

2. Oral Questions

2.1 Deputy M. Tadier of St. Brelade to the Minister for Social Security regarding access to Income Support for mature students:

Will the Minister advise what criteria, if any, exist for allowing mature students to maintain their Income Support allocation while studying in further education and confirm whether some potential students are more at risk of having their Income Support cut if they go on to study than others and if so, why?

Senator F. du H. Le Gresley (The Minister for Social Security):

The Income Support system is based on working age adults supporting themselves through employment as far as possible. Income Support can also be provided if the individual has little prospect of employment with their current skills and a period of full-time education would be likely to provide them with relevant work-related skills and increase their prospects of finding employment locally. As well as courses at Highlands College, adults aged over 19 can receive support through the Advance Plus scheme, which combines work-related training with work placements. The Income Support team liaises closely with the Back-to-Work team, specialist Workwise advisers, career advisers and Highlands College to ensure that each individual job seeker receives advice and guidance to undertake appropriate education or training to develop work-related skills. The application process for courses at Highlands includes advice on financial support at an early stage to ensure that students understand their benefit entitlement. I can confirm that an individual who voluntarily leaves employment to take up full-time study is unlikely to receive support through Income Support benefit and may therefore suffer a cut. A move of this nature would only be supported if the potential student had compelling medical or personal reason, which affected their existing employment. A mature student over the age of 25 wishing to undertake a full-time 3-year degree level course would, as a general rule, not be eligible for Income Support benefit. Exceptions can be made in specific circumstances or for a course which combines studying and paid work experience, such as a nursing degree course.

2.1.1 Deputy M. Tadier:

I thank the Minister for that full answer. If I read some contact that I have had with a constituent who said she was initially told that Income Support were very supportive of her taking on further education and then said: "Within a month I received a letter saying that if I do not leave Highlands by Friday I would have my support removed" and that there was 10 days' notice with 4 removed already by letter date. She goes on to explain - I believe the Minister has probably seen the correspondence - that she did not receive much success from the department and was treated in what she felt was an unsatisfactory manner. But the question is, does the Minister accept that since the date that Social Security and Income Support were implemented there has been a vast increase in unemployment so there are more people chasing fewer jobs. Also that there needs to perhaps be a review of the policy given that those who cannot find jobs because they do not exist or they do not have developmental training need to be given a level playing field so that they can access a higher education without having obstacles put in their way?

Senator F. du H. Le Gresley:

Obviously I cannot go into the circumstances of an individual case but I hope in my original answer I made it clear to Members that where we assess that taking on an educational course at Highlands College or other suitable training would assist people with finding a job, which of course is what we are all about at Social Security, then they will be encouraged to do that and assisted to do that but the maximum time would be a one-year course. We would not normally be encouraging people to do a course longer than one year.

2.1.2 Senator S.C. Ferguson:

As a corollary to this, will the Minister confirm that mature students will receive credits for pension contributions while they are undertaking a degree course?

Senator F. du H. Le Gresley:

There is a scheme whereby people attending a university degree course are entitled to credits and this would of course normally apply to people under the age of 25, but I will check that and confirm to the Senator whether that applies to mature students.

2.1.3 Deputy G.P. Southern of St. Helier:

Will the Minister state whether receipt of an education grant for a particular course is regarded for Income Support calculations?

Senator F. du H. Le Gresley:

The provision of what I think the Deputy refers to is the maintenance grants for a local student attending a degree course at the university centre at Highlands College, would be available to somebody under the age of 25 but the majority of students in that category will be living at home and therefore the grant would replace effectively the personal component of Income Support.

2.1.4 Deputy G.P. Southern:

For an independent student, not at home, would receipt of an education grant be regarded for the Income Support calculation?

Senator F. du H. Le Gresley:

Yes, it would.

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

The Minister mentioned in his first answer relative working skills. Could the Minister therefore advise who determines exactly what "relative working skills" are?

[9:45]

Senator F. du H. Le Gresley:

Yes, I would confirm that this is through a meeting of the people who are relevant to this decision, which would be careers advisers, Highlands College tutors, the individual concerned at the Back-to-Work team, and the people who look after Income Support. So it would be looked in the round by all the relevant people.

2.1.6 Deputy J.A. Martin of St. Helier:

Is it not a fact that somebody who may be in finance at the moment who is then unemployed or wishes to change career, if they want to go into, say, a caring profession, not nursing, just say a healthcare assistant, then Income Support will not support them because they look at it as they are downgrading? Whereas if it is the other way round people will be supported. As Deputy Vallois says, who says what is relevant to somebody's own circumstances and what is needed in the Island?

Senator F. du H. Le Gresley:

I keep going back to my original answer to Deputy Tadier's question. If somebody chooses to leave full-time employment to go into studying then we are very unlikely to assist them with Income Support benefit. That applies whether they want to go into a different type of profession - which the Deputy suggests may be lesser paid - or whether they want to improve their employment chances by doing a totally different course. But the point that Members need to understand that Income Support benefits are to support people who are actively seeking work and are fit to get into work. We are not substituting our benefit for education grants.

2.1.7 Deputy T.M. Pitman of St. Helier:

The lovely Deputies on my right and left have stolen my thunder a little, however I would just like to continue the theme and ask the Minister, was it not a comparatively short time ago that Deputy Southern put forward the very sensible idea of having a designated selection of courses that might have been very helpful in this so people could know where they stood, and is there any work being done in developing that?

Senator F. du H. Le Gresley:

Department officers will have their own list, if you like, of courses that they would feel would be appropriate but of course each individual is different and their needs are different, and we would not want to be so specific that we make a list of courses which people might choose as an option rather than actively seek work.

2.1.8 Connétable P.J. Rondel of St. John:

What availability is there within Social Security for a person being retrained in the trades, which takes 4 to 5 years? What kind of support is there within Social Security for the long-term training given somebody who is totally inexperienced going to be a plumber, for instance, or electrician, where the first 2 years are basically paid at a very low rate? Is there support for these people being retrained?

Senator F. du H. Le Gresley:

Yes, I can confirm to the Constable that in those circumstances where somebody is in work and learning a trade and perhaps on a low... they would have to of course be either on the trainee rate within the minimum wage or the minimum wage itself. If they were self-supporting, in other words if they were renting their own accommodation, we would certainly consider them for Income Support benefit to top up so that they could afford to live a reasonable standard of living.

2.1.9 Deputy M.R. Higgins of St. Helier:

Can the Minister tell me whether there is any strategy at all within the Council of Ministers between Education and Income Support to deal with training? Because we seem to talk about university courses as if it is the only form of training there is. There are many people in this Island who want to develop skills which would be for the benefit of the Island and the economy and they are not getting assistance from Education; they cannot get grants for it or they are not getting money from Income Support. If we are going to deal with the unemployment situation and provide the workforce we need for the future, does the Minister have a strategy and, if not, when is he going to get one?

Senator F. du H. Le Gresley:

I would say to the Deputy that there is... in fact we had a meeting yesterday of the Skills Executive which is chaired... the Chair rotates but the 3 Ministers sitting on that is myself, the Minister for Education, Sport and Culture and the Minister for Economic Development, and the Skills Board reports to us and it is their role to make sure that we are joined up in the provision of training and skills training across the Island.

2.1.10 Deputy M.R. Higgins:

Can I just ask a supplementary? You mentioned a meeting yesterday but is there a strategy in place and how long is it going to take? Obviously there is not, but how long will it take?

Senator F. du H. Le Gresley:

There are numerous strategies starting from age 14 upwards to mature students and I cannot tell you that there is one strategy across all groups but there are individual strategies for different groups of people. There is a lot of work going on particularly with apprenticeships and a launch of a new apprenticeship scheme which is very relevant to getting people back into work.

2.1.11 Deputy M. Tadier:

I have had information from a professional at Highlands College who says that several students have approached her and said that they are too scared to approach Social Security and tell them that they have not got a job, so they are paying for their own study. Does the Minister not think it is a strange situation that Social Security will pay somebody who cannot find work to maybe not find work and not have anything meaningful to do with their day or pay them the same amount of money so that they can better themselves in the context of a higher education or further education college? Will the Minister undertake to review what seems to be a discretionary system so that proper policies, if they do exist, can be put in place so that people are not made to feel as if they are being pushed from pillar to post?

Senator F. du H. Le Gresley:

I am not quite sure where the Deputy was going with that particular question but the important thing perhaps to make clear is that if somebody on Income Support, particularly if they are actively seeking work, wishes to study at home then we do encourage that to increase their qualifications and we will provide assistance with the cost of courses and materials in those circumstances. I know the Deputy would like me to be more specific as to regard the policy but we do have a policy. I am happy to provide the Deputy with a copy of that policy and, at the moment, I do feel it is sufficient for the current circumstances under which we are working.

Deputy G.P. Southern:

Will he circulate that policy to all Members?

Senator F. du H. Le Gresley:

I would have to check with officers but I see no reason why I could not do that.