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26 May, 2020 - Government announces decision on Munster Technological University application

An Taoiseach Leo Varadkar TD, Minister for Education and Skills Joe McHugh TD and Minister of State for Higher Education Mary Mitchell O'Connor today (26 May 2020) announced the decision to grant Technological University Status to the TU Consortium made up of Cork Institute of Technology and Institute of Technology Tralee.

An Taoiseach Leo Varadkar TD said: "This is an important day for higher education in Ireland and for the South West. The Government has a very clear ambition to expand and consolidate higher education facilities, to boost economic development across the country and to attract research funding. Technological Universities are central to delivering on this. The establishment of the Munster Technological University will stimulate a more balanced growth of population and employment across Ireland. It will make it easier to secure foreign direct investment and provide quality jobs in the region. This new TU in Munster will be a driver of regional development, and it will help to make higher education more accessible. Above all else it will provide more opportunities for individuals, enterprise and the community. I want to thank both Institutes, their staff, students and management. I congratulate in particular Minister Mary Mitchell O'Connor who has been driving this change."

Minister McHugh said: "I am delighted that we can announce this landmark development for the South West region and for Irish higher education, in line with the Government's strategy for higher education and regional development. The development of the new university from these two institutes will bring enormous benefit to the higher education landscape, to both institutions' communities and stakeholders and to the region.

"Both institutes have worked hard and overcome challenges to meet the conditions stipulated so that it is possible to announce this decision, and subject to the relevant Oireachtas process, proceed to award TU status.

"I would like to thank all concerned, and also thank sincerely the international advisory panel which played a key statutory role earlier in the initial application process, the Higher Education Authority, Quality and Qualifications Ireland as well as my Department officials."

The Minister noted that it is important also that both institutes maintain a continued focus on ongoing engagement with staff representatives in relation to certain industrial relations issues currently under negotiation and in stabilising the financial situation in Tralee in line with the sustainability plan which has been developed. This plan has received positive assessment and endorsement from the Higher Education Authority.

The process to designate a new Technological University is underpinned in the Technological Universities Act 2018 which the Minister of State for Higher Education Mitchell O'Connor piloted through the Oireachtas to subsequent enactment on 19 March 2018.

Minister Mitchell O'Connor said: "Today is a great day for the South West and for the higher education system in Ireland. The higher education landscape is changing and the people who will benefit most are the students of the South West. The technological university model provides the template to drive regional development, enhance opportunities for students, staff and business, enterprise and community stakeholders, and creates a step change in the impact and influence of these institutions regionally, nationally and internationally.

"Munster TU will now take its place in our higher education system. It is essential that a new university is agile, forward thinking and builds on the combined strengths of its staff and students across all disciplines and all levels, promoting enhanced teaching, learning and qualifications opportunities for students, from apprenticeship level right up to post-doctoral level.

"This type of far-seeing initiative is doubly important to us, individually and collectively, as we begin to work through the Covid-19 and emerging post-Covid-19 realities.

"I know how hard everyone involved has worked to make this next step a reality. There is a deep commitment to ensuring that staff can flourish academically and in their research activity in the new environment, and that students will see Munster TU as a place where they can thrive and develop. This commitment and this drive will ensure that the university will take its place proudly in our higher education landscape, contribute hugely to our knowledge, innovation and research base and can drive change in our society and economy. I would like to warmly congratulate the many people from the two institutions who have brought us to today's announcement and look forward to a strong future for this exciting new university."

A draft Ministerial order will subsequently be prepared for approval by resolution by both Houses of the Oireachtas for the appointed day of 1 January 2021 for the establishment of Munster Technological University and the dissolution of Cork IT and IT Tralee following the designation by the Minister of a first president and the appointment of the first governing body to the new university. As such, students graduating in the 2020 – 2021 academic year will do so with university qualifications.

ENDS

Notes for Editors

1. Background to MTU Consortium Application and Decision

The two Institutes of Cork Institute of Technology and Institute of Technology Tralee applied to the Minister in February 2019 as the Munster Technological University (MTU) consortium for the making of an order Under the Technological Universities Act 2018, seeking the dissolution of their institutes and to be established as the second technological university in the state, the first outside the capital.

The Minister postponed his decision to grant the consortium's application in September 2019 instead setting out a number of conditions to be met jointly by the institutes. These conditions related to strategic vision, stakeholder engagement, governance structures and joint planning and were to be met by the applicant institutes before the Minister made his final decision. The current challenging financial position of IT Tralee also required the submission of a viable sustainability plan endorsed by the Higher Education Authority. The Minister set a deadline of end March 2020 for the institutes to demonstrate their joint compliance with the required conditions.

Technological University Policy – National Strategy for Higher Education

The development and progression of technological universities is an established policy objective of Government in the context of overarching national strategy on higher education landscape restructuring and arises from recommendations contained in the National Strategy for Higher Education to 2030 published in 2011.

Since the publication of the National Strategy a number of consortia of Institutes of Technology have with Exchequer co-funding support been progressing proposals seeking to become TUs. The process to do so is now underpinned in the Technological Universities Act 2018 which the Minister of State for Higher Education Mitchell O'Connor piloted through the Oireachtas to subsequent enactment on 19 March 2018. Under the statutory framework provided in the Act, two or more IOTs may jointly seek TU designation through a prescribed legislative process. Section 29 of the 2018 Act provides for the application jointly by two or more applicant institutes to the Minister of Education and Skills for an order seeking designation as a TU subject to their jointly meeting specified eligibility criteria. Section 38 of the 2018 Act provides that an applicant institute and an established technological university may apply to the Minister for an order.

The 2019 TU Research Network (TURN) Report, prepared through a process initiated by the Department of Education and Skills, entitled '*Technological Universities: Connectedness & Collaboration enabled by Connectivity*' details the case and requirements for a state change in higher education reform whereby TUs will assist in the delivery of national strategic objectives for regional socio-economic development, higher education access, research and skills progression. The TURN report is available on the Department's website.

On foot of the TURN report's publication, Government announced in Budget 2020 the provision of €90 million over the next three years under a new TU Transformation Fund to support Institutes of Technology to jointly achieve TU designation and to further the advancement of established TUs. This dedicated funding is additional to the €31 million in Exchequer funding invested in TU development and progression to date.

The first TU in the history of the state, TU Dublin, was established on 1 January 2019. Currently, seven out of the other nine Institutes of Technology are involved in TU development consortia, the exceptions being Dundalk IT and Dun Laoghaire IADT.