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Where Does This Leave the South East?

Irish Independent newspaper

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News Education

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Where does this leave the South East?

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A FOURTH university in Dublin, with a fifth only 25 kilometres away in Maynooth, will be a game changer.

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It will mean that over half the country's universities will be located in the Dublin region - with far-reaching effects for already unbalanced regional development.

Not alone will the newcomer transform the Grangegorman area of the capital, it will offer serious competition.

The second technological university (TU) should follow a few years later, arising from an amalgamation of the Cork and Tralee institutes of technology. So where does this leave the South East, which has long maintained that the absence of a university is a reason for the region's decline and its failure to attract sufficient badly needed investment?

Minister Brendan Howlin and his former Cabinet colleague Phil Hogan put Waterford and Carlow institutes of technology under strong pressure to agree to merge and come up with a viable joint TU plan. So far, they have singularly failed to do so, and relations between the two are strained, to say the least.

Education Minister Jan O'Sullivan has appointed Michael Kelly, former chair of the Higher Education Authority, to knock heads together. She has also appointed Dick Langford to chair the Waterford Institute governing body. He's the original 'cooler', guaranteed to calm the heated passions and arguments that have been raging in Waterford IT.

If the two institutes can't get their act together it's back to the drawing board for policy makers.

But, for Waterford, failure to agree a plan would be a further serious setback to a campaign for a university which began in the 1840s.

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Some people are holding out for an upgrading of the institute to university status. But a simple rebranding as a university would spark off demands elsewhere.

There are too many memories of the consequences of upgrading the Regional Technical College in Waterford in 1997 to institute of technology status, which prompted similar demands from other regional colleges, all of which were eventually upgraded.

There is a determination to avoid a repetition of the decision taken by John Major's administration which effectively upgraded UK polytechnics to universities.

What the government wants is a strong technological sector complementing the traditional universities. It wants co-operation between them in 'clusters' to avoid unnecessary duplication of courses. But nobody can predict how things will finish up.

The worst fear is of a three-tiered system with the traditional universities on top, technological universities in the middle and the remaining institutes at the bottom in terms of their standing among students and employers.

John Walshe was special advisor to former Education Minister Ruairi Quinn

Irish Independent



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