

TU Bid is "Teetering"

Eoghan Dalton Reports



Crisis talks are being conducted between staff and management at Waterford Institute of Technology (WIT) to prevent the region's Technological University (TU) bid from going off course. This year has seen relations between both deteriorate, with a number of industrial actions overwhelmingly approved by Teachers' Union of Ireland (TUI) branch members at WIT. A key part of the dispute is based around the union's claim that there has been a lack of consultation, engagement and information in the bid for a Technological University of the South East (TUSE). Another disputed point has been a lack of transparency around the membership of the TUSE steering group.

The application for the TUSE was declared finalised in September but it remains surrounded by controversy thanks to the ongoing dispute concerning allegations about staff involvement. A meeting is to take place today (Tuesday) between the WIT and the TUI branches at the Institute, while another sit-down took place between the TUI branches in Waterford and Carlow and the IT management in each county. A meeting between the branches and their respective managements took place in Kilkenny in the past fortnight, however confusion persists.

In an interview prior to that first meeting, the TUI Branch Secretary at WIT, Dr Kathleen Moore Walsh, said she feared the application process for a Technological University had been "at best, completely mismanaged and at worse, a concerted effort to deprive members of their right to information and consultation". Having viewed minutes from meetings of the steering group, acquired under Freedom of Information legislation, Dr Moore Walsh added that the steering group had spent "more time discussing letterhead than consultation with various staff groups. My concerns have not been assuaged in the least. "Nothing in the minutes makes me believe that the steering group acknowledges or even recognises the branch members' rights to information and consultation. We want to be part of the process that is going to dissolve our workplace and nothing suggests that we have or will be part of the process".

The minutes also show that the membership of the steering group was asked to be added to the TUSE website days before it became an issue at a hearing of the Workplace Relations Commission on 2nd of October.

At that hearing, the TUI branch members say they were told the membership was free to view on the website. The minutes from a steering group meeting on the 28th of September state that the chair, "requested that the names of the members of the Steering Group be published in the interests of transparency". Previous industrial action took place in September, when WIT and IT Carlow union branches voted in favour of withdrawing from any TU-related activity, having said no meetings had taken place between management and staff regarding what the TUSE would mean for the workplace.

That action has now been reinstated by both branches. The TUI Executive is to meet this later this week to decide whether to approve of the WIT branch's vote, while the ITC action is ongoing. TUI branch members at WIT have also passed a motion of no confidence in the TUSE steering group. The motion said that the steering group had been operating on Terms of Reference that had not been reviewed or approved by the WIT Governing Body. It further read that the "branch has grave concerns regarding the actions undertaken to date by the improperly constituted steering group".

A document laying out the mission and values of the new TUSE, prepared during the work of the TUSE steering group, are on course to also be rejected by staff in their current form. Dr Moore Walsh said the writing of these documents took place without consultation and so "contain elements that adequately address members' concerns". According to the September minutes, one of the WIT management on the TUSE steering group raised concerns that non-academic staff may not "feel part of the journey" and would need to be included in the application. When asked if the WIT branch members have felt part of the journey and process for the application, Dr Moore Walsh said: "No. We didn't even know that the journey commenced until we were told on September 5th in an all staff meeting that the steering group's application was going to be submitted at the end of September. We were told that consultation would take place after the application."

When asked if WIT had any comment to make on claims by the TUI that members had not been consulted, informed or engaged with throughout the process towards TU status, a spokesperson directed this newspaper to the TUSE to receive a direct response. At the time of going to print, no response had been received from the TUSE. Among the industrial actions being taken by the TUI at the Institute in recent weeks, is a work-to-rule in support of a female member of staff who has not received back-pay after a delay in their progression from assistant lecturer to the role of lecturer.

The Workplace Relations Commission (WRC) ordered back-pay of around €18,000 be paid. However, WIT told this newspaper that the Department of Education has told it in the past week that cannot sanction the awards as the lecturers' claims are cost increasing they are prohibited under national pay agreements. It added that complaints revolving around lecturer progression should have been raised by the TUI at the national forum "after exhausting local avenues and before the matter was referred under Section 13 to the Workplace Relations Commission".