The 1980s were a very difficult time in Ireland economically and socially: as unemployment was high, migration was the only option for many young and not-so-young people; interest rates rose to 16%; divorce, homosexual acts, and abortion were illegal, as was contraception until 1985. Ireland was a challenging and very conservative place to live.

UCD was far from being a bastion of enlightenment at the time. Like other Irish universities, it was a traditional, male-dominated place, with deep hierarchies, not only between professors and more junior academics, but also between academic staff and those who worked in the university in administrative, library, technical or other service positions. The Common Room reflected those hierarchies. It was a space reserved for academics although some administrative staff were allowed join. The criteria on which staff who were not academics became members were never quite clear, although several more senior post holders were active members in the mid-1970s, including senior officers in the offices of the President, the Registrar and Bursar.

To some of us who were new to the university at the time, the petty hierarchies seemed bizarre and devoid of logic. We noted how it contradicted the core UCD motto *Cothromh Féinne* as it denied colleagues equality of respect and parity of esteem at a basic social level. As there were very few facilities for staff on Belfield campus, other than the main restaurant which was generally overcrowded, it seemed fair and reasonable that the Common Room should be open to all staff. It would be a place to socialise or relax during the day or meet for a drink or chat after work.

At that time, I worked in the Education Department, which was located just around the corner from the Common Room on the C corridor of the Arts Building (now Newman). There were colleagues in Education who were administrators and technicians. They could not come to the Common Room for coffee/tea or a drink unless they were signed in by academic members. Several colleagues and I decided that we needed to do something about this, so I initiated a petition on the subject. I had the support of several colleagues in my own Department, and across other Departments in the Arts Faculty (which included all the Humanities, Social Sciences, and Mathematics), and outside of it, especially in the Commerce Faculty, but also in others.

In my innocence I thought opening up membership of the Common Room would be a straightforward matter. I quickly learned otherwise. In Spring 1985, as required...
under the Constitution, I made a proposal to the Common Room Committee requesting a Special General Meeting (SGM) to change the Common Room Constitution to allow all staff, part-time and full-time, to be eligible for membership. The proposal was signed in support by 20 Common Room members. The Committee responded informing us that any change in membership required a change in both the Rules (Article 6A) and the Constitution (Article 2). They also informed us that, as the Rules took precedence over the Constitution, under the licensing regulations, any change in membership required a change in the Rules as well. Any changes to the Rules had to be made at an AGM.

This sent us back to the drawing board, and the following year, I put forward a motion for the forthcoming AGM, on March 11th, 1986, which was seconded by Michael Richter from the History Department. It requested that:

Article 2 of the Constitution and Article 6A of the Rules be changed to read: Membership of the Common Room will be open to all full-time and part-time staff members of University College Dublin who are on the weekly payroll as defined by college records.

Prior to the 1986 AGM those of us seeking change engaged in a campaign canvassing support for the motion. As there was no email at that time, we sought support by making phone calls, writing letters and meeting people in person. The Common Room Committee announced the proposed changes well in advance of the AGM, through the post, so there was quite a buzz about the meeting in the Belfield campus. It clearly was a subject on which people felt very strongly as the AGM was exceptionally well attended.

There was a lengthy, and, at times, heated debate, initially around the relative standing of the Constitution vis-à-vis the Rules of the Common Room. As it was simpler to change the Constitution (via a simple majority vote) than the Rules (where a two thirds majority was required), those of us seeking change, argued that the Constitution should take precedence, while those opposing change claimed the Rules had priority. The Chairman of the Common Room, Anne McKenna explained that the Common Room Committee had got legal advice that the Rules had to be changed to allow any change in membership, and a vote would be taken on this basis.

The arguments made against the change varied: there were claims that there would be overcrowding, that academics would not be able to discuss matters in confidence, and that it was a break with tradition, as common rooms in other established Universities were normally reserved for academics. The irony of such a claim about the commons was not lost on many of those attending. Under the proposed new Rules and Constitutional change, students who were on the UCD pay-roll would be able to join and there were several staff who opposed this.

The motion was eventually put to a vote. The tellers were Kyra Donnelly and Michael Foley, and Oliver Delaney was the returning officer. While a majority voted in favour of the motion: 53 (62.3%) to 20 (37.7%), it did not meet the two thirds majority required so the vote was lost.
Given the vote in 1986, those of us seeking change re-entered our motion for change in good time for the AGM in 1987. My colleague Ciaran Benson seconded the motion this time and Máire Nic Ghiolla Phádraig (Sociology) and Michael Foley (Education) put forward separate motions in support. Moore McDowell (Economics) put forward a motion that all changes in the Rules and Constitution should be taken by postal ballot.

In 1987 we ran an extensive campaign, not only writing letters, phoning and meeting people, but also printing posters. We distributed leaflets and posters around the various academic buildings in UCD. It was not such an onerous task as there were not that many buildings in Belfield at the time! We knew from both the debate in 1985 and subsequent campaigning, however, that we had to modify the motion if we were likely to win in 1987, as there was considerable opposition to allowing students working in the university to be full Common Room members. A new motion was proposed, to alter Article 2 of the Constitution and Article 6A of the Rules, as follows:

Membership of the Common Room shall be open to all full-time and non-student part-time staff members of University College Dublin.

This time I was the proposer and John Baker (Ethics and Politics) was the seconder. The other supporting motions were withdrawn. Moore McDowell’s motion, seconded by Derek O'Connor, was also put forward to the AGM. In sum, it proposed to:

Change Article 11 of the Constitution and Article 36 of the Rules to allow the Chairman of the Common Room to put any Constitutional or Rule Change to a Postal Ballot if the Chairman has the support of 20 members of the Common Room for this action.

As the Common Room membership issue was being widely debated among staff from 1985 until the Hilary term of 1987, the media also reported the events. The Irish Times published a piece titled Apartheid in UCD where it claimed that allowing academic staff exclusive use of the Common Room was a type of social class apartheid. The fact that Trinity (and I suspect other Irish universities) had the same system was never mentioned in these reports by the Irish Times. When the issue entered the media, prior to the vote in 1987, the President rang me to express his concern at this adverse publicity. I do not recall him asking me to desist from action, but I do recall the implicit reprimand, although it was given in a highly courteous manner!

The campaign continued. It spurred a lot of debate in UCD as to how we treated colleagues across the University, and about equality and respect more generally. It challenged the institution to think about who and what it valued.

The night of the Common Room AGM, 12 March 1987, was a significant event: 100 members turned out to vote. And there were several non-members attending, people who just came to see what was happening! The debate went on for hours with heated exchanges. The first motion to be debated was Moore McDowell’s requesting that any Rule or Constitutional change be put to a postal ballot. There were many who spoke for and against this motion, but the only contributions recorded in the minutes are those of Moore McDowell and Bill Roche. Moore claimed that those attending the AGM were not representative of the entire membership and should not have a right
to change the Rules and Constitution. Bill Roche (UCD Professor of Industrial Relations and Human Resources) opposed this motion on the grounds that such a move could be highly undemocratic as there was no way of monitoring a postal ballot in UCD, and no resources to do it. The motion was put to a ballot. Jim Kavanagh and Brian Gregory were appointed tellers and Oliver Delaney was the returning officer for the night. Moore McDowell’s motion was defeated by a vote of 62 against and 38 for the change.

The vote and discussion on the motion to open the Common Room to all UCD staff followed. I made the case that opening membership would not lead to overcrowding as the Common Room was underutilised. Moreover, there was no reason to confine Common Room membership to academics and selected senior administrators, other than a simple desire to exclude people on the grounds of their occupational standing. John Baker, seconding the motion, made similar observations. There were many others who spoke eloquently on the subject deploring the implicit snobbery involved in excluding colleagues from membership. Among those whose contributions I remember on this latter subject (and apologies to those I do not!) were Máire Nic Ghiolla Phádraig (Sociology) and Thomas Docherty, then a lecturer in English, and currently Research Professor of English and Comparative Literature at University of Warwick. The motion was put to a vote and carried: 77 voted for change and 23 against.

As the campaign to change the Common Room Rules and Constitution was a grassroots movement, it generated a great debate about equality in UCD at the time. I got to know many new people through that campaign, leading to new friendships and collaborations with Máire Nic Ghiolla Phádraig and Mary Kelly in Sociology, Alpha Connelly in Law and John Baker in Ethics and Politics. We formed the Equality Studies Working Group later in the year, and then petitioned the President to give us a stand in Campus Ireland to promote Equality Studies as a field of scholarship, which he did. In 1990, the first cohort of Masters’ students in Equality Studies entered UCD as did the first cohort of Women’s Studies students.

Closing the Common Room shows a profound disrespect for UCD staff and scant regard for the concept of Community that is at the heart of UCD’s ethos. The manner of its closing is also deeply disturbing in a university context, as the democratic wishes of staff were summarily disregarded. Sadly, this type of action has deep ideological roots in the authoritarianism of new managerialism, the organisational form of neoliberal capitalist politics.

I sincerely hope that the Common Room will be reinstated for all staff in the future, at a more enlightened time in UCD’s history. It should be made a precondition for the appointment of any new UCD President.