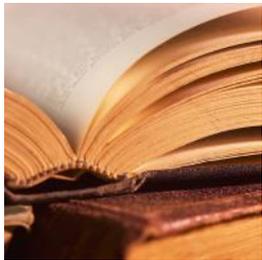


[The Lib Dems are listening](#) [1]

Written by [Anton Howes](#) [2] | Friday 26 November 2010



It seems as if the Liberal Democrats may be reading this blog. We can't say for sure, but after a truly lamentable start to how university reforms were being presented, they appear to be taking the advice of classical liberals. Rather than making the reforms about deficit reduction and accepting the unpopularity of a rise in tuition fees, they are attempting to redefine the debate. They might not be taking our ideas but they are certainly converging on them: Already, they've done something similar to my [suggestion](#) [3] of renaming it so as to differentiate the scheme from up-front tuition fees: I proposed something akin to a "graduate income repayment", and now we hear Nick Clegg (as well as [John Hemming](#) [4]) talk about a "graduate contribution scheme".

The Liberal Democrats have finally found their message. Now they simply need to shout a little louder, and a little more. Students aren't stupid, but up until now some extreme socialist activists have misled them: not having actually read the proposals, they readily act upon any number of myths. On closer inspection, the National Union of Students (NUS), having vowed to hound Liberal Democrat MPs as traitors, actually has fairly similar proposals to the coalition government's.

Remarkably, the NUS appears to have got away with this gross hypocrisy: although they would end graduate contributions after 20 years rather than 30, and would set an unrealistically low level of contributions, a system of income-related graduate contributions would remain. The government's proposals [fulfill their call](#) [5] for an end to up-front fees for part-time students, and are actually substantially more generous with regards to lifting the repayment threshold from £15,000 per year to £21,000: something the NUS would have kept the same.

The key difference is in abolishing the ability of universities to set their own fees, instead having all funding centrally directed - presumably according to perceived "need" rather than rewarding universities based on their popularity with students. I'm certain that the vast majority of student fury was directed against paying more rather than against maintaining a market in higher education. How absurdly ironic that even the first reason is based on a myth: students would in fact pay less per year under the new system.

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