01 Mal Nairn Introduction

I've always been interested in a multi-sector educational thing. I came out of the TAFE system myself. I never did year twelve. I went to an agricultural college which gave me the chance to go to university.

02 Mal Nairn on: the early days of NTU and the amalgamation

I think my first leadership challenge when I arrived here was really to get the major together from the university college and DIT and then there was a TAFE component as well. So that was a challenge that persisted for quite some time. And then there was the challenge of finances. There was a number of challenges and I had to put them in some sort of order of how they should be tackled.

There were comments about the speed of amalgamation at the time. I personally favoured a quick amalgamation. I thought it gave less time for people who were opposed to it to mount a spirited opposition. So I was always in favour of a quick amalgamation. And I think in hindsight it turned out to be in favour of the university's development to have that. And while there was opposition it was not that difficult to counter that as long as we had a clear vision of where we wanted to go and how we were going to get there.

There was no doubt that post amalgamation anxiety persisted and it went on for several years. Not surprising I was sort of ready for that. And it was not just anxiety from within the University sector. The local media was not very helpful. They kept querying for a number of years can you really be a real university. Why are you doing this? So we had to counter opposition both inside and outside.

03 Mal Nairn on: the support of the NT Government

It was quite clear that the money from the Federal Government wasn't sufficient to advance the University. We relied heavily on the NT Government for subsidies. And I must say they were very generous and very supportive. And without their support the University would have really struggled in those early years. Not a lot has been written about the support of the Government but I was in a position to know how important it was, but I was in a position to know. And the Chief Minister Marshall Perron, Shane Stone who was later the Chief Minister but for a lot of my time the education minister and they were unavailing in their support for the University long term and they understood that there would be bumps along the way.

04 Mal Nairn on: being a regional University
I always believed that there was an opportunity for NTU to have a much wider focus - not just across the top of Australia, and throughout the northern territory, but beyond its shores. Uniquely placed to have a real role in places like Indonesia because of the proximity.

Perhaps the most memorable thing was a visit to Dili. I was interviewed by the military, taken to their headquarters and grilled about why I was there - what it was all about. They thought it was some political or subterfuge going on. So that was an interesting aspect of it. And of course not long after that the university got decimated - there were riots, sadly it got destroyed. It had a really tough time.

**05 Mal Nairn on: Indigenous Education**

An important development was to get a well respected intellectual, an academic, and Marcia Langton was appointed. And Marcia Langton at the time, I regarded as her as probably the best intellectual in Australia with an Aboriginal, Indigenous, background. And she's still significant in the country. She was fairly aggressive, that's ok, you have to be to make your point. I expected she's be outspoken - you know we had Charlie Perkins on our council for a while. I think to get advancement on some of these issues you need to be prepared to be outspoken.

Isaac Brown who was the Director, much calmer quieter person but also significant. But the numbers increased dramatically. When I arrived there were about four or five hundred students - mainly TAFE students - in that centre. When I left there were about a thousand. And they were going on to higher education. I always knew it would be a slow process, but an important one.

**06 Mal Nairn on: Dissent in the University**

I think it's good when any academic in the University shakes it up a bit because we pride ourselves on free speech. I think if you muzzle people too much you destroy the value of the institution so I was never dismayed about people that were openly critical of the University. Often it was justified. You could take account of what they said. Sometimes it was over the top a bit but often there was a grain of truth in there. And the same with the student body. I like to have a very active, vocal student body. I didn't mind demonstrations. I had forty people in my office within a week of arriving arguing about the Arts Theatre course... I like to see a bit of passion.

**07 Mal Nairn on: The media**

The university always had a difficult relationship - sporadic relationship - with the local media, particularly the NT News. It came to a head I think with the Quality Assurance Program when the Australian Government put out a list of categories and we were in the bottom category based on certain criteria and the NT News put out
pretty awful headlines about that. It came at a time when Ron McKay took over from Vice Chancellor - roger Holmes took over from me for a short while while then Ron took it on and he got hit by this at the time when the Government put out a report that could have been construed as not being very supportive. I think at the time I said...they were saying we don't stack up with the Universities in the South..."How would you like it at the NT News to be compared with the Melbourne Age? How would you stack up against that sort of thing? So don't keep comparing us with Melbourne and Sydney Universities" - it just wasn't fair. And in fact at the time our academic staff members had the highest level of research funds per head than any other university post 1987 - all the new Universities. That was ignored...and that was really pretty good. That was a real reason to celebrate the University's success and the NT News was totally silent about that. So I thought they were being unfair. But I think - hopefully that's disappeared to a large extent. in fact since I've been here this time I've spoken to the source of all knowledge - cab drivers - "what's the feeling about the University?" . I've spoken to three of them now, they all said "great" - "no bad publicity?", "oh, no, wonderful institution, best thing that ever happened,"

08 Mal Nairn: Reflections

I think the thing that pleases me most is that it would appear that it has developed as a successful multi-sector regional university. And that's what I hoped it would grow into and that's where it's at. And that it can stand high amongst the new universities in Australia and can feel proud of that. So that's what I think it's achieved and that's what I hope it's achieved.

It was a graduation ceremony - a lady was walking across the stage - she clearly was a mature aged person - very proud of what she had done . A young voice said ‘good on you mum’. It meant the university was more than a place for young people to go to. It was a place for everybody - everybody.