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A continuous association …: AIRAANZ as a scholarly association

Diana Kelly

Abstract

Over twenty years ago industrial relations academics in Australia and New Zealand formed a scholarly association as one means of strengthening their field of study. This paper considers the nature and effects of Association of Industrial Relations Academics of Australia and New Zealand on academic industrial relations in light of the changing context for universities and employment relations in Australia, on the one hand, and the broader literature on scholarly communities on the other hand. The paper concludes that the foundation ideals of AIRAANZ have served the scholarly community well.

Introduction

The formation, development and growth of an academic association will depend on an array of interacting internal and external factors. Moreover the academic association serves multiple uses depending on the nature and structure of the association's epistemic community. In order to understand the development of AIRAANZ, it is useful therefore firstly, to consider the ideal-type purposes of scholarly associations, and identify briefly the processes and needs for the formation of a scholarly association. The importance of changing context will be discussed before a brief overview of the AIRAANZ conferences. In a 'rural' discipline such as industrial relations where members are widely dispersed in small groups, the conference becomes the central site of interaction within the scholarly association and influences the direction and nature of the discipline or field of study. Following a brief overview of the establishment and development of AIRAANZ from the early 1980s, the notion of AIRAANZ as a scholarly association will be revisited in order to analyse what have been the abiding and dynamic attributes of AIRAANZ, and to understand the extent to which it has been an effective scholarly association.

Scholarly Associations – their formation and their uses

An academic association can play a significant role in the development and direction of a discipline. Such an association only develops when an intellectual community has developed sufficient mass and impetus to be able to claim a group interest and capacity for an ongoing network. Of itself an academic or scholarly association gives evidence that the discipline or field of study has sufficient scholars with a shared investment in a particular intellectual territory. Scholarly associations can be likened to speech communities - networks of scholars who share the same vocabulary and shared language in a particular area. In this respect associations become institutions, which have a life of their own, with rules and patterns of interaction which ensures their continuity. Within the scholarly association, rules and norms develop which may act to strengthen or challenge the dominant paradigm or web of disciplinary rules. Elites may form and communication processes develop which may enhance or limit elites, enhance or constrain innovation.

Whether there is a community paradigm, 'a set of beliefs, values, techniques and so on shared by members of a given community ...' (Kuhn, 1977, p.175) is perhaps less important, for a new formal grouping. Rather, in the emergent academic association, a network of scholars agree to formalise communication channels for both cognitive and 'social' purposes,

which are linked through the common ground of disciplinary interests. By so doing, the newly formalised institution performs several roles though the formal and informal interactions and channels of communication. Indeed the actual provision of communication channels is a fundamental function of an academic association, especially where members of the community are geographically isolated from each other. Some have argued that this function may alter as use of Internet becomes more sophisticated. Epistemic sub-communities can develop links through Internet groups, where previously scholars may not have been able to develop into a 'virtual' community. Since the early 1990s for example a group of radical organisational theorists in several countries, most of whom are members of larger academic industrial relations associations, have maintained a network for debate and discussion. (Communication, Clive Gilson, University of Waikato, 1995); alternatively, the Internet offers ways reinforcing and sustaining collaboration which begins in debate and discussion in meetings and conferences.

In part, the roles and effects of a scholarly association will also depend on membership rules, especially on who may become a member of the community (see e.g. Coats, 1993). Original choices and later changes about who can be a member will influence the patterns of communication, the cognitive and social imperatives and, indeed the direction of the discipline. Some academic associations are open, some closed; some are hierarchical, and some egalitarian; some have strict formal structures, while others are informal in every respect. For example, Goodman and Berridge (1988) note that the founders of British Universities Industrial Relations Association (BUIRA) confined membership to academics, but on the other hand, in assuming the multidisciplinarity of industrial relations did not control the disciplinary area. By contrast, the IRRA in the USA took a different structure, partly related to the geographical size of the USA, but also in acknowledgment of the needs of practitioners (Stern, 1992). At regional Chapter level, practitioners greatly outnumbered academics, which in turn led to the imperatives of practitioners driving the direction and focus of debates. Even more constrained are dual academic- professional organisations such as those of engineers, doctors or accountants, where barriers to membership are further constrained by formal degree and practice requirements.

Regardless of the objectives of the founders and later decision makers, there may be other intended and unintended outcomes of an academic society. With the formalisation of the organisation, concepts and issues can be legitimated or rejected as reputational systems develop. Thus the potential exists for disciplinary association to enhance broadening, dispersion or narrowing, depending on its structure and the goals of the members extant at any point in time. Nevertheless, the basic function of an academic association is to enhance and advance the academic discipline through interaction and collaboration not accessible to the individual academic. Even in the most scientific discipline, however, context is important for the scholars, the discipline and the scholarly association.

The importance of context

The scholars in an academic community do not get their knowledge in a vacuum. Knowledge is obtained by individuals who operate within disciplinary, national and local frameworks. Moreover, knowledge-getting is influenced, not only by communities of scholars in nearby disciplines, or in the same discipline in other countries, but also by social, economic and political changes and the nature and imperatives of higher education and the research systems in a country. This is perhaps more true of academic IR than many other disciplines. This is because of the nature of inquiry in IR. More than most disciplines academic IR has been open to analysis of current and recent events, in the public sphere of employment relations.

Certainly in the last two decades and coinciding with the formation of AIRAANZ, there has been a welter of change in both Australia and New Zealand, reflecting significant shifts in government priorities. In both countries, the overt moves away from welfare statism to wide market economies and the imperatives of business liberalism have been evident in all aspects of legislation. Thus it has not only been the legislation dealing with employment regulation such as Employment Contracts Act (1991) in New Zealand and the state and federal industrial relations acts in Australia. These have been very important for the analysts, but also governments in both countries have sought to establish an enterprise orientation for areas such as health, education and, of course, telecommunications. The process of devolving their responsibilities in these sorts of activities has induced major changes in the administration of employment and the organisation of work, the primary foci for industrial relations scholars.

The other major attribute of much industrial relations legislation from the late 1980s was the marginalising, and often demonising of trade unions – a long-time feature of politics and the media which gained in effectiveness in the latter years of the twentieth century. While the pro-enterprise legislation occurred last in the federal sphere in Australia, the governments of the Australian state and New Zealand all sought in the years around 1990 to enact legislation to lessen rights and opportunities for trade unions to promote and uphold workers' rights. It seemed for a while that as employee collectivism was increasingly demeaned, employer collectivism in the name of free markets was enabled. These government actions led to levels of violence against striking or picketing employees that had been notably rarer in Australia and New Zealand, than in many other countries. Moreover, since the early 1980s the more concerted and overt role taken by business in influencing public opinion and government policy has been evident in the expansion of the Business Roundtable in New Zealand, and the Business Council of Australia (BCA) and the Australian Chamber of Commerce and Industry (ACCI now the Australian Business Chamber). The employers' shift away from 'historic compromises' in both Australia and New Zealand was underpinned by more strategic and aggressive management styles at the level of the enterprise and workplace. While couched in the seemingly persuasive terminology of HRM and similar initiatives, the managerial styles apparent from the 1980s can be rather more clearly inferred from the great swathes of downsizing and the growth of casual, part-time and contract work.

The final major contextual feature which has influenced the 'academic tribe' of industrial relations scholars since they first formed their scholarly association in 1983 has been the changing role and responsibilities of higher education. As universities have become vocational and market driven in their orientation, the nature of scholarship and teaching has changed to meet new imperatives. The changes in public policy, labour market structures, business agenda and management methods have also become apparent in universities. Unlike the traditional and academically based style of governance that had previously been the practice, universities quickly developed business orientations from the late 1980s. Language such as customer-focus, measurable outcomes and key competences entered university vocabularies, as did performance appraisals and point systems for publications for academics. Whereas professional and vocational education had mainly been just tolerated (aside from the prestige professions and vocations), the structure of university education had by the 1990s become vocationally oriented, thus giving higher priority to employers' demands (Karmel, 1990). For academic industrial relations researchers, these kinds of pressures were emphasised by the very considerable growth of business studies in the higher education sector. The issue was not only that industrial relations was increasingly incorporated into business courses, where it sat a trifle uneasily, but also because with the emergence of management studies, especially HRM in the 1990s, the very basis for

researching and teaching industrial relations seemed to some to be under threat (Kelly, 2003).

All of these changes have provided an often arid environment for academic industrial relations, an environment which seemed scarcely possible at the time of the formation of AIRAANZ.

Establishment and Growth of AIRAANZ

The first overtly formal gathering of industrial relations scholars took place in Wellington New Zealand in 1978, although there had been meetings of legal, labour studies, trade union and personnel management scholars for much longer. Five years later in Churchill, Victoria, AIRAANZ was formed by a group of self-styled Young Turks who were seeking to strengthen their emergent discipline. Their ideals were reflected not only in the absence of formal titles such as Professor / Associate Professor, but also in the opportunities for informal debate at informal social occasions. The logic was not simply that of individuals maximising their social utility, but rather more that intellectual improvement was nurtured in non-hierarchical, non-threatening situations, leading to the development of a 'common pool of ideas .... that will strengthen teaching and research in industrial relations' (Benson, 1983b, p.v).

This fundamental objective of strengthening industrial relations research and teaching was reflected in the aims of the newly formed association. These were very similar to the foundation goals of BUIRA, (Berridge and Goodman, 1988) and included aims to convene conferences, inform members of developments, make periodic surveys of members' research and teaching activities, lobby for improved statistical sources, and affiliate to other organisations, as approved by the Executive. Most of those original goals remained, although some were not followed through in 1990s.

A Constitution was written after 1983 and adopted at the 1985 Conference. The aims of the Association were incorporated, as was the decision that membership was open to anyone engaged in industrial relations teaching and research, in a similar mode to the BUIRA membership control. Included in the Constitution were the processes of decision-making and the structure and nature of the Executive. Besides an elected President, the Executive was to comprise Vice-President, Secretary and Conference Convenor, a small Executive committee and such co-opted members as the executive saw fit. The Constitution changed little over the next twenty years until Mark Westcott Secretary- Treasurer from the late 1990s undertook the task of a major redraft in 2003 in order to ensure AIRAANZ met new tax and governance laws.

Thus, from the beginning, effective representation and procedural efficiency were emphasised but with a minimum of formality. The role of the founding members in designing the structures of an organisation is significant. In this respect the impact of the ideas of academics such as John Benson (foundation secretary) and Kevin Hince (later the first Honorary Life Member) in setting up the rules of AIRAANZ should not be under-estimated. The same informality inherent in the initial conference organisation itself remained evident over the next twenty years. Until the turn of the century there were virtually no invited papers after the first Conference and organisers actively attempted to avoid elite sessions. While notions of social collegiality are rarely covered in the literature on disciplines, there is no doubt that such notions can influence disciplinary development. Drawing on some industrial relations literature, it could perhaps be argued that the social interaction at conferences, and patterned behaviour of constructive comment, may generate high trust relations (Fox, 1974). Certainly, where scholars are widely scattered, conferences

substitute for department or faculty cohesiveness, which in turn can generate collaboration or open debate. Such an attribute has not been wholly consistent. For example 'high trust relations' were not evident in the responses to papers such as Drago and Wooden's (1989) neo-liberal analysis, or Nyland's (1987) revisionist Taylorism. Indeed response were only exceeded in what Taylor (1983) had called 'acrimony and ritual bloodletting', by the responses to Nyland's (1990) paper on 'sex differences in industrial relations'. In other words, even in the informal collegial and actively supportive environment, there were implicit but rigid rules which Wooden and Nyland (twice) broke, a reminder that the role of the invisible college should not be under-estimated.

During the 1990s AIRAANZ Conferences became annual instead of biennial. Parallel sessions became the norm as attendance increased and pressures grew for academics to produce more measurable research outcomes. Where the early conferences had fewer than 60 or 70 participants, numbers have frequently been well over 120 since the large conference at Coogee in 1994. While the annual conference remained the central activity of AIRAANZ, the focus and nature of the papers presented at the conference has shifted over the years reflecting a re-broadening of academic industrial relations. By the end of the 1990s the Young Turks early notions of rejecting elitism were weakening as guest speakers were brought in to highlight the strengths of industrial relations research and government requirements led to the streaming of conference papers into refereed and non-refereed strands. At the same time, however, financial and academic support for postgraduate students attending the conference was strengthened, and in general registration fees have been kept at a relatively low level.

Non-conference activities

Although the central activity of AIRAANZ has been the Conference, a number of other activities and initiatives were undertaken from the first to meet the objectives and Constitutional undertakings of AIRAANZ. For example, the AIRAANZ publications have been a major initiative. The Proceedings have been published before or shortly after every conference, and until 1997, there was no attempt at refereeing. Barring a few problems, papers were printed as long as authors submitted them to the Proceedings editor in time and in the right format. The Proceedings has been the first publication for many novice scholars and has encouraged paper-givers generally to present complete papers. That several overseas university libraries subscribe to the Proceedings attests to their acceptance. As noted above the issue of refereeing arose from about 1997 as governments started to send more rigid requirements on academic performance as part of the corporatisation of the higher education sector.

As well, recording IR literature of Australia and New Zealand has been an AIRAANZ enterprise from the first. Volume 1 of the 1987 Proceedings comprised several literature reviews of aspects of Australian and NZ industrial relations, labour law, labour history and employers associations, as well as a general survey of labour process literature. The commissioning of literature surveys had begun from the first Conference, and reflected an awareness that there had been little systematic study of the literature of the discipline. Other bibliographies such as Nyland's on rationalisation of worktime followed in the latter 1980s. As well AIRAANZ has assisted in the publication of indexes of the *Journal of Industrial Relations* (Plowman and Bryce, 1991) and the *New Zealand Journal of Industrial Relations*. (Geare, 1993) By these means AIRAANZ members sought to provide accessible and systematised references for scholars. The Association has also provided some financial assistance to the social science journal, *Labour and Industry* for nearly a decade.

The arrival of the Internet opened up new means for academics to research and to communicate with each other. For industrial relations academics, particularly those outside the larger departments the net offered a means of ready access to current debates and issues. At the 1994 General Meeting, Clive Gilson, then Designate Professor of Strategic Management at the University of Waikato, offered to'set up an e-mail Listserver for AIRAANZ members. This would enable email debates and sharing of information among AIRAANZ members. After some discussion this was agreed to by the meeting'. Since that time prir-l has proven to be a central means of communicating ideas under the steady eye of Webmaster Gilson. Clive Gilson has also developed the AIRAANZ Home Page which provides details of the organisation, conferences and publications. In 1996 in another 'first' for the Association, the entire Proceedings was also put on the Web.

On the other hand the Internet has lessened need and indeed the value of a hard copy directory of members. AIRAANZ published two Directories of AIRAANZ members, although none since 1992. The potential for developing a new directory through the AIRAANZ Home Page may be a possibility. In 1990 another AIRAANZ publication was mooted at the GM. The objectives of the *AIRAANZ Review* were to provide further resources for industrial relations teachers as well as other material not quite appropriate to journals, such as an index of PhD theses in industrial relations, and humorous but helpful guides to getting published.

The Uses of a Scholarly association II

The histories of other academic associations (e.g. Coats, 1993) have revealed the tendency to focus on the changing power relations, the organisation's role as the invisible college or the paradigmatic struggles. It is difficult to find any such issues in AIRAANZ history. Until 1997 at least, elections for executive positions have been mainly non-events. A role or non-role in AIRAANZ seems to have little correlation with academic success, and there has been insufficient basis for a paradigm, much less a paradigmatic dispute. To be sure there are occasional undercurrents, but these seem rest more on geographic location or perhaps, access to funding.

On the other hand the raison d'etre of an academic association is to promote scholarship within a discipline through encouraging communication, to stimulate intellectual debate and in these commodified times, to enhance increased funding for research through lobbying and other tactics. Certainly AIRAANZ has achieved the first of these criteria. The Conferences themselves have been significant in promoting scholarship. This has been particularly important for industrial relations researchers and teachers, appended as many of them are to the margins of other academic units. AIRAANZ Conferences are notable for their collegiality. Of itself collegiality is a valuable attribute which should not be belittled simply because participants enjoy attending the conference. Similarly, the fact that there is a tradition that feedback is constructive rather than captious should not be portrayed as overly kindly or weak - the assumption that destructive feedback leads to rigour does not appear to be founded on logic. Rather, the very provision of a regular and generally non-hierarchical forum which encourages open discussion, sets standards, (albeit mostly tacitly), highlights new issues and provides feedback is a necessary, though not sufficient attribute of any discipline.

In terms of the discipline's content, any overview of the AIRAANZ conferences provides a broad picture of the developments in a scholarly community whose discipline is rural and research is mainly applied. Such an overview of AIRAANZ reveals the discipline, which,

while not deeply committed to theory, method or technique, draws on multiple methodologies in order to investigate complex phenomena in a scholarly process. Industrial relations is rural because, unlike long-time fields such as English literature or economics, the research terrain is not heavily populated, and the field offers a great deal of choice for the researcher. This rurality has even increased in the twenty years since AIRAANZ was formed, because as a discipline that is strongly 'applied' and policy oriented, the major changes in markets, governments and notions of social justice have enabled continuous new opportunities for research, even before older areas have been well-studied.

Also evident in the conduct of conferences and decisions taken by members about conferences over the last twenty-two years has been that the underpinning ideals of the Young Turks in 1983 have been in large part retained. The fluid structure of AIRAANZ and the ways in which changes have evolved out of open debate have ensured that, to a fair degree, the original conception of the association as non-hierarchical and cooperative, rather than competitive organisation. This is remarkable given that the association has increased to well over two hundred members, (including tardy subscribers) in an environment where universities have undergone major changes. Even greater have been the changes to the economic, social and political environment of work management, and the employment relationship, and the language used to describe and evaluate these. That AIRAANZ could develop under what has often been a hostile environment perhaps attests to the organisational efficiency of anarchies. More likely, the cooperative and open environment together with an insistence on proper scholarship and the capacity to return to the broad concerns of scholars of earlier years, have ensured a continuing interest in industrial relations.

The change in the wider environment is apparent in the changing emphases of papers at AIRAANZ Conferences. Three changes are notable. First, while many papers have utilised case studies, the methods used in such studies have changed, drawing, with increasing confidence and effectiveness, on useful concepts and techniques from other disciplines. Secondly, devolution of decision making over matters pertaining to work, management and employment in New Zealand and Australia has tended to lead to more focus on the workplace or enterprise. This is not to say that critical analysis of broader legal, social organisational and economic has disappeared, but there has been an increase in studies on the ways in which the broader environment influences the micro-level. Thirdly, there has been a range of responses to the increasing popularity for HRM. The initial response tended to be defensive and inward looking, but then it seems that scholars simply incorporated those ideas from HRM which could prove useful in analysis or policy-making. Nevertheless it is perhaps surprising that HRM was less of a focus for debate as the 1990s progressed. It may be that those scholars most concerned simply took their questions to other organisations. Certainly, the growth of alternative avenues such as the expanded ANZAM, the revitalised Human Resource Institute (AHRI), and another major association which has centred on both industrial relations research and practice, the International Employment Relations Association, (IERA), have all provided new fora for scholars in Australia and New Zealand who preferred different emphases to those apparent at AIRAANZ.

The Australian approach is different from that in Britain, where 'critical management' has developed and the US where there has been considerable disciplinary fragmentation with many scholars gravitating back to the larger disciplines of economics or management. Within AIRAANZ, the Conference papers reveal an array of views about the IR/HRM issue, from those who claim that vocational disciplines replicate business practice to those who see HRM as one variable within IR.

An allied continuing difficulty for AIRAANZ scholars lies in the fact there is still no clear, shared agreement of precisely what is industrial relations. The breadth of the papers at AIRAANZ Conferences perhaps attests as much to the lack of a shared core of the discipline as it does to a general (and tacit) commitment to social science analysis of the regulation and management of work and employment. There is no doubt also, that other disciplines have claims to theoretical superiority or more theory, even if such theory is the assertion of evident formulae.

Moreover, the focus of much industrial relations research has been on the impact of public policy on employment, but with the borrowing of analytical tools, albeit often with great effect, from other disciplines. Of itself, this need not be problematic. As a 'multidisciplinary' discipline borrowing will always comprise part of industrial relations analysis (Klein, 1990). Nevertheless, in the cold environment where pretensions to 'theory' are widely perceived as fundamental as 'practical relevance', there is still a great vacant space for industrial relations theory. It is arguable that until there is some shared specific understanding of what is the core of industrial relations, it is unlikely that any broad theory can be developed. Perhaps it is time for a pre-paradigm debate?

The intellectual environment for industrial relations goes beyond the academic climate. Public hostility to concepts of equity and social justice, the continuing popularity of management education, where ideals of profit and control predominate, and the pressures for increasing the quantum of publications *inter alia* mean that it is likely that the chill environment will remain, particularly in Australia. In this respect the continued broadening of industrial relations scholarship is a worthwhile response, but again stronger analytical foundations will be needed. All of these tensions point to the necessity for a continuing reassessment of the processes. Identifying and retaining the core attributes and objectives of AIRAANZ will be a challenge.

Conclusion

This brief history set out to identify the foundations and attributes of AIRAANZ over its first two decades or so as an academic association. The investigation of the history of AIRAANZ has revealed discontinuities and stresses, most important of which has been the ever chillier environment for research and analysis in any area defined as industrial relations, underpinned by the changing environment for higher education which have put pressure on what is taught in universities, especially in Australia. However, there have also been continuities, including not only a number of long-standing members, but also cultural continuities such as a commitment to a broad notion of industrial relations and a conference atmosphere best characterised as collegial, non-elitist, and supportive. This perhaps partly explains why a discipline whose star has sometimes waned in recent years has retained members over a long period as well as had many new registrants each year – AIRAANZ has indeed proven to be 'a continuous association ….'.

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