Australian Futures: The Swinburne Foresight Program

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Introduction

Humans have been interested in the future since the beginning of time. People have been obsessed with knowing what will happen, and find the unknown uncomfortable. In times of great uncertainty people have turned to fortune-tellers, astrologers, and oracles to try to get answers. We are soothed in the short term by the false sense of security such people provide. We love stories of time travelers who can go back and forth in time, able to change future events by changing decisions in the past or present.

At this point, we do not have any way of seeing the future, of knowing what will happen, or of making the unknown known. Despite this, there are people who make good money offering predictions and forecasts about the future. Very few people are trained to think intelligently and usefully about the future and to apply that thinking in practical ways. In a radio broadcast in 1932, HG Wells noted that people tend to let the future "happen to us." He suggested a need for professors of foresight to help us "anticipate and prepare for the consequences" of new inventions and other actions. Since that time, various efforts have been made to introduce Futures Studies in academia, including the establishment in 1999 of the Australian Foresight Institute (AFI) at Swinburne University of Technology (SUT) in Melbourne, Australia. The AFI's aims include supporting the emergence of a new generation of foresight practitioners and carrying out original research in order to address the issues described by Wells.

This paper tells the story of the establishment and development of a formal Futures Studies program at SUT and explores whether its aims were met. This story has been told by others.² This paper offers a fresh perspective—that of a member of the "new generation of foresight practitioners" trying to make foresight work in the real world. With the closure of Swinburne's Master of Strategic Foresight (MSF) program in 2018, it seems we have taken a backwards step from HG Wells' call to action. This paper has implications for those interested in continuing the tradition of Futures Studies education and asks: "What does the future hold for the education of the next new generation of foresight practitioners?" Surely they are still needed.

Onto the boat

I was fortunate to be in the last intake of the MSF. I had worked as a psychologist for many years, then took on leadership and strategy roles in the community health sector. I returned with fresh focus to the workforce after having children, but I was feeling lost professionally. I didn't want to take my psychology career further, but I didn't like the look of senior management roles either. I became an explorer, and went to a postgraduate studies information session at the Melbourne Town Hall. All the major universities (except one) were represented there. I was immediately met by a smiling woman from a leading university with long, flowing hair and a business suit. She started to talk at me about her wonderful course and showed me her glossy MBA brochure. I remember thinking, "There must be more than this." As I walked around the hall, I found more of the same. Drained and disheartened, I started to give up and went to leave. As I walked past the Swinburne stall I ended up having a conversation with the convener of the MBA, who made me curious when he mentioned

"strategic foresight." On his advice, I rang Peter Hayward and we arranged to meet. I remember Peter described the MSF as, "If the MBA is over here...," gesturing in front of himself (business suit, flowy hair, glossy brochure), "...the MSF is over here"—turning 180 degrees. I still didn't know what it was, but I knew I needed to sign up. I made it onto the boat.

This kind of story is not unusual. When our class did its final clearing at the end of 2016, the stories of coming to the program were very similar. Meeting strangers in registration queues and, based on that quick conversation, being internally compelled to sign up, and clambering onto the boat. We all said that this course had changed our lives, it was transformational, it changed how we understood the world.

The future can only be seen through the lens of the past, so it is worth recapping the history of formal Futures Studies at Swinburne through combining the work of Slaughter and Hayward, Voros and Morrow, and adding some details of what happened next. Hopefully some lessons will emerge that might give insight into possibilities for future Futures Studies education.

Chrysalis

While people have been interested in "the future," and in making predictions about it going back at least hundreds of years, strategic foresight and Futures Studies have only relatively recently emerged as a legitimate professional field and academic discipline. As part of the professionalization of the field, key professional bodies were established in the 1960s and 1970s. University courses in Futures Studies began to emerge in the 1970s. Some of the earliest academic courses still exist today, such as the University of Houston graduate program in Studies of the Future (now Foresight), established in 1974, and the Hawaii Research Centre for Future Studies in 1971. Since then, there has been a proliferation of formal Futures Studies programs both internationally and in Australia, some successful, some less so. Development of the *Knowledge Base of Futures Studies* (KBFS) in the 1990s made a significant contribution to the legitimation of the Futures Studies field.

In the 1980s in Australia, at a government level there was a growing understanding that futures thinking was needed. The Labor Government established the Commission for the Future (CFF) in 1985 as "an entity to encourage the public to have a say about the use of science and technology in building the future." Unfortunately, the CFF was not designed as a true futures or foresight organization. In 1996 it was privatized and ultimately was closed in 1998. At about this time, the Vice Chancellor of SUT started to think about Futures Studies. Adolph Hanich, a consultant to the university, and Richard Slaughter, who had been working with Hanich to design strategy/foresight workshops for a local management college, were invited to put forward a proposal for a feasibility study. In September 1998 the Vice Chancellor accepted the proposal and wished to proceed.

The feasibility study focused on how an institute for Futures Studies and applied foresight might be established. The resulting recommendation was for an institute that would offer postgraduate qualifications centered on the concept of strategic foresight, as well as carrying out original research. In February 1999, Slaughter was offered a Professorial Fellowship to set up the Australian Foresight Institute (AFI). Accreditation of the program was granted with the full support of the Vice Chancellor in September 2000, and classes commenced in the Master of Science (Strategic Foresight) in February 2001.

Terra Firma

The Australian Foresight Institute took an applied approach to Futures Studies in an attempt to balance theory, tools, and applications. In this spirit, the AFI deliberately chose to focus on Strategic Foresight rather than Futures Studies as it was felt that "people did not understand what Futures Studies was all about." This focus meant that the program "could be distinguished from more academic approaches to futures enquiry and concentrate on practice, or implementation." The AFI had its own external Board of Directors which provided access to high-quality expertise from outside the university. For example, Barry Jones, who had set up the CFF, agreed to be a patron.

The core purposes of the AFI were:

- 1. To understand and help create social foresight in Australia
- 2. To support the emergence of a new generation of foresight practitioners
- 3. To develop and run successful world-class courses
- 4. To carry out original research, with a special focus on methodological renewal in Futures Studies and applied foresight
- 5. To be a global resource center and exemplar for the above work
- 6. To gain financial independence

In two specific ways, the AFI had a new take on what futures enquiry and practice were all about. The first was a focus on linking foresight to strategy, with the view that "foresight refreshes strategy." Foresight was therefore seen as a "fusion of futures methods with those of strategic management." It was intended to have real-world applications in a wide range of organizations and to help organizations face the challenges of the early twenty-first century.

The second was the view that "Depth within the practitioner is what evokes depth and capability in whatever method is being used." Slaughter believed that "the bulk of US [futures] work... foregrounds the external world and overlooks the inner world of people and cultures." As part of "methodological renewal," the program focused on the inner world through Ken Wilber's Integral Theory. This was a key pedagogical difference of this program compared to other programs. In 2002, the AFI created the first course unit anywhere in the world on "Integral Futures."

In addition to the master's course, research played a central part in the overall AFI program. The goal was to ensure that Swinburne was at the cutting edge of work in the field. The backbone of the research was a three-year project called "Creating and Sustaining Social Foresight in Australia," supported by the Pratt Foundation. It included the establishment of AFI's publishing program in 2003, including the launch of the <u>Australian Foresight Institute Monograph Series</u>. According to Slaughter, the AFI "focus on social foresight... helps to lift our eyes from the nitty-gritty of daily organizational life and lends the enterprise a high-order social purpose."

The program attracted a group of students who were already very forward thinking, and of whom many were experienced professionals, ranging in age from the late 20s to the late 50s. Some were already working in the futures field and were hungry for formal training. The program became highly sought after and there was a formal application process to enter. The three-year program was designed to appeal to "mid-level professionals," who typically took

the courses via "block mode": five full days separated by a period of a week or weekend. The units were also taught in a logical sequence. This mode of teaching meant that each cohort developed its own unique dynamic. This cohort effect was later considered to have been a key to the success of the program. All assignments were related to real-world projects. The KBFS was another fundamental element of the AFI course, with a copy provided to each student in advance of the first class.

In 2001 Richard Slaughter was elected President of the World Futures Studies Federation. By 2004, Swinburne's master's program had "attracted several cohorts of extremely capable and forward-thinking people" and it began to receive international recognition. The first-year Graduate Certificate program was translated into an online course in 2004, taught by Jennifer Gidley. It seemed that the AFI was going from strength to strength. The future looked bright.

As it turned out, 2004 was a "crisis moment" for the program. The Vice Chancellor who had championed Futures Studies at Swinburne retired in 2003. His successor made sweeping changes, including a change in university policy over what could be called an institute. This resulted in the abolishment of many of the research institutes within the university and the AFI was disestablished. Slaughter felt that "the value and associated status accorded to it and myself in the previous administration slowly diminished," and in August 2004 he decided to leave the university.

Phoenix

Rising from the ashes

At the time that the AFI was disestablished as a research institute, total enrollments in the master's program had been declining. It seemed that the initial pool of enthusiastic potential students was drying up. The deputy deans of the university decided not to reaccredit the existing MSF and suggested it be changed to a Graduate Certificate. Peter Hayward worked with a small group of people in late 2004 to quickly put together an alternative proposal to try to save the master's.

The redesign changed the discipline from Master of Science (Strategic Foresight) to Master of Management (Strategic Foresight), removed all prerequisites so that class sizes would not shrink over time, and removed most research and practice units. The third year of the program was designed so that students could choose to take either a research or practitioner (through an enterprise project) pathway. The deputy deans approved this redesigned program and relocated it to the newly formed Faculty of Business and Enterprise.

The program was also opened up to other, non-foresight, postgraduate students in the faculty without the requirement for the earlier prerequisites. Many of these came from the MBA and some from the Master of Entrepreneurship and Innovation (MEI). This resulted in a "futurist-manager dichotomy," a dichotomy that was present until the program closed. This new dynamic forced Hayward and Voros to rethink the way they taught foresight. For the reader interested in the changing cohort, see Voros⁶ for a detailed account.

Joseph Voros and Peter Hayward were the tenured academics and took responsibility for the running and development of the program. They continually modified the course to "try to adapt to the changing demands of the student/customer base, the hosting institution, and our own experience as foresight practitioners of what was effective in undertaking actual

foresight interventions." As part of the reaccreditation process in 2008, units were unbundled to allow for full-time study, and there was no longer a logical sequence of units. This had a significant impact on the dynamics of the group and the critical cohort effect was lost.

The view of the AFI that "foresight refreshes strategy" was retained in the redesigned master's, and the Generic Foresight Process (GFP)⁷ was introduced as a key organizing framework for how to do foresight work as part of methodological renewal. The GFP, based on the work of Mintzberg, formed "part of the formal curriculum for many of the subjects in the MSF." The "underlying urge behind the creation of the GFP was to attempt to take an integrative or integral view of the wide range of methods." The purpose of the GFP was to take a "process/template view of foresight in contrast to particular-method-based views which were (and indeed still are) very widely held."

The focus on the importance of developing "depth within the practitioner" was also retained. However, there was a fundamental shift in the way integral theory was approached and taught. The internal work was still considered to be a critical element of foresight work, but a broader approach was taken in which the integrative or integral view was made more general. In 2006 the Integral Futures subject was redesigned to "no longer focus only on integral theory as a knowledge framework as such but also on the use of integral theory on the subjective nature of perspective-taking," and was renamed "Integral Perspectives." Hayward and Voros opened up this space to other theorists and thinkers. It was around this time that the program became influenced by the work of C. Otto Scharmer, and particularly Scharmer's Theory U,8 not only in the curriculum but also in the way foresight was taught (i.e. creating "the field" and designing processes that took students on a deep dive "down the U" of self-awareness in order to do the work required on the other side).

Whereas the KBFS had been a foundational aspect of the AFI master's, at this time it was considered to be "a bit dated as a resource." The internet allowed for "rapid and widespread dissemination of new ideas and debates." Thus the KBFS was viewed as an important "snapshot of the field" but it was used "in a different way than was its original expression."

Hayward and Voros introduced two new key areas of curriculum into the master's. They decided to expressly teach philosophy, as they believed that "to teach foresight properly, and to prepare researchers and practitioners well, we must explicitly and consciously consider the philosophical foundations upon which futures research may be built." They also introduced a dedicated systems-thinking unit, run by Rod Sarah, which became so popular that it became a core offering in another master's course. The sustainability unit was deleted.

Another key shift in the program was a change in pedagogy from "a single foresight expert/academic teaching all" to utilizing a "facilitator at the front of the room" coupled with lectures from subject experts. This meant that the process of learning was explicitly divorced from the content being learned. Rowena Morrow brought a different perspective into the program at this time, focusing on relationships and trying to create less power imbalance in the classroom. Her role was as facilitator in the room with the students, and Hayward and Voros came into the room to teach content sessions. Morrow would then unpack the session with the students, which meant that students could learn how to reflect and think critically about the information they had been given. The program was run this way for two or three years and, while it was felt that "magic was created" in that room, the model was expensive and ultimately could not continue. After this, different ways of creating conversational spaces without a "guru" present were tried; for instance having people come in and out of the room.

This pedagogical philosophy continued through to the end of the MSF and was a significant factor in the power of the program.

Hayward and Voros took a participatory approach to teaching strategic foresight, which resulted in innovative teaching methods. Their belief that reality comes into existence through participation, and the importance of "practical knowing" —that we know things through doing things, that there is a wisdom in "doing" as opposed to merely thinking and talking—resulted in teaching through "running carefully designed processes" rather than through traditional lecture-style formats.

A key example of this participatory approach to teaching foresight is the Polak Game. Hayward and Voros ran this game for the first time around 2004. They were teaching Polak's concept of the "image of the future" and Hayward said, "Instead of explaining Polak, let's *do* Polak." Students found that through embodied processes such as these, they developed a much deeper level of understanding of the concepts than if they had listened to a lecture on the topic. Another example of this approach is the Sarkar Game, which was invented by Voros and Hayward based on PR Sarkar's theories of social change and was first run in 2003. Voros and Hayward believed that by using the Sarkar Game to create the experience of the social cycle in the classroom, students learn of their own social constructions and roles. This was certainly a powerful way to learn this complex theory.

Flight

With a new dean, the second reaccreditation process occurred around 2010 in a more supportive atmosphere. This time it was not a matter of saving the master's, but of adapt-or-die. The focus was on resolving the problem of the sustainability of teaching and the desire to recover the critical cohort effect. The result was to reduce the number of units taught from twelve to eight, and a "mini cohort effect" was created by teaching the first four methods units as two double units.

Significantly, the award was at last called the "Master of Strategic Foresight" (MSF). The MSF could be offered as a double master's with the MBA, giving it additional credibility. The Graduate Certificate level was removed completely. The MSF gave two pathways in: one for experienced students who could bypass the Graduate Certificate completely, and one for inexperienced and international students who could still do a Graduate Certificate. The program was asked to reinstate a sustainability unit. Integral theory, systems thinking, and sustainability were squeezed into two "new" units and 21st Century Challenges (21CC) was introduced as the capstone subject.

Undergraduate teaching in Futures Studies also commenced for the first time in 2010. Four undergraduate foresight units were created and offered as part of the Bachelor of Business Entrepreneurship and Innovation degree. A difficulty was experienced in recruiting permanent staff to manage the undergraduate program, and it was too difficult to sustain in the long term.

Two important new areas of study were added to the program and remained part of the curriculum until the MSF closed. Foresight Leadership (taught by Nita Cherry) focused on developing students' ability to respond to, and lead through, uncertainty and change. The second unit was Foresight & Design (taught by Bridgette Engeler) which was intended to develop a foresight approach to innovation and design. It was thought that the inclusion of

design principles in Futures Studies education would help students design a response to change, or a plan to take them towards their preferred future. In addition to traditional design thinking methodologies, students were introduced to Bill Sharpe's Three Horizons model and transition design. These methods could be applied in an organizational context or in response to "wicked problems."

Flames

The MSF underwent reaccreditation again in 2015. The context for this reaccreditation process was once again difficult, but this was related to issues faced by the higher education sector in general—student numbers at universities were falling and costs were rising. It seemed that the MSF was under threat once again.

Whereas previous reaccreditation processes had involved many and significant changes to the program, in 2015 the course was "tweaked." Sustainability was dropped yet again, as was the dedicated integral unit. A new unit, "Powering 21st Century Innovation" (P21) was introduced based on the coming Energy Transition as a context-setter for the capstone unit 21CC. These units together represented another sequence at the second year, partially recapturing the first-year double-unit cohort effect. Undergraduate units were also withdrawn.

More recently, Hayward and Voros introduced Big History, the "science-based story of how our present-day technological civilization came to be the way it is." History and Macrohistory¹² have always been a big part of futures thinking, but Hayward and Voros found that "one of the best ways to teach an openness to *futures* thinking is to introduce students to *the whole of the past!*" Voros argues that Big History "invites students to not only consider the deep past that lies behind and gave rise to us but also consider the possible futures that may lie ahead." While Big History was shut down in other parts of SUT in the second half of 2015, it continued at the undergraduate level and MSF students continued to undertake a "whirlwind tour" of Big History in the P21 unit.

While foresight had come to be viewed by the university as a "strategic differentiator," it was not generating the income required. Despite the program developing strongly, it ultimately got caught up in the problems faced by the higher education sector. In 2016, SUT completed a review of all postgraduate programs and announced the end of the MSF. The program was taught out in 2017–18. Peter Hayward retired at the end of 2016 and a unique event was held to honor the program: the MSF "wake." This event drew a number of people from the futures field, from people who had been involved from the very early days to recent graduates. There was a real sense at the gathering that something important had been lost.

Ashes

Since the closing of the MSF, two significant, privately organized initiatives have been undertaken to try to continue the Futures Studies education tradition in Melbourne. Peter Hayward established and currently coordinates the AltMSF. This is intended to be an extension of the learning space created in the MSF room and offers an opportunity for people to practice their craft. A range of MSF alumni attend these events, from highly experienced to those new to the field. The group comes together every couple of months on a Saturday and a member of the alumni, or occasionally a guest, facilitates the day. It was always an aim to open this space to new people, those who were not lucky enough to have made it onto the

MSF boat. This has started happening, partly because the numbers from graduates alone have been small.

The second initiative is the <u>FuturePod</u> podcast series. FuturePod "gathers voices from the international field of Futures and Foresight." FuturePod contains interviews with a range of people from the foresight and futures community on a range of topics, including Andy Hines, Andrew Curry, Debra Bateman, Zia Sardar, Jim Dator, Rene Rohrbeck, Kate Delaney, Sohail Inayatullah, Tanya Schindler and many more.

And foresight has not disappeared from Swinburne completely. Bridgette Engeler has now moved from Design to teach foresight and innovation in the Master of Entrepreneurship and Innovation (MEI). SUT is also currently rethinking its university offerings and is looking to develop micro-unit or single-unit strategies around topics that the market has said it wants. The core introductory material from the MSF continues to live on as units for industry and government, and currently decisions are to be made to turn the content into executive education. A new unit, "Futures Thinking," was commissioned by an industry partner as part of the MEI and ran for the first time in 2019. This unit is designed to be offered as a standalone unit, and a second follow-up unit, "Strategic Foresight," is currently awaiting the go-ahead for development.

Reflections

Many of those who completed the MSF over the years agree that the experience was life changing. Personally, I went into the course looking for "something." I didn't know what that was, but I wanted something *more*. This is consistent with Hayward's research which explored the growth of foresight capacity in relation to stages of development of the Self. He found that people who took to foresight were at a certain later stage of Self-development compared with those who had not.

As someone looking for more, the MSF was a true gift. I found that my thinking changed, my understanding of the world deepened. Brexit. Trump. All of a sudden, these things made sense. I didn't like it, but I could see. My previous need for "answers" and the "right" way was replaced with curiosity, questioning, and openness. My strong inclination to judge was replaced with higher levels of compassion and a desire to understand. My growing anxiety was calmed by zooming out and looking at the bigger picture. There can be no doubt that for those who came in at the right developmental level, the MSF was transformational. The MSF clearly succeeded in developing "depth in the practitioner." Looking at this through Wilber's four quadrants, ¹³ a key strength of the MSF was in the upper left quadrant (individual, internal).

Another strength of the MSF was in the futures methods that we were taught. The classroom was a wonderful and, at times, messy experience. We were taught traditional futures methods, such as a wide range of ways to approach scenario development. We received strong grounding in how to facilitate group processes in a foresightful way. Again, using the four quadrants, the MSF provided students with strong development in the upper right quadrant (individual, external).

The new generation of foresight practitioners was supported at an individual level by the MSF program; however when they came out of the program and started to look for ways to make their training land in the real world, the story was a bit different. There seemed to be no

organized professional support at a local level. People outside the foresight community didn't seem to grasp the value of what we offer. The community itself seems to be fractured. There are some who do extremely well as individual practitioners, others who seem to disappear into their organizations and do foresight work quietly from within, and others still who really want to make a go of it but can't seem to work out how to make it happen. There is even confusion over what to call ourselves. Is it "strategic foresight practitioners," or just "foresight practitioners," or "professional" not "practitioner," or "futurists," or something else? This lack of clarity and a common language makes it difficult to communicate with non-foresight people.

It seems that there is some work to be done in the lower right quadrant (collective, external). The CFF and the AFI were both attempts to develop a formal futures system, but neither was able to survive in the long term. Despite good intentions and effort, the government's CFF seemed to fail as there was a lack of trained futurists involved in the organization, and the AFI did not seem to have the full support of the academic institution that was hosting it at an organizational level. While there are professional futures bodies, these are international and are not specific to the Australian context and culture. I remember when the Australian Psychological Society decided that it needed to work hard to professionalize the field of psychology, to differentiate it from other rapidly emerging areas requiring less (or sometimes no) training, such as "therapists and "counsellors." It was understood that as a community, psychologists needed to come together and sell the value of their qualifications, training, and ethics. They seem to have been successful in this (of course nothing is perfect), and it seems to me that Australian futures practitioners would benefit from a similar legitimation system.

And then there is the matter of the lower left quadrant (collective, internal). If our work and ways of thinking do not align with the underlying culture and values of our society, foresight practitioners will struggle as a profession. We will not have the legitimation of the very people we are trying to influence. So there is work to be done in the lower left quadrant as well. This is huge. Currently we exist here in Australia in a culture of short-term, capitalist thinking. We find ourselves in our current reality, driven by others' own interests. Of course, like everywhere else, there is an emerging voice of dissatisfaction that challenges the status quo. Our society can see that there are global challenges and that many of these are linked to our society's capitalist values, economic growth, and the "profit motive." But we do not have the collective imagination to conceive of an acceptable alternative. So we stick with capitalism. People are even becoming more aware that short-term thinking is contributing to the problems we face, but as a society we do not know how to think usefully about the future, sadly bringing us back to where we began with the reflections of HG Wells.

It is clear that, although humans are natural "futures thinkers," and have historically been fascinated by the future, we are resistant when it comes to applying this in a professional or civilizational way. It is clear that we need to be explicitly taught how to think about the future so that we can, as Wells argued, anticipate the consequences of the decisions we make today. But for some reason this capacity has not been prioritized; in fact it has been sidelined. Given this resistance, it is important to prime people to think about the future in useful ways. In order to think about civilizational futures, people need to be able to understand their place "in the grand scheme of things."

Voros' insights into the challenges of educating "non-foresight" people to grasp future time and futures are helpful. He found that people enjoyed learning about Big History (as opposed

to some of the challenges he experienced teaching futures to those who don't "get" it) and that this way of thinking primed people for futures thinking:

Even for non-foresight students taking P21 [an energy transition unit that began with an introduction to Big History] "cold," as it were (i.e. without any prior foresight study), the long "run-up" provided by the Big History perspective did seem to tend to make "switching on" foresight cognition just that bit easier for them.

It is worth considering different ways that people and society can be primed for the futures thinking that is needed in order to respond adaptively to the significant challenges we face. Perhaps teaching Big History as a lead-in to futures thinking at primary, secondary, and tertiary levels would be one way of priming people to think about the future, and thus making a change in the lower left quadrant. Some progressive Australian schools have included Big History in the curriculum; however relatively few schools seem to combine this with a formal approach to futures thinking.

The key aim of the AFI, supporting the emergence of the new generation of foresight practitioners, has been partially achieved. The strength of the MSF was in developing the "individual" quadrants, but the difficulties lie in developing the "collective" quadrants. High quality Futures Studies education is a necessary, but not sufficient, condition for the emergence of a new generation of foresight practitioners. Without the support of external systems and a societal culture open to our way of thinking, these practitioners will struggle to apply this education in order to make a difference in the world. In order to support the next new generation of foresight practitioners, we need high quality educational experiences such as those provided by the MSF. But we also need the systems and structures in place to support us and them to put their education and training into practice, and to make the much needed and overdue change in the world that we want to see.

The paper draws heavily on the work of Slaughter¹⁴ and Hayward, Voros and Morrow¹⁵ for the details of the history of the AFI and MSF.

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Note

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