

University of Limerick Oral History Project.

Interview:Dr. Noel Lindsay.

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I: So, thank you for talking to me, Dr. Lindsay, we were talking about the beginning, the origins in the 1960s of the NIHE.

Dr. N. L.: Yes, well, if you like the beginning of the alternative to the university sector had it's origin in two reports, (1) the report on the shortage of technicians, and that was the key driver, and (11) the Mulcahy report then recommended a network of Regional Technical Colleges and two super Technical colleges, the two NIHEs, in other words, an alternative was being established with the primary aim of training technicians, not undergraduates, but technicians. The two NIHEs were top of the pile, one to be established in Dublin and one in Limerick. The original intention was that the Dublin one would be DIT, Dublin Institute of Technology, transferred to a new campus, a new integrated campus, and that the NIHE in Limerick would subsume the Technical College which already existed there and would become an enhanced as you say, top of the pyramid, for the alternative to the university system. They were the origins of it, and fortunately, Dr. Walsh had a different concept of what the NIHE should be, once he was appointed. John O'Connor has a letter on file somewhere there, that I wrote to Ed, informing him that he had to provide for technicians as well as undergraduates. He totally ignored that letter, very wisely!

And, in fact, the Technical College in Limerick never ceased to exist as a separate entity, and was developed as a Regional Technical College essentially, but the original intention was not that, just as it was not that in Dublin. In the case of the Dublin, the problems with the DIT, I left the country during that period, but there were problems there, and eventually the concept of DIT being the NIHE was abandoned, and as a result, the new NIHE was established in Ballymun, as a separate entity to the DIT. They were the origins of it, but the key driver was in fact the shortage of technicians, other than those provided

to a very limited extent by DIT at the time. And the whole concept of technicians was ill developed in Ireland, as you are probably aware, at that time, that even in agriculture when the World Bank came, they were horrified to find that there were no agricultural technicians, that they were all graduates of the universities and they hadn't got this intermediate layer, in fact, the whole project nearly collapsed on the basis that the Bank were insisting that it should include technician training. So there, if you like, that's the background and other than the NIHEs, when we're talking about a binary system and equality of esteem in terms of it's origins, it's mythical, that was not the original intention, that the intention was a technical orientation, which was an entirely different animal to the universities, so that's the origins as I see it.

I: So the intention then was to set up a Technical College if you like, and this was what...

Dr. N. L.: The two NIHEs would essentially have been technological institutes, the others would have been technical institutes, primarily providing technicians and with provision, very limited provision, if you look at the report, the Mulcahy report, you'd say with some provision for undergraduates in the traditional sense of university undergraduates, but a very limited provision for that. The essential focus was on technician training.

I: And when you were part of the HEA which recommended (Dr. N. L.: now I only joined the HEA, I only became involved in the HEA directly in 1993, but of course I was involved in it with my link when I was in the Department, ... yes) through the Department, yes, yes, and the HEA recommended that some element of the Humanities be considered as well in the setting up of the NIHE (Dr. N. L.: of the NIHE, yes), but primarily, and the function of the NIHE was to serve the emerging needs of the country.

Dr. N. L.: To serve the emerging needs of the country in the technical/technological sense. I myself wrote an article about the fact that Ireland was different to comparative countries, Finland, Denmark, Switzerland, the whole range of comparative countries where we had really no technical/technological base; it was an agrarian rural concept. I wrote an article about this, in fact maybe I should have brought it with me, giving a

background with regard to this rural agrarian context and how that was broken with the announcement of the second Economic Development Plan, Whittaker's Development Plan, where he actually identified the need to put more of, even of the limited resources into education as being an essential driver towards technological/technical development in Ireland.

I: And you came to Limerick and you oversaw the purchase of the site for the NIHE, as later became the university, out at Plassey?.

Dr. N. L.: Yes, yes, and you know there was a limited number of acreage there, I don't know the exact, you have it there, seventy or eighty acres but with the potential for acquiring another area but I remember actually standing on the site with Ed Walsh on one occasion, and I'm looking across into Clare, and talking about acquiring another few hundred acres across the river. That was certainly his dream in the very early 70s and I 'pooh-poohed' the idea because it was far too adventurous altogether. But in fact there was potential and then, just to finish up on the sites, you may recall that in the '90s there was actually the takeover of the College of Physical Education, as part of the NIHE, so that actually added a further site area to it, I don't know what it is at the moment now, on one side it's probably about 137 acres (I: I think so yes, it's well over 100 acres). There was actually Plassey House of course, it was virtually a ruin at that stage but a magnificent location, and Ed in particular saw the potential of the development of the house itself as a key feature in the development. It wasn't going just to be a model campus, but it would have it at its core this magnificent White House as it was called at one stage (I: and it remains to this day a very important feature, a central feature of the institution) a very important feature, yes.

I: So in what ways was the NIHE unique?.

Dr. N. L.: Well, you're probably aware that when they applied for university status they wanted to be identified as a technological university which was absolutely bitterly opposed by the existing five universities on the grounds that they were technological as

well. But if you like, they were different, in the sense that they had their origins in the technical aspects of the development of higher education with a particular focus on it. As you mentioned, the HEA recommended there should be a division of Humanities, but the key driver of the NIHEs was to be technological. Now in fact, the two developed differently, because of the style of operation of the two Presidents. In the case of Limerick, there was a major focus on links with industry and that was a key driver, and that subsequently caught on with the universities (I: certainly), but in fact, Limerick led the way in terms of its links with industry. DCU or NIHE Dublin was less so, but it did more at post graduate level than perhaps Limerick did, and perhaps that was one slight failing, that its post graduate level didn't develop as early as DCU did develop. But it had this very strong origins and links with of course, Shannon Development Company, and the whole concept of off-campus training of students and then modularisation of course, were key features. But the technological aspect would have been the distinguishing feature in the early years or the intention that they would be technological in their origin, in their outlooks.

I: Can you tell me what you remember of funding and the funding structures at the time for the NIHE?

Dr. N. L.: That's too demanding on the memory! (I: is it?) inadequate.

I: We had talked a few minutes ago about the World Bank, and the role of the World Bank.

Dr. N. L.: Yes. Now the World Banks role was limited in so far as Limerick was concerned, just to the one phase, Phase 1A, I think, of the university. And it had this decant building which the World Bank admired enormously, but essentially it was confined to the capital funding of that phase, that was really the only role that it had, but as I mentioned, it did create a wonderful precedent in the sense that it emphasised the need for heavy equipment provision within a third level institution, far beyond anything that had been visualized in Ireland previously. You know where we talked about 25% of

the building would be equipment? but now they were talking about far higher levels of equipment, if you are talking about a technical/technological type of institution.

I: And a number of institutions were involved in the early 1970s, I think you know maybe around 1974, I've read that the NIHE was accountable to a number of different universities or to a number of different institutions, including the World Bank, the HEA, UCG, UCC at the time, because it was set up as a constituent of the NUI and it wasn't then until the NCEA, then, became a degree awarding authority of itself, I think ...

Dr. N. L.: Now you'll have to look at the record for that period, I wasn't in the country at the time, and I wouldn't be speaking from personal knowledge, but there was a change of government, a change back and there were changing structures established for the awarding of qualifications. It was really just that, how they would get their qualification that was really the only issue. It wasn't a major feature of the development of Limerick; you know it was just a passing phase, during which there was uncertainty before they actually got the entitlement to award their own qualifications.

I: So that period between 1972 and I think it was 1977 (Dr. N. L.: yes) when the NCEA was re-instated (Dr. N. L.: yes) I think as the degree awarding body, I think that period then you would see that as not terribly significant?

Dr. N. L.: Not terribly, not a major event in the history of Limerick, it was just a blip in the sense of uncertainty with regard to who were going to award them qualifications and it was just a step on the road towards their actually attaining their own qualifying powers.

I: How important was the role of the Department of Education in the setting up of the NIHE?

Dr. N. L.: Well frankly, and I'm sure you have talked to Ed, and you will talk at length to him; he had some enemies in the Department. The Secretary or the man who became Secretary, and who had previously been in charge of higher education was not a friend of

Limerick. So in fact in the 70s, Ed would have had considerable difficulties getting what were very promising ideas through, one of them being for example, the creation of student accommodation which was a totally novel idea, he ran into terrible problems with that. The other thing and this is something I wouldn't like to name, but there was a person who actually had served from the Department, who had served down in Limerick for I think, was it, about two years probably, and when she came back, she was less than friendly. And there was a big issue, which became a very vexatious issue, with regard to what approvals were necessary, do you have to get approval for a post, or do you have to get approval for the person who fills the post? My interpretation of the legislation when I came back was that you just get approval for the post; the previous interpretation was that every single person he appointed to staff had to be approved by the Department. That was an extremely vexatious issue, and I'm sure if you talk to him he'll confirm that. And it was a preposterous interpretation of the legislation. So, the Department was not, was not a hugely favourable influence on the development of Limerick in the 70s. It was Ed himself who was essentially the driver, and any change that took place was fought for by Ed, it was not at the initiative of the Department.

There was one gentleman that you probably will be seeing, if you haven't already seen, Finbar O'Callaghan (I: no, not yet). Well, he would have been now a man who would have been very helpful, we'd have found very helpful to Limerick, and others, you know, Oscar Richardson on the physical side, would also have been favourable. I myself, if I may say so, was also highly favourable. So there were some, but nevertheless there was a certain resistance in the Department to the more adventurous thoughts of Ed, in terms of the development of the institution. And of course he always had aspirations of it being a university, which was another thing that the Department was not in favour of in the early years.

I: That disapproval of the granting of a university and I suppose what they were looking for in Limerick, you know, what the Project Committee and everything were campaigning for, there was from the outset a resistance to the granting of a university to Limerick?.

Dr. N. L.: Yes, just as there is now to granting university status to Waterford, you know but there was considerable resistance to it, and it was the Hardiman report, it was only eventually when the Hardiman group were set up, that you had a favourable recommendation, and I think that was accepted fairly readily. Now, I would have thought myself the Hardiman analysis of the reasons for and against, weren't as thorough as would actually be undertaken at the moment but nevertheless, it was clearly that the NIHEs were an unknown animal internationally, and that was the thing that Ed had a problem with, in terms of the international recognition of the institutions, NIHE didn't mean a lot (I: yes), and it was really, that was one key factor, and of course you could associate the donors, were also uncertain about the status of NIHE, it was seen more like a state institution, and of course it was, it was state owned, the site was owned by the state, and essentially then the buildings were owned by the state and it was funded by the state. Ed wanted an independent path under which he could actually, and as he did highly successfully, get philanthropic money to support initiatives, which were not being supported by the state. So they were key factors, international recognition for a variety of reasons, and then the question of being more successful in terms of donor contributions under the umbrella of a university rather than a NIHE.

I: In the context of 1970, when Ed was appointed and of 1972 when effectively the institution began, with the first enrolment of students, this came on the heels of a decade, the 1960s, when there was huge expansion and maybe highly creative thinking about education in Ireland (Dr. N. L.: yes) what were the distinguishing features of that decade do you think, or the most significant features?

Dr. N. L.: Of the 60s, yes. Well, first of all, the 1963 announcement by Dr. Hillery of the Comprehensive Schools. If you look at the history of education in Ireland, it was one of, the state's role, was one of hands off. In that article I wrote I have a number of quotations which you'd scarcely credit, that in fact the idea of the state playing a direct role in the provision of schooling was totally foreign to the culture of the time. Now the 1963 announcement, also was supported by the second Economic Development Plan which

actually identified education as a key feature in economic development, and the need to put more resources into it, so they were the two driving forces.

Then you had the secondary schools, were supported at the same time, maybe as a sop, with a new capital grant scheme also. But then the major change that took place was in 1967, where you had a re-structuring of the system, where you had actually the formalising for all of the two years of pre-primary, six years of primary, leading to a transfer to post-primary at age twelve, roughly, twelve and a half, and then a three year course for all, and the raising of the school leaving age to fifteen. Now that actually was the key factor, and was opposed in a number of quarters, e.g. parish priests were very unhappy with it because it meant that people were leaving the rural areas to proceed to second level schools. So called secondary tops in primary schools which gave a limited amount of secondary education, but all at the local level were phased out, and so there was a cultural change even there.

But the three years meant it would be obligatory for every student to do primary education and three years of secondary education, and to match that the vocational schools were developed to be able to provide on a par with the secondary school, a three year, post-primary, which was not a preparation for apprenticeship, as was the previous arrangement. So you actually had this idea of the continuation of students in education up to age fifteen. There was then a re-structuring at the Leaving Certificate level, now that went through a number of alterations, a number of battles. You had the concept of a technical Leaving Certificate, which never really succeeded in planting itself firmly in the system. You had some vocational schools offering Leaving Certificate, only some, that gradually expanded of course, but the whole concept was that you would actually have equality of esteem, again this equality of esteem between the two sectors. But the idea was to cater for all. What a change, because in the mid 60s the Council of Education declared in response to the idea that you'd have equality of treatment and participation of all students; that the majority of children would not benefit from secondary education and that standards would inevitably fall. So that was the concept in the mid 60s. So this was a huge breakthrough and you had this idea then, than where you had maybe 50%

participation up to fifteen, you were talking about 100% participation and then a continuation beyond that to a more limited extent. At the same time the university grants were introduced, I think '66 -'67, I wouldn't be too sure of the exact year (I: that's right), and then there was a massive expansion in the numbers attending secondary education ... I mean a quite phenomenal, something of the order of 170,000 up to 350,000, you know somewhere around, you'll find the figures there. But this was an absolutely astonishing achievement, may I say, for which I was given responsibility by the then Minister, Donogh O'Malley. He said to me, now he was a man who was quite vocal and you'd want to watch his language, but he said to me 'I won't take no for an answer, there has to be a seat for every person who looks for it'. (I: yes). So this was, if you like, was setting a scene for the concept of education being a key feature in the whole development of Ireland, and it set the scene then for with the report on technician training, and then the Mulcahy report, leading then into the concept that more and more people would go on to post-primary, post-secondary education given the provision of technical/technological education in parallel with a university system.

I: Yes, and the Commission on Higher Education, it reported as well at this time.

Dr. N. L.: Yes, now, the Commission on Higher Education, one recollection from the report on which they said they could not cater for any more students than the university system, because resources were inadequate. Now, in other words, it was a negative thought. Instead of saying we must provide more places but we need more resources, they dismissed the idea of an expansion of the system on the basis that they hadn't got the resources, so there was still a very elitist thinking there, within the university system, and there would be some suspicion as well that the more they expanded the more standards would go down, that's a common understanding, you know, in other words, we now have fifty odd per cent of the age group in, and we're actually, as one university lecturer in Trinity once said: once you go beyond the 50% you're going into the subnormal. -laugh- So that thinking, so you know, reading it one wouldn't realise the nature of the change that took place, there was a whole change in thinking with regard to education and that was the setting for the concept of the technical colleges, which were almost to some,

christened white elephants by the church, you know. For example, Athlone, I think, had about fifty students in the first year, other than Leaving Certificate students, so it was a faltering start, and it was only when it began to get in late in the 70s, into the 80s, that the system began to expand.

I: What was the role of the church, specifically with the NIHE, was there any input at all or any comments or any commentary, from the Church?.

Dr. N. L.: No, just the Regional Technical Colleges, they would have been antagonistic to. They felt that in fact, the state was taking over at post secondary level. Now this had already taken place at the secondary level, now it was taking place at third level, more and more the tentacles of the state were moving in to it. The universities would have considered to be independent but the churches would have had a certain amount of influence, Trinity on the one side, the NUI (I: colleges), with considerable Catholic influence within them. So they felt that this was an injection, a state injection into the system. Now I'm not certain the extent to which that was vocalised, to what extent you'd find records of it, but there was a sense of antagonism too, and certainly in terms of the RTC's, they were certainly antagonistic to the RTC's, I'm sure there's records of that available somewhere.

I: Was it Donogh O'Malley who had the vision for this advancement of technological expertise in education?

Dr. N. L.: Yeah, yeah. I'd have to pay tribute to Paddy Hillery, he really did initiate it. And a gentleman that was in the Department at the time, which I had the pleasure of being associated with, Seán O'Connor, he was the Principal Officer and then became the Assistant Secretary. I was an Assistant Principal and became a Principal Officer in that period, but he had the vision in relation to education and his 1963 speech as Coolahan said, was a seminal speech, it made a major breakthrough for Minister Hillery, in terms of the importance of participation in education for the future of the country. I wouldn't say Donogh O'Malley had the technological vision, but he certainly had vision for the

development of education, and really, the various reports of the 60s did in fact help provide a scene where the emphasis became more and more on greater participation in education and a focus on the technical/technological. In the Lynch report as well, was this focus on the need to develop the technical/technological side of Ireland, both in terms of industrial development, and in terms of supporting technological training. So Minister O' Malley actually carried it through, he carried through the Regional Technical College programme. You know, he had sufficient influence with the Taoiseach of the time, and then of course his announcement of free post-primary education was just a huge change, to my understanding without any approval from the Department of Finance or anybody else, you know. My recollection now was that he came back early from a holiday in Lisbon, in Portugal, fed up lying on the beach and decided to come home and made this announcement!. That's my recollection of it now, how true that is, I don't know.

But if you like, a succession of Ministers, from Paddy Hillery on, and going even further, going to Paddy Faulkner, who introduced the Community Schools, which was a further step beyond the Comprehensive schools. If you like, that period, up to 1972, was a huge breakthrough. There was a change of government then and there was some retrenchment and some difficulties in that period, of a few years. But it was that period up to 1972, and it wasn't only Donogh O'Malley, Paddy Hillery, Colley and then O'Malley, you know all of these and then of course, most importantly the Taoiseach of the time, Lemass. If you like, he had the vision, he had the technical vision, and he saw the need to industrialise and all the others were actually subsidiary to that thinking. The economic development of the country was the key factor, how can you create a situation where we can develop economically through industrialisation. So the education development was an adjunct to thinking in that area for which Lemass deserves absolutely huge credit.

I: And do you think that the NIHE in Limerick particularly, did play this role in providing the graduates that were required and assisting in the industrialisation of the region?.

Dr. N. L.: I would consider that they played an enormous part in this, and in changing the whole outlook towards higher education, because while the universities would have

claimed that they were doing technological training, and after all they had medicine and engineering and so on. Nevertheless the orientation was not to the extent that was driven by Limerick, and then particularly this link with industry, this was a key driving force in how can you liaise with, and support industrial development through links with industry. That was a key feature of what Limerick contributed and so then its whole emphasis was on technological training, you know, with very limited humanities, but some humanities but nevertheless technical/technological, to a degree that was unknown in the universities at the time.

I: And the thinking in Limerick was that the graduates would be ready to immediately go into the workplace, because they had the experience of Co-op as it was called. (Dr. N. L.: exactly, yes, yes) They would have had that work experience, of work placement during their academic career. The NIHE in Limerick was from its inception, European in outlook too, they had the first, I think, degree in European Studies, (Dr. N. L.: yes) so even at that stage when Ireland still hadn't joined the EEC, but they were very European in outlook (Dr. N. L.: yes) and encouraged students to travel to Europe and to get experience

Dr. N. L.: And I'd say again, in tribute to Ed Walsh, supported by John O'Connor, a wonderful man, wonderful. I don't think a lot of what was achieved could have been achieved if it weren't for John, he was a man who actually was able to manage the system very well, he got on very well. Now he would have had a very good relationship with people in the Department, his very manner and understanding made it possible to work very well with him, you know counter weight to Ed if you like, a lovely combination, but certainly the outlook as you said, was outside Ireland, Ed was constantly referring to the need to compare ourselves to systems abroad and of course his modularisation was brought from the United States. They were the first to actually develop that. So he had this dimension outside the country from the very beginning.

I: Did the NIHE in Limerick prove itself?.

Dr. N. L.: It more than proved itself (I: more than proved itself!), just the same as DCU did in its own way, you know, thanks to Danny O'Hare and in fact both of them I would consider them to be huge successes and developed further when they did get the university status and were now part of the fold. Now they had their own differences with some of the people within the existing universities, there was some acrimony between Limerick and Cork for a while there, particularly when we arranged that Limerick would take over the awarding of qualifications for Mary Immaculate and the links between Mary Immaculate and the university now. They didn't actually develop to the extent that we had hoped, but nevertheless the links are there and I think quite strong links, which continue to work quite well.

I: And was that a Department, or a HEA decision to ... (Dr. N. L.: no, that was purely department) department decision to link Mary I. as it's known, with the University of Limerick.

Dr. N. L.: Yes. The context of it was, because the numbers in teacher training had gone down so much, we were actually talking about 300 students, where the capacity could have been 900, and I wrote to the Archbishop in Dublin and the Bishop in Limerick and informed them that something was going to have to be done and came up with a suggestion of the link, and that they could in the process of that, take in additional students into arts courses, you know, as part of this agreement. Now, the whole idea, which has been abandoned since, was that according as the numbers going in for teacher training would increase, we could reduce the numbers in the arts courses, but that concept is gone, but that was the original intention. But the whole idea was to create an entity which was cost efficient, in other words, it had the numbers to sustain its costs, its costs at the time were approximately twice to three times per student what they should be if they had the full complement of students.

I: And there was a little bit of acrimony about the negotiation of that structure.

Dr. N. L.: There was, yes, but eventually we drew up, ourselves, we drew up a draft scheme and Bishop Newman bought in to it eventually, he said he trusted us, whether he should or not was another matter! But he said he did.

I: Is there anything else, that ...?

Dr. N. L.: No that's the main thing, you know, that people forget the context in which it was set up. As you rightly said, the 60s was a total revelation in terms of the history of Ireland since the 1920s, where in fact you had this concept of education being a key driver of economic development, and then what does education mean in that context? It means two things; it means the participation of all within education up to a certain level and then beyond that, the focus not only on the traditional patterns of higher education but the development of the technological section of that.

I: And you talked very eloquently there about the huge culture change that was needed (Dr. N. L.: yes) you know, at that period as well in modern Ireland.

Dr. N. L.: And the excitement of that period, one of the factors that I remember very well was in 1967, and it was the change that in fact, you know these small businesses, employed girls doing sewing and all that sort of thing, they ran short of people because they were transferring over from primary into secondary education and there was a shortage at that particular time so the whole concept of secondary education caught on very, very quickly. People somehow embraced the concept in a most extraordinary fashion. Now if you like it was talked about everywhere at that particular time, the excitement was generated by the amount of emphasis that was placed on it, but it was that cultural change, the concept of education being a good thing which unfortunately hasn't translated into universal participation as we know, but nevertheless there was a huge change, nevertheless, in the levels of participation and that led very readily to a concept of going on beyond that, more and more going on to Leaving Certificate.

I: Yes, and then of course the introduction of grants as well, grants for university especially for third level, (Dr. N. L.: yes) that facilitated the entry of many who would never have been able to consider it and who came through the secondary education.

Dr. N. L.: Now there was, at the time, you'll see it in the literature there there was a somewhat exaggerated claim for that. O'Malley made a statement on one occasion, that no one should be deprived of higher education through lack of funds. Now the grants were not going to overcome all the difficulties for all of that. But that was the idea, that in fact you were going to take money out of the equation, so that everyone would have the opportunity to receive a higher education. Now you did have university grants previous to that, but on a very limited scale, local authority scholarships, you know, but the whole national aspect of it caught the imagination. Here you could actually get a grant, what seemed to be a very lucrative amount of money to go on to higher education, and then of course the fees in the non-university sector were very low so you could actually go on there and still get a grant, and then later on of course the Social Fund, the EU Social Fund totally paid for the courses in the RTC's and the NIHE's.

I: Thank you very much.

Dr. N. L.: Not at all, I hope it's of some help to you.