

The New Reality of Australian Higher Education in the Performing Arts

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November 2022

Heraclitus, the Greek philosopher (535 BC – 475 BC) is credited to have said, “Change is the only constant in life”. This is most likely a paraphrased notion from Plato’s written records τὰ ὄντα ἰέναι τε πάντα καὶ μένειν οὐδέν (All entities move and nothing remains still) and δις εἰς τὸν αὐτὸν ποταμὸν οὐκ ἂν ἐμβαίης. (You could not step twice into the same river).

More than 2000 years later, Charles Darwin’s *Origin of Species*, published in 1859 indicates that ‘it is not the most intellectual of the species that survives; it is not the strongest that survives; but the species that survives is the one that is able best to adapt and adjust to the changing environment in which it finds itself’. (Megginson, 1963)

In more recent times, John F Kennedy once said, ‘Change is the law of life and those who look only to the past or present are certain to miss the future’. Winston Churchill concluded, ‘To improve is to change; to be perfect is to change often’ (Rooyen 2022). George Bernard Shaw observed that “progress is impossible without change, and those who cannot change their minds cannot change anything”.

Subsequently, the notion of change is not a new one, but the *New Reality for Australian Higher Education in the Performing Arts* relates to how efficiently and effectively we manage and adapt to the constantly changing post-Covid tertiary landscape.

Changes in Student Demographics

In the aftermath of the coronavirus pandemic, Performing Arts institutions now compete for a share of a smaller market that has a reduced financial freedom due to the current rates of inflation.

In 2012, data from the Queensland Curriculum and Assessment Authority (QCAA) found 23,035 Year 12 students were enrolled in one of the five arts subjects, which include music, visual art, drama, dance, and film, television and new media. Eeles (2022) states that in 2021, there was a total of just 12,772 enrolments — a drop of more than 44 per cent. As the pool of secondary school students studying performing arts decreases, the competition to attract potential students to tertiary degrees increases exponentially.

In 2022 Australian Bureau of Statistics reported that the balance of work and study had changed for young people aged 15-24 years:

- 26% were fully engaged primarily through full-time work in 2022, compared with 24% in 2021.
- 50% were fully engaged primarily through full-time study in 2022, compared with 53% in 2021.

Changes to Course Delivery

The COVID-19 lockdowns of the past few years have forced all tertiary Performing Arts institutions to reassess almost every aspect of how they operate. Bichard (2022) indicates that whatever 'new normal' emerges for individual performing arts institutions, whether it includes continuing to deliver online or in hybrid models, interacting digitally or harnessing emerging technologies to innovate, it is the speed and quality of the adaptation to technological advances that will set institutions apart.

An example of essential adaptability is the James Morrison Academy of Music (JMAM). With the closure of its tertiary qualifications in jazz music, the JMAM is now to be delivered as a pop-up academy, "Since we started seven years ago, we've been focused on the tertiary sector," James explains. "It's been fantastic but through various things – COVID, our partnerships – that was coming to a close; I thought, 'this is an opportunity'". (Rose 2021)

Resistance to Change

I have observed many staff and institutions who are reluctant to change because their concerns are that *quality* will be affected. One of my closest colleagues noted that these people probably could not even spell the word let alone understand the potential positive benefits of change to education quality.

The measure of quality for Performing Arts institutions was historically determined by the standards of their best alumni. The National Institute of Dramatic Arts (NIDA) has benefited from the success of alumni Mel Gibson and Edith Cowan University's Western Australia Academy of Performing Arts regularly relies on the undeniable success of its alumni Hugh Jackman.

This has in some cases skewed the measurement on educational quality. In most instances these students are self-motivated and already possess many of the skills and attributes required. In a similar concern, as it is very selective to gain a place in these institutions students are reluctant to report on critical issues such as poor quality teaching, bullying and sexual harassment.

To try and replicate this notion many of the well-known tertiary performing arts institutions have relied on smaller intakes of candidates who are already exceptionally accomplished in their chosen field before undertaking tertiary study. As the potential intake demographic changes this is not a sustainable approach.

In NSW, ATAR scores will be adjusted by up to 10 points to encourage female participation at university in some courses. Over the past few years cut-off scores to enter many university courses have also fallen. When economic factors for potential employment are then considered, many potential performing arts candidates now have less impediments to study other tertiary courses.

The New Reality is that the responsibility of the Performing Arts institutions is to ensure that quality is measured on the educational journey of the majority of the students and not just the performance standard of a select few of the graduates.

In anticipation of this, the Australian Government established the Quality Indicators of Learning and Teaching (QILT) that surveys data from all tertiary students. It covers 6 key areas of:

1. Quality of entire educational experience
2. Teaching quality
3. Learner engagement
4. Learning resources
5. Student support
6. Skills development

These quality measurements are more indicative of a quality education for the majority of students rather than just the achievements of an elite few. The results are made public on the qilt.edu.au site and many potential students are now using this to guide their choices for tertiary study. The internal student response in the survey for 'Quality of entire educational experience for undergraduate university students' (Qilt 2021 p.15) demonstrated some of the established Go8 university's performance in this survey period had fallen significantly.

Changes to Strategic Planning

Instead of out-dated, traditional strategic planning, tertiary performing arts organizations need to consider an entirely new strategy and putting a roadmap in place to go somewhere new. In the past 18 months, most tertiary performing arts providers have pivoted (sometimes dramatically) from their existing 5-year Strategic plan.

"Flexibility is the name of the game when business conditions and customer buying behaviours are shifting," said Wasley (2022). "Sometimes the smartest thing a company can do is step outside of their comfort zone and be willing to walk away from their former strategic plan and take smart steps to the unknown.

These concepts are not new as in his 1994 book, *Rise and Fall of Strategic Planning*, Henry Mintzberg highlighted many weaknesses of the five-year plan and carefully exploited why it's an obsolete instrument. To put it simply, a five-year plan holds practically no strategic importance to an exponential organization. You could even say it's a plan for eventual death for rapidly growing companies. Such plans can only send a company in the wrong direction chasing a goal that's passed its usefulness, or can send them in the right direction, however, running after an inaccurate representation of the future. In both cases, the organization is headed towards its doom.

Concluding Thoughts

Jack Welch remarked, "If the rate of change on the outside exceeds the rate of change on the inside, the end is near." It is imperative that Performing Arts institutions are proactive and facilitate change before the ramifications of not acting quickly enough become a detriment to the ongoing nature of the business. A flexible mindset to embrace quality change effectively to ensure organizational excellence is a key to building resilience and sustainability in this New Reality.

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