
From the President

Jim Watterston FACEL



Where to from here...

I feel very proud of the ACEL Board, staff, members and particularly our CEO for their collaborative efforts over the past few difficult years. It was only a short time ago that we engaged legal and financial experts to provide us with assurance that, as an organisation, we were not trading insolvently as we worked our way through ensuring a sustainable future for this very important professional association. In an extremely tight and resource constrained environment and at a time when our members are rightly questioning the value they get from their membership, for the past financial year ACEL has arguably, from a financial point of view at least, had one of its most successful years since our inception. Not only did we make a net profit of over \$450,000 dollars but we also relocated our national office to Sydney, had stability and collaboration in relation to national Board membership and we set about designing a relevant and guaranteed future for the organisation. We now have retained earnings of around \$700,000, which provides us with breathing space and places us in a positive position to plan more thoroughly for further growth. The financial turnaround for ACEL, in some ways, is analogous to a small rural school with the lowest ICSEA topping the NAPLAN results for the nation!

As we know however, amazing school turnarounds do not always endure if those elements that drove the change are not sustained. Collaborative leadership, well developed staff, stakeholder commitment and high quality service delivery that is underpinned by rigorous accountability must be in place to ensure that gains are not lost or squandered. So it is with ACEL. During this break in the clouds, and while the sun is shining, we must decide collectively what we want from this unique organisation and then put the foundations in place to ensure that we best serve the education profession but don't lose sight again of what is required to keep us buoyant and thriving.

As Charles Darwin pointed out, the secret to survival is not about being the strongest, it is about being able to adapt within a changing landscape. I, therefore, write to challenge our membership at this moment because I was part of a similar experience about a decade ago where I was the chair of a not-for-profit organisation that managed to galvanise its members, board and the general public at large to contribute to a similar rapid and quite amazing turnaround. Despite the rescue and apparent sustainability this organisation now finds itself again beset with a large deficit and an uncertain future. It is a very sad story that primarily came about because the corporate memory and governance structures were not 'built to last' so as to enable new staff and board members

to understand past mistakes and to mitigate future risks in order to insulate the organisation from self-harm. As I begin to think about my departure from the ACEL Presidency I am in deep discussions with our Board and stakeholders to ensure our past mistakes are also not repeated.

As we all know, it is hard, if not impossible, to guarantee the future of any organisation as times change due to the economic climate, rapid internationalisation, shifting consumer demands, the impact of technology and a range of other factors. To set ACEL up for sustainability and to prevent future Boards having to launch similar 'rescue missions' we need to decide what we want the organisation to provide and what it stands for. We need to enshrine the values that underpin the organisation and we need to professionalise the business side of the operation to ensure that risk is well managed and resources are wisely invested to enable us to focus on improving lives for students. To that end, we are currently putting the finishing touches on our next ACEL Strategic Plan which will, hopefully, provide consolidation for us as we move into a better business model to support our work.

We need, however, to continually improve our governance and we will therefore be asking members to vote on a constitutional change at our AGM in Canberra in October where we will be seeking to slightly alter our Board composition in order to help prevent past problems that contributed to our challenging existence. At present our Board is made up of the eight elected State and Territory Presidents, two Member Elected Directors and three Independent Directors (of which one is the National President) for a total of 13 members. Current Board members unanimously endorse the proposed changes, which will seek to transition our two Member-Elected Board members into four Independent Director positions. This will mean a 12-person Board instead of the current 13 and it will also enable the Board to appoint Independent Members who can provide the required expertise to enhance the education skills brought to the table from the elected members. Having legal, financial, governance, business, project management, human resource or a myriad of other specific skills will be important for independence and growth of ACEL as we move forward.

I would ask that you not only consider and support the above-noted changes but that you also contribute to the wider discussion about how we can build a strong business that supports and sustains our efforts to improve education and the leadership of the profession when it is needed more than ever. If a vibrant, energetic and influential ACEL did not exist going forward we would all be disadvantaged and without a cross-sectoral and united voice. We have a lot to do and it is later than you think!