

FUSE Statement

16/04/2021



Over the past few months, we have campaigned to ensure that the proposed Technological University for the South East is the meaningful university that the region needs. In the process, we renewed the long legacy of campaigning for a meaningful university with a direct lineage to the 1980's Waterford University Action Group, the FUSE campaign of 2008/2009, and the more recent Waterford Gives a Shirt campaign.

Engagement and shared aspirations

We are grateful for the engagement with Waterford's Oireachtas members (from Government parties: Minister Mary Butler TD, Marc Ó Cathasaigh TD, and Senator John Cummins; and from the opposition: David Cullinane TD; and non-party: Matt Shanahan TD) who joined us in a series of meetings. They have brought our message to the attention of Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science Simon Harris, publicly, in Oireachtas Committees, at the Seanad, in the Dáil, and privately.

We are heartened by the spirited debates in those two meetings (on 20th February 2021 and on 3rd April 2021) which, to us, evidences their passion and commitment to delivering our future university.

All five Waterford Oireachtas members are aligned with us in recognising that the 'brain drain' from this region must end. This 'brain drain' sees an exodus of half of every leaving certificate class each year to universities in Dublin, Cork, and Limerick. They like us, share the fervent aspiration that our new university must be funded on an equal basis with universities in other regions and rapidly grow to deliver the new courses and facilities needed to achieve this goal.

We are however, extremely disappointed that Minister Harris has declined to engage directly with either Waterford Media representatives or interested groups such as FUSE. This is contradictory to his continuing TUSE-related media interviews in other south east counties and is contributing to the ongoing negativity (by some) regarding the TUSE process in Waterford. FUSE have requested a meeting with the Minister, to get further clarification on issues of concern. We have asked our Government-affiliated TD's to facilitate this as soon as possible. We believe that a solid public commitment, made directly to the people of Waterford through a Waterford-based channel, would help Waterford people to 'trust the process' more easily.

Where there are differences

We have asked for specific assurances on capital investment, governance and configuration for our new university. While these assurances have not been formally given, all party-affiliated Waterford Oireachtas members have assured us that they are satisfied that these will be attended to after the new university is established. While we are not entirely satisfied with this, they have asked that we 'trust the process' and it will yield the meaningful university that we all aspire to.

We are heartened that the Minister's promise that the new university will be backed by investment and expansion.

"But let me be clear, the creation of Technological Universities is not just about a name change for institutes of technology. It's not about a new letterhead or a new sign outside a campus. It's about scale. It's about wanting to expand the footprint of higher education in the regions. And yes, it is about investment and expansion. (excerpt [Minister Harris Speech to TUI Annual Congress 2021 - MerrionStreet](#))

We accept the assurances made by Minister Mary Butler TD, Marc Ó Cathasaigh TD, Senator John Cummins, and David Cullinane TD, supported by Minister Harris — that transformative investment will follow the merger, that new governance structures will be effective, and that strategic control of the new university will not be diluted. However, we also acknowledge the concern and dissenting voice of Matt Shanahan TD who has consistently stated that without explicit assurances we are to a large degree, hostage to fortune.

Expectations

The expectations for the new university could not be higher, or clearer – halting the 'brain drain', contributing to an economic catchup outlined, delivering on Ireland 2040 growth projections, and stabilising the region socially and economically. Progress on this agenda will be visible quickly.

These expectations are entirely reasonable, indeed in the past number of years national politics has delivered this transformation in the Mid-West; where UL has led a dramatic and sustained economic and social transformation of the entire region — halting that region's brain drain, supporting transformative growth in IDA inward investment, with graduates now living and working across the entire Mid-West in high-quality, well-paying graduate jobs. The social problems and stigma of that region have also reduced significantly over the past two decades.

Known by its fruits.

With the university application due in the coming weeks our hope is that this is “the real deal”. Having raised our concerns and contributed to establishing the agenda for the new university, we believe that it is best now if we let the process take its course. The region cannot waste any more time in addressing the urgent economic and social challenge of halting the brain drain. It will be evident in the coming months if the challenge of funding, governance and configuration follows the scale of ambition and expectation that has been built up.

Success will be measurable and if the new university flourishes, and with it our region, it will be evident whether our faith in the process was justified. Oireachtas members Mary Butler, Marc O’Cathasaigh, David Cullinane and John Cummins have assured us that the Government will provide the funding and structures needed to deliver a University of Substance for Waterford & the South East and we truly believe the people of Waterford will hold them to account on this promise at future polling booths.

Find out more about the campaign by visiting www.thefuse.ie; join the conversation on Twitter/Facebook by mentioning @thefusecampaign.

ENDS

Media contact: In line with the sentiments of the release, we do not intend on making individuals available for comment until the submission is made (due 28/04/2021), an advisory panel review the application (we gather sometime in June), and the Minister signs the order creating the university.