

## **THS026 Norman Biggs**

Track 1 [00:45:41] [Session one: 19 August 2015] Professor Norman Biggs [NB], born 1941. Emeritus Professor of Mathematics at LSE. NB describes first coming to LSE in 1988 as Professor of Mathematics [00:24] and describes his first impressions of campus [01:01] which was different than his previous work places: University of Southampton and Royal Holloway. NB talks about the students taking mathematics at LSE [02:00]. NB describes the first course he taught: Set Theory and Analysis [02:58]. Now in 2015, the course has 250 students, but in the 1980s, the course contained approximately 15 students. NB talks about what the students studying in the 1980s and how diverse his colleagues were [03:36]. NB describes the different departments relating to economics and mathematics [04:00] and how disorganised the departments were. NB talks about the differences in how departments were structured in different institutions [05:00]. NB describes his colleagues [05:57] and how the mathematics department was re-built. NB talks about the challenges of the REF [06:50] and how it affected the mathematicians at LSE. NB explains how his post has changed over the years: when he arrived he was the only professor of mathematics at LSE [08:03] and was the sub-convener of the department. NB talks about how the recruitment of students was controlled [08:47] and how it was centralised at the School. Mathematics professors had no control over recruitment or tutoring. NB describes John Ashworth being appointed and his setting up of working groups [09:50]. NB is appointed to the teaching structure working group and the BSc in Economics is abolished [10:00], which led to more autonomy in the departments and students being able to study a mathematics and economics degree. NB describes in 1995 [11:58] that the idea of a mathematics department was proposed. Mathematics becomes a department [12:00]. NB explains what [13:18] subjects he taught in the '90s and what degrees were available to students, including maths and business, maths and economics, algebra, maths and analysis. NB explains that over the years the maths being taught became broader [14:31]. NB describes being Vice Chairman of the Appointments Committee from 1993 – 1996 [15:11] and what the post and committee entailed [15:20]. NB describes the hierarchy of the School at that time [16:09]. NB talks about helping to appoint lecturers in all subjects throughout LSE [17:00] which meant modernising how academic staff were appointed [18:00]. NB describes how the process of promoting Readers changed [18:45]. NB explains the sensitive issue of academic promotions [20:30]. NB talks about how stimulating it was working with his colleagues [21:25] and how he established a regular research seminar to share knowledge [22:00]. NB explains how he wrote to different departments when he first arrived at LSE [22:40] to see if they were interested in mathematics. This led to some sharing of knowledge [23:00] and making new contacts, which NB describes in detail [23:10]. NB describes how technology has changed the subject that he teaches [25:19] and the changes in IT at LSE [25:20]. NB talks about the software 'Mathematica' and how he struggled to gain access to it at LSE [27:00]. NB describes Professor Anthony Atkinson, based in Statistics, being appalled by the technology at LSE [28:01] and lack of innovation in the IT provision at the School. NB talks about the challenges to do with the REF and the short-term planning of the School and academic appointments [28:40]. NB describes the pressure to appoint staff who have already achieved an REF ranking or achievement in their

research, rather than faculty first starting out and developing [29:00]. NB describes the competition for academic appointments [31:01] and the cohesive changes to departments at LSE [31:40]. NB describes the changes to lecture theatres over the years [32:00]. NB talks about the technology provide in lecture theatres and the changes that have taken place [33:03]. NB describes the changes to the administrative decisions that departments at LSE are required to make such as personal tutors and recruitment [34:20]. NB explains the personal tutor process and how it developed [35:00]. NB describes eating lunch in the Brunch Bowl on the fourth floor of the main building [38:15] and the Senior Dining Room. NB describes using the library for researching his hobbies [39:00] rather than for research and he describes being in the basement of the old library [39:30]. NB talks about lack of social space on campus [40:00]. NB explains his view on what the future of LSE will be [40:51], including the impact on LSE of rising tuition fees [41:00]. NB explores the idea of LSE doing more distance learning [43:00].