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Inspiring Interns

What Is The Higher Education And Research Act, And What Does It Mean For Students?

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The average person in the UK isn't aware of politics and its effect on them. They vote in elections based on fragmented information filtered down from legislation into the media, despite supposedly living in a democracy. Most major legislation is passed quietly, remaining mostly unexplored by the main media outlets, despite the obligatory, brief fanfare of judgement upon its passing.

The Higher Education and Research Act, passed in April, probably signifies the most significant shift in the sector in twenty-five years, since the 1992 Further and Higher Education Act. It's been widely referenced as the bill to see tuition fees rise yet again, but not widely dissected.

The bill means that all universities will be able to hike fees based on teaching improvements. However, in reality, the fee hikes will remain unregulated until 2020 when the Teaching Excellence Framework (TEF) activates, leaving students vulnerable to three years of thankless fee increases.

There is public cynicism about the TEF, championed by George Osborne, which claims its regulatory system, containing an 'Office of Students', is flawed. These measures follow the September fee increase from £9000 to £9250, and the 2015 abolition of student maintenance grants.

Statistically, most students won't ever fully repay their debt, leaving a gap in the economy worth billions. This gap is set to grow after the passing of the Higher Education and Research Act. The gap drags everyone down, especially public services affected by cuts.

The bill also allows more public institutions the chance to become universities and award degrees, with the new universities able to award degrees immediately rather than after four years, unlike the current system. This measure attempts to offer students

more choice and universities more competition. The risk of this is a sudden explosion of for-profit institutions, but the potential benefits are more local, vocational universities.

The House of Lords called for an amendment to the bill that would see students removed from the target to reduce net migration in Brexit negotiations. However, the House of Commons rejected the amendment firmly, leaving international students with less of a chance to enter a British university. The final Brexit deal as regards international students could be reviewed.

The Labour alternative to this Tory measure, the scrapping of tuition fees, has come under fire for leaving universities vulnerable to underfunding. In the absence of tuition fees, Labour would have to source £10bn for universities from taxing high earners. Throughout history, the left and right have both suggested reasonable tuition fees as a suitable approach to higher education.

Nick Hillman, director of the Higher Education Policy Institute, said: 'We have needed a new legal framework for higher education since at least 2012 and it is, on balance, good that we finally have one. Whether the new system works smoothly, however, will depend on who becomes the CEO of the Office for Students, the shape of the secondary legislation on the back of the act, and also the volume of cash available to lubricate it all.'

June's snap election's effect on the Higher Education and Research Act is minimal, with Jo Johnson remaining as universities minister, despite widespread talk of his being ousted from the Department for Education. The Higher Education and Research Act is set to sail smoothly, for better or for worse.