

4.15 Deputy T.M. Pitman of the Minister for Education, Sport and Culture regarding the costs of university education:

Can the Minister give assurances that the opportunity for children of ordinary working people to afford to take up university education in order to better their future life chances will not be negatively impacted upon as a result of the Comprehensive Spending Review cuts and, if the Minister cannot do so, would he advise what the extent of these negative changes will be?

The Deputy of St. Ouen (The Minister for Education, Sport and Culture):

I am pleased to be able to confirm that there are no plans within the Comprehensive Spending Review for a reduction of support for local students seeking to enter university. Indeed, I would like to inform the Deputy that, rather than reducing support, I have taken direct action over the last 6 or so months to improve the support given by my department by curtailing the freeze on the value of the maintenance element of the student grant and returning to a policy in which maintenance increases each year to take account of inflation, thus preserving its value. I should advise the Deputy, however, that the U.K. *Brown Report* on university funding is to be published imminently and that it is likely to recommend significant increases in tuition fees from which the Island may not be immune. I would like to assure the Deputy, however, that we are monitoring the situation very closely and will make every effort to protect the current policy that no one who can benefit from higher education should be denied access because of financial hardship.

[11:45]

4.15.1 Deputy T.M. Pitman:

I welcome the Minister's answer. The *Brown Report* was published this morning and, given that report and the increase in fees recommended, to what extent is the Minister confident that he can give the very welcome assurances that he has given as not impacting on our children and young people?

The Deputy of St. Ouen:

I have not had a chance to even look at the news this morning, let alone consider the *Brown Report*. However, we will be doing that in more detail over the coming weeks. This is an issue that I flagged-up with the Council of Ministers over 12 months ago when I recognised that the support offered and provided for higher education had been devalued over a number of years. The Council of Ministers fully recognised that there is or could be increased pressure to meet higher education costs and I am sure that together we will find a solution.

4.15.2 Deputy T.A. Vallois of St. Saviour:

In light of the Minister's comments about the *Brown Report*, what is the Minister doing, along with the Chief Minister, to represent our interests with the U.K. in light of what may happen to tuition fees and with the future of the economic growth and prosperity in the Island?

The Deputy of St. Ouen:

There are always and continue to be ongoing discussions with the U.K. departments and indeed the U.K. universities to try and obtain the best deal possible for this Island.

4.15.3 Deputy M. Tadier:

While Members and, I am sure, the public appreciate the goodwill which is being expressed by the Minister, will he confirm that the harsh reality of it is that we have tuition fees going up and likely to go up in the U.K. - perhaps through the roof - which unfortunately is coinciding with a tighter and tighter budget across the board here in Jersey and the Minister's department is no different? How does the Minister seek to reconcile these 2 conflicting issues?

The Deputy of St. Ouen:

For a start, this is not goodwill. This is, I believe, a Minister that is looking at how his budget is prioritised and identifying and dealing with funding pressures in the best and most manageable way possible for the benefit of all the community. With regards the budgets: yes, there are going to be challenges and, yes, my department has been considering producing a *White Paper* on higher education. However, since we started that process the context has now changed and I will be planning to consider more far-reaching changes to university funding when I issue that paper.

4.15.4 Deputy M. Tadier:

A quick supplementary; what leverage does the Minister realistically think he has when negotiating with the U.K. on tuition fees that Jersey will have to pay to U.K. universities?

The Deputy of St. Ouen:

It is obviously limited.

4.15.5 Senator S.C. Ferguson:

However, given that the Cayman Islands and such countries pay very much lower fees than we do for their university students, given the success or the possible success over the discussions about the health agreements and given the change in government in the U.K., will the Minister not take these as a sort of guide and push to get our students rated at a lower rate to go into the U.K. to university?

The Deputy of St. Ouen:

This is an ongoing issue that we have with the U.K. The Isle of Man, Guernsey and ourselves are classed as Crown Dependencies and are treated somewhat differently to overseas territories, of which the Cayman is an example, and as such we have flagged-up the differential. We believe that it could be improved and every effort is and will be made with the U.K. to ensure that the arrangements that we have in place to support our young people in higher education are the best that we can possibly achieve.

4.15.6 Senator S.C. Ferguson:

Yes, but given the fact that there has been a government change in the U.K. will the Minister give us the assurance that he will use all means possible, including the Anglo-Irish Group, to get these fees down and prevent them being charged at such an incredibly unfair rate?

The Deputy of St. Ouen:

The Chief Minister has been made aware of this issue for some time and I believe that his department has been actively considering and discussing these matters with the individuals that he meets in his official duties.

4.15.7 Deputy P.V.F. Le Claire:

The Minister says he will look at these matters and all matters with all means possible. Would that include (as we have an element of people going to university, those that are supported by States grants) considering adopting a comprehensive means testing system across the States education platform so that those people receiving free nursery education who can afford to pay for it and those who are struggling to keep their children in the fee-paying schools can keep their children there and that the grants that are offered to people going to university can be retained at the level that it needs to be? At the moment his department is giving money to people that do not need it while not supporting people that do.

The Deputy of St. Ouen:

I would just like to remind the Deputy that my department is carrying out policies agreed by this Assembly. It was not I that chose to increase and provide for free nursery education. It was this Assembly, quite rightly so. I am only required and properly required to deal with that and that is what I am doing; hence the reason why I am now bringing proposals to reduce that support that is provided. There is a need to look and deal with all matters and I believe that my department, together with the remainder the Council of Ministers and, collectively, all departments are doing just that as tasked by, again, this Assembly.

4.15.8 The Deputy of St. Mary:

This question was about university education and I just wanted to ask the Minister whether he is equally as enthusiastic about vocational education in the U.K. or abroad, 2-year courses, not university courses? There is an issue there and I wanted to have it on the record what his view about that was and whether he will be pursuing that with equal vigour as university education.

The Deputy of St. Ouen:

This was one of the platforms when I stood as Minister for Education, Sport and Culture: it seems a long time ago. I fully understand and accept that we have tended to focus on supporting those academically minded individuals, perhaps far more so than those that are practically minded. My department is and will be considering ways where we can better support those practically minded individuals and develop and improve the skills base both for the individuals and that of the Island.

4.15.9 Deputy T.M. Pitman:

Unfortunately for once Senator Ferguson and I are singing from the same hymn sheet. I will do my best to make sure it never happens again. Could the Minister advise what progress he has made in rectifying the anomalies for parents who are separated, perhaps, and married couples? There have been some anomalies there in support.

The Deputy of St. Ouen:

This is a work in progress and I think that the Deputy is well aware because I have recently shared with him and his panel a report regarding higher education and some of the issues that we will need to deal with in the near future. As I said before, this is a work in progress and one of the proposals that I aim to bring forward, included in the *White Paper*, is how we deal with this inequity or perception of inequity that certain Members raise.

The Deputy Bailiff:

I am afraid that that brings this part of question time to an end and I know that many Members are disappointed that they have not had the opportunity of asking questions which they wanted to get in but, unfortunately, that is the way in which this particular session has gone.

Deputy P.V.F. Le Claire:

Sir, I do not know how other Members feel about their questions but may I ask the Minister for Health and Social Services to answer my question in writing and circulate it to all States Members, please, as we have run out of time?

The Deputy Bailiff:

I call the Minister for Health and Social Services to address that.

Deputy A.E. Pryke of Trinity (The Minister for Health and Social Services):

Yes, I will do that this afternoon.

Deputy M.R. Higgins:

Sir, could I ask the same of the Minister for Treasury and Resources on mine?

The Deputy of St. John?

Sir, can I ask that we lift Standing Orders so that we continue with questions, please?

The Deputy Bailiff:

The previous ruling of the Bailiff has been that that is out of order and cannot be proposed at this stage.