

3.4 Deputy R.G. Le Hérisier of the Minister for Education, Sport and Culture regarding contingency plans to meet Higher Education top-up fees:

Would the Minister advise Members what contingency plans, if any, will be put in place to enable less well-off families to deal with top-up fees and would he inform the Assembly of the outcome of negotiations with the Student Loans Company?

Deputy J.B. Fox (Assistant Minister for Education, Sport and Culture - rapporteur):

Top-up fees charged by UK universities to Island students entering higher education in September 2006 has been set at £1,350 per student. This is an issue which will be discussed by the Council of Ministers at its meeting on 8th April. The proposal by the Minister of Education, Sport and Culture is that all students, or their families, should be asked to meet the additional cost. Families on limited gross income of less than £26,750 per year receive a full award for university attendance. This award covers the cost of tuition, travel to and from the United Kingdom at the beginning and end of every term, and approximately £4,663 for subsistence. Out of this they will be expected to meet the additional cost of top-up fees. This may mean that some students, as in the UK, may have to seek part-time employment before or during their time at university in order to supplement their grant. My department intends to consult local banks in order to ensure that it can advise students of any loan facilities which may be available to them. Students who feel that they face particular difficulties with regard to paying top-up fees should contact officers in the Student Services Section of the Department of Education, Sport and Culture where advice and support will be available. The direct telephone line is 509450. With regard to negotiations with the Student Loans Company, the Department of Education, Sport and Culture in Jersey, along with the Education Departments of Guernsey and the Isle of Man, have been in communication with the UK students loan company since early 2004 to explore its potential involvement in establishing a student loans option for Island students. However, at a meeting held in December 2005 the Student Loans Company suggested the Island should obtain permission from the company owner, the United Kingdom Department of Education and Skills before any agreement was concluded. Officers from the inter-island authorities met with the Department for Education and Skills representatives in London on 3rd February 2006 and returned doubtful that permission would be forthcoming. A subsequent letter from the Department of Education and Skills indicated that the Student Loans Company may not have the capacity to take on additional work required to provide the service to Island students. The Minister for Education, Sports and Culture has commissioned a full review of student finances during 2006 which will include options for student loans.

The Deputy Bailiff:

If I may, that is another department that must learn to speak more concisely.

3.4.1 Deputy J.A. Martin:

Would the Minister confirm whether this will be retrospective? For example, students already at university who will be starting their second or third year this September, will these top-up fees apply to them or is there some contingency plan, because these students, or their parents, did not know about this extra money when they entered into their university studies?

Deputy J.B. Fox:

No, this applies to students that are about to commence higher education in September 2006, not ones that are already there.

3.4.2 The Connétable of St. Helier:

I would like to inject a bit of pace into this question and answer session, if I may. Could the Assistant Minister - and I realise he is not exactly responsible because he was not there - but could he confirm that there was an emergency meeting of the Council of Ministers to discuss this quite recently, and does he not agree that the timing of this announcement is absolutely appalling given that many parents have been in England looking at universities at the very time when the Minister announced that their top-up fees would be imposed?

Deputy J.B. Fox:

Yes, I am aware, as is my fellow Assistant Minister, of a meeting, which you could describe as an emergency as it was outside the ordinary scheduled meetings of the Council of Ministers. Yes, if I had time to answer that question in full I would have been pressing for a long time that we need to tell parents of the possibilities of what was coming. It was hoped, however, that there would be a much better resolution through the Student Loans Company than what was available. I think that is in the time available.

3.4.3 Deputy R.G. Le Hérissier:

Would the Assistant Minister not confirm that by that rush as cited by the Constable of St. Helier, and by the fact that the less well-off who usually get full grant support will now have to pay a fairly substantial sum, would he not agree by not putting viable arrangements in place to deal with this he has let down the whole raft of students?

Deputy J.B. Fox:

That is assuming that the proposals laid at the moment will become the final decision. At the moment that is not the final decision, that is a recommendation made by the Minister to the Council of Ministers and we will have to wait until 8th April to find out if that position stands.

3.4.4 Deputy G.P. Southern:

Can the Assistant Minister outline for Members what consideration and, in particular, what talks have taken place between his department and the Ministry of Treasury and Resources over the additional impact of "20 means 20" - or its replacement - on middle earners who are going to be affected by this measure with reference, in particular, to their children going off to higher education?

Deputy J.B. Fox:

I am aware that there are current discussions taking place both on this subject and a great many more subjects relating to the cost of further education which have been placed upon us by outside UK establishments, universities, et cetera, that we have no control of, and that is part of the review that is going on at the moment. Basically, the Minister has commissioned a full review of all student finances for 2006 which this will be a part of.

3.4.5 Deputy P.N. Troy of St. Brelade:

Does the Assistant Minister agree that the people of the Island of Jersey pay taxes for their contribution to the education budget and with university costs approximately £10,000 to £12,000 per annum the burden on many will be significantly increased, and really this is not cricket to pass this on to parents? Can the Assistant Minister also give the cost for his department to underwrite the top-up fees?

Deputy J.B. Fox:

That is a long one, is it not? The cost is £1,600,000 in a 12-month period, £250,000 - I think - for the remainder of this year. Yes, I accept that if this is the final decision it will be a burden on parents, and indeed for the students. And, yes, we do pay taxes towards our education and higher education. Regrettably at this time things are getting harder and we are going through rigorous discussion at the moment to find the most painless way forward to educate our students to the requirements under our economic policies and various other strategic plans. But I do not think you are going to allow me time to answer any more. **[Laughter]**

3.4.6 Deputy G.P. Southern:

[Aside] Would the Assistant Minister answer my initial question, what discussions have taken place with the Ministry of Treasury and Resources? But secondly, will he accept that the changes taking place will make it extremely difficult for his Ministry to meet its target set out in the Strategic Plan under 2.6 to maintain the proportion and profile of people entering higher education? Does he not accept that this will become very difficult indeed?

Deputy J.B. Fox:

Yes, Sir. We are assuming that everything that has been indicated becomes a matter of fact. Yes, it will make things more difficult because any rising costs and any additional cost factors that are emanating from the universities and other establishments do affect us. As far as the Treasury goes, I am aware that there are many discussions going on, on this subject, at the moment. The trouble is I do not know the details of them because I am not a party to them. I am not a Minister.

Ministers: Oh!

Deputy J.B. Fox:

As I say I do not know the details of them. I know that this is part of the commissioning of a full review of student finances is occurring at the moment, and I will hopefully know by the time it gets to the Council of Ministers on 8th April what progress has been made or what direction we will be taking so far.

3.4.7 Deputy R.G. Le Hérissier:

As we speak, the Minister for Education is selflessly touring Australasia **[Laughter]** for the next month to seek cheaper university prices. Would the Assistant Minister confirm that it is the policy of the department to outsource places to the farthest extreme in the world to reduce costs? **[Laughter]**

Deputy J.B. Fox:

The Minister, as part of his Education, Sport and Culture role, is supporting the Island's athletics at the Commonwealth Games, but while he is there he is visiting various university and government departments with a view to looking...

Ministers: Oh!

Deputy J.B. Fox:

[Laughter] If I am allowed to answer the question, Sir. There are cases and there are certain circumstances where the higher education down in the southern hemisphere can be provided, which either cannot be provided in this hemisphere but has the same international recognised qualifications, or can be provided cheaper. I would suggest to you that part of our strategy is to look for not only best value for money but also for best value in educational terms, which is what my Minister is doing at this time.

3.4.8 Senator L. Norman:

Does the Assistant Minister consider it reasonable to encourage Jersey students to be lumbered with debt by the student loan scheme at the end of the university studies? And does he not recognise that the States and the people of Jersey might prefer his department to reprioritise their expenditure or to come to the States to seek additional funds?

Deputy J.B. Fox:

Yes.

3.4.9 Senator S Syvret:

Is the Assistant Minister aware that the Welsh and Scottish Assemblies have agreed to fund top-up fees for their students educated in their countries?

Deputy J. B. Fox:

Yes, Sir.