

SUBMISSION FROM THE ST HELENA CHAMBER OF COMMERCE IN RESPONSE TO THE FOREIGN AFFAIRS COMMITTEE'S SUB-COMMITTEE ON OVERSEAS TERRITORIES ISSUES CALL FOR EVIDENCE ON EDUCATION

1. The St Helena Chamber of Commerce acts as the collective voice of St Helena's private sector and strives to facilitate business growth that will enable sustainable economic and social development. Educational achievement is central to capacity building and effective talent management so it is seen by the Chamber as a prerequisite for business success.
2. It is pleasing to note that most larger businesses and state owned entities are currently led by St Helenians with the minimum of first Degree level qualifications. In most cases, their studies were directly funded by the British government for which St Helena is extremely grateful. However, the private sector is in great need of qualified accountants, information technology specialists, tourism and hospitality specialists, engineers, project managers, lawyers and innovators.
3. St Helena lacks commercially significant natural resources, but its people are an extremely valuable resource that requires nurturing and encouraging in order to move the island forward. To date, the majority of individuals selected for higher education have performed exceptionally well¹, gaining First or Second class Honours and/or Masters Degrees, and there have been very few "drop outs". This is testament to the ability, commitment and resilience of St Helenian students.
4. Therefore, provision of appropriate opportunities for those who have demonstrated their capability to succeed in higher education is of paramount importance in order to unlock potential; enable personal and professional development and contribute to a sustainable future.
5. In accordance with its responsibility under Article 73 of the United Nations Charter, the United Kingdom promotes educational advancement of the people of St Helena. This is achieved primarily through Official Development Assistance (ODA) which partially supports the recurrent budget of the Education, Skills and Employment Directorate and is essential for enabling the delivery of compulsory education and a small AS/A Level offering. However such funding does not address the needs of students wishing to enter tertiary education via academic or vocational routes at Degree -or equivalent – level. This is a serious deficiency that holds very negative implications for the island's future if the current situation, which appears to contradict the British Government's aspiration to prioritise aid assistance for education in ODA eligible Territories is not addressed.
6. Until some two years ago, students from St Helena who met the required eligibility criteria to enter higher education in Britain received fully funded scholarships. This provided an incentive for individuals to study hard and make appropriate career choices. The number of eligible students per year was very small -usually less than six. However, St Helena Government was then advised to go down the UK Student Finance route and this has not proved satisfactory.
7. Student Finance is only available to meet the tuition fees for St Helenian students. It is worth noting that the application process and requirements are extremely onerous and do not take into account the constraints of St Helena's physical isolation which impact on issues such as timely and secure submission of original documents, etc. This exacerbates the stress and difficulties experienced by applicants.

¹ This can be verified by official data pertaining to student results held by the Education, Skills and Employment Directorate.

8. Currently St Helenian students do not qualify for access to travel or maintenance support until they have resided in the United Kingdom for three years. Given that St Helena is ODA dependent; the number of students involved is miniscule and that any students not returning to St Helena following graduation remain in Britain to ply their skills there, the rationale for refusing such support is questionable. Our students hold British passports, so why is their access to travel and maintenance funding aligned with that of those who are not British nationals? This appears anomalous.
9. Furthermore, the absence of such support denies some students the opportunity of readily accessing higher education courses although they studied hard to obtain the threshold qualifications and have demonstrated their potential to succeed. This does not appear fair or equitable and is certainly not in the best interests of the individuals concerned nor of the future of St Helena. If St Helena is really considered to be part of the British family, as is frequently stated by senior figures in His Majesty's Government², this makes the case for review of the present situation all the more urgent and imperative.
10. Competing pressures on St Helena's extremely constrained recurrent budget mean that only a very small amount of funding -if any – can be put towards student travel and maintenance costs. In 2023/24, GBP 10,000 was made available as a "one-off" contribution shared between the cohort commencing their studies This is unlikely to be able to be replicated for the cohort eligible to start university courses this year.
11. Travel costs from St Helena to Britain are in the region of GBP 2,000.00 per student, taking into account the flight from the island to Johannesburg, overnight accommodation there, the onward flight to Britain and train/coach transport to the university, while annual maintenance costs exceed GBP 10,000.00, with university accommodation alone costing some GBP 5,000.00 to 8,000.00.³ Students currently not accommodated on campus face local travel costs in the region of GBP 400.00 per annum.⁴
12. As the median annual income on St Helena is some GBP 9,000.00 pre-tax⁵, few families can meet the costs associated with their child following a Degree or similar course of study. Although the Bank of St Helena provides student loans to a maximum of GBP 5,000.00 per annum plus 6% interest, these are beyond the means of many families to service without hardship and parents have been placed in the position of offering their homes as collateral to enable their child to access tertiary education. The reality is that high achieving students from families with low incomes and not possessing adequate collateral will be unable to pursue university studies because these are unaffordable.
13. Many local students in Britain engage in part-time employment to improve their financial position. However, this is more complicated and daunting for those from St Helena who may not have left the island previously and have to adjust to a very different pace of life and environment. In some cases, the young persons will be separated from family and friends for the first time and physically isolated from what is familiar to them. To have to job seek and then work to make ends meet when simultaneously embarking on demanding and challenging studies is far from ideal and likely to impact negatively on students' performance and health.
14. In order to assist last year's cohort, the Chamber of Commerce spearheaded, and made a financial contribution towards, a 'one off' campaign to encourage businesses to donate

² This position was reaffirmed formally by the Foreign Secretary in the 2023 UK and Overseas Territories Joint Ministerial communique

³ Estimates provided by Student Finance to students commencing studies in 2023

⁴ Feedback obtained from parents

⁵ St Helena Government Statistics Office

towards their 'set up' costs, such as purchase of warm clothing which is not needed on St Helena and the students did not possess and of essential household items (crockery, cutlery, bed linen, etc) which are not provided in the accommodation. A Bank account was established for this purpose and the sum of GBP 6,550.00 was raised and shared between the four students who reached out for assistance. Unfortunately, the present economic climate on St Helena is such that almost all businesses are faced with significant financial challenges and several have had to close, so student sponsorship at the level required to cover travel and maintenance costs is not a realistic option.

15. Arguably the young people of St Helena hold the key to the island's sustainable future development. If there is not adequate investment to enable the most able to access higher education this will stifle progress, damage morale and undermine how education is valued within the community. It is already extremely difficult to keep many students motivated to study and reach their potential when unskilled jobs overseas pay much higher salaries than specialist local posts. Currently, pay structures in the private sector are slightly more attractive than those within St Helena Government which is reflected in fairly low turn over of senior personnel in the business community.
16. For the private sector to strengthen and be able to make a greater contribution towards boosting the local economy and increasing the island's self-sufficiency, there is a growing need for highly educated, confident and competent business owners, leaders and managers possessing skill sets that require study at tertiary level. This is recognised fully by the Chamber of Commerce which is seriously concerned about the potential negative impacts if access to such study becomes increasingly beyond the reach of St Helena.
17. The Chamber is not seeking preferential treatment for students from St Helena, but merely that they receive the same support as that provided to other British nationals who all form part of the "British family."
18. The Chamber welcomes this opportunity to raise awareness of the current unsatisfactory situation regarding access to higher education for St Helena's students, and is very willing to provide any further information that might be of assistance to the Sub-committee.