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British Plan on Financing for College Draws Protest

By WARREN HOGE

LONDON, Dec. 4 — Thousands of students from across the country marched in London today to protest reported government plans to let British universities start charging American-style tuition fees.

"Education should be based on your ability, not your ability to pay," Mandy Telford, president of the National Union of Students, told the placard-waving demonstrators. "Going down that road is putting a price tag on degrees, and that's not positive for society."

Which road the government will choose will not be known until next month when it publishes its formal proposals, but trial-balloon comments and leaked discussions from more than a year of meetings and ministerial consultations have made the issue one of the most contentious for the British public and within the governing Labor Party.

The British university system says it needs \$16 billion in new financing to become competitive with universities abroad, principally those in the United States, that offer teachers higher salaries and better working conditions and students better facilities and smaller class sizes. The government does not quarrel with that figure, but an internal debate has raged over how to come up with the money.

Proposals to raise general taxes have run into objections from Prime Minister Tony Blair, who does not want to revive the party's tax-and-spend image.

Suggestions of an after-graduation repayment, based on the notion that a student with a degree makes substantially more money than a person without one and can therefore afford the expense, run into objections because the revenue would take too long to come in.

The proposal that brought students into the streets today is the one that Mr. Blair is said to favor — giving universities the right to charge "top-up fees" to supplement the \$1,700 tuition now asked of students.

The tuition, which is means-tested and therefore paid by less than 50 percent of students, was put in place by Mr. Blair in 1998 and itself has been the object of protests and demands for repeal.

Imperial College in London has already drawn up plans to charge \$16,500 a year, the amount that non-English students now pay — in anticipation of restrictions on top-up fees being lifted.

"The government says it wants to be able to compete on a global scale, yet it is willing to price thousands of our most talented students out of education," Ms. Telford of the students' union said today. She told the rally that the average graduate already ends up \$19,000 in debt from course fees and living expenses.

The current quandary arises out of the national transition in Britain from an elite to a mass system of education. In 1992, the Conservative government of Prime Minister John Major put an end to the division between universities and so-called polytechnics and furthered moves to open up higher education to a larger number of students.

Mr. Blair continued that push by setting the target of getting 50 percent of high school graduates into higher education by 2010.

But while student numbers went up, investment did not. According to figures from Universities UK, which represents higher education heads, since 1989 student financing has declined by 37 percent while numbers have risen 90 percent. Where only one in 20 high school students went on to college in 1960, one in three do now.

British universities do not have the kinds of alumni-supported endowments to finance scholarships and subsidies for low-income students that American institutions do, and American tuitions are disparaged here as blocking university education for all but the rich.

But Margaret Hodge, the secretary for higher education, cited the American example more favorably. "In the U.K., we see paying for education as a cost," she said. "The Americans see it very much as an investment."

Mr. Blair faces objections within his party. The former health secretary, Frank Dobson, said today, "If we have got very high top-up fees, then the only people who would be able to go to the most prestigious and expensive universities would be rich Brits and rich foreign students."

Barry Sheerman, the chairman of the House of Commons education select committee, said he believed the government was having second thoughts about top-up fees in the face of such public protest, but that inaction was not an option.

"We have wonderful ambitions for expanding universities and keeping them world class and getting more kids from working class backgrounds into higher education," he said. "If we don't like top-up fees, we have to come up with something else, because it is a very big bill."