

STATES OF JERSEY



INCOME SUPPORT FOR MATURE STUDENTS (P.89/2019) – COMMENTS

Presented to the States on 20th September 2019
by the Council of Ministers

STATES GREFFE

COMMENTS

1. SUMMARY

Members are asked to reject this proposition.

The proposition asks the Minister for Social Security to make an exception to current Income Support policy with the aim of providing extra financial support to a small number of mature students. Members are asked to reject the proposition for 2 main reasons –

- The proposition would provide support to a very small number of students on 2 specific courses this year, whereas other benefit claimants have not been given this opportunity.
- The proposition would create an inappropriate change to current education and benefit policy, which would allow additional individuals to take these courses in future years.

It asks for students enrolling on 2 specific courses to become eligible for financial support to study full-time, exempting them from the Income Support rules that normally require working-age adults to look for work.

The Income Support policies do not stop students from studying and don't affect financial support from Education. They have expectations that people will spend a certain number of hours each week working or looking for work. However, most further education courses have a limited number of hours where attendance is needed in the classroom; although time is needed to study outside class time, students do have the option of studying and working at the same time. Many full-time students already support themselves through work, both in Jersey and outside the Island. Many Islanders study in the evenings whilst working full-time, or take up shift work that fits around class hours.

Ministers are already developing a skills strategy and a vision for post-16 education. There is no evidence that the particular courses named in the proposition should be prioritised for additional support over many other courses available at Highlands.

It is important to find ways to improve the overall skills levels in the Island, and to meet our need for critical skills, but there is no evidence that approving this proposition will help in this aim.

Exceptions to Education/Income Support policy

Exceptions to the Income Support work requirement have been agreed for courses that meet an essential need for key workers in the Island. Local students studying to gain teaching, nursing or social worker qualifications can receive Income Support whilst undertaking these specific qualifications. The Psychology/Criminology and Childhood Studies foundation degree courses do not lead directly to a key worker qualification, and the proposition does not provide any evidence to include them in this category.

In the absence of evidence, the Council of Ministers does not believe that this proposition is an appropriate way to make changes to education policy in Jersey. It is not fair to use a States' decision at the last minute to force an exception for a small number of students who have been unable to secure a place on their first choice of course.

2. FINANCIAL SUPPORT FOR HIGHER EDUCATION

Income Support is not the primary source of funding for Jersey students undertaking a full-time course of education. Higher education funding for course fees and maintenance grants is the responsibility of the Minister for Education. Highlands College provides a number of two- and three-year courses which are included within the higher education funding scheme. This provides support for tuition fees for most households, and provides an additional maintenance grant based on household income. An eligible student in a household with a total income below £50,000 would receive a maintenance grant of £7,500 per year. This funding is available to students of all ages.

Income Support

The Income Support system provides means-tested assistance to households across a wide range of personal circumstances. One of the basic rules of Income Support is that working-age adults should be working or seeking work unless they have an exemption from the work condition. There are a range of exemptions in respect of adults who are in full-time education, summarised in the following table. Employment advisers will support a person who is studying with finding work hours that fit around their course, for example in finding shift work.

Person claiming Income Support	Requirements to work/ look for work	Exemptions from work requirement in order to study?
Young person up to age 22	Yes	Yes – if studying for any degree. Exemption runs for length of degree course (e.g. can start at age 21 and finish at 24).
Young person up to age 25, who is a care-leaver or has experienced severe disruption to secondary education	Yes	Yes – if enrolled on any further or higher education course.
Parent responsible for the care of a child below nursery age (3+)	No	Not applicable – can enrol on any course, but not supported with childcare costs. Critical skills courses only – childcare costs will be met.
Responsible for the care of a child at nursery/ primary school	Yes – limited hours	Full-time study: “Critical skills” courses only. Can study alongside work requirements.

Person claiming Income Support	Requirements to work/ look for work	Exemptions from work requirement in order to study?
Responsible for the care of a child at secondary school	Yes – 35 hours a week	Full-time study: “Critical skills” courses only. Can study alongside work requirements.
Working-age adult	Yes – 35 hours a week	Full-time study: “Critical skills” courses only. Can study alongside work requirements.
Person with a health condition which limits their capacity to work	Part-time or none, depending on individual circumstances	Dependent on circumstances.

Younger students are supported during their full-time education, regardless of their choice of degree course. Mature students are generally not supported to return to education on full-time degree courses unless they are accepted onto a critical skills course.

3. THE DEFINITION OF “CRITICAL SKILLS” COURSES

Within the Income Support rules, the Minister for Social Security holds a list of full-time critical skills courses that provide exemption from the work requirement. This list details those courses that award a qualification on completion that is directly linked to key roles in the Island where there is clear evidence of a shortage of local workers. At present, the courses that are included are –

- Access to higher education – one-year course to gain level 3 qualifications required for progression to the Nursing/Social worker degrees
- Nursing degree (including mental health nursing)
- Social Work degree
- Jersey Graduate Teacher Training Programme.

Students of any age on these courses are exempt from the work requirement of Income Support, and will receive support with childcare costs if this is required. This is a significant financial investment in terms of benefit cost. The list of courses included addresses the availability of key worker skills in the Island, and successful completion leads directly to professional level employment.

Adding additional courses to the critical skills list

In order to add additional courses to this list, the Minister for Social Security receives evidence from education professionals, or their equivalents in healthcare or other fields, that a similar outcome is expected from an additional course. The list of critical skills courses is kept under regular review, and the Social Work degree course has been added in 2019 as this course first became available in the Island.

There is no evidence to suggest that the 2 courses identified by this proposition meet the level set for a critical skill.

- Psychology with Criminology Foundation Degree

The course is a foundation degree course that does not lead directly to a professional qualification. Further study to complete a third year would be required to achieve a bachelor's degree qualification, and the completion of an additional 3-year degree course would be needed to provide the individual with a graduate level professional qualification to work as a nurse or social worker.

- Childhood Studies Foundation Degree

The course is a foundation degree course that does not lead directly to a professional qualification. Further study to complete a third year would be required to achieve a bachelor's degree qualification. A one-year post-graduate qualification would then be needed to qualify as a primary school teacher.

The proposition argues that –

There is no doubt that obtaining this degree will enable these students to find work within the social or health sector, such as social work, policing and mental health. Equally, there can be little doubt that possession of this degree will raise these students' earnings in the long term.

Whilst the 2-year courses provide the student with valuable training and knowledge, they do not provide any specific qualification that is deemed essential to take up a particular level of employment in a key skills area.

4. STRATEGIES TO INCREASE EARNINGS AND EMPLOYABILITY – DEVELOPING A SKILLED WORKFORCE

Policies to provide all adults in Jersey with access to lifelong training and education are of benefit to the whole Island, particularly where they help people participate fully in the local economy. In the longer term this not only benefits the individual, but also helps Jersey as a whole by increasing tax revenues, reducing benefit costs, and reducing the need for skills-driven inward migration.

In reviewing the Island's need for skills, Ministers will take advice from specific employment sectors, with a view to understanding and responding to supply and demand in Jersey's economy. Government must work with employers to design the Island's skills strategy. The Government Plan 2020–2023 ([P.71/2019](#)) sets out the actions that will be taken in this area next year by the Minister for Education. The costs associated with providing training and education facilities, and the cost of supporting a wider range of adults whilst undertaking such courses, will be investigated for inclusion in future government plans.

However, there are many different routes to achieving lifelong learning, and it will be important that the strategy considers all of these options, many of which do not require full-time study.

The Minister for Education is committed to providing an education system in the Island that meets the needs not just of school-age students, but also of lifelong learners. The post-16 strategy is our best opportunity to examine the skills gaps in the Island, and to revisit the available pathways for every Islander who wishes to further their education.

The list of full-time critical skills courses held by the Minister for Social Security was created to look at immediate skills gaps in the Island, and to courses that directly lead to one of these jobs. As part of the development of the post-16 strategy, the Minister for Education will look to broaden access to educational opportunities by improving the availability of courses at different levels to Islanders, with a direct link to the pathways these courses might open to employment. This will be co-ordinated with the Income Support system to ensure that appropriate courses are available to local residents at all income levels.

The availability of high-quality, impartial careers advice and guidance is also essential in this process, so that students are aware of where any training can or cannot take them. The Council of Ministers is keen not to limit choices for learners, and believes that any additional training to improve skills is valuable. Equally, Ministers recognise the importance of informing learners of progression routes and transferability of learning, so that there is transparency over where courses can lead.

For example, the Access course is a key part of Jersey's current offering for mature students who do not have the level 3 qualification required to enrol on a degree level course, but in itself it does not guarantee entry onto any specific degree course. It is important that prospective students are given clear guidance to understand their options and possible employment outcomes. The Council of Ministers will ensure that Government departments and partner organisations work closely together to achieve this.

Government of Jersey as an employer

The States Employment Board recognises the need for workforce planning to grow local talent and develop skills within our workforce. This need led directly to the creation of "Team Jersey," a significant and long-term Government programme focused on building a positive workplace culture across all Government departments. The Team Jersey discovery report identified the importance of creating a taskforce of Jersey employers; the objective of growing local talent will be at the heart of this initiative.

The Government's internal People Strategy is in the early stages of development. The Strategy will focus on the people priorities that underpin the delivery of the Government Plan. It is intended that the strategy will include talent development, identified through workforce planning and succession planning. This will feed in to the Government's learning and development strategy, education system, and through to skills development offered through the 'Back to Work' and 'Skills Jersey' schemes.

Direct support for benefit claimants is already provided through the 'Back to Work' service, which provides training opportunities designed to enhance earnings capability and employability. The 'Get Ahead' scheme helps Income Support claimants in employment to take actions and undertake training to improve their earnings potential.

Additional support for mature students

The circumstances of 5 students who initiated an e-petition have been widely communicated through social media. Highlands College have already taken steps to ensure that mature students and potential students receive comprehensive advice on their educational and career choices before committing to a particular course. This will include advice about personal circumstances which might prevent a person from being accepted to work in a specific field.

5. CONCLUSION

As stated, Ministers are already developing a skills strategy and a vision for post-16 education.

As part of this careful consideration will be given to the Island's skills needs, and whether additional courses should lead to support through the benefit system for mature students. However, there is no evidence that the particular courses named in the proposition should be prioritised for additional support over many other courses available in the Island.

There is no evidence that approving this proposition is an appropriate step towards meeting Jersey's need for critical skills.