

WIT's R&D arm a trump card in bid for University upgrade



Professor Willie Donnelly of WIT (in conversation with Minister Sean Sherlock and Deputy Ciara Conway) is one of the Institute's great driving forces. | Photo: Noel Browne

The undoubted strength of the Research Department at Waterford Institute of Technology (WIT) could well prove the trump card if the long held ambition of University/Technological University status is to be realised.

As we reported in our Editorial in last week's edition, WIT compares well with what are considered Ireland's 'medium range' universities when it comes to research funding, particularly the University of Limerick (UL).

A Higher Education performance evaluation report covering 2007-2010 states that the college drew in €17 million in research grants and funding, with UL and NUIM attracting €14m and €42m respectively (Cork IT is drawing in €14m, while UCC was in receipt of €70m) in the same period.

However, as also noted in last week's edition, IT Carlow (ITC), which the Government remains committed to merging with WIT, lags significantly behind all of the aforementioned, drawing in only €1.8m over the same timescale.

According to Professor Willie Donnelly, the Vice-President of Research and Innovation, WIT has secured over of €100m in research funding and has expanded its research briefs across a range of areas, namely telecommunications, pharmaceutical and molecular biotechnology research, applied materials and eco-innovation.

Prof Donnelly is also Director of the Telecommunications Software and Systems Group (TSSG), which is based at the West Campus in Carriganore, a body which he himself founded in 1996.

"We started off with a staff of three - we now have 120 staff and in that time we have secured over €80 million in competitive funding," he said.

"At present we have 20PhD supervisors, and across the Institute we currently have in excess of 180 PhD students, with 29 of that number due to graduate this year."

It takes four years to achieve a PhD, representing a significant body of academic work, and it is this level of education and the expansion of WIT's PhD base which will play a significant role in the Institute achieving its much sought upgrade.

For a lecturer to attain the levels required to supervise a PhD student on a full-time basis, they themselves must hold a PhD which takes four years to achieve and then commit to another four years of supervised training and mentoring.

As Willie Donnelly put it: "This is, by any stretch of the imagination, a long road to travel. Eight years is a significant commitment but the rewards come the end of that academic journey are worth it, in my view." WIT has a further 190 PhD students registered at present.

Of course, the option to hire in PhD lecturers from abroad to bridge the eight-year training gap could come into play, but only if there was a change of funding policy at the Departments of Education and Public Expenditure.

Carlow certainly appears to require such a move, and Minister Brendan Howlin, who has tied his colours to the ITC/WIT merger mast, could open the purse strings, but with other high-end third level bodies seeking additional funding, such an option doesn't appear to be on the table right now.

WIT has a strong record with Enterprise Ireland via the TSSG and remains the only IT in the State to lead a Science Foundation Ireland (SFI) Research Centre, and that too is something worth championing.

Said Prof Donnelly: "I don't believe that politicians, however well intended they are, understand how long it takes to build up a research centre such as the TSSG. Developing new academic, research and industry projects takes time, and you're talking about developments that cannot necessarily be delivered within an election cycle, for example..."

"I firmly and truly believe that the endgame here - be it as a University or a Technological University - also involves a process which cannot be rushed. To do this right shall take time, and it has to be done right, in my view."

Prof Donnelly added: "We know what our strengths are, we know what WIT's key selling point is and I feel we know what it can evolve and grow into looking into the future. But for me, the focus must be on the internationally established benchmark

required to achieve University status.

“Be that as a Technological University, as a merged entity, then we must do all we can to best combined the strengths of such merged Institutes in terms of population and reach, which will only boost the south east, but the economic, research and industrial potential of the entire State.”

As the funding data in the adjoining table clearly indicates, there is a yawning research gap between WIT and ITC, a level of mismatch which political will alone cannot change, one suspects, between now and the general election.

This data again suggests that WIT would be clearly better suited in a new partnership proposal with another University or Cork IT if a meaningful upgrade is to be realised.