

2025.07.08

4.1 Deputy C.D. Curtis of St. Helier Central of the Minister for Education and Lifelong Learning regarding support for students that were remote learning (OQ.160/2025):

Further to the recent increases in education grants to distance-learning degree students, and in light of the possible increase in students choosing this option and the higher dropout rates associated with remote learning, will the Minister detail what in-person support, if any, is being considered for students?

Deputy R.J. Ward of St. Helier Central (The Minister for Education and Lifelong Learning):

I thank the Deputy for her question. I am pleased to confirm there will be local in-person support for distant learners for students studying by distance learning. Students can access in-person face-to-face support locally from Skills Jersey who offer a range of services to all local residents, including those studying remotely.

4.1.1 Deputy C.D. Curtis:

I thank the Minister for that answer. Has the Minister carried out research into how many students studying by distance learning will be dependent students or independent students?

Deputy R.J. Ward:

No, that figure probably exists because of funding applications. There were 11 applications for distance learning this year, 12 last year, so the numbers slightly decreased. They are small numbers, so that should not be an issue in terms of that information.

4.1.2 Deputy H.M. Miles of St. Brelade:

Could the Minister outline the rationale for making changes to the grant system so that the maximum student grant for distance learning courses available is now nearly the same as the grant for in-person learning?

Deputy R.J. Ward:

Yes, it is to increase access to education. Distance learning is a way in which people can access education that perhaps they could not before. They can spread it over a longer time. They may not have had the opportunity the first time. They may have commitments at home. They may not suit in-person learning.

[10:15]

They may be able to access a high-quality course, which they could not before. So there are a myriad of reasons to level the playing field, so to speak.

4.1.3 Deputy H.M. Miles:

Has there been any consultation with Highlands College to understand the impact on University College Jersey degrees of this change?

Deputy R.J. Ward:

Yes, there is constant dialogue but we have to be realistic about what we are offering here. As I said, 11 people applied this year for distance learning. It is not huge numbers. I do not see it as a significant impact on Highlands College in their degrees. They are very different degrees; social work for example, and degrees are, if you like, tailored more to being in person. But what this does is it widens the access to higher education for many people on this Island. Those who want to learn by distance learning stay on the Island, and may well be more likely to stay on the Island to use their skills as well. I think that is an important advantage of this small change.

4.1.4 Deputy L.K.F. Stephenson of St. Mary, St. Ouen and St. Peter:

What extra support is provided or is being considered to be provided to students who may have additional needs and choose to pursue distance learning? Is that different to what is offered to those who go away to study?

Deputy R.J. Ward:

There will be similarity in support needed; guidance on course selection or if distance learning is the right fit for the student. It supplied mentoring support to help students structure their studies and stay on track, signposting to local services such as counselling and mental health support, careers advice, including connections with local employers to help students gain work experience and explore job opportunities are some of the things that are there. I have a bit more detail as well in terms of the requirements of the courses, but I think I might go on a little bit too long. I will leave that for a supplementary.

4.1.5 Deputy L.K.F. Stephenson:

I was not clear if the Minister was saying that that is what is available to everybody ... support for everyone with distance learning because my question had been about those with additional needs who may choose to do distance learning because we may find that there are more who would want to do that because it is easier. The reason I ask is that some of these students with additional needs will go from having one-to-one support and a record of need at school to potentially having no extra support if they choose to go off-Island to university or potentially pursue distance learning. I would just like to know the Minister's opinion on this. It certainly seems to me that there is scope for this to be looked at and potentially improved. Would he agree to take this away and look at it, please?

Deputy R.J. Ward:

A record of need, I believe, goes up to the age of 18. Whether that should be extended up to the age of 25 across our society is a very good question, but that would go out of the Education remit and into some form of Social Security support. I will say that the eligible for distance learning grant, the qualification must be awarded by an institution regulated within the British Islands. I am going to read this, so I get this right: "This requirement ensures that students receive a high quality education that meets a regulatory standard set for higher education in the U.K. These standards place a clear obligation on providers to support students throughout their studies, helping them to succeed academically and reducing the risk of early withdrawal." This includes, in practice, access to well-being services as counselling, personal tutoring, along with high quality learning resources like online libraries, virtual labs and robust digital platforms, all of which help providers meet their obligations. Recently, we did have communication with the Open University to look at the way in which they support one-to-one, particularly those students with additional needs. The change in distance learning and how that happens has been significant in the last few years, and it is one of the reasons I am confident to say that supporting people with distance learning can actually happen now.

4.1.6 Deputy C.D. Curtis:

Does the Minister see this plan - the increase in distance learning maintenance grants - leading to fewer students going away to study?

Deputy R.J. Ward:

It is very difficult to tell. We had an increase in distance learning during COVID, and I know the U.K. has seen a decrease in that recently, since COVID has sort of got into the background, although not disappeared entirely. I think that is one of the reasons we have had an increased dropout rate as well, which seems to be leavening up a little bit now. I do not think it is about whether more students will be taking the option. I want students to take the option that is right for them. If distance learning means that somebody can access a degree over a longer period of time while working, while supporting a family, then I think that is a really positive move forward. I do not think it will make a significant difference for those who perhaps stereotypically at the age of 18 want to go straight to do a degree, because distance learning is a particular type of learning that is usually fitting around people's lifestyles. So I do not see a significant increase, but we will track that. As I say, this year there was a slight decrease in numbers, but we will see how that goes with the increased support.

