

University of Limerick Oral History Project.

Interview Transcript: Dr. John McGinn

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I.: Dr. McGinn, thank you very much for speaking to me today. Would you mind introducing yourself and giving me some background to your employment here at UL?

JM.: Sure Catherine. Well I came to what was then NIHE in 1979. Prior to that I had worked with Enterprise Ireland, the National Board for Science and Technology. I had involvement also with Trinity College, Dublin, as Director of an Information Science course. I'd done a range of consultancy work for the likes of UNESCO and FAS and I was on a range of EU working committees. I took my B.Sc. and PhD at Queens University Belfast, and I have an M.Sc. in Information Science at the University of Sheffield. So whilst I didn't have a mainstream academic experience, I had a range of qualifications and experience more related to science policy and industrial liaison. And I felt that this blend of experience lent itself to the type of role that I took on, which was very much a role involving industrial interaction and it was the backbone then to the Cooperative Education programme. I was appointed, as I say, in April of '79 as Director of Cooperative Education and Careers. At that stage the placement programme had been run on a fairly ad-hoc way, but it had reached a point where there needed to a formal layer put on it. There needed to be a centralised entity, towards industry which would have focussed in a very targeted way, that there weren't repeat visits going to the same company by varying academics - maybe each faculty member hard selling their own course. Prior to that industry was coming back to NIHE to say 'what's going on?. We need a coherent institutional approach to this'.

So that was probably the parameters that led to my appointment in the first place. So, when I came here there was something like maybe one hundred placements a year. Currently the placement programme has something like two thousand a year. It has an employer payroll of twenty million euro and about one third of the placements are international so ... it's one of the largest placement programmes in Europe and even in North American terms if you take out the top six North American universities, it would rank just in behind that. I think, and believe, the power of education very much was the driving force to ensure that programmes remain relevant, that both NIHE and the University of Limerick avoided the ivory tower

problem; because as well as placing the students in industry it also involved academics going out to industry to visit, during the placement period. So not only were the students exposed to having a work relevance, the faculty were exposed to getting feedback from industry. So it meant that when the same people were re-designing the programmes they were re-designing it against the backdrop of industrialists telling them what was right and probably what was wrong with the course. But that also offered broader fronts for the university to develop research programmes with industry and I believe it's no coincidence that, all of the companies that were involved with the university over the years in industrial research collaboration, they were all previously Cooperative education employers. So the Co-Op programme allowed a mechanism where trust was built up on both sides and industry got to know the individual key faculty members and out of that grew a range of other initiatives. And I believe that those parameters, that were relevant during the formative phase of the institution, are as relevant today as they were then.

I.: Was this placement and these links with industry unique at the time, in the NIHE?

JM.: Well certainly unique to Ireland. And when NIHE was seen in that era as being very innovative, maybe not respectful of the traditional university educational mores and all of that. So a lot of the traditional institutions would have looked on it askance and maybe queried 'were these people not making tea on a Monday morning?' So it certainly was seen as a very strange beast in 1972 when Ed Walsh was pushing the concept. But it certainly wasn't strange in North American terms where you'd find that maybe half of the institutions had Cooperative Education as a model. But certainly in Irish terms, it was seen as new.

I.: Why is it called Cooperative Education?

JM.: Well it can be called Cooperative Education or Integrated Learning. There's a range of terms all meaning the same thing, but it's basically the cooperation between, the triangular relationship between university, employer and undergraduate, you know. So there are a number of terms, probably workplace learning would be another. But it's probably a good collective term, which embraces the concept. At the same time, when one markets the programme and going to industry, you can't go to them on the basis of altruism or to be a partner in this educational process of this individual. You know, you have to market it as a resource and you're offering the employer a resource that they can use in their own work.

That you're offering an undergraduate that's going to be eight months in placement, that's going to be there for a reasonable length of time after the induction training programme so as to offer a reasonable investment to the company. If you take the altruistic approach you'll be dead in the water. And you know, you convince employers that the student will be capable of a range of motivations, for example, the relevance of the experience, looking on that employer as a potential employer in the future, or a potential referee in the future, or a potential collaborator in any post-graduate research that that individual may do. And although they may not even go back to that employer after graduation, their paths may cross ten years up the line, twenty years up the line, so it's a fairly broad commitment. And then what's in it, as I said previously, for the university, viz the whole idea of maintaining relevance, having a discipline that you put your academics through, that they're getting feedback outside their own work context and maybe subconsciously or otherwise, when they're re-designing programmes. They may re-design it and think that the re-design has come out of their own head, but it may have come out of a series of influences that they've got over the years from their direct contact with industry.

I.: So that communication and feedback worked both ways? It worked for the university but it was also of benefit to the employers as well?

JM.: Yes, because it allowed for such communication and feedback - you see what this university is offering the likes of industry is a multi-disciplinary approach. Now probably we could be more multi-disciplinary than we are because we can be accused of having silos of expertise, but still you know, you can go to a company and, if a project entails a range of disciplines, you can regroup internally. And I think that the collective mechanism of Cooperative Education lends itself to that more easily than if you had an individual faculty going out on a consultancy run. They would be more inclined to talk to industry on a personal and individual context and may not go outside their immediate expertise. But if it's done on a more cooperative basis, which Co-Op lends itself to, you've a greater chance of having a more institutional approach, as you're using a range of expertise across the board, not necessarily that of the individual academic.

I.: When you began as Director, did it involve, did your role involve much marketing then?

JM.: It had a lot of marketing. And a lot of, maybe, understanding the intrinsic process that was going on within a company. I would call it industrial liaison or industrial interaction and it had a marketing role in terms of the marketing tools you use, but you certainly had to get the commitment from industry, maybe at board level or at CEO level in the first instance. Thereafter you maybe dropped down to the HR director or the Chief Engineer or the Chief Accountant, but you certainly tried to go in at the top. You tried to make an impression in the first ten minutes of that encounter. You also had to do a lot of homework about the company prior to going in. Intrinsicly you had some appreciation of the types of expertise that they would require and then you had to try to convince them that what you had on offer as a resource, was the type of resource that would fit into their operation. You cannot do that on your own. You establish firstly a lot of close links with the likes of the IDA and with Fás and with other agencies. You try to find out for instance, which companies had got research grants, what companies had got developmental grants, so that when you were going into a company you knew what was on the agenda for that company, what need they may have, what new expertise they needed. I believe that working with the IDA; we worked with them with respect to companies with whom they were negotiating to locate in Ireland. Quite often we visited the corporate headquarters, in the likes of the US, before they actually were located here.

What we were saying to the IDA synchronised very much with what the IDA were trying to say to prospective FDI companies. And that if they did come to Ireland, if they did make the commitment, there would be an adequate range of relevant graduate expertise for them. So quite often we knew individuals from corporate headquarters some two years before they came here and we knew these decision makers before they made the local appointment of the CEO in Ireland. So then, when the CEO came along, we would maybe let them know we were available, but we would give them maybe a year before we would move them into the next phase. But going into those companies we were going in with the knowledge of their own corporate headquarters, which was a great way to leverage yourself into their Irish operation. So marketing has a role but a whole lot of other roles in terms of having a technical experience or appreciation of what the companies were doing and having a sort of a political organisation of things to allow you to tap into large organisations.

And of course we did not ignore the SME sector which is largely Irish based. And again, working with the SMEs, which maybe weren't large enough to recruit graduates, we were

offering them a half way house to employ undergraduates so as to let those embryonic roles develop. And then maybe, if they did develop, companies would go on to graduate recruitment. They may well drop out of the Cooperative Education programme for a while once they recruited a graduate but then again in a further eighteen months or two years fresh opportunities could arise. So it actually took SMEs through that sort of graduate recruitment phase in a very gradual way that you weren't in a very abrupt way asking them to take the quantum jump from non-graduate recruitment to graduate recruitment. So it offered that half way house. So it was to get that blend of Irish SMEs and international corporate organisations participating in the Cooperative Education programme.

I.: Did you work with Shannon Development?

JM.: We did. We did. And having the Free Zone there presented a concentration of companies. We have that combination of regional involvement and national involvement; say about maybe twenty per cent of our placements are regional, with a huge emphasis on where the main jobs are, where you would see the industrial concentration, the placements were in proportion to that.

I.: So only twenty per cent would have been regional?.

JM.: I would have thought – about that, maybe twenty-five per cent. Shannon Free Zone was there and of course Shannon Development as an employer was there as well. The companies were there and we would have made direct approaches to the companies ourselves. Furthermore, we worked through chambers of commerce and all of that. However, our most effective contact was the IDA because they had the responsibility for FDI in Ireland. So, for instance, when Wang came here, and all the other larger companies, they came in under the umbrella of the IDA. The IDA are and were, very, very important. And obviously Fás were important too, though they didn't have the same level of contact with companies, but they'd keep you right on who was getting training grants, etc. If companies were getting training programmes, it meant things were on the move, things were happening. They weren't entering into training arrangements with Fás without a fresh order book. Likewise with the Environmental Protection Agency, if they're handing out environmental protection grants, you get an insight on what companies are doing. And the same with the allocation of research grants. I mean in present day terms, the trick would be to develop close liaison with Science

Foundation Ireland, to find out where those grants are going and then develop a collaboration with the recipients.

I.: Originally Cooperative Education was introduced into the Engineering programmes, it began with the Engineering programmes?

JM.: No it applied across the board from day one. And I think it was easier to have that green field approach to it. Like when Ed. Walsh came here, the 'diktat' was all courses were to have Co-op. Course commenced in '72, and eighty people came in firstly, so there weren't a lot of people involved. I think Business and Engineering took maybe three quarters of that eighty. The calendar was manipulated for the first couple of years, it was nearly year three before people were scheduled for placement. I think that maybe things were very ad hoc in the very early days, and it was before my time here. I think in some cases, if placements were scheduled for year two, and there were problems they were pushed it into year three to allow more time. It was very much a pioneering era. So the real problems of the logistics of all that began to creep in about '76 when it was realised there was a need for a centralised Cooperative Education role.

But it was to apply to all courses and I think Ed. Walsh had the foresight to know to do it from day one, when you told academics that when they were designing a curriculum, they had to design it around terms being allocated for Co-Op. It's easier to do that, Catherine, at the start. Once you let a curriculum settle and you have to go back a couple of years later to ask academics to prise open their design programme to cater for Co-op, you've got a fight on your hands. However, it was introduced from the very beginning with the awareness that Cooperative Education would be easier to sell in some areas than in others. For instance, if you were offering electronic engineering placements to employers, it was a real selling commodity, because of the types of companies that the IDA were locating. It was a lot easier to sell than history or politics placements.

I.: This was in the late seventies, early eighties when it was much easier maybe to sell to companies, engineering companies, and science?

JM.: Well I think the fabric of society has changed since then and we've introduced a broader range of courses now. You go for other kinds of placements, you know in terms of central

government, local government. And obviously we built up our international programme to maybe cater for those non-engineering and non-business types of courses. But industry tends to be hard nosed still. I mean, outside engineering, they'll take marketing people, finance people, HR people, but, on a broader front, you won't get as much uptake. But we built up local government involvement which worked to our advantage if there were formal job embargoes, you had to be quite political at times. If there were job embargoes you'd use that as an excuse to say, 'well these aren't jobs, this involves a sum of money to be allocated by you for eight months. These people will be going off your books and in eight months or so there are no long term implications in you having to document Co-Op students as employees'. So you 'boxed clever', and we used embargoes very adroitly down through the years. I remember times Fás at headquarters had an embargo taking in any Co-ops, but if you went round all the satellite entities of Fás, we were placing people there, because they weren't down as employees. Maybe it would be harder to do it now because there is so much centralisation. It worked similarly with local authorities if there was an employment embargo.

There was a huge emphasis on international placements, you know. A lot of Arts students then took teaching English as a foreign language; then there were international placement opportunities. There was no point going to traditional Irish industry and saying 'we've got a tranche of Arts people here, do you want to take them on Co-op?' because you're back to the thing 'is it a resource that will be of use to us?'. Don't try to appeal to their altruism, because they'll just look at you coldly. That formed the basis for the twenty million employer payroll we have today. Furthermore, we negotiated grants through the E4 Connect programme, and the Erasmus programmes so as to subsidise placements in the European Union. Countries like France and Germany, they haven't got a record of actually paying undergraduates. They'll take undergraduates in, but they take them in without paying them. So it allowed the University to either place people without asking the employer to pay them, or to partially pay them. Thereafter you try to wean those employers off those grants and use the grants for other placement opportunities.

I.: How did you cope with recession in the 1980s and more recently in the last few years?

JM.: Well it wasn't easy now, because you're trying to manage expectations. You're handling kids from middle class backgrounds who could hardly spell the word recession. I mean graduates coming out now, they're really getting an 'upper cut', because they're seeing the

full implications of a recession for the first time. They knew nothing about it when they were being reared. So there's huge problems you know, there's that 'give us a job' mentality and 'if I haven't got a placement, Co-op aren't doing their job'. You've all those things to try and handle. There's always media quite prepared to publish things, The fact is, UL has got through two recessions with ninety per cent placements. But certainly it wasn't easy.

That's the down side. Co-op is like motherhood and apple pie, it's a good thing and all that ... and people get relevant degrees but the underbelly of it is you have committed academic terms to the Co-op programme. And so you have got to retain meaningfully high placement targets for the credibility of the programme. Not all academics are committed to Co-op. Some would say it's a waste of time and they'd be better doing a more traditional curriculum. Maybe they have come from a very traditional academic experience themselves. Politically, if one doesn't reach meaningfully high placement targets, you've those type of people coming out of the woodwork saying this programme shouldn't be based on a Co-op model, it should be based on a more traditional model so you've to fight the politics of that as well. The way to fight it is to maintain reasonably high placement targets. That's why an institution appoints a Director and the Director argues for adequate resources. During the formative years that happened here. Where Co-op failed in institutions was because institutions thought it was a cheap way of getting people educated, they were off campus for eight months and you hadn't to pay for it. But try doing that and it'll blow up in your face. But it's not easy you know, there's no magical formula to it. If you don't meet placement targets then there's a lot of internal unrest, mostly from academics.

I.: In the University of Limerick?

JM.: Oh no, in other institutions. In the University of Limerick the model has sustained. There's been an appropriate allocation of manpower in the Co-op programme. And funding from the Higher Education Authority. Where Co-op failed, say in the UK, it was because they got they didn't have the resources to allocate people to run the programme. And then to allocate time for your own academics to do visits and to evaluate Co-op reports. So it worked here, but it worked here because at the start Ed. Walsh secured adequate funding from the HEA.

I.: You must have seen tremendous change over the thirty years that you were here?

JM.: Well the early years, the early years were hectic and they were probably even more hectic before I came here. The place was being tossed around like a rag doll for a number of years. In the mid seventies, for eighteen months the NIHE was placed under UCC as a recognised college and then for the next eighteen months it was placed under UCG. I think the UCG environment was a more benign, or a less malign, environment than UCC, because I believe they were out to close down NIHE and they were feeding all sorts of lines to the media that degrees at Limerick were worthless and all of that carry on. If NIHE had remained as a recognised college within the NUI system, it would have been a junior satellite where NIHE labs would have been used but it wouldn't have been allowed to grow. And if you go back to the initially proposed NIHE legislation, it was limited to pass Degrees, Diplomas and Certificates. So you know in a very single minded way Walsh would have taken note of what was on paper and then went ahead to do what he considered was the appropriate thing to do. And he pushed ahead and his first target was to push into honours Degrees. You had to then get a lot of accreditation of all those Honours programmes through the National Council for Education Awards, which had a lot of people on their board from the NUI system. And you probably had a weak enough Directorate within the NCEA so that, for a quiet life, the NUI policy prevailed at the NCEA board level.

So there were huge battles to get accreditation for all sorts of engineering courses and you had that NUI influence to try and 'keep you under control'. And then the next was to get into the post-graduate area. In that context Walsh participated in a conversion course initiative to deal with the dearth of expertise in a number of key areas. And a lot of graduates were put through technology courses for a year to convert them into these niche areas of expertise. But Walsh used those courses as a means to get into the Masters area. In about eighteen months, he got those conversion courses upgraded by grafting on projects to get a range of Masters programmes through. Getting the MBA programme approved was also a big deal. In particular it went to Cabinet for approval, and really that shouldn't have had to happen. It showed the fight that was being mounted by the traditional universities.

So there was hostility from the outset. Maybe for the first couple of years the traditionalists thought the NIHE wouldn't last. Walsh then looked at the board of the Higher Education Authority and he saw that it was all traditional academics on it. And he said why isn't there

any IDA people and their like on this. It seemed a logical thing. The HEA were investing in a whole lot of new areas, the country had no electronic engineers or software engineers – the logical thing was to have some sort of IDA presence that would indicate what the future manpower implications of their industrial policy were and the types of courses which were required to entice in new industry. It was nearly a no-brainer, but Walsh got them to broaden the spectrum of the board involvement and he was very canny in how he developed NIHE. When he got resources from the World Bank, it was on one to one funding so they were to put in money for labs and the exchequer was to put in money for manpower. And he probably could have got away with giving the World Bank a yearly progress report but he got them to say that it would be preferable to have quarterly reports, so as to have continuous leverage on government.

He was mature beyond his years. And probably he pestered the bureaucracy in that they didn't really know what they wanted in Limerick. They probably would have been happy with a reasonably polished RTC or Institute of Technology but I mean it was his own vision that ensured progress. Had the first appointment been from an older age group, which would have been the norm, then they would have retired before the attainment of university status and the system would have put in a more conservative creature the next time out, just to get NIHE off their back and thus be relieved of the continuous 'Walsh pressure'.

I.: What did you enjoy in your career here?

JM.: Well I think it's first of all a pleasant environment. And I think it was and still is, a pleasant organisation. It was adventurous. There were all sorts of things changing, particularly until we got the university recognition and there was a great corps d'esprit, in that you were fighting a common foe. That energy is there still which you don't find in more traditional academic environments. You know, if you have the energy and you have the vision, you are given opportunities to achieve. It was an organisation always growing and you could grow with the organisation. And it didn't have the same constraints that would be elsewhere and certainly not the same level of academic backbiting.

I.: Do you have any outstanding memories?

JM.: Well I would have thought the main one was getting university recognition because it was a long battle. It was getting the ground rules changed from the constraint that half your portfolio was to be pass degrees, or lower. You couldn't do masters programmes, you couldn't do an MBA, then you couldn't do a PhD. Getting our first PhD through and all of that was done under the debilitating NCEA system. So then when Walsh had all these building blocks in place, he said 'it walks like a duck, it talks like a duck, so why don't you call it a duck'. In essence Walsh developed all the elements of a university product and then achieved university recognition.

I.: Was it of assistance to you in your role as Director of Cooperative Education and Careers?

JM.: I believe in an international context. You had less explaining to do to prove what you were. Not within Ireland, because we were getting great profile anyway; graduate relevance and all that, but certainly internationally it was much, much better. Because first of all, you couldn't be badmouthed that well you were, you were neither fair nor foul type of thing, you know. Because bad mouthing went on, you know and certainly you didn't, you didn't have as much fast talking to do to open doors abroad. You hadn't to start explaining what you were about, that you weren't the Northern Ireland House Executive !! viz NIHE. It certainly opened more doors, more easily, abroad.

I.: Thank you very much.