

University of Limerick Oral History Project.

Interview Transcript: Liam McMahúna

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I: Liam, thank you for talking to me today, would you mind telling me a bit about yourself?

L.M.: I was born in Tullow in 1954 and my parents moved into Limerick in 1957. I went to the Model school, the all Irish primary school on O'Connell Avenue and then I went to St. Munchin's college and I got seven honours in the Inter. cert and five honours in the Leaving cert. I decided to apply to the NIHE. I had an interview with Peter Wolk, he was the lecturer of Computer Systems Fundamentals in the early years. I was offered a place and I started in late September 1972.

When I started there, the only facility, the only building on the grounds of the campus was Plassey House and the library and the canteen were in the basement. The language laboratory was in one room on the upper floor and the east room was the major lecture room. Other rooms in the building were used for lecture, some were used for the staff and there was Dr. Walsh's office as well.

There were 115 students in the first year and there were five courses on offer at the time; European Studies, Business Studies, Administrative Systems, Electronics, Mechanical Engineering. I studied 42 modules over the four years involving twelve subject areas – Politics, Psychology, History, Business studies, German, Russian, French, Maths, Computers, Economics, Technology, Communications, Soviet Studies, Systems Analysis and Sociology, social research methods.

In the first term, I think that students kind of took it easy that first term. I remember that we had 36 exams in our first year, you see, there was six modules per term and there was mid term tests and there was final term tests, and there was continuous assessment as

well. So it was tough enough, but in that first term I think students were only settling in and they were socialising a lot and they weren't very applied to their studies. So I remember that results after the first mid term tests were poor and I think there was, it looked like there was a policy decision taken from the director down to put the fear of god into the students. I remember Terry Moran, he was the lecturer in German saying to us 'you wouldn't get into Trinity on your hands and knees unless you pulled your socks up', you know and this kind of thing so. After that the students began to take the whole thing a lot more seriously.

Some of the subjects that were there in the first tranche of terms, for instance, you had in the first term, you had, accounting conventions, you had secretarial function, you had management principles, workshop technology, Engineering science, Engineering drawing, French, German, Irish studies, Russian, French advanced, German advanced, Russian advanced, computer systems, fundamentals, Maths with computation, A1 maths computation, B1 Visiting lecture series. There was a Visiting lecture series, it was every Wednesday. A lecturer used to come who was prominent in business or industry or education. He used to give a lecture on a topic, usually related to the European project.

In the second, in Hilary, there was three terms at that time; there was Michaelmas, Hilary and Trinity. In the second term, Hilary, of year one, 1972/73, the kind of subjects / modules on offer were, workshop technology, engineering science, graphics, maths with computation, accountancy, word processing, communication, visiting lecture series, technological environment. They tried to break down the barriers between humanities and the sciences to some extent so they had this technology environment module which all the students attended.

I: What went on in that Liam?

L.M.: They discussed, they discussed, if you like, the social aspects of technology and the environmental aspects of technology and the economic aspects of technology.

Technology from a broader perspective, you know, they didn't go into detail like the Bessemer Process and so on.

I later went on to do an Engineering module myself because they were encouraging students to cross over but the technology environment was a generalised module. French, German, Russian and then French, German, and Russian advanced. They also had Accountancy, marketing research materials and manufacturing.

In then in year two, 1973/74, international trade, Politics, History, Accounting, distribution, microeconomics, materials engineering 1, personnel management 1, document design and reproduction, classical shorthand, word processing, counting conventions, systems and control Engineering, electrical properties and materials, electrical measurements, mechanics of machines, stress analysis and design, mathematics with computation A4, French, German, Russian and Irish studies.

In Hilary then of year two, they had diplomatic history, Dr. Balekijian, they had been trying to recruit a director of European Studies for some time. It was vacant for the most of the first year really, most of the first year, all of the first year, and then a Dr. Balekijian came from university of Vienna and he headed the European Studies dimension. They brought in diplomatic history, political studies, personnel managements, marketing economics, the Irish economic environment, records managements, classic shorthand, meetings, law and procedure, electronics 1, systems and control engineering, production technology, materials engineering, maths with computation, French, German, Russian, Irish studies, Accounting, economic law, thermo dynamics and fluid mechanics. So they evolved the courses as time went on and they started forming Departments, like the Department of Business Studies and so on.

By 1975, in Trinity they kind of courses they had on offer were business law, political sociology, issues in contemporary European politics, Europe since 1945, Europe in world affairs, political development of France since the revolution, introduction to the USSR.

They had a lecturer, Brian Faloon, lecturing in Soviet Studies and they had two Russian lecturers, Terry Moran and another lecturer as well in Russian, Andrew Bromfield. A certain number of students took the Russian option.

I: Did you take Russian?

L.M.: I took Russian, yes, because I done French in secondary school so we were to pick two subjects, two languages in European studies and I took German and Russian. In Trinity of 1975, the introduction to the USSR, German for Business Studies, intermediate German, advanced German. And then they had, in Business Studies, they had business law. By 1975, the students were beginning to be concerned that the courses were too generalist, that they weren't, that by the time they'd graduate that they wouldn't be specialised enough in any one area to get, to have a marketable degree. So they discussed the matter with the man, the faculty and the faculty decided that they would need specialisation or at least options. In European studies you could take a language like German or French or Russian or you could take Economic and Social Studies. I took Economic and Social Studies. In Business Studies you had a marketing option and or you had a personnel option.

The kind of courses they were offering in 1975, in Trinity Business Studies were business law, financial management, applied behavioural science, industrial relations, financial management, taxation, management accounting. They had another, a third option in Business which was a finance option and then managerial economics and economics of integration – that was to do with the integration of common markets and so on, I did that when we were doing that course. And then Administrative systems, they had shorthand, programming language, techniques of word processing, techniques of systems analysis, organisational methods. So they ... continued to try to expand the courses and the options available in each year as the years went by.

The other dimension then to the course, of course was the Cooperative Education. I had three Co-Op periods, two in Ferenka, the old Ferenka factory which was a steel chord

manufacturer out at Annacotty, and it was a joint Dutch/German company. I worked in the logistics department from March to June in 1974 and then January to June 1975. Four students got placements in Ferenka. I was interviewed for the job and I got in, I was offered the job because my German was adequate at the time. I was working in, first of all, in the purchasing department and I was sending fax, telexes as it was then, they didn't have faxes at that time, they had telexes, making phone calls to the head office in Germany to order stuff. And then I came back in 1975 and was working in, there was four sections in the logistics department, there was purchasing, there was warehouse, there was stock control and there was transport, and I worked all in all four to give me the experience.

Then for my third period of Co-Op I went to Brussels to the European Commission as a Stagiare. I was the first UL Stagiare in Brussels. I was there from September to December 1975. I worked in ECDOC which was the computerised information system in the general secretariat, and because I had done Systems Analysis in the NIHE in Michaelmas '75, I was given the task of completing a report on feedback mechanism to the ECDOC CIS. While we were there the Stagiaries were taken a trip to Strasbourg to the European Parliament and to the European Court of Justice and we were taken for a week to Berlin courtesy of the West Berlin Senate in 1975. That was interesting, because we got into East Berlin through checkpoint Charlie and we could see all the Soviet soldiers, there were a lot of Soviet soldiers in East Berlin, you know. You could see how poor the place was. We went into their museums, and they had kind of wooden supports for their exhibition pieces and the shops had very little in them, you know. What I remember, one of the things I remember about Brussels was the comradeship with the other Stagiaries. There were ten Irish Stagiaries and there was about 150 altogether. We all got on very well and it was a rich experience. I returned in January 1976 to complete my degree, because I had another two terms to complete, to the ongoing dispute of the awarding of the degrees.

On the 15th October 1973, Dick Burke had announced the creation of the University of Limerick but within a year the cabinet sub-committee involving Justin Keating, Conor

Cruise O' Brien and Garrett Fitzgerald, all academic doctors, had reversed the government policy. On the 16th December '74, Dick Burke announced the change of policy, announcing that NIHE was to become a recognised college of the NUI under control of UCC. We were very much opposed to that, the students and the staff and the faculty because it was a different ethos. We also knew that if we were under control of UCC, that the campus would have been drip fed of resources and we would never have developed properly. So we fought it, but the government were not for turning, you know. We fought a long campaign, the time of Dr. Walsh and the staff and all that fought, it's well documented now. But a few points of it, on 19 February 1976, the students marched in Dublin, we marched to Dublin, picketed Leinster House, the Department of Education and burned an effigy of Dick Burke

I: Were you on that?

L.M.: Yes, I was yes, and we burned an effigy of Dick Burke on O'Connell Street, yes. On the 8 April 1976, 300 students along with the faculty and staff and parents marched to Dublin where the students burned their matriculation papers in front of the NUI offices. There was a meeting held before that, a week or so before that, in which the students discussed what to do about the matriculation papers and they were suggesting that they burn them on campus but I proposed that we burn them up in Dublin, so we burned them where the cameras caught it, you know.

I: How many of ye were involved in that, was there a big group?

L.M.: There was 300 went up on that trip, yes.

I: By bus or train?

L.M.: Bus, buses, yes, and their parents as well got involved, faculty and staff went along as well. The whole thing rumbled on and then came to a head on 13 May 1976 because the Governing Body met to finalise their decision, you know the recognised college

status. And the government, the Department of Education had made clear that they weren't for turning and that there was no other option. It looked clear, if the Governing Body didn't accept it, that they would be removed and replaced by a commissioner. And I remember at one of the many meetings between Dr. Walsh and faculty and the students and all about the whole issue; he said that his father-in-law, who was a High Court judge, had advised him that many an institution before him had gone to seed, because they had resigned at a crucial time and they were replaced by direct control. So he decided, he decided, the Governing Body decided that they wouldn't resign. And they decided, at that meeting of the 13 May 1976, it started before twelve o'clock, twelve pm, and went on till ten o'clock, after ten o'clock that night. The students kind of barricaded the Governing Body inside, and demanded, that they wouldn't let them out unless they agreed to reject the Governing Body status, or the recognised college status. But there was no other option, they would have been replaced and they felt that, they felt that there was no other option other than to accept the government's diktat. And they came out and they went to the Jonathan Swift lecture room and they explained to the staff, to the students and the parents and the staff, what their decision was and the logic behind it. They decided on a strategy that they would outlast the government and that's what they did, they outlasted the government, Fianna Fáil came in in June 1977, and Wilson was made Minister for Education, he placed them under the NCEA, so the whole project kind of had gone to ground by that time, you know.

In July 1977 then, 18 July 1977, we had our graduation, our first graduation ceremony. There were ... two years were combined, the students that graduated in '76 and '77 were awarded degrees at that stage. The distinguish performance medals were given. Gold medal, 1st place overall, the degree class of '76, was given to James O'Reilly, 1st class overall, diploma class '76, Monica Gleeson, 1st class over all degree class '77, John J. Reidy. 1st place in each area of study, degree class, Fionnuala Lyddy, who is still working out in UL, got the Administrative Systems, 1st place, Business Studies '76 Michael Clancy, Electronics '76, Peadar Little, European Studies Maria Mc Guire – she later went to work for the OECD and did extensive work for them. She's still working part time for them but she is living in Ireland now. James Ross, Materials and

Manufacturing Engineering, 1976 ,and then there was three for '77, Eileen Cody Business Studies '77, Patrick Mitchell, Electronics, '77 and Helen Barrett, European Studies, 1977.

I: When did you graduate then?

L.M.: I graduated in '76. I was working part time in an auctioneer's office for a while and then eventually I got a job in the Mid Western Health Board in 1978. I had a permanent job as a clerical officer and I worked in Catherine Street, I worked in the Regional Hospital, I worked in St. Camillus Hospital, and then I got posting as research officer with the Director of Corporate Strategy. Research and Information Officer was more or less the exact title. I worked in Corporate Strategy and then I worked in disabilities, and I worked in childcare, and then I took early retirement on the 30 December last year.

I: Can I just take you back to how you heard about this new college, the NIHE, why you chose to go there or how you came to go there, and then if you feel that the education you got there equipped you well and the degree you got there, you were happy with that?

L.M.: How I heard about it was Dr. Walsh came out to St. Munchin's College to address the final year students, about the NIHE. He had a policy of going around to all the second level colleges in the region addressing the final year students. I didn't fancy leaving Limerick when the option was there to study at third level in my own door step, you know. I liked the European studies option, I liked the languages option, I liked the whole idea of embracing Europe.

I: And and were you happy, you mentioned how broad ...?

L.M.: Yes it was broad; I studied 13 different subject areas. Basically I got, I mean, one of the strengths of the Irish education system is that it is a general education system up to the end of Leaving cert unlike in the British system where you have the A levels and the

O levels and so on. I felt that, in the NIHE I got that continuation of the general education right up to the end of the final year in third level. It gave me a broad, a lot of hooks on which to hang things.

I: Did many from your class in St. Munchin's go onto NIHE?

L.M.: Yes, there was a few. There were about three or four that joined. Three or four went on, yes, three I suppose, yes.

I: What was the atmosphere like in Plassey as the first students there?

L.M.: There was good comradeship, camaraderie among the students and there was a kind of informal atmosphere between the staff and the students, you know. Because there is only 115 students and we are all in the one building and you tend to interact a lot. You wouldn't see much of Dr. Walsh, mind you. He wasn't one who made his presence felt very much, he tended to be dealing with the higher affairs of the Department of Education and all that kind of thing. But in terms of the students there was a kind of camaraderie, you know, built up, you know.

I: Do you remember from that time, staff?

L.M.: I remember Terry Moran- the Russian lecturer and Andrew Bromfield, the Russian lecturer, because Russian I suppose was so demanding a subject I tend to remember them. I remember Brian Faloon, the History lecturer; he later unfortunately went on to develop Alzheimer's, you know, the poor man. He knew his subject area thoroughly. I was interested in the whole Soviet, at the time the Soviet Union was pretty big, you know, you had the cold war going on, and there was a lot of interest in the Soviet Union, Soviet affairs. It was a novel kind of area, so that took my fancy. I liked economics too; Donal Dineen was interesting as a lecturer. Psychology, I did one psychology module with Damien Dyer, he has since moved on a long time, but I have retained an interest in psychology ever since and I have read a lot in that area since, you

know. I mean, because we covered so many subject areas and I retained an interest in many of them since. I had a lot of areas in which to go and a lot hooks on which to hang things, you know.

I: What about socialisation and sporting activities?

L.M.: I tended to be, I was a studious type, you know. I tended to be the one that just focused on the academic studies a lot. I remember they set up, I remember Ed Walsh at one stage saying that students were fortunate in the first year and they would have the choice of setting up the first societies, you know. And they did set up a society, the Abaraxian society. It was kind of a literary, historical society but it didn't last beyond a year or two. They had a dramatic society. I went to one of their productions in the city theatre. It was a production of Moll by Moliere, I think it was. It was good.

I: You didn't get involved yourself?

L.M.: I didn't get involved much myself. I was the studious type; you just focus on the study and the books, you know.

I: What about sports?

L.M.: Yes, we were beginning to develop the ... well you see, Thomond College came on stream, The National College of Physical Education came on stream in 1973, so that gave the facilities then, for sports, and they used start participating in the inter university competitions and so on and that gradually developed over the four years.

I: What was the reaction among your family and friends towards the NIHE?

L.M.: Well I remember that there was one girl, she was ... her father was living out in Killaloe and she was due to go to college, you know. She said she wasn't going to the NIHE, she referred to it as two and a half level education, not third level education! , so

she wasn't going. Most of my ... peer group, when they were going to college went to UCD, UCC or Trinity, they didn't consider ... but there was a certain demand from ones that wanted to stay locally and study locally, to go to the NIHE but there were only 115 places initially.

I: And a lot of what you were doing as a student like Cooperative education that was so far seing really, in that it wasn't happening in other colleges?

L.M.: Co-Op was a big plus, because I mean, if you take people, most of us who had reached the age of eighteen, we'd spent, apart from summer jobs, we hadn't spent time in formal work place environments where you actually had the discipline and structures of work. It was a very different experience for a while, it took a while to adjust, but it was valuable experience. Especially, like, I enjoyed the time in Brussels, it was interesting. Getting off to a different country and being in a large organisation that size.

I: And do you think that you were part of a very pioneering group in that sense?

L.M.: Well that's one of the things why we were so hurt by the reversion of the government's decision to place us under the NUI and UCC. We felt it was a betrayal of our ... 'esprit', a betrayal of our ethos. We saw ourselves as pioneers. We saw ... the whole thing was experimental in the first year, anyway. I mean they were allowing the European studies students to do a technology module. They had the QCA system and the continuous assessments and we felt we were a part of a pioneering group of students and staff. That is why we felt so betrayed by the government's reversal of policy.

I: Thanks very much.