

Higher Education Funding Dora Meredith

The future of Higher Education Funding and Student Support: are the Browne Review's proposals the right way forward?

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Let's be clear, students will pay more for their university education than ever before if the proposals made are accepted by the government.

That said there are some positives to draw from the Browne review. Not least the prospect for part-time students to access the full range of loans and benefits, the increase in the loan repayment threshold, increased grants for the least well off, no upfront fee payment and quality standards for teaching.

But that should not detract us from the issue that these proposals will mean more debt for those entering higher education. With no cap on fees, students will incur higher costs, borrow more and pay an increased interest rate. Altogether not a reality I would look forward to as a prospective student.

If the recommendations are taken on board there will be a responsibility for universities to ensure that students who pay more, actually receive a quality education. With cuts to funding expected to be announced shortly, it is imperative that student fees are not used to plug the gap which will be created by government cuts, and that increased fees really do mean a better quality of education for all.

If adopted, the proposals will arguably lead to increased competition - with courses being marketed to prospective students on the likelihood of graduate employment prospects and future earning potential. There is also a danger that students who are thinking about going to university from less traditional backgrounds are discouraged, or even worse making decisions based on cheaper courses at even cheaper institutions. Widening participation in higher education must be preserved under any new funding model.

The interest rate on loans will rise, with those earning above £21,000 faced with increased interest repayments of around 5.5% (based on current rates). Yet more finance to find. Browne expects the rich to pay more and the poor significantly less. But what about middle-income families?

Ultimately, we have a responsibility to ensure that a fair and progressive funding system is in place which supports both quality of education and the student experience, and places students at the heart of the debate.