

Hanafin urged to "get off the fence" during testy Dáil debate on WIT

Education Minister Mary Hanafin was urged to "get off the fence" on the great WIT question during exchanges in the Dáil last Wednesday with her Fine Gael counterpart Brian Hayes.

When Deputy Hayes queried if a decision would be made on WIT's submission before the summer, Labour's Ruairí Quinn wryly observed: "The Deputy has got to be joking."

In a lengthy statement to the House, Minister Hanafin again spoke of WIT's many virtues, but didn't appear to add anything new to her previous public utterances on the institute's bid for an academic upgrade.

"The options presented in the Port report are being examined carefully by officials of my Department and the Higher Education Authority with a view to developing specific proposals on the appropriate next steps in the context of wider considerations," she said.

"I intend to present proposals to Government in this regard very shortly."

Deputy Hayes bluntly replied: "The net question is if the Minister supports the establishment of a university in the south east," prompting Leas Cheann Comhairle and Wexford TD Brendan Howlin to add: "It is a very important question."

But Minister Hanafin kept 'on message' as she has throughout the recent escalation of the WIT debate, which has taken on an increasingly national dimension thanks to the high-profile FUSE campaign.

"The application will be considered in the context of not only the region of Waterford but also international priorities," she said. "That leaves something for Government to consider."

Growing increasingly frustrated with Minister Hanafin's replies, Deputy Hayes claimed that the Port Report was commissioned "to get her through the general election".

He added: "Will the Minister please get off the fence and make up her mind on the issue? The Cabinet is clearly affected by dissension and division on the subject, as could be noted from the rather public spat the Minister had with the Minister for Social and Family Affairs, Deputy Cullen, at the Fianna Fáil parliamentary party meeting last month.

"When will the Minister make up her mind on the issue? Her indecision is leading to total instability within the higher education sector and she must come to a view sooner rather than later as to the future and the responsibility and need for a university in the south east."

When again asking Minister Hanafin to commit to a Government decision on WIT's application, Deputy Hayes was told that proposals based on the Port Report's recommendations "will happen in the coming weeks".

Reacting to the debate, Senator Paudie Coffey said that Minister Hanafin had "fudged on this issue leaving the people of

Waterford out in the cold”.

Said Senator Coffey: “However, as her response in the Dáil illustrated, not only has she not come to a view on a university for the South East, she hasn’t even brought the matter to cabinet...

“The key issue on which she must decide is whether to allow the Waterford application, which was made in 2005, to be independently assessed under section nine (of the Universities Act, 1997), as it currently stands.

“As Fine Gael’s policy document on this issue shows, Waterford should be independently assessed and, we believe, in that situation, it would be granted university status. The south east deserves it.”