

PNQ ON EDUCATION

PNQ

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ORAL ANSWER TO QUESTION SSR MEDICAL COLLEGE - BACHELOR OF DENTAL SURGERY - INTERNSHIP

The Leader of the Opposition (Mr P. Bérenger) (*By Private Notice*) asked the hon. Minister of Education, Culture and Human Resources whether, in regard to the Bachelor of Dental Surgery students of the Sir Seewoosagur Ramgoolam Medical College, he will, for the benefit of the House, obtain information as to if –

- (a) the College is implementing a recommendation of the Tertiary Education Commission for the one year internship to be undergone at the College and, if so, if a sum of USD 3,500 is being claimed therefor from them, without notice or authority;
- (b) the degrees of the students having completed internship thereat are being withheld until the payment thereof, and
- (c) a sum of USD 1,750 is being claimed from students for a resit.

Dr. Bunwaree: Mr Speaker, Sir, I would like to thank the hon. Leader of the Opposition for this question. In fact, the Ministry has been working for a few days on the problem that cropped up there.

Mr Speaker, Sir, the Sir Seewoosagur Ramgoolam Medical College started offering Bachelor of Dental Surgery course in 2003 and there have been 51 students enrolled to date.

I would like to inform the House that the Bachelor of Dental Surgery course of the Sir Seewoosagur Ramgoolam Medical College, Belle Rive is a five-year course comprising of 4-year Theory with para clinical and clinical training followed by 1-year internship at the Dental School of SSR Medical College.

During an International Monitoring Committee (IMC) for the Internship year conducted by the Tertiary Education Commission in March 2008, it was observed that students who had completed year IV of the programme had not yet embarked on their internship. TEC recommended that, among other things, the internship should be started immediately as per the requirements of the BDS programme. This was done.

The Internship was closely monitored and a second International Monitoring Committee was held in December 2008. The Internship year was approved subsequently in June 2009 following implementation of all the recommendations by the SSR Medical College.

As regards the second part of question (a) and part (b), I would like to point out that neither the Tertiary Education Commission (TEC), the Regulatory Body overseeing Tertiary Education and Training, nor my Ministry has been officially informed of the introduction of the fee of US\$ 3500 for internship.

With regard to the current batch which has just completed internship, we are informed that their certificates have been forwarded to the Dental School, SSR Medical College by the Awarding Body which is the University of Mauritius (UoM) at the request of the college.

It would seem, Mr Speaker, Sir, that a meeting was held lately with these students informing them of the new internship fees applicable and this was followed by a letter from the College to that effect. We believe that charging of fees for internship at this stage is a departure from the contract entered between the students and the college.

I would like to take the opportunity to inform the House that, on my personal intervention, after consultation with Mr R P N Singh, Chairman of the SSR Medical College, he has taken a verbal undertaking, which has been confirmed by email this morning, to the effect that Mauritian students from all batches will not be charged internship fees. But I am pursuing the matter with him to ensure that all the students of other nationalities also, because we cannot have *deux poids deux mesures* be given the same treatment. At least, he has confirmed for Mauritian students.

With regard to part (c) of the question, students who have failed one or more subjects will have to pay a fee to resit the paper or the term, in line with the prospectus and the agreement signed between student/guardian and the college.

The resit fees depend on when the student was enrolled because each time there is a new prospectus and a new agreement is signed. For those enrolled in 2005-2006, the resit fee is 1,750

US\$ per term irrespective of the number of subjects failed. For those enrolled in 2006-2007, the fee is 2,500 US\$ per term.

As from 2007-2008, the fee is being charged at the rate of US\$ 500 per failed subject. There is some difficulty to understand, but what I want to say is that, according to the cohort, the agreement that has been signed between the students and the college depends on what appears in the contract and this, we cannot change, but there are three different terms for the three different cohorts.

Mr Bérenger: I think I have heard good news, but before I reach those good news at the end of my question, I would like to ask a few points of clarification. Is it a fact that it had been agreed that the students would do their internship even in a country of their choice, anywhere, including outside Mauritius, and that the Tertiary Education Commission recommended that the internship at the medical school itself?

Dr. Bunwaree: This is a fact, Mr Speaker, Sir. In 2007, through the work done by the International Monetary Committee, TEC informed the SSR Medical College that if it failed to provide internship facilities, because these are needed for students, the internship would have to be completed in any other institution and at no extra cost to the students. But the facilities have been inspected at the college by the authorities and they have agreed that they have the necessary facilities and internship can be carried out at the college.

Mr Bérenger: The House will have understood that I wish the Medical School well. There is a problem which is being solved from what I have heard, but the point is not to damage the image of the college, and yet my question refers to allegations that those dollars were being claimed without authority and without notice. From what I have heard there is confirmation of that. Will the Minister agree that the attention of the school should be called upon the fact that Mr Singh, the Director, came out with a statement - because they were informed by way of letter only on the 24 November, it is very, very late, when they were completing their internship – that:” *nous n'avons pas réclamé ces frais plus tôt parce que les étudiants terminaient leur* internship, *nous ne voulons pas les perturber davantage.*” Will the Minister agree that we

should call the school to order on that and to give proper notice whenever additional money is going to be claimed, at least, to give notice if there is authority, which there is not in this case?

Dr Bunwaree: This is why I thanked the hon. Leader of the Opposition right from the beginning. In fact, this PNQ would certainly serve a good purpose because we are proposing to make new regulations. There is a Memorandum of Understanding which is signed between the University of Mauritius and the College, but TEC oversees, of course, everything that is happening. We are proposing to make new regulations under regulatory framework of TEC for any institution to communicate - not only them - to the TEC well in advance of any change in fee for any course.

Mr Bérenger: In my question I referred to the allegation - and it has proved true - that this money was claimed without authority. The hon. Minister has used a very diplomatic term that it is a departure from what had been taking place. Again, we should call the attention of the school that this is not proper, they can't just introduce something like that and then have to admit that it is not only a departure, but without authority.

Dr Bunwaree: This has already been done, as I made the House understand and, of course, Mr Singh has responded positively to our request to correct this.

Mr Bérenger: I tried to listen carefully to the hon. Minister, but if it is - I don't know if he has information, but my information was that some students from India, South Africa, neighbouring friendly countries had completed the internship, had left, but were asked to pay that sum of money, otherwise they would not get their diploma until they have settle that amount. I will get to the last part where the Minister said that the Mauritian students are not going to be asked that money, but foreign students. Is it the case that their diploma is being withheld and, if it is so, I am sure the hon. Minister will agree with me that we can't act like that, it concerns the image, this time not only of the College, but of Mauritius itself in the case of India, South Africa and other friendly neighbouring countries?

Dr Bunwaree: I have already informed the House just now that for Mauritian students, of course, Mr Singh has already agreed, there is no problem at all, no certificate is going to be withheld for these reasons and, of course, I don't find it normal for other students; I agree with the hon. Leader of the Opposition that this has to be for all the students.

Mr Bérenger: I move to the last part, I am very happy that the Minister has informed us, if I get him right, that the school is not going to claim that sum from the Mauritian students. This

is a very good thing, because most of the students are from poor families and some very poor families. Therefore, I am very happy with this outcome, but will the hon. Minister keep pressing for foreign students also; if it is wrong to have acted in that way in the case of Mauritian students, surely it cannot be right that it becomes right in the case of foreign students.

Dr Bunwaree: I think this is already confirmed, but I should *mettre les points sur les 'i'*. We are talking of no fees to be claimed for internship. Now, it happens that there are some students who had to resit papers within the course of their studies and for the resit, according to the agreement, there is a fee to be paid and who have not paid. This probably could cause confusion in the minds of certain people that they are being asked for that. Insofar as this is concerned, they will have to pay for what they owe to the University, but for the full term internship - two terms of six months, that is, two times six months making one year - nothing will have to be paid.

Mr Bérenger: The hon. Minister will have understood that I made the difference between internship where the problem is solved for Mauritian students and the resit issue. I am not insisting on the resit issue but is the hon. Minister aware - I am putting the question so that he might have a second look or third look at it - that resit fees are being claimed from some students whom, according to me, are in possession of a certificate from the College that they do not owe any fees at all. It seems that there is confusion there; there is a problem there, it seems.

Dr Bunwaree: We are going to take that on board and look into the matter. There should be no discrepancy at all, Mr Speaker, Sir.

Mr Bodha: Mr Speaker, Sir, may I ask the hon. Minister whether the quality assurance department of the Tertiary Education Commission has carried out a survey as regard to the infrastructure, amenities, facilities and the standard of training, including the issue of internship, given at the institution and when was this carried out and whether he is satisfied with that report?

Dr Bunwaree: It is carried out on a regular basis, I must say, and, in fact, I wish to inform the House that for this College we are talking of those students who are already enrolled but, for about three years, they have not been allowed to enrol students for the first year because there were certain discrepancies and this has already been looked into.

Mr Speaker: We are talking of internship and resit.

Mr Hawoldar: Mr Speaker, Sir, in an answer to Parliamentary Question No. B/214 by the previous Minister of Education, I had asked a question whether the Tertiary Education could

set up a special committee to look into the technicalities at the SSR Medical College and the Minister replied in this term....

Mr Speaker: No, I am sorry, this is a general question. If the hon. Member is talking about internship and resit then the question is relevant.

Dr Hawoldar: Exactly, Mr Speaker, Sir, when we speak about the technicalities of the whole course which is being carried out by SSR Medical School this comprises also internship which is part of the training of the students. I am just asking...

Mr Speaker: I recall the hon. Minister saying that there was an international committee which made an inquiry 2007 and found that the College was fully equipped to have the internship. So, we rest with this for the time being.

Mr Dayal: Can I ask the hon. Minister why the registration of the first batch and the second batch of the BDS SSR dental wing has not yet been registered despite the fact that the internship has been completed for more than five months and all relevant documents submitted?

Dr Bunwaree: Whether it has been registered – what does that mean, I don't know. But what I know is that there are some regulations that are being prepared and, in fact, Cabinet approved about two weeks ago for these students of the University of Mauritius studying at the Medical College for dental courses be recognised by the Dental Council. Maybe that has caused some delay.

Mr Gunness: In fact, I go in the same line as hon. Dayal. I put a question on 11 October concerning the first batch of 2004 to the fact that after their internship, their qualifications are not yet recognised by the Dental Council, and the hon. Minister said that, in accordance to section 40 of the Dental Council Act, some principal regulations have to be amended. Can the Minister inform the House as to when this will be amended so that this batch of 2004 be recognised by the Dental Council?

Dr. Bunwaree: In line again with what has been said here, I can give the assurance to the House that, in accordance with section 40 of the Dental Council Act 1999, action has already been initiated to amend the principle regulations to include the University of Mauritius, as I have just been saying, in the list of recognised Medical Institutions by the Dental Council of Mauritius. It is good also to note that the appropriate regulations have already been vetted by the State Law Office and the University of Mauritius will be included in the list of recognised Medical Institutions.

The 12 dental surgeons from SSR Medical College who have applied to the Dental Council for registration will then be eligible for registration. The number of dental surgeons, I am said, registered at the Dental Council is to 247 but for the 12 of the Medical College they will be registered very soon.

Mr Dowarkasing: Mr Speaker, Sir, the hon. Minister is certainly aware that this is not the first time that the direction of SSRN is flouting our laws. Does he consider that the mail that he has obtained is a formal guarantee to the fact that students will be exempted from those fees?

Dr. Bunwaree: Of course, this should be taken into consideration. In fact, I intervened yesterday. The mail is in with me and I can circulate it, if needed, but I think we have to rely on what has been said.

Mr Speaker: I have to remind hon. Bodha and hon. Hawoldar, if they have any qualms about the facilities available generally, they can still come with substantive questions if they wish.

Dr. Hawoldar: The hon. Minister had promised that he will ask the Tertiary Education Commission to carry out an inquiry into all technicalities which include internship, post-internship, pre-internship and the clinical studies. I would like to know from the hon. Minister whether the TEC has carried it out this and whether he is in presence of the report.

Mr Speaker: Yes, we have to apply the Standing Orders. This question is only for internship and the hon. Minister has answered that all the facilities are available for the internship. If the hon. Member wants to come on this issue, he will have to do so by way of a substantive question.