

Written evidence submitted by Kelly-Jo Peters and Jaede Benjamin (OTE0002)

1. Our names are Kelly-Jo Peters and Jaede Benjamin. We have collectively authored this submission as 2024 prospective university students from St Helena Island. Since the commencement of 2024, we have endeavored to engage with various individuals, including Julie Thomas, the Minister of Education for St Helena; Sir Lindsay Hoyle, the Speaker of the House of Commons;
[REDACTED]; and Ben Stern, Head of the FCDO's St Helena and Tristan da Cunha Team.
2. Our objective has been to raise awareness of our financial circumstances among officials within the UK Government, with the hope of securing some form of assistance and seeking answers from our Minister. Regrettably, we have not received either acknowledgment or assistance thus far. By submitting this information once more, we aim to achieve support for our forthcoming endeavors and to establish resources for future generations.
3. The pursuit of tertiary education by students from St Helena within the United Kingdom is fraught with significant challenges, encompassing financial constraints, administrative hurdles, and systemic disparities. Despite being recognised as home paying students and having access to British GCSE and A Levels certifications, including those from renowned boards such as Cambridge, AQA, and Pearson, St Helena's students encounter formidable barriers that impede their educational aspirations.
4. A pivotal setback emerged in 2021 with the termination of Saint Helena's Scholarship Scheme, which had [previously provided crucial support to 57 students pursuing tertiary education](#), covering both tuition and maintenance fees. The sudden discontinuation of the scheme, without formal announcement or comprehensive explanation, left affected individuals, including those in the midst of their GCSE and A Level education, grappling with uncertainty and financial strain. Decisions regarding the scheme's cessation were made by the island's Education Leadership in conjunction with the Minister of Education and Chief Secretary, driven by financial constraints within St Helena's budgetary framework. The reduction in the budget allocation to the island necessitated prioritization of core services, relegating scholarships to a non-priority status and rendering financial support for university attendance unavailable.
5. With the end of the scheme in 2021, St Helenian students were made eligible for tuition loans from Student Finance UK. Although grateful, there was still an exclusion from maintenance loans, despite their status as UK Nationals from Overseas Territories, leaving an ongoing sense of devaluation regarding their citizenship status. Even with the establishment of the [student loan from the Bank of St Helena](#), which falls short of adequately addressing accommodation costs, due to the maximum allowance being

£5,000 per academic year, for up to 3 years of full-time study plus a relatively high interest rate of 6%, St Helena's students find themselves financially strained, inhibiting their ability to focus on their studies, potentially leading to a decline in mental and physical well-being of the students. With a significantly lower minimum wage and higher cost of living for St Helena's students, saving up for maintenance fees, travel expenses, and other educational necessities becomes an arduous task for prospective students.

6. The inefficiencies in the current application process for financial aid from Student Finance UK, such as the [EU application](#) form's inadequacy in accommodating the unique circumstances of Saint Helena's students, further hinder their access to essential resources. The logistical challenges associated with submitting paper forms from St Helena to the UK, compounded by potential delays in flights and possibility of losing personal documents such as passports or birth certificates, only serve to exacerbate the administrative burdens faced by the students.
7. Furthermore, navigating the administrative procedures involved in applying for university admission and securing financial aid presents another significant obstacle for St Helena's students. The lack of awareness among UK universities regarding the status of St Helena's students being part of an Overseas Territory, and their eligibility for home paying fees complicates the application process. Hence, students often find themselves inundated with multiple forms and requirements, causing additional stress and impeding their ability to meet deadlines.
8. To address these challenges and facilitate impartial access to education for St Helena's students, the UK government must take proactive measures to alleviate financial constraints and streamline administrative procedures. Several initiatives can be implemented to support St Helena's students in their pursuit of higher education:
 - 8.1. The UK government should extend eligibility for maintenance loans to St Helena's students, recognizing the gap in living costs between the UK and the Island. Additionally, the government could explore the establishment of a dedicated financial aid program specifically tailored to the needs of St Helena's students, providing comprehensive support for tuition fees, accommodation, and living expenses.
 - 8.2. Collaborating with UK universities to raise awareness about the status of students of Overseas Territories and their entitlement to home paying fees would simplify the application process and reduce administrative burdens. Implementing digital application systems for financial aid specifically designed for St Helena's students would enhance accessibility and efficiency, mitigating the challenges associated with paper-based submissions.
 - 8.3. Fostering partnerships between UK universities and St Helena's educational institutions to facilitate seamless transitions and cultural integration for our students would enhance their overall academic experience.

9. While expressions of support from dignitaries, such as Sir Lindsay Hoyle, have been noted, substantive action from the UK Government to address these expressions of interest remains elusive and no tangible steps have been taken to rectify the financial inequities experienced by St Helena's aspiring university students. The persistence of unanswered questions and the lack of support for securing maintenance funding underscore the systemic challenges facing students in accessing higher education.
10. To conclude, St Helena's students face formidable challenges in pursuing higher education in the UK, ranging from financial constraints to administrative hurdles. However, with concerted efforts from the UK government to expand financial aid, enhance educational outreach, and improve support services, these challenges can be effectively addressed, ensuring access to education for the island's students and fostering an advantageous environment for their academic success. By prioritizing the needs of students, the UK Government can play a pivotal role in empowering St Helena's students and helping to fulfill their educational aspirations and contribute to the strengthening of the Island's economies and societies.

Annex

Figures on St Helena Scholarship Scheme prior to cessation - House of Commons Library - Accessing higher education in the UK's Overseas Territories Report:

<https://commonslibrary.parliament.uk/research-briefings/cbp-9801/>

Information regarding the Bank of St Helena student loans:

<https://www.sainthelenabank.com/products-and-services/personal-and-commercial-lending/personal-lending/student-assistance-loan/>

EU Student Finance Applications:

<https://www.gov.uk/student-finance-forms/y/studying-full-time-in-england-and-only-qualify-for-support-with-tuition-fees/2024-to-2025/no>

March 2024