

DÁIL ÉIREANN

AN COMHCHOISTE UM OIDEACHAS, BREISOIDEACHAS AGUS ÁRDOIDEACHAS, TAIGHDE, NUÁLAÍOCHT AGUS EOLAÍOCHT

JOINT COMMITTEE ON EDUCATION, FURTHER AND HIGHER EDUCATION, RESEARCH, INNOVATION AND SCIENCE

Déardaoin, 12 Samhain 2020

Thursday, 12 November 2020

Tháinig an Comhchoiste le chéile ag 1.20 p.m.

The Joint Committee met at 1.20 p.m.

Comhaltaí a bhí i láthair / Members present:

Teachtaí Dála / Deputies	Seanadóirí / Senators
Alan Farrell,	Rónán Mullen,
Pádraig O'Sullivan,	Fiona O'Loughlin,
Marc Ó Cathasaigh,	Pauline O'Reilly.
Donnchadh Ó Laoghaire.	

Teachta / Deputy Paul Kehoe sa Chathaoir / in the Chair.

Technological Universities Act 2018 (Section 36) (Appointed Day) Order 2020: Motion

Chairman: Our business today is to consider the motion relating to the Technological Universities Act 2018 (Section 36) (Appointed Day) Order 2020, copies of which were laid before Dáil Éireann and Seanad Éireann on 28 October 2020. On behalf of the committee, I welcome the Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science, Deputy Harris, the Minister of State at the Department, Deputy Niall Collins, and their officials. I will invite the Minister to make as brief as possible an opening statement and then members can ask questions. As the Ministers are probably aware, the committee will publish the opening statement on its website following the meeting.

Before we begin, I remind Members of the long-standing parliamentary practice to the effect that they should not comment on, criticise or make charges against a person outside the House or an official either by name or in such a way as to make him or her identifiable.

We want to conclude the meeting quickly in order to comply with Covid restrictions. This meeting is solely to legislate for the date of the commencement of the Munster Technological University and is essentially a technical motion. Members will have the opportunity to raise substantive issues about the Munster Technological University if they wish with the Technological Higher Education Association at the meeting scheduled for 3 December and future engagements with the Minister. I asked the Minister to appear before the committee very early in 2021 to discuss technological universities. I invite him to make his opening statement.

Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science (Deputy Simon Harris): I know the committee is tight on time. While this is a technical motion, in many ways it is a very important step because what it will effectively do is seek the start date for Ireland's second only technological university, and the first outside of Dublin. It is a key priority in the programme for Government to create and progress technological universities. I am very pleased, therefore, to introduce the following draft order to this committee, the Technological Universities Act 2018 (Section 36) (Appointed Day) Order 2020. Under the Technological Universities 2018 Act, an appointed day for the establishment of a technological university and its name in both English and Irish, shall be made by order. The order must be approved by resolution of each House of the Oireachtas. I thank the committee for the opportunity to discuss the matter today at this committee.

I wish to set 1 January 2021 as the appointed day for the establishment of a new technological university, to be known as the Munster Technological University. The establishment of only the second technological university in the State, the first as I said, outside the capital, is another important milestone for higher education in Ireland and, in particular, for the south-west region. The merging of the Institute of Technology Tralee and Cork Institute of Technology creates a new step-change institution of sufficient size, capacity and critical mass to maximise its potential and deliver significant additional benefits to the Munster region in particular, but not solely. We have a very clear ambition to create a series of interlinked higher education institutions of greater capacity and reach across all regions of the country to help deliver on national strategic objectives.

We want to ensure that all our regions become vibrant powerhouses of skills creation, research and development potential and, crucially, to provide the components necessary to deliver that potential. Technological universities, TUs, are a key component in this approach. They provide increased reach, international recognition, greater research capacity, foreign direct in-

vestment, FDI, attraction, skills retention, regional development, enhanced staff and student experiences and advanced socio-economic progress as well. Uniquely, TUs provide higher education programmes at all levels on the national framework of qualifications from apprenticeships right up to doctoral degrees.

From the turn of the year, the new Munster Technological University will start its journey and drive the agenda of higher education access, excellence in teaching and learning, regional development, research-informed educational provision, and strengthened linkages with industry in the region and the community. The new TU will build on what is best in both of these prestigious institutes of technology, particularly in regard to sectoral strengths in apprenticeships and strong links with industry and employers. As a unified and cohesive new entity, the Munster Technological University can expand beyond individual hinterlands and become a force to be reckoned with nationally and internationally. This is a significant step forward and I look forward to having a chance to discuss it with members in more detail when we appear before this committee on technological universities.

I record my thanks to all of those who have been involved for many years in driving this agenda, in particular all the staff, students, the project group and the governing authorities and presidents of both the Institute of Technology Tralee and Cork Institute of Technology.

Chairman: I thank the Minister. I will call Deputy Farrell, whom I ask to be brief.

Deputy Alan Farrell: I do not have any question, so I will be brief. I compliment the Minister and the Department on this step. It is the second step in an important process for our regions. I have a personal interest in seeing a technological university arrive in the south east, but this meeting specifically relates to the one in Munster and I am delighted to see it happen. As has been outlined correctly, it provides an opportunity for recognition of the regions in educational terms, which will bring everything the Minister mentioned, including foreign direct investment, FDI. It is a positive step and I look forward to the next phases the Minister outlined, those being, the roll-outs across the entire country.

Deputy Donnchadh Ó Laoghaire: As a Deputy from Cork, I will obviously welcome the fact that the MTU has progressed. It might take us a while to get used to it, but perhaps a good run in the Fitzgibbon and Sigerson cups will do that. I hope that this process will be extended. My colleague, Deputy Conway-Walsh, is anxious for a technological university in the north west.

As welcome as this development is, there are still issues that need to be resolved, for example, policies relating to staff. I urge the Minister and Minister of State to keep an eye on these and ensure that they are resolved in co-operation with staff and their representatives. It is positive overall, though. Well done.

Chairman: Instead of replying now, I will ask the Minister to take a note of the questions so that he can answer them together. I call Deputy O'Sullivan.

Deputy Pádraig O'Sullivan: I have no questions. I welcome the announcement. There have been a number of job announcements in Cork in recent months, including this morning by Qualcomm, which has announced a €78 million investment in Cork over the next four years. The establishment of this regional university will increase the attractiveness of Cork for training new graduates and attracting FDI. CIT is in my constituency. It will probably take me a number of years to refer to it by its new name, but this is a welcome development.

Senator Fiona O'Loughlin: I remember the palpable excitement two years ago concerning Technological University Dublin, TU Dublin, attaining its status. There was a realisation of the large number of opportunities it could provide, which have since come true. It is great that we are at the point of a second technological university coming into play. We all know of the legendary rivalry between Cork and Kerry, but it is great to see both third level institutions coming together to form this body, which will cater for 18,000 students. There is no doubt that the link between research and attracting business and providing jobs is important. We have seen this across the Continent. In terms of attracting inward investment, this announcement will be important for Cork and Kerry. I look forward to similar progress being made in the south east and north west.

The technological university will fully support apprenticeships, which are important for the future of skill-based jobs. Yesterday, a committee discussed opportunities for people with disabilities to attend third level institutions. It is important that there be a placement quota for those with disabilities, for example, on rapid access programmes. I would appreciate it if the Minister addressed this point.

Chairman: I welcome this fantastic development. Well done to the Minister, the Department and other officials on getting it over the line. Regarding the investment opportunities that such a facility can bring to a region, perhaps the Minister will update us on the technological university for the south east. This might be parochial of me, but has the Minister information on the site in County Wexford? The south east is lacking investment. We have had some good news in recent weeks, but there will be real benefits in the form of further investment and opportunities once we get the technological university over the line.

Deputy Marc Ó Cathasaigh: I am not sure if the Chairman is being parochial. Rather, he is speaking for the south east and I echo his comments.

I welcome the technological university project overall and the MTU specifically. I agree with the Chairman's comments on the quantum of funding in particular. Quite an amount of capital funding has been made available to facilitate the MTU. Can we expect such a substantial level of funding to facilitate the creation of a technological university in the south east?

Chairman: Does Senator Mullen wish to contribute?

Senator Rónán Mullen: Briefly. I welcome this important development. I have an association with TU Dublin and I have seen its importance for that region and everyone involved. This development will enhance the life chances and opportunities of those who attend. I wish everyone involved in bringing this forward to the next phase the very best.

Deputy Simon Harris: I will respond quickly. I welcome the bipartisan and significant support for the agenda of technological universities. In and of itself, that sends an important message to all those across our country who are working on trying to get technological universities over the line. A large amount of work goes into such a project. It is not just about merging institutions and changing letterheads. It is more profound than that. It is about trying to create a powerhouse within one's region in terms of skills, linkages with industry and access to education, whereby someone does not have to trek somewhere else to attend a university.

A number of members asked about other technological universities. TU Dublin was established on 1 January 2019. It is now the largest higher education institution in the country with more than 28,000 students. It published its first strategic plan in 2020. The MTU will open its

doors as a new entity on 1 January, subject to the approval of the Oireachtas of that designation date. In an issue close to the Minister of State, Deputy Niall Collins' heart, Athlone IT and Limerick IT intend to make a joint application for technological university designation before the end of the year. It will be an important step. The Connacht-Ulster Alliance, which Deputy Ó Laoghaire asked about, will serve the north west and comprises Galway-Mayo IT, Letterkenny IT and IT Sligo. It is working on its application, which it expects to submit by the end of this year. The Chairman and Deputy Ó Cathasaigh asked about the south east. The Technological University for the South East, TUSE, consortium has delivered its project plan to me. I intend to bring it to the Cabinet, probably this month but certainly before Christmas. It will then be published. The consortium expects to submit an application for designation to me next April or May. That work is on track. Regarding the multi-county campus, I assure the Chairman that my Department's commitment and that of the consortium to ensuring that there will be a Wexford site is clear. This is not a university that will be owned by any one county. Having a footprint in each of the counties of the south east is important. Our commitment to Wexford remains in that regard.

Deputy Ó Laoghaire asked about staff. This is an important issue, given that we are discussing a large workforce whose members have been working and doing a good job in different institutions. From reading through my notes, there has been considerable engagement with unions, including the Teachers' Union of Ireland, TUI, and the like. I believe it was in April that the TUI requested the Department to progress a number of issues at national level with it, the Technological Higher Education Association, THEA, and TU Dublin. I understand there is a process targeted at a collective discussion of working through certain issues that arose in the initiation of the MTU consortium situation, but that will equally apply as we continue to roll out TUs. I give an assurance that that engagement will continue. On funding, in reply to Deputy Ó Cathasaigh, I will circulate a table to the committee showing the breakdown regarding the funding being provided in Exchequer allocations to make these projects a reality. Regarding the Technological University for the South-East Ireland, TUSEI, an allocation of €5.1 million runs from 1 September this year until 31 August next year. We also have the technological university transformation fund and I remain committed to ensuring that is fully harnessed.

Senator O'Loughlin asked a question about something close to my heart. I had some good meetings with disability organisations since taking up this role. It is fair to say that we are making good progress at primary level and second level, and then, frankly, we fall off a cliff. During my time as Minister for Health, all the questions concerned what would be done for school leavers in respect of day care places, an important issue, but never about what they wanted to do in respect of further and higher education.

I had a good meeting with the Trinity Centre for People with Intellectual Disabilities, TCPID, which does incredible work. Why is that only in Trinity, however, and with ten places each year? I would like to see that model, or something close to it, rolled out across other institutions. I am meeting with a range of stakeholders on Monday in that regard, and I am happy to keep Senator O'Loughlin and the committee updated. I think we are also going to have a detailed debate on technological universities in January and I look forward to that.

Chairman: I thank the Minister.

Messages to Dáil and Seanad

JEFHERIS

Chairman: In accordance with Standing Order 101, the following message will be sent to the Dáil:

The Joint Committee on Education, Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science has completed its consideration of the following motion:

That Dáil Éireann approves the following Order in draft:

Technological Universities Act 2018 (Section 36) (Appointed Day) Order 2020,
a copy of which was laid before Dáil Éireann on 28th October, 2020.

In accordance with Standing Order 75, the following message will be sent to the Seanad:

The Joint Committee on Education, Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science has completed its consideration of the following motion:

That Seanad Éireann approves the following Order in draft:

Technological Universities Act 2018 (Section 36) (Appointed Day) Order 2020,
a copy of which was laid before Seanad Éireann on 28th October, 2020.

The joint committee adjourned at 1.42 p.m. until 1.30 p.m. on Tuesday, 17 November 2020.