

Final report

2015 SAA(NZ) Conference Organising Committee

University of Waikato

The 2015 SAA(NZ) annual conference was held on the Waikato campus, December 9-11. The university has introduced new policies for hosting conferences on campus and we were obliged to use the university's accounting system. The advantages include discounts on the room and A/V hire, but the main disadvantage is that we had no direct access to the accounts. This meant that we relied on the good will of our department administrator to process all payments and even she had no access to check the balance at any point. The system was clunky, to say the least and we are very grateful to Bev for her perseverance. It also meant that we were travelling blind for much of the time, but that probably made us very cautious about how much we were spending.

In the course of organising the conference, we dealt with more than 1200 incoming emails and we received 49 student registrations and 59 full registrations, mostly for the full conference, though there were a few day registrations. For quite some time, student registrations were significantly higher than full registrations and since student fees don't cover costs, we needed sufficient full registrations to break even. A nail-biting wait, but they came in the end, with quite a few registering at the conference itself. Ultimately, we made a significant profit – our intention was to avoid a deficit!

We feel the conference went well and have received very positive feedback. Our student helpers (both graduate and undergraduate) were superb! They were invaluable in the last few weeks prior to the conference, but really shone during the conference itself – obliging, personable, and unfailingly enthusiastic. Together with the student delegates who attended the conference, they give us good cause to celebrate Sociology's future.

Our approach in terms of speakers was to believe in us. NZ sociology has much to be proud of and our theme suggested that we should look to our local communities for guest speakers. The exception was of course, Michael Flood, who was hosted by the Gender and Sexualities stream. While we shared in the costs of bringing Michael to the conference, overall our costs for guest speakers were modest because airfares were national, rather than international and accommodation was not required at all for the very local speakers. Not all conference themes will lend themselves to this approach, but we do think that it would be a mistake to assume that international speakers are essential.

The other major cost is catering and we followed Canterbury's lead with this. We catered fully on the middle day, but lunch was not provided on the first and third days, which is a significant saving. Delegates could purchase food from a range of options on campus. On the other hand, the barbecue on the first night was free for delegates, but did not involve excessive expense for the conference accounts.

As well as relying mostly on local speakers, we were particularly pleased with a couple of related innovations – making relevant keynote addresses open to the public and taking koha for the benefit of community organisations at these events. Additionally, throughout the conference, delegates donated food items and Christmas gifts for distribution through a local charitable organisation. The public events were very well-attended, especially Max

Rashbrooke's because of the later time slot, and this provided a valuable opportunity for community engagement. (We did engage in a little (free) publicity via campus newsletters, community networks and on the local community radio station, which may have helped with attendance.) We were ultimately able to donate around \$300 each to Poverty Action Waikato and to Women's Refuge, who also received two large baskets of donated food and gifts.

In retrospect, there are a couple of things we would do better. We needed to liaise more closely with the caterers as there were a couple of misunderstandings along the way – butter for your scones, but no knives! We also wish there was another way to do the conference dinner. They tend to be expensive for what you get. It's not that the food was bad, it was just very ordinary. The following week, one of the campus cafes catered the end of year TEU function. It was held in/around Oranga, was (we're reliably informed) a very nice barbecue with a choice of meats and salads, along with dessert and significantly cheaper than what we paid. No liquor licence however, so we don't really know how to make the dinner better.

We'd also do the recording a little differently if given the chance again. Some speakers wander about more than others and it would have been better to get them to wear a microphone. I'm not sure how this would affect the amplifier that the speakers wore for the benefit of our deaf delegate, but there must be a way to make it work. And more attention to detail during the recordings. At this point we're not sure how much can be tidied up through editing, but some speakers had an ugly screen behind them if they didn't have a PPT.

The challenge remaining is to continue to foster the spirit of sociology, to nurture our ongoing commitment to change the world, no matter how big or small the change. Conference delegates brought us their stories of change and SAA(NZ) does much to support the next generation of sociologists. We are in good heart.