Emertius Professor Charles Webb:
Pro Vice-Chancellor NTU, Deputy and Senior Deputy VC 1997-2011

01 Charles Webb on: University College of the Northern Territory 1987-1988

The College [UCNT] had started to be staffed from 1986 but the College didn't open its doors for its first intake until the first semester of 1987, and I was there for the start of first semester.

For a start i was housed in refurbished buildings of the old Darwin Hospital. that was interesting for a number of reasons. The library was the site of the old maternity wing of the hospital. So literally we had students studying where they'd been born. Which is probably a fairly unique situation. The science facilities were based in the old operating wing and there were still operating theatre lights out the back of the building. And there was a belief by security guards that the building was haunted. And though most of us were sceptical as scientists and dismissed it, when we were working late on grant applications in the early hours of the morning, the odd creaking door certainly got us wondering.

The University College started operating in 1987 - a lot of optimism, a lot of camaraderie - it was a small staff - there were only 12 inaugural science staff. The College as a whole had a total of around four hundred students in its first year. That contrast now with over 26,000 students. So it was small and intimate and there was a sense that people were coming here to establish traditional university teaching in the territory.

The nickname of people that were there was "first fleeters".

02 Charles Webb on : the Amalgamation between UCNT and DIT, 1988/1989

We didn't have a lot to do with the Darwin Institute of Technology and of course the publication of the Dawkins green Paper did set off quite a lot of speculation and discussion. And amongst the foundation staff of University College, there was some trepidation, there was some anxiety because everyone who had taken up academic posts at the University had in their mind that they were coming to a traditional model of University education that focused on the Higher Education components. So there were a lot of people quite anxious and unsettled by the thought that the Dawkins reforms would fundamentally change the institution.

I probably had as much a traditional and unenlightened view of the need for a monolithic higher education sector as my foundation colleagues. I think over time though, and hindsight's a wonderful attribute to have, it made - and makes- an awful lot of sense to consolidate post secondary teaching in the one institution.
Jim Thomson, in his book, about the making of the Northern Territory University, commented - and I think this was Jim's sense of humour - his was a zoologist - that the period of amalgamation between DIT and UCNT was exactly the same as the gestation period of a camel. I don't think one should read too much into his views about the organisation that was given birth to. But it was quick compared to some of the other amalgamations at the time which dragged out. It was certainly intense but in a way all the heat and light was out of it relatively quickly. There were some lingering issues from the amalgamation but I think the fact that it occurred relatively quickly meant that a lot of the issues were faced up to quickly and resolved.

03 Charles Webb on: Ken McKinnon becoming Vice-Chancellor in 2002

An interim Vice-chancellor, though he was never referred to as an Interim Vice-chancellor - to steer the University was Professor Ken McKinnon. Pretty much referred to as the doyen of Australian Vice Chancellors. He actually had a reputation as a bit of a toe-cutter. I was the Acting Vice-Chancellor and no-one would tell me who the Vice-Chancellor was. This was something to do with Ken's particular arrangement. I could have signed off on about fifty million dollars of expenditure but no-one would tell me who the Vice-Chancellor was. Until one day the then PA, slipped a photo on my desk and said "have a look at that". And I knew what she meant. It was a picture of ken, and he was in his academic dress and looked a bit like a cardinal of the catholic church. But in reality Ken was one of the most humanly oriented vice-Chancellor's I have ever met with a strong, deep interest in the development of people and he was a delight to work for.

04 Charles Webb on: changing the name to Charles Darwin University

Ken was keen on having a name change and there was quite a lot of discussion. An interesting anecdote about ken he used to talk about managing governing councils. And he said that if you ever wanted to distract the council you put something high up on the agenda like changing the logo and that would get them in hours of discussion and then all the main business could slip through at the end. I think he was just joking.

Ken was pretty insistent that the new university needed a new name and that name would give it an international resonance but would also provide an intellectual framework for the university to operate under.

05 Charles Webb on: the Anniversary of UCNT

I think if I had to choose one and there are a lot of moments i like to personally reflect on would be the formation of UCNT. It's just over 25 years since I came to University College - no 26 years. I think for me being right in at the beginning of a tertiary institution and being involved and have the privilege of helping to form and contribute to the development of the institution is a relatively rare and certainly very privileged experience.