

Secretary of State for Education and Minister for Skills
Department for Education
Via email only

Cc: Office for Students Chief Executive

Thursday 26 March 2026

Dear Bridget and Jacqui,

I am writing to urge immediate government action to protect Defined Benefit (DB) pensions in our universities, providing the leadership needed to stabilise the sector. You stated in the post-16 education white paper that DB pensions are “an important and valued part of staff remuneration” in higher education. That was welcome, but we now need to see those words backed by decisive action.

Since I last wrote to you about this issue in November, the situation has deteriorated sharply. This week alone, two post-92 institutions—Sheffield Hallam and London South Bank—are seeking to force staff out of the Teachers’ Pension Scheme (TPS), alongside ongoing disputes at Southampton Solent, Northumbria and elsewhere.

Worse, university employer bodies UCEA and UUK, are now lobbying aggressively for the legal freedom to dismantle DB provision altogether. In their recent letter to the Chair of the Education Committee, Raj Jethwa and Vivienne Stern accept the absence of new public funding and instead call for “flexibility” to “offer” significantly inferior pension schemes.

One of the things I have valued most in our discussions, and indeed in your public statements, since July 2024, has been your insistence that higher education is a public good, and that it should be treated as one. But this will come to nothing unless action is taken to protect DB pensions.

Employers are using the pretext of the current financial crisis, but their long-running efforts to weaken DB schemes, including during the boom years, tell a different story. We know this well, having been forced to strike for almost 70 days of strike action since 2018 to defend the Universities Superannuation Scheme (USS).

I urge you to:

- Publicly rule out legislative changes that would permit sector-wide opt-outs from TPS
- Make clear to institutions pursuing fire-and-rehire tactics to remove TPS that such actions are unacceptable and may incur sanctions from the Office for Students

- Develop an emergency financial package to support TPS contributions, comparable to that provided to schools and colleges

We need more direct government intervention in the sector than usual, but this is an exceptional moment. Failure to act will both see irreparable damage to higher education and severe weakening of TPS as a scheme, with wider fiscal ramifications.

Allowing university employers to dismantle our pensions unchecked would directly contradict the government's stated commitment to treat higher education as a public good. Continued Treasury inaction risks looking less like neutrality and more like complicity in the systematic weakening of one of the UK's last world-leading sectors.

I would welcome the opportunity to meet soon and discuss how we can work together to protect TPS and DB provision more broadly.

Yours sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Jo Grady'. The signature is written in a cursive, slightly informal style.

Dr Jo Grady
General Secretary