Government denies limiting presidential scholarships after public outrage

Following a public outcry, the education ministry today denied limiting the number of presidential scholarships awarded annually to A' Level top achievers.

Citing a two-month-old announcement by the department of higher education, newspaper *Haveeru* reported this week that the scholarships will be limited from 2016 onward to 15 students from the 1st place achievers in the A' Level national top ten. A special panel would select 15 students based on interviews and a point system.

All students who earn first place in the top ten were previously awarded scholarships. Some 23 students achieved first place in the national top ten last year.

The announcement has since been removed from the higher education department's website.

Dr Abdulla Nazeer, state minister for education, told the press today that the ministry has not finalised a decision on limiting the scholarships. The announcement reported by the local daily was a discussion paper or a proposal on improving the grading criteria, he added.

"In 2010, the English grading system was modified to set A+ as the highest grade. There are ongoing discussions to increase the grading system in Maldives as well. The announcement on the DHE website was an initial paper of one of the proposed models. It is far from final and definitely not a decision to limit the scholarships to students finishing A' level next year."

Nazeer said he was "deeply saddened" that the paper was made public, adding that it was uploaded by mistake.

According to the removed document, of the 15 students chosen for the scholarships, only five could study in a country of their choosing. The other 10 students will be awarded scholarships to study in developing countries.

Under the proposed points system, 12 points will be awarded to each A grade and 15 points to each A+ grade.

The *Haveeru* report prompted a flurry of social media posts from students and parents expressing outrage and frustration.

"My only motivation for as long as I can remember was to get the president's scholarship and make my parents proud. I know I'm not the only with this dream. I know I'm not the only one studying to make their parents proud. The question is, do you know this? Or is it just that you do not care about the youth?" wrote one student.

He added that the decision was "demotivating and a huge thumbs down for all the students."

"You're taking away the dream we've had for the past 11 years. You're taking our only hope for a better future."

Another student wrote: "Apparently the economy is thriving and we're making so much money due to the booming tourism industry and other forms of income. Yet they do this? Why? Because they have less money to spend on diversifying the opportunities our students have?"

Speaking to *The Maldives Independent* yesterday, former Education Minister Dr Mustafa Lutfy expressed grave concern over the decision, which he said would be detrimental to the country's human resource development.

“The top of the top ten are the highest achievers of our higher education system, our best and brightest. Limiting opportunities for their higher education is limiting the development of our country’s human resources,”

Lutfy, also a member of the main opposition Maldivian Democratic Party’s education committee, said limiting government scholarships would demotivate hardworking students and parents.