

Essay for 6th degree black belt grading 27/01/2024

Theme: How do you see our organization currently, and are we moving in the right direction?

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Over the past many years, I have been observing how the International TaeKwon-Do Foundation of New Zealand (ITFNZ) is changing from more numerous smaller clubs to a higher concentration of ITFNZ's members in fewer larger clubs. This results in increased administrative burdens on an aging instructor population while at the same time we struggle to find members willing to start new or take over existing clubs. I have also observed limitations with the current organisation's structure, governance, and policies which could be improved to provide a more sustainable future for ITFNZ. Lastly, I have some commentary about the International TaeKwon-Do Federation (ITF) and a couple of aspects that it could consider improving to the benefit of all national and local TaeKwon-Do organisations.

Lay of the land

Firstly, let us examine some ITFNZ's figures over the past 15 years (2008-2022). Figures 1 and 2 show the number of clubs and the number of members per year respectively, throughout the period 2008-2022. We see that the number of clubs grew between 2008 and 2012 up to 95, decreased and then stabilized around 79 between 2015-2019. The total number of clubs started to decrease during the pandemic and still continues to fall in 2022 reaching 58, our lowest number over the last 15 years. The pandemic period covers the years 2020 and 2021 and some of the decrease seen in 2022 could be a consequence of the August to December 2021 Auckland lockdown.

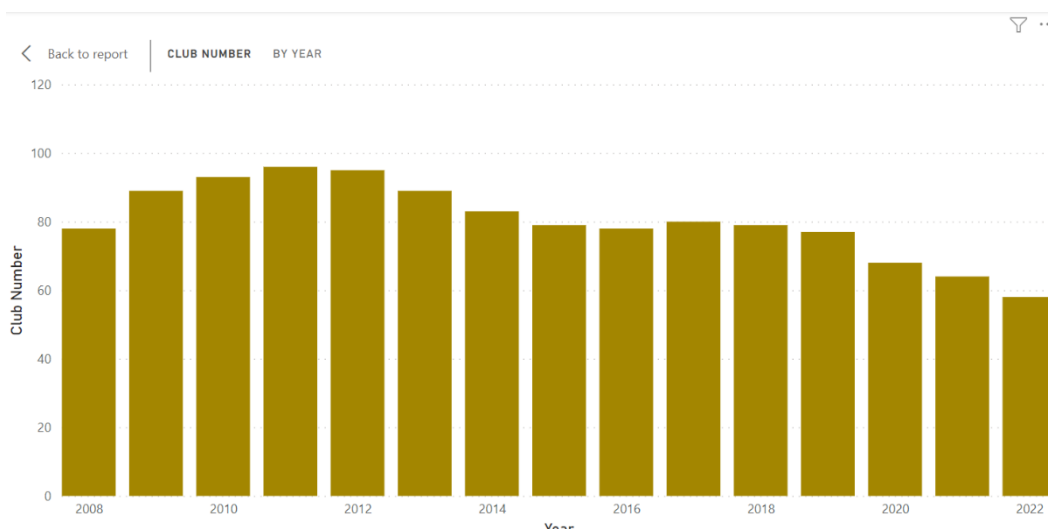


Figure 1: Number of clubs with active members per year

When it comes to membership, Figure 2 shows a somewhat similar story: firstly, the 12-year period 2008-2020 depicts two six years' cycles of steady growth followed by a sharp decrease in the following seventh year, 2014 and 2020. The membership numbers

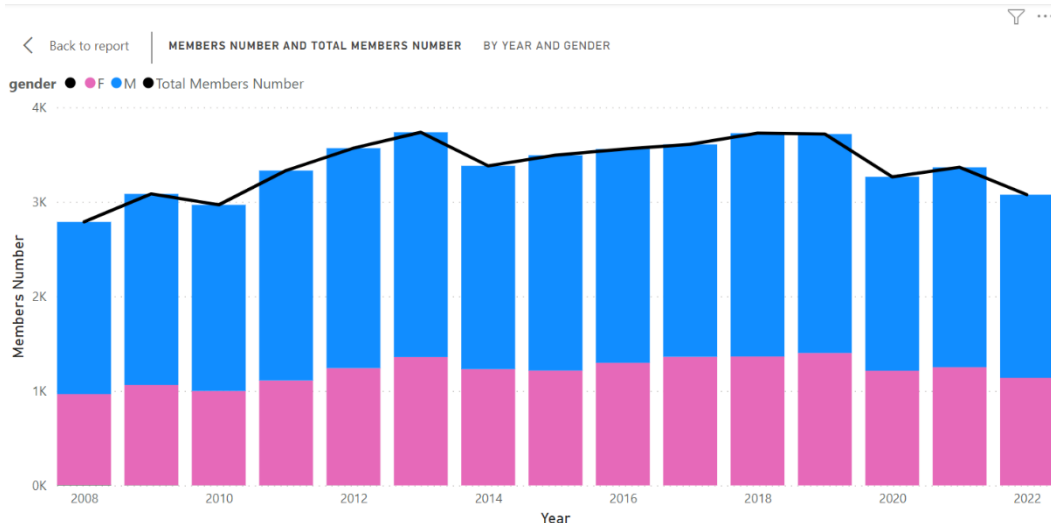


Figure 2: Members number per year. Bar chart shows breakdown of members per gender (male in blue, female in pink). Black line shows overall total number of members per year.

for 2021 seems to indicate that ITFNZ had started to recover from the pandemic's impact but the sharp fall in 2022 membership numbers tends to indicate otherwise with 3,076 members comparable to the 3,085 of 2009. The main difference between 2022 and 2009 being that members in 2022 belonged to fewer clubs (58 vs. 89, 35% fewer clubs) which indicate that ITFNZ has moved towards fewer but larger clubs over the past 15 years as indicated by Figure 3.

This figure shows that over the last 12 years there has been a gradual but consistent upward trend in average number of members per club. This has been a clear trend for more than a decade and consequently not a result of the pandemic.

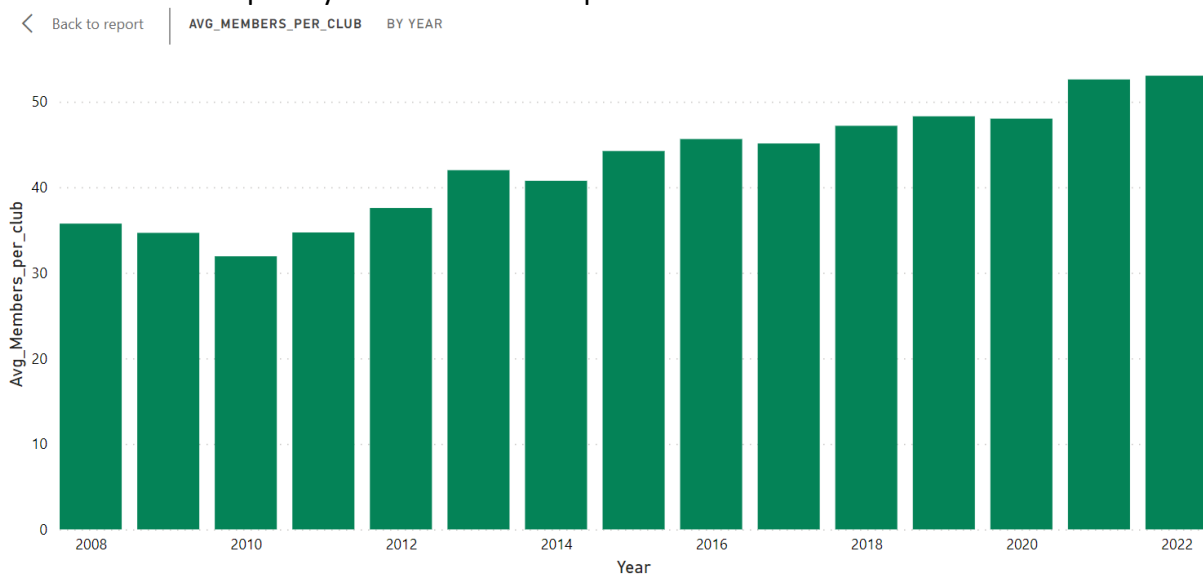


Figure 3: Average number of members per club

It is worth mentioning that larger clubs come with larger operational burdens.

Figure 4 shows retention numbers. The percent retention represents the members in a given year that were members in the previous year.

If we now look at retention numbers showed in Figure 4, we can clearly see the impact of

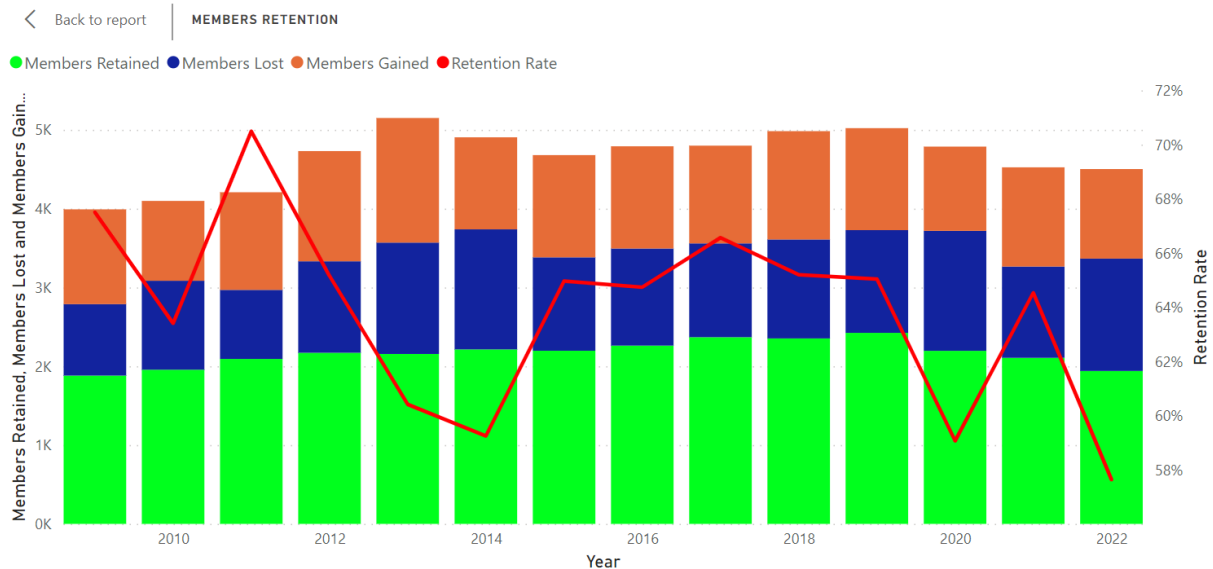


Figure 4: Retention per year. The bar chart shows numbers of members retained (green), lost (blue), and gained (orange). The red line shows the retention rate per year. Note that retention is calculated when comparing numbers against the previous year.

the pandemic in 2020 where the retention rate was only 59%, our lowest rate over the last 15 years, equaling 2014 results. However, 2022 has broken that barrier with a retention rate of only 58%. Again, 2021 seemed to indicate that ITFNZ had started to recover from the pandemic, achieving a retention rate of 65%, which is on par with pre-COVID years.

Exploring aspects that could help ensure a sustainable future for ITFNZ

Recently there have been some encouraging initiatives taken by ITFNZ to either address some issues or aiming at improving the organization. The Child Protection Officer position is an example of the former as a child protection policy was missing and crucial to have in place when children form the backbone of our organization (ca. 60% of our membership). Examples of the latter are the creation of a TKD in schools coordinator and the Youth Council. The Youth Council, in particular, is a very promising initiative as it might allow for the younger generation to help shape the ITFNZ they will inherit and one day lead.

However, there are still several aspects that, in my opinion, would need to improve or be considered for ensuring a sustainable future to ITFNZ.

ITFNZ Structure and Governance

The ITFNZ structure is complex: a Council, a Board, a Leadership Team (Operations), an Advisory Panel, and Advisor Groups. This multitude of groups can lead to some confusion as

to who does what and where the different responsibilities actually sit. My personal assumption is that it is a result of a legacy structure and the wish to transition towards a more business-like approach. Unfortunately, it seems to me that we have stopped half way.

It is always difficult to clearly explain to a new member or an outsider what the various groups do and are responsible for. The Council and Operations appear to share a traditional not-for-profit organizational structure (president, vice-president, treasurer, and secretary) while at the same time the Board, Operations, and the Advisor entities seem to indicate a business-like approach. Having both results in a hybrid and confusing system.

I believe it is necessary to fully operate in a mature corporate structure if ITFNZ wants to develop and establish itself as a leading organization in New Zealand. In such corporations there are only two entities: the Board of Directors and the Leadership Team. Each having clear and separate responsibilities. The following table summarizes what these responsibilities could be:

Board responsibilities	Leadership Team responsibilities
Appoints CEO	Set Organisation’s vision, purpose, strategy
Approves Leadership Team members	Execute strategy
Approves / Declines strategic decisions	Perform operational activities
Holds Leadership Team accountable for achieving vision, purpose, and strategy	Present progress reports to Board
Governance and Compliance	Responsible for Organisation’s culture

Why do I think this is necessary for us? When I compare the size of ITFNZ to large New Zealand corporations, we are on par. As we have seen in Figures 1 and 2, ITFNZ is currently composed of ca. 60 clubs and 3,100 members with maximums of 96 clubs and 3,737 members achieved in the early 2010s. For comparison, this is equivalent to the total number of employees from the three publicly listed state-owned energy providers put together in the country (Meridian, Mercury, and Genesis). For us, at ITFNZ, such a change would require a tremendous shift in our organisation’s structure and it could lead to rebuilding the ways we operate at a national level and also potentially at the club level.

Another important aspect to develop is a strong positive, inclusive organizational culture where every member’s voice can be heard in a safe environment. The current structure does not ensure that most let alone every members’ voice is represented at the national level as it is solely dependent upon what the clubs’ head instructors wish to discuss at the national level meetings. To that effect it is necessary for the ITFNZ’s culture to be examined and strategically improved together with the clubs. In thriving organisations, the culture is defined **by** the people **for** the people.

Club structure

Most of our clubs at ITFNZ are organized with one head of club, managing all aspects of the club’s life.

One of the issues we have at ITFNZ, is our aging instructor population and the lack of a proper succession planning. These instructors are spending a lot of their time teaching, administrating, organizing, and contributing to ITFNZ's events. These responsibilities can lead to burnout as the amount of support provided by ITFNZ is limited due to its business model. ITFNZ can be seen as an entity that coordinates a conglomerate of independent entities, the clubs acting as sole traders entities (owned by the head instructor). When an instructor cannot continue or retires, this may lead to the end of that particular club.

Two questions arise:

1. Why is it so difficult to find someone willing to take over a club?
2. Should we re-consider the current ITFNZ-clubs relationship?

Club creation and succession planning

New black belts do not seem to be interested in establishing their own clubs or taking over a club but seem to prefer to train and achieve their own personal goals either competitively or socially. It is in part a reflection of our current society where there is an emphasis on personal (inner) development, a focus on the 'self' and pursuing what benefits the individual, declining responsibilities that could increase stress or reduce the pursuit of their own personal development.

Another reason a person may be reluctant to take over a club is seeing the amount of work and responsibilities their current club owner has. Many black belts are happy to instruct either as assistant instructors in class or leading their own class within a club, but not willing to accept further responsibilities. From discussions I have had over the years it appears that the administrative part of running a club is the main deterrent. When it comes to taking over a club, another deterrent is financial, as one needs enough money (personal or loan) to buy the business.

We should also ask the Youth Council to investigate why so few of us are willing to open or take over a club and what would it take for them to open their own clubs. This is an example of developing an organisational culture **for** the members **by** the members.

One option that could help address the reluctance to either create or take over a club due to administrative responsibilities would be to shift from a sole trader structure to a structure where the responsibilities are shared across several individuals: president, vice-president, treasurer, and secretary. More black belts could then be exposed to different parts of running a club, work as a team, and not feel overwhelmed. After a few years of such 'training' we can hope more black belts would be willing and interested in opening new clubs under the ITFNZ umbrella.

ITFNZ-clubs relationship

I would like to develop further my concepts of 'ITFNZ umbrella' and the 'tremendous mind shift' that could be required to help ensure a sustainable future to ITFNZ. Assuming that the decrease we see in membership and club numbers is the result of three main factors: societal change (individuals focusing more and more on their own personal self as commonly reported in the media) which has been exacerbated by the pandemic, an aging

instructor population stopping or retiring, and the administrative burden putting off black belts from creating or taking over clubs.

Different alternatives exist that could help address these issues and establish ITFNZ as a leading organization within the international TaeKwon-Do community. This of course needs to be discussed by the entire New Zealand community as in my opinion it is paramount, for an organization to be successful, to ensure that everyone has a voice and to create a thriving culture: **for** the people, **by** the people. Such discussion could take place during a purposefully organized summit or a series of hui across the country to ensure that every voice can speak and is being heard.

Here is one thought provoking alternative. ITFNZ would become an overarching organization providing support and structure to clubs. It would provide:

- Common templates for structure
- Marketing such as websites
- Centralized IT functions for all administrative purposes
 - E.g., membership tracking web app
- Maintain a pool of substitute instructors across regions that could be called upon when an instructor cannot teach his/her classes (illness, away for work or competitions) and when they do not have black belts available to help in their clubs

These are just examples as there could be more ways the organization could support clubs. The collateral advantage would be from an external viewpoint where new prospective members would have the same professional 'feel' when contacting different clubs. Also, club leaders would not have to create everything from scratch.

The clubs would have to be organized in a collegial approach as mentioned earlier: president, vice-president, treasurer etc. This is mainly to spread the load of responsibilities from one person to several as well as encouraging younger/new members to start taking more responsibilities hopefully leading to a stepping stone for opening new clubs.

For larger clubs, or clubs in small cities, we can also explore the satellite structure where there is one main club with one satellite per suburb. Each satellite would have one black belt acting as the main instructor but still being part of, and training at, the main club under the head instructor. The organization of the club and its satellites would be unique, however, with one president, vice-president, treasurer, and secretary. This way the responsibility of the satellite instructors would mainly be teaching only.

Private clubs (as in the current sole-trader type situation) would be encouraged and supported to some extent for those who wish to become professional instructors. These clubs would then be considered as ITFNZ franchises.

Communication

Nowadays, to be successful an organization must have a flawless communication strategy. It takes years to build a reputation and mere seconds to lose it. Over the past 20 years and with the emergence of social media, communication departments have become more and

more a central part of successful companies. It is heartening to see that ITFNZ has understood this and has a Communications & Social Media Coordinator. However, it is worth mentioning and recalling a few issues. The key phrase here is: timely transparency.

In 2020, we have had the 'Master Salton affair'. The decision taken by ITFNZ to evict Master Salton from its midst was correct and necessary however the speed at which communications were made was lacking. It gave the feeling that ITFNZ was 'reactive' instead of appearing to be 'proactive' and in full control of the situation. The latter provides a sense from the public that an organization is fully aware of what is happening, has already taken measures, and is implementing additional policies (if necessary) to ensure that no such situation is repeated. The former leads to a loss of trust that can go viral with rumours spreading either by word of mouth or social media. Unfortunately, such rumours were spread during the Salton affair.

In 2023, Carl van Roon and Kerry McEvoy decided to part from ITFNZ and join another ITF organization. To my knowledge, no communication has been made on the ITFNZ's website. We still do not know 'officially' that something happened. Again, this lack of timely transparency leads to rumours and mistrust.

Most recently, Master Mark Banicevich and Master Peter Graham took the decision to retire from Taekwon-Do. However, yet again, no communication is to be found on the ITFNZ's website. Master Banicevich's photo and background have also been removed from the website without any information being given which can lead to further rumours.

ITFNZ needs to have a clear communications policy which defines what type of information is published on which channels. Some information may be appropriate to communicate via social media channels, but other types of more critical and official matters would need to utilize more formal channels such as the national ITKD website or emails directly to members.

[The International Taekwon-Do Federation \(ITF\)](#)

The theme for the essay is 'our organisation'. It is natural to consider ITFNZ but we could also interpret this as our overall organisation, mainly the ITF itself. Although this is probably not the intent behind the question we are asked, I will provide some thoughts for consideration as well.

The main opportunity for improvement I see with the ITF is that it is not leading by example when it comes to organizational structure and communication. This is an issue because by not providing a good leading example, national Taekwon-Do organisations across the world do not have a strong role model of good practices to replicate and follow.

The organizational structure of the ITF is similar to what I described earlier as a collegial structure sports clubs have: president, vice-president, treasurer, secretary, and committees. However, what works for small entities such as clubs, is not suitable for such a large organization with a Board acting also as Leadership Team. Again, I will compare the size of ITF to large corporations. The ITF is represented in more than 100 countries and most likely has 100,000+ members. This puts it on par with major corporations (Google has ca. 140,000

employees with offices in 60 countries). The comments I made earlier about ITF NZ in New Zealand therefore apply to the ITF on the world stage.

There is, however, an additional comment that applies to the ITF and to a lesser extent to ITF NZ, namely that it is mostly seniority based leadership. In the ITF Board of Directors, six out of eight members are Grand Masters and Masters. Consequently, the ITF is led by TKD technical experts. The issue with technical experts at the helm is that we do not necessarily get people with the range of skillset required to lead the organisation. To phrase it another way, we have the best people to lead the technical aspects of the organization but not necessarily the best people for governance and running of operations. When comparing with corporations worldwide, it is noteworthy that most C-level executives and board directors “only” have Bachelor’s degrees¹. When compared to TKD, a BSc and BA would be equivalent to 1st-3rd degree black belts, MSc and MA would be equivalent to 4th-6th degrees, and PhDs equivalent to Masters and GMs. By restricting ourselves to a small pool of candidates (7th-9th degrees) as opposed to a much larger group (1st-9th degrees) we probably pass on extremely talented leaders that could bring the ITF at a similar level of professionalism than large corporations of similar size.

The second issue I can raise is about poor communication and the lack of transparency. Again, not leading by example can cascade down to national organisations. A recent example from 2021 is when Grand Master Pablo Trajtenberg decided to leave our ITF and join another organization. This was a major event given the high profile of our former president. Official communications were published quite late, and rumours spread like wildfire on social media very early on. Overall, from a communication point of view, the situation was very poorly handled. This was even more disappointing as Grand Master Paul Weiler was elected on a promise of transparency which did not materialize when it was most needed. This highlights the need to have a clear communication strategy in place at all levels of our organization.

Final words

This essay is in no way a criticism of our organization. At all times our leaders’ hard and good work is visible and valued by ITF NZ members. The leaders have invested countless hours over the years, more often than not as volunteers, and in a selfless manner.

My attempt here is to provide some food for thoughts and try to think holistically to what could be done to ensure a successful and sustainable future to our organization. I know many of my suggestions will be perceived as challenging and provoking, but I firmly believe that these are the questions that need to be discussed if we want to be in a position to adapt to the way society has changed and the way it is going to change in the next 20 years.

¹ Note that many C-level executives later earn MBAs often sponsored by their companies to recognize their hard work and potential but this does not replace their initial core skills and learnings