

University of Limerick Oral History Project

Interview: Professor Evan Petty

2 February 2009

I: Professor Petty, thank you very much for talking to me, and if you'd like to tell me about your involvement with the NIHE please.

E.P.: Well fine, I was lecturing at Sheffield, what is Sheffield Hallam University now, for about ten years in the field of Metallurgy and I thought this was an opportunity of diversifying somewhat and going to a new country. I'd never been to Ireland before, never even visited it, but I understood that they did speak English, the sort I do as a Welshman. I came over in 1972 for my interview and I was due to fly into Shannon, and because there was fog, which was not supposed to happen at Shannon; I was diverted to Aldergrove, Northern Ireland. They put me on a train down to Dublin and then the train down to Limerick from there and that was a bit of a shock having to do those things when I wasn't quite aware where the hell the railway station was and so on. Anyway, I sat on the train and sitting opposite me was Frank Prendergast who I didn't know before, of course, the first Irishman I'd ever spoken to. I was very impressed and I thought he was a lovely friendly fellow and, not only that, he seemed to know a lot about what had been going on in Limerick and I realised after, he'd been, or he became, the Mayor of Limerick twice and he also became a T.D. and also a member of the Governing Body, so he really knew what the plans were for it (which was more than I knew at the time). It was a bit of pie in the sky as far as I was concerned.

Ed Walsh of course, I got to know extremely well over the years, he's a man that I would work for anytime; we had our ups and downs, he was a very determined man, sometimes determined in different directions from someone like me. He had a very American background for quite a few years after his qualifications in Cork, and he was not a typical Irishman at all, not how I understood Irishmen, i.e, easygoing like the Welsh and don't rush things. Ed Walsh had no time to live, he was a man with a mission and a terrific driver and I accepted that, I thought that was great for starting from a green field site and

trying to produce, as he said, about 8,000 students by the end of the century. I got back to the hotel afterwards and thought 'yeah, well don't forget now Evan, he's an Irishman and they have the blarney, it may not happen anything like that'. But it did, it did!. So some of the things that they talked about at my interview, there was about twelve people sitting in front of me, it was quite frightening in a way although I'd been interviewed before many times. I understood that some of them would be looking for something and some people looking for something else and I'd be looking for 'are there any bombs going off in the South?' because at the time it was very bad in the North wasn't it?. I think they even burned down the British Embassy just before I got there. Anyway, I was assured that no, 'there's no problem down here, we like the Welsh, we think they are just Irishmen who couldn't swim, you know'.

So I met then, Seán O'Connor who was the Secretary for Education and at first he sort of quizzed me about this Co-Op programme which we called in England the 'Sandwich' course and he seemed to be very deprecating about it. I was trying to tell him the idea was that it makes the students when they go out, grow up, they become very mature, they see what industry's all about and what their future place is in the world as well as in industry, as opposed to students who'd come through a standard three or four year degree and came straight from school and really didn't know much about it other than meeting the professors who have very often done the same thing, they've gone through university and stayed in the university and never saw the real world as working engineers might consider it. So I tried to convince him of that and frankly I got to know him fairly well after because Ed and I and a few others went up regularly to the Department of Education; either we were called up there for one reason or another doing something not in a way they liked it or just to help us and I found Seán O'Connor was a really good man and I grew to respect him a lot after that.

I: Had that idea of Co-Op and Cooperative Education been promoted in the NIHE?.

E.P.: Not before, (I: not before?) not this (I: was this your idea?). No, not me personally no, Ed has thought of this because they were doing it in the States of course for many

years, I think 1904 was the first Co- Op education programme there and they'd been doing it at Sheffield where I was, the Polytechnic at that time, for about ten years or more and I'd been involved with that aspect.

I: So you were a supporter of this?.

E.P.: Oh yes indeed, yes. So that's why Ed and I sort of hit it off very well on the courses. So anyway I went back to my hotel afterwards and I phoned my wife who was in England still and I said well, they've got great ideas but I don't think it will come to anything. Later, Ed Walsh phoned and he said 'would you like to come out to dinner with us tonight, I've got a few people you might like to meet in a less formal occasion than today at the interview'. So I said alright, yes, thank you, and I went to dinner with them and from that point on they changed my views on what I was thinking previously. I then went back to tell Pauline when I got home, I said, 'I think we'll be staying for a while anyway', so we kicked it around and I said 'let's give it three or four years, we'll see how it goes' and by that time we would have known whether it's going anywhere or not. Well by that time I'd been thoroughly imbued with Ed Walsh's and other peoples enthusiasm and I became the fourth member of staff who was appointed at the NIHE. Of the first dozen academic staff there was only one Irish person and there was a lot in the papers about that why can't we have Irish people?. The reason of course was fairly obvious; Ed Walsh was doing something different. We couldn't go to the Irish university and pick people because unless it was straightforward Mathematics or Theoretical Physics or something, then there was nobody there teaching Metallurgy as such and very few people teaching anything that related to an industrial side of affairs. And even some of those who had titles somewhat similar to what we had planned to do would be people who did it from a very academic point of view and didn't relate to industry at all.

So consequently it became a very exciting period, we were developing new ideas, not new for the world necessarily but certainly new for Ireland and then convincing people in the Department of Education that this is the way it should go. People in the universities who were put to look after us, because they assumed they wouldn't trust these young

whippersnappers coming over and giving them new ideas. They had been doing it for many years, 200 or something, well in the case of Trinity College, of course, nearly 400. Anyway, I think we made a stand on what we wanted to do, the trouble was, we were a bit cocky as well and we wanted to move fast and there were lots of arguments at various sessions of either the Academic Council of the University or our own separate meetings with various people. And we were starting with some of them from the point of view that, I said well, 'I'm a Metallurgist', and they said 'Oh, you've been teaching the weather forecast!' and so on. There were a few like that, I mean not in the Department of Education entirely, so it was quite something to get the right idea of what we were doing across.

I arrived in February and Ed Walsh was telling me that in September we're having a pilot group of students coming through. So we had to prepare courses, we had to prepare laboratories, we had some laboratories which were part furnished in the Stables which had been quite nicely converted but the equipment was sort of standard, traditional university type of teaching equipment. There was nothing relating to Metallurgy or Polymers or anything of that sort. So we had a lot of fun with that especially once we'd been given money by the World Bank, that was the real thing that got us going and made everybody in the universities jealous because they didn't get any, you know.

I: Can I interrupt you for one moment, what was your position, your first position?.

E.P.: The title of it was Senior Lecturer in Applied Science and Engineering. I'd had a discussion with Ed Walsh about this and said 'I'm already a principal lecturer over in the Polytechnic in Britain, which is well established and a big place compared with what we were going to do'. And he said 'forget about it and forget about this NIHE title' and I said 'yes, I want to know, what the hell does that mean?' Anyway his ideas came to fruition I'm glad to say in the end. He assumed that they couldn't appoint me as a Head of Department because the title wasn't used by the Department of Education when they were setting us up or something. So very soon anyway I became the acknowledged Head of Department, Applied Science became Metallurgy or Materials Science and the

engineering aspect took on the manufacturing industry and we went from there. And as I said at the beginning, we were setting up the laboratories, buying equipment, interviewing new members of staff. I was the first one in that side, the 'wet' side as it became known, there was one in Electronics who I could mention later again, a great fellow, John Alexander, he'd been working for Marconi all over the world, in Australia and elsewhere. He used to shoot up rockets at Woomera and all the rest of it, a really good scientist as well as a manager, the trouble is he didn't know much about managing academics and it used to drive him nuts that everything took longer in a new place setting up a university under a Department of Education which wasn't quite that dynamic. He eventually left us after about a year and a half and went to Aberdeen University and then he didn't stay there long either and he went back into industry.

So there were other people as well. Of the first twelve there was I think only one that was Irish, that was Una Mansfield who used to work for Paul Quigley of SFACO; she was administrative side of affairs in Business Studies and then, I'm not going to go through the whole list even if I could remember them all but the others came from, a few from America, one even from Egypt and several from Britain; in the Languages area there were one or two from the various countries like France and Germany. Anyway, we started in the September with ten students in each of five areas. One half of the area being diploma and the other half being degree. So we had a very small number and we wanted to set up something which allowed the diploma people if they did well enough to transfer. We also had wonderful ideas like they could have choices, electives, to do things. Well that gradually got less and less as we realised we were getting more and more students and less and less ratio of staff, so that unfortunately was a bit of a drawback. The Co-Op programme went very well; we had to start from scratch because very few people in the country knew what it was although fortunately there was a lot of American industry and they knew what it was and we got a lot of students going off to those various companies. So it was all going pretty well except for the political side of things and I mean that with a small 'p' because there's nothing worse than academic politics.

So we had no end of rows with various people - I don't know if I'm telling tales out of school now - Richard Burke was the Minister for Education at the beginning and he went off to hospital, I don't know if it was a breakdown from having to put up with us, but I don't think it was. And I remember he told his Department of Education Secretary to get rid of that Ed Walsh as soon as you can, he's a menace. But fortunately, the Department of Education saw that it was not a good thing to do. That was just one aspect, I mean we all had problems with various other academics who were 'looking after us' and, as I said, we were pretty cocky as well at the time and consequently there were many flare ups. I got to know most of them later and eventually we got on very well together. I think most of them would probably be retired by now, even if they're still alive.

It was difficult for families to settle in easily. I mean we had our academic life and we all were very keen for getting that done, so keen that we'd have Academic Councils going on until about eight o'clock at night for instance, that very often happened. And then Ed Walsh would take us all out to dinner somewhere and so continued the academic discussion over dinner. The wives of course were stuck at home. Most of them were alone, and they didn't know the other wives, and it became very difficult for them and one or two marriages broke up as a result of that. I know my wife, Pauline set up a playschool and that was her daily job, if you like, with one of the other lecturer's wives and that was the first playschool in the country. They got involved with that and it kept them fairly busy, which probably saved our marriage in that respect.

I: So it was a very time consuming place of employment, you were very committed to it?.

E.P.: That's right, one had to do organising, lecturing and laboratories and tutorials and we would in September have to start lecturing as well. My first lecture was in the East Room in Plassey House, as it was a mixed academic group, I talked about Sir Henry Bessemer, a famous nineteenth century engineer and inventor. Very often we were asked to teach things we had just learned, because the next day you had to teach it. I can remember, you said you interviewed the Registrar (I: Leo Colgan?) Leo Colgan, before he was Registrar, was a lecturer in Business Studies or Accountancy. And he always tells

the story that he'd bought a book which he called the bluffers guide to accountancy so he could learn it the day before he had to give it to the students. But we were all doing that sort of thing; it made life interesting although sometimes difficult. Anyway, the first students came along and they were on the whole, great to work with. We had this attitude engendered by some of the American side of the staff like Peter Wolk who said you got to call them by their and our first names, not Mr. this or Dr. that. And so they all knew us in the first few years by our first names and we knew them by their first names and that was great but of course after it got bigger it was difficult to continue that situation. But it was wonderful; I'd never been involved with a small place beginning like that before. So we all thoroughly enjoyed ourselves I think apart from the odd frustrations, running courses and getting equipment and so on. When we had the money from the World Bank that was wonderful because we could really buy stuff that amazed the 'poor' universities.

I: And where did you go for that equipment, was it available in Ireland?.

E.P.: Sometimes there were companies in Ireland that we would get it from but they were suppliers rather than knowing a whole lot about it. There were some who were good, we bought a good few microscopes and they could give us advice because they'd been doing it to the universities and so on. But there was a lot of equipment that was not available in this country and we had to buy it directly from England or sometimes America.

I: And you had adequate funding for this from the World Bank?

E.P.: We had in the first years; we almost didn't know how to spend it all. It was absolutely wonderful but that slowly dried up. Though we got a European Bank allocation as well sometime after and these weren't just dropped in our laps, we had to go out and fight for them you know, we had to talk the talk. And that was part of the excitement of the job as well. So now we were quite well funded at the beginning and what we had to wait for was for some of the laboratories to be built, because you couldn't put all this wonderful equipment in old stables. Well they'd cleaned out the horse manure and so on so they were better than old stables, but once the buildings started coming

along it was great because you sometimes had to design a laboratory around a large piece of equipment, an electron microscope, for instance. So it was all coming along very nicely and I think most of us enjoyed ourselves and we sometimes had a bit of fun as well. I remember we used to eat downstairs in the basement next door to the library which was also in the basement then. You'd lose it now in one of the rooms in the library (I: this is in the White House?) in the White House yes, that was all we had in the beginning. My office was in the top of the White House in what I suppose one time was one of the servant's rooms. In fact Noreen Copley is in it now, she's in Administration. So we we're down in the basement and we cooked our own meals or some of the girls who were in the office did a soup or something for us. Then there were the occasions when again John Alexander I mentioned who was a keen fisherman sometimes used to say about twelve o'clock, 'let's go down and catch some fish and have them for lunch', so we did. They were only perch, and they were a bit bony you could say (I: so you went out to the river?) down to the river. That's right, back in half an hour with a couple of fish, it was fun. Those were the sort of things that don't normally happen in setting up a university.

I: So you would all have been involved in the cooking then of these fish or whatever?

E.P.: I think John and I sometimes did but people like Ann Lyons and so on who were there permanently, secretaries or administrators or whatever so we would sort of hope that they would do the cooking for us but when it was soup that was easy, whatever about the fish.

I: And it was a very young faculty at that stage?.

E.P.: They were young when they came in I suppose so yes, I was in my thirties, I'd had some time in industry and then ten or eleven years at Sheffield so I was about thirty-five or something, I think. And John Alexander was just a bit older than me, he'd been in industry for some time as I said. The rest were probably all younger. I won't say anything about Una Mansfield, it's not very nice, but she was young and attractive too. She moved

on to the States to help a Professor write a book. So we were all young and enthusiastic, that's the point I suppose, we hadn't been dyed in the wool and had jobs that had made us get bored before we got here.

I: You mentioned that Ed Walsh inspired people with his enthusiasm (E.P.: Oh absolutely, yes), and you would all then have shared that enthusiasm, was there a sense that you were doing something unique?.

E.P.: Oh yes, absolutely, certainly unique in Ireland, I mean all the things we were doing, we invented things as we went along. You know, Co-Op, how to go and start a Co-Op system, I'd been involved in Co-Op in Sheffield but I didn't start it, there was an office that did that. There is now in Limerick of course but we started off where Dan O'Neill who worked in my department for me, he's American although his name is Irish of course, so you can guess he was from Boston. He took over the running of Co-Op for the first couple of years, then it got sort of out of hand and he couldn't do his lecturing and look after several hundred students, finding jobs for each. So we all threw in our ideas as well and if we'd got to know any of the other industrialists for other reasons/purposes, we got them to take students as well. So it was very much a hand to mouth existence at that stage, and now it's much more professional of course.

I know Ed was a great inspirer, there's no doubt about it. I'd never met anybody like him in my life and I still probably haven't, although he's retired now. Limerick itself was disappointing. You know a lot of the faculty had been used to bigger cities, more developed, with more diverse cultures. In Limerick I don't think they'd seen a black face, for instance, not for the first several years of the university whereas in Sheffield we'd been used to them for several generations. And I'd been used to black faces in Wales because my father was a coalminer!. Anyway the thing about Limerick was that 200 years ago it was probably a very advanced, not industrialised so much as business orientated, international city but by the time we got there it had gone down the drain really; come back up now thank God. So the shops weren't there for getting what you want, you always had to order it and wait for it or if somebody bought something and it

went down nobody could repair it or give you the odd piece that was needed. I think the world has changed now, Ireland has changed considerably since that time.

We liked the countryside, we liked it from various points of view. One, it reminded me of where I grew up in South Wales, a lot of unused fields but you could walk along them and nobody cared, which was a big advantage in many ways. And the lake just up the road here was lovely, we eventually bought a boat and sailed on it, that makes a nice story as well, perhaps I'll diverge into that. We went to Cork, Passage West, I think it was and we found a chap who was a boat maker, that's why we went down there and he said 'yeah, I can do you that, what do you want exactly?'. So we told him about a little cabin and all the rest of it and an outboard motor and he said okay, give me a month, so we phoned him up in a month and he said 'ah, give me another couple of weeks or so', and it went on like this for a while and in the end I don't know if he got fed up of me phoning him up but he said 'yeah, it'll be ready on Saturday', and I said 'oh lovely, we'll come down, are you sure it'll be ready now?', I don't want to come down and find there's nothing there'. And he said no, it will be ready on Saturday. We got down there and of course it wasn't anywhere near ready and I said 'why did you make me come down here when it wasn't ready?' and he said 'I didn't want to disappoint you'. Now I didn't quite get the logic of that but we got the boat eventually and we had some lovely times up on the lake.

I: Did you have children?.

E.P.: I had a daughter and she was four when we arrived so she thinks she's Irish, in fact every time Munster is playing she puts on her red rugby shirt you know, and I was a rugby player as well when I was young.

I: So that helped you as well to settle into Limerick ?.

E.P.: That's right and would you believe it, I know everybody says this but I was actually at Thomond Park when Munster beat the New Zealand team of All Blacks (I: you and all

the other thousands of people!) Hundreds of thousands and I think it only took about twenty but I was there; I think I was with Leo Colgan at the time, in fact.

I: So that was a good memory?.

E.P.: It was tough, absolutely, nothing like that since though they are doing well at the moment. So that was another thing, talking of Leo Colgan, it was the period when Wales won everything in rugby. Four Triple Crowns and three Championships, one after the other, and I had the tie. Leo was a big rugby man himself. We used to bet every time there was a game on, he'd bet a pound or whatever it was and I was taking money off him right and left. Fortunately by the time Wales had gone down the drain I think we had stopped betting.

I: You wore your tie with pride?.

E.P.: Oh absolutely, oh yes, yes, those were great days. I think they're coming back a bit now again.

I: Did you get involved in any sporting activity or events in the NIHE, because you had Thomond next door?.

E.P.: Yes that's right, I played squash there in Thomond. No, I didn't do much else, I played a bit of tennis, it was mostly with my wife who was a good tennis player when she was younger. She would beat me regularly. I didn't do much else in that respect, no. Well I was getting past playing with young fellows you know at about the thirty –five to forty age group.

I: Did some of the younger members of staff, did they use the facilities there at Thomond?.

E.P.: Oh yes, yes, I played squash with Leo quite often and there were a few others as well that came. There was no other sport that I took part in, didn't have a lot of spare time.

I: But outside the university campus itself, well the campus of the NIHE at the time itself, there wasn't an awful lot in Limerick to get involved in?.

E.P.: No, and being a foreigner you didn't know that many people, you didn't know what the situation was and the GAA was a big thing as well. You know, I wouldn't know anything about the GAA. In fact I often thought of it as a political force and anti -Brit, so I don't know if that was true, but it always seemed a bit like that. But the individual people I mean they were great, I love the Irish people. I'm not just saying that like the Americans say it on tv but they were so like the Welsh people that I'd grown up with you know. Where are we now then? Oh, the official opening was quite good; it was done in a marquee behind Plassey House because we didn't have any large buildings other than that. That was fun.

I: Jack Lynch came down to open it, I think.

E.P.: That's right, yes. Yes it was quite good from my point of view, I had never in all the time I was in Britain met a member of Parliament, let alone the Taoiseach or the Prime Minister whereas I was meeting them quite often in Ireland and that would give you a bit of a gizz you know, it was quite good.

I: Can you remember some of your difficulties with the Department, what were they concerned with, was it resources, was it new courses, I suppose you had to have new courses ratified all the time?

E.P.: It wasn't resources because of the World Bank input and so on, that wasn't too bad. It was getting freedom in time to do something, you know, the Department of Education and I suppose from their background quite rightly, they had to look after the money, and

the small amount of money they had. You would have to have three quotations for what you wanted and in some cases there was only one real manufacturer you were interested in and similarly if you were employing somebody that you really wanted and you found it was amongst ten people who had no experience at all in that area, you still had to wait for letters to come in and interviews to be arranged and so on. Those were the frustrating things. Otherwise, apart from odd occasions when, as I say, with courses you had difficulty getting people to accept what you wanted to do and also of course we were running a four year degree which included a Co-Op period. In fact in the beginning there was a two six months period, and to get them to accept that the students weren't just going to the local pub and chatting with the boss of their company rather than learning anything, that was hard to convince a lot of people, certainly a lot of university people at that time. I notice a lot of universities are doing it as well themselves now. Oh I think we initiated a lot of that sort of thinking and that was satisfying too, you know.

I: What were your early degrees in, in Engineering?

E.P.: That we taught? Well there was Materials Engineering which is Metals, Plastics, Ceramics and so on. Then there was Industrial Engineering which was the organisation of industry and people in industry to get things done and Manufacturing also which was more the man/equipment side of things, not so much the management as the organisation of a factory and whether you had various pieces of equipment in the right place. We also started Mechanical Engineering which we didn't do at the beginning because we didn't want to step on the toes of the existing universities and Mechanical Engineering was quite a traditional course but then we realised, as we did with Electronics, there was nobody doing Electronics at that time (I: really?) No, the people that we had to try and convince said 'well, we do Electrical Engineering, it's only the same thing really', but of course it wasn't anything like it. Consequently, we had those fights with various people who were serious professionals and they knew what their course was like and assumed that we would link in somehow. Well we had different ideas and as I said we were pretty cocky as well, and young and fit. And those were the sort of problems we had I suppose, convincing people who were in charge of us in many ways, because the university had to

set up organisations to look after our courses and to convince some of them. There were some good university people but on the other hand there were some who were dyed in the wool you know and that was difficult sometimes.

I: So you introduced Electronic Engineering into Ireland really?

E.P.: Yes, that's right, well certainly in 'Southern' Ireland. I don't know much about the Northern situation, yes it was a case of the people doing Electrical Engineering said two things: 1) we can take that into our courses as an elective of something, but also 2) what if you turned out ten or twenty electrical engineers, where would they find work? They all subsequently put on courses in Electronic Engineering and we're turning out how many now, a few hundred a year. Now there are peaks and troughs and so on, you know industry doesn't want any for some years and then you find that four years later they can't get enough of them. Now at the moment we are going through a terrible trough of course, I wouldn't like to be a student coming out at the moment, but 'this also will pass', as they say.

I: I was going to ask you that about your graduates, this was Ireland in the early 1970s, I suppose the mid 1970s when the first students came out, 1976, so, how difficult was it for them to find employment in Ireland?.

E.P.: Relatively easy compared with the university people who'd been shipping abroad to America or Britain. Ed Walsh was one of them, he got his degree and used it to buy a ticket to America, that's what so many people did. But we were supplying the sort of people that industries in the country wanted and sometimes we leaned over backwards and looking back, perhaps didn't give enough of the strong academic base which any university professor would expect but which industry wasn't so bothered about. And of course we were also turning out diploma students who were less academic and more hands on, and of course they'd gone and worked in Co-Op in industry, really hands on. So we found very little difficulty. There was always one or two students who were either

difficult or not as bright as the others and you know you might have problems helping those, but otherwise no, we never really did at all.

I: So you had strong connections with a local industrial base, of industry?.

E.P.: Not just local, in all of Ireland. We were sending students up to places like Donegal and so on and of course we had expenses paid up there which was a very great advantage, although, limited expenses but adequate. And you know all over the country we found places for these people. We would write to companies and say can I come and talk to you about our Co-Op programme and so on. Local was easy, just go down the road but there weren't any big companies other than at Shannon of course.

I: Can you remember the names of the first companies you would have worked with?.

E.P.: Oh yes, I think some of them are around still. There was Boart which does drilling equipment and there was some which have changed their name since and some which have gone since. There was a tool company, a cutting tool company down in Shannon, I think it did change its name, it became High Tool or something of that sort and it made bolts for the aircraft industry, so it supplied the bolts and they supply some of the tools as well. Then there were chemical companies, there was Syntex, I think that changed its name too or been taken over (I: yes, it's become Roche) that's right Roche. So they were big companies and they'd take quite a few students knowing that they may not employ them all but they would take quite a few for the Co-Op and then there would be enough for them to pick and choose later.

I: So it worked well, this process? (E.P.: that's right, the Co-Op and employment afterwards) and then the fostering of those links. Was there any consultative process, you said that we trained the sort of people they were looking for, was there an input by these companies?.

E.P.: There was yes. Apart from the meeting of people, the bosses in these various companies and listening to what they had to say we set up organisations which met say, one term at least, maybe once a month, in some cases when we were starting with people that we'd cherry picked from these organisations. And we brought them in as a committee to look at the development of our courses and that worked quite well too. Because they would sometimes guide us into some directions that we hadn't thought of and sometimes they would want something we weren't so sure about, you know. They'd sometimes want somebody who was more of a technician than a graduate. So you know the two bouncing ideas off each other, that worked quite well.

I: Was that structure set up from the very beginning, from the first days?.

E.P.: From very early on, that's right, yes. Because we got to know these people, the first Co-Op period was in Year 2 and we would have been meeting these other people before then. And then we had people set up later on, a year or so later on who were going to be external examiners. Now in some cases they would be people from this country, in many cases because I've explained we were doing things a bit different from the ones that were being done in this country. So we had to bring a lot of people from the UK and America or wherever and it still goes on I'm sure; I've been away from it for ten years. We had input from them as well, and some from the Polytechnics, for instance in the UK, Open University in the UK. They had a broader view on the interaction of students, academics and industry than the traditional universities might have had in mind. And we were slowly starting to do research as well, we'd all been doing it before we came here and then we tried to pick up the traces and carry on so that we'd be interacting with people as well, and we would know the way perhaps that industry was going or some of the developments particularly in Electronics which were moving fast.

I: You were interested in the Research aspect yourself?

E.P.: I was, but now how can I put this; a university has to do research and unfortunately I feel that many universities do research, at least until recently, almost to the exclusion of

teaching, the students can find their own way through. In fact I remember there was a Professor in Cork who said the worse I teach the better the students have to be to pass. And I thought what a terrible attitude, he's not encouraging them at all, he's not helping them in any way. It was the leftovers from the old days where just the cream went to university. You know, the top two per cent would perhaps get in. And nowadays we're up to the top forty to fifty per cent get in. Okay that's probably gone a bit too far as well especially as we don't take as many in the levels that are required like apprenticeships and technicians and so on. That's a shame but it's unfortunate then that it means an industry employs somebody who is a graduate but makes them do a technician's work which you know isn't right for both of them. So I gradually, to get onto the track that you're talking about, I gradually came around to the idea that lecturing was an important activity, and I love lecturing, and I joined organisations like SEFI, (Société Européenne pour la Formation des Ingenieurs) the European Society for Engineering Education and I became President of that eventually. And there were other organisations in Britain for instance, that were the Polytechnics that got into this teaching thing. And perhaps they've gone too far in that respect in having to fill out forms for everything that they do but these things happen that way I suppose.

And I gradually saw that some of the students were coming to me and saying I can't learn anything from this guy at all. You know there was one particular one, he's gone now, I think he's dead now actually, he used to lecture to say 100 - 150 students, which again was not right but we didn't have enough staff. He used to lecture to them, spoke very quietly from the front and they said nobody beyond the first two rows could hear what he was saying and he had a foreign accent as well which didn't help very much. And his attitude was, well, if you want to hear me, you come down the front. But with 150 students, it's not possible. And there were others as well who were very superior about their teaching who thought that if I want to get on in this university I have to publish research papers and of course they had a certain justification.

But anyway towards the last ten years of my career there I gradually moved into training people to teach, not teachers as such, but as lecturers who interact with students rather

than just take their notes and read them out, which I've seen lots of people do. So I talked with Ed Walsh and suggested that maybe I could be a Dean of Education. Now he wouldn't buy that but he said 'why don't you take on the education, teaching and lecturing part and we'll call you the Head of Teaching and Learning or something?'. I still did my own teaching of course and in between I'd been Dean, as well as Head of Department, but not Dean of Teaching, Dean of Engineering and Science. And I gradually moved into that and spent more time doing that and I instituted an award for teaching every year and that gave me an excuse again for going in to listen to various lecturers who were applying for it or somebody else sponsored or suggested they did it. I could see that some of them were excellent but a lot of them didn't have a clue and didn't think it was that important but it would be nice to have a piece of paper saying I was the best teacher of the year. But it gave me a chance to take them after the time I'd listened, I used to go in at the time they'd lecture and try and point out to them that you know if you did it this way instead of that way, I think you'd get through to students better. And I also then used to run week long courses at the beginning of term and new people used to come along and I hope learn something from it and my interaction with people all around Europe with SEFI, that made me see how it was done in other countries as well as England, which I probably had a good idea of.

And I also joined the American Society for Engineering Education and I met a lot of people there who gave me good ideas. And I tried to apply some of them and I think I did a bit. In fact now of course, we have a Dean of Teaching and Learning (I: this is the Centre for Teaching and Learning?) yes that's right, it's a Centre now, isn't it? (I: so you initiated the idea?) The idea, yes, and did some work towards it and put things in the library and so on about teaching as well. But I was never appointed as a Dean of Teaching and Learning because Ed Walsh was still there and he had his mind made up, 'don't confuse me with facts, you know. But of course I then overlapped a little with Roger Downer and he bought the idea and he'd come from Canada for many years and I think he'd seen that attitude there and consequently we now have the Dean of that area and a Centre that runs it. So that was something again I was glad I initiated, probably without anybody realising it, any more.

I: It's a very dynamic part of the institution now.

E.P.: Is it? Oh, I'm glad to hear it.

I: Just to go back to ... one of the distinguishing features I think as well, of the NIHE, was modularisation, the fact that there was a certain interdisciplinarity in the beginning, which was unusual in higher education (E.P.: oh yes, absolutely). Did many of your students for example take language courses or was there an overlap?

E.P.: I think in the beginning we insisted that they took a language. A lot of engineers did French or German as an extra and we had somebody in the first days who taught Russian as well because we thought that was going to be a big area that we would develop, in fact it became less important I think. It was more difficult to teach or learn I suppose, the writing isn't the same of course, Cyrillic language with different letters and different pronunciations and so on. So we tried modularisation almost to the extent of saying you can learn anything you like; and then the reality came in that it didn't fit in to the timetable, if they wanted to do French on a Wednesday at three o'clock, it wasn't taught at that time so it gradually came down to reality. It's great in a big American university where they can repeat a module time and time again. Here we couldn't, certainly on starting we couldn't because there weren't enough staff or sometimes not enough rooms to teach in.

I: Was staffing a problem then?.

E.P.: Oh yes.

I: Did you often feel you just didn't have enough staff in your department?.

E.P.: Yes, not often but we usually cut our suit according to our cloth, you know. But we had to plan ahead you see, it meant that you'd design a course and hope that by the time

it's running there'd be somebody to teach that bit and that bit and sometimes it did and sometimes it didn't work too well. But we could say yeah, we never had enough teachers, academics, but that's true of every place, I'm sure they could all say something like that. I mean I was listening the other day and I know it's been happening over the years that the universities cut down for a variety of reasons. One is they are cutting the money down to them in Britain and they took early retirement of a large number of the staff and they found almost immediately the following year that they'd nobody to teach a, b, and c, so they hired back on a part time basis all these staff. They probably spent as much on it as they would if they'd just kept them on in the first place and it's still going on, there was something on the news about it the other day. But you know planning ahead is an important aspect.

I: And finally I suppose are there any highlights that you remember of your time in Limerick, does anything stand out, or any events or any achievements that you're particularly proud of?.

E.P.: I'm being slow about this, because there are probably so many that I can't think of one that stands out, there're all at a high level anyway. I suppose as I said earlier, working with Ed Walsh meant that a lot of things were happening that were great and new and constantly new in Ireland anyway, and consequently when they succeeded you felt 'I've done something, and my living has not been in vain'. There were times when I was asked to sit on committees in universities and what was the forerunner of FÁS, the Institute for Industrial Research and Standards or something like that. I was asked to go and help them with such and such a problem, and I thought oh good, I've arrived, these are well known places and they're good places on the whole and they're asking for my advice, those are great, very ego growing things. I suppose really, satisfaction was getting the courses going, growing every year, having more students and then getting them out into industry. I suppose there are a few things that might seem minor but I occasionally bump into an ex student who said, the last one I can think of said 'I remember you lectured in Engineering to me in my first year and it's the best set of lectures I ever had' or 'you were the greatest lecturer I ever had' and that's wonderful because that's what I

was, a lecturer. And there's one or two people that I know who are now at the top of their business, their industry, because I didn't teach business students much and these people, there's one now whose wife is a friend of my wife and they've gone out to Singapore. He's running a company which is a hive off of one of the companies at Shannon and it's a big company, an international company and he's head of it and that's great you know. There's one or two others as well who've gone right up to the top level and that's satisfying that they've done it from their own ability, but at least I trained them in the beginning and that was good. I suppose there are other things but they don't come to mind straight away.

I: Thank you very much.