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2011-11-25

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Irish Times

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Recommended Citation

Irish Times, "Senior Figures in Education Echo Hunt's View that there is no Case for More Universities, Technological or Otherwise" (2011). *Media*. 31.

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Senior figures in education echo Hunt's view that there is no case for more universities - technological or otherwise

Fri, Nov 25, 2011, 00:00

First published:

Fri, Nov 25, 2011, 00:00

Waterford's long battle has gained renewed impetus after the abrupt closure of the TalkTalk call centres. In Dublin, DIT, Blanchardstown IoT and Tallaght IoT have joined forces in a bid to gain redesignation as a "technological university". In Cork, the local IoT has a long-standing demand for some form of university status on the table.

There is every prospect that one – if not more – of these bids will enjoy some success. One senior education official conceded last week that "the grassroots pressure" from Fine Gael and Labour party members in Waterford is immense. Similar pressure is no doubt being applied for some kind of redesignation for DIT in line with its hopes to move to its new campus at Grangegorman, even though the flow of exchequer funding for this has been delayed.

For these colleges, and some other IoTs, redesignation is seen as a panacea which will automatically bestow a new status on the institution – and act as a catalyst for economic revival and growth in their region. It's an alluring prospect if you are the president of an institute of technology – but does it serve the national interest?

To serve a population of four million, Ireland has seven universities and 14 institutes of technology. Each has its own academic structure and administration. Each has its own much-prized tradition and ethos.

Last year, the Government-commissioned National Strategy Group on Higher Education by Dr Colin Hunt considered the case for more universities. It was blunt in its assessment; it ruled out the prospect of any new universities. It also rejected the demand by the institute of technology sector for a single federal national technological university. Instead, it favoured the institutes working in regional clusters as essentially junior partners to the universities.

As a sop to the sector, Hunt held out the prospect that some institutes could be redesignated as technological universities – provided very strict conditions were met. It is this latter proposal that has driven the recent move by DIT and the institutes in Blanchardstown and Tallaght to push for a technological university in Dublin. This Dublin Alliance promises that the new "Technological University of Dublin" will "break new ground" in the higher education sector. For its part, Waterford Institute of Technology says redesignation could help reinvigorate the economy in the southeast.

These are lofty claims which should be fully analysed and tested before any decision is made by Government. Instead, the decision will probably be made on the basis of the pressure applied to Government ministers and deputies in both Dublin and Waterford. Privately, senior figures in education echo Hunt's view that there is no case for more universities – technological or otherwise. But political realities may result in some kind of special deal for Waterford and the Dublin Alliance.

It's no way to run a higher education system. Minister for Education Ruairí Quinn would do better if he told the various colleges to end their apparent obsession with redesignation and focus instead on boosting quality. He might also remind them that California Institute of Technology is the highest ranked higher education college in the world with MIT not far behind in the latest rankings.

There are many issues in the institute of technology sector which should take precedence over the redesignation issue. Several come to mind including;

The workload of some staff: Last year the Comptroller and Auditor General John Buckley said it was "disturbing that some lecturers have a belief that their obligations to an institute of technology are exhausted upon delivery of contract hours which are set in terms of a norm of 16 hours per week".

Mission drift: In recent years there has been criticism the institutes – formerly regional technical colleges – have moved away from their original mission of supporting industry. All now offer an extensive range of arts and humanities courses; most duplicate courses already on offer in the universities.

Low international rankings:DIT is the only one of the 14 institutes to feature in the world rankings, ranked in the 401 to 450 bracket in the latest QS ranking.

Employment:Despite their mandate, the IoTs have been slow to demonstrate to policymakers and the wider public how they are driving employment in their regions. Hunt demanded that any new technological universities should be more closely aligned to labour market needs, a thinly veiled criticism of current practice.

Hunt also says there are strong arguments against simply making changes to the names of institutions. Any such changes could, if allowed, lead to confusion internationally as to the roles and mission of Irish institutions, the report said. But is anyone in Government listening?

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