

DÁIL ÉIREANN

AN COMHCHOISTE UM OIDEACHAS AGUS SCILEANNA

JOINT COMMITTEE ON EDUCATION AND SKILLS

Déardaoin, 4 Deireadh Fómhair 2018

Thursday, 4 October 2018

The Joint Committee met at 1.45 p.m.

MEMBERS PRESENT:

Deputy Thomas Byrne,	Senator Maria Byrne,
Deputy Kathleen Funchion,	Senator Paul Gavan.
Deputy Catherine Martin,	

DEPUTY FIONA O'LOUGHLIN IN THE CHAIR.

Technological Universities Act 2018 (Section 36) (Appointed Day) Order 2018: Motion

Chairman: Apologies have been received from Senators Robbie Gallagher and Lynn Ruane. I propose that we conduct our public business with the Minister of State, Deputy Mary Mitchell O'Connor, before going into private session to deal with some housekeeping matters. Is that agreed? Agreed.

The first item on the agenda is engagement with the Minister of State with responsibility for higher education on the proposed approval by Dáil Éireann and Seanad Éireann of the Technological Universities Act 2018 (Section 36) (Appointed Day) Order 2018. On behalf of the joint committee, I am very happy to welcome the Minister of State and her officials. I invite her to make an opening statement, copies of which has been circulated to members. It will be followed by engagement with members who will have an opportunity to ask questions or seek clarification on matters, if they so wish.

Minister of State at the Department of Education and Skills (Deputy Mary Mitchell O'Connor): I am pleased to present the draft ministerial order entitled, Technological Universities Act 2018 (Section 36) (Appointed Day) Order 2018, to the joint committee for its consideration. It relates to appointing the day for the establishment of the first technological university in the State. Under section 36 of the Technological Universities Act 2018, the draft order must be approved by resolution by each House of the Oireachtas.

A key element of the national strategy for higher education to 2030 is to consolidate the institute of technology sector and establish technological universities of increased scale and capacity. Technological universities will have an emphasis on the social and economic development of their regions through the provision of programmes at levels six to eight in the national framework of qualifications. They will also provide programmes to qualify students at postgraduate levels nine and ten. They will develop and use new knowledge through industry-focused research. They will enhance the pivotal regional and national role traditionally played by institutes of technology in facilitating the widest possible access and progression by students of all ages and from all socioeconomic backgrounds through a multiplicity of full-time, part-time, blended and online learning approaches.

It is not overstating matters to say the Technological Universities Act 2018 is seminal legislation for the higher education sector. Last November I reintroduced the Technological Universities Bill on Committee Stage in the Dáil. With the committee's informed assistance and support, I took the Bill through the legislative process to its signing into law by the President on 19 March. Shortly thereafter, in late April, the first application for designation as a technological university under the new Act was made by a consortium, comprising the Dublin Institute of Technology, the Institute of Technology, Blanchardstown and the Institute of Technology, Tallaght. On 17 July my colleague, the Minister for Education and Skills, Deputy Richard Bruton, granted the consortium's application following a comprehensive international expert advisory panel assessment and receipt of the supporting views of the Higher Education Authority.

Under section 36 of the 2018 Act, an appointed day for the establishment of the technological university is required to be made by ministerial order. The order shall also specify the name by which the new technological university will be known, in both English and Irish. The order must be approved by resolution of each House of the Oireachtas. The draft order which is before the committee provides that 1 January 2019 shall be the appointed day for the establishment of a new technological university. It also provides that from the appointed day of estab-

lishment the new technological university shall be known as Technological University Dublin in the English language and Ollscoil Teicneolaíochta Bhaile Átha Cliath as Gaeilge.

When established, Technological University Dublin will be Ireland's largest higher education institution, with almost 28,000 students and more than 3,000 staff. The establishment of Technological University Dublin, the first ever technological university in the history of the State, on 1 January 2019, if the draft order is approved by both Houses of the Oireachtas, will be a milestone event in the evolution of the higher education sector. I hereby commend the draft order to the committee for its consideration and approval. I thank colleagues for their kind attention.

Deputy Thomas Byrne: We were delighted to advocate for, support and facilitate the passing of the Technological Universities Act. I particularly welcome what is happening in Dublin. There is teaching, learning and research ongoing in the Dublin Institute of Technology and the institutes of technology in Tallaght and Blanchardstown which will come together while retaining separate campuses. We offer an unequivocal welcome, as there was much toing and froing. It is to the considerable credit of new politics that the legislation has come through and there is a result from it. There has been much criticism of new politics that nothing can get done, but this could not have been done during the term of the previous Government which had the biggest majority in the history of the State. The joint committee played a key role in that regard.

Student housing is a major issue. It is of concern that it seems to be a priority of the new technological university that housing be provided for its incoming president. It has been suggested in newspapers that a property known as Kirwan House has possibly been acquired to accommodate the president. It is almost 2,000 sq. ft in size and a rezoning application in Dublin will be required. It seems we have got things the wrong way around. No accommodation is provided for the presidents of the institutes of technology, although I know that there is in other universities and that the issue can be controversial. There is a severe shortage of accommodation in Dublin. With the positives of this announcement, the establishment of the technological university at Grangegorman will bring with it the negative of a huge number of students looking for accommodation in the area. I hope the Minister of State can shed some light on what is going on in accommodating the incoming president.

Deputy Mary Mitchell O'Connor: I acknowledge the work of Deputies Thomas Byrne, Catherine Martin and Kathleen Funchion in getting the Technological Universities Act across the line and thank them for their support. I know that there were issues about which they were not happy, but a democratic process took place and I won some battles, as they did. I really appreciate their support. I only became aware today of the issue raised by Deputy Thomas Byrne.

Deputy Thomas Byrne: It was reported in the *Irish Examiner*.

Deputy Mary Mitchell O'Connor: There was a newspaper article about accommodation potentially being provided for the successful appointee as the first president of the new technological university. I asked my officials to look into the matter immediately.

Chairman: Could the Minister of State respond to the Deputy and the rest of the committee?

Deputy Mary Mitchell O'Connor: I will.

Deputy Thomas Byrne: That is the wrong way around. We should be telling our universities and institutes of technology to do everything they can to house students rather than always

pass the buck to other people. In this case, one could fit probably eight or ten students in that house, although that number might be a bit high.

Chairman: It is a concerning issue for all our students.

Deputy Mary Mitchell O'Connor: Once our officials have a reply, we will come back to the committee.

Chairman: I thank the Minister of State for that.

Deputy Thomas Byrne: I have to go to the Dáil.

Chairman: That is fine.

Deputy Thomas Byrne: If there is a vote, I would hear the bell but I doubt it.

Deputy Catherine Martin: I welcome the creation of the Technological University Dublin, TU4Dublin. It is heartening to read in the international advisory panel's report how positive the current collaboration between DIT, Institute of Technology Blanchardstown and Institute of Technology Tallaght is. I congratulate everyone who has worked on this project at all three institutions as well as the TU4Dublin programme lead on their work. I wish the students and staff members the very best of luck in 2019 in what is an exciting new chapter for higher education in Dublin and Ireland.

I have one comment about some issues raised in the advisory group panel's report, particularly the possibility of unexpected expenditure after the merger, which I believe was raised by the HEA when recommending this report. Can the Minister of State outline how she intends to ensure that unexpected but necessary funding for TU4Dublin during this phase will not come at the expense of other higher education needs? This is particularly important in the context of a higher education system that is seriously struggling and needs a huge influx of new investment to meet demographic demand.

Deputy Mary Mitchell O'Connor: I also wish TU4Dublin the very best of luck. To be fair, much collaboration took place beforehand and the expert panel could recognise that. In respect of the future funding of higher education and following on from the Cassells report, the Deputy knows that my Department commenced a programme of reform in the higher education sector. An interdepartmental working group on the future funding of higher education was established to consider this. My Department is progressing a number of different funding priorities in higher education, including reforming the model by which higher education funding is allocated and ensuring additional funding is being tied into the delivery of important national policies, for example, in educational disadvantage, addressing skills gaps or promoting research and innovation. These various requirements will be monitored through the systems performance framework 2018 to 2020 and the strategic dialogue and the performance compact processes will be overseen by the HEA. Last month, we announced a €5 million higher education innovation and transformation fund and ring-fenced that funding for multi-campus institutions.

Deputy Catherine Martin: I am aware of the Cassells report, which recommended €600 million per annum in additional current funding by 2021. We are almost there so that is the big issue of concern but I appreciate what the Minister of State is doing.

Chairman: This is certainly to be very much welcomed by all of us. It is terrific that it will be in time for the final year students in the three institutes of technology and will allow them

to graduate as university graduates. This is very significant. They will be the first cohort of students to do so in the history of the State so it is a milestone towards which everybody has worked.

I thank all the members of the committee for their work on this Bill to assist the Minister of State with it. The point regarding the accommodation crisis involving students is well made. It would be remiss of me if, on behalf of the committee, I did not say that we are very concerned about this. Deputy Thomas Byrne rightly raised the issue. There are other costs for those living in or just outside Dublin such as transport. I spoke yesterday about how when a student in my own town of Newbridge wants to take a train to go to college or university in Dublin, the monthly train ticket costs €186 and it costs another €120 for the Leap card. All it costs for somebody travelling from Sallins in Naas is the Leap card - €30. The two towns are only seven miles apart but there is an extra cost of €186. A parent recently came to see me who has two children in college. This person is paying that amount of money - almost €400 extra compared to somebody living seven miles away. This is something we must examine.

Bearing in mind what Deputy Catherine Martin said regarding the three suggestions made by the Cassells report, as the Minister of State is aware, we have been waiting for an economic assessment report from the Department. We do not have the resources to do it within the committee and have asked that this be carried out with regard to the economic impact of all of the three options on the State and the individual. We awaiting that report. Until we get it, the committee will not be able to make a final recommendation so it is hugely important and while the Minister of State is here, I must take the opportunity to remind her of that. If she wishes to comment on that, I would be happy to hear it.

Deputy Mary Mitchell O'Connor: We have a strategy on purpose-built student accommodation and are working our way through it. A total of 3,000 spaces are being built at the moment while 7,000 have planning permission and another 7,000 are in the pipeline for pre-planning so it is going ahead. I am sorry; I would love to get it done more quickly but it is going ahead.

Chairman: Will the Minister take on board what we said about transport costs for students?

Deputy Mary Mitchell O'Connor: I hear the Chairman. I have nephews and nieces in some of the colleges and I know it presents difficulties for parents. The Chairman also asked about the Cassells report. We have taken that and are getting advice in Europe on it. However, it is not just about throwing money at a system that is exactly the same as it was in 2016. We are looking for reforms and at apprenticeships and where there are skills gaps so we will be looking for reforms when there is more money coming through. I really need to tell the committee that since 2016, an extra €100 million has gone into current spending. Spending in total for higher education is €1.6 billion so that money is there. Of course, I will looking to make sure we increase that in the forthcoming budget next Tuesday.

Chairman: I accept that point but, again, as Chairman of the committee, I must point out that we have received some negative coverage in terms of not making a recommendation to the Minister of State and the Department. The reason we are waiting is because a commitment was made to give us the economic review of the impact of the three options. Quite aside from current investment in higher education, which we welcome, we are asking the Minister of State to ensure that we get that economic review as soon as possible.

Deputy Mary Mitchell O'Connor: We are looking for it from an expert group in the EU.

There is an extra €600 million and after 2020, there will be an extra €1.1 billion. I have just told the committee that the entire budget is €1.6 billion. I am very cognisant that we need more investment in education and I want the right kind of investment in the sectors in higher education in which we need to invest. I understand that the committee has received criticism but if members were sitting in my chair, they would get criticism every day. We will just have to wait and see before we invest such huge amounts of taxpayers' money.

Chairman: I must point out that this is not just about us accepting criticism. We want to get on with the work of the committee and deliver the best recommendation but we feel that we are being curtailed because we do not have the economic report. I shall leave that matter as it is.

Messages to Dáil and Seanad

Chairman: On behalf of the committee I am pleased to report to both Houses of the Oireachtas that we have completed our consideration of the motion and we recommend that the Dáil and Seanad accept this statement.

Business of Joint Committee (Resumed)

Chairman: I thank the Minister and her official-----

Deputy Mary Mitchell O'Connor: I thank all of my officials.

Chairman: Yes. I thank the Minister and her official for their attendance here today. I suggest that we go into private session to deal with housekeeping matters. Is that agreed? Agreed.

The joint committee went into private session at 2.21 p.m. and adjourned at 2.30 p.m. until 9.30 a.m. on Thursday, 18 October 2018.