

Virtually Yours – The creation of Australia’s First Virtual Conservatorium

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What began as a conversation in a McDonald’s restaurant in early 2000 and culminated in a successful doctoral thesis a few years later – also initiated a lasting concept in music education and arts management. ‘The Virtual Conservatorium’ (TVC) provided Australia’s first online Bachelor of Music degree and supported a Master of Arts Administration for national and international students.

A Virtual Bachelor of Music

The initial question posed was ‘How can a conservatorium in a geographically isolated area (Mackay, Queensland) with a relatively small catchment area survive and thrive in the 2000s?’

The *Central Queensland Conservatorium of Music* (CQCM) had been absorbed into the larger Faculty of Education and Creative Arts at *Central Queensland University* largely because of its struggling economic situation. The entity had been given an ultimatum in the late 1990s – ‘shut down’ or find a solution to its economic woes. The University decided to give it a last chance for rejuvenation.

With the responsibility clearly in the back of our minds we scowled the opportunities available and decided that an outreach (virtual) Bachelor of Music might be a possibility supported by a hybrid offering of a Master of Arts Management (itself worthy of a discussion at another time).

Grappling with the notion of being virtual – but at the same time ensuring student support in the more practical aspects of the program – the decision was made (supported by the Faculty and the University) to provide classes online – and provide a hybrid option (location specific) for principal study and ensemble classes.

The program ran for several years = quite successfully and of course with its own set of challenges – until both authors departed for The *Australian institute of Music* in Sydney to further the concept into the Australian Virtual Conservatorium (AVC) – sadly the opportunity did not reach fruition due to a change of ownership.

AGME online Bachelor of Music

In part inspired by *The Virtual Conservatorium* - the *Australian Guild of Music Education* (now the *Australian Guild of Education*) developed a full Bachelor of Music online in 2016 and had it re-accredited in 2019 (still in operation today) fully available online.

The course had the USP (prior to the pandemic) of being one of the few awards available (nationally and internationally) fully online - servicing domestic students and offshore students – though predominantly nationally.

The program was well received from the outset with modest enrolment numbers. With changing regulations regarding F2F for international students – the program remains viable – but would have to consider a hybrid variation as well as the challenges of ‘caps’ being placed on international enrolments.

COVID-19 environment

The COVID-19 pandemic was a major disruption given the various Australian State lockdowns and ironically impacted on enrolments at AGE. The rest of Australia of course was required to embrace the notion of online learning – at all levels – whether they liked it or not.

Our own Schools at the time (*Group Colleges Australia/Australian Academy of Music and Performing Arts*) embraced the technology given the expertise and capital investment available. Ongoing surveys of international students indicated extremely high levels of satisfaction and support of the online mode for postgraduate business students – domestic undergraduate performing arts students on the other hand longed for a return to the physical classroom – largely to do with the practical elements of their courses.

A number of exciting online options emerged including Work Integrated Learning (WIL) online presentations (from all over the world); the development of a bespoke invigilation program (*Invigilator Plus*); and the use of streamed live performances – all became a mainstay and remain in use. The technology and mode also provided the option for Group Colleges Australia of opening two additional campuses to Sydney – including Melbourne and Adelaide.

The mode was online and later morphed into hybrid and/or F2F.

Current opportunities

The entire exercise (initially chosen and then mandated) taught us valuable lessons and has provided rise for further innovative ideas – a few come to mind:

Online meetings have become extremely useful – and have cut down on considerable expense and effort when it involves interstate travel. If used effectively it can be a most useful mechanism.

Online subjects remain with us today. Our own institutions provide numerous online options – usually of a theoretical/historical nature – and are supported by F2F practical options where applicable. This is best viewed as ‘hybrid’.

Full degree online is still operational at AGE. This will continue for domestic and offshore students – but may have to be adjusted for onshore international students given the current ESOS requirements of no more than 30% online.

What began as a possible (almost risky) innovation to attract additional students – and it certainly worked - has morphed over some 25 years into a valid (and during the pandemic mandated) mode of delivery in the world of music (as well as other disciplines). The lessons learned will certainly assist in moving forward in this domain in a positive and informed manner.

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