

Alfred O Rahilly Lecture

The Civic Role of Higher Education Institutions

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Introduction

I am very honoured to have been asked to give the annual Alfred O'Rahilly lecture and wish to thank the Adult and Continuing Education Department at UCC for extending the invitation to me. I had the privilege of last year hearing the inaugural Alfred O Rahilly Lecture by Professor Fred Powell at these conferrings. He spoke on the topic of The University, Society and Democracy.

I have been asked to speak on the theme of the Civic Role of Higher Education Institutions, in many respects related to Professor Powell's lecture. I would like to take a quite different approach and in doing so to look at the topic through a prism of Cork experiences and to look at what has made Cork a successful Learning City. Saying successful is not a piece of Cork chauvinism. It is to accept the achievement of the city as one of the first cities to have received in 2015 an award from UNESCO as a Learning City, one of only twelve cities world wide and only two others in Europe to be so honoured in UNESO's first tranche of these awards.

It is also to recognise the selection of Cork as the host for the biennial UNESCO conference of the Global Network of Learning Cities, held last year. This was the third such conference - the previous ones had been in Beijing and Mexico City. Cork is in good company. It is also to recognise that Ireland has gained a reputation internationally for excellence in education, for its learning and its training systems and that Cork is a good exemplar of these systems.

I also bear in mind the saying of Tip O'Neill the former speaker of the US House of Representatives that "All politics is local." He might equally have said that "All education is local." Although the frames of reference of higher education institution are ones without geographic boundaries, they are of their communities and formed and influenced by them.

Tradition of Education in Cork

The City of Cork, since its foundation as a monastic settlement, has had a strong educational dimension. The earliest known document from a Cork source, is the hymn of St. Colman, the lector in the Cork monastery. The hymn, written in Irish and Latin and dating from the year 664 A.D. over 1450 years ago, refers to the school of the monastery and the welfare of the students there. Two words from that hymn, *Risam Uile*, meaning may we all attain, or may we all achieve, became the motto on the crest Cork Institute of Technology and "may we all achieve" could well reflect the civic role of any higher education institution.

More directly, the origins of both UCC and CIT may be traced back to an institution established in Cork over two hundred years ago in the early 19th century. The Royal Cork Institution, founded by the Presbyterian minister, Thomas Dix Hincks, was a pioneer of adult and continuing education in this city. Initially it was located on the South Mall and later, from 1826 onwards, in Emmet Place in premises that are occupied now by the Crawford Art Gallery.

The emphasis of the Royal Cork Institution was on what it termed the propagation of useful knowledge and facilitating improvements in the arts, in manufacturing and in agriculture.

The Institution had full-time and part-time staff, lecture rooms, a laboratory, an extensive library, botanic gardens and other facilities. Its courses included chemistry, physics, botany, and art. Dr. Bullen, one of its chemistry lectures, said that his chemistry classes were attended by large numbers, about 400 people.

"I lecture twice a day and there was many in the room as it would hold and many persons in the evening could not get in."

The Royal Cork Institution, nowadays hardly remembered, has left the city some great legacies. One of the most enduring was that it generated the educational movement that created the demand and eventually led to the founding of the university. It assisted the fledgling new college with its library, science equipment and the donation of its collection of ogham stones.

It nurtured and fostered a complex of offshoots in the city, all in the spirit of propagating 'useful knowledge' and fostering social and economic development. The Cork School of Science and the Cork School of Design which operated in its premises in Emmet Place, as well as the Cork Mechanics Institute have direct educational descendants in the science, engineering and art programmes in CIT. The premises of the Royal Cork Institution became the headquarters of the City of Cork Vocational Education Committee and remained so up to recent years.

Its other important legacy was that it sowed the seeds and nurtured the growth of a culture of learning in the city. The emphasis it had might nowadays be couched in terms such as education for employment, for improvement of productivity and for career development.

That strand of education continued to manifest itself in Cork over the succeeding years. Side by side with the education in the school system at primary and secondary levels and in the university, there was an important system of part-time education in applied areas of study under the City of Cork Vocational Education Committee and its forerunners. Both the Cork School of Commerce and the Crawford Municipal Technical Institute began their lives as schools for part-time evening classes. The Crawford was a very well equipped

institution and, in its early days, provided practical classes for UCC Engineering students. These students preferred to have their classes by day, and the evenings free for other activities. It was then at the request of UCC that engineering day-time classes were first started in the Crawford, an initial step towards much greater developments.

Alfred O Rahilly and his legacy in Cork

A charge frequently levelled against higher education institutions is that they have a tendency to become 'ivory towers'. Sometimes the language of the institutions may accentuate those impressions. The commonly used term of extra mural courses - literally outside the walls - may convey one sense when looking outwards from an institutions but may convey remoteness behind the high walls of a citadel when looking inwards, especially from marginalised communities.

None of this would have been characteristic of Alfred O'Rahilly when he took up employment in UCC in 1914. From his arrival he identified with Cork, not only with the university but with the city's whole civic life. His initial post was in mathematical physics but he was notably involved with labour leaders in Cork and with social problems in the city.

After 1916 and throughout the War of Independence, he was associated with Sinn Féin and was elected as a Sinn Féin member of Cork Corporation in January 1920. At his first meeting he was the person who proposed the appointment of Tomás MacCurtain as Lord Mayor.

Two months later, Tomás MacCurtain, as a member of the Governing Body of UCC, proposed Alfred O Rahilly for the position of Registrar. That was Tomás MacCurtain's last public act. Later that very same day he was killed in his house in Blackpool. Alfred O Rahilly was the man selected to be put in charge of the funeral arrangement for Tomás MacCurtain. Seven months later was also the person in charge for the funeral arrangements for Lord Mayor Terence McSwiney, who died on hunger strike in October of that year.

The following January, Alfred O Rahilly, along with nine other republican members of Cork Corporation was arrested and interned until after the Truce. He was then became an advisor to Michael Collins and the others negotiating the Anglo Irish Treaty and served for a time as T.D. for Cork City while still holding his post as Registrar of UCC.

Alfred O Rahilly maintained strong connections with the labour movement which he sought to influence towards social democracy rather than more extreme ideologies and his standing in all sides of the community led to him being frequently called on as an arbitrator in labour disputes - not always to the satisfaction of the employers' side.

Early in his presidency he established the UCC Diploma in Social and Economic Science in the Cork School of Commerce. This was aimed at providing access by trade union

activists to a higher education qualification through study on a part-time basis. It was organised in partnership with the City of Cork VEC and in cooperation with trade unions and employer organisation, a ground breaking development at its time and was a significant milestone in adult and continuing education in Cork.

It was however predated by another milestone course established in the first year of Alfred O Rahilly's presidency in 1943 when the course leading to the NUI Diploma in Chemical Technology was established in conjunction with another city of Cork VEC college, the Crawford Municipal Technical Institute. The course was run in the Crawford and provided additional educational opportunities for technicians employed in science based industries in Cork, such as chemicals, fertilisers, paints, brewing and distilling. Many of those who pursued the course held senior positions in Cork industry later in their careers.

In time, the Diploma in Chemical Technology became a course that was a significant factor in attracting IDA supported multi-national chemical and pharmaceutical industries to Cork. It was a key source of staff for both laboratories and production areas and was the foundation on which the degrees course in Chemical Engineering and in Analytical Chemistry in CIT were subsequently built.

On personal level, I have particular reason for being grateful to Alfred O Rahilly for his part in initiating that course. That was the course on which, in the early 1970s, I began my teaching career in the Crawford Technical Institute before our courses were transferred to the Bishopstown campus in 1974.

In Cork, Alfie Rahilly, as he was known, was larger than life and a beloved figure among the general population of the city. Growing up in Cork, I have personal recollections of hearing conversations about him when I was young. One typical such incident, in my grandmother's house, and said with a mixture of affection and admiration, was along the lines of *"Will you look at what Alfie is after doing now."*

This was in reference to his decision, after retirement from UCC and after his wife had died, to join the priesthood, in which he served for the rest of his life.

Cork - A Learning City

And what would Alfie Rahilly think of us now?

He certainly would be very pleased by today's ceremonies, by the achievements of each graduate receiving an award and the diverse range of disciplines. He would be equally impressed by the symbolism of holding the first ever UCC conferring in Cork City Hall.

He surely would have approved of the role of Cork's higher education institutions have had in the economic development of the city. The industrial base in the Cork of his day had, by the 1980s, almost totally disappeared. The older established industries - textiles, milling, ship repairs, light engineering, Fords and Dunlops had almost completely disappeared. They would be replaced by industries such as pharmaceuticals, electronics and information technology. These transformed the economy of the region. They located and developed in Cork because of its education and training and were critically dependent on the supply of high skilled graduates from its higher education institutions.

Alfie Rahilly would have applauded the decision of Cork City Council in 2002 when it approved the strategic plan for the development of the city which had one of the pillars for development that Cork would become a Learning City. That decision required the establishment of co-operative structures among the educational partners in the city, with the flagship for many years being the annual Lifelong Learning Festival.

Later, in 2014, it led to the adoption by the City Council of the UNESCO Declaration on Learning Cities. The UNESCO Declaration is about much more than educational establishments. It recognises that learning takes place not just in those settings, but in families, in communities, in the workplace, in public spaces and throughout digital technology. It values all learning, recognises that learning is both lifelong and life wide and aims that in a learning city, no one should be left behind. It has goals of enhancing the quality of education and of economic progress, sustainable development and social inclusion.

In Cork, the means of advancing the Learning City concept is through a Memorandum of Understanding signed in 2105 by Cork City Council, UCC, Cork Education and Training Board, and CIT, and later by the HSE and the Association of Principals and Deputy Principals of second level schools. That commits the partners to collaboration in achieving the UNESCO criteria and fostering a culture of learning in the city.

It also involves an active working group, entitled Growing Lifelong Learning in Cork, representative of these organisations who were signatories of the Memorandum of Understanding and also with representatives from the environmental sector, community groups, youth activities, library services, the Central Statistics Office and business interests in the city.

Perhaps the size of Cork was important in it being one of the first cities to achieve the UNESCO award. It is large enough to have well regarded university and institute of technology, three of the five largest colleges of further education colleges in the country, leading training establishments, a well developed community education scheme and a diverse industrial and employment base. At the same time Cork is small enough to facilitate individual contacts, networks and partnerships across the entire learning environment.

In this structure, the higher education institutions have pivotal roles. Their expertise, their tradition of independence of thought, and their commitment to civic engagement and social and economic progress, are key drivers in addressing the challenges of meeting the goals of a Learning City. That requires respecting the distinct and complementary roles of other participants and the mutual interdependence of different institutions. I am attracted by the imagery used by the UCC Registrar, John O Halloran, in this regard. He likens it to an ecosystem - and educational ecosystem - in which the participants with their different missions, are living and striving together, deriving energy and sustenance from one another and their common environment, but each with its separate existence in facing its challenges.

There are numerous challenges to be met in that ecosystem. To instance one. Just over 100 years ago in 1917, Alfred O Rahilly, in the year in which he was appointed as Professor of Mathematical Physics, published a study entitled *The Social Problem in Cork*. He was man of many parts.

In the study he presented indices of deprivation in the city and wrote on themes that have a familiar ring today, housing problems, unemployment, employment conditions, low wage levels, child mortality, health and addiction. He identified social environment as a leading cause of social problems and education as a means of addressing them. He was particularly attentive to differences throughout the city. Statistics, he said, were a grim guide to the city as he highlighted the variations in deprivation in different parts of Cork.

The rising tides of progress in the intervening 100 years has raised all boats but not equally so in all parts of the city. *The Portrait of Cork City*, published in 2014 by the HSE and the Social Inclusion Unit of Cork City Council, uses some similar indices to those used by Alfred O Rahilly and many more modern ones, but reaches a similar conclusion of an unequal city.

In this regard, the Learning Neighbourhoods Programme, initiated by the Adult and Continuing Education Department of UCC and in working partnership with local communities, Cork ETB, HSE, CIT and Cork City Council, is a welcome and innovative development. Operating at local level, it focusses on community engagement, promoting a culture of lifelong learning in communities, social inclusion and raising educational horizons where expectations may be low. Established at first on a pilot basis in two

communities in the city, it then extend to four and now is in the processes of extending to a further two communities.

Cork has had its successes as a Learning City and enhanced its reputation by doing so. We can be confident that the Learning Neighbourhoods initiative will add to those successes and that reputation. However, in the spirit of the saying by Mark Twain, that "*Give a man the reputation of an early riser and he can sleep 'til noon.*" I am sure that Alfie Rahilly would tell us that there is much to do, that we can not afford to stay in bed until noon will still have to get up early in the morning.