

DÁIL ÉIREANN

AN COMHCHOISTE UM OIDEACHAS AGUS COIMIRCE SHÓISIALACH

JOINT COMMITTEE ON EDUCATION AND SOCIAL PROTECTION

Dé Céadaoin, 19 Meitheamh 2013

Wednesday, 19 June 2013

The Joint Committee met at 1.00 p.m.

MEMBERS PRESENT:

Deputy James Bannon,

Deputy Ray Butler,

Deputy Joan Collins,

Deputy Derek Keating,

Deputy Charlie McConalogue,

Deputy Aodhán Ó Ríordáin,

Deputy Jonathan O'Brien,

Deputy Brendan Ryan,

Senator Fidelma Healy Eames,

Senator Mary Moran,

Senator Marie-Louise O'Donnell.

In attendance: Deputy Timmy Dooley..

DEPUTY JOANNA TUFFY IN THE CHAIR.

Business of Joint Committee

Vice Chairman: We have a quorum, so I call the meeting to order. Apologies have been received from Senator Healy Eames, who has said she will be late. At the request of broadcasting and recording services, I ask members to ensure their mobile phones are turned off completely and not just left on silent mode during the meeting. The broadcasting unit will broadcast the public session of this meeting live. The proceedings are carried on UPC channel 207. We will now go into private session to deal with minutes and correspondence.

The joint committee went into private session at 1.15 p.m. and resumed in public session at 1.20 p.m.

Church of Ireland College of Education Order 2013: Motion

Vice Chairman: I welcome the Minister of State, Deputy Sherlock. Before we commence, I wish to draw attention to the fact that by virtue of section 17(2)(1) of the Defamation Act 2009, witnesses are protected by absolute privilege in respect of the evidence they give to the committee. If they are directed by it to cease giving evidence on a particular subject and continue to do so, they are entitled thereafter only to qualified privilege in respect of their evidence. Witnesses are directed that only evidence connected with the subject matter of these proceedings is to be given and asked to respect the parliamentary practice to the effect that, where possible, they should not criticise or make charges against an individual or an entity either by name or in such a way as to make him, her or it easily identifiable. I advise also that submissions and opening statements will be published on the committee's website following this meeting.

Deputy Joanna Tuffy took the Chair.

Chairman: The Minister for Education and Skills proposes to make an order under the Employment Equality Act 1998 to enable the Church of Ireland College of Education, Rathmines, reserve places for people of its faith. The Act requires that such a draft order be laid before both Houses of the Oireachtas and that the order shall not be made until the resolution approving the draft has been passed by each House. The matter has been referred to the committee by both Houses for consideration. I now invite the Minister of State to make his presentation.

Minister of State at the Department of Education and Skills (Deputy Sean Sherlock): I am pleased to be here on behalf of the Minister, Deputy Quinn, to discuss the proposed resolutions from the Dáil and Seanad approving the draft of the order which I will be proposing.

The order seeks to reserve 32 places in the first year of the Bachelor of Education degree course in the Church of Ireland College of Education, Rathmines, for students who are members of the Church of Ireland or belong to the broad Protestant tradition. The making of the order and its laying before the Houses arises from the provisions of the Employment Equality Act 1998 and is designed to ensure that the rights and interests of colleges and schools with a Protestant ethos and the students of those schools are provided for.

The Employment Equality Act 1998 prohibits discrimination on a wide-range of grounds, including religion. While the Act deals primarily with discrimination in employment it also extends to discrimination in vocational training. Vocational training is defined as any system of

instruction that enables a person to acquire the knowledge for the carrying of an occupational activity. Teacher-training falls within this definition. For many years, the Church of Ireland College of Education has provided training in primary school teaching only to students who come from the Church of Ireland and the broader Protestant tradition. The purpose of this practice is to ensure that there is available to schools under Protestant ownership a sufficient number of teachers who themselves come from a Protestant background and are trained in an institution with a Protestant ethos.

Most primary schools in the State are privately owned, publicly funded denominational schools. This system of denominational education is underpinned by the Constitution. Central to the right of the religious denominations to conduct schools with a particular ethos is their need to ensure that they have available to them a body of staff belonging to and trained in the particular religious denomination of the school. If such staff were not available, the constitutional right to free profession of religion and the conduct of denominational schools would be seriously impaired. To avoid imposing what would in effect be unconstitutional restrictions on the rights of the religious denominations in this regard section 12 of the Employment Equality Act 1998, which prohibits discrimination in vocational training, makes two exceptions. It provides that the prohibition of discrimination does not apply for the purpose of ensuring the availability of nurses and teachers to denominational hospitals and primary schools respectively.

In the case of primary schools the section provides that an educational or training body may apply to the Minister for Education and Skills for an order permitting the body to reserve places on the vocational training course. The Minister for Education and Skills, with the consent of the Minister for Justice, Equality and Defence, may then make an order allowing the body to reserve such number of places to meet the need for teachers in primary schools as is considered appropriate. The Church of Ireland College of Education has made an application on behalf of the college for the reservation of 32 places in the college for the academic years 2013-14 up to 2017-18 for students who are members of recognised churches in the Protestant tradition.

The college makes the case that the reservation of 32 places, which is currently the full complement of first year places in the college, should be made in order to provide sufficient teachers for Protestant schools over the next number of years. The grounds for the request as put by the college are as follows: the necessity of providing a sufficient number of qualified primary teachers to maintain the distinctive ethos of Protestant schools remains the central concern and motivation for seeking the order; primary schools in the Protestant community depend almost exclusively on the college for the provision of an annual supply of well qualified teachers from a Protestant background; a reported continuing shortage of applicants for teaching positions in Protestant primary schools, particularly small schools in rural areas; some of those who enter the college will not complete their studies and of those who qualify some will not take up posts in schools with the Protestant ethos; also, a number of graduates go to live and work abroad while others engage in further studies.

I believe, in the circumstances set out by the college, the continuing reservation of 32 places in the college for students from the Protestant tradition appears reasonable to ensure that Protestant schools have available to them a sufficient number of teachers who share their value system and religious beliefs. Apart from the constitutional requirements from which this order flows, the order is a necessary support for the maintenance of diversity of values, beliefs and culture in our education system and Irish society. Given that schools with a Protestant ethos represent only a small minority of primary schools in the State, there is clearly a risk that that ethos could be diluted unless specific protections are provided. This order puts in place a protection which

the Oireachtas considered appropriate and which will guarantee Protestant schools that they can continue to provide education for their students in accordance with their particular values and beliefs.

I acknowledge that some aspects of the environment in which the Church of Ireland College of Education operates are changing. I refer in this regard specifically to developments in relation to school patronage and the work underway on the restructuring of teacher education provision in Ireland. However, there is a continuing need for this provision to be made. The primary legislation governing the order provides that it may be revoked and any effects of these developments on the necessity for the order will be kept under review.

I thank the committee for its consideration of this important issue, which safeguards and supports the maintenance of diversity of values, beliefs and culture in our education system and Irish society.

Chairman: I thank the Minister of State. I will now take questions, commencing with spokespersons.

Deputy Charlie McConalogue: I thank the Minister of State and his officials for attending the meeting to discuss this issue. While I understand the rationale for the proposal, I would like to put two or three questions to the Minister of State. What has been the experience in recent years in terms of student in-take at the college, including the number of students from a Protestant background who took up a post in a primary school with a Protestant ethos? Is there a precedent for this provision? Is the Church of Ireland College of Education the only teacher training college with a Protestant ethos?

Deputy Aodhán Ó Ríordáin: I would just like to make a few comments. I understand the reason for the order and the constitutional framework under which it is being introduced. It is appropriate to say that the very basis around which we train teachers means that, in effect, it amounts to a sectarian head count throughout our teacher training colleges, and it is important for us to investigate this properly. We still have far too heavy an influence from religious institutions over the education system. It is the fundamental ethos that is in the training colleges and the vast bulk of primary and secondary schools. Any progressive, forward-thinking and enlightened society would view what we are doing today - putting aside a number of training places in a college for people of a particular faith - as particularly weird. Religious background should be of no relevance to anybody if a person wishes to become a teacher. Unfortunately, we are still standing over a position where if a person is becoming a primary school teacher in this country, unless that person is willing to pay over the odds by using the Hibernia College online course, he or she must tick a box on religious faith. Applicants to the majority of primary schools must also answer a pretty invasive question on faith and what religious ethos the person will stand over.

I have no difficulty with what is being introduced because it is, on the face of it, in line with the Constitution and without a constitutional change, our hands are tied. Nevertheless, we should have a conversation about what we are asking of our young teachers and continually providing for in this State and Republic. Effectively, the most important thing that seems to be asked of any individual is about religious background. That relates to teachers, students and other practitioners in the educational field. It sticks in my craw that we return to the issue repeatedly.

I respect the position in which we find ourselves but will the Minister of State comment on

whether an amendment is in train with regard to the Employment Equality Act? It would argue that State-funded religious institutions - either hospitals or schools - should not discriminate based on somebody's sexuality or private life if it could conflict with the ethos of the body. How would that have an impact on training colleges?

Deputy James Bannon: I welcome the Minister of State's presentation this afternoon. We have all had representations from parents and boards of management of Protestant schools with regard to this issue and there is a view among those on Protestant boards of management that there are more constitutional supports for some children than others. It would be a very serious matter if that was the case. That has been alleged in meetings and letters received from Protestant boards of management. Are we proposing a different set of rights for Protestant and other denominations of children? It is important that Protestant schools are treated equally, as claims are being made to Members in different constituencies that this is not the case. I have received numerous letters from parents and boards of management across the midlands outlining concerns about a change in policy by the Government in the school system.

Deputy Joan Collins: As Deputy Bannon intimated, it seems to be more of a question of what type of education is being given to our children, as parents expect a certain quality. They should not feel they need to go to a private school to get a better education or meet the right shakers and movers. As a society, we should deliver an education for every child equally, and it must be of a high standard.

If particular schools want to present a certain religious ethos, is there not space for them? The Minister of State has indicated that under the Constitution this order must be made, which is fair enough. If a school wants to promote a particular religion, it should have to fund the education of a teacher who comes in to practise a religious point, and other education should be given in a secular environment. If parents or religious groups want to present a certain ethos to their children, the State should not have to support that. It should be down to particular schools funding teachers who will educate the children in such religious matters. It is bizarre to have to go through the process.

Deputy Sean Sherlock: Deputy McConalogue's first question was about places and all 32 places have been taken and it has happened three times. I did not really understand the third question and perhaps I misheard it. There is a philosophical element in this, I suppose, and if I am reading the interventions by Deputies Ó Ríordáin, Collins and Bannon correctly, there seems to be an issue with whether the State should provide wholly for education of primary and post-primary levels, or if there should be what could loosely be called a subvention for provision at schools where there is a particular religious ethos. We are all aware of the particular provision proposed here, which is to ensure we can guarantee the teaching ethos through the Protestant tradition. We would not necessarily disagree with that.

Speaking personally, one could argue that religious formation for any citizen could take place through a Sunday school mechanism or outside normal teaching hours. Nevertheless, the State provides for a number of hours, which is probably a vagary of our history of a strong Catholic ethos with other minority religions. The education sector in Finland has 97% of schools within the state sector and religious formation is extraneous to the process. The majority of the schools are within the public sphere.

Ireland is a particular country with a specific history and traditions, so there is an historical narrative in that regard. It is a question of where we are moving. Are we looking to divest ourselves of any State intervention with schools of a particular ethos? That is a particular

philosophical question with which we must grapple. I have a particular policy responsibility for science, technology, engineering and maths, and if members are asking me whether I believe we should spend more time in schools teaching in those areas than preparing for certain aspects of religious formation, I know I would prefer to invest the time in teaching core subjects. That is a personal opinion.

I sense from the committee that there is no difficulty with the provision being proposed. In response to Deputy Bannon, there is no different set of rights. We are recognising a minority ethos and ensuring it is protected in terms of pedagogy, teaching and ensuring the supply of teachers, and we are doing it in a structured way.

Deputy James Bannon: This has come across in the board of management meetings I have attended and in consultations parents have had with me in my constituency offices. There is a view that we are proposing to have different sets of rights for children. Parents feel strongly about this policy. They pay the same taxes and abide by the same Constitution, but they feel there is an element of discrimination in those proposals. I am conveying the message I have been getting from boards of management and parents.

Chairman: We have a substantial agenda and I am conscious that there is another item to be discussed.

Deputy Charlie McConalogue: I have a query regarding the Employment Equality Act 1998. Has there been such an order by the Minister previously? If this has not been in place for the past while, and given that there are 32 places in the college, has there been a problem obtaining a sufficient throughput of teachers who wish to teach in Protestant schools as part of that 32? I presume there must be if the order is considered necessary, as it has not been in place previously.

Chairman: On the Deputy's first point, the Oireachtas committee dealt with this in 2008. It is a five-yearly order.

Deputy Charlie McConalogue: So it is currently in place.

Deputy Sean Sherlock: There is a continuing need and not all 32 graduates necessarily end up within the Protestant sector. Some will go to Educate Together schools and some have even gone to Roman Catholic schools. It is about ensuring the need is met on a continuing basis. That is the fundamental aspect of this.

Senator Marie-Louise O'Donnell: The Minister asked if we are moving towards a particular ethos. The question asked by the Deputies is a very good one. Should the State be responsible for religious education or should religious education be something independent of the schools? I understand the Protestant teacher training college, Mater Dei and other such colleges are coming under the auspices of DCU, which is a non-denominational university. When questioned about this recently, the college's representatives were delighted to be able to say that people could train to become teachers in whatever way they wanted, in the sense that if they wished to work in a Catholic, Islamic, Jewish or Protestant school one could avail of that tributary, as it were, within the education structure. Am I correct on that, particularly within the new four-year programme for teacher training? That might allay many fears with regard to holding onto a certain ethos yet living within a different type of secular regime.

Deputy Sean Sherlock: The restructuring of teacher education colleges throws up vagaries. For example, with regard to the DCU ethos, if one is mapping-----

Senator Marie-Louise O'Donnell: It is the overriding umbrella and these teacher training colleges are coming under it. It has a very secular ethos.

Deputy Sean Sherlock: There is nothing in that which precludes anybody of a particular ethos-----

Senator Marie-Louise O'Donnell: That is my point - one can parallel the two ethos.

Deputy Sean Sherlock: Exactly.

Senator Marie-Louise O'Donnell: That deals with the Minister's question. It might allay many fears about discrimination.

Deputy Sean Sherlock: Absolutely. Fundamentally, our objective is to ensure that every ethos is provided for specifically.

Senator Marie-Louise O'Donnell: Yes, as it should be.

Deputy Sean Sherlock: That is the fundamental tenet of this provision. In any restructuring of teacher training colleges, for example, no single entity or ethos is excluded. I believe that is the point the Senator was making.

Senator Marie-Louise O'Donnell: That is my point, generally. Each one of these teacher training colleges would have been very independent and somewhat isolated and now they are coming under DCU and a different ethos. However, they also have the tributaries of their own ethos to hold onto within the new four-year teacher training programme.

Deputy Sean Sherlock: Yes. Historically, teacher training was very much aligned to particular traditions, even within the Catholic ethos. There were varying traditions in distinct geographical locations. Personally, I believe we must move to a teacher training paradigm that is more reflective of Irish society and more pluralist in its approach, while ensuring there are inherent guarantees for a minority ethos that probably needs a certain protection. This is evolving. As Irish society evolves, the restructuring of teacher training evolves. Even the debate about patronage is evolving. There has never really been a big debate in Ireland about patronage. It is about parents looking at their own religious beliefs and where they want their children to go in terms of religious formation-----

Senator Marie-Louise O'Donnell: It is about choice.

Deputy Sean Sherlock: -----and having choice.

I hope I answered all of the questions. I apologise if I have not. Deputy Ó Ríordáin mentioned the issue of sexuality and equality. That does not have a bearing on this provision in terms of the equality Act, as I understand it. One's sexuality is a matter for one's self. I hope I understood correctly the point he was making. It has no bearing on this provision.

Chairman: I thank the Minister of State for attending the meeting. That concludes our consideration of the draft order.

Messages to Dáil and Seanad

Chairman: In accordance with Standing Orders 86(2) and 87 of Dáil Éireann and Standing

Orders 73 and 75(2) of Seanad Éireann, the following message will be sent to the Dáil and the Seanad:

The Oireachtas Joint Committee on Education and Social Protection has completed its consideration of the Employment Equality Act 1998 (Section 12) (Church of Ireland College of Education) Order 2013.

Third Level Student Grant System: Discussion with SUSI

Chairman: The next topic for the meeting is Student Universal Support Ireland, SUSI. I welcome the delegation from SUSI who will address us today, at the committee's invitation, and provide an update on the current position. I welcome Ms Jacinta Stewart, chief executive officer of the City of Dublin Vocational Education Committee, CDVEC; Mr. Alan Murphy, principal officer, SUSI; Ms Kay Cullinan, principal officer, CDVEC; Mr. Philip Connolly, assessment and control manager, SUSI; and Mr. John Conroy, communications officer, SUSI. I invite Ms Stewart to make her presentation to the committee.

Ms Jacinta Stewart: I am glad of the opportunity to give an update on SUSI. I am chief executive officer of the City of Dublin Vocational Education Committee. In November 2012, SUSI management and I, as CEO, met the Oireachtas Joint Committee on Education and Social Protection and reported on the operation of SUSI at that time. In January 2013 an update was issued to the joint committee following its request to have it for its meeting on 19 June 2013.

I shall outline the present position. The scheme for 2012-13 is now closed. The scheme for 2013-14 has opened and a number of changes have been made to the application process for the coming year. A dedicated website *susi.ie* is now in place and contains supporting information for all grant applicants.

Grant renewals is a responsibility for this year. Renewal of grants for eligible applicants has commenced using the newly developed online renewal process and caters for existing SUSI students.

An external review of the operation of SUSI was commissioned by CDVEC and carried out by Accenture. The review was published and forms the basis for significant structural reform of the management and administration of SUSI. The review's main recommendation is that the SUSI grants process be developed, on an agreed phased basis, over the coming years to be a fully web-based integrated automated grant application system. The review found that SUSI had essentially a year to plan and implement its proposed new operating model for managing student grants at national level. It identified a number of critical issues during the set-up phase that contributed to the operational issues experienced during the first few months. It also acknowledged that SUSI had difficulty in securing all of the staff resources it required in the timeframe outlined in the agreed implementation plan. Consequently, a significant amount of management time was spent addressing staff resourcing issues.

There were communications and expectation difficulties that resulted in insufficient clarity and understanding provided to applicants regarding key dates, deadlines and documentary evidence required to support applications. That complicated an already complex grants scheme for applicants, staff and other stakeholders. It also contributed to different stakeholder expectations of what SUSI would deliver and when. The resourcing and other issues experienced

during set up and subsequently were largely resolved.

With regard to information sharing, major processing development improvements have been achieved this year that includes the exchange of key data with Government and other agencies. To date SUSI has agreed the following: direct transfer of data from Revenue Commissioners; direct access to appropriate Department of Social Protection or social welfare records; direct transfer of data from Central Applications Office; that course registration confirmation from individual universities and colleges will be confirmed as appropriate; that direct access to the Department of Education and Skill's pupil database records to establish and meet residency requirements will be available; and that the General Registration Office for confirmation of dates of birth and nationality will also be available.

The ability to accommodate direct electronic communication with different public and private sector agencies is a core strength of SUSI. It will greatly contribute to reducing the overall volume of paperwork from in excess of 1.8 million documents in 2012-2013. This in turn will improve the experience of applicants in responding to document requests from SUSI and will greatly increase the efficiency of the grant awarding process in the coming year.

We have examined communications in great detail. A number of significant developments have been introduced to improve communication with applicants. These improvements include: Publication of the *susi.ie* website for information and access to online applications; development of an online tracker system for applicants to monitor the progress of their applications; a structured email contact with existing students for the grant renewals process so that we can identify the existing students in receipt of grants and have been in direct contact with them; and a regular email contact with students through the CAO list. The CAO asks students using its system to file an application whether they will lodge an application with SUSI. Therefore, SUSI has had direct access to those students. I will continue to list the improvements as follows: messaging of close-by and return-by dates for applicants; messaging of the need for self-employed and farmers to finalise their 2012 returns early; improved letter templates; an extensive use of social media; and a national campaign is taking place and this week there will also be local radio campaigns.

By the end of June 2013, SUSI had received a total of 69,683 grant applications for the academic year 2012-13. There are 118 cases outstanding that are complicated and difficult. We awarded 39,524 grants and 30,041 people were ineligible. The award category means that 39,524 students have been approved for either a full grant or a fees only grant, that the grant had been paid and that all activity regarding the grant application had been finalised. The ineligible category includes all those who were refused because they did not meet the eligibility criteria. It also includes those who cancelled or withdrew their application. In many cases this happened because applicants realised, after making their application, that they did not meet the eligibility criteria. Applications in the "awaiting student documentation" category includes a very small number of residual applications that are still under examination.

By the end of 2012 grants processing was fully up to date for completed applications and the turnaround at that stage was 48 hours. By the end of December 2012, almost 70% of the full year out-turn of awarded grants had already been awarded. By the end of January 2013 the figure had risen to 85%. The scheme for 2012-13 is now formally closed. Approximately 12,000 applications were received after the formal closing date of 31 August.

SUSI has an internal review process that is followed by an independent internal and external appeals processes which ensures that all applicants are treated in a fair and consistent manner.

THIRD LEVEL STUDENT GRANT SYSTEM: DISCUSSION WITH SUSI

The total number of successful internal appeals for 2012-13 was 4,260 or 6% of the total of 69,693 applications received.

The scheme for 2013-14 has been open since 20 May and SUSI has been processing new grant applications and grant renewals since that date. The opening date is three weeks ahead of the equivalent date in 2012-13. We have already received 30,428 applications for 2013-14 of which 13,841 are new applications and 16,587 are renewal applications.

SUSI expected a total of around 26,000 applications for renewal. By 13 June we had received 16,587 applications. Grant renewal is a simple online process. Students whose financial circumstances are unchanged are able to renew their grants by ticking four simple questions on an online form. By building on the information that is already available to us we can process renewals in a timely and efficient manner. SUSI does not expect that all 39,000 grantholders of 2012-13 will apply for grant renewal for a variety of reasons. A number attend one year post leaving certificate or post-graduate courses, others will drop out and a number will not meet formal progression criteria for continuity on their chosen course. I will give a breakdown of the status of the 16,587 renewal applications received as of 13 June. Effectively, 12,701 renewal applications have been awarded, 86 are ineligible, 3,345 are awaiting initial assessment, 423 await student documentation and 32 await final assessment. The closing date for renewals was Friday, 14 June 2013. A number of current grantholders have yet to formally apply for grant renewal and SUSI will be contacting those students to generate their appropriate application form. Some flexibility will be shown regarding the closing date for renewals. Renewing students whose circumstances have changed will be reassessed and may be required to submit evidence of the change so that a new assessment of grant eligibility can be made. Grant renewal is subject to progression to the next year of the college course and confirmation will be obtained by SUSI directly from the college in question where possible.

The system of application will be much simpler for new applicants in 2013-14 than in 2012-13. I mentioned the links with bodies such as the Revenue Commissioners, social welfare records at the Department of Social Protection, the CAO, universities and colleges, the Department of Education and Skills pupil database records and the General Registration Office, GRO. This means the majority of applicants do not have to directly provide documents such as P60 or P21 forms, social welfare information and college information. The capacity to engage directly at a macro level with other State bodies is a key strength of a single awarding body. This capacity will provide accurate and certified information to SUSI and will significantly speed up the determination of grant eligibility for all applicants.

For some applicants, just two items of information will be required in order to make decisions on eligibility and payment. These are the signed student declaration form and the student bank information details. For the self-employed and farming community, a grant cannot be awarded until SUSI has received a notice of assessment issued by the Revenue Commissioners. In order to get a notice of assessment, these applicants will need to file their end of year returns to the Revenue Commissioners in respect of their 2012 accounts as soon as possible. A breakdown of the status of the 13,841 applications received as of 13 June is as follows. Some 395 were awarded or provisionally awarded, 870 were ineligible, 3,858 are awaiting initial assessment, 7,618 are awaiting student documentation and 1,100 are awaiting final assessment. We have developed strong partnership links with all stakeholders in the grant application process. It recognises values and intends to build on those links. By combining strong partnership with experienced external professional analysis and advice, we intend to deliver a better service to grant applicants in 2013-14 and beyond.

Chairman: The agreed format is that we take the spokespersons first, followed by members in order of indication.

Deputy Charlie McConalogue: I thank the SUSI officials for coming in and for the briefings provided in the past. The experience of the past year has been unfortunate, particularly for students. It has been a difficult year for SUSI officials getting the agency up and running. The Department of Education and Skills did not think it out in advance. Much of the work done by SUSI in terms of preparing for next year and linking with Government agencies to reduce the volume of documentation that must be requested from students should have been dealt with in advance of the central grant authority being set up. When I questioned the Minister on this point, on how the process was set in train and the central grant authority grant awarded, his response was that his Department had very little experience in the administration of student grants. This lack of experience led to the awarding process. He said expressions of interest were invited by those who may be interested in setting up a central grant authority. It was up to those who came before the Department expressing interest to convince the Department how it should be done. The Minister said that County Dublin VEC was the most convincing and that he went with them. This led to the results in the past year, with difficulties and a lack of preparation in terms of how it might pan out. Miscalculations were made in respect of SUSI and the requirements to meet the demand but there was also a serious miscalculation by the Department of Education and Skills in accepting projections and in not providing the expected staff, as highlighted by the Accenture report.

The students in the country suffered because of last year's first years being a trial run for setting up the central grant awarding agency. It did not work on the basis of timely administration. What was the cost of SUSI last year compared to what it would have been under the old system, with 66 grant awarding bodies administering the grants? The calculation may be difficult. The upshot was that over half of the students awarded a grant did not receive a payment until after Christmas. That meant many students eligible for the special rate of maintenance grant, over €6,000, did not get paid until the new year. Anyone eligible for the special rate comes from a family whose income is under the €21,000 threshold. That includes social welfare families, those with no income or families on minimum wage jobs. Where a member of the family was in college and living in campus or rented accommodation, from September of last year until after Christmas the family was trying to keep the child in college when means were exceptionally strained already. People living on minimum wage jobs or social welfare had to pay for running the family in the homestead, pay weekly or monthly rent for students away from home, maintain them and pay school costs. It was unacceptable that the Government oversees the situation.

The Minister for Education and Skills, Deputy Quinn, suggested the move to a central grant awarding body was a demonstration of public service reform at its best.

Chairman: Deputy McConalogue has been speaking for seven minutes.

Deputy Charlie McConalogue: I will try to conclude. There are lessons there in respect of the delivery and establishment of public service reform and the Government needs to take account of it.

Representatives from SUSI have pointed out that 118 cases are awaiting student documentation. How many cases have been appealed or are being reviewed at present? There is an issue of the applications in need of resolution being escalated. The cases may be difficult at this stage but many can be resolved. I and other Deputies received complaints from members of the public who are getting different stories. A parent contacted me yesterday. Her son was told he was

due a special rate yet when he phoned back later he was told he was not entitled to it. We need to have this resolved next year. It should not be happening. Those who have not been awarded grants have sat exams and cannot get exam results because the college will not give them out if they have not paid registration fees. How many are in that category?

Deputy Jonathan O'Brien: I welcome Ms Stewart and her team. Today is very different to the heated meeting we had in November. As a result of that meeting and the fact we got the opportunity to question the group, there was more focus on rectifying the existing problems as soon as possible.

One of the things said at the meeting was that we must get through the backlog of applicants and get as many students as possible their grants so they have their money and then we can review what went wrong. We all know the whole system was a complete dog's dinner but it was not solely down to SUSI. The Department also must take responsibility for much of what went wrong last year. It is clear from the report that one of the biggest issues was that the staff promised to SUSI did not get there on time and, as a result, there was constant firefighting.

Having said that, it is clear from our own meetings with the team in recent weeks and from the briefings we have had that many of these issues have been rectified and should not reoccur this year. We know the systems that have been put in place and the issues that arose last year. In fairness to SUSI, I am more confident we will not see the same level of disorganisation and disarray that we saw last year which resulted in some students being forced to drop out of college. The witnesses went through some of the systems that have been put in place to talk directly to the Revenue Commissioners and the Department of Social Protection, and all of those will help. There is a new website up and running and since the application process was opened for 2013-14. We have had no correspondence to our office and no complaints about the new system.

There are some areas where the message could be better communicated, such as what people are actually entitled to. There was a lot of confusion last year over what students, particularly those studying outside the State, were entitled to. Perhaps the witnesses could put on record the entitlements, if they are fees, maintenance grants and so on. In the Six Counties, not all colleges fall under the remit and even in the colleges that do, not all courses come under the remit. It is an opportunity to put that on the record.

There was also a big issue last year where people were being told to appeal decisions when they should have just been reviewed. If that had happened, those students could have been taken out of the system much earlier. What process has been put in place to ensure we do not see a repeat of that this year?

The other major complaint was that even when students were approved for a maintenance grant and fees, payment was often delayed. The provision of bank details was a major area of complaint and I know SUSI has rectified that. How was that done? It is important that the committee and the media communicate that fact. There is a confidence issue still surrounding this, and going by the last 12 months, because of the failings within SUSI and the whole grant system, there will be an apprehension around whether that will be repeated this year. I am confident we are not going to see the same level of problems, although things can pop up and we must react to them. I am satisfied that the systems put in place for the coming year will address many of the major issues identified in the report that caused so many difficulties. If SUSI can outline how it has dealt with those issues, perhaps the media will pick up on it and we can restore some of the confidence in the system.

Deputy Joan Collins: I welcome the witnesses from SUSI. One of the issues last year was staffing levels. Are there enough staff now to cater for applicants across the system? There were almost 70,000 applications for 2012-13, with 16,500 renewals from last year. Will there be the same number applying for first-time grants this year? Are there enough staff to deal with that? Are there figures for the number of students who had to drop out because they were unable to access payments early enough? When will those payments be made for 2013-14? Applications have been open since May, so will students receive payments in October and November?

I met the USI this morning and was told there were particular difficulties for 118 students, with a further 183 students stuck in the system because they are estranged or not living at home. What can be done to address that? It happens every year so we should sort out a structure they can follow instead of finding themselves all over the place. They have made the point that they have gone to Garda stations to have it certified that they do not live at home with their parents. What process could be put in place for those students?

Some 4,260 students were given grants on appeal. That is only 6% but it is still quite a high number. What made the difference in the appeal?

Senator Marie-Louise O'Donnell: I welcome the group to the committee. It is nice to see the faces behind the attack. I am just back on the Joint Committee on Education and Social Protection so we have not met before. I think it ran quite a benevolent city.

I worked in third level for 35 years so I have some idea of the grant system and what students go through and Deputy McConalogue was absolutely right, there is a great need for this to work efficiently. How much does SUSI cost to administer and how many people work there? How much does it cost as an organisation to administer and to staff? How much money was given out in grants in total last year? How much did the 39,524 grants cost us? What was the greatest reason for ineligibility for the 30,000 applicants who were refused? What was the greatest problem? Was it lack of perception or lack of communication and the fact there was no joined-up thinking between the Revenue Commissioners, the CAO and the Department of Social Protection? There was a good study on this but I want to know what was the elephant in the room.

Ms Jacinta Stewart: I will begin by responding to Deputy McConalogue's questions, if that is okay. The cost of SUSI in its first year was €7.1 million. The staffing costs when the system was run by 66 bodies - VECs and local authorities - were approximately €10 million. There may have been other costs, but they would not have been accounted for separately. A total of 543 students are currently pursuing appeals. A number of members asked about the 118 students who are going through the internal review process. I will come back to that matter. I will ask my colleague, Mr. Connolly, to respond to Deputy O'Brien's question about the position regarding students who applied to do courses in colleges outside the Republic of Ireland. It is a technical question that requires a technical answer.

Mr. Philip Connolly: The simplest way to explain it is to mention that students attending college outside the Republic of Ireland are entitled to maintenance only. Four colleges in Northern Ireland are exceptions to this. Those studying courses at Queen's University, post-graduate courses at the University of Ulster or specific certificates in education at St. Mary's College or Stranmillis College are eligible to make applications in respect of their fees. I hope that answers Deputy O'Brien's question.

Ms Jacinta Stewart: A question was asked about appeals. One of the mistakes we made in

the initial stages was to put those who had been refused straight into the appeals process. We should have provided for internal reviews in such cases. This would have sorted out the issue relating to the adjacent rate and non-adjacent rate much more quickly. Next year, we will use internal reviews to ascertain quickly whether it is possible that a mistake has been made. The matter of adjacent and non-adjacent rates is an example of that. These reviews will be done by a different VEC - the City of Cork VEC - on behalf of SUSI. Students who have gone through that system will then be able to appeal to a national appeals board, which has a separate statutory basis. It is actually independent of everybody. I should also mention that SUSI has come under the ambit of the Ombudsman since 1 May last. The concerns dealt with in that context largely relate to administration and the general functions of the Ombudsman's office. I will ask my colleague Mr. Conroy to talk about the 118 students I mentioned, the issue of estrangement and the particular concerns we have encountered in such areas.

Mr. John Conroy: Since January, we have had an ongoing issue across approximately 750 applications. Many of these cases have been referred to us by Members of the Oireachtas, including members of this committee, as well as by the applicants themselves. We have two areas of difficulty, the first of which is proof of estrangement. I might as well bring up the other issue - independent living - as part of this process. The student grants scheme and, more importantly, the statutory instrument that supports it, do not leave SUSI with much room in how we interpret estrangement or independent living. As part of our process of submitting an end-of-year return to the Department, when it is reviewing the scheme for next year, we will be lobbying for those two areas to be revisited. We have encountered many cases of applicants in their late teens who are estranged from their families, where every other form of evidence available to us suggests there is a need. We cannot take such cases across the line because the statutory instrument requires us to have specific types of evidence. The 118 cases mentioned by Ms Stewart comprise the final tranche of cases we are trying to bring to the award stage. I assure the committee that each of them must be considered by hand. Unfortunately, we do not have the latitude under the scheme to make an arbitrary decision. As I said earlier, we want to make improvements in this area. We will seek the support of the Department in this regard.

I do not propose to get into any specific cases of estrangement. At least two members of the committee are familiar with cases that are outstanding. Other cases relate to claims of independent living. As the committee knows, one has to be over the age of 23 before one can fall into the independent living category. We have dealt with a number of applicants who are renting the "extra bedroom" in a private house, but whose landlord is not registered with the Private Residential Tenancies Board. They do not have bank statements being sent to them at that address. They do not have television licences in their own name at that address. Large numbers of people do not seem to be in a position to give us the level of evidence associated with the many documents we accept. In many cases, rather than simply telling people their applications have been refused, we have attempted to go back to them. With the help of Members of the Oireachtas, in some cases, we have tried to get the individuals in question to identify a document somewhere - even a car insurance statement - that would serve as the necessary proof. We have taken a great deal of flak over the last six months regarding what has happened in these two areas, and we will continue to take some flak. All SUSI can do is encourage the Department to revisit these areas when next year's scheme is being drawn up.

Ms Jacinta Stewart: Deputy Collins asked if we had enough staff at the moment. Yes; we have 99 staff and we will go-----

Senator Marie-Louise O'Donnell: I am not Deputy Collins; I am Senator O'Donnell. I

am not a Deputy quite yet.

Ms Jacinta Stewart: I will respond to Deputy Collins before I respond to Senator O'Donnell, if that is okay.

Senator Marie-Louise O'Donnell: There is a world of difference there.

Deputy Timmy Dooley: The Senator does not like to take second place to anybody.

Senator Marie-Louise O'Donnell: I do not expect Deputy Collins to take second place to me either.

Ms Jacinta Stewart: I apologise. I believe both speakers asked whether we had enough staff. We have 99 staff at present. That figure will increase to 116. To put it in the terms we use, we had 65 whole-time equivalents and we have 88 whole-time equivalents this year. There are times during the year, depending on SUSI's cycle, when we are very busy. That is why our staff complement might reach 99 or 116 before we downsize at quieter times of the year. We are employing the full number of staff that has been approved for this year.

Deputy Collins asked what we are doing to help students avoid dropping out. We are opening earlier for applications. In an ideal world, we would like to open the applications process at the same time as the CAO applications process. When people fill in their college applications, they should be able to fill in their grant applications at the same time. In the initial stages of the process, applicants do not have to tell us what college they are planning to attend. We want the message to students to be clearer. We have to be as clear as we can. We need to process applications more quickly.

This brings us back to the issue of reducing the amount of paperwork. The reduction from 66 to one in the number of agencies doing this work has enabled us to co-operate with bodies such as the Revenue Commissioners and the General Register Office. They would not be able to provide information to 66 bodies but they are able to provide it to us. Mr. Connolly has done a great deal of work to ensure that is happening. We have online access to other State bodies. As I said, that has been hugely beneficial.

Mr. Conroy spoke about the issue of students getting stuck in the system. There are some cases of estrangement, for example.

We were asked whether the number of appeals is relatively high. We hope to eliminate much of that at the internal review stage by identifying problems more quickly. I do not think we are naive enough to expect not to encounter problems. One of the challenges for us is to deal with these cases as quickly as possible. We hope it will work much better if we can ensure people are not put through a long process at the internal review stage. As members will be aware, there is a 30-day requirement and all kinds of things are involved.

I think I have dealt with the cost and staffing issues that were raised by Senator O'Donnell. The main reasons for ineligibility, which she also asked about, are non-qualification in respect of income and failure to submit documents or to do so on time. I was surprised that we received so many applications after the closing date. A large proportion of those cases related to changes in circumstances. Nevertheless, they were deemed to be late applications. That is a concern.

We were also asked about SUSI's main problems. I think communications have to be better and clearer. Anybody who examines this system will learn that it is based on a statutory instru-

ment. It is a clear that a huge amount of information is involved. We are seeking to reduce what the student has to give us by arranging for other State bodies to provide that information directly, obviously with the permission of the student. This should make the process faster and clarify some of the issues that are emerging - for instance, independent means and estrangement - thus allowing us to identify them to the Department. These are clearly national issues which need to be addressed.

Senator Marie-Louise O'Donnell: SUSI receives €7.1 million and has 88 whole-time staff. Is that correct?

Ms Jacinta Stewart: The cost of SUSI in 2012 was €7.1 million. This year its projected cost will be €8.9 million, and we currently have 99 staff.

Senator Marie-Louise O'Donnell: How much money was disbursed in grants?

Mr. Philip Connolly: By the end of the academic year, we expect to have disbursed almost €160 million. The figure refers only to new applicants. The figure required for the system of maintenance grants is close to €350 million.

Senator Marie-Louise O'Donnell: The overall figure, including new applicants, is €350 million. Is that correct?

Mr. Philip Connolly: Yes.

Chairman: Has Ms Stewart responded to all the questions?

Deputy Jonathan O'Brien: I asked a question on the change with regard to bank details.

Mr. John Conroy: The position is that last year banking details were collected at the end of the process. This year, however, they will be collected when the initial declaration forms are submitted. On the payment process, when we award funds to an applicant we need the relevant college to confirm the student's registration or attendance, depending on the type of college he or she attends. This is a two-week process. This year, we are tightening up the process through the use of electronic data transfer. Mr. Connolly has been chairing a number of working groups with the institutes of technology and universities aimed at speeding up the process.

Once a student is awarded, he or she will wait until starting second year for our renewals, at which point he or she will receive payment. In the case of new applicants, once a college confirms registration to us, which is a two-week process, the student will go into payment.

Deputy Jonathan O'Brien: Have changes been made to the way in which colleges are notified?

Mr. John Conroy: Yes; notification will be done by means of electronic data transfer. Last year, we required final course acceptance forms. As a result of our links with the CAO, this document will no longer be required from the institutes of technology or universities in the coming year. Last year, this requirement created further delays in addition to the delay caused by banking issues.

Deputy Brendan Ryan: I thank Ms Stewart and her team for their presentation. We expected to receive a confident report and it would have been a cause for concern if our guests had not taken an upbeat approach. The proof of the pudding will be in the eating, however. I hope representatives of SUSI will not be required to come before us to explain poor performance at

the end of the year. The organisation has the benefit of the Accenture report, which noted inadequate staff resources, a lack of experience and insufficient clarity in respect of information provided to applicants. I hope SUSI has gained experience and resolved the lack of clarity. Is Ms Stewart satisfied that all the pieces are in place? This is key to the joint committee's having confidence in the ability of SUSI to perform its task properly. If Ms Stewart is not satisfied with the resources available to her or believes further changes will be required, we should be concerned.

Improvements in communications and information sharing are positive developments which indicate that matters will improve. What targets or measurements of success are being applied to the team in SUSI?

I ask Ms Stewart to explain how the appeals process works. She indicated that the number of successful appeals amounted to 6% of the total number of applicants. What percentage of appeals were refused? I understand 69,000 grant applications were made last year. How many applications are expected for the forthcoming academic year?

Deputy Ray Butler: I thank Ms Stewart and her officials for their presentation. Our meeting a couple of weeks ago was very informative and I was pleased to note the changes made in SUSI. When local authorities and vocational education committees handled third level grants, I used to deal with students who did not receive grant payments until after Christmas. Unfortunately, in the case of SUSI the work done by 26 local authorities was transferred to one body and people did not do their homework. I come from a self-employed background. When one sets up a business, perception, presentation and the way one starts out are very important. Unfortunately, mistakes were made in the case of SUSI. I understand the organisation originally had between 40 and 50 staff and the figure subsequently doubled. Is that correct?

Ms Jacinta Stewart: I will revert to the Deputy on that.

Deputy Ray Butler: One would have expected officials from the Department and staff from SUSI to have met representatives of the 26 local authorities and vocational education committees which previously operated the student grant system. Unfortunately that was not the case, and it was a matter of having all hands on deck. We have learned a great deal and moved on.

The documentation provided to students was a major problem. Some of those who contacted my constituency office had not received payments despite having submitted documentation two or three times. They were informed that the documentation had not been received and this was causing a delay in processing their application. This was a major problem.

Another problem arose in respect of the returns of self-employed people. The self-employed make their returns in October every year. It would be helpful if applicants were allowed to submit returns from the previous rather than current year. The self-employed are at the mercy of their accountants, many of whom are busy. Perhaps it would suffice if applicants submitted a return for the previous year.

I welcome many of the changes, including the proposal to move the entire process online.

As Deputy Jonathan O'Brien noted, a major problem arose with regard to bank details. I welcome the decision to have bank details provided at the start of the application process rather than at its conclusion.

THIRD LEVEL STUDENT GRANT SYSTEM: DISCUSSION WITH SUSI

Staffing numbers have been discussed. Is Ms Stewart satisfied with the number of staff available to SUSI? While we all took a hammering because of problems in the new system, I believe it will be excellent in future. I welcome the regular meetings with SUSI.

Deputy Timmy Dooley: I thank Ms Stewart for her presentation. While I am not a member of the joint committee, I am aware that SUSI has an ongoing relationship with the committee and Ms Stewart has appeared before it on a number of occasions.

No other organisation has created a greater burden of work for my constituency office than SUSI. We have found it virtually impossible to deal with the organisation, as have the students and parents who have had to interact with it. I do not propose to focus this discussion on my office or any other office. I will focus instead on the impact of the current problems on students. I am still dealing with cases in which grant applications have not been processed. Students have suffered the ignominy of being refused entry to the library of their college or having to make special arrangements to take examinations. Some will not receive their examination results because their cases have not been concluded. This has a major impact on their lives and those of their parents and causes great trauma. There are people at their wits' end as a result of this mess. While I may be concerned about the efforts being made by my staff or Ms Stewart's staff, that is not the main problem. The issue here is the lives of young people who are trying to get an education that will enable them to enter the workforce. Members who know me will agree that I do not engage in grandstanding. It does not give me pleasure to raise these issues. It is the lives of young people that are hugely affected and hugely traumatised by the mistakes of the City of Dublin VEC for expressing an interest in something which, clearly, it was not ready for. I am amazed it would have sought a contract for which it was ill-prepared. That it should bring Accenture in half way through a process is mind-boggling.

One of my questions to Ms Jacinta Stewart is who is taking responsibility for making that expression of interest and being so poorly resourced, so poorly informed and so poorly structured to deliver that service? I like the idea of the public service taking on more work. I liked the idea that it did not fall into the hands of a private organisation because I believe in public service. However, I have to say the respect for public service is eroded every day when an organisation such as this fails in such a monumental way to reach the standard it would have been expected to reach. Is there a service level agreement in place between the CDVEC and the Department of Education and Skills? Has any discussion taken place with the Minister and the Department in respect of the breaches of that service level agreement? Has the organisation been penalised in terms of the payment from the Department, based on its failure to meet the service that would have been expected? Does such an agreement exist? Perhaps it does not. I do not want to put all the blame on the organisation. There is an equal burden of blame on the Minister and the Department of Education and Skills for accepting in good faith what it proposed to deliver. It might be excusable if for some reason the organisation had no knowledge or history of dealing with grants but it did, therefore, it should have been able to put in place an appropriate model to meet the standard. Will Ms Stewart please explain who will take responsibility? I will be straight, has Ms Stewart considered her position as a result of the failure?

(Interruptions).

Deputy Brendan Ryan: On a point of order.

Deputy Timmy Dooley: With respect, I have asked a question.

Chairman: There is a point of order. I have to take it.

Deputy Brendan Ryan: This committee discussed the performance last year and the issues that have been raised now by Deputy Dooley. The purpose of today's meeting is for SUSI to explain what went wrong last year and how it will improve it this year. That somebody should come into the committee and raise issues we have already debated is not the reason we are here today.

Deputy Timmy Dooley: With respect, if I may respond. I am dealing with a number of files still in my office. I would not raise this issue today otherwise. I placed a call to Ms Stewart's office on Monday.

Chairman: Yes.

Deputy Timmy Dooley: As of now I have received no response. I accept she is a busy person but somebody in her office could have called me to tell that she was not available, that she was busy, or whatever. I would not raise these issues today if I had received a response from her office.

Chairman: Deputy Dooley, first-----

Deputy Timmy Dooley: SUSI or CDVEC really gets it in relation to dealing with the student population cohort.

Chairman: The Deputy has been given great latitude and has made a speech. It is very much after the event because we debated this entire issue as a committee.

Deputy Timmy Dooley: As of now, the students who are still waiting.

Deputy Brendan Ryan: The Deputy has made his point.

Deputy Timmy Dooley: -----do not know whether they have passed or failed. They do not know whether they can go on a J1 visa.

Chairman: Sorry, Deputy Dooley.

Deputy Timmy Dooley: With respect, this is a serious issue.

Chairman: First, the Deputy must go through the Chair. That is the rule. Second, he has to ask questions and be constructive. That is the purpose of this meeting and the reason we agreed it. If the Deputy has a brief final question we will move to the next speaker.

Deputy Timmy Dooley: My final question is the following. Has the City of Dublin VEC considered handing back the contract to the State and allowing somebody else come in and take on the work?

Deputy Brendan Ryan: That is grandstanding.

Deputy Timmy Dooley: With respect, it is not.

Senator Fidelma Healy Eames: This is the third time SUSI has appeared before the committee. All of the questions and issues raised by Deputy Dooley were raised in the previous two committee meetings. I commence by saying it was a crisis. Once it gave the exact contact numbers for Deputies and Senators I saw a huge improvement. I state categorically that Mr. John

Conroy helped me with the most complex case that ever came before my office. The family in question had been refused three times. That was not right. Once we got a lead-in to a person who looked at a very complex case, both grants for that family were granted at two different levels. One was adjacent and one was non-adjacent. I compliment him on that. Communication was a huge issue. I found it has improved and is no longer a huge issue. I respectfully say to Deputy Dooley that, perhaps, because he is not a member of the committee he did not have the same information. It is an issue for SUSI to ensure the information gets out to all Oireachtas representatives.

Will SUSI clarify the maximum income a person can earn to qualify for the various grant levels? I understand it is between €39,800 and €54,000. I have encountered some incredibly complex cases, for example, a family where there is a PAYE income and a spouse in a business that is losing money. Let us assume the PAYE person is on the maximum of €54,000 or, for the sake of argument, €75,000, and if, as Deputy Ray Butler said, the spouse is in a business that is losing money and has losses of, say, €40,000, does that family still qualify for a grant, even though one income exceeds the threshold? Is it the net family income that counts? I would appreciate a clear answer to that question.

I have a son who is finishing his leaving certificate today. Given that the dates are being brought how will that benefit students as the child or the family will not know which college the child will enter. It could be Galway, Dublin, Limerick or Cork. How can students apply for a grant without knowing where they will be? How is that a genuine, authentic application? Will it not mean double the work once the child accepts the offer of a college place?

I wish to refer to a matter raised by Deputy Dooley. We got a commitment at one point, if I am correct, from universities and colleges around the country - certainly from Galway - that no student would be disadvantaged in terms of access to, say, the library if SUSI was slow. Can the witnesses verify how many colleges gave that commitment to SUSI?

The examination situation is very serious. I understand from what Deputy Dooley has said that the students were allowed sit the examination but did not have the examination results presented to them because that information needs to go on the record. Which colleges are we speaking about? It would be a huge disadvantage, especially if they are final examinations. If they are final examinations and as some colleges have wonderful internships available they could be dependent on examination results. Therefore, we need accuracy.

Chairman: I can take more questions if that is what Members wish.

Senator Mary Moran: I thank the witnesses for appearing before the committee. I apologise for being late and missing the beginning of the presentation. I was taking part in a debate in the Seanad. I have found an open door policy with SUSI since it came into operation. I agree there have been many headaches. Like my colleagues I have had many constituents who had terrible problems. The last one I dealt with was four weeks ago. In its defence, the Oireachtas line has been a great help. I rang on a Monday on behalf of a particular student who, like many others, kept receiving communications that she had not provided certain information, although I had seen the photocopies she had of that information. Once one got through to the Oireachtas line, the people in the office there were very good at coming straight back. I never had a problem with non-communication; they were always very good. What funding has SUSI been allocated for 2013-2014?

Chairman: That has been answered.

Senator Mary Moran: I apologise. Is SUSI equipped this year to meet the inevitable influx of applications as we approach 1 August? Can the witnesses guarantee that it is better equipped this year? Has it addressed the quality control issues that arose early last year? Last year there were situations in which individuals were receiving varying amounts for their grants and this continued as late as April this year. Staff numbers and training was a major issue and that was raised in the second briefing last year.

Senator Marie-Louise O'Donnell: I sympathise with some of the Deputies here because I do not have a constituency. Senators are not supposed to have constituencies.

Chairman: They have one big constituency.

Senator Marie-Louise O'Donnell: Exactly.

We are talking about a lot of money. New applicants will require €160 million this year and the total for maintenance grants comes to €350 million. Is that correct? So €350 million was given out last year in maintenance grants. Is that correct?

Mr. Philip Connolly: The total is €350 million nationwide, including the 66 previous awarding authorities' due and renewal applications. That is the combined figure for maintenance and fees.

Senator Marie-Louise O'Donnell: So the €160 million is within the €350 million?

Mr. Philip Connolly: Yes.

Senator Marie-Louise O'Donnell: If SUSI awarded grants in 56.7% of cases, which represents 39,524 students, is that a lot of money for that number of students?

Mr. Philip Connolly: That is for fees and maintenance. That is paying the student contribution to the college, so that is the combined figure for expenditure.

Chairman: That is for tuition fees.

Senator Marie-Louise O'Donnell: That is everything.

Mr. Philip Connolly: It is the student contribution and tuition fees for postgraduate studies.

Senator Marie-Louise O'Donnell: SUSI needs to seriously examine the issue of eligibility, because 30,000 students were ineligible, and that is a very serious number. Students do not know what they are eligible for, or they do not know the parameters and fundamentals of the application, if 30,000 out of 60,000 have got it wrong.

Deputy Charlie McConalogue: Ms Stewart indicated that the publication of the grants scheme this year was two weeks ahead of its publication last year, which is welcome, but does she agree that this is still later than required to ensure the grants process moves as smoothly as possible? This has been a problem over the years but it has been a problem again last year and this year. Did Ms Stewart request the grant scheme from the Department by a particular date? What target date does she expect to give the Department for next year? It is a matter for the Department to publish it, but as the primary grant awarding body in the country which is responsible for ensuring this operates smoothly, I would imagine and expect that SUSI should indicate to the Department when it needs that grant scheme. When would that date be for next year?

Chairman: May I call the witnesses and then come back to the Deputy?

Ms Jacinta Stewart: Deputy Ryan asked if we were satisfied that we are in a better place for a better year. The answer is “Yes”. Hindsight is our greatest asset. The Accenture report highlighted many of the experiences we had and made recommendations for actions, some of which we were already doing, but also provided a roadmap for us, which is very important. Our measures of success include the throughput of applications. We examine what applications are coming in, what is happening to them and whether they are awarded or provisionally awarded. The times of award and payment are particular issues for us and they are matched regularly. We hope to provide a better service overall.

Deputy Brendan Ryan: Are there performance indicators?

Ms Jacinta Stewart: Yes. Accenture used the term “KPI”, key performance indicators. To answer Deputy Dooley’s questions, we have been giving those returns to the Department on a weekly basis. A total of 2,666 appeals were refused and it was because the original decisions were sound. We expect 75,000 new applications and 25,000 renewals this year, so approximately 100,000 in total. Deputies Butler and McConalogue asked about the possibility that people could provide returns going back two years. That would have to be part of the statutory instrument that comes in each March or April. There is processing that is currently taking place, along with IT development and business improvement. We need to examine that in terms of business improvement and ask if there are implications that we need to think out, not just for ourselves but also for the Department, and we must think of national implications. For PAYE people one would be looking at 2012, whereas for farmers and the self-employed it would be 2011. One of the questions would be whether that matters. It must be examined and that would be part of our business improvement process.

We had three staff in January 2012, 28 in April, 57 in June, 78 in September and 98 in December. Redeployment was just coming in as a new development at that stage and that is part of the reason for the slowness of staffing in the early stages.

I did not know Deputy Dooley had rung the office, so I apologise. In its first year SUSI processed 70,000 applications in a situation in which 95% of our staff were new. We provided full training and developed a range of quality assurance checks across different levels. However, as in any people-based assessment system, human errors occurred. The student grant scheme is complicated and, by its nature, strictly defined and does not allow for exceptions. Almost 40,000 students have been awarded and paid grants for 2012-13. Eight out of ten of those were awarded by the beginning of the second term. As the Accenture report states, regardless of the issues, both SUSI and our stakeholders rose to the challenge and tried to meet the targets. Deputy Dooley asked who was to blame. One of the things we tried to hold together in this is not to blame anybody. We had a problem and we tried to deal with it and sort it out. We were on a steep learning curve and I hope the results of that will be reflected in our 2013-14 performance.

I will ask Mr. Connolly to answer Senator Moran’s questions about quality control.

Mr. Philip Connolly: In respect of the letters the Senator mentioned and people getting different rates, we have implemented a new system, within the processing system, such that the system will work out the rates exactly and it will not be left to the assessor to choose certain award rates. The system will do that and there will be quality control with the team leaders to verify that is working correctly. That is a new system and it should relieve that problem. Quality control is a huge portion of our team leaders’ functions this year which we hope will make

great improvements in the system.

Senator Fidelma Healy Eames: Is there any chance that my questions will be answered?

Mr. Philip Connolly: In respect of the self-employed person, if somebody has an income of €75,000 and the business makes a loss, that income can be offset against the income from employment so that person could qualify for the grant too. If that is rental income, however, it cannot be offset.

Senator Fidelma Healy Eames: It cannot be offset.

Mr. Philip Connolly: No, only income from business can be offset against income from employment.

I would like to speak to the Senator after this meeting about the bands because the different rates that apply are quite complex. The ones the Senator mentioned are the standard rates but they can vary depending how many children one has and how many are in third level education. I can go through the whole range afterwards. That is no problem.

Senator Fidelma Healy Eames: That lack of understanding is probably why there are so many ineligible. There are 75,000 children sitting the leaving certificate this month. They will all chance applying but 30,000 are ineligible. There should be some type of information board with more clarity to help SUSI reduce some of the work.

Mr. John Conroy: On the earlier question about applying before 1 August, one does not have to have selected one's college or course to apply for a grant. We communicate that from year one, and the previous authorities would have done so too. The idea is that one gets to an awarded stage and gets paid when one selects one's final college. Our connections in particular with the CAO this year will make that process far more efficient than it was last year when they had to finish the final course acceptance forms. As a result of the fact that one can make an application and subsequently not go to college, there are approximately 14,000 people we assessed who did not proceed to further education, for several reasons. In some cases they did not get enough points, some could not afford it, even with the grants, or they were just over the income thresholds as it was. We made 50,000 telephone calls between January and the end of March asking each of those 14,000 were they proceeding with their applications or whether they were cancelled or refused. That is where that figure comes from. While potentially there are many who were refused on the basis of household income, a large proportion were the clear-out from the latter half of the year of people who had never intended to proceed with their applications in the first place.

This year all our communications and information are geared towards helping people through the thresholds. The income earner on student finance linked to *susi.ie* will help them with that but we will also contact people much earlier in the process to ensure that they are going to proceed to college. The total figure of 39,000 is correct for cancellations or refusals but it includes a cohort of 15,000 who applied but never responded to our initial request for documents. The system required us to contact them to get confirmation of cancellation. We could not do it arbitrarily.

Senator Fidelma Healy Eames: I asked whether SUSI communicated directly with students to ensure that the students were not being disadvantaged. We definitely got some commitments in this regard.

Mr. John Conroy: We invited all the institutes of technology and the colleges to contact us regularly to see what their lists of outstanding SUSI student grants were and what we had on our files. Approximately 80% of the colleges took up that offer. The institutes of technology were very strong, the universities less so.

Senator Fidelma Healy Eames: Is Mr. Conroy aware of any colleges that prevented students from accessing libraries and from getting their exam results?

Mr. John Conroy: I can only assure the Senator that anywhere or any time that we found that happening the HEA and the Department contacted the college directly with a view to having that position changed. To expand on that point, a standard note went out from all the institutes of technology prior to Easter on this subject and the note was withdrawn two weeks later.

Senator Fidelma Healy Eames: What does that mean?

Mr. John Conroy: When we contacted all the institutes of technology through the Department the letters that went out to students saying that if they had not paid their registration fees by a certain date they would not have access to certain facilities were withdrawn. That “threat” was withdrawn.

Senator Fidelma Healy Eames: The threat was withdrawn.

Mr. John Conroy: Yes.

Chairman: Deputy Ryan asked was there a forecast of applicants for this year.

Deputy Brendan Ryan: I think we got that figure.

Senator Marie-Louise O’Donnell: It should also be noted that parents who pay because they are not eligible for grants also suffer at the hands of universities that will not allow their students to use the libraries or attend certain courses until their fee is in. This applies to the goose and the gander. It does not affect only those who are eligible for grants. I have been the butt of that myself until the cheque came in: somebody was not eligible to attend lectures or to get onto Lotus Notes or portals or whatever those systems are. It does not just happen to people who are eligible for grants. In fact it is very strict for people who have to pay as well.

Mr. John Conroy: I thank the Senator for giving me the lead on that. There was an article in the newspapers in April stating that 5,000 students were going to be excluded from sitting their exams as a result of fees not being paid. Various colleges gave certain numbers and when we checked them with our own records there was a perception in a particular college that 350 students were going to be excluded and we had only 16 outstanding applications for that particular college. Likewise, the accusation was that this was the total number for the college. We were dealing only with the first year students.

Ms Jacinta Stewart: We have established an advisory group for SUSI which includes representatives of the Irish Universities Association and the Institutes of Technology Ireland, IOTI, and there is a sub-committee from the universities and institutes examining issues arising in relation to that, which increases the level of communication and the knowledge that we have about what is happening. The PLC colleges are more diffuse across the country and we want to increase the communication with them too.

Mr. Philip Connolly: The sub-committee has been useful in dealing with new students for next year in respect of renewals and how we are going to confirm their progression, success and

exam results. We have put huge processes in place with the institutes and the universities for next year.

Deputy Charlie McConalogue: On the renewal dates and flexibility on closing times, SUSI has indicated that the closing date for renewals has passed with some 16,000 having already renewed and they expect 26,000 renewals in total. Will they assure us that those who have not yet applied for a renewal will actually be considered and dealt with on their merits?

The same applies to the closing date for new applicants, which this year is 1 August. It was the end of August last year. SUSI accepted late applications last year and while I understand that from its point of view the importance and urgency of making sure that applications come in early to process it is also important from the students' point of view to make sure that they have the payment by the time term starts. Anyone who is entitled to a grant on the basis of their means should get it and we should not block them because they are late. I would like SUSI to assure us that they will be considered as well.

The witnesses mentioned that there are 118 students who are either estranged from their families or living independently and they are up against difficulties because of the statutory instrument overseeing this scheme. Those are two particularly vulnerable categories of student, one estranged from their family, the other with independent means but without the support that others get from their parents. They would have gone through the academic year, in many cases in extreme difficulty. It is exceptionally important that they are dealt with quickly but also that they are shown consideration and if this statutory instrument is posing a problem I will ask the Chairman of this meeting to write to the Minister for Education and Skills about these people indicating that we learnt today there is a difficulty for them. I ask that we write to the Minister for Education and Skills, indicating that we were told today there is a difficulty. Students have had enough trouble throughout the year and we should ask that the Minister engage with SUSI with a view to dealing specifically with them, ensure they get answers as quickly as possible and are dealt with sympathetically.

I understand 543 applications are currently under appeal. That is a high number this late in the year. Most students have finished their examinations. Some students will not win their appeals, as one would expect. I ask for clarification on the current situation. We have evidence that colleges are not giving exam results to students in that category because they have not paid the registration fees. That is a serious position in which to be and I have no doubt if one spoke to colleges they would probably tell one they are concerned that if they gave exam results to students, in particular those who have completed one year or diploma courses, that they will not get the fees owed.

It is an unfortunate that 543 students are in the appeals process awaiting an answer, some of whom will be successful while others will not. We need to convey our views to the Minister and tell him he needs to engage with third level institutions to ensure students get their exam results. As was said by Deputy Dooley, we cannot have a situation where people do not know whether they can go to college next year, cannot make plans for the future or decide whether to travel to the United States as they cannot get their exam results because they have not got answers on grant applications.

Chairman: I have a couple of questions. It is best to leave the issue raised by Deputy McConalogue until next week in order that we can decide on the specifics of our correspondence to the Minister. I would not want to give the wrong impression. If the Minister introduced an order he could not make people retrospectively eligible for grants by way of legislation. I may

be wrong but I do not think he could. It is a matter for the future.

Deputy Jonathan O'Brien: My understanding is that the statutory instrument on independent living was issued in March or May this year. Will it cover the next academic year? Surely it is possible.

Chairman: We need to know exactly what we want to write. I will put it on the agenda for next week. We can give the committee the go-ahead but I would like to know what exactly the committee is writing.

Deputy Jonathan O'Brien: Deputy McConalogue asked whether a statutory instrument on behalf of the Minister would rectify the situation for next year.

Chairman: I understand.

Deputy Charlie McConalogue: I am not sure how this can be dealt with. There are 118 students dealing with estrangement or independent living who have been caught in a position where they have not yet received an answer. SUSI indicated that may have happened because of the terms of the grant scheme. We need to write to the Minister, flag the fact this issue was raised today and ask him to engage with SUSI. I do not know what the answer is but there are 118 people in a highly vulnerable category. We need to ask the Minister to engage with them, determine their status and see what type of resolution may be possible.

Chairman: We can do that. I want to be clear about what we will say because we are in public session. It will almost certainly not mean that people who would not qualify for a grant now will somehow qualify for one because of some future action. The scheme is in place.

Deputy Charlie McConalogue: The Minister will engage-----

Chairman: That is fair enough. Deputy Dooley referred to constituency work. Health and social welfare are the areas which create the largest workload. It is not always the fault of Departments. It is the nature of the job. The tracker system will help Deputies and empower students to check their situation online.

Senator Fidelma Healy Eames: Like the express passports.

Ms Jacinta Stewart: I will take Deputy McConalogue's question. Mr. Conroy will respond on appeals first because we want to take questions on new applications and renewals.

Mr. John Conroy: On the situation regarding appeals, I will begin with the 118 current cases mentioned. They will take us another eight working days to process. In each case we are looking for the final documents which would bring those people across the line. I welcome the initiative the Deputy has taken, that is, writing a letter to the Minister.

There are 540 cases in the appeals process. About 60% are a result of our close out campaign where people still owe us one or two pieces of documentation or information. All were afforded the opportunity to appeal, provided they sent us the outstanding document, with the view that we would be able to award their grants. None of those appeals are any older than two weeks. One has 30 days after we make an award or refusal to appeal. All 540 cases are current and we will work our way through them as quickly as we can over the next two or three weeks. I will make a commitment that we will provide the committee with an update in three weeks' time on how many cases are outstanding.

Chairman: Thank you.

Ms Kay Cullinan: The closing date for renewals was Friday. We do not want to disadvantage any student and will accept applications on an ongoing basis. We have been proactive about this. Any student who was awarded a grant by SUSI last year and had not submitted a renewal after the closing date received text messages from us yesterday morning. We will send them daily to students who have not filled in the renewal forms with a view to encouraging them to go online and fill them in. We will keep accepting applications from students.

Ms Jacinta Stewart: We are currently at 21,000.

Ms Kay Cullinan: Likewise, with regard to the closing date of 1 August our intention is to make decisions as early as possible for students. We will still accept applications after 1 August but we want to get them in early in order that we can make decisions early for students and issue payments.

Ms Jacinta Stewart: We will report those who apply after the closing date as a separate group. We are keen that people send applications to us as quickly as possible.

Senator Marie-Louise O'Donnell: SUSI has come in for an enormous amount of bashing. It is very important that students are equally as responsible for their applications, documentation and answering the parameters. I have 35 years of experience with students. I hate the phrase "Come up to the plate" because it is so illiterate, but it is their responsibility to know about application forms and have all their eligible documentation attached if a decision is to be made. If they do that, they are justified in questioning decisions. Those who pay fees are open to the same rigours of fee payment and are as equally shut out when they do not obey the rules.

Ms Jacinta Stewart: I should end by saying that nobody was refused on the basis of a late application. One student applied at the beginning of May, which I found amazing. The only reason people have been refused is on the grounds of ineligibility or incompleteness.

Deputy Charlie McConalogue: I would like clarity on the 543 appeals cases. Most are fresh appeals and are two or three weeks old. Where do those students stand in terms of exam results? Will they be unable to get them pending an appeal? Is that something the Minister needs to engage on with the HEA in terms of how colleges handle the matter?

Mr. John Conroy: Any applicant who has entered the appeals process has been refused. We are looking to see whether our decision is correct. That is being carried out at arm's length by the City of Cork VEC and we will respond accordingly. We are quite happy to take the discussion to the HEA and the Department with a view to seeing how to produce the list of 500 people. More important, it is our intention to ensure that those 500 are cleared out of our system with final decisions as soon as possible. I will update the committee on that progress as regularly as possible.

Deputy Charlie McConalogue: It is a good and important initiative to make the Department and the HEA aware of the decision and also to inform the colleges of the situation. Whether or not they get the final papers, it is important that their colleges give them their exam results. No student should be in the situation of not knowing his or her exam result because there is a delay on a final decision.

Senator Marie-Louise O'Donnell: If colleges make them eligible to sit their exams they then have a right to know their results.

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Deputy Charlie McConalogue: I agree. It is important to have clarity on this point. I suggest this be noted in the letter to the Minister so that some arrangement can be made to ensure students are not in the dark, so to speak.

Chairman: I thank the representatives of SUSI, headed by Ms Jacinta Stewart and her colleagues. Our meetings with SUSI have shown how a committee can be effective in holding a State body to account. We have raised the issues brought to us by constituents and members of the public and SUSI has put in place actions to prevent those problems from arising again. The committee would appreciate being kept informed of developments.

The joint committee adjourned at 3.20 p.m. until 1 p.m. on Wednesday, 3 July 2013.