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## **Parliament Approves Hotly Disputed Bill to Allow Higher Tuition in Britain**

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London

Controversial legislation that will allow universities in England and Wales to increase tuition won final approval in the House of Commons on Thursday, its final hurdle in Parliament.

The higher-education legislation, championed by the Labor government of Prime Minister Tony Blair, will allow the universities to charge fees of up to \$5,450 a year, beginning in September 2006 in England. The legislation will not take effect in Wales until 2007 at the earliest, if at all. That decision has been left to the National Assembly of Wales. And it does not affect universities in Scotland.

Students in England and Wales now pay an upfront yearly fee of \$2,050, but under the new arrangement they will no longer pay any tuition while undergraduates. Instead, they will be required to begin repaying the higher fees once they have graduated and their annual income exceeds \$27,300.

In anticipation of an influx of English students hoping to avoid paying higher tuition at home, the Scottish Assembly last week took up a measure to increase fees for British students from outside Scotland by about \$1,275 a year.

The efforts of the Labor government to impose what the British news media have dubbed "top-up fees" prompted fierce opposition from Conservative and Liberal Democratic opponents in Parliament and led to bitter divisions within the Labor Party itself. The government won an early vote on the bill in January by just five votes -- the slimmest parliamentary majority Mr. Blair has mustered in his seven years as prime minister.

After clearing a crucial vote in the House of Commons in March, the bill faced vigorous opposition in the House of Lords. The peers succeeded in adding to the bill an amendment that will waive the increase for students who apply for admission next year but defer matriculation until 2006.

Members of the House of Commons rejected other amendments to the bill proposed by the lords, such as waiving the fee for undergraduates after three years of study, a proposal meant to ensure that medical students were not saddled with excessive debt. The lords unexpectedly dropped efforts to press for additional changes to the bill following its latest Commons airing, leading to its final passage on Thursday. The measure becomes law with the assent of the queen, a formality that is expected to take place almost immediately.

Phil Willis, the Liberal Democrats' spokesman on education, said that his party estimates that the increased fees will result in a total student debt burden of \$25.5-billion by 2009. The current debt load is

less than \$5.5-billion, he said. The Liberal Democrats opposed the legislation because, in their view, it turns higher education into a commodity by creating a marketplace where quality is linked to cost.

"We don't want to go down the road of the United States, where there's that divide," he said. "We agreed with the government's analysis of what was required -- the need to educate more people, and to educate them to a higher standard. We agree with the universities that they need more funding. Our argument was that we should pay for that through progressive taxation."

Even now that the legislation has cleared Parliament, Mr. Willis is not conceding defeat on the issue. "We have a general election next year," he said. "This will become a major platform during the election, partly because it's an issue of principle, and partly because it's an issue of politics, of betrayed promises."

Kat Fletcher, the new president of the National Union of Students, echoed that sentiment. "With a general election approaching, NUS and the student movement will never forget what has happened with this bill," she said in a written statement. "The MP's who gave their word that they would vote against top-up fees but reneged on that promise will be fighting for their seats at the next election."

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