



HEADLINES FROM HISTORY

How Athlone got its college



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In 2021, Athlone Institute of Technology became the Technological University of the Shannon, marking the latest achievement in a history that dates back to the foundation of the regional technical colleges (RTCs) in the 1960s.

This article focusses on that early period and discusses the circumstances in which the college came to Athlone.

'A calculated risk'

During the 1960s, the Irish government took steps to modernise the state's economy. Policymakers had come to realise that the education system was contributing to longstanding societal deficiencies and, in parallel with initiatives such as the programmes for economic expansion, the government launched a series of educational surveys, one of which would lead to the development of the regional technical colleges.

In 1962, the Irish government began working with the Paris-based Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) to study technical education in Ireland. This collaboration, which would result in the publication of a report titled 'The Training of Technicians', recommended that technical education courses were integral to a modern economy and that long-term government spending on education should be regarded as a productive investment.

In May 1963, Minister for Education Dr. Patrick Hillery confirmed that the government was willing to make a substantial investment in technical education by establishing a system of regional technical colleges. He was later quoted as saying that such investment was 'a calculated risk we must take if we believe that the country has a future.'

Although Hillery proposed the creation of RTCs, it was his successors, particularly Donogh

O'Malley, who turned the idea into reality. O'Malley's most famous initiative was the introduction of free post-primary education: a decision he announced in September 1966. Yet that same month he also set up a Steering Committee on Technical Education chaired by Noel Mulcahy of the Irish Management Institute. While this committee was asked to advise the minister on technical education in general, it was also given the task of preparing a brief for the architects and construction consultants who would develop the new colleges.

The committee presented its final report in April 1967, taking up many of the recommendations made by the OECD and setting out a general programme to develop courses with additional provision for apprenticeships and adult education. It proposed that the RTCs provide courses to 'educate for trade and industry over a broad spectrum of occupations ranging from craft to professional level, notably in engineering and science, but also in commercial, linguistic and other specialities'. In order to provide those courses, the committee recommended that eight regional technical colleges should be built: in Athlone, Carlow, Cork, Dundalk, Galway, Limerick, Sligo and Waterford, along with a smaller college in Letterkenny.

Build it and they will come?

While the steering committee was preparing its report, O'Malley established a consortium of architects and builders to oversee construction of the new colleges, a decision that put pressure on the committee to quickly conclude its work. The consortium, Building Design Associates, would construct the colleges at Dundalk, Sligo, Waterford, and Galway, while it was also requested to act as a consultant at the other locations, including Athlone. The Athlone college, soon to be given the title 'Regional Technical College Athlone,' would be constructed by a Dublin-based firm, G. and T. Crampton Ltd, with Noel Heavey as architect.

On 13 September 1969, a brief report in the Westmeath Independent noted that the new 'Athlone College' had been handed over by the contractor to the college's

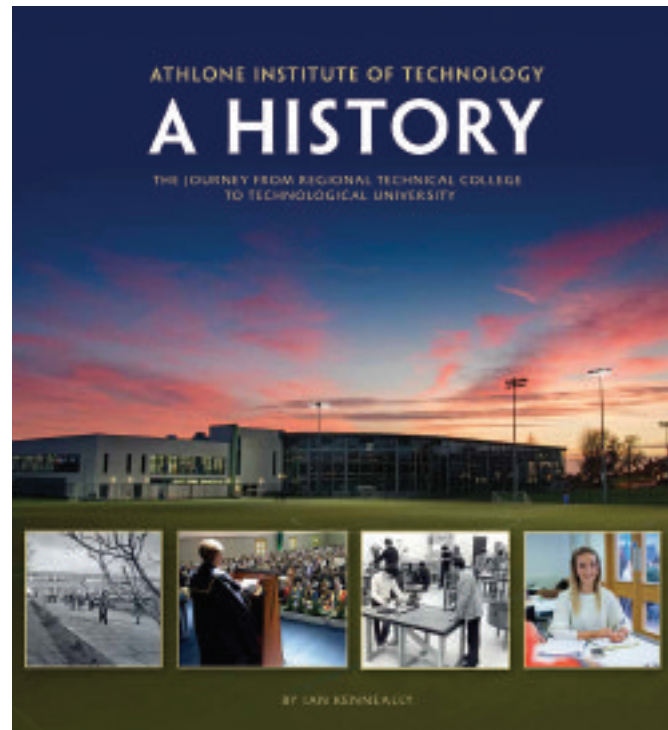
board of management. The new college arrived with little fanfare. A ceremony to mark the handover was held in an Athlone hotel but it was sparsely attended and no journalists were present, a fact bemoaned by Frank Waters, an independent local politician. The indifference displayed by the local media was symptomatic of public attitudes towards the new venture, with many people seemingly uncertain as to the role and status of the RTC sector.

In a sense, the government's success in developing the regional colleges in the short period since the steering committee first convened had contributed to this problem. In less than three years a new third-level sector had been developed, overarching goals had been set and campuses constructed. Yet many questions regarding management and the provision of courses remained unanswered, leading to a battle between the Department of Education and the nationwide Vocational Education Committees (VECs) for control of the new sector (ultimately, the board of management in RTC Athlone would be required to report back to Westmeath VEC for approval).

Local doubts and local needs

RTC Athlone had to contend with a local variation of those wider concerns. At this time, Athlone's vocational school was being rebuilt and a section of its student population was relocated to the site of the new RTC. By the end of 1969, according to a Dáil Éireann report, the RTC campus catered for 50 students, including 10 leaving-certificate students and 14 members of the defence forces on a 'special course for the army'. The presence on campus of Leaving Certificate students from a vocational school caused many locals to doubt that the regional colleges were true third-level institutions.

Another difficulty for RTC Athlone was that it lacked a 'College Principal' (the role was later retitled as Director), a figure who could drive its development and who could act as the public face of the institution. The role remained unfilled partly because the Department of Education offered lower funding for Athlone in comparison to that given to other



A new book, commissioned by the Technological University of the Shannon, charts the history of AIT from its earliest days as a regional technical college

RTCs. The issue became something of a cause célèbre for Westmeath VEC and it organised a cross-party delegation in February 1971 that travelled to Leinster House for a meeting with education minister Pádraig Faulkner.

This delegation was led by Fianna Fáil's Patrick Lenihan and Fine Gael's Gerald L'Estrange and included Jack Spollen, a member of the college's board of management. Their efforts demonstrated the extent to which the board of management and local politicians would push the cause of Athlone's new college and their determination to make a success of the venture.

In the words of Harman Murtagh, who was a staff member of the college for 49 years, those who were part of the new college or who supported its development were driven by a tangible 'sense of civic pride and hope for the betterment of Athlone.' It was

a point echoed by Mary O'Rourke, who would later become the first woman on the college's board of management, when she said that 'Athlone needed the regional college in order to promote lasting growth'.

Athlone RTC's first director, David Fenton, arrived soon after and he set about expanding the college, developing its courses and establishing its place within the third-level sector. In December 1970, he told a public audience that the 'critical task' of the new regional technical colleges was the creation of graduates who would have the skills and qualifications 'required by our economy'.

Over the subsequent years, RTC Athlone successfully carried out this task, providing the region and the state with skilled graduates, gaining the respect of the wider community and becoming integral to the town's development.

