



Joint Committee on Education, Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science

17 May 2022

Opening Statement of Mr Jimmy Deenihan, Chairperson of MTU Governing Body

Chair and members of the Committee, thank you for the invitation to attend this roundtable discussion on the future funding of higher education.

I am here today in my capacity as Chairperson of the Governing Body of Munster Technological University (MTU).

As Chair, I do not have an executive or operational role in terms of the day-to-day management of the University, that is a matter for the President, Prof. Maggie Cusack, and her staff. I am however responsible for leadership of MTU's Governing Body and ensuring its effectiveness in discharging its oversight role and statutory functions under the Technological Universities Act 2018.

I was very happy to take up the role of Chair in 2021, especially so given my support for the development of the technological university (TU) sector during my time as a public representative. I was a member of cabinet as Minister for Arts, Heritage, and the Gaeltacht when the bill for the establishment of the TUs was brought before it by the then Minister for Education, Ruairi Quinn. I was a strong advocate of that legislation, and it is immensely satisfying to have seen it come to fruition and appear here today along with my fellow chairs.

MTU has 14,066 wholetime equivalent students and a staff of 1,676 wholetime equivalents. We operate from six campuses across Cork and Kerry, including campuses in Bishopstown in Cork, Tralee, the Cork School of Music, Cork College of Art & Design, and the National Maritime College of Ireland in Ringaskiddy.

MTU was delighted to recently host a meeting of this Committee at our Bishopstown campus. We look forward to further constructive engagements, and welcoming you to visit other parts of the University in the future.

The Sunday Times Good University Guide 2022 placed MTU as both the highest ranked of Ireland's TUs and winner of a special award: *University of the Year for COVID Impact*. These are proud distinctions and fitting testaments to the hard work of all our staff, students, governors and other stakeholders in realising the merger between CIT and IT Tralee, and rising to meet the various challenges faced during our foundational period.

MTU is currently undertaking significant pieces of work as part of our strategic development, transformation and change management, including: (1) developing our first strategic plan, (2) designing new executive structures, and (3) an operating model for the future of our professional services.

Turning to the matters which this Committee is keen to address today, I would like to make the following submissions, with a particular focus on the funding dimension to them:

- MTU welcomes the recent acknowledgement by the Government, in its *Funding the Future* policy, of the core funding gap of €307 million in higher education. There are three key issues from MTU's perspective in relation to the **future funding model**:
  - (1) The 60/40 funding split between traditional universities and TUs is arbitrary and not justifiable, especially given that the actual breakdown of respective students is closer to 50/50. This perpetuates a 2-tier system, which is not in the best interests of students, staff, or indeed the Irish taxpayers who fund it. Having been established, TUs now need to be empowered through appropriate funding to deliver on our goals.
  - (2) The budget allocations of TUs are set and static, meaning an increase in student numbers reduces the funded income available per student. This is a disincentive to growth, and the polar opposite of what is required. This can be contrasted with traditional universities, who are funded per student and thereby incentivised to grow. A new and fit for purpose funding model is required, and consideration should be given to multi-annual funding as part of that.

(3) Funding per postgraduate student, including PhD students, is also lower for TUs than traditional universities, placing the TU sector and our students at a significant disadvantage in this area. The TU legislation has growth targets in terms of postgraduate output and the funding model should not inhibit those targets.

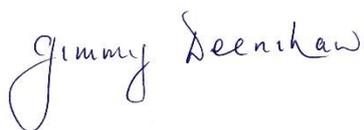
- Linked to the issue of **funding** is the ability of TUs to borrow money. Again, having been established, TUs now need to be empowered. There is a mechanism for TUs to borrow under the legislation, but it is dependent on an enabling framework from the HEA. This framework has not yet been introduced, placing TUs at another disadvantage to traditional universities, who can access financial markets and obtain funding at another level entirely. Such funding is crucial in terms of capital development in particular, along with Government measures to make the cost of construction more affordable, and essential if TUs are to be part of the solution to the student accommodation crisis this country is facing. This crisis will only worsen in coming years with the influx of refugees due to the invasion of Ukraine.
- In relation to **expansion**, MTU must increase its capacity significantly to meet current and future demographics. A major issue for us is a lack of buildings and services, as distinct from lack of equipment. We anticipate student growth at a rate of 35% over the next decade. Based on a norm of 10m<sup>2</sup> per student, MTU requires a further 60,000m<sup>2</sup> of space to meet demand. We have excellent projects at various stages of design and development for new buildings and refurbishments, which will address issues of sustainability and housing. TUs can lead the way on these government priorities if given the mandate, power, and funding to do so.
- With reference to **apprenticeships**, MTU is the largest provider of craft apprenticeships in the State, and we have seen significant growth in numbers over recent years. Further increases will require increased capacity, as previously mentioned. As part of our solutions to this rising demand, MTU aims to deliver learning environments that combine hands-on education with virtual and augmented reality technology. In doing so, we will enhance our flexibility and future-proof delivery.
- In relation to **EDI, digital learning and student grant support**, MTU is passionate about these matters and puts a lot of resources into them. There is a growing appreciation of the importance of access and EDI across the higher education sector and wider Irish society. They should be further incorporated as part of our mainstream activities, and well-funded to

maximise success. MTU is keen, in particular, to encourage more female participation in the areas of apprenticeship and STEM. Knowledge of digital learning has advanced, and providing TUs with support to maximise the benefits of digital delivery will reap rewards by increasing access, retention and success. Such supports, combined with appropriate and sustainable student grants, will make higher education more accessible to all.

- On the subjects of **life-long learning, progression pathways and CPD**, MTU is committed to ensuring that all those who wish to develop themselves are welcomed. In order to strengthen offerings in this regard, TUs require mainstream funding and support.
- MTU excels in **research, innovation, and engagement**. These activities will continue to grow with the introduction of a new academic contract that includes research. Research and innovation funding should rise to match traditional universities. The further funding of schemes to accelerate the growth of research and innovation, such as the continuation of TU Transformation Funding (TUTF), will also help reap rewards in this area.
- Finally, in relation to staff and student **mental health and wellbeing supports**, these are paramount considerations, especially in light of the pandemic. It is therefore crucial that all TUs have sufficient funding to offer appropriate supports and encourage wellbeing, rather than merely dealing with crises, which has been the historical experience to a large extent. MTU is keen to develop its offerings in this regard, and in doing will strive to achieve Healthy University status.

Thank you again, and I remain at the disposal of the Committee to contribute to the today's discussion on these important topics.

Yours sincerely,

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "Jimmy Deenihan". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

Jimmy Deenihan

Chair of MTU Governing Body