

FACULTY OF ENGINEERING: learning on the move

# A less than harmonious past brought innovation

The history of UCD engineering is marked by campus moves, male-dominated classrooms and lots of innovation. John Holden reports

**T**he UCD engineering school, in its entirety, had a relatively brief spell on the Earlsfort Terrace campus.

In fact, the longest period its faculties were ever located together was when it was on the grounds of a wholly different college.

The history of UCD engineering, therefore, can be spread out over three different locations – Earlsfort Terrace, Merrion Street in the former Royal College of Science for Ireland (RCSI), and the Belfield campus – although it could be argued that its time in Earlsfort Terrace was the most important.

Prof Vincent McCabe was a UCD lecturer in mechanical engineering from 1959, and dean of the faculty of engineering and architecture at UCD from 1986-1992.

He was one of six brothers who all did degrees in mechanical and electrical engineering in UCD. "At one time there were four of us studying together – one in first, second, third and fourth year," laughs Prof McCabe. By the time he began his studies, the school of

civil, mechanical and electrical engineering had moved to Merrion Street in what was originally the home of the RCSI. "The whole school had only been in Earlsfort Terrace from 1909-1926," says Prof McCabe. "These were, however, very formative years for Irish engineering."

In the early years, the UCD engineering school would be overshadowed by the state-sponsored RCSI. Based on earlier institutions, it was established in 1867 and it had access to a far greater pool of resources. "Money for the RCSI was always much more *flaithiúilach*. We were meant to be financed by the government of the day as well but we never got as much," says McCabe.

Differences in financial support, professional rivalry, and a small amount of religious and sectarian division, made relations between UCD engineering and the RCSI less than harmonious at times.

When it was later decided in 1916 that UCD engineering students would have to complete their third

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and fourth years in RCSI as the expertise lay in the Royal College, UCD authorities made every effort to enforce their authority by demanding that their students sit a separate examination from RCSI students.

The fortunes of Earlsfort's engineers were to change after the foundation of the Free State. "After the War of Independence, the RCSI hoped, in vain, that they might be left alone to become a centre for research in Ireland," says McCabe. "UCD authorities, however, had already made plans for the Merrion Street premises and agreed terms with the Irish provisional government in 1926 for the merger of the two colleges. The University Education Act of 1926 leased the buildings of the Royal College to UCD for a period of 99 years at a rent not exceeding five shillings."

After this time the story of UCD engineering is somewhat more cohesive, even if there were to be several more moves. The whole school moved to Merrion Street in 1926 where it then became possible for engineering to really flourish.

Then, in the 1960s, UCD engineering welcomed its first female students. "Prof John Kelly was dean at the time," says McCabe. "He had made great attempts to entice girls into engineering. We had seminars and open days exclusively for interested female parties. Bit by bit it grew. The percentage of female students increased to 18 per cent in my time, by far the largest in the whole country. I do, however, also remember a time when there was only one single girl in the whole faculty."

From a social perspective, engineering became known for its "Yarawaddy dances" in the 1940s and 1950s. "Students use to raise the funds to pay for educational trips to Germany by profits from these dances," explains McCabe.

"They always took place in the Olympic dance hall off Camden Street with a half-crown entrance fee. They were very popular. In my time we made a profit of around £2,000 which was enough to send 50 students away to Germany. We used to get the ferry to Liverpool and hired a plane from there," he says. In the 1970s the government gave money to UCD to move some of its facilities out of Merrion Street, at

which point one-third of the faculty, civil and agricultural engineering, returned to Earlsfort Terrace again.

In 1986 plans were made to build phase one of the school in Belfield at a cost of £13 million. The faculty was then spread out over two campuses. "We wanted to maintain some unity between the departments but it was the students who suffered most from this policy," says McCabe.

"All students had to attend various lectures in Earlsfort Terrace and Belfield, which meant the poor things spent half their time commuting."

Today the civil and biosystems branches of engineering are still located at Earlsfort Terrace. All students still make the trek to Dublin 2 for at least some of their lectures, although improved public transport has made the whole experience a little less painful.

"We celebrate the move to Belfield of the Terrace engineering departments, and think with fondness of our predecessors who spread their time between Merrion Street and Belfield," concludes McCabe. "They contributed so much to the industrial welfare of the country."

A graduating class of 1953. The class included: Paul Hussey, Brian Farrell, Louis McRedmond, Frank Darcy, Ronan Keane, Niamh O'Neill (Stapleton), Cliona Cusson, Nuala O'Farrell, Rosemary Gleeson and Miriam Hederman.

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