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Across Europe, an Outcry Over Paying for College

By KATHERINE ZOEPF

LONDON, Feb. 3 - Carrying crude effigies of Prime Minister Tony Blair, about 500 students marched down to Parliament Square last week to protest the government's proposal to allow British universities to raise tuition beginning in 2006.

Similar demonstrations have taken place across Europe in recent months as governments have begun to discuss raising tuition to help meet operating costs at their universities.

The issues differ by country. But in Europe, where higher education is seen as a public good with free or nominal tuition - usually accompanied by government stipends to cover living costs - the idea of asking students or their families to contribute to the costs of their studies has provoked a public outcry.

"The drive to privatize public services, including universities, is very much a European issue," said Mandy Telford, president of the National Union of Students, a British group that has organized dozens of demonstrations against tuition fees, including a national march on London in October that is thought to have been the biggest student demonstration in Britain in decades.

The Higher Education Bill, which includes the provision to raise tuition, was passed in Parliament last week. But student groups say that the bill still has far to go before becoming law and that their fight is far from over. The National Union of Students is organizing a student strike on Feb. 25, with hundreds of thousands of British students walking out of classes to protest increased tuition, Ms. Telford said.

"There's going to be a shutdown of all higher education," said Ms. Telford, a recent graduate of the University of Strathclyde in Scotland. "Obviously there is a university funding crisis, but we think the government should go back to the drawing board and figure out how to get the money through more progressive taxation. Students shouldn't contribute in any way."

Some student leaders support a university financing plan proposed by the Liberal Democratic Party that would raise taxes to 50 percent for incomes over £100,000 (about \$184,000). "If you get a well-paid job after you graduate, you'll pay more through your taxes," Ms. Telford said.

It is a sentiment echoed by Johan Almqvist, 26, a fourth-year computer science student at Lund University in Sweden and the chairman of the executive committee of ESIB, a Brussels-based umbrella organization that represents Europe's national student unions.

"There needs to be more investment in higher education all over Europe to keep it competitive at a world level," Mr. Almqvist said. "But there should be no fees charged for students in any way at all."

Chris Piper, a student at the University of London and the president of its student union, said that as the first person in his family to attend a university, he might have been deterred from higher education if it

had meant taking on loans or drawing on his parents' savings.

"In Britain, we take the European perspective that things basic for life should be provided by the state," he said. "It's not that students expect unlimited free handouts; it's that poor students would be put off from getting the degrees they need."

Elliot Simmons, the president of the students' union at the London School of Economics, said the idea of saving or going into debt to pay for higher education "just isn't part of the culture" in Europe.

"We don't have that idea of the college fund like you do in the States," Mr. Simmons said. "There's no concept of alumni giving either. Those things would take years to develop. It's a shock to the system when the government starts talking about getting people to pay for college."

Zena Awad, an international relations student at Brunel University in London who attended last week's protest, said it has been difficult enough for her family to find the money for her living costs and nominal tuition. Tuition fees of up to £3,000 (about \$5,500), she said, might have made her academic ambitions impossible.

"How are families supposed to put aside money for their children's education if they're barely making a living wage in the first place?" she said.

British student leaders frequently cited a sense of disillusionment at the idea that degrees might be limited to those who could afford them.

Will Garton, a history student at Edinburgh University and the president of its students' association, summed up the general dismay: "You should get higher education based on your academic abilities and not based on your ability to pay."

In Germany and France, however, where getting a high school degree guarantees a student a place at the state university of his or her choice, student groups have protested not just the prospect of tuition fees, but also government proposals to introduce academic selectiveness at certain universities.

Harald Pittel, a literature student at Aachen University of Technology in Germany, and a leader of the FZS umbrella student union, said that German students had been jolted by recent proposals that Germany create exclusive "elite universities" with special admissions requirements. FZS is out to defeat both measures, and its member unions have organized a series of student strikes that have crippled, and in many cases shut down, German universities in the last three months.

"The government wants to have some special universities that it can call the German Harvard or the German M.I.T.," Mr. Pittel said. "But as a student union, we need to make sure that everyone can get the education he or she wants."

Raphaël Chambon, a fourth-year history student at the Sorbonne and a leader of UNEF, the largest French student union, said that hundreds of thousands of French students took to the streets recently to protest a proposal by Education Minister Luc Ferry that France transform some of its universities into selective institutions that would charge tuition.

"They were calling this 'modernization of the universities,' but different articles of this law were very dangerous for us," he said. "We think that universities should be free, and without any selection. We believe that higher education should remain a national public service."

"In my view, the battle continues," Mr. Chambon said.