

## Focusing on education is a dangerous strategy for the Liberal Democrats

Written by The Conversation

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Launching their 2015 election manifesto, the Liberal Democrats have sought to grab the political agenda with the words “ [from cradle to college](#) ”.

So far, other parties have focused on the economy, healthcare and housing in their manifestos, but the Liberal Democrats have put education front and centre. Given their record in government, this is a pretty risky strategy.

Supporting the Conservative plans to introduce student fees of £9,000 runs counter to the narrative of opportunity. The tagline is conspicuously not: “from cradle to campus”. Education is a priority, but only up until the age of 19. The theme of education might have worked for the party at previous general elections, but its support for the higher undergraduate fee level in government means it’s no longer available.

As a result, the party may fail to resonate with precisely those young people who will have their first chance to vote in 2015 – and the most vocally disillusioned of Lib Dem supporters.

The Lib Dems do, in some respects, have a good story to tell on education. The [pupil premium](#) – a key Lib Dem pledge in 2010 – is held up as a success for the party. It [argues](#) that since the last election it has channelled an extra £2.5bn into schools, targeting money at those most in need in order to give every child a fair start in life.

The party is also keen to highlight their success in providing [15 hours of free early years education](#) to all three- and four-year-olds and free school meals to all children in their first three years of school. Emphasis is also placed on the growing number of apprenticeships since 2010.

For the next parliament, the Lib Dems are promising free school meals for all primary school pupils. They would also extend budget protection to early years and education for 16 to 19-year-olds.

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But tuition fees are still a huge problem. The manifesto includes aspirations to make university education more available to disadvantaged applicants but there is no commitment at all on fees and very little detail on funding – and for good reason. The damage caused by failing to deliver on its 2010 pledge to abolish fees has done untold damage to the party's reputation.

The decision to focus so overtly on education appears risky as a result. The Liberal Democrats can [claim](#) to have “protected and invested in education” by putting “opportunity at the heart of the coalition's agenda” but they lack a compelling message for 18 to 24-year-olds.

And providing an extra £2.5bn of funding for two to 19-year-olds by 2020 will do little to win round those voters who feel a sense of betrayal over the party's failure to see through its pledge on tuition fees.

More good teachers, one-to-one tuition and early years education can't address the issue of university education – but focusing on them is nevertheless likely to stoke negative memories about tuition fees.

This is significant because 18 to 24-year olds, who traditionally provided key support to the party, have apparently [deserted them](#) – and the Liberal Democrats still lack a compelling message to get them back.

In trying to recast the political agenda the Liberal Democrats are therefore taking a gamble in focusing on education and in just three weeks time we'll be able to tell whether it has paid off.

**Read more** <http://theconversation.com/focusing-on-education-is-a-dangerous-strategy-for-the-liberal-democrats-40252>