

3.5 Deputy L.M.C. Doublet of St. Saviour of the Chief Minister regarding an update on the work of the Student Financing Sub-Committee: [1(445)]

Further to the publication of the terms of reference of the Student Financing Sub-Committee in which it was stated an update would be provided in July 2017, can the Chief Minister now share this with the Assembly and, if not, when it is intended to be provided?

Senator I.J. Gorst (The Chief Minister):

Treasury is investigating options for student loans, they are also exploring alternative options including with education, expanding local courses and attending universities outside the U.K. We do need to ensure that access to higher education is determined by educational performance, not financial means, so more local students can access higher education.

3.5.1 Deputy L.M.C. Doublet:

How many meetings have been held with the Student Financing Sub-Committee since the last update the Chief Minister gave to the Assembly please?

Senator I.J. Gorst:

Not enough. I cannot recall exactly. It may have been one, it may not be. It should not be, and Members do like to ask me questions, it should not fall to me to do the work for other departments and other Ministers. I set up the sub-group, I have got to be honest with Members, I said I would be 3 weeks ago and I am going to be. I am disappointed that the work has not progressed faster than I asked for it to be progressed. There has been some good work with a local bank who have come forward with a model around what student loans could look like, but it has not been taken sufficiently seriously. I hope that Members will continue to question individual departments and Ministers to make sure that they do deliver in this particular regard. I know they are committed, I know they have been busy, but where we are today and where we find ourselves today, for my part, is not good enough. Those departments know that that is my sentiment and they have committed to working faster to deliver solutions.

3.5.2 Deputy J.M. Maçon of St. Saviour:

Given that is the case, why has the Chief Minister kept with those Ministers if they are not delivering? At the end of the day the buck stops with the Chief Minister and if he is not happy with the performance of Ministers why is he keeping them?

Senator I.J. Gorst:

If Members really want the buck to stop with me I look forward to the changes to the legislation being brought forward so that it does. Because be in no doubt, I will then deliver.

3.5.3 Deputy T.A. Vallois of St. John:

In order to assist families and students for planning, particularly for next year, does the Chief Minister believe it is realistic to expect a solution for them for next year or could we see this dragging on longer?

Senator I.J. Gorst:

Is the Deputy referring to this September?

The Deputy of St. John:

Next.

Senator I.J. Gorst:

Absolutely. I am still working... and I spoke with the Treasurer on Friday that solutions and changes need to be brought forward in Budget 2018, which is later this year.

3.5.4 Deputy M. Tadier:

Although the question asks about student loans, does the Chief Minister agree that we need to look at it holistically, and does he agree that more money needs to be put in the pot? He knows that obviously under a Reform Jersey Government £4.9 million would be reinvested to pay for all students' tuition fees, every student in the Island under a Reform Jersey Government would have their tuition fees paid. Does the Chief Minister and his band of merry Ministers have similar proposals to invest significantly in higher education?

Senator I.J. Gorst:

I thought their proposal might be following the way of the Corbyn proposal running up to an election: "We are going to pay everybody's tuition fees" and directly after the election: "It was not a promise it was just an indication that we might like to in the future." In answer to the Deputy's actual question, is more money going to need to be invested, yes, it is. We do not yet know quite how much it is going to be but more money is going to need to be invested. Of course there is now this debate in the United Kingdom about what is going to happen to tuition fees and the question that some people are bringing forward is does there need to be a totally new approach, which is another reason why it is more difficult for departments to come forward with a solution. But we do need to come forward with a solution, working with banks if that is going to work. But I have no doubt ultimately when we come forward with that it will in due course evolve because the conversation in the U.K. is evolving.

3.5.5 Deputy S.Y. Mézec:

The Chief Minister should probably do a bit more reading on U.K. politics before making such embarrassingly inaccurate statements like the one he just did there. But my question is about the terms of reference for the Student Financing Sub-Committee which I have read they dedicate quite a substantial proportion of those terms of references to looking at the prospect of investigating having more bursary-type schemes and working with the private sector to help them deliver on those. Does the Chief Minister agree with me that while bursary solutions are helpful and better than nothing, for the vast majority of students they simply will not be an option and they will not provide the stability in finding that they need while going through university? Would he agree with me that the focus of this sub-committee should be looking at how we improve our grant system for tuition fees and how we improve our loan scheme for living costs, and that is the solution that is better for the majority of students, and less focus on the bursary systems?

Senator I.J. Gorst:

I would say that it is all 3. So, yes, how we can improve the grant system because there are some - even our lowest income families - who struggle with the current grant system even though it is supposed to absolutely completely cover them 100 per cent. Then we have got the loan system for families who are making decisions now not for their children to go to university because they really feel they cannot deal with the financial burden over time. Then a bursary scheme I think could sit alongside both of those 2 changes to encourage people perhaps into particular areas that we think there might be need for in the economy into the future. So I think all 3 could work and are rightly where focus is being given.

3.5.6 Deputy L.M.C. Doublet:

So as I understand it there will be a solution for the students that will be going to university next September. I am just wondering about those who will be getting exam results soon and

may be offered a place which they might not be able to take up because of the funding. Is there any scope at all for a stop gap solution perhaps for one year to use some of our contingencies for students who otherwise would not be able to afford, just for this one year to plug that gap before the long term solution is forthcoming?

Senator I.J. Gorst:

I may look like I have got a wallet in my pocket but the gentleman with the wallet is sitting in front of me. It is a very good question. It is a very good question. It is not something that currently we have been looking at but I absolutely understand the difficulty that some are facing right now as they wait for their exam results wondering what those results will be, which is stressful enough in my experience, but also then wondering what their entire future might be if they make a decision to go to university or not, and some of that will be based around the financial means of their family. I recognise that difficulty. I know that the Minister for Treasury and Resources has heard the question as well and I am sure he will give it appropriate consideration.