

2020.10.06

6.1 Deputy K.G. Pamplin of the Minister for Education regarding ...

I thank you for allowing this question, as I think it fits the criteria. Will the Minister update the Assembly on the latest situation regarding young Islanders at universities in the United Kingdom or other parts of the world and the support for those Islanders, which the Government is putting in place, given the ongoing impact of the COVID-19 pandemic?

Senator T.A. Vallois:

May I ask my Assistant Minister, Deputy Maçon, to answer this question, please?

Deputy J.M. Maçon of St. Saviour (Assistant Minister for Education - rapporteur):

I thank the Deputy for his question and I am pleased to inform Members that in the past week we have set up a cross-governmental officer working group to monitor and respond appropriately as this dynamic situation develops. The group has officers from Health, External Relations, Student Finance, Travel Policy and Customer and Local Services, so the holistic assessment of issues can be made and that a co-ordinated approach to support in communications is achieved. The Deputy will be aware that I proactively contacted all Members to make them aware of this in my email last week. In the first instance, students should use the welfare and support from their own universities or institutions but those who prefer not to I can confirm that our excellent Youth Enquiry Service team will be happy to take their calls and help where they can. The Minister for Education has written to her counterparts in England, Scotland, Northern Ireland and Wales last week, as these jurisdictions are where the vast majority of our circa 1,500 students are studying. The Minister has made it clear that she will do her utmost to ensure that any students wishing to return to the Island can do so in accordance with Jersey and the country of origin's guidelines. She has also asked Ministers to take this commitment into account and will be aware that our officers are always available to discuss any plans with respect to our students. Finally, I can confirm that the very small number of our care leavers at universities that chose to have voluntary contact with our leaving care service have been receiving well-being checks from their associated personal advisers.

6.1.1 Deputy K.G. Pamplin:

I thank my fellow St. Saviour Deputy No. 1 to engage on this very important subject. We have seen the front page of the *Jersey Evening Post*; this is, as he says, an ongoing situation. What more can be done to support parents here on the Island, speaking as one of those, and those across, further to what he has outlined today?

Deputy J.M. Maçon:

I hope Members will think that by the actions I have already taken that I am absolutely engaging in this issue. Perhaps I have misinterpreted the Deputy's question on that point. What more can be done, again that is why we have set this particular group up. If there are any issues and concerns that come in to us, of course we will respond to them by updating the gov.je website in the F.A.Q. (frequently asked questions) section, as we have been doing all along in this pandemic. But if Members do have any specific matters they wish to raise with me again, I am absolutely accessible to them and members of the public.

6.1.2 Deputy K.F. Morel:

Quite dumbfoundedly the Assistant Minister for Education has said that the Government is directing its efforts towards United Kingdom, students in the United Kingdom. However, there

are students elsewhere around the world, in universities in the European Union and further afield. Would the Minister please describe to the Assembly the measures that the department is taking to reach out to those students proactively to enquire about their welfare and whether they need to return and so on, et cetera?

Deputy J.M. Maçon:

I can say that a student in Holland has already been in touch asking for this, as again the method of communication will be updating the Government website, as well as putting out press releases. You will not hear me say this often but I will thank our colleagues in the media because when it has come to this issue they have been absolutely interested and putting that information out there as well. As the Deputy mentions, we do have students who do go all around the world; Australia, United States and European Union, for example. Sometimes we just need to handle these on a case-by-case basis because if we are trying to bring someone back from the other side of the world we do need to think about the practicalities of that.

6.1.3 Deputy K.F. Morel:

Would the Minister advise the Assembly as to whether the department has a comprehensive list of students who are studying outside the United Kingdom? If so, is the department proactively, as much as I dislike that word, trying to engage with those students or is it just left to those students to come to them with their enquiry?

Deputy J.M. Maçon:

The way that it works for Student Finance is that not all students necessarily register with Student Finance. Those, for example, who do not receive any form of financial support may choose not to register with Student Finance and, therefore, we would not have their contact details, although the department does actively encourage any student to register with Student Finance. As for then having that information and how we would do, for example, a mailing list or whatever, again because there are issues around who would have access to that information and who would not, again the main method of communication has been to update the gov.je website to make sure that it is accessible to all.

6.1.4 Deputy R.J. Ward:

May I ask the Assistant Minister, will exception be given to any students who feel that they do not want to continue their studies this year because of the situation in universities, with regards to fees that may be asked to be paid back in other circumstances being waived and some leeway being given? How will information be communicated to them when they may be in a very vulnerable position?

Deputy J.M. Maçon:

We have had some enquiries like this already. We are, of course, advising people, as per the order and legislation. We have also taken other issues when it comes to matters of student finance and we do accept that the pandemic is what would be considered exceptional and extraordinary circumstances. These matters must be dealt with on a case-by-case basis. I cannot give a blanket statement but I can say that that cover in the legislation does exist, if that is comfort to the Deputy.

6.1.5 Deputy R.J. Ward:

I thank the Assistant Minister for his answer. Can I ask, just to give some detail beyond the Government website, how communication would be made with students proactively in order to reassure them? Because that may be a very helpful thing to do at this time, to show that reassurance to students who are living away from home.

Deputy J.M. Maçon:

I am not exactly sure what the Deputy is asking me. Because we do not have a complete set of, for example, email addresses that we can just fire out. Then if we did use what the Student Finance information has, again I would need to check whether we could do that under the data protection stuff. For example, we know in the Social Security Department most students will have put in their credits for social security but I do not think we can use the information, even if we did have it, for the purposes of welfare checks or disseminating information because it is a different purpose. I would need to do checks over what we can do within the system. But what my advice from the officers has been, the best way to ensure that anyone has the same access to this information, is to put it up on the website, the gov.je website, under the Student Finance F.A.Q. section.

6.1.6 Deputy K.G. Pamplin:

I reiterate my thanks to the Minister and Assistant Minister for engaging me. There are still ongoing concerns and it does not surprise them to hear that, as ever, I am pushing for enhanced communication. Will the Minister and the Assistant Minister commit to providing regular briefings, however they see fit, for all families as we continue to watch with great concern to the growing situation in the United Kingdom for our students away at university, and I thank them again?

[11:45]

Deputy J.M. Maçon:

I am not entirely sure briefings is the best way to do it but absolutely, as and when we have any updates to make, we will ensure that they are done in the most public way and absolutely we will send out any press releases, which Members will have access to as well. But, again, if there are any other things which Members would like to suggest in the way of communication, again, please talk to us and we are happy to take on any suggestions they may have.