

## Quality, accountability, change

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### Abstract

At a time when Higher Education providers are increasingly being held to account for the career outcomes of their graduates, improving preparation for professional life has become a priority for many conservatoires. Recent employment data indicates that graduates of higher education music programs will commonly engage in *portfolio* or *protean* careers that will require them to be pro-active in their planning in order to ensure the sustainability of their careers. This has produced a growing awareness of the need to provide programs that will enhance students' prospects of employment. This paper presents a case study of one conservatoire that has attempted to provide a balance in its program offerings between the demands of traditional performance goals and the skills required to assist in maximum employability.

### Keywords

Conservatoire, portfolio career, skills, professional preparation.

### Introduction

While the current economic climate has had an obvious and profound effect on international financial markets, its impact has been no less significant on institutions of higher education, at least some of which have been forced to respond to their changed circumstances by making changes to undergraduate programs. In the United Kingdom, the United States, Canada, Australia, New Zealand and elsewhere, governments have increasingly tied funding for education to learning outcomes as measured by government-determined standards. These standards are generally linked to government-approved outcomes such as better employment.

A number of academics (e.g. Corson, 2002; Gale & Densmore, 2003; Luke, 2003; Meadmore, 1999; Sachs 2003; Parry & O'Brien, 2000; Gewirtz, 1999) have used the term *corporate managerialist discourse* to denote the logic that drives this sort of

policy. One clear manifestation of the application of this discourse, according to Corson (2002), is the drive towards standardised testing linked to notions of accountability that are among other things presumed to measure improvements in learning:

[G]overnments across the world are saddling [educational] ... systems with an extravagant array of tests and assessments, so much so that some warn against the arrival of the "evaluative state" that will be tied in all respects to a doctrine of competition, measurable results, and efficiency. (p. 7)

According to Ranson (2003), accountability is no longer "merely an important instrument or component within the system", but "constitutes the system itself" (p. 459). It seems reasonable to claim that in conservatoria, as in many other professional communities, audit cultures work as all-embracing mechanisms for validating quantifiable measures of a limited set of outcomes over broader educational goals. It is within this context that the vocational outcomes of individuals have come to matter a great deal in educational institutions such as conservatoires.

It is therefore no longer sufficient for a new graduate to have knowledge of an academic field alone. Increasingly it is necessary for students to be provided with skills that will enhance their prospects of employment (Fallows & Steven, 2000). As a result university departments have been placed under increasing pressure to include activities in their curriculum that are vocationally oriented (Gee, Hull, & Lankshear, 1996; Poster, 1995; Reddan & Harrison, 2010).

For music institutions, this includes the need to acknowledge that "whilst in many professions the model of a regular, salaried, permanent role that one can develop as a career over many years holds true, this is far from the case for musicians" (Burt-Perkins, 2010, p. 277). As Weller (2010) argues, "unlike students pursuing careers in (other)

professions, ... graduates in liberal arts fields... rarely have a clear-cut, predetermined path into professional life” (p. 276). Indeed, according to Bennett (2010) almost all musicians will be self-employed in some area of their work and furthermore, two-thirds of them will work both within and outside of music.

### Skills

Maintaining instrumental/vocal performance standards at an elite level is a priority for conservatoires and therefore performance studies are central to most programs. This is reflected in the curriculum design and credit point allocation where performance and practical components are usually awarded considerable weighting, normally in excess of 50% of a program. As Bennett (2008) argues, however, the term *musician* is not just restricted to somebody who plays a specialty instrument but more commonly refers to somebody who will engage in diverse work patterns around the concept of music. Mills (2004) also reminds us that “locking yourself away in a practice room for four years ... is not a route to success ... personal fulfilment and happiness are found more readily in collegiality and an openness to new experiences” (p. 197). Although at most conservatoires, students are required to enroll in academic courses, it is assumed that performance is the dominant way they will experience music in their lives and consequently their application to acquiring other skills can be limited.

The overwhelming view expressed by presenters at the International Society for Music Education World Conference in Beijing in 2010 was that being a professional musician consists of multiple roles, including the ability to undertake a broad range of activities and being able to adapt to changing circumstances. These include “performing, composing, arranging, producing, organizing, directing, teaching, researching, critiquing, philosophizing, promoting, advocating and facilitating” (Hannan, 2010, p. 278). Graduates will commonly engage in *portfolio* or *protean* careers that are “varied and diverse and which lack formal structures for progression and promotion” (Burt-Perkins, 2010, p. 277). Protean musicians will therefore need to be “pro-active in their planning” (Smilde, 2010, p. 277) and will need to be able to assemble a portfolio of income-generating activities to ensure the sustainability of a career.

This phenomenon is not entirely new. Bridgstock (2005) notes that individuals with careers in the fields of fine and performing arts often fit into a protean model and have done so for at least the last decade. Indeed, the majority of historically

significant leaders in music over the past several centuries have engaged in music in a variety of ways including performance, composition and the nurturing of students. The portfolio career does raise many challenges for music institutions as they seek to balance traditional performance goals with the need to prepare students for a diverse and sustainable career. Put simply, in addition to learning the distinct skills required in their choice of specialised instrument, students will need to gain both broad and deep knowledge about their constantly changing profession.

While most universities have recognised the need to adapt and ensure that graduates have generic skills required for future employment, conservatoires have been slow to respond to the increasingly diverse needs of the music industry and the community it serves. Beeching (2010, p. 276) argues that “often faculty and staff in academia can be oblivious to the difficult realities...and changes in, the real world career paths” and as a result students are uninformed about many non-traditional and entrepreneurial possibilities. Carruthers (2010, p. 276) supports this view, arguing that institutions are largely responsible for the “unrealistic expectations” of students as the model they currently adopt assumes that “students who perform well will have successful (if not brilliant) careers”.

Burt-Perkins (2010) suggests that institutions provide a “space within programs for the development of the skills necessary not only for the objective facets of career, but also the subjective” (p. 277). Smilde (2010) supports this notion stating that one way of assisting students to build their future careers is through creating space for students’ own interventions and leadership. According to Smilde, students need to be encouraged to be pro-active in their planning and need to be equipped with life long learning skills which are essential in preparing them for constant change. Hannan (2010) states that students will need skills to develop strong networks of collaborators across different sectors of the music industry and will need to be up-to-date with technologies relevant to production, presentation and marketing. He also argues that through reflective practice, the protean musician is better equipped to develop strategies for career success and fulfillment.

Weller (2010) argues for both reflective and practical approaches within a curriculum. This, she states, will help safeguard against the danger of developing students’ generic career skills without their understanding how they might apply them within their lives. The inclusion of short range and long-terms goals and the development of strategies to implement these generic skills are also essential.

According to Weller, if students are taught to act, think and interact as music professionals, with business skills and with “intra-preneurship – learning deeply and honestly about oneself” (2006, p.178), then they will be able to deal with ever evolving and changing careers encompassing new challenges and opportunities (ibid).

While the time-honoured music teaching practice of one-to-one instruction is a method that is well entrenched in the teaching culture of most conservatoires, it is clear that it is not necessarily the most effective method for developing the skills outlined earlier. This traditional model of teaching takes place in isolation and insulation and aspires to develop musicians who demonstrate high level performance competencies, deep musical understandings, and a core of personal confidence. It tends however, to be teacher-centred and students may become dependent, rather than adaptable, self-monitoring and self-directing. As a result many students lack the independence and the skills required to achieve a sustainable career.

In light of the current situation, the question for tertiary institutions becomes, how do they provide a balance between the demands of traditional performance goals and the skills required to assist in maximum employability? And in doing so, how do institutions maintain the highest possible performance standards without destroying the primary purpose of their existence which is, as many would argue, excellence in performance?

There are currently some institutions in the United States and Europe (e.g. Weller, 2010; Huhtanen, 2010) that have addressed the need to offer highly innovative courses or programs which focus on musicians’ personal attitudes toward the music business. These institutions have realised that the inclusion of such courses in degree programs is not only desirable but an essential element in equipping graduates for the 21st century. There is still however, some resistance and skepticism in Australian conservatoires about offering anything other than performance related skills. It is timely therefore to ask how far *have* we come in our commitment to providing students with the skills they will need to gain both broad and deep knowledge about their constantly changing profession?

The following case study is a response by one tertiary music institution which has recognised that its graduates will need to have the ability to self-manage, direct their own careers and adapt readily to change, in addition to acquiring performance skills appropriate for successful music practice.

## Case Study

The Conservatorium site of this study, like most conservatoires, has offered tertiary training in the major strands of western classical music, namely performance, composition, and academic subject areas since its inception in the late fifties. The program offerings have continually evolved and now include popular music, multimedia, world music, pedagogy, musicology, music technology, research and education preparation pathways.

During the course of the last five years however, there has been increasing concern relating to the largest program of offering, the Bachelor of Music (BMus) program. The BMus has a total enrolment of over 600 students and is currently offered as a four-year degree with optional third year exit point. The core business of the BMus degree remains performance, composition and pedagogy. Within a four-year structure, the default strands to which all students are admitted are Performance, Composition, Performance and Pedagogy and Advanced Performance. The three-year exit degree is a generic Bachelor of Music without strand qualification (2006, Curriculum review).

The BMus program has undergone two internal reviews since 1991 and one external review in 2006, all of which have highlighted the need for change. The external review recommended that the Conservatorium carefully review its curriculum and strategies in relation to contemporary performance practices, teaching and other professional opportunities, by taking into account the broad skill-basis needed to respond to the realities of a portfolio career for musicians working in the first decades of the 21st century (External review 2006).

In response to this recommendation, the Conservatorium enunciated a number of aims for the Bachelor of Music program including its intention to:

- produce graduates who are highly skilled, musically adaptable and equipped to enter professional life as creative and flexible 21st century musicians;
- develop pathways of study that help the acquisition of skills including adaptability, self-motivation, technological literacy and breadth of vision necessary to succeed in the contemporary music industry; and
- develop in students a clear sense of direction and a repertoire of relevant professional skills built up through practical experience and workplace training.

A five-year review was undertaken in 2010 to ascertain whether or not these aspirations were

being met. As with previous reviews, the 2010 process was informed by comprehensive performance indicator data and substantial feedback from staff, students and other stakeholders. Information was collected through separate meetings with staff and students, student evaluations, graduate surveys and feedback from the music industry, along with benchmarking with other Australian and International tertiary music institutions (Carey & Lebler, in print).

During the course of the review, it was clear that teachers at the Conservatorium are committed to striving for excellence both in their own practice and in the achievements of their students. The strongest criticism of the existing program however, was the perceived limitations in preparing students for a life in music after graduation. Questions relating to the traditional model of performance training were also raised. In particular, does one-to-one teaching as it is currently practised, enhance or impede the development of personal confidence, musical understandings and learning competency, and can a diversity of pedagogical practices within this model increase the effectiveness and self-efficacy in music students?

In order to attempt to address the above, and to better prepare students for their likely futures, the Committee produced a number of core strategies, the most significant of which were the following:

- introduction of free choice electives including cross-disciplinary areas;
- introduction of a new suite of courses titled *My Life as a Musician* specifically addressing issues around life as a music student and preparation for professional music practice; and
- establishment of a research project to focus on identifying and disseminating empirical evidence about the nature of one-to-one pedagogy in the Conservatorium.

### **Free choice electives**

Prior to 2011 the program incorporated the development of musical skills including performance experience at a very high level, pedagogy and project-based learning courses intended to assist students to develop the skills necessary for success in the industry after graduation. However, the program structure was heavily prescribed with limited opportunities for students to exercise choices that would enable them to pursue their personal musical interests and no opportunity to study courses outside the Conservatorium. There were also evident weaknesses in professional/business skills which are essential to a portfolio career (Carey & Lebler,

in print). The new program structure provides students with an opportunity to engage with elective studies, both within the Conservatorium and in other areas. This will assist in the development of a sound knowledge of how the music industry functions and equip them with the business skills to identify opportunities and actively create employment.

Students are now able to enroll in a wide range of Conservatorium courses in addition to undertaking a limited number of free choice higher education courses. A further expression of this more open approach is the development of a double degree program in collaboration with the host university's Business School. Students undertaking the double degree program focus on music in the first two years and business courses in the final two years of the program, graduating with a Bachelor of Music/Bachelor of Business double degree qualification.

### **My Life as a Musician**

The second major innovation has been the inclusion of a suite of courses titled *My Life as a Musician*. The courses are designed to prepare students for life as a musician beyond skills relating directly to performance. They consolidate and make explicit a large number of aspects of life as a musician, providing preparation for a successful career in the myriad professions that form the contemporary musical arena. These courses assist students to understand that viable careers in music can take many forms. One of the mechanisms by which this goal is achieved is the presentation of a range of short video interviews, mainly with graduates of our BMus who have achieved success in ways they did not imagine would be outcomes of their studies. These stories include accounts of success in genres other than those studies as well as such diverse activities as creating music for film, forensic audiology, journalism, management and games design. Students' awareness of how to capitalise on their degree is enhanced through inclusion of practical information and the development of reflective processes. Gaining broad and deep knowledge about the field of music beyond a "performer's identity" (Huhtanen, 2010, p. 278) assists students to discover what a constantly changing music career one might encompass and how one actually makes it a reality (Weller, 2010).

These courses are considered central to the degree and are therefore mandatory in each of the 4 years of the program. The structure of the program is such that these courses do not reduce students' potential to engage with appropriate levels of performance training.

### Research into one-to-one pedagogy

The third significant core strategy has been the establishment of a research project intended to track and monitor emerging approaches to tuition in music performance, to investigate the effects on student learning, and to compare local findings with related sector-wide studies. The project will map how the interactions between teacher and student in one-to-one tuition occur and identify and characterise the observed pedagogical practices. It specifically focuses on staff-student interactions in one-to-one sessions conducted by Conservatorium staff. The aim is to clarify and present pedagogical practices that allow students to acquire a broader, relevant range of skills that will have a life-long impact on professional growth and development. The intention is to assist students to learn and self-evaluate in ways that improve their prospects in contemporary, portfolio careers.

### Conclusion

The need to balance practical skills for the elite performer with the need to provide realistic opportunities and skills for all students to survive in the music industry is an ongoing challenge for conservatoires. The implementation of the strategies described in this paper does not provide a panacea for all the problems facing music graduates entering the uncertain world of the music profession; neither does the paper purport to address the complex employment issues for *all* music graduates. It does however provide a broad framework for learning, which ensures that music graduates are as well equipped as possible to meet employment challenges. By providing a *space* in programs for the development of necessary non-performance skills and by encouraging students to be pro-active in their planning (Smilde, 2010), at the very least, career satisfaction for graduates both within and beyond music can be more readily assured.

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