Short Biography and brief synopsis of the career of Leo Colgan: Founding Registrar of University of Limerick

I was born on 8 August 1937, the first of two boys in Dublin. I was raised on the north side of Dublin and our house was on Griffith Avenue, a handsome European style boulevard. My mother Eileen was a music teacher and conductor, my father Patrick was a bar manager.

I was delivered by a Dr. Larry Masterson whose son Paddy many years later as Registrar of UCD became a professional colleague as we served together as Directors of the CAO and members of the Committee of Heads of Irish Universities (now the IUA), an interesting coincidence.

I was educated by the Christian Brothers firstly at primary level at Scoil Mhuire Marino just across the road from my house in Griffith Avenue. I was ambitious and hardworking and a reasonably bright student and thus managed to evade for the most part, the harsh regime of a corporal punishment culture that was accepted as the norm at the time. In those days Dublin Corporation awarded 100 annual scholarships based on performance in the Primary Certificate. I managed to secure one, being awarded 17th place out of the first 100 in the entire Dublin primary school system. I remember being disappointed at not being first in the school as a classmate achieved 12th place. The scholarship was for £5 p.a for the six years in secondary school. My father’s trade union awarded a number of scholarships for children of members and I was lucky enough to be awarded a second scholarship probably for a similar amount.

My secondary school education took place in Scoil Iosef in Fairview, an A school at that time every subject taught through the medium of Irish. I emerged from secondary school in 1955 with a Leaving Certificate which included five honours. In mid secondary school years, as a late developer, I discovered that I had a reasonable proficiency in both gaelic football and hurling and played for the school and subsequently my local club, St.Vincents, where I made the Dublin minor hurling team of 1955 and Dublin junior hurling team of 1957. All in all, I won thirteen Dublin county medals at underage, minor and junior level.

Always ambitious, I wanted to go to University after second level but my parents could not afford to send me. The participation rates of the second level cohort in third level at the time were miniscule. I discovered that Trinity College offered night courses in Public Administration and Commerce so I decided to seek a place on these courses. Dublin at the time was ruled by the repressive, rigid and authoritarian Archbishop John Charles McQuaid who denounced Trinity as a ‘godless place’ and forbade Roman Catholics to attend under pain of excommunication. This was reinforced year after year in his Lenten pastoral.
However, provision was made for a small number of exceptions to this draconian edict. I made a case through my local parish priest based on economic grounds and got a rather ungracious response saying that, McQuaid would grudgingly tolerate my presence in Trinity College provided that I did not participate in any clubs or societies activities, a proviso which I totally ignored.

I graduated from Trinity College in 1960 with a Diploma in Public Administration, a Bachelor of Arts and a Bachelor of Commerce with Distinction. I returned to Trinity College in 1967 to complete an MBA, achieving second place in the class. This time I ignored McQuaid’s ban completely, which unbelievably was still in operation. I successfully completed a Management Development Programme for College and University Administrators at Harvard University in July-August 1984

My first real job was as an Assistant Accountant in Bórd na Mona. From there I moved to RTE, initially as an Accountant, then as an Analyst in the Management Services Unit where I was involved in the design of systems and procedures for the fledgling organisation.

At that time DeValera was on record as saying no man is worth more than £1000 per annum. I set myself this target by the age of 30. I achieved that with my starting salary of £1050 at RTE in 1963 at the age of 26.

I stayed with RTE until 1972 when one day I read an article in the centrefold of *Business and Finance* magazine. The title of the article was ‘One Man and his Mansion’, and it had a picture of Ed Walsh in a trendy leather overcoat photographed in front of Plassey House. I read the article and when I saw the many innovations planned, modular credit system, interdisciplinarity, cooperative education and so on, I said this guy is going to change the whole world of third level education. I decided I wanted to be a part of this and I sent a copy of my CV to the then Acting Administrator Mary McGuire. This resulted in my being offered, through public competition, the post of Lecturer in Accounting and Finance which I took up in July 1972. I became involved in designing systems and procedures for the fledgling NIHE as well as my teaching duties. It quickly became obvious that the NIHE needed a Registrar. Ed Walsh asked me would I assume this responsibility and I was happy to agree and so in 1973 I assumed the title Registrar with an (A) in brackets after it. The ‘A’ (acting), was removed in 1978 when the government of the day formally approved the creation of the post. I served as Founding Registrar of UL from 1973 to 2002, a total of 29 years which confers the unique distinction on me of being the longest serving Registrar in the history of the Irish University Administration.

In addition to the normal Registrar-type functions, I assumed responsibility for the HR function, the Secretaryship of the Governing Authority and the University’s Quality Assurance Systems. I held these additional responsibilities for many years until suitably qualified experienced people were recruited.

In the course of almost thirty years as Founding Registrar of UL I was responsible for the introduction of a range of initiatives to support and enhance the student experience in UL. These ranged from the appointment of the first Sports Recreation Officer and Music Arts
Officer to design and develop programmes in both these areas and to encourage student participation in sports, music and the arts.

In those early days, barriers were put in place by many of the Governing Bodies of Sporting Associations. I suspect that this occurred at the urging of the traditional sporting fraternity in the established universities, to prevent NIHE, Limerick from fielding teams in many of the established University sporting competition. These barriers were eventually dismantled and our first major Intervarsity triumph came in winning the Fitzgibbon Cup in 1987. Thereafter, many further sporting successes were achieved in all sports at Intervarsity competitions.

Music and Arts activities flourished on campus culminating in the arrival of the Limerick Music Association (LMA) on campus in 1986. The LMA provided a regular series of concerts performed by top international musicians for the next 20 years.

Music and Sport have been special interests of mine and I played squash regularly until my retirement in 2002 and tennis also. Bequeathing the legacy of the Leo Colgan Perpetual Trophy, which is awarded to the winner of the mixed doubles staff/student competition each year.

From the outset, I realised some of the most significant days in the University calendar were conferring days. Together with a small group and with Eoin McCann as one of the leading protagonists we designed a conferring ceremony uniquely personal and centred on the graduate. This model has survived from the first graduation in 1977 to this day and is regarded as a memorable occasion and experience for the graduates, but also for parents and families and the campus community.

I have indulged my interest in music by playing the piano at various social occasions in UL, accompanied at Christmas parties, rather badly, by Ed Walsh on the violin. I have been known to duet with Phil Coulter very late at night after one of his concerts performed to formally open the University Concert Hall.

In relation to relevant external activities I served as:

Member of the Higher Education Authority 1982-1987

Director of Central Applications Office 1982-2002

(Again longest serving Director in the history of the CAO)

Chairman of the Central Applications Office 1991-1997

Member of the Inter University Quality Steering Committee 1995-2002

Chairman of the Irish Universities Association of Freedom of Information Working Group 2001

Member of the University of Limerick Governing Authority 1997-2002
I retired from the University on the 30 September 2002, after thirty years of a uniquely rewarding, professional and personal working experience. Twenty-six of these thirty years were spent working in close collaboration with the founding President of UL Ed Walsh.

I am a member of Limerick Golf Club, Garryowen FC and UL Bohemian RFC and a proud supporter of Munster Rugby, Dublin footballers, Limerick hurlers, the Patrickswell U.14 hurling team and Roedmis Sportverein.

I am the very proud father of six extremely successful and talented children, three of whom are UL graduates and an equally proud grandfather to seventeen grandchildren many of whom I hope will become graduates of UL in the future.