# **Submissions: SUSI Review – Trinity Ability Co\_op  students with disabilities in Trinity College Dublin feedback**

## Introduction:

The Trinity Ability Co\_op  has operated within the college since June 2020. It serves as a collaborative initiative between students, staff and other stakeholders with disabilities in Trinity College Dublin and beyond. The Co\_op’s goal is to provide opportunities for its members to collectively work towards a more radical & meaningful form of inclusion within the wider college community.

**Context:**

The Trinity Co\_op serves as a space for students to come together and discuss ways in which Trinity can become a more inclusive college for students with disabilities. The members work closely with the Trinity Disability Service (DS) in order to ensure that their thoughts, experiences and needs are considered at a decision making level. Trinity has 1800 students with disabilities studying here and the Co\_op aims to gain views and represent our disabled student population.

A key strategy of the Co\_op is to ensure that inclusion dialogue & training is provided for all Trinity staff and students, so as to guarantee that disabled students rights are respected. The leadership team also consistently works to grow the Co\_op’s presence on [social media platforms](http://www.abilitycoop.com/). A key pillar of this has been the efforts to raise awareness of the many difficulties faced by students with disabilities  and how Trinity can begin to mitigate these. This strategy is far reaching and requires us to get involved in national issues such as this SUSI consultation exercise.

## SUSI Grant Structure:

However, many of the obstacles that are encountered by students are not unique to Trinity College. Rather they are systemic issues that affect students with disabilities throughout third level education and which serve as a significant barrier to full inclusion within the sector. While programmes such as DARE have had an extremely positive impact on the number of students with disabilities attending college, the system as a whole still fails to take into account the needs of these students.

A major area of concern for students with disabilities is the allocation of state funding through the SUSI grant scheme for third level students. Although the grant scheme has made education accessible to a large cohort of students who otherwise would not have been able to attend third level, it has proven to be a very blunt instrument of government support. While this may not present an issue for the majority of the student population, it is a major stumbling block for those with a disability.

The complex and multifaceted nature of many disabilities means that the rigid structure of the SUSI grant application and appeals process is totally inadequate for many students with disabilities. Additionally, the financial support for students who require significant support are often insufficient, which in turn places a serious financial burden on the families of these students.

Disabilities are not taken into account when assessing how much students will be awarded under the SUSI grant, even if they have entered college through the DARE scheme. Many students rely on part-time or summer work in order to supplement their SUSI grant, as it is often insufficient to cover costs during the academic year.

However, for students with disabilities, there are significant barriers to both part time and summer employment which leaves them almost entirely dependent on the SUSI grant. This oversight places further strain on students who are attempting to manage their condition as well as a full time course load and all of its demands.

Scholarships have served as one mechanism for reducing the burden on students, but this is only possible for a limited number of each year and does not serve as a viable, long term solution to the current funding gap in any significant manner.

Another shortcoming of the SUSI system is the way in which it handles students who have been forced to repeat a year of their course. These students are not automatically funded for their repeat year, despite the fact that the decision was largely out of their control. Usually, the student in question may have had to take a step back due to the mental strain of college, a prolonged illness or significant surgical procedure.

For students to come through these difficult experiences and then be faced with the possibility of having their grant funding cut off, is totally unnecessary.  A far more streamlined process should be introduced, whereby the submission of documentation from a medical professional should be all that is required for the student to re-enter the grant system.

One student described their experience of the SUSI system:

“As a student with mobility issues, attending college can be a challenging process. Due to the nature of my condition, SUSI is my main source of income during the academic year, so having a more straightforward application process would be a big relief, allowing me to focus on my studies”.

“Over the past few years, I have had a number of surgeries to help with some of my mobility issues. This has had a really disruptive effect on my time in college and I have had to repeat a year of my degree. Having to go through the appeals process with SUSI to get them to cover my repeat year, after dealing with everything else, was the last thing I needed”

In some cases, attending third level education full time is not practical for the students, or they may be forced to split their academic year over two years due to their disability. In both of these cases, SUSI funding is not available for these students, despite the nature of their circumstances. This further restricts the number of students with disabilities within third level institutions.

Additionally, students who encounter difficulties while studying full time, are extremely reluctant to split their year or study part time, due to the fact that they will lose their funding. As a result, students are forced to choose between their physical and mental health or their financial security.

Students affected by this policy include (but are not limited to) those with physical and sensory disabilities. At the current time, the National Access Plan put forward by the Higher Education Authority, contains no specific targets for increasing participation amongst these groups. A change of policy around part-time and split courses would be a significant statement of intent from the HEA in regards to inclusion for these groups.

One student said that:

“ Over the course of my degree, there have been several points where I have been overwhelmed by the workload. If I had been able to study my course part-time rather than full time I would have been able to manage my mental and physical health much better. However, that would have meant losing my SUSI funding, which I really depended on”

Another cohort of students who are not adequately covered by the current SUSI grant system are those who have acquired a disability after graduation and who have now been forced to re-skill. At present, these students are precluded from any support from SUSI due to the fact that they have previously graduated. This presents a significant barrier for these students at a crucial juncture in their lives, where they are attempting to adapt to life with a disability. Without meaningful assistance from the SUSI system to reskill, these students are dependent on the Disability Allowance and as a result severely limited in  their options going forward.

Lastly, the provision of funding for extra accommodation costs incurred by students with disabilities needs to be addressed. Due to having significant disabilities some students have to live on campus and have no choice due to disability. The cost of living on campus is significant and this cost is prohibitive. In addition some students require a Personal Assistants (PAs) to live with them on campus and this cost is significant. In these circumstances, students are required to rent two rooms on campus, effectively doubling the cost of attending college. This can come to a total of fifty thousand euro over the duration of a standard four year degree course. Such an enormously large amount of money, severely limits the possibility of attending college to only a handful of students from very wealthy backgrounds.

Only a small number of students are affected by these circumstances and yet SUSI provides no mechanism to deal with cases such as these. Provisions should be put in place to handle exceptional situations like this, in order to provide the necessary funding for these students and their families. The students most affected by this are those who suffer from physical disabilities and for whom the National Access Plan has set specific targets for in terms of participation.

Currently, the Fund for Students with Disabilities provides funding for PAs  for college hours only, while the HSE provides PA assistance outside of college hours. However neither of these provide funding for the most glaring issue which is accommodation. Without a change in the funding structure for these students, it will be extremely difficult for the HEA to achieve its targets for participation amongst these groups going forward.

## SUSI Application process:

Whilst the funding structure of the SUSI grant scheme is one area of concern for the Co-op members, another is the application process itself. Many members have encountered difficulties with the process throughout their time in college. These have ranged from the design of the website itself to the documentation that must be completed in order to receive funding. The system is often confusing, particularly for students with intellectual disabilities, who often require assistance to navigate their way through each step. We have been informed

that there are members of staff within the SUSI offices who are assigned to deal with disability related issues and queries.

Yet, their contact details are not displayed on the SUSI website, which makes it impossible for students to receive advice and support in a timely manner. Given that time is a critical factor in the SUSI grant application process, it would appear to make more sense if students had a way of contacting these support staff directly, rather than having to wait for their application to be flagged internally within SUSI. Is the named staff in SUSI expert in disability issues and understand the complexities of disability and how it impacts us in education?

Another way in which the application process could be improved is through the development of tools to help guide students through the various sections of the website. The concept of “signposting” is one that has become more widespread in recent years as a means of making websites and applications more accessible. Originally intended as a writing technique for university students, signposting involves a number of steps:

* Using key phrases and words to guide a student through the website in a manner that is easy to follow
* Highlight the various steps involved in the process
* Explaining the links between the various different parts of the website
* Clearly labelling the supports and assistance that students can avail of if needed
* Helping students to move from one section of the website to another within getting lost
* Explain the various aspects of the SUSI funding in an intuitive way

One student described their experiences with SUSI:

“The SUSI application process is extremely stressful at times, especially when providing supporting documentation. It is difficult to keep track of everything. For someone with autism, this can all be very overwhelming. The website and the whole platform is difficult to navigate”

“Having some signposting in place for the application process would make everything a lot easier. If there was someone in the SUSI offices who was there to help students with disabilities work through the application I think it would be a big help”

Another student mentioned how:

“ The whole application process itself is quite difficult to work through on your own and it took me a very long time to work through it all. I don’t think that the website it very user friendly for those of us with disabilities, who are in the most need of support”,

## Concluding remarks:

‘Nothing about us, without us’ is a useful starting point and asking us what works and doesn't work is fundamental to any good, fair, transparent system that is supposed to support our education. Accept that not all students are the same and that those who are from different backgrounds such as us as disabled students should be supported to assist us not hinder us.

While the rate for disabled entrants into third level education has exceeded the original government target of 8%, these numbers do not tell the full story. Simply focusing on the number of students with disabilities entering into college fails to fully acknowledge the challenges faced by those very same students. The fact remains that SUSI fails to fully support these students in a number of ways. It is widely acknowledged that Dublin is an extremely expensive city to live in, with many students struggling to get by. This situation is even more stark for students with disabilities, for all of the reasons already mentioned.

Without improvements in the SUSI grant system at both a structural and financial level, the reality for students with disabilities is unlikely to change in any meaningful way. The rigid categorisation methods use by SUSI often end up punishing disabled students for circumstances out of their control. The grants received by students with disabilities, who are often unable to work part-time, are insufficient to support someone in full time education. At the very least, funding should be in-line with the cost of living within Ireland, so as to ensure that these students receive the necessary financial support in order to focus on their studies.

If the Irish government is serious about promoting inclusion within third level education, then the focus must move beyond merely the number of students entering the sector each year. Without a change in approach, students with disabilities will continue to encounter significant barriers to their progression through university. Ultimately, it is financial support which will be central to the development and inclusion of students with disabilities within the Irish university system.

* Government targets for participation
* Reality for students
* National Access Plan
* Need to increase support for students, cost of living

We are available over the summer months as we continue to work in the Co\_op developing ideas and changes for Trinity to be more inclusive.

Regards,

Rachel Murphy.

**On behalf of the Trinity Ability Co\_op.**