

The Birth of an Organisation: ATEM and the Principle of Subsidiarity, Love and Other Ideals

by Giles Pickford BA Hons (W.Aust), ATEMM

ABSTRACT: The article discusses the origins, present structure and future development of the Association for Tertiary Education Management Inc. (publisher of this Journal) in the light of the principal of subsidiarity, the nature of love, and other ideals. The scope of the article is more philosophical than it is historical.

"Is there not greater room for a decentralisation of decision making, a return of responsibility to the constituent parts of the university, based on the excellent Principle of Subsidiarity ¹: which holds that no responsibility should accrue to a higher body that can rightly and satisfactorily be undertaken by a lesser body? Surely such a principle lies at the very heart of democracy. At all events, it is fundamental to the development and dignity of the human person." (From John Molony's address to the Gang of 700, Australian National University, 25 August 1992)

"The opposite of love is not hate: it is fear" (Giles Pickford, Balgownie Hotel, 31 May 2002)

ORIGINS

The idea of ATEM (previously the Australasian Institute of Tertiary Education Administrators - AITEA) first came to a man called Maurie Blank, Secretary of the Caulfield Institute of Technology in Melbourne (later Chisholm Institute and then subsumed into Monash University).

He was concerned that the middle ranking administrative staff of his and other institutions seemed to be regarded as servants of the kind that should never expect anything better. He, on the other hand, did not see them as lackeys, but as people who could make a genuine contribution to the central aims of the University – teaching and research – and that they could do that by excelling in their work. He was also concerned about the negative impact of isolation, which he had experienced himself during his early career as an academic in Townsville and Rockhampton. This isolation, prevalent in small regional institutions and exacerbated by inter-institutional rivalries in the big cities, stunted the growth of ideas and the development of skills.

In 1974 Maurie Blank set about forming the Australian Institute of College Administration which changed to AITEA when it spread from the Institutes of Technology and the Colleges of Advanced Education to the Universities on 30 April 1976².

Would a soldier say that the supply and medical arms of the military made no difference to the battle? No. But some of the more micro-minded people in tertiary education say that administrative staff make no contribution to teaching and research. Perhaps that is because they have only worked with bad or indifferent administrators. If they had ever had the good

luck to be supported by people with the fire in their hearts and minds, they would know how wrong that idea is.

Maurie Blank collaborated with Don Patterson, Academic Registrar at the Canberra College of Advanced Education (now the University of Canberra), Colin Plowman of the Australian National University, Ding Bell and his Deputy Paul Morgan at the University of Melbourne, Dan Dunne at the University of Western Australia and others, to form an organisation which would empower these staff to get up and look after their collective futures by giving the older ones among them the opportunity to form the minds of the younger ones, and thus become a Guild where skills and perceptions were created and maintained.

Maurie's name, and the names of all the originators of ATEM can be found in the early years of the Honour Roll which is published in the ATEM Web Site: www.atem.org.au.

Whenever a new idea is born, there is invariably intense opposition to it from people of a different cloth.

Blank's idea was opposed by various people, prominent among whom were the Deputy Registrar of the University of Sydney and Monash's Academic Registrar, who were fearful of it. They thought that the junior staff should get on with their work, keep their heads down, do what they were told, and should not be encouraged to get ideas above their station. They also opposed the idea of the Colleges and Institutes of Technology being included, notwithstanding the fact that it was this sector that had thought of the idea in the first place. The thought processes involved in such distorted reasoning stand condemned today, as all the institutions concerned are now universities.

Maurie Blank's idea was founded in love, which, like hate, is always characterised by an intense focus on 'the other'. Whereas the unequal and opposite reaction is founded in fear, which is always characterised by a sharp focus on 'self'. Fear, not hate, is indeed the opposite of love.

Blank's idea was also founded solidly on the Principle of Subsidiarity as explained by Emeritus Professor John Molony in the opening quote. The reaction against it was not founded on any principle. Rather, it was founded on an instinct: the instinct to preserve rights, privileges, territory, and mastery.

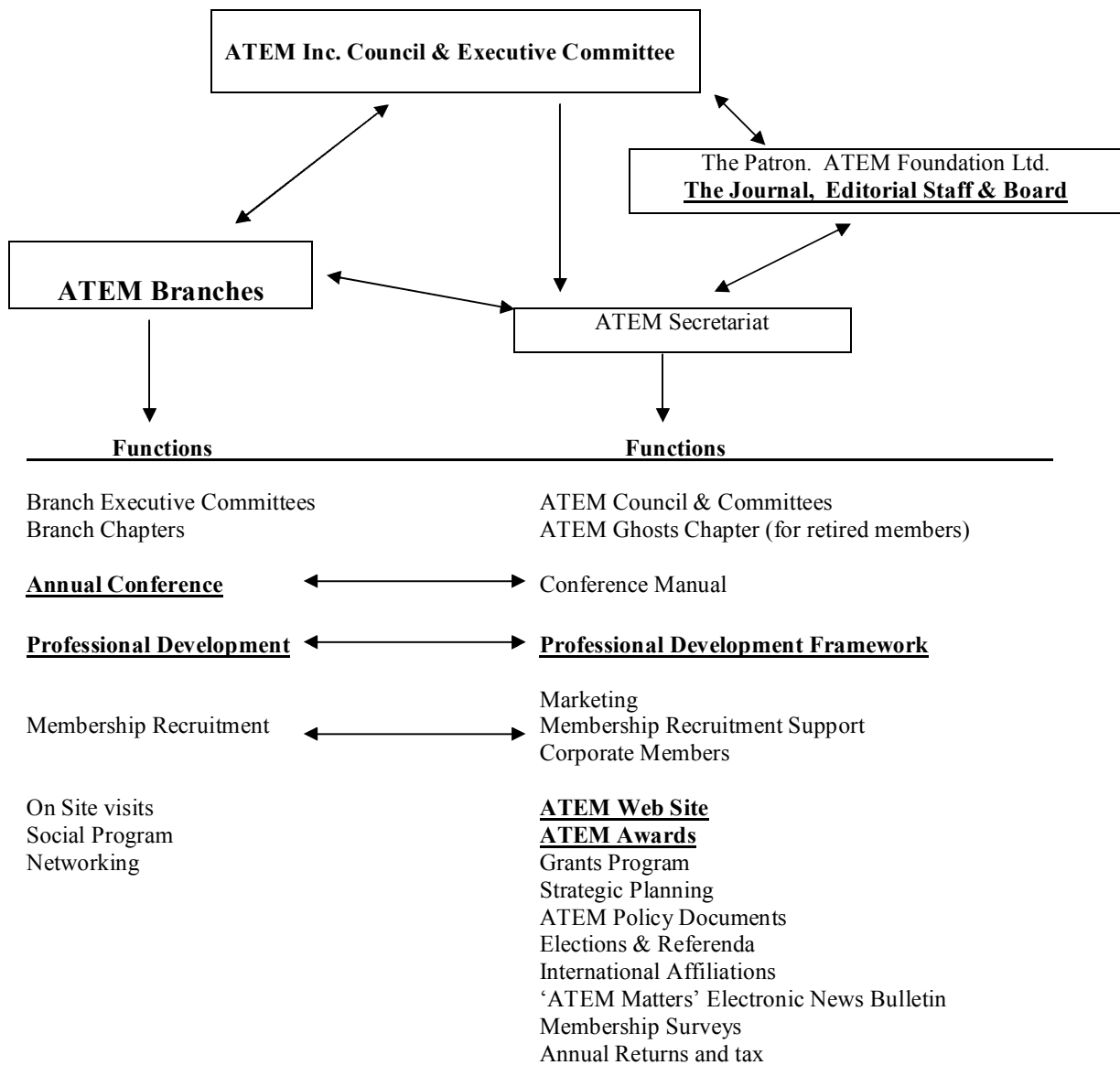
The desire to set a young apprentice free into the world of work is an act of love. The desire to control one is an act of fear. Therefore Maurie Blank's idea was always going to prevail, and indeed it did.

AS IT IS NOW

We should now look at the structure of ATEM, 30 years after it was conceived in a Melbourne Polytechnic, and 26 years after its formation.

At this time it has Branches in all the States and Territories of Australia and in New Zealand. It has putative Chapters in Fiji and Papua New Guinea and plans to develop Branches in South-East Asia.

A diagram of its structure is shown below, underlined items indicate ATEM's core business



The diagram is entirely misleading in one respect because it makes ATEM look like a hierarchy. ATEM is not a hierarchy. It is in fact a federation of anarchies. The diagram makes it look as though the ATEM Council is the head of a body. In fact the ATEM Council is more like a meeting place where many interactions take place and things are resolved, or deferred, depending on these interactions. Therefore, the ATEM Council is more like a synapse than a head.

The Head of ATEM is the Branches. As there are eight of them, ATEM can be seen to be many headed, like a hydra. It is indeed a mythical beast. Any management scientist would tell you that such an organisation could not possibly function. They said the same thing about the University of Cambridge, and were wrong then as well.

The way ATEM is, and has been for many years, is now under review, which is right and proper. I will be happy so long as the two principles of subsidiarity and love are both preserved. In other words I hope that ATEM will always be a Guild for the middle managers and administrators in tertiary institutions, and that it will always speak the truth. The latter is not possible if fear is the driver.

It is hard to speak the truth when funds are diminishing, because fear for one's future gets in the way. But a cowed and subservient future is not worth living. The only future that is worth having is one where people and their beliefs matter.

The truth is not contingent upon the rank of the person. If it were, then truth would stand accused of the *ad hominum* fallacy. Pulling rank is *ad hominum* personified and negates the Principle of Subsidiarity. One of the hallmarks of truth is that when it is uttered, someone somewhere gets terribly upset about it. [Example: when the Australian Labor Party's John Della Bosca told his party to forget about opposing the Goods and Services Tax, uproar ensued. Now we know he was right. Well at least the ALP thinks so]. A corollary of this principle is that if a statement upsets no-one, then it is probably not true.

An institution where there can be only one view, usually imposed from above, cannot call itself an academy. A university is a place where young aspiring minds merge with wiser minds to study the higher orders of human activity³. So it is with ATEM.

It is the apprentices that matter (the young aspiring minds) because the future belongs to them. By the time a person has reached the zenith of their power, they are already more or less irrelevant: because the future is being re-invented by younger people beneath them in the organisation. These are the people for whom ATEM was created.

AS IT MAY BE

The future of ATEM is hard to predict, because the organism is alive and therefore has a mind of its own. However, because New Zealand requested me to do so, I will throw caution to the winds and attempt it.

In 2076, one hundred years after its formation in Melbourne, ATEM will have around 8,000 members (currently we have around 1,800). They will be scattered across Branches in all parts of Australasia, South-East Asia and the Pacific. The reason for this is that ATEM is not a geographical entity. It is not like the Australian Vice-Chancellors' Committee, or the National Tertiary Education Union, or the Australian Union of Students. It is based on people, not geography. Therefore, in today's world, that inevitably means that it is global.

In 2076 ATEM's award of 'Membership' for the young aspiring minds, and 'Fellowship' for the wiser minds, will be eagerly sought. Because, by then, the agencies that either manage or mismanage tertiary education will notice its intrinsic value and make the award one of the factors taken into consideration for promotion within the ranks.

The ATEM Journal, the *Journal of Higher Education Policy and Management*, will have around 20,000 subscribers all over the world. Even now it has twice as many readers as there are members of ATEM. As time goes on it will be compulsory reading for tertiary managers everywhere.

The 100th Annual Conference will return to Melbourne in 2076 and a bust of Maurie Blank will be unveiled by the Chancellor in the grounds of the Caulfield Campus of Monash University to commemorate our 100th anniversary⁴. The Conference will attract 1,000 delegates.

The ATEM Secretariat, part of ATEM's Synapse, will still be housed in the Australian National University in Canberra and it will have a full-time staff of three, assisted by 20 ATEM Ghosts (retired members). The full-time positions will be Executive Officer, Finance Officer and Web Wizard. The Ghosts will be involved in special projects internationally, many of them being situated out in the Branches: which will affectionately be called 'Head Offices'.

And finally, people will notice that ATEM's web server was situated in Newcastle and then in Melbourne, and its Bank account in Adelaide. They will wonder why. Not knowing that these things indicate ATEM's peripatetic origins, when, like a nomad, it hunted and gathered across the savannas of tertiary education in the prehistory of our profession.

Acknowledgments

I am indebted to Maurie Blank, Don Patterson and Colin Plowman, who assisted me to develop this article. They were there at the birth, I was not. Maree Conway's 1994 article² helped me understand the historical truths.

-
1. The principle can be found in Pope Pius XI's *Quadragesimo*, 1931.
 2. For a more detailed historical record see 'The Establishment of AITEA: a short history' by Maree Conway *Journal of Tertiary Education Administration* Vol 16, No 2 1994
 - 3 I thank Stephen Murby, Deputy Vice-Chancellor at Swinburne University of Technology for the idea that the university is 'a place where young aspiring minds merge with wiser minds to study the higher orders of human activity.'
 - 4 In fact the creation of this sculpture by Jan Brown, Sculptor Emeritus at the Australian National University, is now under way and it will probably be shown for the first time at ATEM's 30th Anniversary Conference in Sydney 2006, before finding its home at Monash's Caulfield Campus.

First presented to the Annual Conference of the New Zealand Branch of ATEM, 4 July 2002, University of Otago, Dunedin. Giles Pickford is an ATEM Ghost who works in the ATEM Secretariat - giles.pickford@bigpond.com