Assessment in Music: An Approach to Aligning Assessment with Learning Outcomes in the Higher Music Education

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Abstract

This paper focuses on the progress and findings of the Assessment in Music (AiM) project. It addresses the alignment between learning and assessment by exploring the nature of academic standards as they are applied in higher music education across Australia. Funded by the Australian Government’s Office for Teaching and Learning (OLT), the project team has been engaged in the mapping of all core assessment tasks in Bachelor degree programs at the lead institution to the Creative and Performing Arts Threshold Learning Outcome statements (CAPA TLOs), the Graduate Attributes (GAs) of the lead institution’s host university, and the Australian Qualifications Framework (AQF) Learning Outcomes.

Central to the project is the process of consensus moderation as a means of ensuring assessment standards at the lead institution, as consensus moderation has been adopted at its host university to enhance the validity and reliability of assessment practices. This presentation reports on both the findings of extensive mapping exercises and the results of consensus moderation processes with teaching staff. A list of music assessment tasks which align with the CAPA TLOs and AQF requirements will be the focus for discussion.

Keywords: Assessment in music, learning outcomes, alignment.

Introduction

This paper details the progress and findings of the Assessment in Music (AiM) project. Funded by the Australian Government’s Office for Teaching and Learning, the project explores the nature of academic standards as they are applied in higher music education across Australia. It focuses on learning outcomes for music degrees, drawing on the experiences of staff and students across a range of programs and musical sub-disciplines—jazz, musical theatre, music technology, popular and classical music—for the purposes of identifying best-practice assessment processes. The approaches and strategies in this project are intended to provide an evidence base for the on-going development of assessment practices in music and other creative arts disciplines.

The project’s main aim is to explore the degree to which assessment standards and practices in higher music education in Australia aligned with the Threshold Learning Outcome Statements developed for the Creative and Performing Arts (CAPA TLOs) (Holmes & Fountain, 2010). In this paper, program means a program of study for which a qualification is awarded, and courses are those individual subjects or units that constitute a program of study. Because no program-level assessment is conducted in the Australian context, outcomes at the program level are understood through analysis of the assessment tasks associated with each of the core (or required) courses within a program, and the accumulated assessments are regarded as a proxy for program-level assessment. In order to gain an appreciation of the degree to which assessment practices at the lead institution align with the CAPA TLOs, an extensive mapping exercise was conducted. Assessment tasks for all 350 core undergraduate assessment items were mapped against the CAPA TLOs and the host University’s Graduate Attributes (GAs).
Traditionally, assessment in conservatoire settings—particularly the assessment of musical performance—is conducted largely according to the protocols of individual institutions and without external validation. It should be noted that new Australian Qualifications Framework (AQF) (2011) regulations now require degree programs to publish learning outcomes, the achievement of which must be demonstrated through course assessments, but this was not the case at the start of this project. In light of these new regulations, the project team further extended the mapping exercise to evaluate the alignment of assessment tasks in capstone courses in relation to the Bachelor Degree learning outcomes specified in the AQF. A capstone course is usually undertaken in the final stages of a degree program and offers the student an opportunity to demonstrate learning across the program, usually through authentic assessment tasks. Results indicated that not only did capstone assessment in the four Bachelor degree programs at the lead institution ensure that all students were assessed for their achievement of the AQF Bachelor Degree learning outcomes but that a variety of assessment tasks in all years of these degrees also fulfilled the Bachelor degree learning outcomes, thereby satisfying the requirements of the AQF.

Context

Monkhouse’s (2007) extensive study of Australian assessment practices in music at the Bachelor level highlights an emphasis on the development of performance ability as the primary goal of higher music education and the main focus of its assessment practices. However, as represented by the CAPA TLOs, a broader set of skills are now viewed as equally pertinent learning outcomes for students preparing for careers in the Arts. With this in mind, the lead institution undertook a thorough review of its Bachelor of Music program (see Carey & Lebler, 2012) and engaged with several completed projects which examined non-traditional assessment strategies (see for example Lebler, 2008a; Harrison, Lebler, Carey, Hitchcock, & O’Bryan, 2013). Results from these studies indicate that a major component of assessment at this site involves solo and ensemble performance, and that alternative forms of assessment such as peer, self and group assessment remain underutilised in this context.

As the Creative and Performing Arts include creative writing, dance, screen and media, drama and performance and visual arts (as well as music and sound), the project team noted the non-specific nature of the CAPA TLOs and thus the need to contextualise them within the discipline of music. In order to develop a shared understanding of how these outcomes align with specific program level outcomes in music, the team applied consensus moderation strategies to determine to what extent existing assessment tasks in music relate to these broader industry knowledge and skills outcomes.

The six Creative and Performing Arts Threshold Learning Outcomes for bachelor degrees are:

1. Demonstrate skills and knowledge of the practices, languages, forms, materials, technologies and techniques in the Creative and Performing Arts discipline.
2. Develop, research and evaluate ideas, concepts and processes through creative, critical and reflective thinking and practice.
3. Apply relevant skills and knowledge to produce and realise works, artefacts and forms of creative expression.
4. Interpret, communicate and present ideas, problems and arguments in modes suited to a range of audiences.
5 Work independently and collaboratively in the Creative and Performing Arts Discipline in response to project demands.

6 Recognise and reflect on social, cultural and ethical issues, and apply local and international perspectives to practice in the Creative and Performing Arts Discipline.

Methodology

Drawing on the work of Sadler (2007, 2009, 2011), the lead institution has prioritised accountability in its assessment practices as part of its host university’s focus on assessment, which employs consensus moderation using exemplars of previous student assessment tasks to ensure consistency of marking and develop a common understanding of standards. In this process, academics consider a range of student responses to a particular assessment task and share their views on the standard of achievement demonstrated by these responses. The consensus moderation approach has been adopted for the AiM project, through which project team members work independently and then collaboratively to review the alignment between learning and assessment and national threshold learning outcomes in tertiary music programs. As a means of working towards a broader inter-institutional consensus on standards of student achievement, a similar process will be undertaken at the project’s partner institutions. The sharing of a variety of standards as exhibited in audio recordings of performance examinations will assist in ensuring comparability of the grades awarded as measures of student achievement, and will provide a model for moving towards sector-wide consensus.

Description of process

The process of collecting data to date has included the mapping of assessment tasks and refinement of assessment strategies for all compulsory undergraduate courses at the lead institution. Initially, the team collated the learning objectives for each of the 350 core undergraduate assessment items and mapped the relationship between these assessment tasks and the nineteen Graduate Attributes of the host university, which were further aligned with CAPA TLOs. The initial analysis indicated that all the Graduate Attributes (and by extension, CAPA TLOs) were assessed repeatedly. Given the extensive research already undertaken into the Bachelor of Popular Music (BPM) (for example, see Lebler & Carey, 2008; Lebler, 2006, 2007, 2008a, 2008b, 2010, 2012; Lebler, Burt-Perkins, & Carey, 2009) this instance is used as an example in this report, but similar findings apply to the other study areas.

In the BPM program, Graduate Attributes were each assessed more than 20 times in semester 2, 2011 in the 34 assessment activities analysed, and more than 18 times in semester 2, 2012 over 23 assessment items. The difference in the number of assessment items is a consequence of the reduction in the number of required courses in this program and a corresponding increase in elective courses not included in the analysis. This translates to the CAPA TLOs being assessed between 28 and 34 times across the duration of the degree program. If the claims in course profiles are valid, then the required learning outcomes are being thoroughly assessed in this program; however, such claims for alignment were thought to be excessive. Particularly noticeable were the large number of courses that claimed to be assessing for capacity to recognize, reflect and engage critically on social, cultural and ethical issues, and apply local and international perspectives. As a result, a form of consensus moderation was requested whereby the academics responsible for the design of course profiles consulted with another academic to ensure they were in agreement as to the claims made for the assessment of GAs.
In order to identify current perceptions of assessment, the team has also conducted focus group sessions with teachers and students at the host institution to discuss the perceived relationship and relevance of the six CAPA TLOs to current assessment practices. All interviewees agreed that current methods of assessment successfully addressed the CAPA TLOs in an ongoing, developmental manner. During discussions teachers displayed some concern about appropriately interpreting the level to which students could be seen to demonstrate learning outcomes and questioned the extent to which the CAPA TLOs represented a professional industry standard.

Tacit individual criteria and standards were seen to play a central part in the assessment process. While external criteria were very important, teachers often made judgments according to a student’s demonstrated ability and according to each student’s unique combination of strengths and weaknesses. In general, given adherence to both external and internal subjective criteria, interviewees granted that gross disagreement in panel assessment almost never occurred, and that when significant differences were noted, agreement was always reached through consensus.

**Mapping the AQF Learning Outcomes**

While the main objective of the AiM project was to address the degree to which assessment standards and practices at the host institution align with the CAPA TLOs, a natural progression of this evaluation was to identify to what extent these assessment standards and practices satisfy the requirements of the Australian Qualifications Framework (AQF). This recently revised national framework for regulated qualifications in Australian education and training has provided a new direction for the project, creating an advantageous extension of the mapping analysis already completed.

Of the 10 AQF levels, a Bachelor Degree is identified as Level Seven. Graduates at this level are identified as possessing “a broad and coherent body of knowledge as a basis for independent lifelong learning”, “cognitive skills to review critically, analyse, consolidate and synthesise knowledge”, and the application of knowledge and skills “with initiative and judgement in planning, problem solving and decision making in professional practice” (Australian Qualifications Framework, 2013, p. 13).

This phase of the process involved mapping the program level outcomes for the Bachelor of Music, Bachelor of Popular Music and Bachelor of Musical Theatre programs at QCGU to the AQF learning outcomes, the GGAs and the CAPA TLOs. The aim of this exercise was to identify if assessment tasks in these programs ensured that all Level Seven AQF outcomes are evident in each qualification, and that all graduates have an opportunity to demonstrate them through assessment tasks. Specific assessment items were then identified in which all students engage, and in which the AQF learning outcomes are demonstrated and assessed. The results showed that in each of these three programs, there are several examples of assessment tasks which satisfy all AQF learning outcomes, all program level outcomes and all CAPA TLOs. Therefore, the lead institution can demonstrate with confidence that these three Bachelor degree programs satisfy the accreditation requirements of the AQF.

In the Bachelor of Music program, the mapping exercise was then extended to identify if Level Seven outcomes were being demonstrated in core courses and common electives in each year of the degree. Indeed, several courses satisfied the AQF learning outcomes through a combination of assessment tasks. These included the most advanced core performance courses, and a vast range of electives. Specific assessment tasks which satisfied all AQF learning outcomes include: artistic performances, listening journals, research essays, written
tests, in class presentations, critical reviews, group presentations, written examinations, portfolios, analysis tasks, proformas and project reports.

Conclusions and future directions

The finely nuanced processes described in this paper have provided the AiM project team with a complete picture regarding the ways assessment processes at the lead institution relate to the AQF and CAPA learning outcomes for Bachelor degree programs. Results indicate that the process of consensus moderation has been instrumental in developing consistency of marking and a common understanding of standards at the host institution. The mapping process used provides a possible template for other institutions to emulate and may indeed apply in the evaluation of assessment practices in other Arts areas.

Next steps for the AiM project include the development of a consensus moderation workshop delivered at international assessment symposia to illustrate how constructive alignment between learning outcomes and assessment practices has been enacted at the host institution. Additional focus group sessions with staff and students at the lead institution will provide much needed data to further inform the team of the impact of revised assessment. Finally, a repository based on examples of work and assessment procedures currently in place at the lead institution will be developed and housed on the project website (assessmentinmusic.com.au). It is anticipated that an open invitation to all national and international tertiary music schools will assist in creating a database of assessment tasks and procedures which will be instrumental in developing inter-institutional standards for the assessment of higher education music.

References


