

“Program Management: the next step in the evolution of Project Management?”

AUTHORS	Dianne Waddell
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Program Management: The Next Step in the Evolution of Project Management?

Dianne Waddell

Abstract

The term 'program management', while referred to occasionally in journals, organisation publications and by training consultants, is not a widely acknowledged notion. While literature on project management is plentiful and the concept is well entrenched in both a practical and academic sense, program management is a term that is used differently by various sectors. Its meaning is less defined and more broadly applied than that of project management. For example, although Program Managers are sometimes recruited under that title, the definition still remains somewhat obscure. Seen mostly in the health and education public sectors, program management is commonly thought of as separate to project management but, as this paper will suggest, program management is more likely an extension of project management and a complementary tool to achieving organisational outcomes. This paper attempts to clarify the distinctions between the management approaches by looking at existing literature and comparing it to common practice in a government instrumentality. It will become apparent that further research is needed regarding this significant step in the evolution of management practices.

Key words: Program, Project, management, Australia.

Introduction

The term 'program management', while referred to occasionally in journals, organisation publications and by training consultants, is not a widely acknowledged notion. Seen mostly in the health and education public sectors, program management is commonly thought of as separate to project management but, as this paper will suggest, program management is more likely an extension of project management and a complementary tool to achieving organisational outcomes.

While literature on project management is plentiful and the concept is well entrenched in both a practical and academic sense, program management is a term that is used differently by various sectors. Its meaning is less defined and more broadly applied than that of project management. For example, although Program Managers are sometimes recruited under that title, the definition is somewhat obscure.

This paper attempts to clarify the distinctions between the management approaches by looking at existing literature and comparing it to common practice in a government instrumentality. It will become apparent that further research is needed in this significant step in the evolution of management approaches.

Project Management: the foundation

Project management has been somewhat of a buzz word for several years. It is generally well understood and definable. There are both undergraduate and postgraduate degree courses in project management and a clear career path to be followed. Project management, by its very nature, can be a specialisation that does not necessarily require broader management skills and knowledge (although they are useful), and it can tend to exist in a little world away from everything else. A 'project concentrates on the realisation of a single predetermined result, and the actual work necessary to achieve this is of secondary importance' (Wijner & Kor, 2000, p. 7) because it has a finite timeline.

Because projects must have specific outcomes, these must be identified from the very beginning. The project must initially be defined and the goals clearly stated, usually through a scope that is well communicated to project workers. The scope defines project boundaries "because pro-

jects have finite resources at their disposal and are undertaken within a limited timeframe, it is therefore essential to understand the number and scope of tasks to be carried out before work actually starts" (Wijner & Kor, 2000 p. 7).

In the spectrum of management theory, project management tends to apply to output and the achievement of tangible goals. Projects often become a mini-organisation because all the elements of standard management are taken into account such as budget, resource allocation, quality and information management. However, the attention given to strategy and long term planning would be minimal. Short term planning and process controls are key project management indicators (Wijner & Kor, 2000, p. 7).

Bryde (2003) notes that the tool of project management requires regular updating to reflect changes in practice, indicating that the discipline is still evolving and is adaptable to new events and theories. Regular updates also ensure that the tool remains appropriate, especially given that the scope of project management was once traditionally concerned mostly with project-based industries such as construction and defence where it 'derived from the inherent differences between projects and operations, with project management being seen to be applicable to manage unique, capital-intensive, non-operational activities in project-based industries' (p. 776).

In literature discussing project management, there is often mention of its relationship and co-dependence on quality management. As projects are outcome-focussed (e.g. the necessity to measure, document procedures ...), it is reasonable to expect that the goals are achieved well, with attention paid to the quality of the process as well as any product that may have been developed. There is a similar focus on meeting requirements between the two disciplines. Taken further the quality of the actual project procedures is as important as the quality of the outcome (Byrd, 2003, p. 777).

There are a number of reasons why a project approach is adopted in organisations. Cicmil (1997, p. 390), interestingly in a journal about total quality management, notes that as environmental factors change, modern organisations have had to adopt patterns and methods of coping. The author outlines several reasons as to why project-based management is advantageous in addressing these coping mechanisms (see below):

Advantages of adopting project-based management (Cicmil 1997, p. 390)

- The implementation of strategic management through projects makes the achievement of highest returns possible by optimal utilisation of resources available (including time, money and people) more realistic.
- The expansion of human knowledge creates the need for an effective organisational design to support knowledge management for competitive advantage through intra-organisational integration, professional and functional concurrence based on project teams, inter-organisational networking and 'win-win' partnerships in project situations.
- Companies are increasingly seeking the way of effective product development and market expansion – management by projects provides a disciplined approach to gaining competitive advantage by getting the right product, in time, to market through management of innovation, knowledge and skills.

In practice, a project could mean many things (but each with the finite time-span that a project implies) from mergers and acquisitions and the integration of quality management systems, major technological upgrades to new product launches, management consultancies and topical taskforces. All could be considered projects to various degrees of scale.

Projects tend to arise out of a fundamental need or idea for something new (generated either internally or from a customer/client need) and there is some notion of potential outputs. To become a project to be managed, the idea would require resources that must be procured either from within the organisation or from external sources (such as consultants). Cicmil (1997, p. 392) argues that 'it all happens within a human, social setting – the project organisation, with conflicting strategic, professional and functional interests, hidden agendas and cultural backgrounds and

this ensures that each project will always be different. He further adds that 'effective management and planning processes, monitoring and control lead to the success of the project and the acknowledgement that project implications could be widespread'.

"Traditionally, project management has been regarded as an exclusive management process of scientific nature with specialised planning, monitoring and control techniques, and applied to the operations of very few project-oriented industries...it is now being increasingly accepted as an inclusive concept integrated into general organisational endeavour to provide better quality to customers through effective intra-organisational integration and optimal utilisation of scarce resources' (Cicmil, 1997, p. 391). "In recent years the discipline of project management (PM) has changed its application dramatically to accommodate emerging management processes and philosophies related to implementation of organisational development and strategic change...projects are becoming a template for operational and strategic re-design" (Cicmil, 1997, p. 390). This inclusion into the general organisation is essentially a reference to program management.

Program Management: the next step

The Macquarie Dictionary defines the term *program* as 'a plan or policy to be followed; or a list of things to be done; or an agenda' as opposed to the term *project*, meaning 'something that is contemplated, devised, or planned; a plan; a scheme; an undertaking'. Put very simply a program could, in fact, be a list of projects to be done.

In contrast to project management, the literature on program management is somewhat less (both through traditional journals and the more contemporary on-line references). "Contrary to project management, which is a concept that is clearly understood by both academics and practitioners, programme management seems to be a term that has not reached this maturity yet" (Vereecke, Pandelaere, Desschoolmeester & Stevens, 2003, p. 1279) even though the term gets bandied around every so often, mostly in literature discussing project management, there seems to be no clear definition of program management.

Vereecke, Pandelaere, Desschoolmeester & Stevens (2003) define program management as simply the "the management of multiple projects" and note a survey conducted in 2001 by e-programme.com where respondents showed clear confusion as to what it is. "...Many definitions of programme management have been given, ranging from the management of a collection of projects to the management of change" (p. 1279). Vereecke et al. (2003) cites a number of sources that attempt to provide a definition:

- Russell (1998): "a tool that has evolved out of project management,...that helps organise many interrelated projects";
- Reiss (1996): "the coordinated management of a portfolio of projects to achieve a set of business objectives";
- Pellegrinelli (1997): "the projects are managed in a coordinated way, either to achieve a common goal, or to extract benefits which would otherwise not be realised if they were managed independently" (p. 1280).

Vereecke et al. (2003) also refers to the Office of Government Commerce (OGC, 1999) in the UK who defines program management as "the coordinated management of a portfolio of projects that change organisations to achieve benefits that are of strategic importance". What is obviously needed is a definition that is understandable and meaningful, which is probably *not* the following: 'program management is a controlling instance for a transformation process, i.e. the design, development, and deployment of changes to the organisation and IT, following a result path, which in turn is governed by projects' (Ribbers and Schoo, 2002, as cited in Vereecke et al., 2003).

Vereecke et al. cite Pellegrinelli who suggests that the classifications of programs may ensure that the program management concept is more understandable. Pellegrinelli proposes three types of programs – portfolio, goal-oriented and heartbeat programmes. 'The "portfolio programmes" group is relatively independent of projects that have a common theme. The "goal-oriented programmes"...enable the management of initiatives or developments outside the existing infrastructure or routine [and the] "heartbeat programmes" [enabling] the regular, incremental improvement of existing systems, infrastructure or business processes.'"(p. 1280). Vereecke et al.

(2003) argue that these classifications lack a “conceptual basis that allows us to understand why these three categories would be sufficient for describing and categorising all programmes”(p. 1280). And the classification idea raises many questions: is a breakdown of types of projects really needed when organisations vary widely and are even different between those that produce the same product or service? Is there a point in classifying programs? Does it help with implementation? There are two dimensions implied: whether the projects exist at the start of the program or whether projects are generated as a result of the program. This could lead to the question of whether program management can be implemented across organisations that are already highly project-based AND organizations that are not. Is the program management approach applicable to all organisations large and small, irrespective of product or service?

The useful part of classification however is the extent to which programs can change the organisation's business processes or systems. Vereecke et al. propose a “new conceptual classification of programmes, on the basis of (1) the extent to which projects exist at the launching of the programme, and (2) the degree of change in the expected outcome of the programme. The expected outcome can be to modify and improve the existing systems or processes. Or it can be to introduce new systems or processes, which either replace the existing systems or processes, or come as supplements to the existing systems or processes. This results in four distinct types of programmes...” (p. 1280) which are described in some detail – of which is not important here at this time, although an important point is raised in terms of programs that bring together relatively independent initiatives in various parts of the organisation that provide a synergy because they may share some common goals – this harks back to other definitions of program management mentioned earlier where common goals are an important part of program management, and the prioritising of these goals (and perhaps the dropping of some projects that no longer have that common goal).

Vereecke et al. (2003) again cite Pellegrinelli when linking program management with how a program manager exists within an organisation, i.e. where in the structure is the program manager? Are there differences due to the classification of the programs mentioned above? This specifically relates to whether the projects are existing or not. A program manager that takes on a program of existing projects would take on a different role to that of a program manager who is required to initiate projects and define their content (p. 1282). “Coordination and central management of a programme, which Gray (1997) labels ‘the strong model’, is more likely to work for programmes that are formulated as strategic objectives from which multiple projects are defined.” (p. 1282). There is then mention of Ferns 1991 who argues that “programmes that aim at something new preferably are managed by a dedicated team of professionals, isolated to some extent from the original organisation. This could for example be accomplished by contracting the program out to a prime contractor, by involving external consultants, and/or by establishing a program office in an independent location” (p. 1282) but this seems to negate much other literature that argues that program management exists as part of the organisation's strategic goals – how can an external organisation meet strategic goals when their expertise is only program management – it seems better to have program managers as part of the organisation – unlike project management specialists that can be contracted to look after a single project or series of related projects.

Leading the way with getting the program message across to the general community are consultants dealing in training courses for the program manager. An internet search revealed several advertisements for such consultants. ESI International (Project Connections, 2004) notes that ‘to many, program management is the next logical step in the career progression of one of the world's fastest growing disciplines’ (being project management). This organisation describes program management as the implementation of ‘business strategy through an integrated portfolio of projects involving the management of multiple teams and executive-level stakeholders’. The website suggests that program managers require additional business, marketing and leadership skills to that of a project manager and implies that program management is heavily entrenched in strategic and mainstream organisational management. In fact, ESI International also suggests that the program manager is a coordinator (of teams, project managers and stakeholders), and that program management is predominantly a high-level support role.

Another consultant, SMS Management (2004), argues that effective program management decides which projects will deliver the most benefit to the organisation and determines the most cost ef-

fective allocation of resources across all the projects. SMS Management suggests that most projects and activities in an organisation are 'planned, implemented and coordinated as discrete activities, the higher level management of these activities, and the realisation of the benefits from discrete projects, is often effected using a piecemeal, uncoordinated, intuitive approach' either through general management or individual project management initiatives. These projects are initiated 'to achieve competitive advantage from valuable new opportunities' and they are often additional to existing projects. In a multi-project organisation, resources are inevitably finite. SMS argues that program managers' role is to prioritise projects according to expected outcome and to ensure resources are appropriately distributed (taking into account that many resources need to be shared across projects).

Wijner and Kor (2000) have published an in-depth analysis of project and program management and have suggested that many organisations manage projects by intuition. The authors note that new problems are always being confronted in organisations, that sometimes there is no immediate answer (for example, the arrival of a new competitor, business opportunity or a change in legislation). Wijner and Kor (2000) refer to these problems as 'unique assignments' and argue that responses to unique assignments vary according to the type of organisation operations. An organisation that is largely routine in nature (for example, VicRoads and the issuing of driver licenses) may encounter unique assignments rarely (perhaps a change in legislation to upgrade license security features) and at these times, there is enough routine and procedures in place to respond in a reasonably standardised way. The project builds upon knowledge already existing in the organisation.

Wijner and Kor (2000, p. 6) point out that there are also organisations that do not operate under such a standardised and procedural basis. Organisations that are assignment-based (think events management firms, software-development firms, large building corporations, some public sector agencies adapting to constant legislative changes) often have to shift their approach to problems according to each assignment encountered.

Different approaches to tackling problems range from routine to improvisation. Wijner and Kor (2000) argue that "because of their very nature and complexity, unique assignments cannot be undertaken by one single department in an organisation and cannot be carried out according to existing standard procedures or left to improvisation. People in organisations have to learn new ways of working" (p. 7). They also argue that project and program management can assist in tackling these problems and provide a framework and building blocks to achieve the desired outcomes., 'a program...strives for the achievement of a number of (sometimes conflicting) aims, and therefore the management work undertaken along the way, particularly in encouraging co-operation, is important in its own right. In essence, a program slots projects, initiatives and activities – with frequently diverse outcomes – into a broader corporate or organisational goal...whereas the project approach *directs* energy, the program approach *combines* energy' (p. 7).

In a practical sense, the role of program manager then, is one of coordination and prioritising and ensuring useless diversions from the outcome are avoided. Stated earlier was the notion that a project manager is required to communicate a scope well before the project gets underway (due to finite resources and the generally limited timeframe). Program management, in contrast, may involve several projects running concurrently with different start and finish dates and differing (and often changing) resource needs. Hence a scope is not necessarily the best communication approach for a program manager (given that most of their time would be spent preparing scopes rather than managing the program). This is where the coordination role of a program manager becomes essential. Projects that are no longer beneficial to the organisation, in that they are not meeting strategic goals or outcomes, must be ended and the resources re-allocated to the projects that are delivering.

Programs can differ from large projects because of their goal orientation rather than the focus on results. Programs can be triggered from the bottom up or they can originate from the top down (Wijner & Kor, 2000, p. 8). In the 'bottom up' scenario, small projects or activities already being undertaken may become coordinated into a broad program with a strategic goal. The small projects may have initially been quite simple and have developed complexity due to organisational change or unforeseen events. The 'top down' scenario is more of a proactive, strategic decision with a design to bring about change. With either starting point 'by their very nature, programs tend to bring together people whose agendas conflict and whose motivations are disparate. This need

not matter, provided all can agree on the starting point of the programme, and that there is consensus about who should be involved and what the common goals are' (Wijner & Kor, 2000, p. 9).

Vereecke et al. (2003) conducted research in six Belgium organisations in various fields. Of interest is the type of programs investigated, while all very different, they have in common a 'one off' type of feel. None of the programs: e-business development in electronics, e-business development in insurance, the development of synergy processes between insurance and banking divisions of one financial company, the development of a new pricing structure in a telecom company, the development of new technology for a new market in a telecom company, the development of a structure and new systems after a merger of two banks, seem to involve on-going program management – they are all to be initiated and will have a finish. Perhaps these 'programs' could also effectively be managed according to project management principles. What of the programs that are ongoing?

In program management, goals need to be specified in detail (for example, a goal to reduce employee turnover should include a quantitative element, and a goal of cultural change should factor in a number of quantifiable elements such as employee turnover, absenteeism, complaints and compliments, productivity etc...). In the example of cultural change, not all of these goals can be attributed to one work area – a number of areas/branches need to be involved to undertake the program and this is where program management differs from project management. A project manager identifies resource needs at the beginning and allocates accordingly. A program manager may need to reconsider resource needs frequently as each part of the program requires. Programs exist within normal working parameters. A program of cultural change needs to fit in with the standard strategic goals of productivity and profitability (or in the public sector, the normal expected outputs of an agency as expected by the public it serves – especially obvious in the health sector). Program management involves compromise and accommodation but should also be flexible. Project management is less so.

Wijner and Kor (2000) make a very good point about trying to describe project and program management in a generic way. When thinking of projects it is natural to place the word in the context of the organisation you work within (the authors refer to the defence industry where a project might be related to the development of new weapons. Another example might be in a public sector agency where building projects are often initiated to accommodate changes in structure and functions). "Initiative fatigue' is a well-recognised, and potentially damaging response to the successive launching of new projects by a management that appears to have no overarching goal, other than to keep changing things. The discipline of programming may prove to be a very effective antidote!" (Wijner & Kor, p. 10). To alert us to the distinction between the two management approaches we should be aware of the terminology used. Very often when thinking about projects we think of the defined boundaries, whereas wherever program management is mentioned it is thought more of as a coordinated, strategic, long-term series of projects. A variety of terms associated with Project and Program management appears below (not an extensive list):

Table 1

Key words associated with the terms

Program Management	Project Management
Multifaceted	Specialised
Integrated	Single outcome orientated
Multiple outcomes (multiple projects)	Sequentially planned
Coordinated (predominately top-down)	Finite timeline
Prioritised	Defined boundaries
Long term strategic implications	Horizontally coordinated
Policy based	Scientific (independently measured)
Matrix structure	Operational
	Outsourced

Implications for Managers

- Project Management – the 'soft' option?

In a survey conducted by Bryde (2003), different perceptions of 'soft' projects against 'hard' projects was identified – which is of considerable interest. Respondents who thought of projects as being 'one-off capital intensive work' such as construction believed that this is how project management is defined. Others (23% of respondents) believed that 'a project is a vehicle for tackling all business-led change within an organisation' – hence 'soft' projects. It would be interesting to replace the word 'program' for 'project' in a survey of this type – perceptions of programs are undoubtedly 'softer'. Perhaps a failing of program management would be the lack of expertise developed in specialised fields. As one survey respondent says "I wouldn't waste a good project manager managing a £5 million construction project on a new HRM system, it's a question of priorities" (p. 780).

So does this mean that both project and program management need to exist in organisations or does the perception above highlight non-recognition of the program manager and the importance of the role? Other issues are raised in the process and the reference to priorities is a good one.

- The measurement of success?

Unlike project management, which has clearly defined terms of reference and scope, "determining when a program has ended is not necessarily straightforward, and in reality 'the only decision taken at the end of a program is that the special program management efforts are no longer necessary'". It may not have achieved its goal, despite a large number of actions having taken place. But provided that some things have changed for the better, then the goals may well have been 'pursued to a satisfactory degree' (Wijner & Kor, 2000, p. 9).

When and if the program has an end point, the program manager may, like a project manager, move on – or the program may be ongoing indefinitely (for example, health programs are generally ongoing as programs that have evolved from an organisation's core functions).

The implications of failure also differ between the two management types. Project management failure generally has more consequence because we are looking at a single project. Programs are made up of multiple projects – if one is failing, it gets 'canned', so that the rest of the program can function, resources are just reallocated. How does project management measure success? By the 'iron triangle' whereby there is a trade-off between cost, time and quality, plus an "overriding need to satisfy the expectations of key project participants" (Byrd, 2003, p. 777).

- Combination of both?

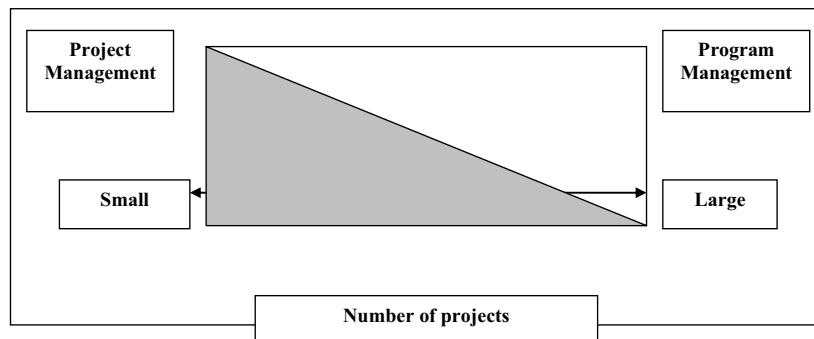


Fig. 1. The proportion of Project Management and Program Management in organisations

Because program management works within accepted project management definitions as well as builds on its capabilities, both approaches do not necessarily exist in isolation. There would be occasions where project management is the tool of choice because the project is intended to operate externally to the normal organisational operations. In this case the project goal may be isolated too and not need to be integrated into future organisational planning. For other projects that do require integration, a program management approach may be the ideal solution – as outcomes are achieved, the learnings are incorporated into daily organisational activity and they may even generate further ongoing projects for which program management has the scope to handle. Possible exploration could involve determining trends where program management is the preferred

choice for managing a project or series of projects. Where does project management end and program management begin? The diagram above gives a visual representation of this idea. There is also scope to gain an understanding of industry perspectives on the two tools, taking into account the 'soft' mentality that program management seems to convey.

Program Management in an existing public sector organisation: a case in point

There is an existing public sector health service that actively utilises the concept of program management and where 'Health Service Programs' are those where a service area has been identified as a priority and where direction is required across a range of services'. These health services include Aboriginal Health, Drug & Alcohol, Health Promotion, Mental Health, Sexual Health/HIV, Aged Care, Primary Health Care, Child Protection & Sexual Assault and Women's Health/Cervical Screening"¹. There are program managers assigned to each service and there is a mix of funding to each program area where each has its own performance indicators or targets as set by the department or funding body.

According to their strategic intent, Program Managers of this government department are responsible for:

- Strategic planning for the program area
- Service development planning, in collaboration with the service provider units
- Resource allocation consistent with the strategic and service development planning
- Determining clinical practice standards and clinical governance processes/frameworks for the program area, consistent with Area clinical governance frameworks and in collaboration with clinical staff
- Monitoring progress against performance indicators, targets and standards and providing reports to the Department or other funding bodies
- Providing support or guidance for service managers and/or program staff to assist with implementation of program-related services
- Providing or overseeing training for employees in program-related areas consistent with the program's strategic and service plans

In most cases program managers neither directly supervise clinical staff nor provide any line management for these staff. They also do not have operational responsibility for program budgets. Refer to Diagram 1 for the organisational structure.

In many of their programs identified earlier, a Purchaser/Provider model splits the body who supplies the funds (Purchaser) with the group that undertakes the program (Provider) with the Purchaser holding the budget, setting the standard of service and providing the funds 'under an agreement that defines the services to be provided, the funds allocated and the performance indicators and targets to be met' (Discussion paper – confidential). In general the Program Manager develops an implementation and evaluation plan in conjunction with a program steering committee.

Mental Health Services are therefore managed within the matrix structure, whereby the strategic and operational roles and responsibilities should be clearly separated. A Mental Health Program Management Unit (part of the Health Service Development Unit) is responsible for strategic planning, resource allocation, clinical governance, monitoring, reporting and evaluation. Operational management and line management of staff therefore sit within the management structure of the service delivery units, not with the program management unit.

There are clearly identified key components of the purchase/provider model which include:

- A clear split between the purchaser and provider roles with operational management responsibility resting solely with the provider;
- A clearly defined service or program implementation plan that describes the services to be provided and the outcomes required;
- Program funding held centrally and allocated to Area or site cost centres as required to achieve the program plan;

¹ The name of the department has been withheld due to confidentiality reasons: permission pending.

- Accountability for achievement of the plan resting with the site managers who should monitor expenditure against the allocated budget and achievement of program targets.

The matrix model of management is not necessarily well-understood within mental health and other services across the Area Health Service, and it appears that in the past, this lack of understanding has created some tensions for mental health staff and line managers alike. Part of this confusion arises because once agreement has been reached between the purchaser and provider on strategic directions, service delivery requirements, resource allocation and clinical standards, the Program Management Unit then has a role in supporting and providing advice to the service providers in order to assist them to achieve the agreed service delivery and standards. This happens at two levels, both with line managers of services and with service providers themselves. It is at this later level that creates the opportunities for most confusion regarding the different roles of line management and program management.

Conclusion

It would be simplistic to say that program management is the next logical step in project management. Why concentrate resources on one project when you can get a program manager to manage multi-projects? Byrde (2003) argues that there has been a change of emphasis of late in that project management now includes “pre-implementation, ‘upstream’ activities and the post-implementation ‘downstream’ activities” (p. 776) – perhaps this is where project management and program management converge. It could be argued that the “emphasis on upstream activities, such as aligning a project with organisational strategy and defining stakeholder requirements, and an emphasis on downstream activities, such as reviewing performance and learning lessons” (Byrde, p. 776) is more attune with the philosophy of program management rather than project management to which the above statement refers.

It appears that while project management enjoys widespread recognition and implementation in a number of organisations, program management is generally an unrecognised approach but could be currently in practice under another name. While there are distinctions between the two management tools, defining the distinctions and appropriate terminology for each could be a potential topic for further research. Case studies in organisations may identify and clarify the characteristics of program management as it exists currently. In this initially broad synopsis of the existence of program management, a simple conclusion can be proffered: program management is a logical extension of project management where multiple projects in an organisation exist.

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GMAHS Mental Health and Drug & Alcohol Services

