

Chair, deputies and senators, thank you for having us today. I'm here on behalf of the Union of Students in Ireland and we represent 374,000 students across the island of Ireland.

USI recognise and appreciate that the SUSI grant supports many students through college. We welcome this review, however, we believe there is a wider issue in terms of budget decisions that have had a vastly negative impact on students and their families such changes to the adjacency rates and cuts to the levels of awards for both undergraduate and postgraduate students. USI has been lobbying for the reversal of many decisions taken in 2011 which are laid out in our Pre-Budget Submission which has been circulated with you all today.

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Firstly, I will address the eligibility criteria. We understand the need for procedures to facilitate a faster application and decision-making process but believe there are areas that can be improved, which could lead to a much better system that can support students.

We believe there is a need for flexibility in terms of the applications procedure. As we know, life can be full of unexpected occurrences and as a result, some applications may not fit the criteria as comfortably as others. We believe there should be flexibility to support students through the application procedure and that they should be supported when there is a clear need but may not have fully met each individual criteria required. This flexibility should extend to supporting documentation requested and we believe the documentation accepted should be reviewed and extended, especially in relation to residency and independent status.

Given the current cost associated with education, we would recommend the earnings limit and specific time period that students can work under the current holiday earnings be removed.

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The second element we were asked to comment on related to the application procedure. We have to commend SUSI for the work they have completed in terms of improving the application procedure for students.

We believe a system change in relation to how SUSI notifies colleges about awards granted to students is necessary. We have heard from students who have been contacted by colleges in relation to missing fee payment deadlines however, they had received an award that covered their fees from SUSI. This can result in students being denied access to certain areas on campus and their online learning platforms, which as you can understand, has a negative impact on their learning experience.

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Finally, we were asked to consider the appeals process.

Again, we believe there should be more flexibility allowed for changes in circumstances. Students experience many changes throughout their time in college, some of which are completely out of their control and we don't believe they should be penalised for those. We also recommend that there should be a greater emphasis placed on exceptional circumstances when students apply for SUSI. If a student has applied to SUSI and later experiences something that qualifies as exceptional circumstances, they should be in a position to appeal their decision and fully understand the procedure available to them to do so.

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To conclude, the Union of Students in Ireland welcomes this opportunity to review the SUSI grant system and we believe this sets the agenda in terms of reforms to ensure students who are in need of financial support can receive such support to further their education.

Our submission goes into more detail on some of the topics I highlighted but also makes additional recommendations that I have not had time to go through today.

Students and their families are struggling to access post-second level education. SUSI is a great support to students and helps to alleviate some of the financial pressures but with fees among the highest in the world and the spiralling cost of living, we need additional support. That being said, making the system more user-friendly and flexible would be a welcome advancement. We need to break the barriers faced by students when accessing education and reform to the SUSI system in one step on the path to do so.