



TELLING THE REAL STORY.

SUSI grants for 3rd level education
Survey findings

Rose Conway-Walsh TD

Sinn Féin spokesperson for Further and Higher Education,
Research, Innovation and Science



TELLING THE REAL STORY.



SUSI grants for 3rd level education - Survey findings

FOREWORD

I am deeply grateful to the 1,022 students and all the parents and Student Unions who participated in this Survey.

SUSI grants are an important support to many students and helps to alleviate some of the financial pressures associated with going on to third-level education. The SUSI grants can be the difference between going to 3rd level education or not.

At the same time, we know from engaging with students and parents across the state that many more are excluded or continue to face financial challenges. It is evident that a high level of inequality exists throughout our education system particular at third-level.

This survey aims to capture the student experience of the SUSI grants and application process. Uncertainty, accommodation affordability, loss of summer jobs, high fees and lack of career guidance have all collided to produce a perfect storm for third level education.

We have been overwhelmed by the level of response we have received from students across the country. 80.3% of the respondents also provided detailed written answers on their experiences and opinions on the SUSI grant system. It is clear there is real concern and frustration that we managed to tap into and will use to guide our approach.

Sinn Féin believes in a higher and further education system that is truly free with financial supports to ensure equality of access for all. Properly funding education is an investment that we can no longer afford to ignore. That means giving people the support they need to get the qualifications, training and skills to engage fully in all aspects of our society and economy.

The maintenance grant was cut and restricted under Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael Governments during the economic downturn and no sufficient attempts have been made by either party to restore them. Our third-level education system is simply not accessible to all. It is becoming less accessible to many on the basis of financial means.

Sinn Féin is committed to breaking down the barriers faced by students when accessing 3rd level education and a fit-for-purpose system for financial support for students is necessary to achieving that. However, for that reform to be effective it must be combined with a broader policy response to the direct and indirect cost of going on to third-level education.

Student fees for higher education have more than trebled over the past decade to the point where we now have the highest fees in the EU. This is compounded by a spiralling cost of living. Affording accommodation has become one of the main barriers to students being able to go on to third-level.

Today the SUSI grant system is the main hope for many to get to go to college. However, we in Sinn Féin are constantly hearing from students and their families about the ongoing hardships they face in accessing education.

The Survey is a combination of quantitative data and qualitative data. The figures are based on the result of multiple-choice questions cross referenced. We also asked students to share their own experiences and opinions with us. This produced a vast amount of information that we will continue to use to inform our policy response.



Rose Conway-Walsh TD

Sinn Féin spokesperson for Further and Higher Education,
Research, Innovation and Science

— “ This is no country for the children of hard-working parents. I worry about my parents' health. They work long hours, never take care of themselves and always put us first yet after all that, their son will most likely not be able to afford to attend third-level education. ” —

— “ I am a lone parent in my early thirties with a ten-year-old daughter. Last year I had to move back in with my parents because I could not afford the rent I was paying. I want to do a course at Sligo IT but have been refused SUSI based on my parents' income. Without SUSI I cannot afford to go. ” —

— “ I have four college age children, two in attendance and two highly intelligent autistic sons who cannot get SUSI to do on-line courses. They should have a right to pursue their education like the other two. ” —



KEY FINDINGS

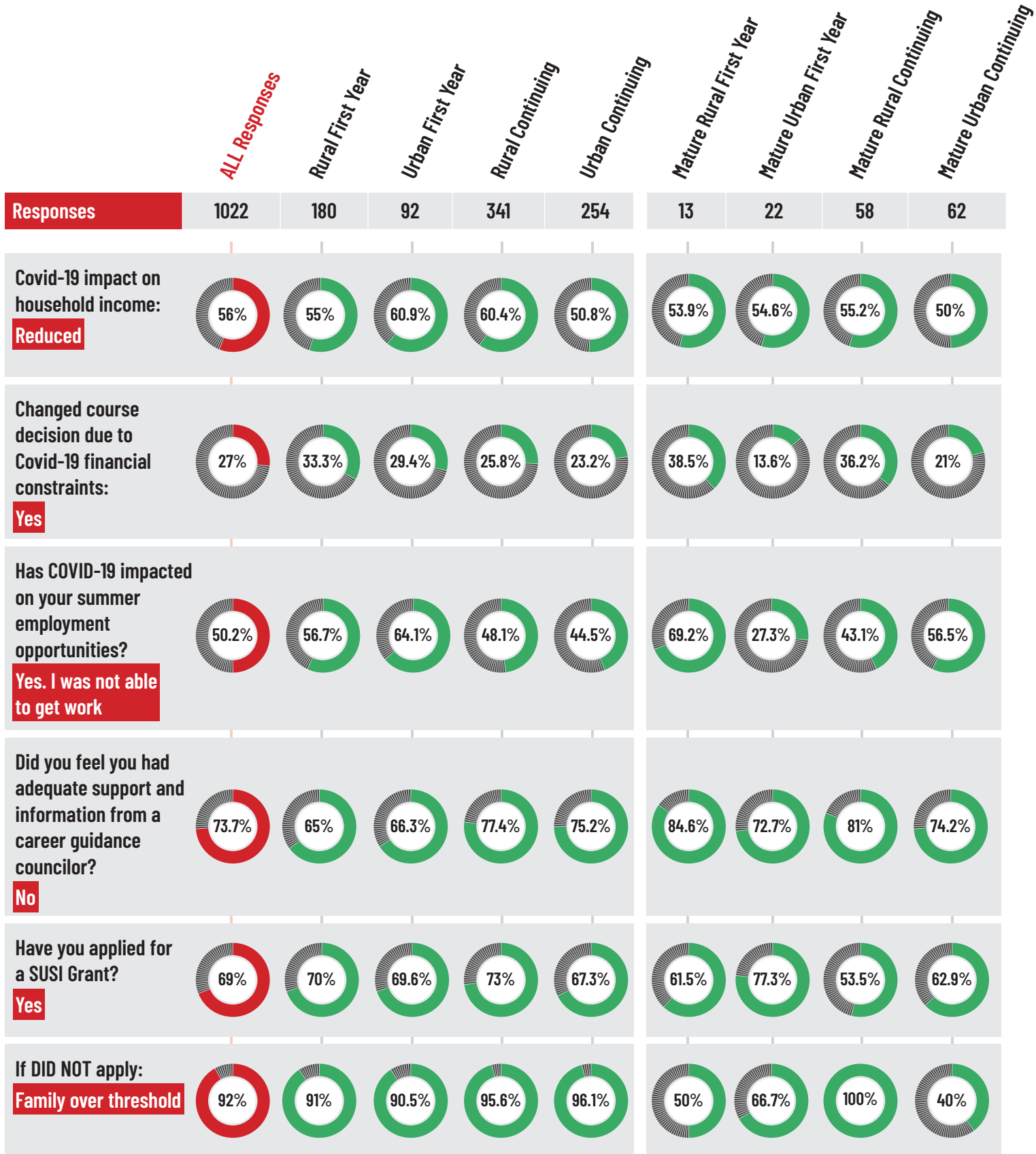
- ⚠ Over **80% of students** are **concerned** or **extremely concerned** that they **won't have enough money** to go to or **remain at college**.
- ⚠ Over **77% of students** and their families are **experiencing financial stress and anxiety**.
- ⚠ **Covid-19 has had a severe impact on students** and their family's ability to afford 3rd level education. **Household Income has been reduced for 56% of students**
- ⚠ SUSI eligibility assessments made on Gross income do not reflect the financial reality of households. **86% believe the income threshold is not set at an appropriate level**.
- ⚠ **70% of students** said their personal employment opportunities or income has been impacted by Covid-19.
- ⚠ Those **eligible for the full SUSI grant continue to struggle financially**. Almost **65%** say it is **not adequate to meet third-level education costs**.
- ⚠ The **application and assessment process are not sufficiently flexible**. The qualitative data from student responses outlining their experiences of the SUSI grant system make it clear that the current system does not adequately account for a variety of different situations. There needs to be a more responsive process were the SUSI staff are empowered to use their judgement and **assess certain applicants on a case-by-case basis**.
- ⚠ **73.5% of students** say they **did not have adequate support from guidance councillors**.
- ⚠ **Post Graduate Students** felt that SUSI was there in name only and was **not fit for purpose** when it came to MA programmes.
- ⚠ **Young people with autism were unable to access suitable third-level education** because part-time or online accredited courses online are **excluded from SUSI funding**.

TELLING THE REAL STORY.



SUSI grants for 3rd level education - Survey findings

SUSI SURVEY 2020 - August 18 2020 - Results

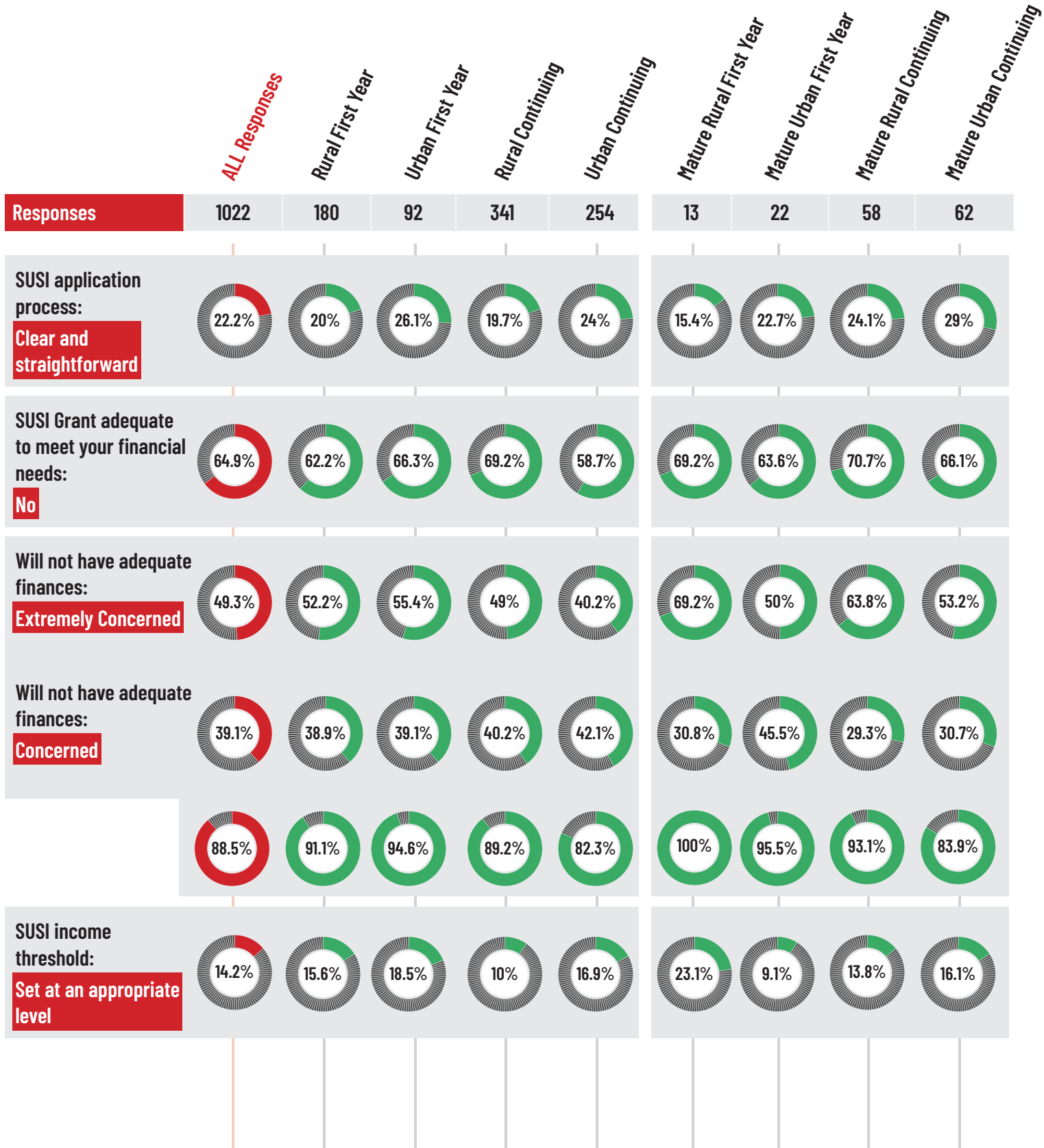


TELLING THE REAL STORY.



SUSI grants for 3rd level education - Survey findings

SUSI SURVEY 2020 - August 18 2020 - Results

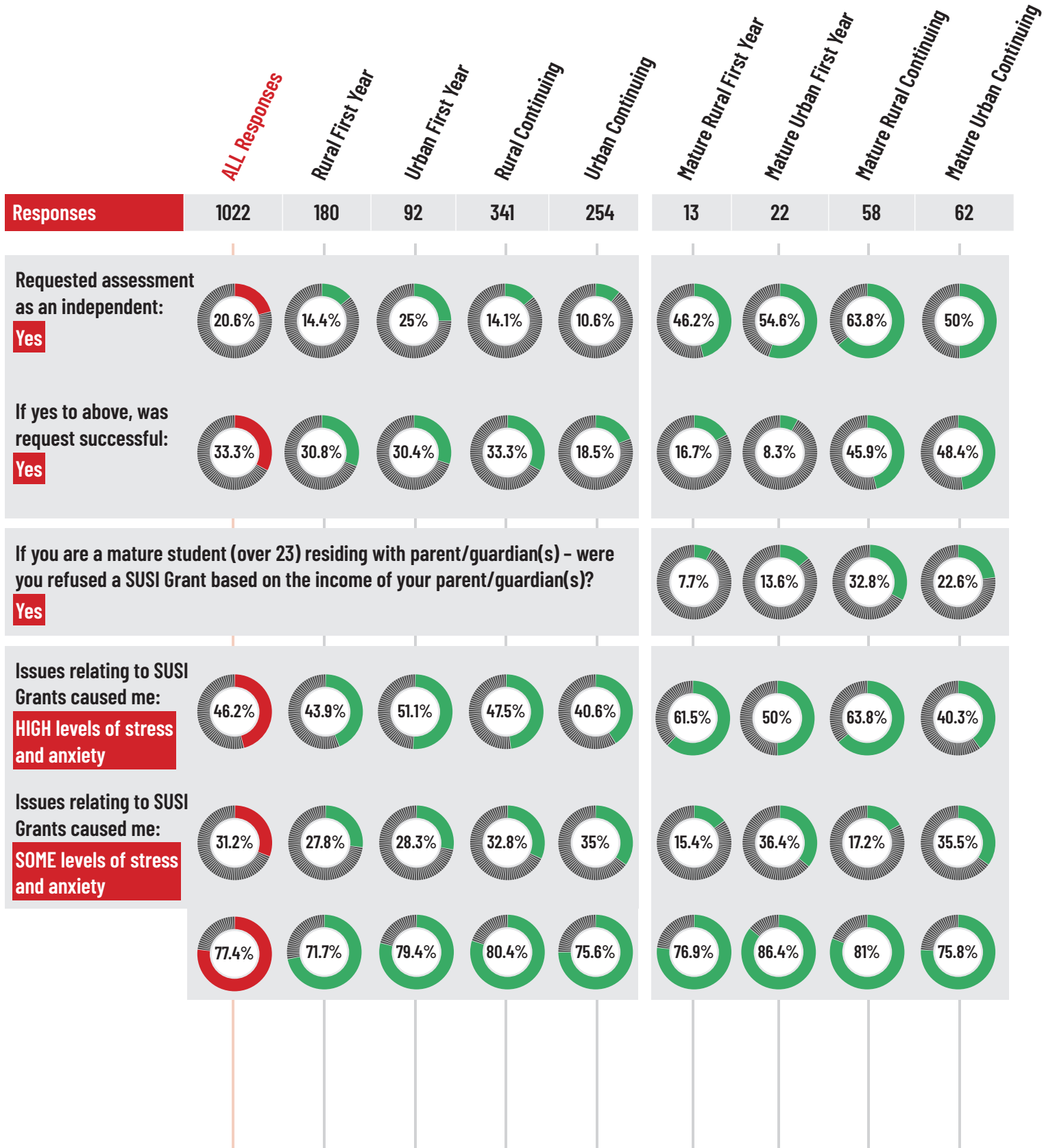


TELLING THE REAL STORY.



SUSI grants for 3rd level education - Survey findings

SUSI SURVEY 2020 - August 18 2020 - Results



CONCLUSIONS

The aim of a grant system like SUSI should be to remove financial barriers to 3rd level education. It is clear that this is currently not the case and that substantial and urgent reform is needed to bring greater equality of access in our further and higher education system.

Greater flexibility is needed in terms of how students and their families' financial needs are assessed. This flexibility should extend to supporting documentation requested, especially about residency and independent status.

We need to transform our 3rd level education system into one that equips our population for life and allows them to pursue their dreams and goals without barriers.

More flexibility is needed to allow for changes in circumstances. If applicants know that they will be refused on the basis of their previous years income they should be allowed to apply under current circumstances in their initial application.

The earning limit and specific time period that students can work under should be removed from the holiday earnings element of the SUSI application. Greater emphasis be placed on exceptional circumstances when students are appealing a SUSI decision.

One of the main barriers in accessing the SUSI grant is the restrictions on students applying as financially independent. No one under 23 years on 1 January preceding the start of one's course can be deemed as financially independent. This rules out so many students who support themselves by working part time at second level and third level. It is particularly cruel on students from disadvantaged socio economic backgrounds and difficult homelives.

The criteria for estrangement are very strict, with most students not meeting them but still facing the task of financing themselves if they wish to continue to third level. Even letters for Gardaí are not accepted as evidence.

For those old enough to apply as financially independent they are excluded if they have been forced to live with their parents. In a time when home ownership is out of reach of so many and ever-increasing rent this is seen by many as particularly unfair.

The SUSI grant system needs substantial reform. In its current form the system is unable to address the ever-expanding divide between those who can afford to go on to third level and those who cannot. Inequality is increasing and is failing thousands of hard-working families.

“ I would like to sincerely thank all of the students who took the in the Survey; the parents who contacted me and the Student Unions who helped promote this survey. Your experiences and insight are invaluable to the work we are doing to do bring about an All-Ireland fair education system that provides equality of opportunity and access. ”

Rose Conway-Walsh Mayo TD
and Sinn Spokesperson on Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science.

SINN FÉIN POLICY RESPONSE

- Increase SUSI maintenance grant by 10 percent (cost €16.4 million)
- Susi eligibility assessments to be based on net income with mortgage/rent payments and essential household expenditure to be considered.
- Abolish third-level student fees (€243 million)
- Reform the assessment model to allow for greater flexibility and simplify the SUSI procedure
- Ease the restrictive burden of proof for demonstrating parental estrangement and financial independence.
- Allow students to apply based on current financial circumstances
- Ensure full time guidance councillors for every secondary school and an additional position for schools over 500 pupils.
- Expand eligibility for mature independents maintenance grants to include over 23 who have been forced to live with their parents for financial reasons
- Expand SUSI grants to cover Masters' programmes
- Abolish the Student Contribution Charge, i.e. 3rd level fees, starting with a €500 reduction in 2020/21 (€39.3 million)
- Provide significant core funding increases to higher education institutes (HEI) to end the need for HEIs to over-charging students' basic elements of educations, such as for repeat exams.

We are currently awaiting the costing of several further and higher Education initiatives from the Department. These will be considered in our 2021 Alternative budget.