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Technological universities are not a 'mistake', they are 21st-century higher education

They provide a wide range of education and research opportunities to...

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Technological universities were not created through a process of rebranding as universities, as was the UK practice. Photograph: iStock

Tom Boland
Ellen Hazelkorn
Tue Oct 3 2023 - 05:00



Philip Altbach and Hans de Wit's argument in this newspaper on September 3rd, [In creating new technological universities, did we make a mistake?](#), for a system of higher education with strongly differentiated institutions by mission and outcomes, chimes well with national policy.

Similarly, their argument supports the policy of a unified tertiary education and training system. They also rightly point to some of the risks for Ireland of an increasingly homogeneous higher education system.

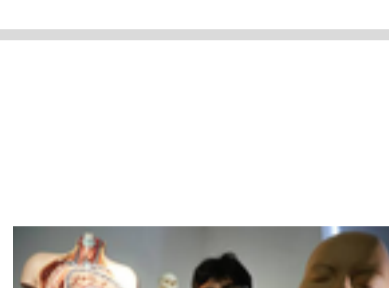
But, in laying this potential outcome at the door of the creation of technological universities (TU), they give insufficient recognition to the need for higher education systems to change to meet the needs of the 21st century.

Technological universities were not created through a process of rebranding as universities, as was the UK practice.

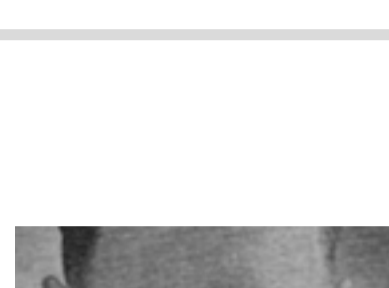
The authors overstate the importance of a rigid binary system as the way to safeguard against homogeneity and the comparison they make with the UK experience is overdone. The latter holds few, if any, direct lessons for Ireland and, inadvertently, the comparison does a disservice to the institutes of technology in achieving TU status.

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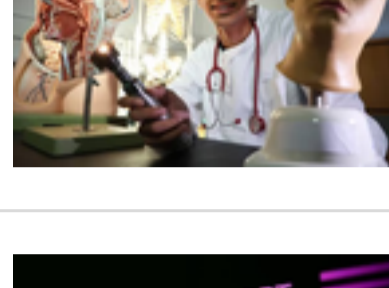
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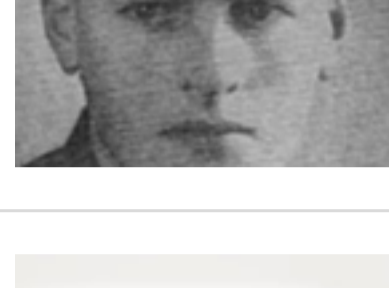
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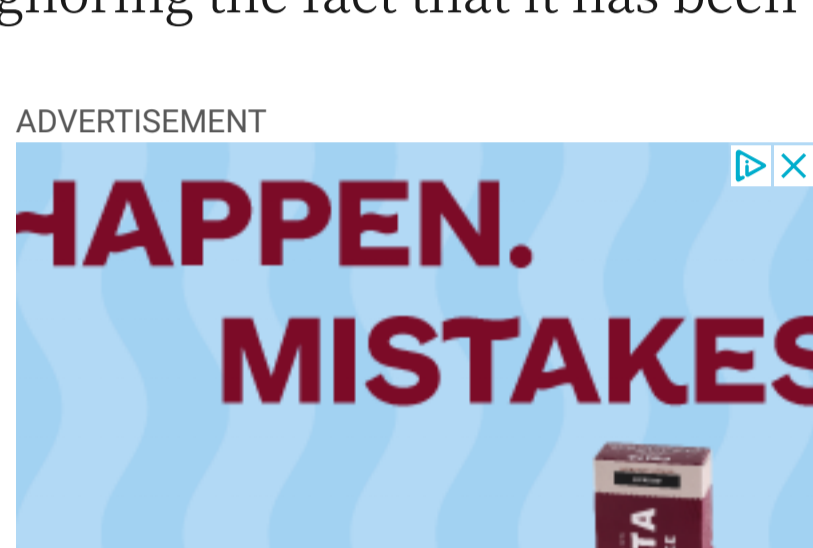


Technological universities are not a 'mistake', they're a milestone in 21st-century higher education



The TUs were not created through a process of rebranding as universities, as was the UK practice. TU formation involved merger of two or more institutes of technology and the merged institution having an immediate capacity to meet stringent criteria laid down in law, as well as being able to demonstrate a trajectory which would, over a specified time, lead to further development. The process in each case was overseen by an international expert panel who reported to the Minister, who in turn decided if the statutory criteria were met. This could not be further from the UK practice.

The binary system of institutes of technology and universities served Ireland well. Each sector, with its very different profiles, history and mission combined to provide for Ireland a range, quality and quantity of skilled graduates to support strong social and economic development. "Mission drift" was a great concern in academic and policy circles, but it was a charge levelled only at institutes of technology ignoring the fact that it has been a two-way process.



Institutes of technology developed in leaps and bounds, enrolling about 40 per cent of the student cohort and expanding into areas such as PhD education, research and international student recruitment. Photograph: iStock

Policymakers clung to the "binary system" long after it was necessary or useful. The institutes of technology developed in leaps and bounds from their early beginnings, enrolling about 40 per cent of the student cohort and expanding into areas such as PhD education, research and international student recruitment. All the while they retained their commitment to widening participation, and their regional and vocational mission. Their plea for university status was too long delayed. The National Strategy for Higher Education to 2030 (Hunt report) finally recognised the legitimacy of their claims and sketched a path towards university status, with an emphasis on "technological".

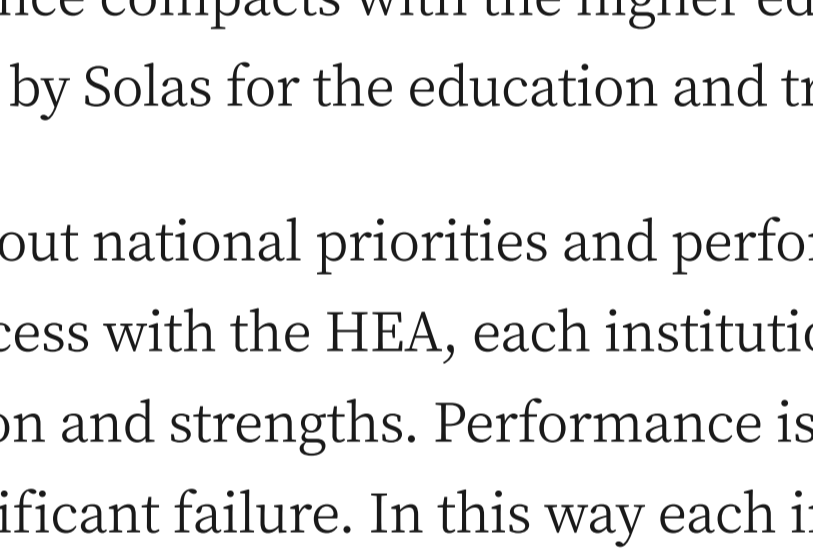
But there were holdouts. Largely to mollify them, the Technological Universities Act 2018 contains provisions reflecting the traditional academic systems in universities with their focus on PhD students and research criteria. It is arguably these provisions, more than anything, that are most problematic. They should be reconsidered, not least because they set criteria which some of the traditional universities do not themselves meet.

The authors argue that by creating TUs "serious challenges are to be anticipated" and point to the UK experience as a cautionary tale if TUs are allowed to try "to become research universities". To counter this, they argue that the mission of TUs should include "applied research only as a minor focus ... [and] developing industrial and professional doctorates". There is a danger here of pigeonholing the TUs by failing to recognise that research and innovation is an iterative and collaborative process, part of a rich ecosystem of diverse institutions, enterprise, citizens and civic society, and that doctoral studies are as diverse as the institutions themselves.

Diversity in the higher education system remains a key principle of Irish policy. Rather than seeing the TUs as "a major error" we should focus on ensuring the system continues to provide a wide range of education and research opportunities to meet the breadth of people's and society's needs. The mechanisms are in place to do so.

The most effective instrument at the disposal of the Higher Education Authority (HEA) and the Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science is the process of strategic dialogue and performance compacts with the higher education institutions. This process is also being introduced by Solas for the education and training boards.

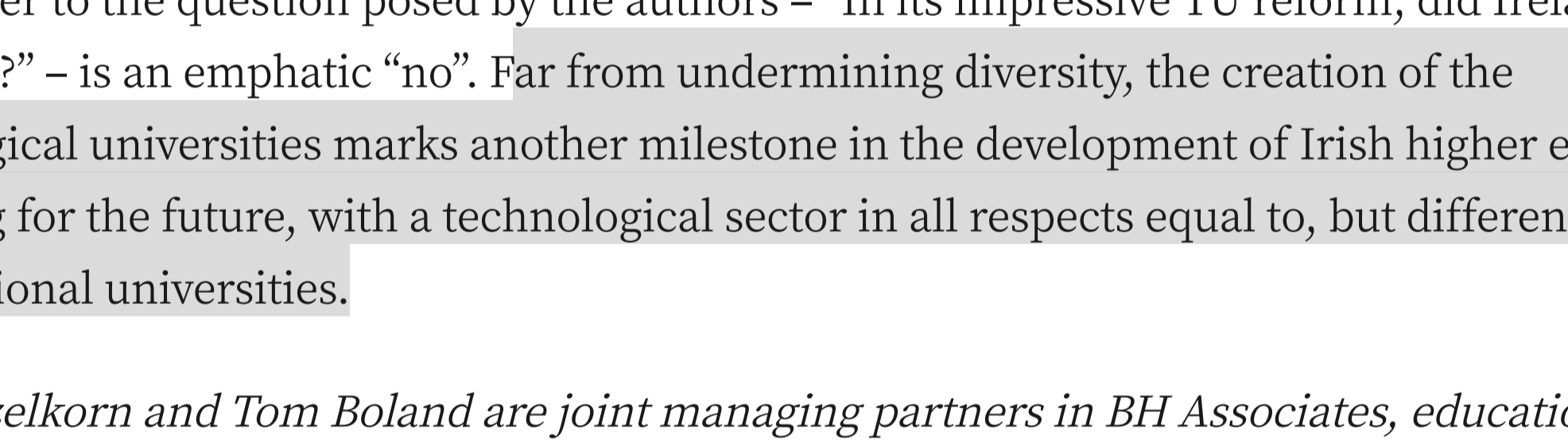
Put simply, the department sets out national priorities and performance indicators for the system. Through a dialogue process with the HEA, each institution develops a performance agreement based on their mission and strengths. Performance is assessed regularly with funding implications in the event of significant failure. In this way each institution can be held within a clearly differentiated mission and purpose in a diverse system.



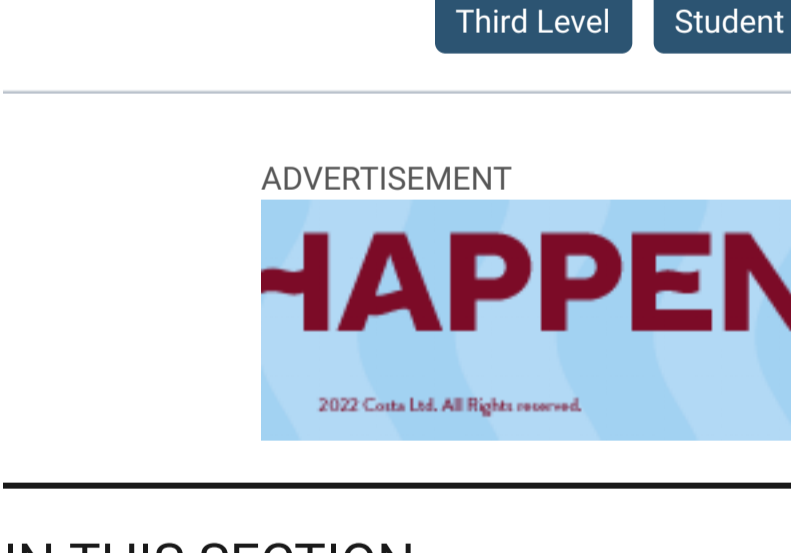
The answer to the question posed by the authors - "In its impressive TU reform, did Ireland make a mistake?" - is an emphatic "no". Far from undermining diversity, the creation of the technological universities marks another milestone in the development of Irish higher education, preparing for the future, with a technological sector in all respects equal to, but different from, the traditional universities.

Ellen Hazelkorn and Tom Boland are joint managing partners in BH Associates, education consultants

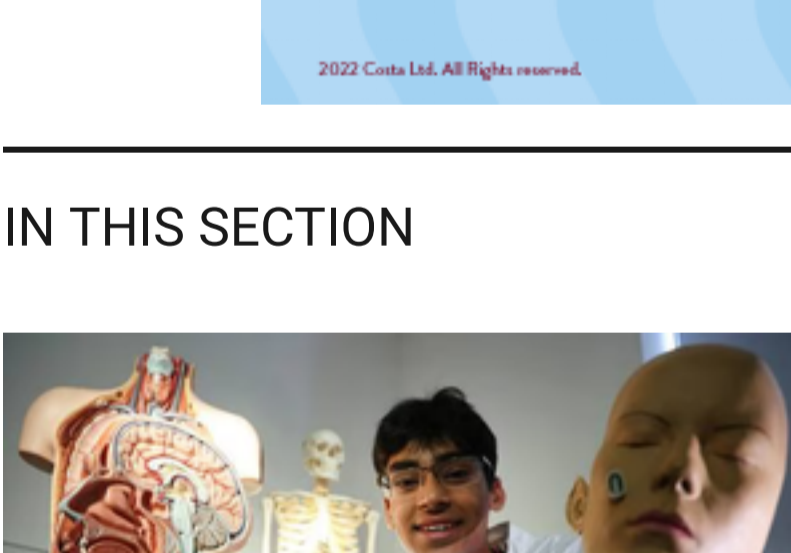
Third Level Student Hub Simon Hamill Higher Education Authority (HEA) Department of Education



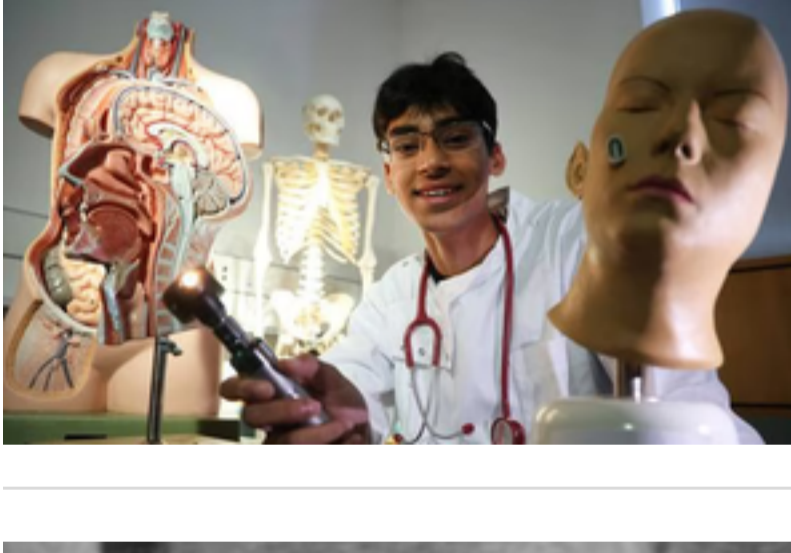
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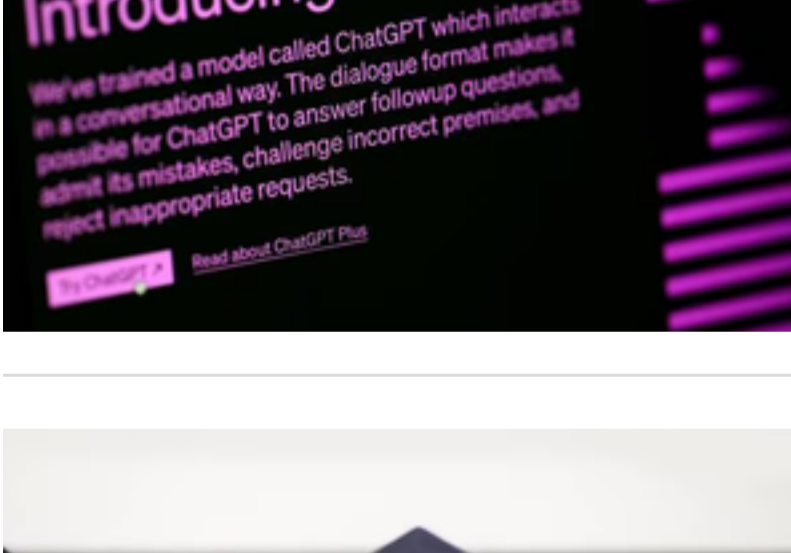
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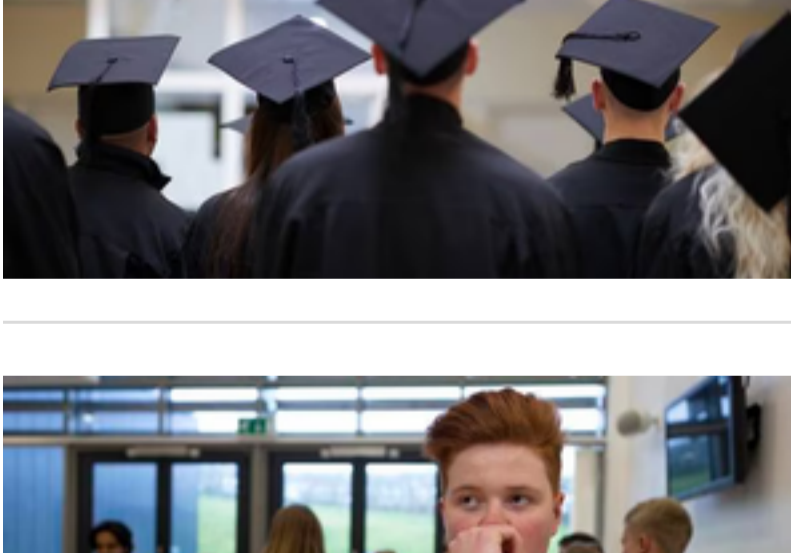
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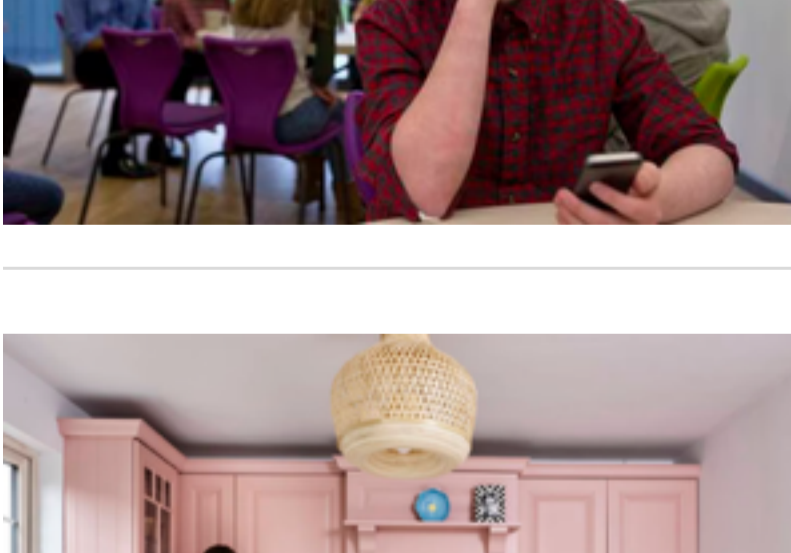
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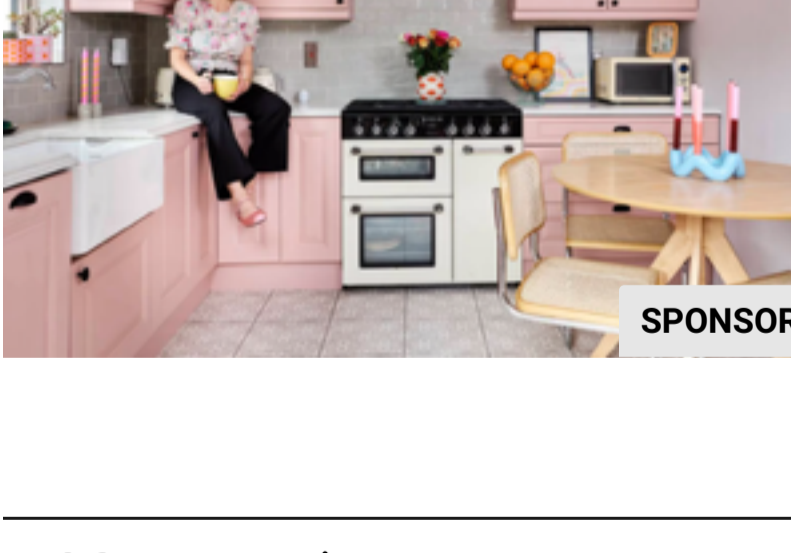
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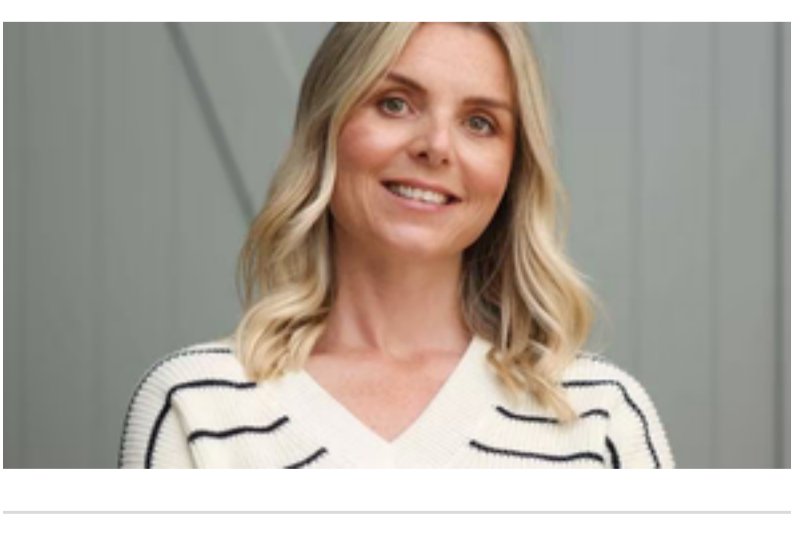
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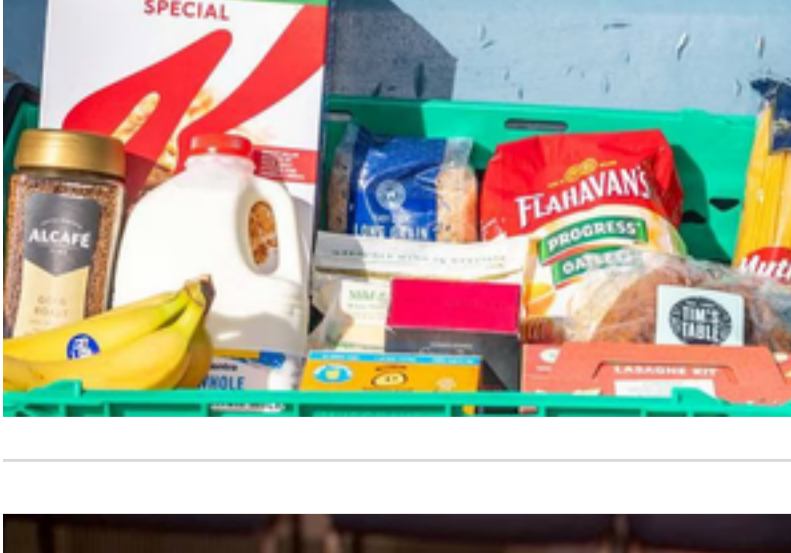
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