

Student grant protest blocks Westminster Bridge

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Protestors gathered to coincide with a parliamentary debate on reversing the decision to scrap the grants

Students protesting against government plans to scrap maintenance grants in England blocked Westminster Bridge for more than an hour and a half.

The demonstrators gathered outside Parliament to coincide with a debate on reversing the government's decision to replace the grants with loans.

From this autumn, means-tested grants are to be switched to loans repayable after graduation.

Labour has tabled an annulment motion to try to block the proposal.

'Broken promise'

The grants, worth up to £3,387 per year for university students from poorer families, are paid to around 500,000 university students in England, according to the National Union of Students, which describes them as a lifeline.

Labour says the proposal amounts to a "broken promise" and has attacked the way in which ministers sought to implement the change without tabling a House of Commons vote.

Shadow education minister Gordon Marsden said the government had instead "shied away" from scrutiny of the issue by putting the plan to a committee vote last week.

He warned the proposals would mean poorer students graduating with more debt than their peers.

"When the government tripled tuition fees in 2012 they tried to sweeten the pill by talking up the centrality of the maintenance grant to ensure that the most disadvantaged could still access higher education.

"They promised three things: A national scholarship programme, the maintenance grants for the disadvantaged programme and an earnings-related threshold that would be up rated with inflation."



Police managed to reopen the bridge after an hour and a half

He said all three promises had been broken since last year's election.

"The regulations that the Government passed in committee last week will disadvantage the very same group of students that the government promised to protect," he said.

'Unaffordable'

But universities minister Jo Johnson denied the government had "sneaked in" the proposals.

"It was in fact included in the Chancellor's summer budget speech, which is one of the most closely scrutinised events in the parliamentary calendar," he said.

Mr Johnson said the government had published a comprehensive 80-page equity and equality analysis in November, a day after the decision was finally taken to proceed as part of the spending review.

The government maintains the grants are unaffordable.

The new system will mean all student finance will have to be repaid, once students have graduated and are earning at least £21,000 per year.

The Department for Business Innovation and Skills says the change will mean more support for students when they most need it, with students from the lowest-income households, studying outside London, able to borrow £8,200 per year, an increase of £766.

Source: BBC News <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/education-35354718>