CENTRE FOR EFFECTIVE SERVICES

An Implementation Case Study of Student Universal Support Ireland

Lessons for Public Sector Reform

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CES Report

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Contents

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Abbreviations

CAO: Central Applications Office

CDETB: City of Dublin Education and Training Board

CDVEC: City of Dublin Vocational Education Committee

CEO: Chief Executive Officer

DES: Department of Education and Skills

DPER: Department of Public Expenditure and Reform

DSP: Department of Social Protection

EFT: Electronic Fund Transfer

EOI: Expression of Interest

IVEA: Irish Vocational Education Association

MFA: Management Framework Agreement

PAS: Public Appointments Service

PO: Principal Officer

PQ: Parliamentary Question

Revenue: The Office of the Revenue Commissioners

SI: Statutory Instrument

Student: Refers to students applying for a grant

SUSI: Student Universal Support Ireland

TD: Teachtaí Dála (A member of Dáil Éireann)

USI: Union of Students in Ireland

WTE: Whole Time Equivalent

VEC: Vocational Education Committee

1.   Introduction

Educational inequality contributes to income inequality and poverty. Recognising that access to education is a key driver of equality, support for access to third level education in the form of student grants is a central instrument of government policy. Student grants are one way of combating inequality and promoting inclusion and thus have social and economic dimensions as well as personal, educational and cultural goals. Student Universal Support Ireland (SUSI) is a significant mechanism of support for equity of access to higher education. The establishment of SUSI involved several features often associated with significant public sector innovation and reform, including:

- The development of a major shared service
- New systems and new management and governance structures
- Outsourcing
- Local and national political attention and interest
- Local and national media interest
- A large and active group of service-users, with an effective representative body
- E-government - the delivery of public services using ICT
- Public infrastructure - increasing scrutiny of the capability and cost of service infrastructure.

After enactment of the enabling legislation (2010-2011), SUSI went from an excellent plan on paper, to a successful and simple online applications process, to a deterioration in effective processing of applications leading to delays in students receiving their grants and a rapid recovery - all this in some two years. The debate surrounding SUSI in the Dáil, Oireachtas Committee discussions and the wider political and media spheres highlighted delays and produced significant challenges.

1.1   Purpose of case study

The aim of this case study is to formally document the learning from the implementation of SUSI and wider lessons for public service reform in a systematic way, using an implementation science framework. Through a review of relevant documentation and literature and engagement with key stakeholders in the initiative, this case study also identifies the significant factors which contributed to the later success of operations.

The study complements the technical analysis of SUSI which was completed by Accenture (2013). The commissioning of this case study by the Department of Education and Skills is enacting a commitment to learn from challenges as well as successes. This record also contributes to the resources available to those conceptualising, planning and implementing change in public services. This is not an evaluation of SUSI.

1.2   Approach and Methodology

The methodology employed in developing this case study involved:
- Review of relevant documentation of the development and implementation of SUSI in the period 2008-2014
- Interviews with key stakeholders in DES and CDVEC/CDETB[1], and other stakeholders, with an emphasis on eliciting and reflecting different perspectives and experiences

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[1] In July 2013 the 16 Education and Training Boards (ETBs) replaced the existing 33 VECs as part of a major reform of education and training. CDVEC became CDETB at this time. This report refers to CDVEC up to July 2013 and to CDETB thereafter.

- Review of relevant literature - particularly relating to implementation, change and crisis management and public service innovation and reform
- An analysis of media and political coverage of SUSI
- Organisation and presentation of the findings according to an implementation science[2] framework.

1.3   Structure of this report

This report is structured as follows:

Section 1: Introduction

Section 2: Overview of SUSI

Section 3: Implementation Framework – The SUSI Story

Section 4: Lessons Learned for Public Sector Reform

Section 5: Summary and Conclusions

Bibliography

Appendix A: Accenture (2013) Recommendations

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[2] Implementation Science is a rapidly developing field of knowledge on how to successfully implement new services, policies and other interventions. It spans many sectors including the health and social sciences, education, agriculture and IT.

2.   Overview of Student Universal Support Ireland

Prior to the introduction of Student Universal Support Ireland (SUSI) in June 2012, the need for reform of the student grants process had long been recognised. At this time there was widespread agreement among stakeholders that the student grant administration system could be streamlined and delivered more effectively and efficiently than the current system which:
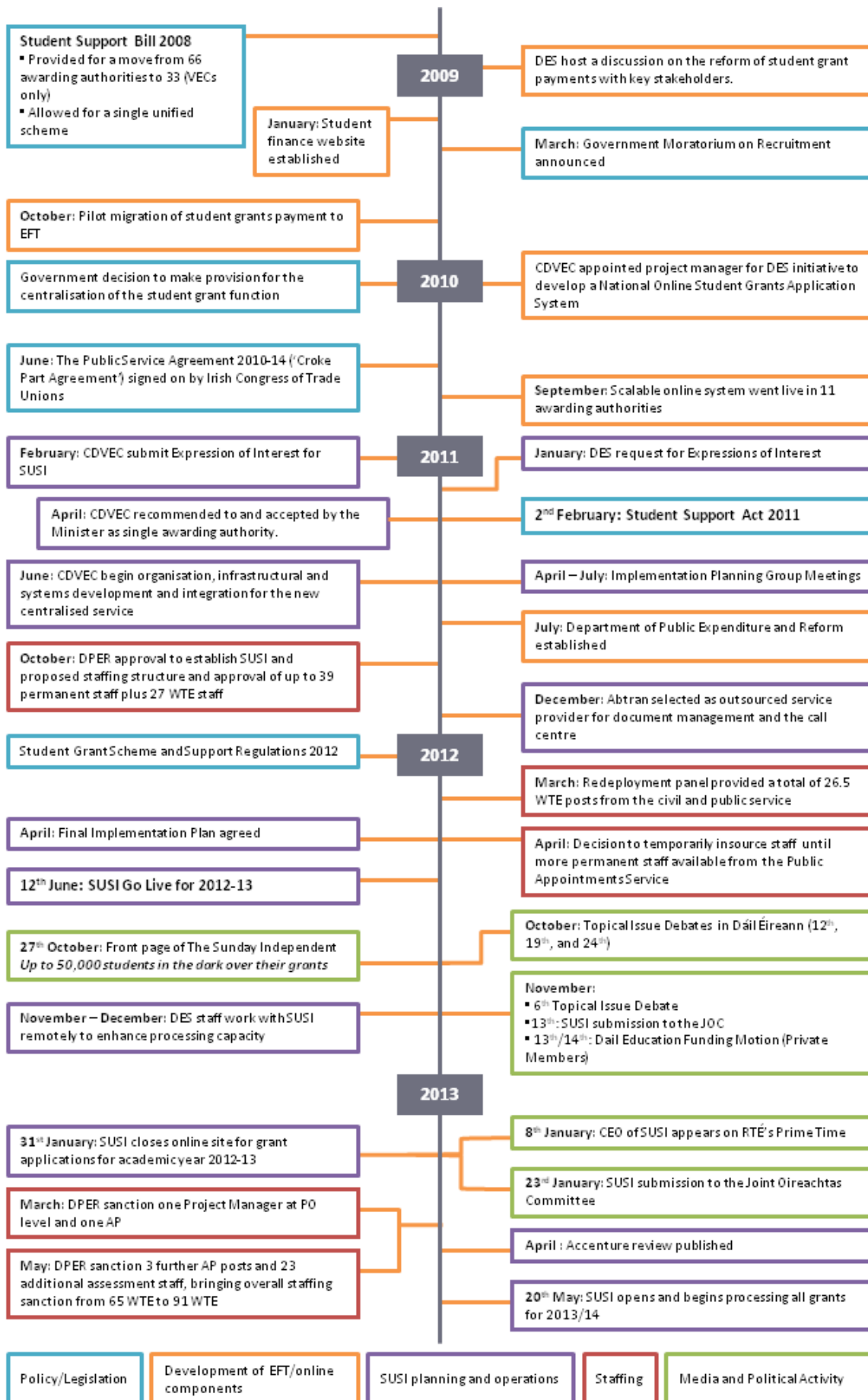
Required four separate grant support schemes:

- Higher Education Grants Scheme
- Vocational Education Committees' Scholarship Scheme
- Third Level Maintenance Grants Scheme for Trainees
- Maintenance Grants Scheme for Students Attending Post-Leaving Certificate Courses

- Was delivered by 66 awarding authorities (33 local authorities and 33 VECs) and 81 different payment authorities
- Was administratively inefficient as it used both paper-based and a variety of different IT systems
- Produced no comparable data to provide the Government with national student grant statistics
- Was open to abuse as there was no central database of applications
- Lacked consistency of application
- Resulted in customer confusion and late payments of grants to eligible applicants

The Student Support Bill was published in 2008. The Bill outlined a move from 66 grant awarding authorities to the 33 Vocational Education Committees (VECs). In the context of an unprecedented escalation in numbers of grant applications arising from the economic crisis and following a Business Process Re-engineering mapping exercise of the current administrative processes of the student grants system it was identified that this decision would need to be revisited. The Government announced the decision to centralise the grants administration process in July 2010. Subsequently the Student Support Act 2011 was enacted in February 2011 which was the enabling legislation for the rapid implementation of reform and centralisation of student grants administration. This new system would consolidate the four existing schemes to a single scheme, move from 66 awarding authorities to one, provide the single authority with the power to enquire into fraud, and provide a new independent appeals board.

The DES issued a call for Expressions of Interest for the single awarding authority in January 2011. The City of Dublin Vocational Education Committee (CDVEC) was one of 10 bodies that submitted proposals and was selected as the single awarding authority in April 2011. The detailed Expression of Interest set out the basis of a 5 year agreement with DES to develop a fully-automated, web-based, integrated grant application process by 2016. To ameliorate risk, grants would be delivered on an incremental basis, accepting first time applicants in SUSI's first year of operation (2012/13), whilst existing grant-holders continued to be managed out by their current awarding bodies.

The timeline below highlights the key milestones in the development and implementation of SUSI, from the preliminary steps taken by DES with legislation and consultation, to the appointment of CDVEC and operationalisation of the services and accompanying milestones.

2009

Student Support Bill 2008
- Provided for a move from 66 awarding authorities to 33 (VECs only)
- Allowed for a single unified scheme

DES host a discussion on the reform of student grant payments with key stakeholders.

January: Student finance website established

March: Government Moratorium on Recruitment announced

October: Pilot migration of student grants payment to EFT

2010

Government decision to make provision for the centralisation of the student grant function

CDVEC appointed project manager for DES initiative to develop a National Online Student Grants Application System

June: The Public Service Agreement 2010-14 ('Croke Part Agreement') signed on by Irish Congress of Trade Unions

September: Scalable online system went live in 11 awarding authorities

2011

February: CDVEC submit Expression of Interest for SUSI

January: DES request for Expressions of Interest

April: CDVEC recommended to and accepted by the Minister as single awarding authority.

2nd February: Student Support Act 2011

June: CDVEC begin organisation, infrastructural and systems development and integration for the new centralised service

April – July: Implementation Planning Group Meetings

July: Department of Public Expenditure and Reform established

October: DPER approval to establish SUSI and proposed staffing structure and approval of up to 39 permanent staff plus 27 WTE staff

December: Abtran selected as outsourced service provider for document management and the call centre

2012

Student Grant Scheme and Support Regulations 2012

March: Redeployment panel provided a total of 26.5 WTE posts from the civil and public service

April: Final Implementation Plan agreed

April: Decision to temporarily insource staff until more permanent staff available from the Public Appointments Service

12th June: SUSI Go Live for 2012-13

27th October: Front page of The Sunday Independent *Up to 50,000 students in the dark over their grants*

October: Topical Issue Debates in Dáil Éireann (12th, 19th, and 24th)

November – December: DES staff work with SUSI remotely to enhance processing capacity

November:
- 6th Topical Issue Debate
- 13th: SUSI submission to the JOC
- 13th/14th: Dail Education Funding Motion (Private Members)

2013

31st January: SUSI closes online site for grant applications for academic year 2012-13

8th January: CEO of SUSI appears on RTÉ's Prime Time

March: DPER sanction one Project Manager at PO level and one AP

23rd January: SUSI submission to the Joint Oireachtas Committee

April : Accenture review published

May: DPER sanction 3 further AP posts and 23 additional assessment staff, bringing overall staffing sanction from 65 WTE to 91 WTE

20th May: SUSI opens and begins processing all grants for 2013/14

Key:
Policy/Legislation | Development of EFT/online components | SUSI planning and operations | Staffing | Media and Political Activity

3.   SUSI Implementation Framework

This section of the report will outline key milestones in the implementation of SUSI, with reference to the activities that occurred in each implementation stage, the relevant enablers and how they manifested, or in some instances did not, in the story of SUSI. It will analyse the implementation of a centralised student grants administration service from an idea, to planning and actual service delivery.

Implementation is essentially the plan for doing something. It focuses on operationalising the plan, the *How*, rather than the *What* (Burke, Morris and McGarrigle, 2012). Implementation spans many sectors, and applies to any innovation, programme or policy. This is an emerging science supported by a burgeoning body of research which has defined the key components and processes involved in effective and successful implementation. In particular, the research indicates that the process of implementation is characterised by four distinct stages of development and particular activities required for successful implementation, also referred to as enablers. The four stages of implementation are listed below:

- Exploring and Preparing – Stage 1
- Planning and Resourcing – Stage 2
- Implementing and Operationalising – Stage 3
- Business as Usual – Stage 4

While there is not an overall consensus in the implementation literature on the exact enablers, the enablers presented below consistently emerge. Some of these enablers are most relevant or required at different stages in the implementation process, and the integration of these enablers can be a powerful facilitator of implementation. The key implementation stages and the required enablers are presented in Figure 1 below.
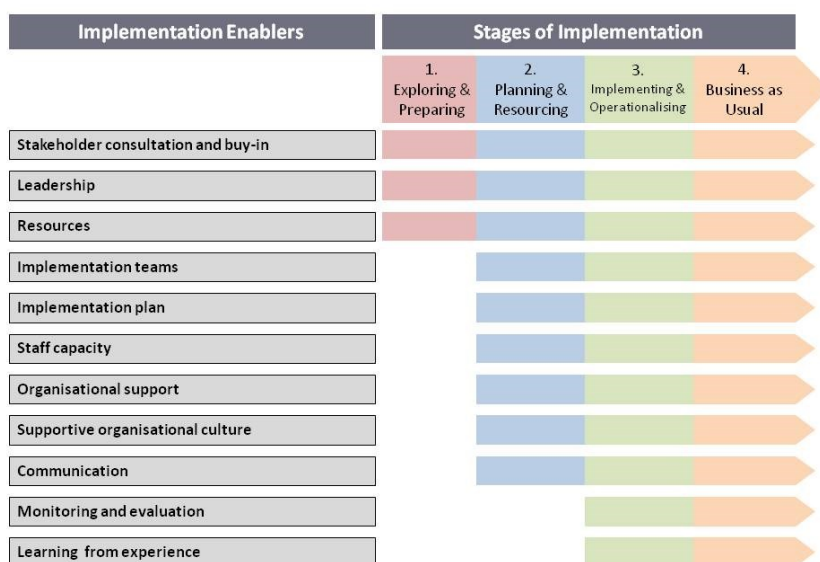

Figure 1. Implementation Enablers and Stages (Burke, McGarrigle and Morris, 2012)

The following table locates the development and delivery of SUSI in the context of these implementation stages and enablers. It highlights some enablers which were present, and some which were not present or which presented a significant challenge at that stage of implementation.

Implementation Stages		Enablers
Stage 1 – Exploring & Preparing: 2005 to beginning 2011	**+**	• Initial **stakeholder consultation** with the USI, existing student grant awarding authorities other government departments and agencies and also the education sector through a joint DES/IVEA Steering Group and joint technical working groups. • Clear **leadership** from DES
Deciding what policy or innovation to implement	**–**	• Lack of buy-in from Local Authorities and other VECs due to staffing implications of the removal of their grants function, and also from public representatives due to the shift to a Dublin based, less personal service. • Reduced resources available as a result of the economic crisis with *Transforming Public Services* (2008) setting out the need for more efficient use of resources in the public sector and a moratorium on public sector recruitment introduced in 2009. • Insufficient baseline data to inform resource requirements for the move to a centralised service. • Time pressures reduced the scope of **consultations** with students.
Stage 2 – Planning & Resourcing: 2011 to May 2012	**+**	• **Implementation plan** and **Implementation group** established with representatives from DES, DPER and Department of Finance. • **Leadership** provided by both DES and CDVEC, with strong **communication** between both parties.
Responsibilities are assigned and preparatory activities begin	**–**	• Difficulties in securing adequate and timely **staffing** due to the recruitment moratorium and the *Employment Control Framework* whereby redeployment superseded other forms of direct recruitment. • Work being conducted in very short timeframe (January 2011 – June 2012) with essentially no pre-existing **resources;** the proposed model needed to be developed, and staff and premises secured.
Stage 3 – Implementing & Operationalising: June 2012 to April 2013 **The first time the policy or innovation is put into effect**	**+**	• Concerted efforts by SUSI to **engage with stakeholders and encourage buy-in**, including setting up a SUSI Facebook page, online application tutorial, and holding briefings for Career Guidance Counsellors, Citizens and Youth Information Services, Access Officers, USI Welfare Officers, the Non-national/Immigrant Support Network and other Advocacy organisations. • High levels of **organisational support** for SUSI from DES, the CDVEC and a small number of VECs from around the country who provided staff for SUSI to help in processing applications. • **Monitoring and evaluation** measures introduced including the technical review of SUSI businesses and processes[3], and the development of clear KPIs to monitor and evaluate progress.
	–	• A number of issues concerning **communications;** the official closing date could not be strictly enforced or communicated as the grant scheme remains open all year even after the official

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[3] See Appendix A

Implementation Stages		Enablers
		closing date. There was also no separate official website in the first year. The estimated process time for applications was also not communicated to applicants. • Continuing issues with **staffing resources** available, with competing simultaneous demands on the redeployment panel from the Revenue Commissioners and the Department of Social Protection. • In terms of **staff capacity,** it was difficult to obtain temporary staff with the requisite skill sets. Considerable training for staff was also required in the IT systems and the grant scheme itself (a 46 page document). • Significant negative **stakeholder,** media and political scrutiny of SUSI due to delays in processing applications and making payments to students.

Stage 4 – Business as Usual: **May 2013 to Present**
 	
The policy or innovation is mainstreamed or fully operational
	+	• A number of changes were made in the 2013/2014 academic year when SUSI was mainstreamed as the grant awarding authority to all applicants including:
		   o Increased **management resources** sanctioned (4 new posts)
		   o Increased **staff capacity** (23 additional assessment staff)
		   o Improvements made to **communications** including an Oireachtas helpdesk, increased social media presence, and a dedicated website.
		   o Improvements to the **online application**, including an earlier opening date, eligibility calculator and an application tracker.
		   o Development of **data sharing protocols** with relevant government departments and agencies[4], which has significantly reduced the amount of documentation applicants are required to submit.
		   o Currently in the process of developing an end-to-end IT system.

There has been valuable learning from experience from the earlier stages of implementation to inform 'business as usual' in SUSI. As stated above, SUSI is currently in the process of developing an integrated end-to-end IT system. The literature indicates that progressing successfully through all stages of implementation, as outlined in the table above, can take 2-4 years. The process of implementation itself is not linear and earlier implementation stages may need to be revisited to address challenges or increase capacity. Any organisation embarking on organisational innovation or change, no matter how big or small, will require a stage-based implementation process. Implementation is dynamic, and at any one time in a system there can be numerous innovations at different implementation stages. The value of an implementation framework, which highlights critical ingredients for successful implementation, can help make the act of 'doing', putting change into effect successfully, a more systematic, clear process which enhances the realisation of desired outcomes.

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[4] Revenue Commissioners, General Registration Office, Department of Social Protection, Department of Education and Skills and the Central Applications Office.

4. Lessons learned

The authors of this case study had access to rich material from a number of sources. The documentation of the planning and implementation process captured important details and allowed scrutiny of the process. Commissioned reports, especially the Accenture report, are an important source of information about learning at a particular point and with a particular focus. The face to face interviews with those directly involved in the planning, management and delivery of this significant reform, as well as those affected by the change, helped to bring to life the reality of this innovative, complex and difficult change.

All of this material gives rise to important and diverse insights and learning. Any one source of evidence or focus of attention could generate useful and detailed information, learning and guidance. Since the brief was not only to develop an overview and document the implementation of SUSI but to distil core messages relevant to future significant change, the authors have identified several key themes arising from the evidence, derived from analysis of SUSI documentation and face to face interviews and reflecting, but not exhausting, the important messages arising from the experience of SUSI.

4.1 Conceptualising the change

A critical dimension of effective implementation is a clarity about purpose and outcomes that is shared by key stakeholders. Although there was recognition that SUSI had the potential to transform the grant-awarding process, to improve effectiveness and increase efficiency, it seems that there were different kinds of goals and some confusion between these.

At the outset, there was recognition and widespread, although not universal, agreement that the existing system was costly, administratively inefficient, would have to deal with an increasing number of applications and in many areas resulted in delays in students receiving their grants: there was a drive to introduce the new system as soon as possible. The proposal developed by CDVEC, agreed with DES and sanctioned by DPER was made in the full knowledge of these constraints. In hindsight, the proposal was under resourced, partly in recognition that no additional public money was available due to the economic circumstances in the country at the time.

Although the purpose of SUSI was not articulated as the development and implementation of a large software project; time, energy, expertise and resources became focused on IT very early in the development process and absorbed a significant amount of management and planning attention. For instance, the Central Applications Office (CAO) had experienced cyber-attacks one year prior to the launch of SUSI, which led to an appropriate concern about the safety and security of the information to be collected by SUSI, which would be significantly more sensitive, involving personal and financial data including bank details. If this data were compromised, it was likely that confidence in the system would never be regained. Attention to this concern led to a preoccupation with a range of IT-related focuses and less attention to other dimensions which would later prove to create a different set of risks for the project. The pressure of time and resources and an over-reliance on experience of the existing system meant that there was little examination of the needs and behaviours of the applicants, the system users. In the design stages of the new single awarding authority, SUSI engaged with students, institutions and other stakeholders in relation to their expectations for the single authority and endeavoured to design the systems and processes accordingly. However the short time frame from design to implementation meant incorporation of all stakeholder expectations into the first phase of operations was not possible. It was ultimately the mismatch between the expectations and the delivery, not the technology, which overwhelmed SUSI.

SUSI began active development and implementation in a very specific context, characterised by external pressure to deliver reform quickly and successfully, with severe financial, time and staffing constraints and in an atmosphere and media environment which was critical of public services generally. The short timeframe to implementation arose from a combination of factors: the increasing difficulties and imminent collapse of the existing systems; the recognition of the public value of an integrated, national system and the opportunity for reform provided, even required, by the economic crisis. Although the short timeframe arose directly from these circumstances, there were identifiable risks created by the overriding pressure of time: limited stakeholder consultation and buy-in resulted in little support from applicants when difficulties arose; despite early acceptance that the resources being allocated to the work were limited, there was not an accurate assessment of the capacities, including time, personnel and finance, which were realistically required to deliver the ambitious goals of SUSI.

All the factors which give rise to optimism bias were in operation in SUSI:
- there was a strong positive attachment to the 'end state' – the goals of the reform
- arising from the positive, public service organisational culture and habitual behaviours, the cognitive mechanisms at work in the planning and decision making process tended to emphasise the problems with the current system and the benefits of success, rather than the possible risks and potential new problems which might be created
- the planning and development process was based on good information about some of those undertaking the work and poor information about those who would be recruited and those who would use the system
- the overall 'mood' was characterised by a determination and 'can-do' attitude and ignored important factors that were not in the control of the project teams

While optimism is an important resource and undoubtedly needed for any successful change, the failure to consider departures from the plan at every stage of the project, combined with a significant time pressure, increased the risks of serious difficulties.

As an IT system, SUSI was a success. Given the widespread evidence of partial and complete failures of large-scale, lengthy and costly IT projects (Arino & de la Torre, 1998; Cooke-Davies, 2002; Finkelstein, 1993; McDonagh, 2006), SUSI was a remarkable achievement. But SUSI was not just an IT system: the changes planned were a transformation, not just a growth or improved technology. A review of the change in how a student applies for a grant reveals a complete transformation of the process from 2011 to 2012 and especially 2013. The SUSI proposal, planning and system design estimated user demand and behaviour by scaling up from the 5,000 students who applied for grants to the CDVEC. While the SUSI implementation team redesigned the process end-to-end to incorporate a new applications process, the submission stage in terms of volume of documentation required from the applicant, was very much the same. This element of the design assumed that the estimated 60,000 applicants would behave in more or less the same ways as the 5,000. There was no other source of baseline data on which to base estimates of demand or behaviour. In this context, what was required was not a bigger version of a system that worked for 5,000 applicants but a transformation of the entire framework, including how the applicant engaged with the system, how the system responded, how the response was understood by the applicant and how a wide range of different stakeholders experienced and responded to the change. The risk created by absence of relevant information and relevant experience of change of this complexity was difficult to appreciate.

The design and planning process was based on inadequate and limited information available to SUSI. The IT design dominated, partly because of the ongoing pressure to achieve the IT targets and partly because what was required for the IT system to work was clearly specified. In contrast, estimates of how long it would take to process applications were based on inaccurate assumptions about applicant behaviour, derived from the limited baseline data available at the time. The dominant focus on the IT systems and the assumptions made about user behaviour meant that there was a tendency to blame the applicants for not using the system as the designers intended. Although it is certainly frustrating when users do not behave as expected, it is a fundamental tenet of good system design that any such failure is related to the design, not the user. Notwithstanding intense pressures to 'deliver', the usability of the system and its capacity to deliver the anticipated benefits should be tested throughout the development process.

An attempt to accelerate implementation by rushing early stages creates significant risks. All the stages in implementation are required for a successful process: if a stage is rushed or skipped, it will almost certainly have to be revisited with more difficulty or cost, at a later stage.

A key part of the implementation stage of Exploring and Preparing is ensuring that the purpose and process of the project is clearly understood and understood in the same ways by all the key stakeholders. There is a risk that the technical aspects of a project dominate the thinking and planning and that other aspects of design and resourcing are neglected.

The organisational culture and behaviour gave rise to strong optimism bias which both enabled and threatened the implementation process.

4.2   The role and influence of information

Resources are a key enabler of successful implementation. In SUSI, the important resources included time, management, other personnel and information.

The annual crisis that characterised the grants system before SUSI reflected an ongoing and increasing problem for government. The information systems that had evolved across the 66 awarding authorities varied: there was missing data; the data were of poor or uncertain reliability and quality and the data could not be compared across providers. The Accenture report acknowledged that there were no metrics available to inform a Service Level Agreement (SLA) or to develop Key Performance Indicators (KPIs). The VECs and Local Authorities were unable to provide accurate information about applications: the return of gross figures (applications; awards; pending; refused) provided to the DES in January each year only provided a point-in-time 'snapshot'. Essentially, grant applications were processed by local authorities and VECs across 66 individual systems, many of which could not communicate with each other and some of which were still paper-based or manual. Indeed, this deficiency in reliable data and information was part of the rationale for establishing a single, centralised system.

Reliable baseline information is an essential resource for implementation. As SUSI was rolled out, it emerged that the estimates had not accurately predicted the numbers or behaviour of applicants. The consequence of moving forward to implementing and operationalising without the key data and information

resources and without adequate contingency planning that acknowledged the missing information had significant consequences later in the work.

 In the first months after go-live, the focus was on responding to applications received. SUSI did not set targets but monitored processing on a daily basis at this stage: the focus was on activity. As delays in the process impacted on through-put, the effort was on increasing resources to improve the speed of processing. As the crisis hit, from September 2012 onwards, there was an increased focus on setting targets. In combination with the other efforts mobilised in response to the crisis, this helped to focus and drive activity.

Information is a key resource and enabler at all implementation stages.

Effective decision-making and planning can only be undertaken with reliable and adequate data.

Where data has not been collected, or is of limited or inconsistent quality, it is important to acknowledge these gaps in the design of the change and to ensure particular attention to those dimensions which are not based on strong data.

Data and information are as important as resources of time and personnel and the impact of deficits in data has an impact throughout planning, development and delivery.

4.3   Organisational capacities and resources required

It is important to have an ongoing process of anticipating the relevant resources and monitoring implementation needs to ensure that the resources are appropriate to the emerging needs. In line with the literature on successful implementation and organisational change, the experience of SUSI demonstrates that attempting large-scale reform with inadequate resources is a high-risk approach.

In SUSI, a range of capacities and resources were required to undertake this extensive reform. Some capacities were identified in the planning stage; others were not recognised until the crisis developed. Critical dimensions for the implementation of SUSI included management capacity; specialist expertise; time, staff and crisis management expertise.

4.3.1   Management capacity

As an implementation enabler, resources must be adequate in range, depth and number. In SUSI, the ambition of the project was not adjusted to the resources available. Rather, there was an optimism that some kinds of resources – hard work, experience, commitment and solidarity – would compensate for missing resources: sufficient baseline data; sufficient numbers of staff at the appropriate level; enough time.

Influenced, as other aspects of the proposal, by the recognition of the acute national financial constraints, the management structure proposed for SUSI was minimal. A small number of managers had too much responsibility for too many areas. The initial management capacity was quickly overstretched. Part of the response to the crisis was to recognise this management deficit. There was an immediate up-scaling of management capacity, to deal with the crisis and a subsequent planning for a more appropriate management structure. SUSI now has a Principal Officer (PO) and four Assistant Principal Officers (APs). The absolute government priority on cost-cutting at that point meant that authority and discretion in relation to allocating resources was limited at the project level. Limited resources in both DES and SUSI, with an inevitable optimism bias frequently associated with large-scale change, worked against the early detection

and monitoring of mounting difficulties. A concern about autonomy and independence of SUSI, alongside an ambition and confidence in relation to delivery, prevented early awareness of and sharing of emerging concerns.

Ample resources of some kinds cannot compensate for inadequate resources required for successful implementation. Inadequate resourcing creates risks for the overall enterprise.

Every new project which operates nationally needs an adequate management structure with adequate expertise, and clearly specified areas of responsibility and accountability.

Management should be given the authority to make decisions and to allocate resources, as well as the responsibility to deliver specified outcomes.

A management resource which is external to the management of the project can provide crucial external perspective in support of internal management. This resource can be invoked in response to a crisis but is probably best used at intervals throughout development work, providing attention to the 'whole' rather than specific details.

4.3.2   System and specialist expertise

Relevant expertise and experience is not only a key implementation enabler in its own right, it also shapes other enablers, including stakeholder buy in, staff capacity and implementation planning. Access to relevant expertise at the right time is thus a critical dimension of implementation.

SUSI was a flagship project for public sector reform, with significant implications for future change. It was regarded by those involved as unique and without precedent. Although some of the key actors had relevant academic expertise and direct experience of internal system reform, the shared view of the project as unique meant that there was a reliance on this, rather than accessing relevant expertise or experience of large-scale national reform. The grants and student loan systems in Scotland and the UK, respectively, were examined, but no-one on the implementation team had direct experience of such wide-ranging reform. This was a critical missing resource.

Expertise in relation to project management, although available in the wider system, was not explicitly mobilised in support of SUSI until the crisis had developed. Specific additional external expertise in relation to IT project design and delivery was not made available until after the worst of the crisis had passed. Additional personnel from DES in Tullamore were made available to SUSI at the height of the crisis. In all cases, it is more difficult to access and use additional help, in the form of personnel, internal expertise or outside resources, in a crisis. In crisis periods, additional resources can be experienced as an additional pressure to cope with and manage, rather than a supportive and helpful intervention.

CDVEC commissioned Accenture to undertake a review of SUSI in February 2013. The Accenture report highlighted the need for metrics, supported the case for adequate resources and laid the foundation for a strong Management Framework Agreement. It recognised the many strengths of SUSI and identified specific developments required to safeguard and enhance the service. Although it is seen by DES and CDVEC as providing an authoritative, independent, outside view, the view of key CDVEC staff of the report is that SUSI was undertaking many of the recommended actions by the time the review was published.

Although significant outlay on consultancy services in a public service context often attracts negative public comment, if this specialist expertise had been available as part of the project establishment and planning process, it would have helped to avoid some of the difficulties experienced.

> Additional relevant expert help should be anticipated, scheduled and planned, used early enough to shape and prevent difficulties arising, rather than in reaction or response to problems or crisis.
>
> It is more difficult to access and make best use of all kinds of resources in a crisis.

4.3.3   Timelines

The timeline that SUSI had to go live for the 2012/13 academic year was dictated by the immediate need to replace the old system. Given that everything about SUSI had to be developed and implemented from scratch, the time allowed was not adequate. Although SUSI did go live less than 2 weeks after the target date in June 2012, it had a backlog of applications to process. This initial backlog was cleared 5 weeks after go-live.

CDVEC undertook to deliver the project in the time specified. Without relevant specialist experience of such a large roll-out, there was insufficient data to evaluate how realistic this target was.

It is particularly important to note that the Expression of Interest did not anticipate all aspects of SUSI being in operation in year one: it was a 5-year plan. However, the expectations of all stakeholders were not aligned with the actual plan for delivery, so there was an assumption that everything would work when the system went live. As the public criticism mounted, it became increasingly difficult to communicate that SUSI was, in fact, meeting key targets in the original plan. Clarifying what will be delivered in advance and communicating clearly in order to manage expectations would have avoided the escalation of criticism.

The scale of what was proposed – and largely achieved – was enormous: there was no existing infrastructure. Another year of planning and preparation would have allowed the system to be developed, completed and tested end-to-end before go live, would have avoided the chronic overwork and stress for key staff that attended the development and early stages after go live and would probably have prevented the crisis of delay and criticism that ultimately developed.

> In terms of implementation, insufficient time cannot be overcome by hard work and commitment.
>
> Clarifying what will be delivered in advance and communicating clearly in order to manage expectations would have avoided the escalation of criticism.

4.3.4   Staff – numbers and skill sets

In common with other forms of resource, there was no accurate baseline data available to inform an estimate of the staff resources required to develop and operate SUSI. The analysis of CDVEC in proposing that 65 WTE staff could operate the system was based on scaling up from their own processing of 5,000 applicants per year: no reliable information about resources required was available across all VECs and Local

Authorities. At the same time, 65 WTE was not inconsistent with the information that was available. There was no specialist expertise available to inform or evaluate the accuracy of this proposal. This combination of inadequate resources of information, experience and expertise created jeopardy for SUSI: adequate resources are not an option but a requirement for implementation. As it became clear that this level of resources was inadequate, immediate approval was given for additional resources as soon as these were requested.

Alongside the issue of staff numbers, the type of staff available through redeployment was an issue. The role of staff in SUSI is not routine administration: every role requires a high level of knowledge and familiarity with the scheme, an understanding of a complex interaction of issues which influence the decision to award or refuse a grant, and a capacity for judgement. The Employment Control Framework was experienced as a crude instrument; staff at Assistant Principal Officer or Principal Officer level with the requisite skills are unlikely to be redeployed. Given the pressure points arising from the economic crisis (collapse in revenues and high unemployment) Revenue and the Department of Social Protection were absorbing almost all staff available through redeployment and particularly staff at the required levels. The needs of these departments were prioritised over SUSI. This was in marked contrast to the previous local system, operated by staff with many years' experience. In SUSI, many staff were new to student grants administration, the information and the system.

The inaccurate early estimate of needs combined with the absence of freedom to match staff due to budgetary/staffing constraints based on the competencies required directly led to many of the difficulties which created the crisis and lead to difficulties in implementation of the centralisation initiative.

Clearance for emergency procurement was agreed after one roundtable meeting including DPER and the Department of Finance. The solution to in-source staff was an important development and SUSI was probably the first example of insourcing in the public service. The Accenture report (2013) did help to specify staff resources required and helped to make the case for greater flexibility in recruitment.

When it became clear that SUSI did not have the staff numbers or capacity to respond to the demand, a small number of other VECs offered staff that were already familiar with the scheme. The DES provided direct support and were also fielding calls from applicants who could not get through to the outsourced SUSI helpdesk in Cork. DES also sent staff that were familiar with the scheme to SUSI HQ to help with processing, but at the height of the crisis.

A contingency plan was developed as it began to emerge that redeployment (itself a new concept) was not going to deliver and clearance. Abtran, won the tenders for the document generation and management system and for the operation of the SUSI helpdesk. In year one, the difficulties with document receipt and processing also led to a considerable level of complaint concerning the SUSI helpdesk operated by Abtran. However, they worked closely with SUSI management to respond to difficulties as they arose and agreed to provide call services alongside their contracted work. The relevant skills and experience of Abtran contributed to resolving difficulties and achieving the goals of the project. Having a single provider enabled effective communication and alignment and a rapid response by Abtran to the problems experienced by SUSI.

The issue of control and responsibility is a core concern in public service reform, especially involving outsourcing. In SUSI, there was a complex relationship between commissioners and providers: the DES

awarded development of the system to CDVEC, which in turn engaged Abtran through a tendering process to operate a call centre and document management system. While transferring responsibility for the delivery of the centralised student grant system to from 66 awarding bodies to one (CDVEC), the DES retained responsibility for the oversight and funding of the system as a whole. In addition, CDVEC has its own accountability mechanism and is responsible through the statutory VEC Committee for the delivery of its services. The direct and indirect control of the resources, planning, development and delivery of all aspects of SUSI had to be negotiated throughout.

For some parts of the work, a need for greater clarity about authority and control only became apparent as difficulties emerged and developed. In a complex change, with many unknown and unclear dimensions, it may be impossible to specify in advance all aspects of responsibility, accountability and control. As in SUSI, it is essential to maintain a focus on the achievement of the goals and to address, implement and, if necessary, change the mechanisms of control in response to the needs of the work.

Estimates of staff required must be based on accurate information.

Specialist expertise is required at an early stage in planning to inform estimates of staffing.

In large-scale innovation and reform, especially with poor baseline data, there is a requirement for internal freedom to respond to emerging needs. In relation to staff, this means being able to recruit staff based on the competencies required.

There are consequences to attempting implementation without adequate resources. Deficits in a number of key resource areas compound the consequences. Other resources can compensate temporarily, but sooner or later the deficits in resources will impact on the work.

4.4   Doing business in public: the impact of media coverage

One of the important features in SUSI's first year of operation was that it was conducted under the glare of public scrutiny. The media is intrinsically linked to political attention and was central in keeping SUSI in the public eye.

At the end of October 2012 the increasing difficulties with the SUSI system made the front page of the Sunday Independent with the headline '***Up to 50,000 students in the dark over their grants***'. This was the beginning of what would be a rapid escalation in criticism of SUSI which was continuous in online media, print media, radio and video news coverage until January 2013. Figure 10 below illustrates the level of text coverage in The Irish Independent, The Irish Times, The Irish Examiner, web-based news site The Journal (www.thejournal.ie) and RTÉ news. Coverage peaked in November 2012, around the time of CDETB's appearance before the Oireachtas Committee, and January 2013 when the CEO of CDVEC appeared on Primetime.
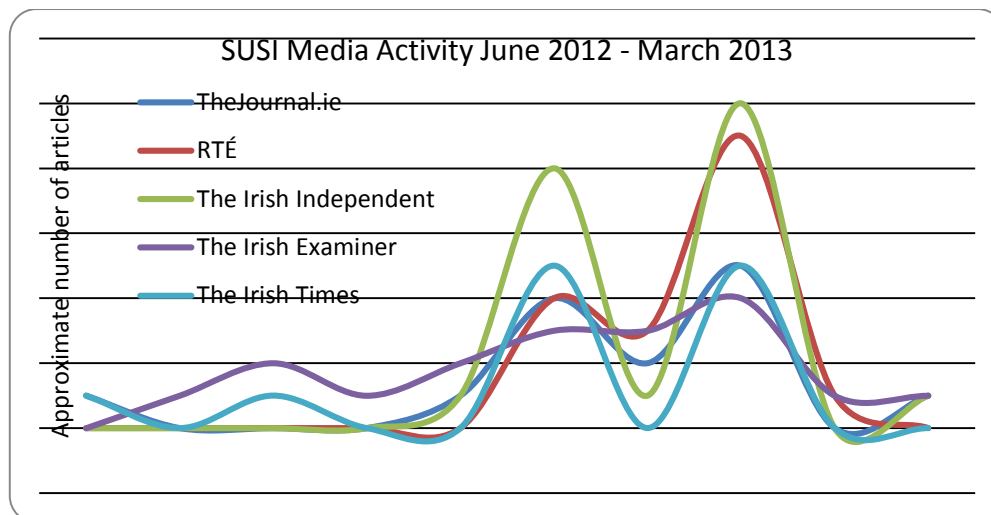
SUSI Media Activity June 2012 - March 2013

Figure 2. SUSI Media Activity June 2012-March 2013[5]

There is a relationship between media coverage and SUSI within the political sphere - each informing and amplifying the other. Therefore many key themes were similar. Key themes across the media were:

- Focus on individual student experiences and the negative impact of grant delays on students
- Time lags in processing and the number of students waiting for confirmation
- Portraying SUSI as 'blaming students', reaction to the insistence that the system was working
- A shift of criticism to the Department and the Minister
- SUSI's capacity to cope and the number of staff operating SUSI
- Quotes often taken from students or TDs
- The use of figures of students awaiting grants or grant payments, sometimes without breaking down the figure into the proportion waiting for documentation from the student.

During the crisis some journalists used social media to seek out students who would share their experiences with SUSI. The terms *struggling* and *hardship* were used repeatedly across all publications, and when some universities offered food boxes to students there was an influx of news articles covering the hardship some students were facing as a result of the delays, one with the headline '*Hungry students begging charity for help'*.

There is another hypothesis for the unprecedented media coverage of SUSI: students were already angry as the then Minister had reneged on his pre-election promise not to increase third level registration fees. USI on the other hand was struggling with its own internal pressures, particularly with criticism that its leadership was ineffective on the registration fee issue, leading to disaffiliation of some colleges. SUSI itself was also a target due to some of the resistance at its inception, as an impersonal Dublin-based system which took the function, jobs and decision-making away from local Councils and VECs.

The lack of a formal feedback mechanism and an overwhelmed helpdesk may have directed students down other avenues: contact with local TDs, or turning to social media. Modern communications are instant: any frustrated student can communicate their thoughts or experiences via social media to a wider audience in a number of minutes or seconds. On this type of platform SUSI, at this point in time, had no control, and there are no rules or regulations on what can or can't be said - this is the crux of 'doing business in public' in the modern age.

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[5] Derived from data gathered from analysis of media coverage during June 2012-March 2013.

SUSI made a number of improvements in year 2, which included leveraging the use of social media, prompt active engagement, analysis of trends on these forums on a weekly basis and milestone reporting, as opposed to responding to data requests as they came in. SUSI is now both a brand and a national service for students. It has recognisable logo, colour scheme and student-friendly imaging, and with over 13,000 'likes' on Facebook, is effectively using the communication medium favoured by the customer.

Increasing media exposure and context is a significant transition for the public service and, as those interviewed identified, requires a new way of working. It also has implications for public servants who are responsible for implementing change in the public sector. An understandable reluctance to incur risk and potentially face adverse media and political scrutiny will impact on willingness to innovate, and take chances with new approaches to issues and implementation of reform. Strong leadership, a supportive culture and establishing a public and online presence are important in this regard. Changes being implemented in the pre-digital years provoked reaction, now, with 24/7 access to online news updates and social media content, the public and media can respond almost instantaneously. It will be a permanent feature for the public sector going forward, and it must actively engage with media and use this as a communications tool.

4.5   Crisis management

There is international experience and evidence to suggest that most organisations do not have plans in place when things go wrong. Each crisis is therefore regarded as unique, links are not necessarily made to previous events and organisations often made matters worse – and harmed their staff – by their response.

All change will experience unanticipated problems. There will be difficulties in any large-scale reform and there will be a need to respond. Within the public service, there has been a rapid move toward a new way of working. In the past, work was conducted in private and problems could be managed without widespread public interest or examination. There is now an expectation for openness and transparency which is accompanied by tools for almost instantaneous public dissemination of information. A rapid and reactive new form of online journalism, which is often guided by user-generated content on social media, means anyone can help shape what 'trends' on the news and in the public discourse. This will continue to impact on the design and delivery of public services. An effective implementation planning process will anticipate difficulties and will include resources of time and personnel to respond. Implementation science, along with project and change management and organisation development, (with which Implementation Science shares important dimensions) recognises the requirement to attend to emergent processes in the course of complex change. Following the recognition that SUSI was in crisis in October 2012, the management in both DES and CDVEC quickly mobilised a different style and intensity of operation.

The scale and ambition of the project, the limited extent of the resources available and the extremely tight timescale meant that all those involved were pre-occupied, day to day, with operationalising the plan. There was little time or opportunity to stand back, take an overview of the project as a whole and to identify actual or potential risks. This objective, external overview is important in preventing problems from developing. In DES, existing management relationships were mobilised to provide this perspective. The capacity to take a broader view, to identify the pressure points, and analyse areas causing problems was critically important in helping to identify and sequence interventions, place additional resources appropriately and specify the information required to inform decisions.

Part of the external judgement required was how to quickly strengthen the internal management. The communication of what was needed and the negotiation of how best to put this in place, as a matter of urgency, was undertaken skilfully by senior managers in both DES and SUSI. The existing relationship and the undoubted skills of key personnel allowed an appropriate and immediate scaling up of management capacity to happen and to be accepted and used well by existing managers.

Ready access to more senior personnel provided the authority to mobilise a response from other departments with a role in solving the crisis, principally DPER and DOF and to work with key actors to identify the actions required. Additional senior resources augmented and supported, rather than replaced, the existing team. It is clear that the intervention was undertaken in a way that safeguarded individuals and relationships, maximised the available capacities and identified missing capacities and resources.

While it was necessary to identify the range of separate actions required, the important emphasis was on pace and sequencing: ranking the significance of different aspects of the problem and ensuring that the solution is constructed in the right order. It was also important that no one was excluded from resolving the problems, that additional resources were secured quickly and that additional resources required for the crisis only stayed involved for as long as was necessary.

The central actors in the crisis identify a number of factors which were critical in resolving the crisis. The organisational 'calmness' in the DES, up to the most senior levels of the department, were important. This calmness and support provided the space and time to solve the problem. Just as the relationships between DES and CDVEC were strong enough to survive the crisis, so too were the existing relationships of trust within the DES a requisite for this critical period. For public sector reform, it is important to stress the importance of the organisational core: the centre of government has a critical role in providing continuity to a complex project like SUSI. The broader organisation – in both DES and CDVEC – moved quickly to provide expertise and stability in a crisis situation. This is in line with the international research on the enablers of effective interagency working (Statham, 2011). The presence of a clear recognition of need for partnership working, strong leadership and effective working relationships and trust between partners not only gives rise to effective collaboration, it facilitates a collaborative responsive to challenges when they emerge.
In implementation terms, the strengths of the SUSI project included the hard work and dedication of all staff and the effective working relationships. These strengths helped to compensate for the lack of adequate resources in terms of both staffing and time. However, all the enablers of effective implementation must be in place: there is a significant risk in relying on key strengths alone to compensate for missing enablers.

Any complex change will experience unanticipated problems. Effective implementation requires that there is time, space and attention to recognise these issues as they emerge.

It is important to establish clear and realistic responsibility and accountability for distinct parts of a complex development process.

Ready access is required to different kinds of relevant specialist expertise at different stages of the process.

Authority and expertise outside the operational team is helpful in offering an external but supportive perspective. The stance of the 'critical friend' enables an appropriate plan to be developed and implemented quickly.

Change management expertise is required throughout.

Effective relationships, mutual respect, and trust must already be in place: it is too late to build the relationships required to address a crisis when the crisis develops.

All enablers of implementation are required: missing enablers create risk.

4.6   Personal, role and organisational dimensions

4.6.1   Personal

The delays that arose in the first year of operation had a negative impact on large numbers of students. The experience of USI and student representatives in colleges throughout the country was that students suffered real difficulties as a result of these delays. Awareness of the impact of grants on students was a key driver for all those involved in SUSI: it motivated the design and ambitious delivery programme of the initiative and focused the urgency of the response when the crisis occurred.

SUSI was designed and delivered by a relatively small number of people and the personal impact on those leading SUSI was significant from the start. These key personnel were also responsible for the pilot online project which was delivered in just 9 weeks. This established both the belief that ambitious targets could be successfully delivered and the practice of working long days, weeks and months. As the crisis intensified, the demands of work grew, with requirements to respond to media, queries from Abtran, PQs, data and statistics for DES.

Relationships between individuals, roles, and within and between organisations were central to the capacity to survive, address and overcome the crisis in SUSI. These relationships were important dimensions of the implementation enablers of staff capacity, organisational support and a supportive organisational culture and as mentioned in the previous section are also key enablers of effective interagency working (Statham, 2011).

4.6.2   The role of leadership

Significant organisational and system change requires consistent, effective leadership. The establishment of SUSI illustrates the leadership capacities which must be in place to conceptualise and plan reform of this

order, to monitor, recognise and respond to the difficulties which will always accompany large-scale change, to understand how to model, sequence and support interventions and to ensure successful implementation.

Leadership of the SUSI development process, within both the DES and CDVEC, required attention to the task, to the process and to the ongoing relationships underpinning the work. Senior management demonstrated a capacity to hold a strategic policy perspective and a global and long-term view of the purpose and process of implementation. These perspectives were particularly important when the process came under considerable pressure and when more local and institutional interests could have undermined the overall strategic reform goals. It is important to emphasise that this capacity was available to SUSI, through the leadership of both organisations, from the start of the process. Such capacities cannot be developed while change is being implemented: they must be already developed and established so that they are available to the change process throughout.

Change requires leaders to distinguish between technical, easier to identify problems and new, more adaptive challenges which require broader changes to values, beliefs, roles and relationships. In the case of SUSI, the senior management in both organisations shared responsibility for maintaining a focus on the achievement of the more adaptive strategic goals, providing psychological and practical containment for an immense and complex process and enabling a more technical, project management approach to delivering targets.

The experience and expertise in relation to managing challenging situations, including a dual focus on getting the job done and supporting people doing the work, were already present and available to the SUSI process. Inevitably relationships came under pressure in the crisis period. Throughout the process senior management in SUSI and DES maintained effective communication between the two bodies. Throughout the crisis, there was ongoing, daily communication between senior staff and this contact increased respect and trust in both directions.

4.6.3   Organisational
Relationships between individuals and between roles were important: so too were the relationships within and between organisations. Although DES and CDVEC had a longstanding positive relationship, direct contact with individual awarding authorities was limited to support with grant scheme interpretation when needed. SUSI was a new and ambitious departure for both organisations.

Within SUSI, the key actors acknowledge the support of the wider CDVEC organisation: HR, Finance, and IT were all involved in support of SUSI. The management team in CDVEC and other personnel fielded phone calls at the height of the crisis. The Board of the VEC was in support of SUSI throughout. Even in the most intense period of the crisis, it was concerned with resolution, both in the interests of students and the organisation.

4.6.4   Relationship with the Union of Students of Ireland
USI was a key stakeholder. While the relationship with DES and CDVEC was maintained throughout, USI's role in representing and communicating the impact of increasing delays on students inevitably created tensions. Although USI was absolutely clear that its job was to highlight the inefficiencies of the system, it continued to maintain relationships with SUSI and DES. This relationship was damaged by the failure, as USI saw it, to engage seriously with USI. The Prime Time programme format (January 2013) also encouraged an adversarial engagement between the president of USI and the CEO of CDVEC.

As the crisis passed, DES and CDVEC actively worked to maintain the relationship with USI, establishing structures to ensure effective and timely information and communication. The incoming USI president, in June 2013, set out to support SUSI and DES in improving the service by identifying trends in cases and presenting possible solutions. By this time, USI was committed to engaging positively in order to protect the reputation of SUSI with key stakeholders. USI is represented at the highest level in the stakeholder group and monitoring group of SUSI.

4.6.5   The Department of Education and Skills (DES)

Within the DES, the responsibility for developing and delivering the overarching programme of legislative and administrative reform of student grants had created significant resource pressures and demands grew further in response to the crisis. As the crisis intensified, there was a requirement and expectation that DES staff would increasingly focus on SUSI work.

4.6.6   Department of Education and Skills/City of Dublin Vocational Education Committee

CDVEC and DES had an effective working relationship during the development phase of SUSI. The DES was a source of support to CDVEC and shared a focus on the ambitious delivery target. In September/October 2012 the relationship began to change in response to pressure of all kinds. Although the foundation of strong inter-personal and inter-role relationships remained core, there was a requirement to move to more formal, structured and explicit forms of communication and reporting, alongside the established dimensions of respect and trust.

Senior managers describe the impact of the crisis on their staff and on the relationship between staff in both organisations. Despite management awareness of the impact on staff and considerable attention to their needs, the volume and intensity of demands during the crisis meant that, at times, it was not always possible to manage the environment in order to reduce the pressure on staff. These pressures contributed to communication difficulties within and between organisations, difficulties in agreeing priorities and incomplete or inconsistent understandings of decisions or proposals.

The senior managers in both organisations trusted the capacity of their counterpart throughout the process. The personal and role relationship was able to overcome organisational difficulties in many situations.

> Relationships between individuals and roles, and within and between organisations are central to successful implementation of change and to the capacity to survive, address and overcome challenges and difficulties. These relationships underpin the implementation enablers of staff capacity, organisational support and a supportive organisational culture and are also key enablers of effective interagency working.
>
> Leadership of large-scale change requires attention to the relationships within and across organisational boundaries.
>
> Significant organisational and system change requires consistent, effective leadership. This includes the capacity to conceptualise and plan reform, to monitor, recognise and respond to the difficulties which will always accompany large-scale change, to understand how to model, sequence and support interventions and to ensure successful implementation.
>
> Key leadership capacities must be in place from the start of an ambitious change process: it is too late to develop such capacities when they are needed.

4.7   The influence of context

Effective implementation requires not only an attention to the overall context of the work, but attention to the changes in context throughout the implementation process. During the implementation of SUSI, specific dimensions of context had particular influences and the changes in these dimensions had a fundamental impact on the course of the work.

4.7.1   Public Service Reform/Transformation

Increased attention to the efficiency and effectiveness of public services has characterised public policy and practice for at least three decades. Internationally, models such as New Public Management have influenced the design and development of new focuses, new forms and new priorities for public service management (Whelan et al., 2003).

The concept of a single, integrated, national student grants system, focused on efficiency, effectiveness and consistency is in line with emerging trends in public services. Outsourcing such an initiative also reflects an increasing focus on concentration and convergence of public services, in contrast to the divergence and diversity of the past. A concern about accurate data on which to base decisions about public spending and priorities was addressed by the design of an integrated system.

The financial crisis in Ireland occurred within this context of changes in understandings and expectations of public services. Between 2005 – when the concept of an integrated grants payment service was first proposed – and 2010 - when governing legislation was being introduced and the invitations for expressions of interest were issued – the context of public services in Ireland were transformed. Alongside unprecedented cuts in public funding, specific agreements committed to a moratorium on public service recruitment, to resourcing by redeployment alone, to cuts and freezes in payments and to increased productivity by all public servants enacted by action plans to achieve savings in every sector.

As the existing systems experienced more and more difficulties, the pressure to develop a new, integrated, national system in a very short period of time was considerable. In 2012, when SUSI started to use redeployment to resource its work, the system of redeployment, itself in its infancy, did not deliver. The combined and cumulative impact of a moratorium on recruitment in CDVEC and in the DES meant that existing staff were already overstretched. There were not enough staff with the required skills to undertake the day to day work and the additional work generated through the SUSI crisis created a very pressurised and stressful work environment. In terms of implementation, there was insufficient acknowledgement of the real impact of these constraints on the capacity to deliver SUSI as planned.

4.7.2   Context of higher education, numbers and funding

Alongside the severe constraints in finances and personnel, the financial crisis also shaped the landscape of higher education. There were rapid increases in the numbers of people unemployed. This led to increases in the numbers and eligibility of students. The profile of students applying for grants was increasingly diverse and complex, with more mature students, students with complex circumstances, and students living independently – all circumstances requiring a longer and more difficult decision-making process in relation to eligibility for a grant.

4.7.3   Local/national context

The introduction of a single, unified, national system for student grants removed authority, influence and jobs from 65 other bodies. While almost every agency had struggled with the administration of grants and

experienced annual delays in processing, the award of student grants was regarded positively by the public. Local councillors and national politicians with a local constituency were frequently lobbied by applicants and their families.

While the very strong political reaction to the delays in awarding grants was undoubtedly an appropriate advocacy for students by their public representatives, its strength was also a reflection of politicians' reaction to the loss of influence or perception of influence by the voter.

SUSI was under resourced to handle the numbers and complexity of applications in its first year of operation. Some applicants were significantly affected by delays in receiving their first grant payment. Many factors combined to create the 'perfect storm' and media frenzy that occurred between October 2012 and January 2013. The highly emotive nature of access to third-level education meant that any threat to this opportunity elicited a strong negative response. Staff in SUSI had to respond to calls from distressed applicants and parents of applicants. The media coverage had the effect of amplifying the distress genuinely felt by some applicants and raised this to the level of community or national outrage. Many of those involved describe SUSI as a 'lightning rod' for anger and dissatisfaction, providing a specific and apparently legitimate target for public frustration and resentment.

> Attention is required to the impact of changing context and project design implementation processes should take these changes into account
>
> The analysis and understanding of stakeholder interests and concerns and how these are affected by changing context must be monitored
>
> Even where public resource constraints predominate, projects must have enough capacity to recognise and adjust to changes in the context.

4.8   Public service values: Professional/personal dynamic

The values and practices of public service organisations have attracted considerable comment and criticism in recent years. In the context of the financial requirement for public service reform, public services are often characterised as out of date, not fit-for-purpose, inefficient and slow to change. The development of SUSI was initiated and led by DES and designed, developed and implemented by CDVEC. Both are public service organisations and public service values informed and motivated every aspect of the work of SUSI.

Both DES and CDVEC explain the undertaking of this initiative as motivated by recognition that it was necessary, and would lead to better, more cost-effective delivery which would be in the best interests of students. CDVEC were aware they did not have sufficient national baseline information on which to plan, and they also knew that the resources they proposed were based on the best information available to them. As it turned out, the resources proposed were not adequate for the needs of the system. The senior managers in both DES and CDVEC were also aware of the innovative nature of this public service reform. They were also conscious of the potential future impact of a failure: if SUSI had not been saved, it would have been cited every time a national reform was proposed. Success and failure both have implications for the future of public services.

The challenges of the crisis period were felt acutely and personally by those directly involved. The difference between the reaction as an individual and as a public servant, in role, was critical. As a private individual, individuals felt hurt, anger, despair and frustration; as a public servant, judgement and behaviour was informed by the public, not the private, interest. This meant that people kept working, when they felt like giving up; they worked long hours, repeatedly, when they were exhausted; they were silent, when their impulse was to defend, explain, or vent; they supported and encouraged others when this was in support of the work. They were self-reliant, focused on solving problems and on staying calm, because this is what the work required.

The public servants who built SUSI from scratch and, within two years, achieved almost all of the critical targets, were influenced by their understanding of public service values. The prioritising of the public good over the personal and human cost, the focus on the future needs as well as the present demands and the concern to achieve and demonstrate the targets of the service characterised the thinking and behaviour of the individuals and organisations involved.

The strong tradition of public service has been criticised for its association with conservatism and risk aversion. The lack of a structure that rewards innovation has reinforced a 'business-as-usual' approach that has tended to prioritise avoiding mistakes rather than improving services or increasing productivity. The very public scrutiny and criticism of difficulties in implementing the radical reform that was SUSI illustrates the consequences and repercussions for public servants who are prepared to take measured and appropriate risks to implement transformational change and improve public services. These repercussions impact, not only on those directly involved, but also on others faced with implementing change. There is a significant risk that such sustained negative coverage increases risk aversion and leads to a reduction in the available capacity for the risk-taking required for innovation and reform. There is an internal requirement to support, promote and celebrate risk-taking in support of more effective public services.

In recent years, co-operation with change and increased productivity have been incentivised through pay increases or as part of public service agreements. It is useful to question this formula and to recognise the possibility that this approach locates innovation and change as separate from and additional to, rather than integrated with and intrinsic to, the public service ethos.

Public service values are tangible resources

The commitment to public service values should be recognised and supported

The prioritising of the public good above the private and individual interests exemplifies what is best about the public service

Measured and appropriate risk-taking should be supported in order to support the implementation of transformational change in the public service

Public servants will not continue to display the attributes of public service if these are not recognised and valued.

5.   Summary and conclusions

This report captures the experiences from the implementation of SUSI in a systematic way, and provides a valuable opportunity to share the learning from the implementation of large scale public sector reform. The establishment of SUSI was a significant achievement. However the analysis of the implementation of SUSI indicates it was done with inadequate time for exploring and planning and inadequate resources of staff and expertise. The risk of failure was considerable. The significant achievement was a result of the commitment and hard work of key personnel and the leadership within DES, CDVEC and SUSI. There is important learning about conceptualising and planning large scale public reform, especially in relation to outsourcing, cross-departmental and multi-agency working. The critical influence of realistic initial conceptualisation and planning, the requirement for accurate baseline data and the central role of effective management and leadership relationships are emphasised.

SUSI was the target for very public criticism. In relation to the impact on students, this criticism was justified. There should not have been the confusion, delay and difficulty in accessing information that existed for several months. However, SUSI's achievement is not limited to the establishment of a single platform for application and processing of applications for student grants. SUSI was a ground-breaking initiative in many ways. It demonstrated the challenges and complexities of implementing large-scale reform, as well as the substantial and important benefits.

As well as highlighting important lessons for national implementation of change, the experience of surviving and recovering from crisis is an important contribution to the practice of public-service reform. All of those interviewed identified what was at stake and recognised that if SUSI had failed, the damage would have reached far into the future. Just as PPARS became a shorthand for failure of large-scale public ICT, if SUSI had failed, it would be cited every time a proposal to centralise, integrate or outsource public services was raised.

The public narrative is that public service is not fit for purpose. The evidence from this example of public service reform and innovation challenges this narrative. There were errors in the development and implementation of SUSI and this case study is one example of the commitment to learning from these errors. At the same time, the enactment of public service values in the attributes described here is influential and important. This study recognises the value of these attributes and suggests that this value should be acknowledged as an important resource in shaping future services and achieving the goals of reform. SUSI illustrates what is required in large-scale public reform and provides a model of the resources, time and capacities needed for successful implementation. Attention to and analysis of multiple, intersecting and changing factors (internal and external, small and large scale, planned and unplanned) is a prerequisite for success. It highlights the need to attend and invest in the stage-based work of implementation in an active and deliberate way. It also shows how important enablers are in facilitating effective implementation of public service reform, and anticipating barriers or needs as the service or policy makes the journey to full implementation, which leads to improved outcomes for the organisation and ultimately, the customer.

6. Key Lessons for Public Service Reform

1.   The change required needs to be clearly conceptualised

It is important to invest time in specifying the goals and purpose of the change, the important processes and measures of success and to ensure that there is a common understanding of, and agreement about, these by all the stakeholders. Differences in understandings and priorities will both create difficulties in implementation and make it more difficult to address and resolve difficulties that inevitably arise. In change which involves technical elements, there is a risk that the technical dimensions dominate thinking and planning at the expense of other aspects of focus, design and resourcing.

2.   Understand the significance of scaling up a project/initiative

Moving from multiple parallel local systems to a single, unified national system involves an increase in complexity, not just size. Large-scale change requires attention to many interacting dimensions simultaneously, careful planning of sequencing of change and a capacity to anticipate, recognise and manage emergent and unplanned developments and to modify plans in response. This attention to the overall process, the 'whole' is difficult for those who are, at the same time, engaged in the implementation of the detailed elements of the change. It is helpful to have this strategic focus on the whole process provided by personnel who are not involved in operationalising the change.

3.   A rush to deliver reform quickly can impede accurate assessment of whether the reform is feasible

When there is an urgency to deliver a specific reform or change, this can create rushed timeframes for implementation, which not only reduces clarity about *what* change required, it takes time away from exploring what is the most practical and effective way to achieve that change. It is important to distinguish between what is urgent and what is important and to engage in an assessment of the feasibility of change in a given context. Urgency may create an immediate and useful imperative and opportunity, but it may make an accurate assessment of needs and options more difficult. A context in which there is external pressure for rapid change together with an internal focus on the importance of making the change may give rise to the risk of over-optimism about what can be realistically and safely achieved, even with optimum work and commitment.

4.   The role and influence of information and data in decision making is crucial

Information is a key resource and enabler at all implementation stages. Effective decision-making and planning can only be undertaken with reliable and adequate data. In large-scale change, missing data cannot be extrapolated from data about the existing system. Data and information are as important as resources of time and personnel and the impact of deficits in data has an impact throughout planning, development and delivery.

5.   A willingness to take measured and appropriate risks is required to deliver reform

Doing things differently involves risk. Effective reform requires a willingness to engage in measured and informed risk-taking, based on a clear rationale, assessment of the benefits to the public, appropriate resources and management. There are serious and long-term implications of the failure to take appropriate risks in the service of innovation and reform. However, there are also implications of taking risks which are inadequately measured, in response to pressures and demands for change. It is the responsibility of leadership and management to ensure the appropriate steps have been taken to assess the potential risks which may be incurred as part of the reform process.

6.   Engagement with new and traditional forms of media must be a permanent feature of reform

Increasing media exposure and coverage and the expectation of immediate availability of information about work undertaken on behalf of the public is now and can be expected to remain a permanent feature of the public sector. Reform measures will not escape media scrutiny. Doing work under close, and often critical, scrutiny is a significant transition for the public service and requires a new way of working. The skills and capacities to acknowledge this changed context and to exploit the opportunities of 'always-on' media to engage with those served by public services should be recognised as core competencies in managing public sector change.

7.   Continuous role clarity and responsibility is necessary for effective implementation of reform

Clarity about the extent and limits of responsibility, authority and control, both direct and indirect, is a core requirement in managing change. Role and responsibility ambiguity can increase as the reform process moves through stages of implementation, and can impede decision making. The clarity required cannot be completely specified at the outset and should be reviewed and revised throughout the work, in response to changing needs.

8.   Adequate leadership capacities are required from the outset of any reform initiative

Large-scale change requires an adequate management structure with appropriate expertise and clearly specified areas of responsibility and accountability. Key leadership capacities must be in place from the start of an ambitious change process: it is too late to develop such capacities when they are needed.

Management should be given the authority to make decisions and to allocate resources, as well as the responsibility to deliver specified outcomes. A management resource which is external to the management of the project can provide crucial external perspective in support of internal management. This resource can be invoked in response to a crisis but is probably best used at intervals throughout development work, providing attention to the 'whole' rather than specific details.

9.   Public service values and ethos are tangible resources to be cultivated

The core value of service and of a focus on the experience of the user of the public service rather than the habit, convenience or capacity of the provider, is a central influence on the direction and development of public services. Public service values and ethos are not served by statement of principle or intention: they are enacted in the commitment to reform, to good practice and to high quality services. Public service values are an important resource which must be recognised, supported and challenged in equal measure.

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Appendix A

Accenture report Recommendations

CDVEC commissioned Accenture review SUSI's performance in the 2012/13 academic year. The review also included an implementation plan to guide improvements for the 2013/14 academic year and beyond. Recommendations include:

Process

- Reduce the volume of documentation sought from applicants
- Develop an online renewal application system
- Set key calendar dates for the SUSI application process
- Further segregate applications to specialised sections
- Collect key data from applicants earlier in the process
- Improve training and scripts for the SUSI support desk
- Develop an eligibility estimator for applicants use
- Further develop operational KPI and Reporting systems

Management and Resources

- Enhanced Senior Management resources
- Increased staff resources
- Develop core staff
- Re-employment of experienced temporary staff

ICT Systems

- Develop the SUSI grants system, on an agreed phased basis, over the coming years to be a fully web-based integrated automated grant application system.
- Develop data information sharing links with Government bodies and agencies
- Continued investment in IT development and capacity
- Develop an online self service tracker system for applicants
- Continue to develop the Management Information Service capacity

Communications

- Develop a dedicated www.susi.ie website
- Enhance the communications strategy across the education stakeholders
- Improve the content of standard correspondence templates to applicants
- Develop a more targeted communications strategy for applicants from different sectors
- Set up a Cross Departmental stakeholders advisory group