

Statement by Philip Connolly, Grant Operations Manager, SUSI

to the

Oireachtas Joint Committee on Education and Skills

12 September 2019

Chairperson and Committee Members.

Thank you for inviting SUSI to attend here today. I am the Grant Operations Manager with SUSI.

SUSI has also been invited by the Committee to make a written submission on the grant eligibility criteria which are prescribed in the Student Support Act and the student grant schemes and regulations issued annually by the Minister for Education and Skills.

Our written submission summarises these statutory provisions for the information of the Committee and outlines the administrative processes and procedures that SUSI implements to enable students to avail of grant funding under the scheme.

I would like to take this opportunity to inform the Committee briefly about our work and our current focus on processing grant applications for the forthcoming 2019-20 academic year.

The core work of SUSI is the processing of large volumes of applications within short timeframes in order to determine eligibility under the criteria of the legislation. Almost 100,000 applications are received annually and almost 80,000 grants are awarded representing €350m annually in grant support for students.

SUSI workflows and staffing levels are seasonally variable as grant applications are processed from April to October and as grant payments are made to students and colleges from September to June. Additional temporary assessment staff are recruited annually while scalable customer support and document management functions are delivered through outsourced providers.

The SUSI support desk provides advice and information for students at all stages of the process through telephone, e-mail and social media communications and through our website. We also attend at college open days and other information events for students nation-wide.

As a modern, centralised government service, the continuous improvement of service delivery for students is central to our planning and work cycles from year to year: the SUSI application submission process is online and further online services continue to be added, the assessment process is streamlined through the use of information technology, applications are verified through extended data sharing with other government agencies, maintenance grant payments are made directly to students' bank accounts and fee grants are paid to colleges on their behalf.

Based on these improvements, students have been enabled to apply to SUSI earlier in each year, application turnaround times are shorter, the requirement for supporting documents has been greatly reduced with increasing numbers of students receiving a decision on the basis of their online application alone without the need for any supporting documents, all students receive

earlier decisions on their applications and earlier payment of their grants and a very high level of customer support is provided for students throughout the grant application and payment process including increased communication regarding opening and closing dates.

A service level agreement is in place with the Department of Education and Skills to ensure that SUSI continues to meet and improve on its performance targets in all of these areas and students for their part are encouraged to apply to SUSI as early as possible in order to ensure that they can have a decision on their grant application before they accept a college place or return to college.

Since our online application system opened following the publication of the 2019 grant scheme in April, we have received 90,000 of an expected 96,500 grant applications for the forthcoming 2019-20 academic year. 81% of all applications were received before the priority processing dates in June and July

To date, we have finalised 74,000 (82%) of these applications and of the remaining applications, 9,500 (11%) are awaiting receipt of documents requested from students while SUSI currently has 6,500 (7%) applications on hand for processing. Average turnaround times on submitted applications and documents are running at less than two weeks and SUSI is processing more than 5,000 applications per week.

63,000 grants have been awarded to date this year and, subject to confirmation by colleges in the coming weeks that students are registered and attending on their courses, we expect to commence payment of 50,000 grants by the end of this month. This represents 69% of the expected total number of grants to be paid this year, rising to 91% by end-October and 98% by end-November as students enter or return to college. SUSI will also be making payments on a weekly basis from September to December to ensure that students receive their first monthly grant payment as soon as possible after their registration is confirmed.

In conclusion, and while SUSI does not have an advisory or policy-making role in relation to student grants, we will be happy to answer Members' questions on the operational arrangements in place to make the grant scheme accessible to students and to ensure that grant applications and payments continue to be processed fairly, uniformly and efficiently.

Thank you.