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## Hansard

[UK Parliament](#) > [Hansard](#) > [Commons: 14 January 2010](#) > [Commons Chamber](#) > [Oral Answers to Questions](#)

# Oral Answers to Questions

## Volume 503: debated on Thursday 14 January 2010

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## Business, Innovation and Skills

*The Minister of State was asked—*

### Royal Mail

**John Robertson** >

(Glasgow, North-West) (Lab)

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1. Whether he has had discussions with Royal Mail on job security for its employees. (Unique identification number 310575 (Unique identification number ))

**The Minister for Business, Innovation and Skills** >

(Mr. Pat McFadden)

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During the dispute before Christmas, we kept in touch with both sides, encouraging an agreement on the modernisation of Royal Mail. Those talks are continuing, and I believe that in the context of falling mail volumes and the greater use of new technology, both Royal Mail and representatives of the work force understand that there are likely to be fewer people working for Royal Mail in the future.

**John Robertson** >

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I thank my right hon. Friend for his answer, although I am disappointed that he is perhaps not taking a more active part in the discussions. What does he plan to do about the apparently ever-growing pensions deficit? Do the Government not have something to do on that? Should they not be helping Royal Mail and the Communication Workers Union and its members to ensure that they get a better settlement?

**Mr. McFadden** >

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We have certainly helped Royal Mail and its work force by putting considerable finance, on behalf of the taxpayer, into it over the past decade. Just three years ago, we lent the company £1.2 billion to finance its much-needed modernisation. The mediator in the talks taking place now is Roger Poole, with whom I regularly keep in touch. The important thing is that both the work force and management reach an agreement to carry forward the modernisation.

My hon. Friend also mentioned the pension deficit. That is an issue for Royal Mail. We put forward a proposal to deal with it, as part of the Postal Services Bill, but I am afraid that many people were opposed to that package, although we made it clear that it was a package, and not something from which items could be picked out one by one.

**Peter Luff** >

(Mid-Worcestershire) (Con)

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Job security for Royal Mail's employees, and indeed the security of its competitors' employees, is threatened by the continuing regulatory uncertainty in the sector. Will the Government use the Digital Economy Bill to introduce the regulatory change aspects in the Postal Services Bill, because those particular issues are not related to the wider issues of the future ownership of Royal Mail?

**Mr. McFadden** >

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We do not plan to separate out the regulation part of the postal services package that we proposed, as is the case with the pension proposals, which I just mentioned. The priority for Royal Mail now is that the talks succeed in reaching an agreement on the much-needed modernisation, because mail volumes are falling around the world and new technology is not going to go away. That is definitely in the interests of Royal Mail, its work force and the general public.

**John Thurso** >

(Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross) (LD)

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May I take this opportunity to pay tribute to postmen and women, certainly in my part of the world, who were pretty valiant in the cold weather, getting the mail through?

The regulatory aspect of the postal service is critical, as the Hooper report made clear. At the moment, Postcomm is in limbo from having half departed but not arrived at its new destination. What are the Government doing to ensure that in the limbo created by abandoning the Bill the regulatory framework will be improved in the way needed?

**Mr. McFadden** >

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I agree with the hon. Gentleman about the valiant work that postmen and women do. They underpin the universal service at the heart of our postal system, and we are determined to preserve that for the future. However, I am afraid that I cannot agree with him that the regulatory system is in limbo. It is true that we had plans to change the regulatory system, but Postcomm is in place, it is the established regulator, it has a job to do, and it should continue to do it.

**Mr. Jonathan Djanogly** >

(Huntingdon) (Con)

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As the hon. Member for Glasgow, North-West (John Robertson) and my hon. Friend the Member for Mid-Worcestershire (Peter Luff) have said, Royal Mail requires structural reform if it and its employees are to move forward. However, the unions and Labour Back Benchers have forced a weak Government to pull the Postal Services Bill, so what, other than a Conservative Government, will deliver any action for reform?

**Mr. McFadden** >[Share](#)

We did not proceed with the Postal Services Bill because the market conditions did not allow us to get the best value for money for the taxpayer. The hon. Gentleman spoke about his plans, but the right hon. and learned Member for Rushcliffe (Mr. Clarke) has been clear about those: the Conservatives would privatise the Royal Mail. That is not our proposal and it was not our proposal in the past.

## University Centres

**Dr. Phyllis Starkey** >

(Milton Keynes, South-West) (Lab)

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2. What plans he has for new university centres; and if he will make a statement. (Unique identification number 310576 (Unique identification number ))

**The Minister for Higher Education and Intellectual Property** >

(Mr. David Lammy)

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As set out in “Higher Ambitions”, we are committed to the enhancement of locally accessible higher education through a new University Challenge initiative. Since 2003, the Higher Education Funding Council England has announced support for 17 new local HE centres. In October last year, the HEFCE announced that six new proposals would be taken forward, including one in Milton Keynes.

**Dr. Starkey** >[Share](#)

The criteria for University Challenge could have been custom written for the University Centre Milton Keynes. We are a city with a large population of young people, but a relatively low participation rate in higher education, and the local centre obviously encourages them to participate. It is based in the heart of our business district and has a proven record. I commend the University Centre Milton Keynes to the Minister and hope that he will ensure that it is at the top of the list for further funding.

**Mr. Lammy** >[Share](#)

I commend my hon. Friend’s continued championing of widening participation in higher education in her constituency. Milton Keynes as a city has perhaps done more than any other in the country to widen participation, being the home of the Open university, as well as the new centre. It is right to say that a strong bid was made, and, having seen the site and the proposed plans for the centre, I certainly welcomed it. My hon. Friend will know that, beyond the next spending review, it is hoped that the bid will come to fruition.

**Miss Julie Kirkbride** >

(Bromsgrove) (Con)

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The Government have long had an aspiration for 50 per cent. of young people to go into higher education. Given the right hon. Gentleman’s savage cuts in the university sector, can he tell us in what year he expects to meet that 50 per cent. aspiration and what percentage of young people will be going to university next year?

**Mr. Lammy** >[Share](#)

I am pleased to say that we have more young people at university than ever before in our history, and we will have even more next year. However, if the £610 million of cuts to my Department's budget were enacted, which was the Conservative proposal 18 months ago, that would mean a reduction of many thousands.

**Mr. Barry Sheerman** >

(Huddersfield) (Lab/Co-op)

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Does my right hon. Friend agree that we have to exercise a degree of caution as the number of universities proliferates? Universities are at the very heart of many of our communities, with the wealth and employment that they bring—Huddersfield university is the biggest employer in my constituency—but we must ensure that we maintain quality wherever we have a university campus.

**Mr. Lammy** >[Share](#)

My hon. Friend is right that we must keep an eye on quality. We must never be complacent about standards in higher education in this country. There is a reason why British universities are among the very best in the world, so while we seek to extend the reach of higher education more deeply into communities that have not experienced it, he is right to keep his eye on standards and quality.

**Stephen Williams** >

(Bristol, West) (LD)

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The University Challenge programme was originally launched in rather different economic circumstances from those of today. Is it not the truth that we can now look forward to a period of contraction, limited opportunities for students and, what is more, higher tuition fees after the general election?

**Mr. Lammy** >[Share](#)

It is surprising to hear the hon. Gentleman mention tuition fees in his opening question, given the five positions on that that we have had from the Liberal Democrats over just the past year. I can confirm that there would be severe contraction if it ever came to pass that the Liberal Democrats were in power, because the money that we have seen as a result of our policy would be diminished, and so would the sector.

**Mr. David Willetts** >

(Havant) (Con)

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Has the Minister had an opportunity to read the piece on universities by Lord Mandelson in today's edition of *The Guardian*? I am sure that the Minister is familiar with that newspaper's comments and clarifications section, which we all enjoy. May I invite him to write something to that section correcting the record and setting out the figures showing how much further the unit of resource in universities is going to be cut as a result of the Government's proposals? As we look at ways of easing pressures on universities, will he consider our proposal? Does he agree that we should not expect researchers and academics carrying out blue-skies research to produce impact statements—invented records of impact—and that the best thing to do would be to delay the research excellence framework until we have had time to work out whether impact can really be measured?

**Mr. Lammy** >[Share](#)

The hon. Gentleman continues his walk on the road to Damascus with this amazing U-turn on policy. I enjoy *The Guardian* every day, and I enjoy all that is said by the Secretary of State for my Department. I can confirm that the hon. Gentleman got his figures on the unit of resource wrong yesterday. I am surprised, given that the hon. Gentleman recognises the importance of science, technology and research, that he does not recognise the importance of the public being able to see the impact that that research—paid for by taxpayers' money—could have. I am also surprised that he is jumping on yet another bandwagon.

## Pleural Plaques

**Mr. David Anderson** >

(Blaydon) (Lab)

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3. What recent discussions he has had with the Ministry of Justice on his Department's potential financial responsibilities for people with pleural plaques. (Unique identification number 310577 (Unique identification number ))

**The Minister for Business, Innovation and Skills** >

(Mr. Pat McFadden)

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I have had no recent discussions with the Ministry of Justice on this subject, but I understand that this is a long-running issue and that hon. Members are keen to see it brought to a conclusion.

**Mr. Anderson** >

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I thank the Minister for that response. He must also be aware of the huge support for this matter across the House, as demonstrated by the fact that a private Member's Bill on the subject was passed almost unanimously here and has gained support in the House of Lords. Also, an attempt by insurers in Scotland last week to prevent the Scottish law from being changed so that people could get compensation was decisively turned down. Surely some financial responsibility must be taken, at least for the people who worked for British Shipbuilders and other previously nationalised organisations. My right hon. Friend's Department and the MOJ also have a moral responsibility to get together and sort this out.

**Mr. McFadden** >

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As I said, I do understand that hon. Members are keen to reach a conclusion on this subject. I also understand that a meeting has been scheduled to take place shortly in which my hon. Friend and others will meet the Secretary of State for Justice and the Prime Minister. The Government are aware that we need to respond not only to this but to issues relating to other respiratory conditions.

## Minimum Wage (Tipping)

**Mr. Adrian Bailey** >

(West Bromwich, West) (Lab/Co-op)

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4. What estimate he has made of the number of people who are likely to be affected by regulations governing the use of tips to make up levels of pay to the national minimum wage rate. (Unique identification number 310578 (Unique identification number ))

**The Minister for Business, Innovation and Skills** >

(Mr. Pat McFadden)

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The Government estimate that just over 60,000 workers could benefit from the change to the minimum wage regulations. This will prevent tips from being counted towards the national minimum wage. Customers do not expect the tips that they leave to be used to make up the minimum wage, and the changes that we have introduced mean that tips can no longer be used in that way.

**Mr. Bailey** >

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I thank the Minister for his reply and I welcome the new regulations. For many young people, waiting in restaurants is their first engagement with the world of work, and it is very disillusioning for them to have the rewards for their hard work taken by unscrupulous employers. Will he ensure that, following the introduction of the regulations, the situation is monitored and that any unscrupulous employers are exposed as a result?

**Mr. McFadden** >

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My hon. Friend makes an important point. Alongside the change in the law that we have made, we need proper enforcement and proper transparency in regard to what happens to tips. The public have a right to know what happens to the money that they voluntarily leave to reward the service they receive. The Government have also toughened up the law on the enforcement of the minimum wage, and there are now better arrears systems for employees who are not paid the minimum wage and tougher penalties for the minority of employers who do not pay it. We have also brought together the helplines for different rights at work to form a single pay and work rights helpline, which will make it easier for people to report abuses. The number is 0800 9172368.

**Mr. Edward Leigh** >

(Gainsborough) (Con)

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My daughter recently worked in a restaurant, which had an optional service charge of 12.5 per cent., but none of that went to the staff. Is that not scandalous?

**Mr. McFadden** >

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That is precisely why, alongside the change in the law to make sure that tips and gratuities cannot be used to make up the minimum wage, we want the industry to promote a code of transparency to ensure that the customer knows exactly what happens to the money they give. If I went into a restaurant and thought that the staff were not receiving anything of the tip, why would I leave one? I want to reward for the service we receive, and that is what the customer wants. That is why we have changed the law and want to see more transparency in addition to it.

## NEETs

**Mr. Philip Hollobone** >

(Kettering) (Con)

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5. What recent estimate he has made of the number of young people in (a) Kettering constituency, (b) Northamptonshire and (c) England who are not in employment, education or training. (Unique identification number 310579 (Unique identification number ))

**The Minister for Further Education, Skills, Apprenticeships and Consumer Affairs** >

(Kevin Brennan)

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In the third quarter of 2009, there were 1,082,000, or 18 per cent., of 16 to 24-year-olds who were not in education, employment or training. That estimate comes from the labour force survey. The latest information for Northamptonshire is from the 2008 annual population survey, which estimates that there were 12,000, or 14 per cent., of people in that age group who were NEETs. However, those figures are not directly comparable with the England figure; the sample sizes are too small to give a constituency estimate.

**Mr. Hollobone** >

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In many ways, the severity of the recession has had its hardest impact on young people trying to enter the job market. I know from my own constituents the difficulties that many families across the Kettering parliamentary constituency are facing. What are the Government going to do to get our young people into work so that they can start their careers in gainful employment? If they cannot do that for young people, what training and education opportunities are the Government going to provide?

**Kevin Brennan** >

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We have, of course, introduced the September guarantee, which means that every 16 or 17-year-old is offered a suitable place in education and training. We have rebuilt apprenticeships and we have signalled our commitment to apprenticeships for young people with the £2,500 golden hello for employers to provide up to 5,000 new places for 16 and 17-year-olds. The Government are doing a great deal to help young people who find themselves out of work, although I should say that the NEETs figures include many people who are not in that position, as only about 37 per cent. are actually seeking work or training.

**Mr. David Evennett** >

(Bexleyheath and Crayford) (Con)

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When we debated this issue yesterday, the Government appeared totally complacent. With more than 1 million young people not in education, employment or training and with the second highest level of youth unemployment in Europe, this Government have let down a generation of young people. Is the Minister not ashamed? As we face another looming crisis this year on university applications, will he take up our proposals, which have been fully costed and funded, for an additional 10,000 university places?

**Kevin Brennan** >

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We are neither ashamed nor complacent, and we will not take up that proposal for the reason I set out in yesterday's debate—because it is not properly funded. Let me point out to the hon. Gentleman that the key issue is how quickly young people move out of unemployment and into work. Six month-plus 18-to-24 unemployment is currently 108,800; in 1997, it was 169,000; in 1993, it was 415,000; and in 1985, during the last Conservative Government, it was 600,000—six times as many people in that age group unemployed for six months or more. That is the difference between us and them.

## Science Education (Universities)

**Alistair Burt** >

(North-East Bedfordshire) (Con)

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6. What recent representations he has received on the future of science education in universities. (Unique identification number 310580 (Unique identification number ))

**The Minister for Higher Education and Intellectual Property** >

(Mr. David Lammy)

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I met university vice-chancellors on Tuesday and I reaffirm the Department's commitment, made in "Higher Ambitions", to science and engineering.

**Alistair Burt** >[Share](#)

On 3 November, the Minister denounced as a caricature that he did not recognise the question I put to him here on the disconnection between school and university science, which was leading to remedial courses for undergraduates who were inadequately prepared at school for university. Has he since had a chance to see the remarks of Dr. Richard Pike, the chief executive of the Royal Society of Chemistry, who has made this far from novel or original point yet again, concluding with the phrase:

"Until we get to grips with this fiasco... this country risks sliding down the road to mediocrity"?

If the Minister will not recognise my description of the problem, perhaps he will recognise Dr. Pike's.

**Mr. Lammy** >[Share](#)

What I recognise are the figures published today, which confirm that there has been a 12 per cent. rise in A-level entries for maths and further maths and a 3.8 per cent. rise for physics, as well as a 3 per cent. rise in undergraduates taking science subjects and a 7 per cent. rise in postgraduates doing so. I suggest the hon. Gentleman goes back to the very foundation of science: the evidence. He should look at the figures for what young people are doing and recognise that there have been massive advances for science subjects as a result of funding from this Government.

**Dr. Brian Iddon** >

(Bolton, South-East) (Lab)

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When vice-chancellors are under financial pressure, they find that the greatest savings in universities can be made by closing science and engineering departments. That is what has happened in the past, and that is what is beginning to happen this year. Will my right hon. Friend keep a very close eye on the way in which vice-chancellors make their savings?

**Mr. Lammy** >[Share](#)

I hope my hon. Friend recognises that we have sought to ensure that the money is in place, particularly to prioritise science, technology, engineering and maths. We set that out most recently in "Higher Ambitions". Our university science departments are key to our "New industry, new jobs" agenda for sectors such as the life sciences, biotechnology and advanced manufacturing, which will have to be centre stage to our economic recovery. I recognise that this is an important issue, therefore, notwithstanding the research and assessment exercise results, which might lead some vice-chancellors to decide to withdraw from certain areas and prioritise others.

**Adam Afriyie** >

(Windsor) (Con)

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The largest research council, the Science and Technology Facilities Council, has already been forced to cut research grants by 10 per cent. and fellowships by 25 per cent. and to withdraw from 27 significant projects. The Government have allocated no money whatever to their ring-fenced science budget beyond this year, yet last night the science Minister confirmed—this has been confirmed again here this morning—that £600 million will be cut from the science budget over the next two years. Can the Minister explain how a specific sum—this £600 million—can be cut from a budget that has nothing in it?

**Mr. Lammy** >

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The hon. Gentleman has got his facts wrong, which is unusual. It is not £600 million from the science budget; it is £600 million up to 2013 from the entirety of the just under £13 billion higher education budget from which we have asked savings to be found. We are committed to the science ring fence and the 10-year framework for science, and it is wrong to caricature the STFC, to which we gave £40 million just last year, in that way.

## Unionlearn

**Tony Lloyd** >

(Manchester, Central) (Lab)

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7. What estimate he has made of the number of people who have completed training courses under the unionlearn programme since 2006; and if he will make a statement. (Unique identification number 310581 (Unique identification number ))

**The Minister for Further Education, Skills, Apprenticeships and Consumer Affairs** >

(Kevin Brennan)

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Since 2006, trade unions, supported by unionlearn, have helped over 570,000 workers access a training course, including over 80,000 with poor basic literacy and numeracy skills. Detailed information on completions is not collated centrally, but Leeds university business school is currently undertaking a comprehensive analysis of learner outcomes, which will provide robust evidence of the percentage completing courses.

**Tony Lloyd** >

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Will my hon. Friend confirm that those 500,000-plus learners through unionlearn include many people who would not have accessed skills training without it, which is why it is so popular with employers—it is in the national interest and the interest of companies? Also, has he received representations from other parties about whether they are prepared to commit to unionlearn?

**Kevin Brennan** >

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I can confirm my hon. Friend's first point. Interestingly, in yesterday's debate, the hon. Member for Havant (Mr. Willetts) said he was very much in favour of unionlearn because it was so cost-effective. I do not know whether that is a pledge, but one thing is clear: this is a Labour Government policy that the Conservative party opposed, but which is now endorsed by its Front-Bench team as very good value for money.

## Student Maintenance Support

**Andrew Stunell** >

(Hazel Grove) (LD)

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8. What plans he has for the future of student maintenance support; and if he will make a statement. (Unique identification number 310583 (Unique identification number ))

**The Minister for Higher Education and Intellectual Property** >

(Mr. David Lammy)

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The independent review of higher education funding and student finance will analyse the challenges facing, and opportunities for, higher education and their implications for student financing and support. It will make recommendations to Government on the future balance of financial contributions by taxpayers, students, graduates and employers, and the Government will not pre-empt the outcome of the review.

**Andrew Stunell** >

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May I direct the Minister to the issue of maintenance allowances, which is the subject of my question? Is he at all satisfied with the future direction, given that 28,000 students are not receiving their maintenance allowances, including several hundred in Stockport, who, even after Christmas, are stranded without the money they deserve?

**Mr. Lammy** >

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That is why I set up the independent review led by Sir Deian Hopkin. I think that we all recognise that serious issues have arisen in relation to the Student Loans Company's performance this year. Its chair and chief executive have apologised, and I am pleased that it has now dealt with the backlog. Many thousands of applications continue to come in, as many students have been delaying seeking their finance. What is important is for next year's process to be far better than this year's, and that is the undertaking that the chair and chief executive have made.

**Mr. David Chaytor** >

(Bury, North) (Lab)

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Forty-three per cent. of students in higher education are part-time students, and future growth will largely come from part-time and mature students. Is there not a powerful argument for raising the cap on full-time undergraduate fees in order to develop a unified system, giving part-time students the same access to financial support that full-time students enjoy?

**Mr. Lammy** >

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My hon. Friend puts his point forcefully. I shall not be drawn on the outcome of the review, but I can say that he is right to underline the position of part-time students and to call for better equity. That is why we have asked Lord Browne to examine the position of part-time students, in particular.

## Grocery Ombudsman

**Andrew George** >

(St. Ives) (LD)

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9. What plans he has to respond to the Competition Commission's recommendation for the creation of a grocery supply chain ombudsman. (Unique identification number 310584 (Unique identification number ))

**The Minister for Further Education, Skills, Apprenticeships and Consumer Affairs** >

(Kevin Brennan)

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My Department published the Government's response to the Competition Commission's recommendation for the creation of a grocery supply chain ombudsman yesterday. The Government have accepted the need for independent enforcement of the grocery supply code of practice, and we will consult on the detail of the body and its powers.

**Andrew George** >[Share](#)

As I chair the grocery market action group, perhaps I should declare an interest. I have been campaigning for this for the best part of 10 years. Therefore, I warmly welcome the Minister's announcement yesterday—I have to say, it was not before time. What timetable does he envisage for the implementation of this vital recommendation, bearing in mind that although the grocery supply code of practice will be unenforced, it will be implemented on 4 February?

**Kevin Brennan** >[Share](#)

On the time taken, the Competition Commission made its formal request to the Government only last August. In the meantime, I have met the hon. Gentleman and his group, the British Retail Consortium, the National Farmers Union, the Food and Drink Federation, Consumer Focus, Divine Chocolate and the Office of Fair Trading, so a proper consultation has been taking place. The formal consultation will start shortly after the code comes into force on 4 February. How quickly we can implement the measures depends on the solution and whether or not it needs legislation, and that will ultimately depend on the design of the body.

**Mr. Lindsay Hoyle** >

(Chorley) (Lab)

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Of course we welcome movement on this from the Government, but we need real teeth and real power. The power of the supermarkets puts pressure on the farmers, and we want fair farm-gate prices and a purchasing policy for local communities. That would provide the teeth and the power we need. We need that commitment from the Minister.

**Kevin Brennan** >[Share](#)

Of course the purpose of the enforcement body is to enforce the code, which has been broadly welcomed by everyone as having the teeth necessary. We just need to ensure that it is independently enforced, and we have accepted the case for that. Ultimately, we accepted it on the grounds that the Competition Commission made it clear that it believed that in the long term this was in the interests of shoppers and consumers, because it would provide the kind of certainty in the supply chain that will produce better prices and choices for them.

**Mr. Mark Field** >

(Cities of London and Westminster) (Con)

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Does the Minister regard the appointment and powers of this ombudsman to be complementary to or in addition to the existing powers of the OFT and the Competition Commission, which, as he will know, have held almost continuous inquiries into the supermarket sector over the past decade or so?

**Kevin Brennan** >[Share](#)

The powers of those bodies remain as they were previously in the event of there being matters that they need to investigate. The job of the independent ombudsman will principally be to enforce the code, but we are also consulting, as part of how we design the body, on exactly what the powers will be.

## Agency Workers

**Mr. Chris Mullin** >

(Sunderland, South) (Lab)

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10. What plans he has for legislation on the regulation of agency workers; and if he will make a statement. (Unique identification number 310585 (Unique identification number ))

**The Minister for Business, Innovation and Skills >**

(Mr. Pat McFadden)

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The Government want to get the legislation to implement the agency workers directive on to the statute book by the end of this Parliament. We will shortly table the relevant regulations and publish the Government's response to the recent consultation.

**Mr. Mullin >**[Share](#)

I am grateful to my right hon. Friend, but it is a pity that this has been left until so late in the day. How confident is he that the matter will be dealt with before Dissolution?

**Mr. McFadden >**[Share](#)

That is the aim. My hon. Friend says that it has been left until late in the day, but if he looks across Europe he will see that we are legislating ahead of many other countries. I do not accept that there has been an unacceptable delay, but it is our aim to get this provision on the statute book by the end of the Parliament. As I have said, we will be publishing the relevant regulations shortly.

**John Penrose >**

(Weston-super-Mare) (Con)

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In October, the Government announced that this regulation would not come into force until 2011 to avoid harming Britain's recovery after the recession. Here we are, however, rushing it through Parliament just weeks before a general election. A cynic might wonder whether this is anything to do with the Labour party's pressing need for election funds from its trade union paymasters, who demanded this measure as part of the infamous Warwick agreement. Will the Minister take this opportunity to reassure those cynics that nothing could be further from the Government's mind and that they would never put short-term, grubby party political interests ahead of doing the right thing for the country?

**Mr. McFadden >**[Share](#)

Our aim in bringing forward these regulations is to abide by the agreement that we reached in Europe to ensure fairness for agency workers and flexibility for employers. That was the basis of the TUC-CBI agreement, and it stands in stark contrast to the Opposition's pledge to downgrade the employment rights that have been agreed in Europe. There will be a very clear choice on this matter when it comes to the election.

**Adam Price >**

(Carmarthen, East and Dinefwr) (PC)

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Does the Minister accept that this change has long been campaigned for? There have been two series of consultation and there is now no impediment to ensuring that agency and temporary workers get the justice for which they have been calling for so many years.

**Mr. McFadden >**

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The hon. Gentleman is right to say that this has been under discussion for some time. It took a long time to get agreement in Europe. We were able to reach agreement on the basis of an agreement in the UK between the TUC and the CBI. We then successfully negotiated for that to be reflected in the European directive. That was something we could do only because this country, under this Government, is properly engaged with our European allies. I dread to think how we would negotiate in Europe if the Opposition, who are isolated in Europe, were trying to negotiate with 27 other countries.

## Libel Laws (Science Sector)

**Dr. Evan Harris** >

(Oxford, West and Abingdon) (LD)

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11. What recent discussions he has had with ministerial colleagues on the effects on the science sector of libel laws. (Unique identification number 310586 (Unique identification number ))

**The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Business, Innovation and Skills** >

(Ian Lucas)

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Ministers at the Department for Business, Innovation and Skills have held no recent discussions with ministerial colleagues on the effects of libel laws on the science sector. The Justice Secretary leads on the issue of libel law. Professor Beddington, the Government's chief scientific adviser, and officials are in discussions with colleagues from the Ministry of Justice to ensure that science and engineering receive appropriate attention in their consideration of libel law.

**Dr. Harris** >

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I am grateful to the Minister for that answer. He will be aware that Professor Beddington has set out his concerns and will, I hope, be feeding them into the Government review. However, does the Minister accept that there is genuine concern among publishers of medical journals, for example, about the chilling effect of the threat of libel actions? Would he, or one of his colleagues—perhaps the Minister for Science and Innovation—be willing to meet a delegation of scientists so that they can effectively feed in scientists' concerns to the Ministry of Justice?

**Ian Lucas** >

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The hon. Gentleman makes a very important point. The Department is aware of the concern in the scientific community relating to the chilling effect to which he refers. As I said in my response, the Ministry of Justice leads on this matter. I shall refer his remarks to it, and I undertake to ensure that its Ministers are aware of what he has had to say today. I shall keep in touch with him on this matter.

**Rob Marris** >

(Wolverhampton, South-West) (Lab)

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May I suggest to my hon. Friend that he as a Minister should have an early meeting with the Justice Ministers on this issue? It directly affects his Department because these wretched libel laws will restrict the publication of scientific research, which will have an effect on research and development and, in particular, on manufacturing in our economy, which is his responsibility.

**Ian Lucas** >

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I fully accept that science, innovation and manufacturing are at the heart of this Department's agenda. This is a very important issue: it is important that we have responsible, intelligent and creative scientific debate, and the review is taking place under the auspices of the Ministry of Justice because we want to ensure that we have the correct legal environment for that debate to happen.

## Venture Capital

**Mr. Henry Bellingham** >

(North-West Norfolk) (Con)

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12. When he next expects to meet small business organisations to discuss Government funding for venture capital projects. (Unique identification number 310587 (Unique identification number ))

**The Minister for Regional Economic Development and Co-ordination** >

(Ms Rosie Winterton)

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The Minister for Trade, Investment and Small Business and the City Minister regularly meet the Small Business Finance Forum, which brings together the banks, small business representative organisations and the Government to discuss the economic situation and the availability of finance.

**Mr. Bellingham** >

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Will the Minister turn her attention to the Capital for Enterprise Fund, which made its first investments in May last year? Will she confirm that her Department has put up £50 million in total, and that annual management and administration costs will come to £2.5 million? In other words, over 10 years, the fees to the City and advisers will swallow up half of the Government's total contribution. Has she secured a good deal, or has she been taken for a ride?

**Mr. Speaker** >

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Order. There were at least three questions there, but one short answer will suffice.

**Ms Winterton** >

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I am not sure whether the hon. Gentleman is saying that he would rather that there was no Capital for Enterprise Fund. Since 2000, this Government have committed £400 million to a range of venture capital funds, which has attracted £551 million of private sector investment. Is the hon. Gentleman saying that he does not want such measures to be taken? Does he not want the new measures that will arise from the 2009 pre-Budget report? If we followed the advice of the Opposition, none of these funds would be available to help small business in these difficult times.

## Capital Expenditure

**Andrew Selous** >

(South-West Bedfordshire) (Con)

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13. What estimate he has made of the level of capital expenditure by further education colleges in (a) south Bedfordshire and (b) England in the last 12 months; and if he will make a statement. (Unique identification number 310588 (Unique identification number ))

**The Minister for Further Education, Skills, Apprenticeships and Consumer Affairs >**

(Kevin Brennan)

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In the financial year 2009-10, the Learning and Skills Council will invest £800 million in the development of 66 further education college capital projects across England. They will cost a total of £2.45 billion, and will receive just under £1.8 billion of Government investment in this and the next spending review. The Bedfordshire and Luton area has benefited from £52.8 million in LSC capital grant support since 2001, although in the last 12 months there has been no capital expenditure in South-West Bedfordshire.

**Andrew Selous >**[Share](#)

I am glad that the Minister made the last point, that central Bedfordshire got nothing. Also, the college took on 250 extra students in September for whom it has no funding. I spoke to the principal this morning, and she told me she believes that she is expected to implement the January guarantee with no money. The local learning and skills council thinks that there is some money, but does not know how to access it. Can the Minister help?

**Kevin Brennan >**[Share](#)

I shall certainly be happy to look into that. I know that the hon. Gentleman's local college, which has changed its name, has received £740,000 in support for the capital project development costs that it was not able to go ahead with as a result of the programme. However, I am certainly happy to look into the point that he makes about the January guarantee.

## University Funding

**Ann Winterton >**

(Congleton) (Con)

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14. What his policy is on the future level of funding of universities; and if he will make a statement. (Unique identification number 310590 (Unique identification number))

**The Minister for Higher Education and Intellectual Property >**

(Mr. David Lammy)

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The Government have presided over huge investment in higher education. Spending has risen by some 25 per cent. since 1997, which has significantly increased income and variable fees. Next year, my Department will allocate some £13 billion to higher education, taking into account spend on institutions and students.

**Ann Winterton >**[Share](#)

Universities face total budget cuts of £2.5 billion, and the Business Secretary has said that he will slash funding next year by £535 million. How will those savage cuts affect the quality of teaching and research? In addition—

**Mr. Speaker >**[Share](#)

Order. I think that one question will do. I am extraordinarily grateful, but we need to make progress.

**Mr. Lammy** >[Share](#)

I think that “savage cuts” were the 38 per cent. fall in the unit of resource between 1991 and 1997, which left universities in this country on their knees. What the Government proposed in the grant letter to universities just before Christmas was in fact a saving of 1 per cent.

**Hugh Bayley** >

(City of York) (Lab)

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Will the Minister join me in welcoming today’s launch of the Centre for Low Carbon Futures at the universities of York, Sheffield, Leeds and Hull? Will he look at the £49 million of Research Councils UK money that those universities have received in the past three years for work in this field, and then write to me to let me know what sort of support the research councils, the Technology Strategy Board and the European Commission could give the centre over the next five years or so?

**Mr. Lammy** >[Share](#)

I am very happy to confirm that I will do that. My colleague the Minister for Yorkshire and the Humber will be there. This is a fantastic example of collaboration that cuts to the heart of the future of our economy. I congratulate everyone in the region who is involved, and I undertake to come back to my hon. Friend on what further we can do to support it.

**Mr. Charles Kennedy** >

(Ross, Skye and Lochaber) (LD)

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A number of us were present with principals and vice-chancellors when the Minister spoke to the all-party university group. He spoke about the need for universities to search for cheaper models in the current financial constraints. One principal described that as a potential assault on quality. Will the Minister be mindful of the distinct Scottish ancient universities component, with the four-year honours degree and the three-year ordinary masters degree, in relation to whatever financial constraints are now going to be upon that sector?

**Mr. Lammy** >[Share](#)

I recognise the right hon. Gentleman’s particular expertise as rector of Glasgow university—a very good university—and all that he does to champion higher education. When I spoke to the vice- chancellors, I think I was referring to the excellent progress that we have made on, for example, foundation degrees as a route into higher education and on part-time higher education courses, which have been mentioned already. We must continue to make progress in this area, especially against a backdrop of tighter fiscal spending.

## Topical Questions

**Peter Luff** >

(Mid-Worcestershire) (Con)

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T2. If he will make a statement on his departmental responsibilities. (Unique identification number 310601 (Unique identification number ))

**The Minister for Business, Innovation and Skills** >

(Mr. Pat McFadden)

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Last week the Department published a growth paper setting out what we needed to do to drive forward economic recovery. The priorities included promoting enterprise, better access to finance, securing much-needed infrastructure investment and making the most of the transition to a low-carbon economy. Those are the priorities as we come out of the recession that will ensure that the recovery is sustained in the long term.

**Peter Luff** >[Share](#)

Can a member of the ministerial team reassure me that today's important round-table discussions with institutional investors about how to vote their shares during hostile takeover bids are not just a flash-in-the-pan response to the hostile bid by Kraft for Cadbury, which is unwelcome, but will be the start of an important debate about how institutional investors behave, which is not always in the long-term interests of the UK?

**Mr. McFadden** >[Share](#)

The hon. Gentleman is right to draw attention to the meeting today between the Secretary of State and institutional investors. We should not see the meeting purely through the lens of a single takeover battle. It is important for the long-term health of the economy that we have long-term commitment from institutional investors. That will be at the heart of the discussions that take place today.

**Laura Moffatt** >

(Crawley) (Lab)

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Ceres Power in my constituency is developing a fuel cell that reduces our reliance on carbon by 50 per cent., but it needs to know that the Government are supporting it. Can my hon. Friend the Minister assure me that proper provisions are in place to ensure at this critical stage that the development progresses and we move forward such excellent technologies?

**Mr. McFadden** >[Share](#)

It is always difficult to comment on one case on the hoof, but with the Department of Energy and Climate Change we have published a low-carbon economic strategy. We have put considerable Government resources behind that, a significant part of which is support for the development and manufacture of low-carbon vehicles here in the UK. Low-carbon industries are an essential part of our economic future, and that is why we have put in resources behind them.

**Mark Hunter** >

(Cheadle) (LD)

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T4. What assessment has the Department made of the impact on small businesses of a recent decision of the Payments Council representing the high street banks to phase out the use of cheques? Is he aware that that move is opposed by the Federation of Small Businesses? Does he agree that a large number— (Unique identification number 310603 (Unique identification number ))

**Mr. Speaker** >[Share](#)

Order. We are in topical questions. May I appeal for short questions and short answers? I want to get through as many colleagues as possible.

**Mr. McFadden** >[Share](#)

It is time for a confession: I am a cheque user. If that is old-fashioned, I am afraid that I cannot make an apology for it. I understand that cheque use has declined more widely, but I certainly hope the transition is managed as sensitively and as carefully as possible—for small businesses and for us cheque users.

**Mr. David Anderson** >

(Blaydon) (Lab)

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T3. The development of electrical vehicles in the north-east has been a huge boost for manufacturers such as Tegrel, which is producing a charging station in my constituency. Will the Minister assure me that the Government and the regional development agency One NorthEast will continue to support such work; and that we will support RDAs, unlike the Opposition? (Unique identification number 310602 (Unique identification number ))

**The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Business, Innovation and Skills** >

(Ian Lucas)

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The north-east is a real hub of low-carbon technology development in the automotive sector. Nissan and Smith Electric Vehicles, which I have already visited, are at the forefront, and the investment at Nissan's battery factory is going ahead. I should be very interested in seeing the company to which my hon. Friend refers.

**Mr. Kenneth Clarke** >

(Rushcliffe) (Con)

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Will the Minister of State confirm that manufacturing, as a proportion of total GDP in this country, has declined by no less than 9 per cent. during this Government's period in office? That is the fastest rate of decline in our history. How can the Government's new industrial strategy, and their claim that they will revive this country's manufacturing capacity, be taken seriously when they have scandalously neglected the subject and the whole sector for their entire period in office?

**Mr. McFadden** >[Share](#)

Manufacturing is still immensely important to the UK economy and to the region that I have the honour of representing. In the past 18 months alone, we have given significant support to the aerospace sector, to new nuclear and to other low-carbon manufacturing industries. It is sad that that support, through the strategic investment fund, was described by the right hon. and learned Gentleman's colleague, the hon. Member for Windsor (Adam Afriyie), as a disgrace. We do not think it is a disgrace; we think it is essential, and that is why we are committed to supporting manufacturing in this country.

**Mr. Dennis Skinner** >

(Bolsover) (Lab)

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Now that the Scottish Parliament has taken steps to overturn the October 2007 ruling on pleural plaques, can we have a guarantee that we will do the same thing here, for the rest of the British Isles, as speedily as possible and before the election?

**Mr. McFadden** >[Share](#)

I do not know whether my hon. Friend was present when my hon. Friend the Member for Blaydon (Mr. Anderson) asked me about that matter a short time ago, but I appreciate that hon. Members wish to see a solution to it. I understand that a meeting involving hon. Members, the Prime Minister and the Secretary of State for Justice will take place in the near future, and I am sure that they will have heard the comments of my hon. Friend the Member for Bolsover (Mr. Skinner).

**Tom Brake** >

(Carshalton and Wallington) (LD)

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T5. I attended the fifth anniversary breakfast of the Givers Gain business networking organisation this morning. The small and medium-sized enterprises there said that they are being crippled by red tape. What plans does the Secretary of State have to reduce the regulatory burden on SMEs? (Unique identification number 310604 (Unique identification number ))

**Ian Lucas** >[Share](#)

For the first time, this Government have published the forward regulatory programme—the regulations that the Government will bring forward. The process with this Government, unlike any previous one, has been open, so our engagement with small businesses and the bodies that represent them has been very close indeed. We are always open to hear from businesses about particular regulations, and I always listen to what they have to say.

**Jacqui Smith** >

(Redditch) (Lab)

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An increasing number of sub-postmasters face action for the misappropriation of funds that, they believe, is based on shortcomings in the Horizon computer system. Given those numbers, does my right hon. Friend agree that it is time for the Post Office to review those cases and that system so that sub-postmasters can be confident that the computer systems that are put in place are there to support them, not to put their livelihoods at risk?

**Mr. McFadden** >[Share](#)

I have received representations about that issue from hon. Members on behalf of sub-postmasters in their constituencies. The Post Office tells me that it has looked into all those complaints, and says that it has faith in the integrity of the Horizon system. However, I am sure that if there are further complaints, the Post Office will properly examine them, as it should do.

**Mr. Ben Wallace** >

(Lancaster and Wyre) (Con)

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T6. Myerscough college in my constituency is an excellent mixed FE and HE college that awards degrees by third-party universities. In the light of the current financial situation and the fact that the Higher Education Funding Council for England has been supportive, yet unable to fund the HE capacity, will the Minister consider a review of HE funding in FE colleges to ensure that money gets to the front line as quickly and efficiently as possible? (Unique identification number 310605 (Unique identification number ))

**The Minister for Higher Education and Intellectual Property** >

(Mr. David Lammy)

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We have increased funding by 25 per cent. In “Higher Ambitions” we set out the importance of HE provision in FE colleges, which extends the reach of higher education to those from non-traditional backgrounds and, often, poorer socio-economic groups. I am happy to look into the specifics of the hon. Gentleman’s college, but the Government’s commitment in this area is clear.

**Natascha Engel** >

(North-East Derbyshire) (Lab)

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Will the Minister take this opportunity to put an end to the exploitation of and discrimination against young people at work who are under 22 and who, if they are earning the minimum wage, earn almost a full pound less than their adult counterparts? For me, and surely for him, this has to be an issue of equal pay for equal work.

**Mr. McFadden** >[Share](#)

As my hon. Friend knows, the Government decide the minimum wage rates on the basis of recommendations from the independent Low Pay Commission, which has on it representatives of employers and employees, as well as independent experts. The commission has recommended that youth rates are justified for the minimum wage. We, too, want to see maximum employment chances for young people. I can tell my hon. Friend that this year the commission recommended that the adult rate for the minimum wage kick in at the age of 21 rather than 22. That recommendation has been accepted by the Government, and it will come into force in October.

**Mr. Peter Bone** >

(Wellingborough) (Con)

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T7. The Government have scandalously neglected manufacturing in Wellingborough, which has resulted in unemployment increasing from 1,407 to more than 3,000—an increase of 114 per cent. Would any of the Ministers like to come to the Dispatch Box and apologise to the people of Wellingborough? (Unique identification number 310606 (Unique identification number ))

**Mr. McFadden** >[Share](#)

As I said, we are giving considerable support to manufacturing; this was set out in the paper on growth that we published last week. I have to say that there is a stark contrast between our commitments on aerospace, on low-carbon vehicles and on advanced engineering and the utter silence and utter absence of a manufacturing or an industrial policy from the Conservative party.

**Mr. Russell Brown** >

(Dumfries and Galloway) (Lab)

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Like so many others on this side of the House, I welcome the decision on pleural plaques reached in the Scottish courts. However, we need a UK-wide response to this, because it would be absolutely ridiculous if we found that people living in one part of the country who may have contracted this condition in another part of the country fall foul of different compensation schemes.

**Mr. McFadden** >[Share](#)

I understand the point that my hon. Friend makes. There is not much to add to what I said earlier. The Government understand the desire for a response to these issues, not only on pleural plaques but on wider respiratory conditions.

**Mr. Nigel Evans** >

(Ribble Valley) (Con)

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The pay package for the chief executive of Royal Mail last year was £1.3 million; for the managing director of the letters business, it was £849,000. If the Government really believe in redistribution of wealth, how about starting with those two salaries?

**Mr. McFadden** >[Share](#)

The rewards are indeed high; the hon. Gentleman is quite fair in saying that. The transformation and modernisation task at Royal Mail is enormous, and for those rewards we want to see modernisation carried through—delivered—to give us the healthy, efficient and modern Royal Mail service that we need in order to maintain the universal service that is at the heart of our postal system.

**Mr. Michael Clapham** >

(Barnsley, West and Penistone) (Lab)

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I am encouraged by what the Minister says about pleural plaques, but can he be categorical? I know that his Department has inherited some of the liabilities from the previously nationalised industries. Can he say that his Department would not object to a change in the law that would overturn the decision on pleural plaques that was made in the House of Lords on 17 October 2007?

**Mr. McFadden** >[Share](#)

These decisions will be taken across Government. As I said, I understand that hon. Members are looking for a response soon. A meeting will take place soon involving the Prime Minister and the Ministry of Justice, which leads on this issue.

**Mr. Henry Bellingham** >

(North-West Norfolk) (Con)

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T8. Following on from the question asked by my hon. Friend the Member for Lancaster and Wyre (Mr. Wallace), and given the strain on public finances, will the Minister confirm that excellent colleges, such as the college of West Anglia in King's Lynn and City college in Norwich, will continue to have the flexibility to respond to local needs and priorities? (Unique identification number 310607 (Unique identification number ))

**The Minister for Further Education, Skills, Apprenticeships and Consumer Affairs** >

(Kevin Brennan)

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Yes. In fact, we are introducing more flexibilities for colleges as a result of our skills strategy, including, for “good” and “excellent” colleges, the ability to do so via cross-budgets, in a way that was not available before.

**Mr. David Drew** >

(Stroud) (Lab/Co-op)

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It is pleasing to see that the Government have accepted the idea of the ombudsman for the grocery trade and I congratulate the hon. Member for St. Ives (Andrew George) on all he has done to push that forward. Will the Government now just accept the private Member's Bill of our hon. Friend the Member for Ynys Môn (Albert Owen)?

**Kevin Brennan** >[Share](#)

Of course, that is ultimately a matter for the House, but the consultation will take place following the introduction of the code on 4 February. That consultation is on not only one model but whether the ombudsman or enforcer will be housed within an existing institution, so at this point I cannot commit to my hon. Friend's suggestion.

**Alistair Burt** >

(North-East Bedfordshire) (Con)

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T9. This is a further comment from the chief executive of the Royal Society of Chemistry: "evidence gathered recently by the science community has identified entire" GCSE "science papers with no underlying mathematics, and science questions with no science." Is the Minister entirely uninterested in this problem of the connection between science at school and the quality of science at university, or does he simply believe that so long as people are going to university, that is all right? (Unique identification number 310608 (Unique identification number ))

**Mr. Lammy** >[Share](#)

It really is a disservice to our students and teachers to talk down science teaching in that way, but I refer the hon. Gentleman to the £140 million we have made available to improve teaching in science across the country.

**Michael Connarty** >

(Linlithgow and East Falkirk) (Lab)

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In the very week when the Crown Estate has given out the biggest contracts for wind power, would the Minister be surprised to learn that I have received a letter saying that there is no course in Scotland for training in that industry and no demand for people to be trained? Will he do something about that so we do not have people from outside the UK building those wind farms?

**Mr. McFadden** >[Share](#)

My hon. Friend is absolutely right to draw attention to the huge investment, employment and industrial potential of those industries. He is also absolutely right to say that if we want to maximise the opportunities presented by the transition to a lower-carbon economy, we have to give young people the skills to do the jobs that that will bring.

**Martin Horwood** >

(Cheltenham) (LD)

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T10. Ministers should be aware of the current financial difficulties at the university of Gloucestershire, which have come about despite its success in attracting applicants. Are they prepared to meet me and my constituents from the university to discuss the crisis and whether the flat-rate nature of the cap on student numbers is unfair to popular universities such as Gloucestershire university? (Unique identification number 310609 (Unique identification number ))

**Mr. Lammy** >[Share](#)

The cap on student numbers affects all universities in the country. It is important not only that we grow participation but that we fund students, often with grants, when they are at university. That is why we have the cap. The hon. Gentleman's views on the university of Gloucestershire are best directed to the funding council if he thinks there is a problem.

**Joan Walley** >

(Stoke-on-Trent, North) (Lab)

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Given the priority my right hon. Friend says he attaches to the new green economy, can he tell the House what new European money there is for the west midlands, in order that we can innovate?

**Mr. McFadden** >[Share](#)

I can tell my hon. Friend that altogether, following announcements from across the Government, there is some £500 million-plus for low-carbon industries. That is significant backing for a range of low-carbon industries, many of which we have mentioned in our answers today.

**Mr. Rob Wilson** >

(Reading, East) (Con)

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Reading college has suffered from a lack of investment over the years and Thames Valley university is now pulling out. It has been announced that Oxford and Cherwell is going to be the preferred bidder, but I have significant concerns about the bid process and the due diligence that has taken place. Please will the Minister take a significant interest in this matter, because young people in my constituency deserve a high-quality education?

**Kevin Brennan** >[Share](#)

I am very happy to look into any real concerns the hon. Gentleman has. I am not aware of any concerns about due diligence with the process—of course, Oxford and Cherwell college won the bid in a consortium with another organisation. I know he has written to me, but if he has any particular concerns, I would be happy to look into them. I understand that he is meeting the consortium soon, and I hope that that helps to alleviate any concerns he has.

**Mr. Andy Reed** >

(Loughborough) (Lab/Co-op)

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A number of measures such as advanced technology and manufacturing and low-carbon fuel vehicles have made a significant difference, but what can Ministers do to assist manufacturing companies that are still struggling with credit insurance? Several local companies have approached me to say that they are still struggling with that scheme. If Ministers can make some suggestions about how they can assist, that would be very helpful.

**Mr. McFadden** >[Share](#)

This has been a significant issue during the recession. I agree with my hon. Friend and many companies have reported problems. It appears to me that there are flaws in a product that is insurance only for good times. After all, we want insurance for good and for bad times. The flaw in the product has been exposed during the recession, and I suggest that we need a better system in the future that helps businesses in bad times and good.

**Sir Nicholas Winterton** >

(Macclesfield) (Con)

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Does the Minister accept that manufacturing industry, which I have supported for almost four decades in this House, is the only source of non-inflationary economic growth and should be supported by whichever Government are in power and that Departments should err on the side of buying British?

**Mr. McFadden** >[Share](#)

I agree with the hon. Gentleman about the importance of manufacturing. That is why we have given it support, and why I am so disappointed that the hon. Member for Windsor (Adam Afriyie) described that support as a disgrace. I disagree with those on his Front Bench, and I am glad that he does too.

**Chris Ruane** >

(Vale of Clwyd) (Lab)

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Last, but not least.

Does the Minister agree with the view that the Lisbon treaty was a package of modest and necessary reforms, and that EU-wide co-operation was necessary to produce an efficient regulatory system? That is the view of the right hon. and learned Member for Rushcliffe (Mr. Clarke), as articulated to the Japanese chamber of commerce.

**Mr. McFadden** >

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It is the case that the right hon. and learned Gentleman is reported to have told the Japanese chamber of commerce that the Lisbon treaty was a modest and sensible set of reforms. I am only sad that the rest of those on the Opposition Front Bench disagree. As on several other occasions, the right hon. and learned Gentleman shows considerable wisdom that is sadly not shared by the rest of his party.

**Several hon. Members**

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rose—

**Mr. Speaker** >

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Order. I hope Members will agree that topical questions are a valuable and valued part of our proceedings. I am keen always to accommodate as many Members as possible, but we could improve in terms of pithiness of question and answer to get everybody in within time.

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