Disaster Planning For Universities: The Advantages Of Co-Operative Effort

Geoffrey Down

Australia is a country of harsh climatic conditions, but its recorded history has been remarkably free of internal armed conflict. Of its principal cities, only Darwin has felt the violence of heavy attack from a foreign enemy. The continent is not situated in an active volcanic region. There are nevertheless natural hazards to contend with, such as tropical cyclones in the northern parts of the continent, and bushfires in the south. Occasionally these natural hazards have resulted in catastrophic damage. Two events in the recent past have had this outcome: Cyclone Tracy, which destroyed the city of Darwin at Christmas in 1974, and the Ash Wednesday bushfires, a series of fires which burned for several days in the summer of 1983, over a front stretching as much as 1,000km in length across the states of Victoria and South Australia, causing massive devastation of property, livestock and wildlife. But such events have always been regarded by the community as occasional incidents, and generally accepted as part of the fabric of life in Australia.

The common perception of the absence of immediate threat has resulted in a kind of apathy, a reluctance by political leaders, government officials, public and private administrators at all levels - local, regional, state and federal - to give risk management and disaster preparedness the serious consideration they warrant. Disaster planning and risk management have therefore evolved in Australia in a pragmatic way from the bottom up, and have not imposed hierarchically from the top down. In the case of threat to life and property from fire and flood, organisations such as the Country Fire Authority (CFA) and the State Emergency Service (SES) have evolved upwards, turning from local community groups into large and effective government or semi-government authorities. In Melbourne, the Metropolitan Fire Brigade was created by the amalgamation of several private fire brigades set up in the nineteenth century by local insurance companies, and its principal revenue base remains a levy imposed on property insurance policies. With regard to heritage and cultural property, issues such as disaster planning, risk management, materials retrieval and salvage have been driven by librarians, historians, archivists, conservators, art gallery and museum staff, not by government ministers, civil service bureaucrats, boards of directors, chief executives or managers.

A number of co-operative groups and organisations have formed among museum and library professionals, to promote the concepts of risk management and hazard mitigation, to formulate disaster recovery plans, and to organize disaster recovery and salvage training programs.

In Melbourne and regional Victoria, one of the most important of these has been the group known as Co-operative Action by Victorian Academic Libraries (CAVAL), originally formed to facilitate resource sharing among academic and research libraries. Since 1989, CAVAL has organized regular training exercises in disaster recovery. The first of these was called Lessons from Leningrad, after the disastrous fire in the library of the St Petersburg Academy of Sciences. It was held at the Waurn Ponds campus of Deakin University, and consisted of briefing and
information sessions, then the main salvage exercise, followed by debriefing and
assessment. Similar exercises were conducted in 1993 at Ballarat and in 1995 at
Mooroolbark. With the completion of the CAVAL headquarters at Bundoora, a
special facility is now permanently available for these exercises, which are held at
least once a year. Emphasis is placed on practical issues and physical work, with
participants sent into a darkened, flooded area to retrieve a range of damaged
material, including books, periodicals, audio/videotape, CDs, microfilm/fiche and
floppy disks. The retrieved material is sorted and recorded. Participants are
required to prioritize and stream material, decide on appropriate treatment, and
construct facilities for packing and drying. They are left, under the supervision of
qualified assessors, to organize teams and to evolve command structures and
communication links suitable for the situation. Those attending these courses have
come from a wide range of institutions across the state of Victoria, from other
states of Australia, and as far afield as New Zealand and Hong Kong. In this way
library, museum and archives staff have been able to return to their respective
organisations and institutions armed with hands-on experience of disaster planning
and recovery.

CAVAL also offered courses in disaster recovery and risk management issues for
senior administrators. The response to these courses was disappointing; they
attracted nowhere near the level of interest as did the disaster recovery training
exercises. This has reinforced the impression of the reluctance to address the
issues, which has been found at the highest levels of administration.

However, in the span of just over nine years a number of disastrous natural events
have occurred, and this seems to have led to a perceptible change of attitude
amongst administrators. Three in particular captured the public imagination. The
first of these was an earthquake which struck the city of Newcastle NSW in 1989:
though measuring only 5.6 on the Richter scale, it was the most destructive natural
event to have occurred in Australia since European settlement. The second was a
severe flood which inundated the town of Katherine NT in January 1998, when
the Katherine River rose to record levels in the wake of a tropical cyclone. The
third event was a torrential hailstorm which struck the suburbs of Sydney in April
1998 and caused losses estimated at Au$1.5 billion through damage to buildings
and motor vehicles. This made it the most costly natural disaster in Australia up
to that time.

As a consequence of these and other events, insurance companies re-evaluated their
stance in relation to large potential losses. Whilst suburban dwelling houses and
everyday automobiles may not normally be considered as cultural heritage, the
increasing frequency of calamitous events has meant that insurers are now much
more wary of exposing themselves to high levels of risk. Consequently,
organisations and institutions, including those which own and keep cultural
property, have been obliged to develop risk management strategies and hazard
mitigation measures in order to comply with the requirements of the insurance
industry. This has produced beneficial effects for the provision of plans for the
safeguarding of national heritage. The University of Melbourne, for example, has
had to become a self-insurer, and must carry its own losses. This has been a
powerful incentive for senior administrators to demand that schools and
departments of the University take steps to minimize hazards not only for staff and
students, but also property (cultural and otherwise) in the areas under their control.

Another pathway to the development of risk management strategies has been
through the Council of Australian University Museums and Collections. CAUMAC, like so
many other heritage organisations, began as a group of concerned individuals, university staff who had become alarmed at the
deteriorating state of their collections, which neither federal nor state governments
were prepared to support. CAUMAC quickly grew into a national body with a
powerful voice, which impressed upon administrators of universities and colleges
the need to take their responsibilities towards the keeping of cultural property and heritage material more seriously. As a result, the Australian Vice-Chancellors' Committee commissioned a review of university museums and collections. The report of the review committee, titled *Cinderella Collections*, appeared in 1996. It pointed out that more than one quarter of Australia’s cultural heritage, including such diverse material as art objects, geological specimens, medical specimens, ethnographic collections, machinery and scientific instruments, lies in the hands of universities and colleges throughout the country. It also drew attention to the fact that most of this heritage material was in jeopardy, often stored in poor conditions, with part-time or no curatorial supervision, and little access to conservation. The report made a number of recommendations, mainly concerned with issues of preservation and conservation, and many of these have already been acted upon. CAUMAC is now incorporated as a Special Interest Group within *Museums Australia Inc*.

At the University of Melbourne, the disaster recovery plan for the Library had been under development for almost a decade, but in 1999 it was brought to completion as a result of co-operative action with CAVAL, spurred by the stimulus of the *Cinderella Collections* report. It has been modelled from a manual supplied by CAVAL on disk. The CAVAL disaster planning manual was itself devised by a working group, based on the *Planning Manual for Disaster Control in Scottish Libraries & Record Offices*. The National Library of Scotland readily gave permission for their manual to be used and modified, and this offers a good example of international co-operative effort. In turn, the idea of modifying the model was passed on through the CAVAL manual, and so it was modified to suit the needs of the University of Melbourne Library. This library system consists of a central library (the Baillieu Library) and more than twenty satellite libraries, located both on the main campus and in regional centres elsewhere in the state. It therefore presented a series of complex problems for anyone trying to cover all eventualities across such a dispersed system. But the adaptable model provided the flexibility needed to deal with this situation. The plan was road-tested at a CAVAL disaster recovery training exercise in July 1999, and is now in its final form. Using this plan as a basis, the staff of the Ian Potter Conservation Centre within the University have begun to prepare a campus-wide plan for the recovery of damaged cultural material. Similar plans and policies are being developed at other universities and colleges throughout the region, following the CAVAL model.

The experience of having to create disaster plans and risk management policies at grass-roots level has proven the value of co-operative action. The evolution of the disaster plan at the University of Melbourne Library had been a slow and difficult one because of the complexity of having to deal with numerous sites and a wide variety of local conditions. The ability to derive the plan from a prepared template greatly hastened and simplified the process. Its completion is the result of three major factors:

- the feasibility of co-operation between staff in various libraries and museums who share common goals. This is not only true of co-operative organisations like CAVAL, but it works also at an international level,
- the influence of CAUMAC, a group which was formed to work and speak co-operatively to improve the lot of heritage collections in universities and colleges,
- the beneficial flow-on effects from the insurance industry as a result of a number of serious disasters in other parts of the country.

This confluence of circumstances, mostly deliberate but partly serendipitous, energized disaster planning and risk management, and aroused the interest and support of administrators. Disaster planning is no longer seen as a fringe task to be assigned to some ad-hoc committee or "miscellaneous services unit", but has become a mainstream administrative activity. Even though the shortage of funds for education, and especially tertiary education, has sadly become a fixture in the
Australian economic landscape, such planning does not necessarily involve the expenditure of large amounts of money. The process, once started, should now be encouraged to go forward, to spread from university libraries and archives to museums and art galleries, historical societies, and other organisations with responsibility for cultural property and heritage material. Only if this type of cooperative effort continues can the survival of this important part of Australia's patrimony be ensured.