

WIT SHOTS DOWN MERGER INTERVENTION



Pictured with Kerry football star and AIB Bank Youth Ambassador Colm 'The Gooch' Cooper (promoting the 'Future Me' project) at Ardscoil na Mara, Tramore were, from left: Sadie Mai Rowe, Jamie Lee Kirby and Niamh Purcell. See Townlands 8-13 for a special feature on Tramore's new Secondary School. | Photo: John Power

Board unhappy with “unwelcome interference” in decision making

The Executive Board of Waterford Institute of Technology (WIT) has shot down Government plans to revive a merger with IT Carlow, with a view to creating a Technological University of the south east.

The Heads of School at WIT, including President Dr Ruaidhri Neavyn, attended a special meeting last Thursday at which a decision was made to refuse to accept the new process agreed by Cabinet earlier in the week to get the merger back on track. This followed Education Minister Jan O’Sullivan’s appointment of Michael Kelly, a former Department of Health secretary, to oversee a new consultation process between the governing bodies, staff and students in Waterford and Carlow to “develop a shared vision for a technological university in the South East”.

In the wake of last Thursday’s meeting, the Executive Board drafted a letter “categorically asserting the autonomy” of WIT and “insisting on the Institute retaining the right to determine its own future direction”.

This letter is to be sent to Minister O’Sullivan and was also forwarded to WIT’s Governing Body, which held a special meeting on Monday to consider their stance on the new process.

Last month, the Governing Body took the unprecedented decision to suspend all activities related to the merger following a draft review by UK academic Professor John Taylor, which said it would be at least five years before a merged institution could meet the stated criteria for Technological University status, while Waterford, as a standalone body, could make the grade in the next two years.

The Executive Board’s letter to Minister O’Sullivan, which was postdated to yesterday (Monday) in anticipation of a reaction from the Governing Body, refers to the Government’s attempt to force the merger as “unwelcome interference in the institute’s decision-making”.

A multi-campus Technological University of the South East is in the Programme for Government and was spearheaded by Wexford-based Public Expenditure Minister Brendan Howlin and former Carlow-Kilkenny TD and now EU Commissioner Phil Hogan. However the Executive Body’s letter expressed concern that recent actions by the current government will adversely impact on the Institute’s ability to perform for the region and ‘will delay, indefinitely, the achievement of a university for the South East’.

The letter said attempts to ‘force WIT into a merger which is not capable of meeting the criteria for the creation of a technological university’, were ‘unacceptable’.

Lecturers at WIT have consistently argued that the Institute has been operating at 'university-level' for some time, by national and international standards. Representing union the Teachers Union of Ireland (TUI) released a statement in recent days expressing concern that the proposed merger would 'just create a very big IT, with all the associated costs, upheavals and unpredictability, and with no certainty of attaining university status'. The TUI described attempts by the Minister of Education to try to force the merger as a 'gross interference' in the independence of the institute.

The TUI said last week's resignation of WIT Governing Body chair Dr Donie Ormonde was a surprise to staff and demanded that the appointment of his successor be made 'in the interests of WIT, not on the basis of political expediency'.