

# An engaged approach to redesigning a Bachelor of Music Education

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## Abstract

Education degrees are constantly shifting in order to remain relevant and contemporary within changing curriculums and teaching paradigms. This change is vital to ensure the degrees meet the requirements of a practicing teacher in today's schools. One method of informing such changes is to investigate the views and mine the wisdom of practicing teachers. As part of a review of the Bachelor of Music Education degree at the University of Canberra, a survey of music educators working across all school sectors in the ACT was undertaken. The aim of this research was to ascertain the relative importance of a variety of musical skills and understandings that new music educators needed to have upon exiting the degree and entering the teaching profession. Yet the act of engaging in this research project yielded a far richer result than just the redesign of a single university degree. This research served as a launching pad to rekindle strong connections between practicing music educators and their training institutions that has the capacity to deliver a far superior educational experience to the students.

**Key words:** music, teacher education, engagement, change management

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## Introduction

Education degrees are constantly evolving in order to remain relevant and valuable to political priorities and new educational paradigms. This evolution is vital to ensure university qualifications provide the skills and essential attributes to a practicing teacher in today's schools. It is equally vital to guarantee that graduating students enter the teaching profession with the necessary standards of professional knowledge, practice and commitment (NSW Institute of Teachers) to embark on their teaching careers. To accommodate for these shifting priorities and new educational foci, degree structures and content undergo periodical review and redesign. These are accepted motivators for change (Dubrin & Dalgligh, 2003), but possibly a stronger

motivator to change come when a degree is simply dying.

Dying may seem a strong word to describe what may just be the natural decline of a university award, after all, just as degrees are renewed through review and redesign, others are discontinued due to lack of interest or need (Yoshida, 2002). Yet this degree, a Bachelor degree in Music Education in Canberra, Australia, serves a great need within the educational community. Local music educators consistently bemoaned the lack of qualified music teachers available for the large number of teaching positions in the public, independent and private school systems in the region. So if it wasn't a lack of employment opportunities, what was it that was failing to attract students wishing to become music teachers and to study in Canberra?

Put simply...neglect. The degree had no champion and therefore it received no marketing support, the content did not reflect the needs of a 21<sup>st</sup> century teacher, and relatively minor administrative problems, such as timetable clashes, were becoming so unmanageable that students were leaving the course in their first year. Consequently there were not enough graduating students to make the degree financially viable. The education community needed the teachers but the degree was not meeting the needs of community.

This paper will outline the context, research project and resultant findings from a committee review process aimed at revitalising the degree structure and attract more students to the music education profession. Yet this is only half of the story to the resurrection of this degree. The open and engaged approach used during the act of reviewing this degree has had a broad, deep and completely unexpected impact on the professional relationships of all involved. The associations between practicing music educators and their training institutions in the region have improved significantly. Furthermore through these relationships the capacity to explore an exciting model of professional and educational engagement has been realised.

## **Educational and professional context**

The location for this study is Canberra, Australia. Canberra is part of the Australian Capital Territory (ACT), the smallest territory in Australia and one that was specifically built to house the Australian Federal government in 1910. While it is the national capital of Australia it is a city of just over 350,000 residents.

There are three tertiary institutions in the city, the University of Canberra (UC), Australian National University (ANU) and Australian Catholic University (SIGNADO). The University of Canberra grew out of the Canberra College of Advanced Education in 1990 and was originally a vocational

education institution. It caters mainly for undergraduate students but is moving to increase its postgraduate student intake. The Australian National University was established in 1946 and is ranked at number one in the 2010 Australian University Research Rankings. It has a significant focus on postgraduate study and research. The Australian Catholic University has a smaller presence in Canberra with a Faculty of Education. In a city with a population of only 350,000 supported by three independent universities, the market for students is fierce and inter-university relations ebb and flow.

The number of professional organisations representing music educators in the region mirrors the population size with a few small organisations trying to represent music educators locally. At the time of the research project a state chapter of a recognised body such as the Australian Society of Music Educators (ASME) did not exist. This made industry involvement in the project more difficult, although a young and yet to be incorporated professional organisation, the Australian Capital Territory Music Educators Network (ACTMEN), did represent a large number of the ACT's music educators at the time.

## **The Degree**

The degree under review is awarded through UC with students undertaking pedagogy and general education units at UC and music units at the ANU School of Music. This mode of delivery is unique as approximately 60% of the degree is delivered through an institution that is independent from the awarding university. It is common practice within Australia to deliver music education degrees through a single institution that shares enrolment, assessment and grievance procedures. Bridging two independent and naturally competitive institutions adds a layer of complexity to the successful delivery of the degree. This degree is also delivered in two streams, Classical and Jazz, and although students do 'cross over' and study units in either school the

current pathways are significantly different and thus yield very different student experiences. The degree structure is accredited through the New South Wales Institute of Teachers (NSWIT) and has mutual recognition across all Australian states and territories.

## The Research Project

The degree, and consequently the supply of music teachers into the local education systems, seemed set to cease in 2008-9. A series of seemingly innocuous independent events contributed to a dramatic turn in the health of the degree. New leadership at both the UC Faculty of Education and ANU School of Music brought new vision and impetus. Support for the review and renewal of the degree came from the university hierarchy, a new course convener was appointed to manage the degree and a formalised representative industry body was formed. The degree had not one champion, but a coalition for change.

Representatives from this coalition quickly became a committee charged with the review of the course with the most pressing outcomes to attract and retain a larger number of students in the course. The 'felt needs' and deficiencies in the degree, previously expressed by many music teachers, degree students and degree lecturers, were clarified into a list of problems to be addressed (Morrison, 1993, p. 13). Normally findings from previous review processes would be consulted, current students would be interviewed and all staff involved in the degree delivery would be surveyed. Unfortunately this degree and the timeline for its recovery could not withstand a long wait for a specialist's attention, it needed triage and emergency care right now. Formal data from previous reviews was not available to the committee and the number of students enrolled in the current course was so small that their experiences, while valuable, could not be statistically significant. The review required research, a status report of the degree if you

like, that the review committee could base any redesign decisions upon. The research needed to complete the engagement process with both universities and industry partners within a 6-week time frame. This was necessary in order to leave sufficient time for redesign and subsequent institution approval and accreditation. As course convener I was chosen as the lead researcher.

During the initial consultation period the committee identified that we were entering into a change management process, and that selecting a relevant model to guide our actions would be appropriate. In a very organic and seamless manner the committee identified that in the first two meetings we had completed the first three stages of Kotter's *Eight-Stage Process of Creating Major Change* (1996). These were:

1. Establish a Sense of Urgency – the degree would be discontinued and the supply of locally trained music teachers to the ACT would cease.
2. Creating the Guiding Coalition – the review committee had been formed.
3. Developing a Vision and Strategy – to attract and retain a larger number of students by redesigning the degree.

As this model seemed to mirror the natural beginnings of the degree redesign we chose to use it as a guide.

The research project served as a vehicle to complete the next stage of Kotter's change model, *communicating the change vision*. The research project took the form of a skills audit; a survey of practicing music educators on the perceived importance of a variety of skills and knowledge required by newly graduated music teachers. The survey participants were the members of the ACTMEN organisation that had 69 members at that time with 43 working in the secondary school system, with a 44% response rate. The survey content was designed in a collaborative process between the researcher and several key members of the ACTMEN organisation. The survey questions were designed to measure the perceived level

of importance of a range of understandings and skills needed by a new music teacher entering the school environment. The research project communicated to the wider community of music educators that we, the guiding coalition, were looking for a new vision for the degree and role modelling a desire for authentic change (Kotter, 1996).

Such an approach is aligned with the social efficacy or research-based approach to teacher education development, the notion that teacher education should be consistent with the realities of teaching (Cochran-Smith & Fries, 2001). Two recent studies (Ballantyne & Packer, 2004; Roulston, Legette, & Trotman Womack, 2003) assisted in determining the direction and format of the survey. Ballantyne and Packer (2004) examined the knowledge and skills perceived to be necessary by early-career music teachers in their practice. Roulston, Legette & Trotman Womack (2003) looked at beginning teachers perceptions of the transition from university to the teaching profession. These studies used data gained from student experience, a data source that was not available in this case. This study would approach similar issues as the above-mentioned studies from the point of the practicing music teachers. There would be numerous benefits to this approach, the data would be current, regionally specific and authentic but it would also place the beliefs and professional wisdom of the region's practicing music teachers at the centre of the research study.

One of the particularly negative outcomes from the neglect of the degree was the unwillingness for practicing music teachers to mentor pre-service teachers during their degree. They expressed a lack of connection, and at times mild contempt, toward both universities and believed the degree structure was out of date and complicated. Without their willingness to mentor pre-service music teachers, the degree was quite simply, undeliverable. Based on the adage *people support what they help to create* (Weisbord, 1987)

it is hoped that by involving practicing music educators the acumen of the degree within the region would improve.

As a broader frame of reference for music teacher education reform the work of Ballantyne (2006) on a 'unified understanding of an ideal teacher education course' (p. 1) was useful. Ballantyne's study examined the educational model that early career music educators felt best prepared them for the music education profession, and would have minimised any 'burnout' or praxis shock. After comparing the academic, social efficacy, developmentalist and social reconstructivist traditions, the study found that early career music educators would have preferred none of the individual approaches but a simultaneously integrated tradition. The UC degree at the centre of this research project was firmly located in the academic tradition and lacked this integrated approach that was attractive to students. By collecting and analysing data from the current teaching community in the region, a new light could be shone on structure and content of the degree and support more of a social efficacy tradition. The research study would be a first and a significant step towards this new paradigm, but due to the neglect suffered by the degree there was no hope of moving from an academic tradition to an integrated tradition in one review cycle. This degree required small and sustainable change to be of benefit to the current and future students.

## **Managing relationships**

Successfully managing the relationship between two naturally competitive universities, the local community and industry partners during this research project was a challenge, but one which was integral to the success of the project and survival of the degree. Burton and Greher (2007) examined at length the significant benefits of school-university partnerships and implored both music teachers and music teacher educators

to overcome the boundaries to realise the potency of such a relationship. While Burton and Greher focus was on benefits of shared practice, Winter, Wiseman and Muirhead (2006) explores the idea of engaged research between community and university spheres and promotes 'applied and locally relevant research [as both] a continuation of past trajectories and a newer form of scholarship' (p. 218). Bringle and Hatcher (2002) comment on the nature of university-community relationships in terms of motives, 'the best relationships are those that are self-affirming and supportive [yet] the motives to protect "me" and to support "we" are too often incompatible' (p. 513). The relationships also need to remain dynamic to support the concept that 'implementing change is an on-going process of discovery, with thoughtful questions continually being asked throughout the change journey' (Mento, Jones, & Dirndorfer, 2002, p. 46). In term of this research project the process and the outcomes needed to be beneficial to all and emphasis placed on the possibilities and positive results. The research findings needed to remain grounded in the local environment and the relationship needed to remain consistently supportive.

While the review committee waited for the findings of the research study they continued to explore and refine the source of the degree's ailing health. Some of the culprits were relatively minor; how can the two universities communicate better to resolve any timetabling issues and how can the audition experience be less intimidating for students and reveal better information on their musical and educational aspirations. The focus of these conversations and to an extent the research study design was aided by strategic questions posed by Hope (2007). These questions were 'what would we like to achieve? What are the qualities of our aspirations? Who are our students and what do they want? How effective are we at addressing kinds of knowledge in music and the learning styles of students in various generations?' (p. 8).

These questions served as touchstones for the review committee, informed the research study design process and eventually the analysis phase. This step also satisfied the fifth stage of Kotter's change process; *empowering broad-base action*, where obstacles, systems and structures that could undermine the change vision began to be identified and removed (1996).

While these questions were being explored the survey was completed. The scope of this research project was specific and small. The purpose was to inform the review committee of the skills and understandings that practicing music teachers in our region perceived were important for a newly graduated teacher to possess. It was one part of the treatment plan for the ailing degree and the findings were viewed in the context of a large and far more complex problem. The findings would go on to direct visible improvements in the degree structure and content, Kotter's sixth change stage, *generating short-term wins* (1996). Some parts of the problem were easily cured, others would take time and some needed to be addressed in a way that recognised the symbiosis of the core issues between the two universities.

## Findings

The data was presented to the committee in a number of different diagrammatical forms, including individual pie charts and cumulative tables. The representation that was most useful to the committee was a relative frequency graph, or tag cloud (Figure 1), as it was both easy to understand and rich in data. Interestingly, it was discovered that in no instance was the median answer for any question rated as below important, meaning the participants perceived everything to be important but then ranked relative levels of importance. This led to further discussions within the committee concerning the balance of responsibility between tertiary institutions and workplace mentors to adequately prepare pre-service teachers for the profession.

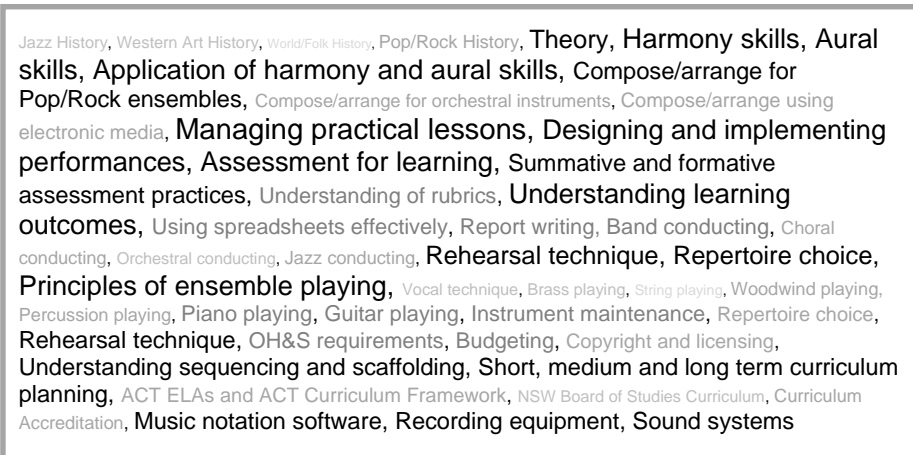
One of the more interesting comparisons to make is the understanding and skills perceived to have a high level of importance with those that have a low level of importance (Table 1). While the former list is somewhat predictable the latter list prompts some deeper questions about the state and nature of music education and music educators currently working in the region. Of the 48 understandings and skills listed, 28 fell into the medium level of importance.

The first interesting outcome was the listing of Jazz and World/Folk Music History at a low level of importance. Considering the current division of the degree into Classical and Jazz streams, and with both the admission and graduation rate of twice as many students from the Jazz stream than the Classical stream, where has this perception come from? This could be influenced by the educational background and training of the current membership of ACTMEN and the self-selection of responders to the survey itself. Specific data to establish the factors that may influence this finding was not collected in the survey, as it was not included in the initial brief. Thus the outcome, although interesting, cannot

be expanded upon at this time but could lead to a targeted study in the future.

NSW Curriculum and Curriculum Accreditation may not be significant to the Canberra music educator as the ACT uses a school based curriculum model and accreditation is only required every five years. Generally a senior teacher or a team undertakes this process. The final two skills are of most interest, *Orchestral Conducting* and *String Playing*. Is this due to a lack of value among the music teachers for orchestral music and string instruments or a lack of cultural support within a school for this broad genre of Western Art music? To achieve a modicum of success on a string instrument it is generally agreed that students should begin tuition between 3 and 8 years of age. Therefore could the issue be that tuition on string instruments is not widespread in primary schools in the ACT and therefore music teachers in the secondary school sector are unable to form orchestras due to lack of players? Again this is an area that deserves investigation and comparison with other Australian schools and states.

**Figure 1: Skills audit tag cloud.**



## The future of the Degree

This research study provided invaluable data to the Review committee, data that continues to be analysed for its implications. Several immediate changes were implemented as a result of this survey and the review process. The twin-streamed degree was amalgamated into a single stream. To create an appropriate balance for students between broad and specialised music learning, multiple elective options were included so students can still undertake study in a particular areas of interest, such as Jazz, recording techniques, musicological research or composition. The music history elements are now more balanced and broad. Both studies in Music Aural and Music Theory have been integrated into history and composition courses to provide relevance and context to these skills. Composition is now taught explicitly as an applied creative process in a dedicated unit. The philosophy behind performance training has fundamentally changed and is far less wedded to the traditional concepts of musical training for elite Classical or

Jazz performers. These choices consolidated the procedural and logistical changes that had begun during the review stage, and in turn completed Kotter's (1996) seventh stage of change with increasing levels of change and new projects starting to develop.

The mere act of conducting the research led to a multitude of positive associations and discussions between previously disconnected groups of music education professionals within the region. These discussions enriched the redesign process and served to bring the otherwise disconnected parties together with one goal in mind, a greater number of confident and well prepared music educators who meet the graduate standards of professional knowledge, practice and commitment. As part of the continued development of the degree an alignment with the concepts expressed by Johansen (2007) concerning educational quality will become more important. Even before the new degree structure was introduced in 2010 the change in attitude and openness to new ways of approaching music

**Table 1: Relative importance of skills and understandings.**

High level of importance	Low level of importance
Understanding learning outcomes	Jazz Music History
Understanding sequencing and scaffolding	World Folk/Music History
Assessment for learning	NSW Curriculum
Principles of ensemble playing	Curriculum Accreditation
Music Theory Skills	Orchestral Conducting
Music Harmony Skills	String playing
Aural Skills	
Application of harmony and aural skills	
Managing practical lessons	
Designing and implementing performances	
Ensemble rehearsal technique	
Repertoire choice	
Large Musical Performance	
Rehearsal technique	

education students in the audition process lead to an increase of over 400% of offers and acceptances into the degree in 2009. It is hoped that these new attitudes coupled with the new degree structure and content will maintain or increase those numbers in 2010.

This research study shone a light on a number of other, rather unexpected, outcomes that warrant further investigation. To what extent may the survey group have interpreted *level of importance* as *frequency of use*? A complimentary question could be the concept of the value or worth of these skills and understandings to a music educator and how they assign that value. These questions need to be viewed in the context of the unique ACT school system where music teachers personally design their curriculums to a far greater extent than music educators in other Australian states. This may also be influenced significantly when the National Arts Curriculum is introduced in 2013. It would be valuable to know how their personal values, and by extension their musical training, influence their curriculum design and focus.

During the redesign process a philosophical push-pull issue occurred. Should university awards solely cater to the current needs of industry or can and should these awards develop and hopefully improve the quality of music education delivered in the classroom with each successive cohort of graduates? This research highlighted a perceived lack of importance of orchestral and Jazz genres and the issue arises as to whether as a team of tertiary teacher educators we are happy with this situation. Furthermore, in what ways could this finding be impacting on the learning outcomes for secondary students in the ACT?

The review and redesign, although effective and useful to a point, was only half a review. To strengthen the findings and complete the review spectrum, recent graduates should have been surveyed using the same tool. This process was attempted but so few of the graduates could be contacted that the results would not have

substantially aided the review.

Possibly the most pleasing of the unexpected results was the sense of renewed collaboration and collegiality amongst music educators all over the region. The educational content and value of each students experience is now at the forefront of lecturers and mentors minds and has already made a significant difference to the student's learning experiences. This renewed trust and energy has extraordinary potential to underpin a large variety of innovative and sustained developments across all areas of music education in the region as well as on a national level. At the time of writing UC, ANU and several ACT public and private schools are exploring a formal partnership that would create opportunities for both pre-service classroom teachers and instrumental music teachers to study and train using a Work Integrated Learning model. ACTMEN has instituted an annual conference that has been well attended for the past two years and attracted presenters from around Australia. The community of music educators now has a voice in the National Curriculum through this professional body. Kotter's (1996) eighth stage of change, a culture of change, is now firmly anchored in the behaviours and leadership of the many stakeholders in this degree. To maintain this relationship with mutual benefits for all parties a model such as Wenger & Snyder's (2000) Communities of Practice would be ideal.

The research study question was sourced from a similar study undertaken by Ballantyne and Packer (2004) and as mentioned earlier omitted the reference to capacity which students perceived they possessed at the end of their teacher training degree. There is significant scope, as a greater number of students graduate from the degree, for an additional longitudinal research study to take place around teacher capacity.

Ultimately it is the student's experience of the degree that will truly test how successfully this study has informed the review process. The coalition for change, the champions that began this review, now has the new challenge of assuring



the quality of the learning experiences for the students. The all-important enthusiasm for the continue development of the degree still prevails and as the evaluative cycle rolls onwards the value of these findings will be tested and refined. The next generation of music educators awaits us.

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