago. It introduces a flexible lifelong learning entitlement and DAs should be considered one pathway that 'A' level, mature students, and people in mid-career can pursue.

From 1st April, Ofsted had took on the responsibility for inspecting DA provision (<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/provider-guide-to-delivering-high-quality-apprenticeships/ofsted-inspection-and-esfa-intervention>). This will involve a visit by Ofsted inspectors, and providers will need to: collate the appropriate data on their apprenticeships and apprentices; prepare a self-assessment report; arrange for access of the inspectors to the staff involved in teaching and to the apprentices and the employers.

There are clearly challenges associated with developing and delivering DAs. There are also still challenges in ensuring applicants to Universities are aware of the DA opportunities. The standards are sometimes reviewed and altered, and this can lead to major changes, as happened to the Senior Leader DA. The funding bands can be changed. Block teaching, which is often the preferred mode of teaching for DAs, is clearly different to the usual teaching pattern. Setting up a level 7 DA, with normally 120 credits of taught modules (plus a 60-credit project) is potentially more straightforward than developing a 360-credit level 6 programme with respect to block teaching. Level 7 DAs, which are mainly aimed at people already in work, often use distance learning modules as part of the provision.

Watching Brief – Scotland

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Scottish Government to scrap Scottish Qualifications Authority (SQA)

The Scottish Government is set to abolish the SQA, Education Secretary Shirley Anne-Somerville has announced. The announcement that the beleaguered exams body was to be scrapped came just hours after the publication of the long-awaited report into Curriculum for Excellence (CfE) from international education experts, the OECD. They recommended the government should consider creating a "specialist stand-alone agency responsible for curriculum (and perhaps assessment)". The review warned that Scotland's education system has become too "politicised" with changes being reactive rather than long-term. In its 139-page report, the OECD also praise Scotland's teachers but warn of "a large variety of practices between schools and classrooms" which could be "threatening the aspirations for equity in students' experiences and outcomes". There is criticism too over the sheer number of exams for senior phase pupils. The review was initially commissioned by the Scottish Government to look into that senior phase of schooling but was expanded to cover all years after a vote in Holyrood. A further report into exams and grading - ordered after last year's exams debacle - is due to be published in the autumn. In its report, the OECD stated: "Education is a source of pride in Scotland, which shows in the broad commitment to CfE and educational excellence for all. It has been granted great importance in the political debate to a degree that would be the envy of many a system. "This importance has sometimes translated into a busy system at risk of policy and institutional overload.

<https://www.holyrood.com/news/view.scottish-education-too-politicised-warns-oecd-in-long-awaited-report>

School exam data used to spot 'unexpected' grades

A report looking at the way national qualifications are to be awarded in Scotland this year says "most" councils will be analysing the grades assigned by teachers against their school's historical attainment data, in order to "identify and address any unexpected provisional grades". Last year there was an outcry when the Scottish Qualifications Authority (SQA) results were published because high-attaining students in schools with comparatively low attainment – often serving disadvantaged areas – had their teacher estimates unfairly downgraded. A week after the results came out – and following protests from students that they should be judged on their performance, not their postcode – the Scottish government reverted to teacher estimates, except where a candidate's result had been improved by the quality-assurance process. However – while the government promised when this year's exams were cancelled in December that "no algorithm will be used in this exercise" – a new report out today from Education Scotland into how local authorities are quality-assuring grades this year shows that "most" councils are developing "bespoke data analysis tools" for schools so provisional results can be analysed "against three-year or five-year trends from

historical data". The report says : "Local authority officers plan to analyse trends to discuss this year's provisional results with headteachers, with a particular focus on verifying the data and identifying and challenging results or attainment patterns which appear anomalous. This includes consideration of historic patterns and trends of attainment when compared to this academic session's provisional results, at individual, departmental and school level."

<https://www.tes.com/news/sqa-assessment-2021-school-exam-data-used-spot-unexpected-grades>

Scottish universities could be allowed to quarantine students arriving from red list countries on campus

Scottish universities will be allowed to quarantine students arriving from red list countries pending the success of a "pilot" scheme exploring the idea. The Scottish Government has given the green light to a plan for universities to use on campus accommodation for international students if they can demonstrate safety measures in place would match those being used at quarantine hotels. However, before it is allowed, a pilot scheme involving two unnamed universities must take place to make sure it More than 100,000 international students are due to come to the UK in September from red list countries, according to Universities UK International (UUKI). As well as concerns over cost, it is unclear if there is enough hotel space to accommodate them all. In April, it was revealed some institutions were in talks with the Scottish Government about participating in a "hotel quarantine" pilot in July to help deal with the influx of foreign students due to start courses in September. The Scottish Government would not confirm if they still plan to run the pilot in July or if it would be pushed back, but in a statement, a spokesperson said: "The Scottish Government has been exploring with universities how student accommodation could be used in place of hotels for managed isolation. "Guidance is currently being drafted for a 'pilot' scheme to assess how this would work in practice, with two universities expressing an interest in taking part.is feasible. At the moment anyone arriving in the UK from red list countries has to quarantine at government-approved hotels at a cost of £1,750 – a hugely expensive sum for many students.

<https://www.scotsman.com/education/scottish-universities-could-be-allowed-to-quarantine-students-arriving-from-red-list-countries-on-campus-3288084>

Universities say admissions plan 'risks Scottish schooling'

Universities have told Gavin Williamson that proposals to reform course admissions could undermine the distinctive structure of Scottish secondary schooling. The warning to Boris Johnson's Education Secretary came in response to a UK Government consultation on whether to move to a post-qualification entry system that would see individuals receive and accept offers after they get exam results. Mr Williamson has said the current arrangement, which is based on predicted grades, is complex, lacks transparency and could, in some cases, "breed low aspiration and unfairness". There is particular concern over evidence indicating that unconditional offers can lead to disadvantaged students "undermatching". This means they end up studying courses, or at institutions, with lower entry requirements than those to which they might have gained access based on actual results. However, Universities Scotland (US), which represents the higher education sector north of the Border, said measures outlined in the consultation document presented a range of problems. "The proposed reforms are largely focused on English pupils sitting A-levels," it said in its response. "We have significant concerns about any reforms which could undermine the

Scottish education system, and in particular the role of S6 and of Advanced Higher qualifications. "A post-qualification system which encouraged learners to apply to university with grades achieved at the end of S5 could impact on schools' ability to resource Advanced Higher qualifications, thereby disadvantaging Scottish students who wish to study high-demand professional subjects such as Medicine or Dentistry, or who wish to study at world-leading institutions in the rest of the UK which require Advanced Highers."

<https://www.heraldscotland.com/news/19343197.university-reform-risks-structure-scottish-schooling/>

Watching Brief – International and Further Education

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International

Updated UK International Education Strategy

In February 2021 the government published its updated [International Education Strategy](#) (also see [Briefing paper](#)), confirming targets set in the previous 2019 strategy: 600,000 international higher education students per year and education exports of £35 billion per year, by 2030.

Updates on progress against the 2019 strategy included:

- appointment of Sir Steve Smith as International Education Champion
- introduction of a new [Graduate Route](#) for international students (see November 2020 Watching Brief)
- introduction of a new points-based immigration route, with [Student Route](#) and Child routes
- Introduction of [Turing Scheme](#) for overseas student placements from September 2021 (replacing Erasmus+ for UK students).

The strategy proposes a number of areas which are aimed at helping to meet the headline 2030 aims on student numbers and value of exports: • The International Education Champion • Building lasting global partnerships • Enhancing the international student experience from application to employment • A new international teaching qualification, 'International Qualified Teacher Status' • Increase export opportunities for UK chartered professional bodies and UK special educational needs and disabilities providers

EU students

The 2021-22 academic year will see the end of home-student status for EU students.

International recruitment 2021-22

The impact of the pandemic on international student numbers in 2020-21 appears to have been less dramatic than initially predicted, although final numbers have yet to be confirmed. Uncertainties remain for 2021-22, especially as international travel restrictions continue to change, but there are some grounds for optimism. A [report on agent sentiment](#) (March

2021), highlighted in [THES](#), indicates that student decisions about study abroad destinations for 2021-22 are more influenced by border controls than by number of COVID cases. The report suggests that the UK, alongside Canada and USA, are seen as open and welcoming, whereas New Zealand and Australia, with tighter border controls, as viewed as less welcoming. In July 2021 the government also confirmed that [visa flexibility](#) for international students would be extended into the 2021-22 academic year. Students who began UK courses online from the start of the 2020-21 academic year will have an extended deadline for arrival in the UK and will be eligible for post-study work visas.

Support for displaced scholars

A [report](#) published by the Institute of International Education (IIE) marked the centenary year of IIE and highlighted the remarkable achievements and impacts of academics supported by the IIE Scholar Rescue Fund (IIE-SRF). IIE-SRF was established in 2002 and is a global programme that funds fellowships for threatened and displaced scholars.

Further Education

White Paper

January 2021 saw the publication of the FE white paper "[Skills for jobs: lifelong learning for opportunity and growth](#)", heralded as "exciting and bold" by Gavin Williamson. The paper sets out key priorities which include:

- give employers a greater say in the development of skills
- provide higher level technical skills
- provide a flexible, lifetime skills guarantee - including a flexible lifelong loan entitlement of 4 years post-18 education (from 2025, with consultation in 2021)
- simplify and reform funding and accountability for providers
- support outstanding teaching – including a new recruitment campaign to attract talented teachers to FE

Commentators ([FE News](#), [WonkHE](#), [FE Week](#)) were somewhat underwhelmed, finding that the paper largely repeated or built on previous reforms, rather than presenting exciting or bold new ideas.

An **FE workforce** [data collection project](#) promised in the white paper will open on July 12th 2021

A levels

In January 2021 the government confirmed that A level and AS level grades regulated by Ofqual in 2021 would be awarded based on [teacher assessment](#). Teacher/centre assessed grades were also confirmed for A level students in [Wales](#) and [Northern Ireland](#) and for [Scottish Highers and Advanced Highers](#), and for vocational, technical and other general qualifications (VTQs) used for progression to higher education (including some BTECs, IB and EPQs). A/AS level results are due to be released on 10th August 2021.