

Controversial UK research reform crosses finish line

Snap general election triggers compromises in legislation overhauling how Britain's science is funded.

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Stefan Rousseau/PA

UK universities minister Jo Johnson celebrated the passing of the UK higher-education reform bill.

A controversial and wide-ranging shake-up of the United Kingdom's research and higher-education landscape has been completed, amid a huge rush by the country's parliament to push through legislation.

The urgency comes courtesy of a 'snap' general election announced this month by UK Prime Minister Theresa May, which will trigger an early dissolution of Parliament. The reforms were passed on 27 April with a number of concessions made by the government in a bid to push through the bill, which might otherwise have died as a result of the early shutdown.

The legislation, which set out sweeping changes to the way in which research is funded and how universities are governed, elicited huge debate among scientists and university leaders when it was proposed in May 2016. For scientists, the headline change, which is now law, is the merging of the various UK research-funding bodies into a new [centralized agency called UK Research and Innovation, or UKRI](#). The agency will be responsible for distributing Britain's £6-billion (US\$7.8-billion) research budget when it comes into being in 2018.

Senior researchers had [publicly clashed](#) over the proposals — and the [creation of UKRI in particular](#). Some said that the changes would strengthen UK science at a time when it is threatened by [Britain's looming exit from the European Union](#). Others called the reform at best unnecessary and at worst [a threat to researchers' autonomy](#).

In February, the government made [concessions on a number of issues that had been worrying scientists](#). It added safeguards for institutional autonomy and, unusually, wrote into the legislation a long-held principle in UK science funding called the Haldane principle, which states that decisions on research funding should be protected from political interference.

Further concessions

The government's original legislation, proposed in the country's lower chamber, the House of Commons, was heavily scrutinized and amended by the upper chamber, the House of Lords, where a number of members are senior university figures. The bill's passing means that both houses have now agreed on the legislation — but the rush prompted a series of new compromises from the government.

Among the biggest of the latest concessions is the promise of a review of the new Teaching Excellence Framework, which will assess the quality of university instruction — an initiative proposed by the government but questioned by the Lords. The review will scrutinize the metrics used in the framework and whether it is affecting the ability of university staff to do research.

Julia Goodfellow, the president of umbrella group Universities UK, said in a statement that the bill would provide “stability during a time of uncertainty”. The latest compromises address many concerns relating to the original bill, she notes. “In particular, we’re pleased with changes which protect university independence and standards.”

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