

Interview with Emeritus Professor Joe Wiskich conducted by Stephen Beaumont in Adelaide on 14 December 2012.

\*Interviewer's comments and questions are noted in bold.

**This interview is with Emeritus Professor Joe Wiskich, formerly Professor of Botany at the University of Adelaide. Joe was born in Tully, Queensland, in 1935. He was educated at the University of Sydney and graduated with a BSc honours in 1956, and a PhD in 1960. During his PhD Joe was supervised by Bob Robertson. After Sydney Joe took up post-Doctoral fellowships at the Johnson Research Foundation at the University of Pennsylvania, and in the Department of Sub-Tropical Horticulture at the University of California Los Angeles. Following these fellowships Joe returned to Australia to the Botany Department at the University of Adelaide, and to his earlier mentor Bob Robertson. Taking up a lectureship in 1964, Joe remained at Adelaide throughout his career, eventually to be appointed professor and serve as Head of Department. He was also prominent in the administration of the University, serving among other roles as Chair of the Executive Committee. Joe formally retired from the University in the year 2000 but continued his research as a professorial fellow at Flinders University School of Biological Sciences. Joe received many honours during his career, included election to the Australian Academy of Sciences, and in 1997 was awarded the Verco Medal of the Royal Society of South Australia for his outstanding achievements in Plant Physiology over a period of 35 years. Joe is the author of more than 150 journal articles, and numerous reviews, conference proceedings, and presentations. He received continuous grant support for his research, and held a prestigious special investigator award of the Australian Research Council from 1993 to 1995. Joe was a prominent member of the Australian Society of Plant Physiologists and was President from 1996/97.**

**Joe, can we start with you saying a little about your early years? How a boy from Tully came to be interested in botany and about your years before the U of A?**

Well, good heavens. As you said I was born in Tully in 1935, and my father worked on a sugar cane farm obviously, and I went to primary school in a little place called Ramleh, and the War came about and some bombs were dropped up the coast somewhere, and families

were told to evacuate south of the Brisbane Line. This was a line east-west of Brisbane. Australia was going to defend at that line, but would let whoever have the top half. And so we were evacuated and moved to a place south of Brisbane, but north of the NSW border. (Trying to think of the name of the bloody place...it was called [inaudible, 4:17]). And I continued my schooling there, but when the War finished my father got an opportunity to move and he did he moved to a place called Leppington, which is near Camden in NSW, and he share-farmed for a while, and then bought his own farm and set up a market garden [inaudible, 4:43] system. I went to primary school at Ramleh, and from there I went to Hurlstone Agricultural High School which is at Glenfield, NSW. And uh, five years of high school, and at the end of that I was fortunate enough to get a scholarship to go the University of Sydney. And I went to the University of Sydney, I had every intention of doing physics, but for some reason or another I got waylaid and I ended up doing plant biochemistry with Bob Robertson, who was [inaudible 5:20] and all the rest. And from then on I stayed in plants, working in plants – respiration – and had post-Doctoral fellowships in America, and did study leaves in the UK and elsewhere – and eventually Bob Robertson went to Adelaide as a Professor of Botany, wrote to me inviting me to join the staff – so I did. And that's it! I landed there, worked with him, met a young girl, married her, and I've been here ever since!

### **Very good**

Anything else you want? (laughter)

### **Who were your other colleagues in those very early days?**

In Adelaide?

### **Mm**

Oh, um, trying to think, who was the professor at the bloody time, Jesus....he was a professor [Professor JG Wood], Robertson was a professor, [inaudible 6:20], there was an ecologist, a plant ecologist called Bob Lange, who was very interesting if at times ah...a bit erratic...but he was a very interesting guy. Ah, Andrew Smith was appointed (he's also a member of the Academy [of Sciences] now), [inaudible – 6:45 - who was it, Andy Smith/there was a lady Smith?]....oh of course Bryan Womersley the algal man was there and he was well known, and he was also appointed to the Academy, um....

### **Brian was a great taxonomist wasn't he?**

Yeah, he was a...he could identify algae from anywhere, very good. Um, Lange the ecologist, Smith, who else did we have? Oh, we had a lady taxonomist there for a while, Con [Constance] Eardley, she was a nice old dear, she was aged, but she took, ah, retired soon after I got there, she was quite aged. I can't think of anybody else, oh we had, Robertson appointed a young physiologist from England, ah I can't think of his name, sorry Steve I can't think of his name...yep so anyhow I did my work there, managed to get students, ah, got grants, did research, and published things. And I guess one of the things I can thank Robertson for is to make sure you publish something when you've got it right, absolutely, and that was true to me then, and true to me now. I'm very grateful to Robertson for that lesson.

**Right. I won't ask for details here, but is not getting it right very common then?**

Um, I wouldn't say its common, but it does happen. I think I wrote a few papers correcting other peoples' conclusions, their work. I didn't do this directly, I always wrote to the person first saying "I've noticed you've said this, now I think you're not quite right there, this is what's happening", and some of them wrote back and thanked me for it, were really grateful for it, others I didn't hear from at all.

**Ok, but this is the march of science isn't it?**

I know, that's progress.

**So, I know you as a mitochondria person**

That's right.

**Was that your focus in those early days?**

It was, yeah. Robertson was very interested in mitochondria and, ah, in respiration, and he wanted to get down to the anatomical level and so Bob worked on mitochondria. And with him I worked on beetroot, for some reason or other I picked on beetroot, and I think it's because years prior he was interested in salt...what's that?

**Clock striking, sorry (laughter)**

...years earlier he was interested in salt uptake on plants, and he used beetroot, a sort of a homogeneous tissue he could slice up and see what's going on with it. And he wanted to know about the mitochondria in it, so he set me up a program to isolate mitochondria. I did my honours work with Frank Mercer, in the Botany Department, and he was a chloroplast, photosynthesis/chloroplast man, and I worked on chloroplast with him. And I remember Robertson saying to me, "I don't know anything about chloroplasts, if you're going to work

with me you're going to have to work on mitochondria", and I thought "bugger it". Mercer went on study leave so I thought "I better work on mitochondria".

**So that was the start of mitochondria for you?**

Yeah.

**And that was at the University of Adelaide or Sydney?**

University of Sydney.

**Yep**

So Mercer went off on his study leave – he lost me – and I continued working with Robertson. And when I got first class honours he said "You can apply for a scholarship, you'll get one, stay here and work." And so I did. That was actually a unit of the CSIRO within the Botany School.

**Ok**

And, uh, it was a very successful unit because Robertson was a very good scientist, there was Marshall Hatch who was another member of the Australian Academy who did very, very well, and there was myself and there was Ken Glazier, a guy who was interested in hormones and so forth, and he did very, very well. So I don't know whether it was something about Robertson that did that, or whether it was the CSIRO unit within a University – they were very rare in those days, there weren't very many. So he had the opportunity to attract good students, and also get good equipment and good money from the CSIRO. So yeah, we struggled along. Where've I got to?

**Well, let me just pick up on that. So Bob Robertson moved from Sydney to Adelaide. Was Botany at Adelaide at that time strong, or did he build it up?**

Botany at Adelaide, it was doing quite well under Professor Joe Wood. But Professor Joe Wood was getting old, as we all do, and it was waning a little bit. And some of the staff, the older staff that Wood had been appointed weren't that good, that good at it. There was only one, two sorry that were [indecipherable] than that. One was Brian Womersley, the guy who [studied in?] algae, he was a world expert on that, and that was very good, and the other one, interestingly enough, was Bob Lange. Bob was, ah, what's the expression I want? He had great ideas, got great work done, but he could shoot off in any bloody direction at any time, you never knew where he was going, or what he was doing. But he was also very good, those two were very good indeed. Associated with me was a young Englishman called Andrew Smith, who was interested in iron and iron transport and he was doing well, very

well, as well. And he eventually went on to Sydney. But I stuck there. I got married and that was it, I couldn't move, kids and children and whatever, and so I stayed there. And in the end Bob was put onto the Australian Research Council, on the research grants, and in the he moved back to Sydney I think, in charge of the CSIRO Plant Physiology Unit, within the Botany Department of Sydney University. So he left and went back there.

And I continued. I had a job, got permanency in Adelaide, I had students, I was quite happy. They did invite me to go to Sydney, but yeah...

**Ok, and back in those early days was your main focus on research or on teaching?**

Well, we all did teaching here. But research, I thought research was very important because it's what attracted students for further research. And I worked on organelles, mitochondria, and chloroplasts. Some students liked to work on chloroplasts, and others on mitochondria. And I was very fortunate I think to pick up some really good students. We worked well and published and established, I think we established a good reputation for ourselves. But meanwhile Robertson had moved on to bigger things, up in Canberra in charge of the ARC and CSIRO, and things like this.

**But meanwhile he built the Department and got some strong staff.**

Yeah, he built the Department, he built up the research activity, and got some good staff, and ah, yes. And I think that's why they appointed him.

**And you mentioned that you had good students. Are there any names of people who've gone onto great things you'd like to mention?**

Well, there's David Day, who went on and is in ANU...

**Now at Flinders University...**

Now at Flinders University, yes of course I'd better say Flinders, professor at Flinders, he's very good. There's Kathy Soule [?], who's also at Flinders. Ah, there's Ian Dry who is with CSIRO Horticulture, behind the Waite. There's Simon Robertson who's at the same place – he worked on Chloroplasts, he's done very well for himself. Um, David Day I've mentioned...I think that's enough. And there were a number of overseas students. Because of the publications I think they thought "this is a good guy to go and work with", so I had people from overseas often. Some came with their own money, some we had to find scholarships for.

**And have you maintained contact and collaborations with any of these former students?**

Certainly with Simon Robertson and certainly with David Day, certainly with the ones located on staffs in Australia. The others, no, not really.

**Uh huh. And so, just staying with students for a moment, um, teaching in those early days, was the teaching load very heavy?**

Um, to start off with, I found it quite heavy. But I think Robertson was aware of this and because I was attracting students (God knows why I was attracting students, PhD students, I don't know why), he relieved my load a bit. Ah, but having students of course meant I actually had more time for teaching, because the senior ones would look after the junior ones and so on. Yeah, it was quite good, a very successful, very active period.

**Ok. Did that continue, the senior students looking after the junior students? Or is that one of the changes that's happened in Universities over the years**

I don't think it happens as much, maybe because students might feel themselves a lot more competitive now – "I'm doing this, no one's meant to know about it" – but in my lab we all worked in a cooperative way. Everyone worked on different projects so they didn't overlap, but they could assist one another. And we used to have regular monthly discussions about the research that was going on, that they were doing, and it was more or less not to inform me, although it did, because I was probably on Council at that time, but more so to inform other people, and to pick up ideas from each other. And of course as you know I ended up on the University Executive Committee, chairing that, and that gave me a post-Doctoral position, and I appointed a young former student of mine, Ian Dry, to that position. And he was superb, he ran it well.

**And where's he now?**

Oh, he went to ANU, as I remember, oh he went to ANU and now he's back at, he came back to Flinders. On the staff at Flinders.

**Oh, ok. All very local**

Yeah, very local, very much an Adelaide boy, but a very bright boy, very bright. I was quite embarrassed to have him actually (laughs)

**Look, again staying with the student theme, you say that the guidance, mentorship, assistance of older students to younger students because they're more competitive. In my time at the University I noticed a change once HECS came in, it introduced a sort of competition among students. Do you have any cause you can attribute it to?**

I remember HECS coming in but I don't remember it changing anything in the research lab.

**Yes, well that would have been at the undergraduate [?] level, I suppose, but for me it rather changed the climate of the University. Maybe we'll take a pause and just collect our thoughts**

Ok.

**And Joe, do you want to tell me about the main people you collaborated with in your research?**

Yes, well I collaborated with a former student, David Day. I can't really think of anyone else, I'm trying to think, sorry.

**Yep. On your list of publications you'd have collaborated with people through those wouldn't you?**

Oh, yes, I did. But most of those are people I worked with or had an association with when I was travelling on study leave, or whatever. I didn't collaborate much with people in Australia, apart from David Day – I maintained contact with him for a long time. And to a lesser extent Simon Robertson, but they went on in their own way and in their own direction, and things like that.

**And were there people overseas, or organisations, with whom you had a lot of shared work?**

Oh yes, there were collaborations with overseas people. I guess I'm not a nasty sort of person. So when I read something, papers, which I thought, "Hello, this guy's got this wrong", I didn't run off a paper saying "This guy's crackers, blah, blah", I wrote to them and said, sorry...[Phone rings]

**We just had a slight phone interruption there. Joe, please carry on. You were talking about people with whose work you took a slightly different opinion.**

If I read anything in the paper where I thought the author had it wrong I wrote to them, suggested this and this, even in a few cases suggest they did an experiment they did, that they'd been doing, to determine which is correct. And this worked wonders, worked wonderfully well - cooperation worked far better than antagonism. And not only with senior scientists, but with students who were publishing papers from overseas, I'd write to them and say, "look, I think you've made a mistake here, have you thought about this and this and this." And it's marvellous the number of student who wrote back and said "I didn't think of that but thank you very much". And their supervisors would be thanking me so I thought "Perhaps this would be a good way to go". So I've made many, many friends around the

world in Plant Biochemistry. And so if I ever went anywhere, to a conference, there was always a student coming up and saying “Can I speak to you please”, and I’d say “Of course, why not?”, and um, I think it worked well for me, it really did.

**Very good. And were there particular places when you took study leave where you would go back to time and again?**

No, no, I, I took study leave on the basis of either a place where there was very good equipment, or good people or good scientists, or something, so I could do work, but also some part of the world I could see as well. So apart from the UK and the State where I went to conferences and all the rest, I didn’t go back again.

**Hmm. And Joe, can you identify what you consider your main achievements in research?**

Well, at the time when I started off, the work was on plant mitochondria – the way they respire and take up oxygen, and so on. And the animal people at this stage were isolating mitochondria from rat liver, or wherever, and they were noticing that you could control respiration by the energy load you put on the mitochondria. So the mitochondria make a compound called ATP, which is the energy carrier in the cell, and if you have a lot of ATP respiration slows down – you don’t need it – and if the ATP is used up then more ATP is made and respiration goes up. That’s called respiratory control, it’s very evident in the animal mitochondria. And no one had shown it in plant mitochondria, apart from one odd paper, which came from I think in India, published in some obscure damn journal, and they actually showed that their mitochondria had some respiratory control. But nobody else took any notice of it, and I didn’t either at the time. But anyway I thought, “Well damn it, plant mitochondria ought to behave the same, I don’t see why not”, so I went around to make mitochondria that would do that. And the thing, the answer, was very simple – plant tissues are very hard, so to get the mitochondria you have to cut it up, in a whirling blender or something, to get the mitochondria. And that was damaging the mitochondria. And when you damage the membrane of the mitochondria, then you don’t get this sort of property. So I set about working to isolate mitochondria that were intact. And lo and behold I went to Philadelphia to work with Walter Bonnet of the Johnson Foundation, and he would occasionally produce mitochondria that had this property of control. And he thought it was very good, blah, blah, blah, but he had no idea why sometimes it happened, sometimes it didn’t. And I got there and set about finding out what you needed to get mitochondria [in a controlled quantity] on a daily basis. And I did it. The thing was plant tissues are pretty



tough. And usually to break them up you grind 'em like hell. But that also damages the mitochondria. So you had to find different ways of grinding them.

### **Handle with care**

Handle with love and care, you see. And lo and behold, when I left Philadelphia we were banking mitochondria on a daily basis, buckets of them, with this controlled property – the mitochondria were intact- they weren't broken. And, uh, that was quite interesting because it showed that you could do it. And there was an ideas going around, I won't go into details, but there was an idea that plant mitochondria, could not, were leaky, because they could oxidise a compound that animal mitochondria couldn't. So they said that this has to be oxidised from inside, so it's getting into the mitochondria [inaudible]. And I thought "Bugger this, this can't be right", so I set about showing in fact that it was on the outside that mitochondria, plant mitochondria had this, they were intact, they had respiratory control, they still oxidised that bloody thing on the outside, and that showed control as well. That paper, I think, shocked quite a few people...

### **Ok**

And I remember one reviewer writing back to the editor saying, "You ought to congratulate this person because this is going to be a classic". I really felt very good after that, very good, I thought I was on my way. And my old mentor, Bob Robertson, who really was a [inaudible] man of mitochondria, was chuffed with this. He thought, "Oh well, another good student of mine". Mind you, he had plenty of good students who went on to do very well.

### **Very good. So that's your seminal achievement, is it?**

That's the seminal achievement, yes, if you like. But I went on from there and thought I'd work on chloroplasts. I thought, "Bloody chloroplasts must be the same". But chloroplasts are bigger, so when you grind up tissue you break them. And I thought, "There must be a way to get intact chloroplasts". And someone in the States bought a machine and they said "This produces intact chloroplasts". But unfortunately then they had a mixture of broken and intact chloroplasts. And so broken chloroplasts would just [inaudible] everything all the time. The intact ones, you had to get things into them, at different [inaudible], and I thought "Yeah, he's got a mixture, he doesn't know if the intact ones are working or not." So, um, I then set about to make intact chloroplasts from leaves, and I was helped by a publication from someone in England who actually said, "If you can do this, you can get intact chloroplasts". And that was great except the process produced very small yields. And I

thought “Well this is ridiculous, we’ve got to do better than this”, and so in the end someone wrote to me saying “Have you tried to use such-and-such a blender? It’s very gentle and doesn’t damage chloroplasts”. So at great expense bought – got Robertson to buy me – one of these blenders and it was marvellous, absolutely marvellous....yes (laughs).

**Good, good. I have to say I don’t know mitochondria. My main recollection of mitochondria from you in your inaugural lecture is that somehow it involves Mars Bars...You ended up in your inaugural lecture to make some point about mitochondria, handing out Mars Bars**

Ah, well, that’s because mitochondria in our cells produce a compound called ATP, which is the energy carrier of the cell. Whenever we do anything – walk, talk etc. – we use ATP. And so if we don’t have mitochondria, we can’t do anything. And, well, I guess I must have said “You eat Mars Bars, you get energy from ‘em, and mitochondria provide that energy for you”.

**(Laughs) Very Good. Perhaps on that note we should move on to activities in the University more generally. You played an administrative role both within the Department, and more generally within the University. Could you tell us a little about what you did and your reflections on those times?**

Well I came to Adelaide with Bob Robertson as Head of the Department in nineteen sixty-something...

**‘65**

’65, thank you. In those days when the professor was God of the Department...That was alright, I didn’t mind Bob Robertson, I got along very well with him, I thought he was great. (Not everybody thought that, I might add, but anyway...). Ah, but the obvious thing in the University at that stage was that a lot of people in the Departments were very dissatisfied with their, uh, professors. And the change came, we got departmental government, elections of heads, and things like that. And, uh...oh, I’ve forgotten now what I was about to say. Oh anyway, Bob Robertson left, so we went to the departmental system then – Bob Lange was our first, uh, first Departmental Head. And, uh, eventually I became Departmental Head, looked after students, got onto the University Council - I think I’d served my sentence in administrative affairs – [inaudible] and, uh, because the University realised that good people who were getting research grants, publishing, were involved more and more in this sort of administration, they did something and they offered, they gave me

an assistant while I was Head of Department – a young lad called Ian Dry. And he was a wizard! Absolutely terrific! We'd never published so bloody much [inaudible]. And he had to do my teaching and help me with the research. And I insisted that I have at least a day, if not two, away from administration, the front office, down there in the lab. I didn't always get my two days, but certainly got my one day. And with him we published a lot of papers, and got a lot of – and he was young – students liked him, got a lot of students coming through. A very active and successful period of my life, that was.

**But this was a time when you were chair of the Executive Committee?**

Well this is when I was, I got onto the Executive Committee, and I got some compensation for that, then became Chair, and of course I got a lot of compensation for that.

**Hmm, yes. Can you just say a little about...**

Can I just say...telling you this, I realised young Ian Dry could probably do a better job than I was doing in the lab.

**(Laughs) You're on tape here....**

I know, yeah....

**Can you say a little bit about Executive Committee? Because that, whose innovation was that?**

Uh, that was Professor Stranks, the late Professor Stranks. He had a... who was the guy who?...the physicists...can't think of his name...

**Bennett?**

No, physicist at that stage, uh, well known Adelaide family...He, Stranks, I think set it up with him, this departmental government business. Uh, and I think there were a lot of departments suffering from old professors having been there for a long time, running the place the way they wanted to run it, and not the way the younger people thought it should be run. And that was the case for Botany but it wasn't a lot of places. So there was a strong move to get rid of this departmental head business and have a committee running a department. Uh, well, once that swept through it went everywhere, even Botany [inaudible]. Ah, what were we...

**And the Executive Committee came about because...**

The Executive Committee was about the same time, yeah...

**And that came about to streamline management within the University?**

That, well you could say that, say that in writing. But I think it came about to get professors out of the bloody administration. Because they were so one eyed...they weren't being fair, let me put it that way. And things were bogged down – one committee wouldn't agree to what another committee was doing because two professors argued, it was bloody stupid.

**Right. And the Executive Committee was a very small committee wasn't it?**

The Executive Committee itself was a very small committee – I think it had seven people or eight people. The Vice Chancellor was Chair, the Registrar was there, the Treasurer...

**Bursar...**

Bursar, and so on. And then it was, the Faculties were represented. A very small committee. And that was a very good committee, very pleasant. I'll say this as an aside now, don't put this in. Everyone in that committee worked well, I thought it was a great little committee. Except for Jim Quirk from the Waite. He was obstructionist...God! Anyway, we got along very, very well, and when I got made chair of one of the subcommittees, Quirk used to come to me and say, "You should do this, you should do that". I'd say [inaudible]...You're not going to give this to them, are you?

**Well this is a formal recording so we may have to do some editorial....**

(laughs) You may have to do some editing, sorry, I didn't appreciate that.

**Um, so you were chair of Executive Committee for how long?**

On the Executive Committee I think for eight years, but Chair for the last four.

**And is that during the time when Professor Stranks died?**

Yes. He died when I was Chair. And so, Stranks was a very good leader at the University. He had everything under control, I thought. And I said to the Executive Committee and my other heads of various areas, I said "Look, we're going to have to take up the slack for a while till this University sorts out who they're going to have, what they're going to have. And I went to the Registrar, Frank O'Neil, and I said "Frank, look we're here to help, we're not going to hinder. I know it's going to be tough on you, you're going to have professors telling you what to do, ah, you've got the Council, who will probably want to do things, and you've got us." And I said to Frank, "Be assured, we're here to help you, and to help the University. I'm not going to push any personal items, I won't let it happen." And that I think engendered a relationship between Frank and myself that was absolutely excellent. And so whenever I went to Frank and said, "Look Frank, I feel we need a bit more money for such-and-such", Frank would say, "Just leave it with me for a while and I'll see what I can do".

Having Frank as a friend was far better for the University than having him as an enemy, which is what a lot of people wanted to do. My God! But anyway, that was a good time.

**So the role of the Executive Committee was pretty crucial during that time?**

Absolutely. Someone wrote that he thought that during the time of the Executive Committee, the University made more progress than it had ever before.

**And what were the main issues you were grappling with?**

There was funding, making sure, we tried to distribute funding where it was needed, to the people who could use it properly, not just to professors who wanted the money for their own use. Uh, I think that was probably the most important thing the Executive Committee did, it redistributed the funding. Now I'm sure that Stranks saw that this was the thing that was needed, I'm sure Stranks was sick and tired of professors coming and belly-aching to him. So, so, that worked, it worked very, very well. And I remember other university Vice Chancellors saying the University of Adelaide's got this problem, it's doing things silly, but it was very successful. I think the research really just blossomed, yeah....

**So when was it that you withdrew from the Executive Committee?**

I served my years as chairman and then I had 12 months study leave. Cor, blimey, now you're asking...I think that was in the...I don't know, whenever it was, I'd have to check my file. But I got a year's study leave automatically, to get away from it...

**And after this time on the Executive Committee, when you had to devote most of your time to running the University, were you able to pick up easily back on research?**

While I was on the Executive Committee, while I was Chair of the Executive Committee, I was given a post-Doctoral research fellow from the University, I don't know quite why, probably as recognition that I had a good research record and wanted to maintain it, and uh, so he was in the Botany Department and I'd go down, I had two half days a week and I go down and talk to him, and we'd work out research things – young Ian Dry it was, now he's with CSIRO, that was very successful, very good.

**And that helped you get, to renew your research after...**

Oh yes, I think so, yes, yes, definitely. It would have been hard for me to pick it up again afterwards without him there keeping it going, yeah.

**And...what part of your career would you say was the most productive in terms of research? If we say young academic, mature academic and older academic.**

I think the most successful, I'd have to say, was mature academic. As a young academic you're keen, you're eager to publish, keen to do things. And that was quite good. But you don't, in my case anyway, didn't really know everything about everything, not that I do now, but I was still learning. That middle stage was very good. Then the older stage, you're going down, going downhill then.

**Um, well, it's probably an unfortunate jump to move onto your impressions of the University, having just said that, uh, but you were at the University for, what, 35 years. What sort of changes in the feel of the place did you have, did you experience over those years?**

Well, I must admit that when I first joined the University it was a God-professor system, and I don't think that that affected me terribly much, because my professor, Bob Robertson, was very good, I didn't mind it. But I could see in other departments that they were happy. And of course that led to the departmental government thing. I had nothing to do with that but that was a dramatic change. And I honestly think that unless you have a very good Vice Chancellor, and there are some very good Vice Chancellors I'm sure, that that's a better system if the Vice Chancellor isn't very good. And I thought Professor Stranks was a very good Vice Chancellor, but I didn't think so of his successor. And I really thought that he was going to send the University from a research point of view downhill. But the departmental government idea I thought was an excellent. And I hope, I hope I'm right that we managed to let those involved in good research, and those who could do good research go ahead and do it. Now, there were a few areas of the University where research wasn't quite what I'd hoped it would be – I guess you can't win 'em all. But I think that people would have said that, that from a research point of view, that was a very active period for the University, and a very good period. I think we achieved something. And I remember going to a conference somewhere, back at a university somewhere, Sydney or Melbourne, and some idiot getting up and saying, "Oh, of course, that's silly old Adelaide, silly old Adelaide doing this thing, do you know what they're doing?". And I sat there and thought "You ratbag, just wait". And when the result came out about ARGC grants and this, that and the other, Adelaide was always out amongst, the [these guys], the bloody University of Melbourne. Anyway, don't get me onto that (laughs).

**Mmm. And we briefly touched on students. Students of your time at the University, student attitudes at the University of Adelaide, they've changed quite a lot, haven't they?**

Well I believe so, I'm told so. But I doubt if they have in my area. I would recognise good students as young, and although I didn't insist that they did a higher degree with me, if they were interested I certainly let them. If I didn't think they were very good I said "We'll you know you're probably better suited to do something else". Um, so I ended up with some very good students. I think the secret of my success was that they produced lots of papers, and so on. And the attitude I think was inspired by Robertson, a sort of research attitude [inaudible], and there were a lot of departments where they didn't have that attitude, for some strange reason. I won't mention them now, but there were some departments that I don't think did very well. And when I became Chair of the Executive Committee I saw it even more obvious (sic). I mean some departments asking me for research money to do some absolutely stupid bloody things. No wonder we couldn't give them money.... Anyway, but I would think that the whole attitude to research in the University changed, slowly evolved, when people realised that you've got to be doing research at the frontier of research, and then you'll get money and then you'll get on. And the department's reputation goes up, everything goes up, and it's good.

**Hmmm. And at the undergraduate level, back in the nineteen sixties, early 'seventies, there was the phenomenon of the perpetual student. Whereas now University education is expensive. Has this changed the climate do you think?**

Yeah, I think when students can do, and repeat, without having to pay, they just kept repeating it, it was a great life. But when you had to win the scholarship, and when you failed the scholarship wouldn't continue...is that, that what you meant?

**Well, just the fact that education is now expensive, and....**

Well yeah, and not only that, it's competitive too....

**Competitive. And indeed the Universities have to compete too.**

Oh yeah, absolutely.

**Back when you moved to the University of Adelaide there was one university, now there are three, or arguably six or seven, depending on your definition, um...**

Let me say, when I moved to the University of Adelaide, not only was there one university, there was one head of department, he was God, and he dished out money to whomever he wanted for research. There wasn't any competition for it, they didn't do it. Then along came the ARC and then we could compete for it, and lo and behold those who were good could compete and started to get grants, the others didn't. I remember the old professors saying

“I didn’t get my grant, why didn’t I get my grant?” - it was pathetic. But any rate, that was a good change, and that was brought about by Stranks.

**And how about the more competitive nature of the University sector more generally. I mean there are 40-50 universities in Australia now and they’re set in competition with each other.**

I think competition is what you need to develop good universities, good ones and bad ones. Those that compete well will do well. It’s like business – you’re in competition. The ones that know how to compete will do well, and the ones that don’t will fall by the wayside. So I didn’t ever object to competition. I thought competition was good, it’s a good driving force.

**Mm. And do we have enough universities, or do we have too many?**

I think we’ve got enough, quite frankly. Because what you produce from universities is at the upper echelons of the workforce. And I think at the moment we’ve probably got enough, because there’s some universities failing dismally. Yes, I think we’re producing enough doctors, lawyers, brilliant scientists, so on...

**Mm**

Now, on the other side I’m a little bit concerned about access to universities by some people who can’t afford it. And not only can they not afford it, but they don’t get the right sort of information about how to go about it, how to go to school, get scholarships, do well, blah, blah. In country towns or wherever they are, they’re probably being told, “Hurry up and finish school, get a job and get money for the family, we need it”. That aspect worries me a little bit, and that is one that I don’t quite know how to solve. Because let’s face it, to get to the university you’ve got to compete, but you’ve got to compete from a school result. And if you don’t do well you’re not going to get there. And I think that a lot of people aren’t getting there because they’ve got other problems, [more on than?] school. So I don’t know how to solve that. Yeah, a difficult one.

**A sign of the times?**

Well yeah I guess it is, but it really means the community, I mean to say I can’t solve it and I suspect the community can’t solve it, and I wish the government and the community could solve it, because there must be lots of bright young people who’d do very well if they had a good education, [a universal?] training at the university. But anyway...

**And [they indeed?] are country students Joe?**



Oh they are, they are. At the moment you get rich people's children coming through – I've had a few of them. Anyway...

**Well look Joe, we'll bring this to an end...**

Ok

**Thank you and this has been an enjoyable discussion, and this discussion has been held on the 14<sup>th</sup> of December 2012, with Emeritus Professor Joe Wiskich talking to Stephen Beaumont. Again, thank you very much**

Thank you, Steve, thank you.