Expanding Understandings of the Prior Learning, Hopes, Fears and Expectations of Commencing Conservatory Students

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There is strong theoretical support for the notion that learning characteristics developed by students through experiences before higher music education will affect engagement with educational processes and outcomes. This project seeks to enhance understandings of this "preage" learning. An earlier pilot study found that students entering conservatories have more diverse experiences, expectations and learning strategies than might be assumed. However, many programs provide tightly focused training for careers that are likely to be diverse and changing. We have therefore extended the study to examine the prior learning and expectations of students entering music courses in Australia, the USA, and the UK, exploring similarities and differences according to program of study and location. Data were collected at the beginning of the 2008-2009 academic year from an Australian Conservatorium, an Australian university-based Academy of Performing Arts, a Conservatoire in the UK and a degree-conferring College of Music in the US. The questionnaire asked about prior learning experiences, expectations of higher education music study, and future careers. Responses were compared according to institution, program of study and musical genre. There were substantial differences between institutions in most prior learning categories, but differences between institutions and genres in students' hopes, fears and aspirations were surprisingly small. All cohorts were much more hopeful than apprehensive. The US Bachelor of Music (BMus) deals with popular music so these responses were regarded as popular music responses. Other BMus cohorts in the survey study classical and jazz music. While BMus students had more private lessons than popular music students and often started younger, all cohorts reported diverse learning experiences and all students drew on a wide range of feedback. Popular students however favored band mates, friends, and family for feedback, while BMus students relied more on teacher feedback. Popular music students listed on average three to five musical activities whereas BMus students tended to select only one or two activities. Informal learning situations including bands or friendship groups were important to all cohorts, particularly popular music students. This presentation suggests that music students have knowledge, skills and hopes that are often not addressed within their studies. Programs designed to match "preage" with "process" would seem appropriate. One model does not fit all students and program development should be informed by our increasing knowledge of what the students bring to their studies.