



Southern African Association for Institutional Research

The History of the Southern African Association for Institutional Research

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behalf of the team:

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INTRODUCTION AND CONTEXT

- The Southern African Association for Institutional Research (SAAIR) is 22 years old as an organisation in support of evidence-based research in higher education in Southern Africa.
- As institutional research professionals, it is not only important to keep abreast of developments in the profession but also to contribute to the body of knowledge about the profession through various research studies.
- The authors felt it was important in our Southern African regional context to understand where SAAIR as an organisation has come from.
- Understanding the history of SAAIR paves the way for guiding it towards envisioning its future trajectory.



INTRODUCTION AND CONTEXT

- The **founding organisation** for institutional research in the US (AIR), which is in existence for just over 50 years, has also documented its history (Coughlin & Howard, 2011) lending impetus for the Southern African study.
- This study addresses the **theme of the conference** “Supporting decision-making in Southern African Higher Education” from an **historical perspective**.
- It uses an **historical lens** to understand the history of SAAIR as an organisation in support of decision-making in the Southern African context.



RATIONALE FOR THE STUDY

- There have been **recent efforts** in the US to document the role, function and contribution of institutional research in supporting the development and transformation of higher education (Calderon & Webber, 2015;) and its origins (Reichard, 2012; Coughlin & Howard, 2011) under the auspices of the Association for Institutional Research.
- However, **similar research** has **not** been formally undertaken within the Southern African higher education context.
- There were **various drivers** within the Southern African context which shaped the field of institutional research (e.g. National Plan of Higher Education, 2001), and it was important to **reflect** on these.



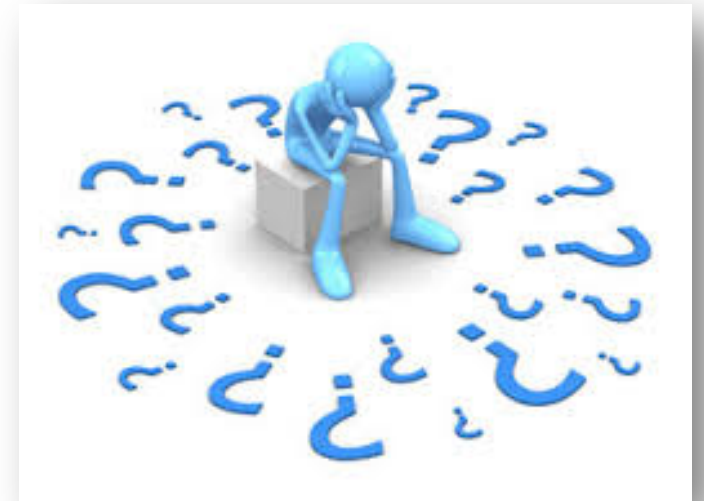
RATIONALE FOR THE STUDY

- It was therefore pertinent, as a **region**, to **document the history of institutional research** over the 21-year period which is also intricately linked with the establishment and functioning of SAAIR.
- It was also important to **highlight the wider implications of the study** for the professional development of institutional research and its organisation in Southern African Higher Education.



RESEARCH QUESTION

What is the history of SAAIR?



OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

- To reflect on the history of SAAIR, in particular:
 - The contextual drivers that led to the establishment of SAAIR and consequently shaped institutional research
 - The registration of SAAIR and its constitution
 - SAAIR's vision and purpose
 - Annual events of SAAIR
 - Past presidents and highlights in each term with a focus on achievements and challenges
 - A profile of membership
 - Governance and financial management
 - International links

This presentation addresses some of the above aspects

RESEARCH APPROACH

- The investigation employed a **case study** research design (Yin, 2009), with SAAIR as an organisation being the unit of analysis.
- Multiple **sources of evidence** were used including documents and reports residing in archives and available data captured by the organisation over time.
- Also included was a **survey** component including both closed ended and open-ended questions, the latter to elicit **narratives** about the organisation.
- Triangulation of results

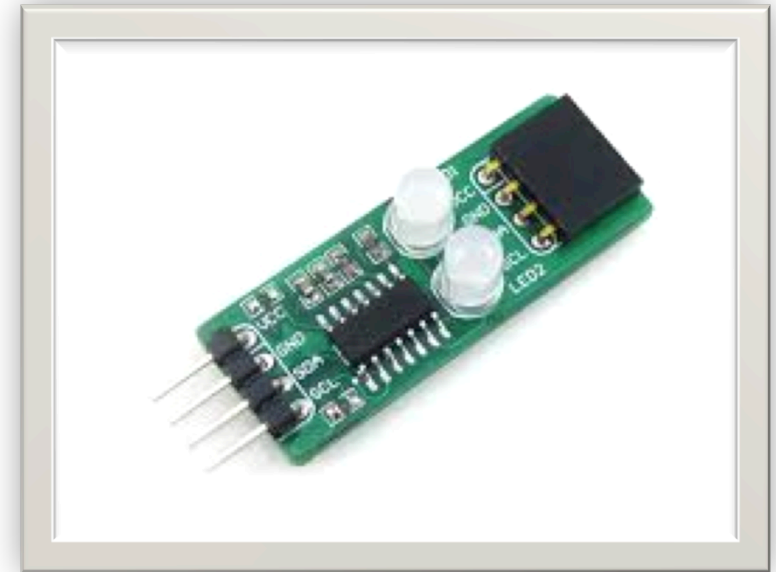


THE HISTORY OF SAAIR



DEVELOPMENT DRIVERS

- International Example
- Government Steering
- Technological Change



ORIGINS OF SAAIR

- ‘International example’
- Attributed by first Chairperson Phil Minnaar to ‘a single idea by a single individual’ – Herman Visser – after returning from an AIR Forum in the US



Early days of SAAIR recalled

BY PHIL MINNAAR

The origin of an organisation can often be traced back to a single idea by a single individual. In the case of SAAIR, that individual was Herman Visser. After returning from an AIR Forum in the USA he suggested the idea of a South African AIR.

Institutional research was in a fledgling phase of development at the various institutions of higher education in South Africa. In most cases separate units were not yet established. Institutional managements were not yet fully aware of the importance of a dedicated unit focusing on the delivery of timeous, dependable and relevant management information, and more in-depth institutional research results for planning and decision making.

There was no platform or forum where ideas on the

the Steering Committee was to do the groundwork for the formation of the South African Association for Institutional Research, which was to take place at a national Forum at some date during 1994.

According to the minutes of the Steering Committee meeting, the first item on the agenda was the approval of the proposed constitution. Herman Visser adapted the constitution of the American AIR for South African circumstances. International affiliation to similar associations overseas was also discussed and it was decided to seek affiliation with AIR.



Phil Minnaar (extreme left) with a group of delegates to the first SAAIR forum in 1994.

discussed at the next meeting. A call for papers must also be finalised."

This first meeting of the Steering Committee of SAAIR laid the foundation for the association. It was decided, among other things, that SAAIR should serve the interests of the whole of Southern Africa. The logo of SAAIR, as designed by Herman Visser, shows the African continent with countries below the equator shaded to reflect those that could belong to SAAIR.

Several committee meetings during 1994, as well as dedicated hard work by the members of the Steering Committee, led to the Inaugural Forum of SAAIR on 17 and 18 November 1994 at the University of South Africa.

The first Forum of SAAIR was an international event. Three international speakers were invited to present keynote

ORIGINS OF SAAIR

- First steering committee meeting held on 29 November 1993
- Decision taken to serve the interests of the whole of Southern Africa
- Inaugural Forum of SAAIR held on 17-18 November 1994, at Unisa



ORIGINS OF SAAIR

- **Steering Committee:**
Phil Minnaar (Unisa), Herman Visser (Unisa), Ian McLean (Univ. of Natal), Marié Oosthuizen (Univ. of Pretoria), Philip Pretorius (Technikon Witwatersrand)
- **First Executive Committee:**
Phil Minnaar (Chairperson), Herman Visser (Treasurer), Marie Oosthuizen (Secretary), Johan Bruwer, Mike Phala, Pieter Vermeulen



EARLY CONTEXT

- **In Phil Minnaar's view:**
 - Institutional Research was in a *'fledgling stage of development'* in higher education in SA
 - Institutional managements were **not yet fully aware** of the importance of dedicated IR units
 - There was **no platform** for sharing ideas on information retrieval, data analysis and presentation
 - Contact between institutions was **ad hoc** and on an **individual basis**



RESEARCH & CAPACITY BUILDING

- At an Exco planning meeting in **1999**, it was agreed to focus on **three strategic areas**:
 - Research and capacity building
 - Recruitment and membership
 - Networking and public relations
 - The latter two areas were subsequently collapsed into ‘Membership and Public Relations’



RESEARCH: RETENTION PROJECT

- Amanda Lourens headed a sub-committee on student retention
 - The project's starting point was a report entitled *'Qualifications Awarded and Retention Statistics at Technikons: 1994-1999'*
 - A survey was sent to all South African institutions to determine what was being done in relation to retention studies
 - The project played a key role in defining terms and advancing our understanding of retention and throughput



CAPACITY BUILDING

- In **February 2002**, the Chairperson wrote to members:
 - ‘I hope to see SAAIR adopt a more service-oriented approach in 2002, going beyond the sharing of ideas, experiences, and best practice at the annual forum, to provide our members with **practical assistance** in improving the quality of institutional information across Southern Africa.’



CAPACITY BUILDING

- Capacity building, or professional development, became a **core focus** of the SAAIR Exco from **2002**
- Three members of AIR attended the joint conference of **SAAIR and SAARDHE** held at Peninsula Technikon in 2002
 - Gerry McLaughlin, Josetta McLaughlin, Mary Ann Coughlin





THE FIRST INSTITUTES 2004



- SAAIR's first Institute was the **HEMIS Institute**, 3-4 May 2004 at Unisa - focus was mainly training. Ian McLean played a leading role to establish this event.
- The first **Institutional Research Institutes** were modelled on the US example and were held at Pentech, 15-24 June 2014
 - Developing and Applying Institutional Research Skills within the context of the Institution and National Data Needs
 - Developing and Applying Institutional Research Skills focusing on Academic and Financial Issues

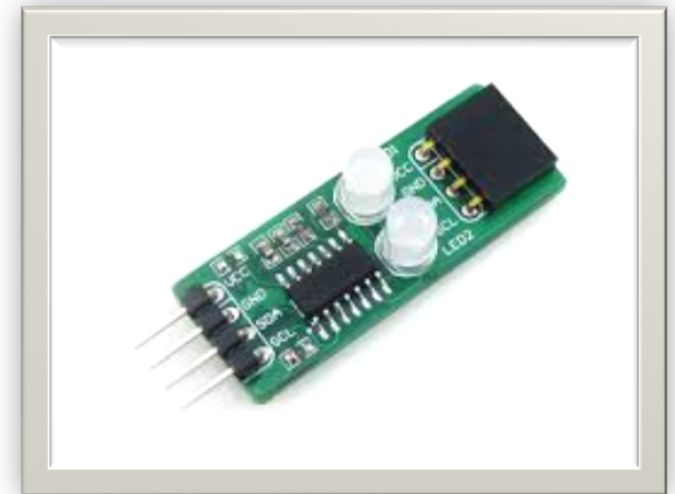
THE FIRST INSTITUTES



- With the assistance of Terry Russell, previous Executive Director of AIR, funding was obtained from the National Science Foundation in the US for a ‘**train the trainer**’ initiative for the Institutional Research Institutes
- The original plan was for multiple workshops over three years, in multiple locations within the region; but available funding restricted the initiative to **two Institutes**, at one place and time

INSTITUTE DRIVERS

- There were **three main driving forces** behind the introduction of SAAIR's Institutes:
 - International Example
 - Government Steering
 - Local Example



INTERNATIONAL EXAMPLE



- In **June of 2003**, the Chairperson was invited by AIR to attend its annual **Data Policy Institute** in Washington DC
 - This was a two-week training programme focused on the **use of higher education databases** maintained by the Federal Government
 - He later reported to the **2003 Forum in Bloemfontein**:
 - ‘This networking opportunity left me with a strong sense that SAAIR should try to do more to develop a sense of professional identity among the institutional researchers in the Southern African region.’

INTERNATIONAL EXAMPLE



- The wealth of information made available by **IPEDS** (the main focus of AIR's Data Policy Institute) provided a model for the sharing of South Africa's HEMIS data.
- Information on all of the country's public Universities, as audited and submitted to the DHET via the HEMIS reporting system, is now **freely available** via the Web,
 - E.g. on the **Peer Data Sharing** site maintained by IDSC in Potchefstroom and by CHET (the Centre for Higher Education Transformation) in Cape Town.

INTERNATIONAL EXAMPLE



- Dr Raj Sharma of **SEAIR**, a keynote speaker at the **2003 Forum**, made the following observations:
 - Institutional researchers need to be more versatile in the application of their knowledge and skills, as well as engaging in lifelong learning.
 - Institutional Research offices are required to devote an increasing proportion of their time to functions and activities related to the greater efficiency and effectiveness of their institutions.
 - Globalisation of Higher Education requires greater co-operation between international Institutional Research organisations including AIR, European AIR, Australasian Air, Southern African AIR and the baby of the Institutional Research family, namely, South East Asian AIR.

GOVERNMENT STEERING

- SAAIR's first HEMIS Institute was 'aimed at improving the reporting by South African institutions to the Department of Education by enhancing the skills and confidence of staff members who contribute to the HEMIS submission'
- In the Institute Outline, it was stated: 'The Institute starts from the new Funding Formula, and then takes participants through the various data elements contributing to the institutional submission to the Department of Education.'



LOCAL EXAMPLE

- The local example on which SAAIR could draw was a 'best practice' workshop conducted by ITS (Integrated Tertiary Software), suppliers of operational software to many of the country's Universities and Colleges

EXAMPLE MAY NOT BE ENOUGH

- In two areas of professional development, SAAIR has not yet succeeded in emulating more developed Associations:
 - A peer-reviewed journal
 - An academic qualification for Institutional Researchers



SAAIR Chairpersons/Presidents



Mr/Dr Phil Minnaar † (1994/1995, 1995/1996)

Prof Pieter Vermeulen (1996/1997)

Mr Ian McLean † (1997/1998)

Dr/Prof Amanda Lourens (1998/1999, 1999/2000)

Dr Cay van der Merwe (2000/2001)

Mr David Bleazard (2001/2002, 2002/2003, 2003/2004, 2004/2005)

Dr Sukude Matoti (2005/2006)

Mr Glen Barnes (2006/2007, 2007/2008)

Prof Jan Botha (2008/2009, 2009/2010, 2010/2011, 2011/2012)

Ms Nicolene Murdoch (2012/2013, 2013/2014, 2014/2015)

SOME RESULTS FROM THE SURVEY



SURVEY

- The **target sample** for the survey included:
 - ☐ Past SAAIR **Presidents**
 - ☐ Stakeholders from key organisations **within** SA who were involved in SAAIR or had experience of SAAIR through their interactions or engagements.
 - ☐ Stakeholders from key organisations **external to SA** who were involved in SAAIR or had experience of SAAIR through their interactions or engagements.
- Sampling approach was therefore **purposive**.



SURVEY PARTICIPATION

- The survey questionnaire was sent to 22 individuals from a range of organisations
- Elicited 12 responses from various respondents who were associated with SAAIR as follows:

| Respondent Type | No |
|---|----|
| SAAIR Presidents | 4 |
| SA Stakeholders (DHET, CHE) | 2 |
| External International Stakeholders (AIR, EAIR) | 5 |
| Long standing SAAIR Participants | 1 |
| Total | 12 |

*55%
Response
Rate*

SOME RESULTS FROM THE SURVEY

The current presentation will speak to just **some aspects** of the study in responding to the research question:

From Past Presidents and Others:

- *Achievements of SAAIR*
- *Internal challenges experienced by SAAIR*
- *Drivers that shaped IR/the agenda of SAAIR*
- *Responsiveness of IR units*
- *Benchmarking of SAAIR*
- *Opportunities for supporting evidence-based decision support into the future*



ACHIEVEMENTS OF SAAIR



According to SAAIR Presidents:

1999 and 2000

- 'The development of IR capacity in terms of research skills, MI skills and writing skills within HEIs via training sessions'
- 'Expanding regional awareness of SAAIR. Valuable input was provided at various strategic platforms such as ECCHEA (The Eastern Cape Council for Higher Education Associations) and ICOTS (The International Conference on Teaching Statistics)'
- 'Establishment of an information database of expertise in IR'
- 'Activities of SAAIR were published in internal publications of institutions'

ACHIEVEMENTS OF SAAIR



According to SAAIR Presidents:

2006-2008

- 'Focus was on quality of contributions to the Forum in terms of content, relevance, presentation and impact of contributions'
- 'Another area of effort was to increase the geographical representation of members to ensure the association maintained an international flavour'

2009-2012

- 'Making AIR's Data and Decisions Courses available to SAAIR members' and graduating the first cohort of 20 participants in 2011'
- 'Beginning a process to enhance and professionalise the governance and management of SAAIR, developing a document outlining the principles, creating a SAAIR Administrator/Coordinator Post.....'

ACHIEVEMENTS OF SAAIR



According to **External International Stakeholders:**

- 'It provides opportunities for professional development of its members, a voice for standards and ethics in dealing with governmental bodies and encourages high standards among its members'
- It provides a venue for sharing ideas, practices and challenges that practitioners face in providing evidence-based decision support at their institutions'
- 'SAAIR has been an active and growing organisation for the past 20 years – this has occurred because of institutional support to send IR professionals to your meetings and workshops. This has to have had an impact across the country on the quality of data and reporting and the overall understanding of HE in SA'

CHALLENGES EXPERIENCED BY SAAIR



According to SAAIR Presidents:

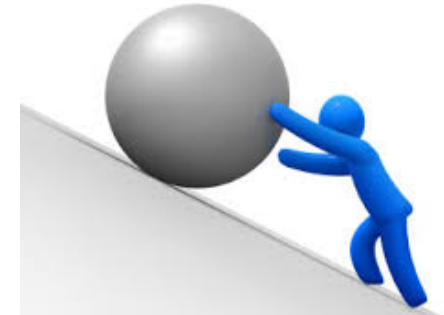
1999 and 2000

- 'Increase in membership, making SAAIR activities more visible and soliciting funding for SAAIR projects
 - 'Dedicated staff member provided significant support to the SAAIR EXCO'

2006-2008

- 'Capacity in the EXCO, and the membership to deliver quality events and to offer continuity over time.
 - 'Initiatives were to rekindle lost relationships with key institutions and members, to re-establish the reputation of the organisation and to attempt to place it back on the national and international agenda'
 - 'Communication had a strong agenda presence and we successfully maintained the SAAIR newsletter'
 - 'Launch of the Quality Institute'

CHALLENGES EXPERIENCED BY SAAIR



According to SAAIR Presidents:

2009-2012

- ‘Much improvement in quality of SAAIR services and activities with the appointment of the Administrator/Coordinator, but the voluntary basis of the involvement of EXCO members (all very busy people, doing the SAAIR work in their free time) remains a challenge’
- ‘Not meeting deadlines (e.g. for paper submissions, finalising SAAIR programmes, finalising conference and institute arrangements, etc)’
- ‘Despite repeated and continuous efforts, we do not succeed in active participation of colleagues from other countries other than SA (only limited involvement from Botswana and Namibia)’

DRIVERS SHAPING IR/AGENDA OF SAAIR

According to SAAIR Presidents:

1999 and 2000

The following influenced the annual focus on the Forum:

- 'The proposed changes of the HE landscape – discussion regarding transformation and the review of higher education'
- 'A strong focus on the submission of three-year rolling plans to the Department of Education (at the time)'
- 'The impact of the proposed changes to the funding formula, as the new funding framework was introduced in 2004 but discussions started in 2000'

2006-2008

- 'Reputational driver – this shaped the agenda in that at that time the reputation of SAAIR was not high and interest in the work of SAAIR was on the decline'

DRIVERS SHAPING IR/AGENDA OF SAAIR

According to SAAIR Presidents:

2006-2008

- 'Financial driver – a concerted effort to offer value for money events was high on the agenda and this together with the first one framed the arrangements of the events'
- 'Visibility driver – the association needed to become more visible and offer something to the membership. The newsletter was an attempt to give effect to this'

2009-2012

- To provide better quality capacity development opportunities
- To provide more learning opportunities at a foundational level
- To provide online capacity development opportunities
- Higher levels of international involvement and cooperation

RESPONSIVENESS OF IR

*Within HE institutions at the time (public and private), how **responsive** would you say that IR offices/units/departments were to the needs and/or demands of the HE sector?*

| Response category | No of SAAIR Presidents |
|--------------------|------------------------|
| Not at all | - |
| Very little | - |
| Somewhat | 1 |
| Quite a bit | 3 |
| To a great extent | - |

BENCHMARKING SAAIR

Rate your *level of agreement* with the following statement:
SAAIR has to make significant improvements to reach the same level of performance to similar international organisations

| Response category | SAAIR Presidents (4) | SA Stakeholders (3) | External International Stakeholders (5) |
|----------------------------|----------------------|---------------------|---|
| Strongly disagree | - | - | 1 |
| Disagree | 2 | 1 | 1 |
| Neither agree nor disagree | - | 2 | 3 |
| Agree | 2 | - | - |
| Strongly Agree | - | - | - |

BENCHMARKING SAAIR

Strongly disagree/disagree

SAAIR President

'I have attended many similar events in other countries and think we offer an equal experience and I think we arrange very successful events. Our challenge will be in further participation in an area with an already limited audience in Southern Africa'

External International Stakeholder

'I think they are actually more advanced than AIR at this time'

Agree

SAAIR President

'The only reason I agree with the statement is in relation to research publications and studies.....for example consider the New Directions for Institutional Research by AIR....'

OPPORTUNITIES FOR SUPPORTING EVIDENCE-BASED DECISION MAKING INTO THE FUTURE

SAAIR Presidents

‘SAAIR needs to pull its key members into groups – what about Special Interest Groups?’

‘Professionalise, professionalise, professionalise’

‘Proper curriculum development of courses/institutes’

‘The movement into learning analytics and collaboration with a number of similar organisations is crucial to the survival and progress of the association’

External International Stakeholders

‘Creating stronger connections and communications among SAAIR members, other SA region colleagues and international colleagues involved in IR and related professions

CONCLUDING REMARKS

- This presentation touched on some of the findings of a much broader study on the history of SAAIR
- Multiple sources of data were used
- The detailed feedback from the survey provided many useful insights

IMPLICATIONS

- Provides us with an opportunity as HE institutional researchers to research our profession and make a scholarly contribution in this regard
- Adding to the body of knowledge about our association and our profession may put us on a path towards formal professionalisation – a ‘discipline’ within the higher education management space

