

# SUSI (Student Universal Support Ireland)



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**Organisation:** Department of Education and Skills

**Country:** Ireland

**Level of government:** Central government

**Sector:** Education

**Type:** Data, Digital, Methods, Partnerships, Public Service

**Launched in:** 2012

**Overall development time:** 2 year(s)

**Link to the innovation's website**

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# Description

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The Government decided in principle on 26 July 2010 that the awarding of student grants for further and higher education courses should be centralised under a single awarding authority.

Following a selection process Student Universal Support Ireland (SUSI) was established in 2012 as a unit of the City of Dublin Vocational Education Committee (CDVEC) in 2012 to centralise the process for new entrants for the academic year 2012/13. It was agreed that the existing 66 different grant-awarding bodies responsible for student grants would continue to deal with grant renewals for their existing students until they completed their courses.

The move to a single awarding authority was designed to drive efficiencies in the system, combat the potential for fraud, ensure greater consistency in the application of eligibility requirements and deliver a more automated service, providing monthly payments to students directly into their bank accounts.

SUSI offers funding to eligible students in approved full-time third-level education in Ireland and also, in some cases, funding for students studying outside the State. Support is offered to all types of students, from school leavers to mature students returning to education.

The number of Student Grant Applications processed by SUSI in the first three years of operation is as follows:

2012/13: 69 700  
2013/14: 92 300  
2014/15: 103 800

It is estimated that SUSI will process some 108 000 applications in the 2015/16 academic year.

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## Why the innovation was developed

- The innovation was developed in response to a number of challenges. Prior to the introduction of SUSI, the student grant process was administered by 66 local authorities and Vocational Education Committees (VECs). The previous system was administratively inefficient and in need of investment. It also lacked consistency in terms of how eligibility criteria were being applied by different awarding authorities.
  - From 2009/10, when the economic crisis was at its height, the system came under serious pressure with unprecedented increases in the numbers applying for grants coinciding with staffing reductions in the local authorities and VECs as a result of stringent controls on recruiting and deploying public sector staff. This led to delays in processing applications and progressively later payment of grants.
  - This innovation was developed as part of the wider Public Service Reform agenda, in which the emphasis was on efficiencies, development of shared services and External Service Delivery. In 2010, a Government decision was made to centralise the grants administration process. This move was enabled by the Student Support Act 2011, enacted in February 2011, which provided for the consolidation of the 4 grants schemes and the move from 66 to one awarding authority.
  - CDVEC (now known as the City of Dublin Education and Training Board - CDETb) was designated as the single awarding authority following a call for Expressions of Interest to Public Bodies. SUSI was established as a business unit of the CDVEC to deliver the new service, for which Government approval was given in 2012. SUSI comes under the overall existing governance arrangements for CDETb.
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## Objectives

Improve access, Improve effectiveness, Improve efficiency, Improve service quality, Improve user satisfaction, Support economic growth

- The objectives of the move to a single awarding authority and the establishment of SUSI were to:
  - Drive efficiencies in the system.
  - Combat the potential for fraud.
  - Ensure greater consistency in the application of eligibility requirements.
  - Improve customer service (including a fully automated service, and the provision of monthly payments to students directly into their bank accounts).
  - Improve data collection that would in turn inform policy making and assist in targeting those most in need.
  - E-Government and the digital delivery of services.
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## Main beneficiaries

Academia, Families, Government bodies, Government staff, Students

- Main beneficiaries are:
  - Approximately 110 000 further and Higher Education Student Grant applicants and their families
  - Higher Education Institutions, Further Education Institutions and Education and Training Boards (ETBs)
  - Department of Education and Skills
  - Staff in VECs and Local Authorities
  - Other Government Departments
  - Public Representatives
  - Other key stakeholders including Guidance Counsellors, Union of Students Ireland (USI)
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## **Existing similar practices**

### **Students Awards Scotland**

In other countries' public administrations

Students Awards Agency for Scotland

SAAS is an agency of the Scottish Government giving financial support to eligible students undertaking a course of higher education in the UK. They receive over 150 000 applications annually from undergraduate and postgraduate students as well as applications for Disabled Student Allowance, the NHS Bursary Scheme and the Part-time Fee Grant.

<http://www.saas.gov.uk>

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# Results

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## Efficiency

- Increased automation of service delivery from on-line applications through to payments by way of EFT (Electronic Funds Transfer).
  - Timely processing and payment of student grants – SUSI is currently meeting and exceeding key processing and payment metrics set in the Management Framework Agreement (MFA) between CDETB and the Department.
  - Progressively earlier application opening dates.
  - Tracking and payments card modules which allows the applicant to track progress.
  - Consistent and on-time payments to both students and further/higher education institutions assists the Department, CDETB, education institutions and students themselves in budgeting and planning.
  - Grants paid in September for the first time in 2015/16 academic year. Students now receive 4 grant payments before Christmas (previously 3).
  - Cost savings: (i) under the old system, some 177 WTE (Whole Time Equivalent) staff were employed across 66 local authorities and VECs in this area of work. SUSI's current staffing complement is 103 WTE. (ii) it has been estimated that the old system cost some EUR 10.5 million per annum to run. SUSI operating costs are currently approx. EUR 9 million per annum and further reductions are expected in future years, when the new integrated ICT system is operational.
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## Effectiveness

- Consistency in application of eligibility criteria.
  - National database of student grant applicants: one of the benefits that a single awarding authority provides is the availability of more data to analyse the profile of applications.
  - Greater capacity for data-sharing with other Government Departments and agencies.
  - Improved data has potential to better inform policy development.
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## Service quality

### Accessibility:

- MFA sets a target for SUSI to be online and capable of accepting applications and queries from students for 97% of the available time between the opening and the closing of the student grant scheme
- Online eligibility reckoner, online grant application form, application status tracker and payments card
- SUSI website, Facebook and Twitter pages
- Text/SMS campaigns
- Call centre/Helpdesk outsourced with increased cover at peak times
- Dedicated phone line and email address for queries from public representatives

### Responsiveness:

- Performance Targets set in the MFA: 70% of calls to be answered within 30 seconds. The metric out turn for this was 81% for the 2013/14 academic year and 86% for the 2014/15 academic year.
- 90% of email queries to be answered within 5 days: the metric out turn for this was 100% for both the 2013/14 and 2014/15 academic years.

### Reliability:

- MFA target - 20% annual decrease in number of contacts to helpdesk per grant application. Decreases of -27% for 2013/14 academic year and -16% for 2014/15 academic year reported.
  - Maker-checker approach adopted so that at least two different staff members review each grant application.
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## User satisfaction

- Lack of criticism from media and other sources is an indicator of general level of satisfaction.
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## Evaluation

The establishment and operation of SUSI has been examined in the following Reports:

- Centre for Effective Services (CES) – An Implementation Case Study of Student Universal Support Ireland: Lessons for Public Sector Reform.
- Accenture Review (Business Process Improvement).
- Comptroller & Auditor General Report No. 88 – Restructuring the Administration of Student Grants.
- Management Framework Agreement (MFA) – Performance Measurement Metrics – SUSI are required to provide regular Outcome Reports on these metrics.

<https://www.education.ie/en/Publications/Education-Reports/CES-An-Implementation-Case-Study-of-Student-Universal-Support-Ireland-Lessons-for-Public-Sector-Reform.pdf>

# Development

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## Design

The decision to centralise the administration of student grants was made in light of the economic and budgetary conditions prevailing which made it both desirable and necessary, given the then government's overall programme of public service reform and the need to explore more efficient and cost-effective administrative solutions. The idea for the innovation was generated initially by policy makers within the Department of Education and Skills.

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## Testing

- It was agreed that the new service would be delivered on a phased basis. SUSI would only process grant applications from new applicants in the first academic year of operation (2012/13). Existing grant payments would continue to be processed by individual grant awarding authorities.
  - Trialling of key aspects of Student Grant Administrative Reform prior to the establishment of SUSI included:
  - New Online Application Facility – a scalable online application facility was developed and went live in the 2010/11 academic year and was rolled out to a further 24 grant awarding authorities in 2011/12. This system was designed to be completely transferable to the new single grant awarding authority in 2012.
  - Payment by EFT – In 2009 the Department worked closely with a number of local authorities & VEC's piloting the migration of the payment of student grants from cheque to electronic fund directly into a student's bank account. This trialling enabled all payments to new student grant applicants and institutions to be made by the new centralised grant awarding authority by EFT. In 2012, SUSI paid maintenance grants in nine monthly instalments directly into the student's bank account.
  - At an operational level, a small level of testing of the SUSI system was carried out prior to the launch date in June 2012
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## Implementation

### Tools used:

- A Project Implementation Plan Group was established in May 2011 to work with CDVEC in overseeing implementation on the basis of an agreed implementation plan. The group comprised of officials from the Department of Education and Skills, the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform and the CDVEC team.
- Staffing – staffing was secured via redeployment and through insourcing
- External Service Delivery (ESD) model – The CDVEC included the external delivery of document management and the contact centre in its proposal.
- ICT System Development – SUSI built on existing IT systems and integrated with those of the ESD provider.
- An external review of SUSI's business processes was undertaken by Accenture in early 2013 to inform improvements in the system for the 2013/14 academic year.

### Resources used:

- CDVEC initially proposed a staffing complement of 65 WTE (Whole Time Equivalent/s) posts to operate SUSI with the actual numbers in place being variable during the year to reflect the cyclical and seasonal nature of grants processing activity.
  - Following an external review by Accenture in 2013 of SUSI's initial year of operation, the department secured sanction to enhance its leadership and management resources and increase its overall staffing level from 65 to 91 WTE.
  - Following a review of SUSI staffing based on the experience of the first three years of operation which was carried out in 2015, sanction was secured in June 2015 to finalise the staffing profile of SUSI through filling key management and supervisory roles, bringing the overall staffing level from 91 to 100 WTE.
  - In addition sanction was also received for 3 posts for a major SUSI ICT project on a temporary basis. SUSI's current staffing complement is therefore 103 WTE.
  - The cost of administration of SUSI are based on a financial year rather than an academic year. The estimated cost for 2012 (year 1) was EUR 7.1 million. Estimated costs for 2013, 2014 and 2015 (Years 2, 3 and 4) were EUR 10.7 million, EUR 8.9 million and EUR 8.8 million respectively. This encompasses staffing, set-up and operational costs.
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## Diffusion

- Experience shared with other shared services projects that are being initiated, most recently with the Department of Children and Youth Affairs.
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## Challenges and solutions

- Challenges experienced in the initial year of operation included tight “non-negotiable” timelines due to the grants cycle, limited baseline data, funding restrictions, difficulties securing staff from redeployment, issues relating to the suitability of some staff recruited via redeployment, the complexity of integrating IT systems, implementing a new External Service Delivery model, and scaling up processes and procedures.
  - Other difficulties presented due to the level of documentation required from applicants and the technical issues caused by this.
  - Communication challenges included managing expectations of stakeholders, lack of a SUSI website and no online tracker of application status.
  - Another challenge was managing the significant delays in processing which emerged between October and December 2012.
  - An additional significant issue was customer frustration, leading to significant negative stakeholder criticism, including media and political reaction.
  - Although considerable challenges were experienced in the initial year of operation, a comprehensive review and an agreed programme of work between the department and CDETБ enabled the identification of the key process improvement issues to be addressed.
  - Solutions included: an external review of SUSI’s business processes undertaken by Accenture in early 2013; approval secured for extra staffing resources; enhancement to management capacity within SUSI; enhanced engagement, monitoring and reporting by CDETБ to the Department including agreement of an Management Framework Agreement (MFA); and exceptional team effort both between and within the Department of Education and Skills and CDETБ. Increased management resources brought a more effective management structure to resolve operational issues.
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## Partnerships

### 1. Abtran – External Service Delivery provider 2. CDVEC and relevant Government Departments 2.CDVEC and relevant Government Departments

Other Public Sector, Private sector

1. Abtran was selected, following a public procurement competition carried out by CDVEC, to provide document management services and call centre services for the student grants service, providing expertise in areas that the CDVEC did not have. As challenges unfolded, Abtran developed a close relationship with SUSI management, enabling difficulties to be responded to quickly.
  2. There is a very close partnership between the Department of Education and CDETБ, as well as other Government Departments who are relied upon for data sharing. In the second year of the project, a formal management framework, in the form of a Management Framework Agreement (MFA), was concluded between CDETБ and the Department of Education and Skills, which now forms the basis of the system’s operation and ongoing oversight.
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# Lessons Learned

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## Lessons Learned

- Planning and provision of adequate staffing is critical. Also, ready access to relevant specialist expertise is needed, including change management expertise.
  - Significant change projects require consistent effective leadership, including managing adverse media or political criticism at times.
  - Reliable and adequate data is essential. Furthermore, efficiency and economy claims should be expressed in quantitative terms with relevant baseline comparators.
  - The change required needs to be clearly conceptualised. It is vital that the strategic goals and purpose of the innovation are clearly understood by all parties. Effective leadership can play an important role here as does ensuring there are clear lines of accountability and responsibility. It is also important to ensure a strategic overall focus is maintained on the significance of scaling up a project/initiative.
  - Effective relationships must be in place, at all levels of the organisation, trickling down from senior management and also with key stakeholders.
  - Developing realistic timeframes - Insufficient time for planning and implementation cannot be overcome by hard work alone. It is also important to be mindful of contingency planning - any complex change will experience unanticipated problems.
  - A willingness to take measured and appropriate risk is required to deliver reform.
  - Client-focused services need to communicate appropriately to those clients. Furthermore, communication is very important in managing customer expectations and addressing criticisms directly.
  - Benefits of engaging with both new and traditional forms of media.
  - Formal service level agreements should be in place with service providers before service provision commences.
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## Conditions for success

- Appropriate staffing, including change management expertise
- Realistic timelines
- Effective communication
- Effective leadership
- Clear lines of accountability and responsibility
- Robust data
- Formal service level agreements should be in place with service providers before service provision commences