

A Plea For Help  
From Very  
Concerned and  
Unhappy Students

UNIVERSITY MAINTENANCE

| March 1, 2023

# To Ministers and Elected Members of Council

We are writing to you as students of St Helena Island who have lost all hope since the discontinuation of the island's Scholarship scheme; Students who feel not only neglected by our education system, but by our own government. However, we would like to stress that we are grateful for the help we have received thus far. We fully appreciate the predicament SHG finds itself in; we understand that there are moments we don't see. We genuinely thank you all who have supported us, positivity does not go unnoticed. But at the end of the day as we are British Students, aren't we entitled to higher education and the full benefits of this position?

We are writing to you to explain how we feel and seek your support as we all continue this fight to make access to study at university possible for the youth of St Helena.

**But first, let us tell you about ourselves and our aspirations:**



## **Kyla Joshua**

*I chose to study Diagnostic Radiography (Medical Imaging) in the hopes of becoming a qualified Diagnostic Radiographer. My course is a total of three years with the option of starting my Master's Degree after Year two. Depending on which path I wish to follow I will complete the course either having gained my Masters*

*Degree or a BSc in Medical Imaging. If it is the latter, the next step would indeed be my Masters.*

*Once I have gained my Master's Degree I aspire to gain as much experience in this field as possible. I would have to carry out placements at various hospitals until I am deemed competent and qualified to perform this job to the standards set by the SoR and the HCPC. Furthermore, there is also the possibility of developing my skills in a specific area of Imaging such as Mammography or CT Scanning. My overall goal however is to become a qualified Diagnostic Radiographer, working in a hospital, here or overseas.*



### **Kirsten Augustus**

*I am going to study a BSc in Architecture, upon completion I will achieve a ARB/RIBA Part 1 qualification; I hope to gain experience by working for an architectural practice for a year and to allow me to move onto a master's degree. I would either continue to pursue a Masters degree in architecture in which I will attain an ARB/RIBA part 2 qualification, or if I have decided throughout my undergraduate degree and experience on a specified area within architecture, then I would continue this as a career path. If I continue a Masters in architecture I hope to then complete another year of experience in practice and then move on to the final ARB/RIBA Part 3 qualification to become a qualified architect*

*After I have gained my qualifications and had some experience overseas, I would also like to come back to St Helena if the opportunity arises, to contribute to St Helena's built environment or possibly on the side of planning.*



**Katie-Ray Williams**

*I have applied to study Biological sciences, in the pursuit of learning several topics under this umbrella. Each year of my degree, I will be able to adapt this course by selecting modules that interest me. Moreover, choosing similar modules each year will allow me to narrow my course, for example, I am most interested in the conservation, environmental and ecological sections of the course. This stems from my work experience with the National Trust and the St. Helena Research institute. The end result would be a career in conservation and research, however biology will provide a range of skills and knowledge, which I could apply anywhere in the scientific field.*

*I believe I can support our island's precious ecosystems, through gaining a deeper understanding of ecology. Moreover protecting our endemics, and nurturing our island's natural beauties, is rooted in understanding them.*



### **Cerys Joshua**

*Unlike the rest of the students, who knew that they wanted to further their education after sixth form, I only realised that conservation was a career path that I actually really loved and wanted to follow, later in the second year of A-levels. This meant that I did not have sufficient UCAS points to be accepted into a three year course at university; however I still applied and have now been accepted into all five of my choices, to study conservation and ecology with an integrated foundation year. Sadly though, Student finance England does not support four year courses, so I have made the decision to take a gap year to make extra money for an additional year of tuition, gain more experience in my chosen career and hopefully gain more UCAS points to reapply next year.*



### **Ronaldo Johnson**

*I am looking to acquire a BSc in Biomedical Science and hoping to do an industrial placement in year 3 of my course, so I may become more experienced at the end of my degree. This experience will also aid me in becoming more employable and help me obtain my HCPC certification to become a certified Biomedical Scientist, able to work clinically. After this, it was my plan to get a Masters degree and then (hopefully) a Doctorate in Science of Biomedicine, likely specialising in the diagnosis and treatment of cancers and chronic diseases and regenerative medicine.*

*My overall path is to become a Biomedical Scientist, specialising in diagnostic oncology. A specialisation, that if acquired, I would be happy to return back to St Helena and contribute towards the function and progression of our healthcare system.*

When starting Sixth Form, we expected access to scholarships to naturally follow, this was something we always had faith in, as we saw our senior students attain this goal. However, just last year, in our final months at Prince Andrew School, we were told that our end goal was no longer attainable. Our motivation for studying at A-Level: the scholarship scheme has ceased to exist. This was a devastating blow. Everything we had worked for, and the grades we tried so hard to achieve, were bitter-sweet as there was no certainty, - that we could move forward to a university degree, despite meeting the requirements and choosing courses that are relevant to St Helena. Indeed we find ourselves in disbelief that we are in this situation. How are we any different from previous students? What has gone wrong? Support for tertiary education is going backwards at the cost of young people and their future, and consequently the future of the island.

Furthermore, talks with the Chief Minister and the Director of Education have resulted in increasing uncertainty for us as students. Lack of funding and dwindling budgets were prominent topics in all meetings held. It has become clear that changes in the UK's financial climate have significantly affected St Helena. We as young adults can appreciate this after the recent conflicts and of course the pandemic; the world's economy is struggling. We are no strangers to the financial predicament St Helena and its community find themselves in, however, when we hear of some of the projects SHG affords to pay for, we wonder where their priorities are? For example, the CASH centre at Porteous house has stood closed for nearly 2 months. Yet for the past year nearly 70k of tax payer's money has been utilized to keep this centre going.

Will higher education merely fall to the wayside? Have the implications for the future of the island if this were to happen been fully considered? Thankfully, our educational leaders did seek for alternatives to the scholarship scheme; this came in the form of Student Finance. Funded by the UK government, Student Finance supports all economic backgrounds, and allows anyone to access a University degree. However, we would be indebted to the UK government through student loans, which you can agree, is an awfully substantial difference to a funded scholarship. Despite this, it is an amazing opportunity; however for St Helenian students the further we venture into this process, the more complicated it becomes.

This glimpse of hope was explained to us in detail only recently. Alas we were left in the dark for months on end, no one from our previous school reached out, and we might have been truly forgotten had it not been for our own initiatives.

Moreover, what seems to have been lack of knowledge early on, has led students astray. Initially we were told that the UK would provide funding for as long as needed. Recently it was clarified the loan covers 3 years only; this has students doing 4 year courses in a difficult position. Continually being in a shroud of insecurity from both ourselves and our directors is extremely disheartening. We understand that this is a new procedure for us all, but shouldn't we be able to trust the information we receive?

We have recently obtained Student Finance application forms; it is enormously nerve-wrecking to be receiving them so late in the process. (Although we don't believe this is the fault of our Education Directors).

These applications will be hand carried off island (which we are perpetually grateful for), and mailed once in the UK as they cannot be sent digitally. This physical element has added even more pressure to an already stressful situation.

The most discouraging factor is the funding allocation. When applying for Student finance, UK students are eligible for tuition and maintenance fees. We are not. We are classed under the EU scheme of Student Finance. Meaning St Helenian students can only access fees which contribute towards tuition. Therefore we cannot obtain the maintenance loan, this figure would include accommodation, food, university supplies, travelling and most things you would consider essential. The university process is daunting in itself, now we have to question how we will afford basic necessities.

Accordingly, the forum: Student Finance England provides a brief calculator questionnaire, which includes contextual questions about what you're studying, UK status and household salary to estimate what financial coverage one is eligible for. For most of us applying, our households are comprised of ourselves, and two parents. When placed into the SFE Calculator, the average Saint Helenian student would be eligible for £9,826 maintenance (if we could obtain it) alongside typical tuition coverage. You can guarantee there will be those who require more.

The Bank of St Helena has put forth an incentive, offering a maximum £5,000 per year for maintenance, for a maximum of 3 years with a 6% interest annual payback rate. Whilst we are grateful, this will barely cover our yearly accommodation fee (which is upwards of £6,000) and is an astounding £4,826 less than the fee suggested by the SFE Calculator. There will simply be local families who can't afford this undertaking. Taking out the loan offered by BoSH is a huge risk for parents; they must put down collateral, such as our homes, which isn't feasible.



On the 30<sup>th</sup> March 2023 the Statistics Office released the Median Annual Wage 2021/22 on the SHG Website. The figure was detailed as £9,460. This figure is massively overshadowed by (according to the ONS) the average salary in the UK in 2022, which was estimated at £27,756. Furthermore our own incomes do not even cover our projected maintenance fees.

Of course, it is typical for students to take up part time employment alongside studies, and it seems that employment maybe our only means of financial survival. However, how are we to effectively study if much of our time will likely be spent trying to make up funds to live?

In fact, the only students who can still consider university are the privileged; those of us who have savings can consider ourselves lucky as these savings are literally, our sources of living. But realistically, can we venture into tertiary education when we are not sure that we can support ourselves? Is the risk too high and would we be irresponsible to take it? Do you recommend we take this on? Should we leave higher education and success on the back bench?

Surely our island wants to invest in its future. Many of you have previously promised to do so. As said, to specify, in the St Helena Budget speech, by Honorable Mark Brooks Minister of Treasury, Infrastructure and Sustainable Development, Section 2. *Our Key Priorities for 2022/2023* sub-section 2.5. *Education*,

We will encourage lifelong learning by **investing** in and valuing our people in order to develop through up-skilling, training and rewarding as we create a sustainable workforce” and section 5: *Our Outcomes*, sub-section: 5.5, *Altogether Better for Children and Young People*: “Our children and young people in St Helena get the best start in life and we are better educated, more skilled and more successful”. However, achievement of these “outcomes” is threatened by the lack of financial support for maintenance which is putting tertiary education largely beyond the reach of St Helenians. We can assure you; as a consequence, this will only lead to more and more locals leaving, and the island’s population continuing to age. The youth will not stay where they are unappreciated.

This brings us on to the mental health aspect of all this, it is extremely draining to be called the future of the island, and then moments later be the poster children for “tertiary” education, which seemingly falls to the bottom of the totem pole. We as Saints are seeking, with our own initiative to become skilled enough to fill the roles which tend to be filled by persons from overseas. We want to be recognized, we do not want to fight with other areas to become a priority, and we are a priority.

In time, the leaders and decision makers of today will no longer be with us, we will. It is interesting that world dynamics have changed and current leaders including St Helena's own government press forward the importance of renewable energy, our Marine Protected Areas, sustainable business development, health, water and food security, climate change, the cloud forest project and many other areas like pandemics that are now causing major, global concern.

A high ratio of students both past and present have taken a considerable interest in many of these areas of study, we are the researchers, scientists and environmentalists of the future and yes, a future that is ours. Ultimately it will fall to us to continue the fight to save Diana's Peak and our oceans, to combat global warming and take care of our environment, we are the future saviours of our island. To equip us now is to save our future.

## What do we seek?

1. We are not asking SHG to fund our tuition fee as this is already provided through the UK student finance loan
2. We are seeking support for student maintenance as we have already been told that this is not an option for overseas territories until we are resident for three years in the UK and then we can apply. In fact we ask that SHG continue this support to all students until the UK maintenance loan becomes accessible to all.
3. And as an act of goodwill to all students, we ask that travel expenses also be covered, SHG have an agreement with Airlink, we are certain that a minimum of 5 seats could be negotiated at least at a significantly reduced rate

It is said that a nation's leaders are judged by the way they act towards their children and young people, at a time of financial challenges just because we can't do everything does not mean we shouldn't try to do something.

We ask our government today, to recognise the value in us and ultimately in the future of our island. We hope you will take our predicament into consideration, and provide the support we need.

To conclude, we want to express our gratitude and acknowledgement for all the support we have received. We won't forget those who have really stood by us. We know you all care about our island. We know you all want the youth to prevail. So let us continue this fight together, because it's a cause worth fighting for.

Yours Sincerely,

University Students 2023: The “Future of the Island”.

*Cerys Joshua*

*Ronaldo Johnson*

*Kyla Joshua*

*Kirsten Augustus*

*Katie-Ray Williams*