

Why Do Organisations Die?

By Tom Gregg and Giles Pickford

Do you remember ANZAAS? The Australian and New Zealand Association for the Advancement for Science?

Before it “died”, it used to be a three thousand strong interdisciplinary Conference which attracted a huge audience of scientists and social scientists and a vast press corps. Stories from the Conference swamped the media in Australia and New Zealand for a week as the stories were told in many halls and theatres.

It was the ‘other’ Conference that everyone attended, as well as the one that was specific to his or her own discipline. Astronomers would attend the Astronomical Society Conference as well as ANZAAS: Geographers, Mathematicians, Psychologists, Chemists would do likewise.

Then it died. Various diagnoses were given of the illness, but whatever it was, it was fatal. The scientific world resumed its tendency to diaspora and stopped uniting in the one big corroboree which had held it together for many years.

We can remember attending one in Adelaide in the heyday of ANZAAS in the seventies. There were around 3,000 people at that one. We can remember attending the last one in Canberra in the nineties which had about 400 registered delegates.

Our own view is that the death occurred shortly after governments began to see “privatisation” in its many forms as the answer to their prayers, and initiated the long war of attrition against tertiary education that has continued to the present day. “Commercialising” universities and seeing education as a commodity and a “private good” is probably the one and only education policy that is entirely bi-partisan and across Australasia. In Australia now it is unanimous, apart from the Democrats and more recently One Nation.

As university funding per student was cut, and then cut some more, and then again, and again, budgets were also cut and the funds to support attendance at major events shrank to the point where people had to decide which of the two Conferences they could afford to attend: the small one that was directly related to their research or outside profession, or the big one unique to their sectors where their minds were expanded beyond the immediate and the familiar.

In this case-study, they chose the small one and ANZAAS died. All this has parallels in other arenas, and where we work and think.

There are many professional groups amongst the general staff in tertiary institutions. Some of them are lobbies as well as other things. The smallest and most powerful are the Australian Vice-Chancellors Committee, with 38 members; and the New Zealand Vice-Chancellors Committee with 8, both packing a massive punch in the world of Higher Education. It is mirrored in the VET/Polytechnic/Institute of Technology/College of Education worlds by similar organisations, each with different levels of effectiveness and influence.

Then there is the Association for Tertiary Education Management (ATEM Inc.), with around 1,700 members: focussed on the development and up-skilling of those who manage tertiary education in Australia and New Zealand.

ATEM collaborates with the Tertiary Education Facilities Management Association and the Australian Association for Institutional Research in running what is now the annual Tertiary Education Management Conference. The first such combined conference for the sector attracted 584 delegates to Adelaide at the end of September this year.

Alongside, but not yet under that wider, single umbrella there is a long tail of specialist groups. Some of them meet under the AVCC umbrella, such as the Administrative Staff Conference which attracts around 70 members, the Public Relations Officers Conference, the Deputy Vice-Chancellors (Research), and soon to come, the Conference of University Chancellors.

Then there are other groups who meet under no umbrella, such as the Alumni Officers, the Prospective Student Advisers, the Research Officers, the Student Administration Officers, the Laboratory Managers, the HR Directors, the Planners and so on.

What drives the dynamic in these groupings?

Within Universities there are many groups who make up the general staff. Some of them are qualified in other professions such as accounting, librarianship, public relations, information technology, internal auditing, engineering, laboratory technology, statistics, counselling, law.

These are all separate professions with their own structure and criteria for membership. All of them require continuous professional education and training in order to maintain standing and therefore employment in the profession. All of them are professions that are needed in the management of tertiary institutions.

All of them tend to go to conferences where members of their profession gather together to find out how to improve the way they do things.

Then there are the people who belong to a wider grouping, managing and administering tertiary institutions. Secretaries, faculty managers, facilities managers, executive staff, student admissions officers, multi-media specialists, student advisers, managers of student residences, examination officers, timetabling officers, alumni officers, fund raisers, publications officers, minders and sorters of all descriptions.

These people may not also belong to a separate specialist profession, but do belong to a wider profession covering those who choose as their professional career, the work of tertiary institutions.

The people in the separate professional groups have to choose which Conference they will go to. Will they go to the Certified Practising Accountants Conference, or the Tertiary Education Management Conference? The choice is very similar to the choice that faced the scientific world when ANZASS was alive and well.

However, the staff members in the wider tertiary management profession have very little difficulty deciding where they will go. The Tertiary Education Management Conference is the first choice option. They flock to the ANZAAS-like meeting and in doing so they take their steps towards developing the unique body of knowledge that is part of their profession.

It was an interesting experience recently when ATEM went through an internal convulsion trying to decide whether or not tertiary management was a profession. All those whose focus was strongly aligned to an existing separate profession tended to say that ‘the jobs that the other ones did were vital, necessary, frightfully important, but did not make a profession’.

Whereas the people whose focus was sharply on the university rather than some other outside grouping, knew that tertiary management was an emerging profession, strongly developing its own unique knowledge base, and having a clear set of skills and code of conduct that had to be developed to support the new tertiary sector.

It is the existence of this second professional group that will ensure the continued existence of the Tertiary Education Management Conference. They do not have an alternative smaller corroboree or hui to attend. If they want to grow they must attend the big one.

On the matter of attending the TEM Conferences in general, there is a continuum of views:

At one end is the view that they are a waste of time, that people go there to be seen swanning around, that nothing productive ever comes out of them, and that staff ought to stick to their knitting, keep their heads down, don’t answer back, and get on with the job. The people who hold this view tend to have limited imaginations and see all work as a mechanical, repetitious monotony that never ends.

At the other end is the view is that people only ever learn something new when they are playing. That life is a Ball and must be lived to the full. That a completely new idea only ever arrives out of chaos. And that joining in great festivals of ideas is an ancient, atavistic human instinct that cannot be suppressed. For these people, knowing that something cannot be suppressed means that therefore that it must be encouraged.

We suggest that it would be selfish of people who also belong to “other” professions to deny the emergence of a new one, and that such a view could prevent important development opportunities for the staff and the sector. Especially when the emerging profession has a body of literature backing it up which goes back to the 11th Century and which is listed in well-known bibliographies such as those found in the ATEM Web Site – www.atem.org.au

ANZAAS had the seeds of its death embedded in its nature. The opposite seems to be the case for the Tertiary Education Management Conference and for the emerging profession that supports it.

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