Tuition fees and student protest

Prepared by: Becky Lewis
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The majority of students in the UK feel betrayed by Nick Clegg and the Liberal Democrats over rising tuition fees, according to damning new figures.

A new survey shows 73 per cent of university students feel let down by Nick Clegg and his party, for supporting a rise in tuition fees when they signed pre-election pledges to oppose the rise. The poll, by student market research specialists OpinionPanel, includes the views of a representative sample of 1002 undergraduate students from nearly every university in the UK.

The results show the strength of feeling among the country’s student population and comes on the eve of another protest in London, this time targeting the Liberal Democrats’ headquarters.

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The findings indicate strong opposition to the proposed changes to Higher Education funding, with the introduction of an upper cap of £9,000 on tuition fees.

Of the 1002 full-time undergraduates who took part in the survey, 85 per cent said they feared higher education will become the preserve of people from a wealthy background.

Of those questioned 51 per cent said they felt ‘very’ let down by the Lib Dems and Nick Clegg. A further 22 per cent said they felt ‘slightly’ let down. Feeling was even stronger amongst students who voted Lib Dem in May 2010, 58 per cent felt ‘very’ let down and 25 per cent ‘slightly’ let down.

One student said: ‘Expecting students to balance the economy with loan repayments is not the way forward. It is already the case that universities have few spaces and will take on foreign students for extra revenue. This approach will just increase student debt and make an already difficult situation worse.’ In total, 81 per cent of students said they opposed the new proposals, and a similar proportion said the protests at Millbank were right but that it was wrong to use violence.

Nine in ten students agree students should protest against the rise in tuition fees, while Eight in ten felt lecturers should do the same.

Alarmingly, one in ten students said they would be prepared to break the law, (without using violence), to make their point during protest over tuition fees, according to the OpinionPanel survey.

One student said: ‘Violence is wrong, but what did the government expect from such drastic changes? Increasing tuition fees is an understatement, they intend to almost quadruple them in some cases. The protests should occur more often.’ Another said: ‘I feel very let down by the Lib Dems. They are a bunch of power hungry lying bastards.’

The National Campaign Against Fees And Cuts has planned a national day of protests on Wednesday and at least one in ten students are planning to protest. Radical student group, The Education Activist Network, say they intend to occupy Lib Dem HQ in Cowley Street, central London. Seventeen per cent of students said ‘maybe’ when asked if they would be prepared to break the law without violence, such as occupying a government building.

However, a few students did speak out against the protestors. One said: ‘I would not wish to be associated with the students protesting in any shape manner or form. Surely people who are studying to be professionals should be able to rise above the violence and criminal damage caused.’ Another said: ‘This is something I feel very strongly about. However I can’t be violent because I’m against that and I’m cautious about breaking the law because a criminal record will ruin my future prospects of a medical career and get me kicked out of medical school.’

Some students admitted they could see some benefits from rising fees; Forty per cent strongly agreed that higher tuition fees would help to discourage applications from those not serious about university or without the necessary qualifications. The majority, however, disagreed that the new regime with its higher repayment threshold would lead to more people taking part in Higher Education.