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EAIR IN THE MAKING

Abstract. This chapter attempts to bring to life the early years of the movement that became EAIR, by recounting Forum events, colourful anecdotes, growing pains and important decisions. Conceived in an era when globalisation, personal computers and the internet did not exist, EAIR evolved from its early AIR parentage years to a fully-fledged independent organisation serving the professional needs of its individual members, in particular through its annual Forum and its journal – Tertiary Education And Management (TEAM).

To attain the Truth, we need, once in our life, to get rid of all the opinions we received and to build again, from the foundations, all the systems of our knowledge.

René Descartes

NOVEMBER 1979

On the 16th of November 1979, the symbol was striking. Twenty-six (26) individuals from 12 different countries and two continents, gathered in the Descartes Amphitheatre located inside the walls of the Old Sorbonne, were being welcomed, in prophetic terms, by the President of one of the largest universities in France:

Tradition is of little use (unless) we discover and apply qualitative and quantitative techniques which enable us to answer this double challenge: to become better and better with less and less resources and to prove it.

It is sure that European administrators, managers and researchers in the field of higher education systems improvement have a lot to learn in contact with AIR representatives. But it does not mean that it would be a one-way co-operation. ...perhaps we, Europeans also have many things to show and teach North Americans. (Ahrweiler 1979: 5-6).

A merger of contrasts was in the making: the 'high' culture of the old countries with the 'experimental' culture of the young continent; the more ideological tenet of the university concept as a society-shaping institution with the more utilitarian approach to higher education as a professional and socio-economic lever; and the accustomed way of managing public institutions tied to government methods and riches with the less travelled style dictated by greater autonomy and diversified financial sources. Even before the welcome address of the First Forum, participants from both sides of the ocean knew that their differences were strands apart, and yet that they shared many of the same concerns and interests. The unknown was really how many of 'them-us' would be willing to listen first, consider second, and then decide that by engaging in a dialogue, 'their-our' professional and institutional predicaments, as so vividly captured by President Ahrweiler, would be enhanced.

Compelled as we are to reflect on our historical antecedents as a special interest community, let us remind ourselves that facts alone can bore us to death - while embellished anecdotes can easily take legendary proportions. Hopefully this chapter will be a tribute to those 'pioneers' who had to go down memory lane to recollect

important events and unrepeatable episodes, particularly in the early years of this organisation to help these two authors to bring life and veracity to 25 years of existence. It is also an occasion for newer EAIR members to realise that non-profit professional organisations are not unlike small businesses. The ones that do survive and thrive are the results of foresight, hard work, luck, need fulfilment, and shrewd change management from committed leadership and membership. EAIR is a living proof of that.

THE INCUBATING YEARS (1975-1979)

Independent testimonies confirm that what became EAIR was conceived in California during the AIR San Diego Forum, in May 1979, either at the Balboa Zoo during a spectacle of trained birds or at a French wine and goat cheese party by the poolside. Thereafter, the involved protagonists played a steady parental role in the early years with various contributions. First, a few words about how the courting season evolved. American 'institutional researchers' incorporated their Association for Institutional Research (AIR) in May 1965. From 384 charter members in its first year, AIR grew rapidly not only in numbers but also in vitality and sophistication (Doi 1979). A decade later, it was clear that Institutional Research (IR) had convincingly emerged as a staff function and a profession in North American universities (Tetlow 1973; 1979; Johnson 1979). In return for their membership fees, members insisted on more services and support. It was in 1975 that an AIR Professional Development and Services Committee (PDS) was set up, with a Workshops Subcommittee and an International Activities Subcommittee (IAS), both chaired by F. Craig Johnson, Professor of IR at Florida State University. The workshop side of the Committee was quickly a smashing success with a first workshop in Atlanta followed by many other sites.

Expectations for the international activities were less clear and represented a priority that did not quite register on the radar screen of the typical AIR member and elected Board official whose daily livelihood depended almost entirely on the resolution of institutional and local problems, with the occasional exposure to regional and perhaps national (USA) issues. After all, perestroika and glasnost were still a decade away from appearing on the scene, and globalisation had not surfaced as a household name. What then was the rationale behind establishing a subcommittee to oversee international activities that only a small faction of members were passionate about? Was it savvy, greed, or just dumb luck? Probably a combination of all three! In the mid-1970s, AIR already counted close to 1200 members with about half of them attending the annual Forum. Although the Canadian membership was on the rise (around 100 members), numbers from other parts of the world were stagnating at around 25 to 30 and showing no sign of improvement. Only the odd 'foreigner' from Asia, Australia, Europe or Latin America attended occasional annual AIR Forums. However, as overall AIR membership increased, so did the appetite for more growth, more services and more revenue. The European market was perceived as a potential target for new recruits. The problem was that, having approved its own resolution without fully understanding the consequences, AIR remained a reluctant player, had no experience in the international arena, had a collective knowledge of the European terrain over which no one could have tripped, was widely assuming that Europeans were doing no institutional research, and therefore saw itself as the only game in town: 'Y' all come and learn! The plan resulted in four years of sputtering while only the few international

'zealots' (including a handful of Americans) kept hammering away at the issue. Understandably, the overwhelming majority did not really mind or notice as they were too busy adding student-credit hours, producing induced course load matrices, and crunching numbers because students had to be counted and retained, budgets prepared, policies documented, etc ... and these were their immediate concerns. The elected AIR Board leaders, as in most professional organisations, were themselves clones of the membership. Knowing how other countries were struggling with (perhaps) the same issues and comparing notes had little place, if any, in their universe.

At least, those four years (1975-1979) had served to confirm one thing. AIR had sent a Board member twice to Europe to join an international group interested in Higher Education as a field of study. The event was run like an organised tour. Fifty people paid a conference fee, for which they had room and board, a chance to present and publish a paper and, at the end, a tax receipt. That exclusive group met every summer in a different location, presented papers that lacked peer review and whose substance was of mixed rigour and limited interest. If European activities ever took off, the Love Boat tour model was not it! During the same period, there had also been two reciprocal visits from OECD-IMHE and AIR representatives to participate into each other's events. After four years of distant and lackadaisical courtship, the historical conception moment was on the cusp.

FROM HATCHING TO INFANCY (1979-1981)

The attractive venue of the San Diego Forum had contributed to drawing together a number of elements favourable to making 16 November, 1979 a memorable date. The incoming AIR President, F. Craig Johnson who was a strong supporter of the international movement, had indicated several months in advance who, among Board members, was going to chair available committees and subcommittees, as previous practice wanted it, and encouraged every one to start developing terms of reference, goals and strategies so as to be able to have a productive first meeting under his one-year tenure. That procedure provided every Board member with an adequate time allocation to explain his/her plans, and for the first time, elevated the International Activities Subcommittee to a more level playing field. The IAS was now chaired by Charles Bélanger (from 1979 to 1982), then Director of IR at the University of Montreal, and someone who had studied under Johnson and shared similar ambitions. Concurrently, Claude Cossu, Professor of Management Science at the Université de Paris 1 (Sorbonne) was discussing his interest in organising the 'First AIR European Forum in Paris' with other European colleagues present in greater numbers at the San Diego Forum: Aidan Duggan from the Royal Irish Academy, Thaly Nilsson from Uppsala Universitet, Michel Hecquet from Université Catholique de Louvain, John Calvert from Loughborough University of Technology, and Paul Levasseur from OECD-IMHE. AIR Board members, who did not feel ready in May to authorise the Paris Forum, took a deep breath, crossed their fingers, and approved the project at their September meeting, giving two months to organise and improvise the Paris meeting. Fortunately, before leaving San Diego, it had been decided that those involved in the discussions would serve as regional 'correspondents' as well as IAS members. For rapid communications, telegraph and telephone (rotary of course!) were still the instruments of choice and both were used abundantly.

<http://www.springer.com/978-1-4020-1505-2>

The Dialogue between Higher Education Research and
Practice

25 Years of EAIR

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2003, X, 146 p., Hardcover

ISBN: 978-1-4020-1505-2