

'Fawlt Towers' at WIT



IT disruption blights start of academic year

Teaching staff at WIT have complained to the Institute's President about the 'massive disruption and stress' and professional embarrassment they've suffered since the start of the new academic year.

This, they claim, has been due to by obsolete technology and widespread IT systems failures, with both lecturers and students left without access to proper timetables, email, internet and Moodle, WIT's online learning platform.

And, in a worrying blow to the Institute's amalgamation with IT Carlow and aspirant elevation to technological university status, WIT lecturers said it seemed "ludicrous" to proceed with negotiations while these serious issues go unaddressed.

In a letter sent to WIT's President Dr Ruaidhrí Neavyn by the local branch of the Teachers Union of Ireland last Monday, lecturing staff complained about working on old PCs that don't have the capacity to deal with current file sizes and are prone to seizing up and crashing altogether.

The letter states: "PCs and projectors in most of the teaching rooms are the same. In addition, there has been no budget available for replacement of ink cartridges in printers, or for the replacement of the antiquated lecturers' photocopiers (two each in the Cork Road and College Street campuses) that are regularly 'out of order'.

"Through their good will, working with obsolete technology, lecturers have been able to keep the learning process on track, that is, until this semester."

Lecturers believe that many students opted not to return to class until the second or third week of September due to the IT problems, which has led to WIT's disparagement in social media commentary, earning monikers including 'Waterford Institute of Non-Technology' and 'Fawlt Towers'.

In the letter to Dr Neavyn, seen by The Munster Express, lecturing staff lashed out at a "wholly inadequate response on the part of senior management" to an ongoing IT systems failure "involving failures in hardware, software, systems and servers... exacerbated by inefficiencies and inadequacies in the timetabling and registration systems".

"The ongoing lack of network and internet connectivity, intermittent connectivity and/or very slow connectivity speeds, means staff cannot rely on email communication, use Moodle to anywhere near its full potential and are limited in their access to teaching resources and research", the letter continued.

"As a consequence, lecturing staff and their Heads of Department are suffering professional embarrassment and work-related stress; there are no immediate consequences for senior management."

The TUI's letter was sent in response to "many members" making contact with the local branch, a source indicated.

It also highlighted serious concerns amongst teaching staff that the general systems chaos at WIT was having an especially negative impact on the college's ability to attract and retain students, especially non-national students who rely heavily on social media in deciding where to attend college.

"Frankly, it seems ludicrous for WIT to proceed with negotiations for an amalgamation with IT Carlow and especially an application for consideration to be a Technological University when these critical issues remain unaddressed", the letter said.

"The TUI strongly contend that senior management should invest time and energy in actually improving the operational delivery and capabilities of WIT under its current remit, before senior management wastes further time and resources in negotiating an amalgamation with IT Carlow."

Dr Neavyn has since responded to WIT staff, and in an email sent last Friday, he apologised for what he described as a "series of unrelated difficulties with the IT systems".

He also acknowledged the Computer Services team for agreeing to work outside normal office hours to correct some of these internal issues as quickly as possible.

"The senior management team is very conscious of these issues and is closely monitoring the situation with a view to rectifying them as soon as possible," he continued.

In a statement to The Munster Express, Dr Neavyn said that WIT's Governing Body recognised the strategic importance of ICT facilities at the Institute and has set aside capital funding for the coming years to maintain and improve this infrastructure for all stakeholders.

“WIT has one of the largest ICT infrastructures in the sector supporting 7,500 active network points with peak traffic for September 2014 at twice what it was for September 2013 as well as 2,500 devices concurrently connected to the wireless network throughout peak times.

“The Institute also continues to lead the sector in efficient registration and other online facilities for students.

“Some of the upgrades to our systems this year have included an upgrade to the network infrastructure and servers; upgrading of the timetabling system and increased internet connectivity from 1Gb to 10Gb (one of the few in Higher Education).”

The statement concluded: “We acknowledge that the college has had some IT issues in the last month, many of which were outside of our control. We responded to those issues very promptly and all services are back up and running at full strength.”