

The panel will be aware of concerns our group have had over planning for students.

We have consistently had to raise problems that needed solving, and though perhaps it might have been easy to forget them in the early days of the pandemic there is no excuse for repeating this, as has been the case.

Part of the problem maybe is that no one sees themselves responsible for our Higher Education students whilst they are away.

It seems to be one of just financing and forgetting them.

This of course does not give an impression to students or their parents that their island wants them to bring back their skills. Especially if during extraordinary times such as a pandemic they are simply left to 'get on with it'.

Background.

Students have in the past couple of years had numerous obstacles to their studies, not all are a problem caused by Jersey, but by the following:

Lecturer strikes in the past couple of years.

Uncertainties about how their A level and equivalents exams would be done.

The changing way of how results would be classified.

Due to A-level classification changes, problems arose about courses they lost a place from but later were able to attend etc.

Btec students waiting weeks longer than A-level students for their results, but having no way of contacting or if they did contact no helpful information.

The problems that we discovered or were reported to us include/ed:

Students at universities in the early days had problems with travelling home. Cancelled flights and costs associated with that.

Those from Income Support households were in a difficult position of what happens when a student returns home to study online, but they still have their accommodation costs to cover, so meant that if they were at home their parent/s would not have their claim adjusted.

Trying to get information was a struggle and or who to direct questions to.

Later on in the year we identified, that due to Student Finance office being closed that calls about grant applications were not being answered. Emails were not answered either.

After much effort we eventually found that any grant applications missing information would not be dealt with but simply put aside. This left families in no mans land but still expecting a grant to appear.

This led to students going away, receiving threats from universities about paying outstanding fees, but then no way of finding out what the hold up was.

Hall and private accommodation where students receive maintenance grants had the same issue.

It took weeks to get this sorted out, and an official complaint by our group was made.

This received an initial will be dealt with but may experience a longer wait than normal due to covid.

It wasn't until months later that Student Finance ever saw that a complaint had been made.

Very recently a meeting was held, but by then the issues raised had already been sorted.

Thankfully, had it not been so, four months before a meeting takes place is not what any person or group should find acceptable.

Grants have by and large been applied for and paid, though we did hear of one this week that was still waiting.

Mental Health provision for students.

As some students were in their first year, had spent much of their time in their rooms, with ongoing cycles of self isolation, and some several times, this was beginning to cause mental health issues for some of them, and parents expressed real concerns about how these young students away from home were coping.

We felt that for first year students whose knowledge of their local services, with few if any friends would find contacting support services here would be far easier, more reassuring, and for some it may have been a service they had already used.

Whilst universities have some help the level of service offered varies, and the same can be said of what self isolating help that was given too.

Eventually after considerable effort, we were told they could call YES.
A service called Kooth is now in place but that is only very recently.

We were concerned about how much our reciprocal health agreement would cover students away, it's still unclear if they needed repatriation if that would be covered. No one seems to want to answer this question. It is a question that requires an answer pandemic, or no pandemic.

We did however discover the U.K. will treat anyone visitor or not for covid, so at least that removed those concerns. That information should have been sought by government, and students advised, not by us going through reams of U.K. legislation and press releases.

Moving on to Christmas end of term.

It was clear to us that provision for students returning needed to be made, we asked if flights would be kept going.

Would there be any place for students to self isolate if they couldn't safely do so in their home.

Again Income Support households and what funding they would have.

We were horrified that a survey would be launched to gather information, BUT, the department could not send this to students because of data protections 'issues'.

It begs the question why that was the case because the declaration signed by students includes health and information as a reason for government contact.

It seemed later on this 'issue' dissolved, and students were contacted, no reason given as to what had changed to allow this.

It would be prudent if the reasons for contacting students was amended in order this does not occur again, preventing government from contacting students quickly whilst away.

We looked at how Guernsey dealt with their students, you simply could not have had a wider contrast. They have planned, for their students, they have welcomed them back as members of their community.

They had a survey announced very early on to gauge what flights would be needed, they had self isolating sorted.

They had a flight booking system set up for students to book first before opening up to other Guernsey residents to use.

They have displayed a 'Putting Children First' mentality to their student planning. What was also obvious was that they include students in their pandemic planning.

Their whole communication was one that showed they cared, and that well-being of students was important.

That same, unfortunately, can't be said for the government of Jersey.

To us it seems no one has any responsibility. This only caused parents and students stress, more emails and phone calls having to be made to departments increasing government workload even more, at a time when they don't need it.

It would seem from correspondence we have had that Student Finance are just that; even the Children's Commissioner says that students are not in her remit, due to their age.

So exactly who does have responsibilities for our students during a pandemic?

It would seem no one department or person.

The students and or their parents have no clear idea about the lines of communication that government are using when it comes to issues / problems that are a concern for students.

We don't know if they are considered at every meeting, weekly, monthly, or only when a group like ours 'makes noise'.

We don't know who or which departments are included.

So we tend to email anyone we think might be able to assist. Whilst a cross departmental group was set up, there are no reports or minutes of what they discussed or decisions made or who was responsible.

Further they make no plans for students as a group. It became clear to us that unless we asked for solutions, and we have been very persistent, that they would have been left unresolved

Currently we have been working on vaccines and how students will be accommodated.

We have been asking for weeks about the vaccination programme for students, with silence as a reply to our requests.

It is clear from the email we have seen only the end of last week, that students will be able to get a vaccine in the U.K.

However, this highlighted that government here do not understand that students who maybe there now, will not be in 12 weeks time.

Or those here now will likely be elsewhere 12 weeks later.

That the scheme in the U.K. is running on a different timescale for their groups compared with our own.

That there has been no thought by officers about those studying in the EU, or ROW.

The Education minister has also recognised this, and we have given him a list of queries and he will have to ask for it to be looked at again.

Perhaps the point to make here is that again, our group are asking the questions, the planning isn't happening until we raise the problems.

Recently test requirements for students to travel back has been a problem.

Once Condor required it, we asked if students could be tested. It took a while, and eventually it was agreed.

However a couple of weeks later we discovered students were turned down. It transpired that it was limited to a week, this was not what we had understood at all. We asked it be extended, which they did a couple of times but it ends on the 21st Feb and students can only do it once.

What they have failed to understand or maybe they do, is the following:

Students who are returning, are in the main on medical placements, these are to qualify them as Doctors, Paramedics, Nurses etc...skills which at the moment one would have thought is essential. Other placements are teaching. Other areas students are still receiving face to face lecturers are in areas which use laboratories etc.

We have some students who study further away and have PCR / test requirements before they travel on from the U.K. they are in the difficult position where they could get trapped not being able to come back or go on to the country.

It would seem Jersey is very happy to cover the costs of visitors getting three tests here, but not for the limited number of students leaving the island to study.

It should be noted that students often work part time to supplement or cover all of their living costs. Parents have in many cases had their incomes reduced, with covid and traditional work places like pubs, bars and restaurants closed the opportunities to supplement incomes have been wiped out.

Our Treasury minister changed our tax system in recognition that incomes for 2020 would be less than 2019. However there appears to be no recognition of the drop in incomes for students. Though somehow that they can find the funds for a test in order to complete their studies?

There had been no provision made for students to study when that wasn't possible at home. With libraries closed, siblings learning from home, and parents working from home.

Space to study has been an issue, for those that required specific types of space. i.e. Artists, Performing Arts studios, again it was our group raising the questions.

Student Finance don't see it as their responsibility, again, who is responsible? Has it been thought about in government plans?

With all of this in mind, it seems to us that our students have not really been part of covid planning at all.

We feel that unless we had been persistent, nothing would have been done. Even after the first few issues, students were not then added to the government planning.

There doesn't appear to be any ministry that takes overall responsibility for students.

Students ages start from those doing Arts such as Dance or Drama usually from about 14/16 years old so they are children, (some are degree level courses even at this young age) upwards, there is no upper age limit.

So they can't be all described as Children, or Young people, and what help and support required will be different according to their ages, but also responsibility for some under the Minister if still a statutory school age or care leaver.

We have to ask this question. If we had not raised the problems students have, and we have had to be persistent, would Government have done anything at all?

We don't think they would.

Our group was never set up for these purposes, but we saw the need and have tried to help where we could. We saw the distress being caused and were not prepared to just sit back and do nothing.

For now, and any future pandemic planning it must include the following:

Government include students, with a clear understanding of the ages and course variations, and different term times.

That they create a point of contact for matters relating to students, that includes a response in a reasonable time, not one of weeks or months.

That they have an understanding of the ages that being a student can include.

That if planning involves working with other governments that they look at differences in timetabling, provision of services, and costs.

That clear appropriate information and messaging is targeted to students directly with thought given to where that might be.

U.K. universities have hardship funds set up, unfortunately our students are excluded from almost all of these.

A local hardship fund ought to be established to cover students.

It should be noted those studying locally have not had the same level of difficulty, and some will have had ability to earn money, if receiving a maintenance grant it is at the same level as a student away receives, however their costs if living at home are considerably less.

kind regards,

Nicki Heath
Student Loan Support Group.

I spotted this article today (HEPI) I know one of the panel's advisors in the past, and also the department too, Bahram Bekhradnia is a Director of HEPI.

They seem to have drawn the same conclusions as we did.

The hardship funds provision, to apply to both Home fee status and International students. No doubt you'll be aware that Jersey students now will have Home fee status, however that applies only to England and doesn't not apply to RUK, it also doesn't not apply to scholarships bursaries etc.

In various universities regulations for hardship funds, I noticed that the restrictions meant our students fell between both descriptions.

We need to have something similar set up here, not just during covid.

Also, of note was the funds that international students need to have in place to be able to satisfy that they can live.

The amounts specified are far higher than the maximum amount any student will receive on a full grant, for London it is almost double.

As you'll recall we commented on the current new scheme needing to be kept under review in order that it didn't become out of date.

Having read the latest business plan update it's clear any new student finance scheme will not be in place till 2023.

It means our current scheme again will be out of date RPI wise, and income on which it is based by 5 years.

The amount of maintenance currently paid is what was in place on the old scheme plus the loan that no longer exists.

In that respect max maintenance grant is even more out of date.

Include as HEPI mention the loss of access to jobs for students, and it's clear that students, will be finding it very difficult during covid restrictions.

To date we have not seen any comment or recognition from our government on this, in fact when it comes to areas like free PCR testing in order students can return to study, government have been less than helpful.

I thought the panel may find the article of interest.

<https://www.hepi.ac.uk/2021/02/16/supporting-students-in-times-of-hardship/#comments>