


**Promoting professionalism: Developing self-assessment in a popular music program**
Abstract
Higher music education usually has the development of professional musicians as one of its core goals, a primary learning outcome, though the meaning of this goal may vary between institutions. The ability to conduct independent and autonomous assessment of work while it is in production is one of the characteristics of professionalism, though the intentional development of this skill is not necessarily present in higher music education. In many contexts, degree programs are now required to be able to demonstrate the achievement of their learning outcomes through their assessment processes.

Self-assessment has been included among a variety of assessment processes in an Australian popular music program for more than a decade, and since 2011, the main self-assessment activity has been conducted using a purpose-built on-line assessment tool. While the primary motivation for the development of the tool was to enhance the student experience of a complex assessment regime, a collateral benefit has been ready access to detailed data on all aspects of the process. The development of students’ ability to make systematic judgments about the quality of their own work in the context of their degree program can now be evaluated, and from the end of 2013, cohorts that have used the on-line system for the entire duration of their degree can be tracked through each of the six semesters of their program, to establish how their self-assessment abilities have changed over time.

Data on the performance of various aspects of the assessment process will be presented, particularly focusing on comparing self-assessment with assessment conducted by panels that include a number of students and a teacher. The marks awarded by the assessment panels constitute 60% of the course result and are routinely cross-referenced with the marks awarded by the teacher panel member, the assumption being that a close correlation between these marks demonstrates validity. Comparing self-assessments with panel assessments provides a measure of the students’ ability to apply the same criteria and standards to their own work as will be applied by the members of assessment panels later in the process. It was hypothesised at the time this process was designed that students’ abilities to conduct valid self-assessment would be improved by engaging with the process in each of the six semesters of the program,
and that students should perform this task better as they progress through the program. Current data enable this hypothesis to be tested.

Keywords
assessment, self-assessment, participatory assessment, experiential learning, popular music pedagogy

Introduction
Institutional leaders in Australia are quickly realising that strengthened regulation of higher education not only provides a framework for reporting, but also provides impetus for reform and renewal of curriculum, driven by new demands for accountability in the assessment of learning outcomes. Acronyms for regulatory bodies like TEQSA (Tertiary Education Quality and Standards Agency Act 2011), the AQF (Australian Qualifications Framework, 2013) and the HESP (Higher Education Standards Panel, 2013) have become part of the normal academic vocabulary, and being mindful of changing regulatory contexts has become a fundamental requirement of working in the higher education sector. In practical terms for those at the coalface of higher music education, the main change is that degree programs are now required to have published learning outcomes, informed by the AQF, by statements from the HESP, and by discipline Threshold Learning Outcomes (TLOs) (Holmes & Fountain, 2010), which were developed for the Creative and Performing Arts discipline cluster of which music is a part. Higher education institutions are subject to periodic evaluation by TEQSA to ensure compliance with the requirement to be able to demonstrate graduates’ achievement of their programs’ learning outcomes as well as a number of other regulatory requirements.

Though there is no national curriculum for higher education programs as there is for other levels of education in Australia (“The Australian Curriculum,” 2013), new regulations are in place for all higher education providers that mandate the volume and level of learning required for various levels of qualification (Australian Qualifications Framework, 2013). Generic statements about the learning outcomes that graduates should be able to demonstrate through their assessment tasks have been developed, and each degree program must customise these including reference to the relevant discipline Threshold Learning Outcome statements and any professional accreditation requirements that might apply. Under current regulations, graduates must have demonstrated their achievement of all their program’s learning outcomes through their assessment tasks.
Among other learning outcomes, graduates of the Bachelor of Popular Music (BPM) program investigated here are expected to have a “basis for independent lifelong learning”, as well as “cognitive skills to review critically, analyse, consolidate and synthesise knowledge”, and also be able to “exercise critical thinking and judgment in identifying and solving problems with intellectual independence”. They should be able to “demonstrate the application of knowledge and skills with initiative and judgment in … decision making in the professional practice of music and/or scholarship” and “adapt knowledge and skills … for independent and collaborative learning and professional practice…” (“Bachelor of Popular Music Program Learning Outcomes”). These references to independence and professionalism indicate that the ability to self-assess should be among the attributes developed in this program. Indeed, eminent scholar D. Royce Sadler proposes: “students should learn how to appraise complex works using approaches that possess high scholarly integrity, are true to the ways in which high-quality judgments are made professionally, and have considerable practical potential for improving their own learning” (2009, p. 53). There is ample evidence that these skills can be developed and exercised through self-assessment and peer assessment (Blom & Poole, 2004; Boud, Cohen, & Sampson, 1999, 2001; Daniel, 2004; Hanrahan & Isaacs, 2001; Hunter, 1999; Hunter & Russ, 1996; Lebler, 2008, 2013; Sadler, & Good, 2010; Searby & Ewers, 1997; Spiller, 2011), both of which are included in the process under investigation in this paper.

Context
The BPM program has been the topic of a number of publications and further details on the assessment process described briefly here can be found elsewhere (see for example Lebler, 2006, 2007, 2008, 2010, 2012, 2013; Lebler, Harrison, Carey, & Cain, 2013; Partti, Westerlund, & Lebler, Forthcoming). A Popular Music Production course is included in each of the six semesters of the BPM program. Students submit recordings of their original music and associated written work along with a written description of their intentions for each track submitted, an account of the contributions of others involved, and their observations on the outcome. Most importantly for the current project, each submission is self-assessed using the same criteria, standards and marking guides as assessment panels use later in the process.

Each assessment panel includes seven or eight students drawn from all year levels of the program along with one teacher. Each panel will assess the complete submissions of seven or eight students also drawn from all year levels. Panel members have access to the submitted material through the Bachelor of Popular Music Assessment Tool (BoPMAT) at least five days before their panels meet and they are expected to have conducted a preliminary assessment online before their panel meets for half a day in one of the reference standard
listening environments in the BPM facility. Panel members listen to each track and critically evaluate what they have heard before making their final individual judgments and awarding marks for each track as well as for the submission of each student as a whole. The ten marks awarded by each panel member for each of four criteria for each track are averaged, contributing 40% to the course mark. This is added to the averaged marks out of ten for each of two whole folio criteria, one for the quality and substance of the submission as a whole, the other for the quality of the self-assessment and reporting, resulting in the assessment panel being responsible for awarding 60% of the course mark. Half of the remaining 40% awarded by teachers is on the basis of the student’s performance as an assessor in the assessment panel process, and the other 20% is shared between a reflective journal (15%) and the project proposal due in week three of the semester (5%).

Findings
In most assessment situations, one or more teachers will conduct the assessment without input from students. In this context, comparing the marks awarded by an assessment panel with those awarded by the teacher member of that panel effectively compares results under the current system with those that would be achieved by the dominant model of teachers assessing without the involvement of student markers. It should be noted that data relating to instances of panel members failing to include all required marks have been excluded from the following analyses. Over the six semester period from 2011 to 2013, 45% of marks awarded by panels out of a possible 60 marks were within 1 mark of the teachers’ marks, 98% were within 5 marks, and all were within 8 marks, demonstrating a close correlation between teachers’ marks and panels’ marks. There were no substantial differences between semesters. A comparison of students’ self-assessments and the marks awarded by assessment panels will provide an indication of the degree to which self-assessment conforms to the expectations of the program. Figure 1 illustrates the relationship between self-assessment and panel assessment over the six semesters from 2011 to 2013.
The correlation between self-assessment and panel assessments is substantially less close than that between teacher assessments and panel assessments. It should be noted that students work independently to arrive at their self-assessed marks, while their peer assessments are effectively consensus moderated (Sadler, 2010) by their participation in the discussions that are part of the assessment panel process. Positive encouragement is given to improve this ability through its assessment having a significant marks value (10%), though its validity would have to be improved before self-assessment could contribute directly to an individual’s grade.

When this process was implemented, it was assumed that more experienced students would have benefited from past assessment experiences and their self-assessment abilities would have developed experientially. This assumption is supported in Figure 2 below, which illustrates self-assessment performance improving with experience.
It was also assumed that self-assessment performance would improve as a student progressed through the program, and that assumption is supported by the data for the cohort that commenced in 2011, represented in Figure 3.

Although there is considerable variation in this cohort’s performance between semesters, there is a general trend of improvement with experience, notably in 2013 when better online
reminders of marking criteria became available. Figure 4 shows the general improvement across all cohorts over the past six semesters.

![Figure 4. Self/panel comparison 2011–2013 all cohorts](image)

Comparing the difference in self-assessment performance between year one students and year three students (as shown in Figure 5) demonstrates that experience correlates more strongly with higher levels of performance and has less effect on lower levels of performance.

![Figure 5. Difference between year 3 and year 1 means](image)
Conclusion
The validity and reliability of the assessment panel system was demonstrated by the close correlation between teachers’ marks and panels’ marks and these results were consistent between semesters. Comparisons between self-assessment and panel assessment indicated a steady improvement both as an individual cohort progressed through the program and also overall from one semester to the next, indicating an incremental improvement in this aspect of the assessment process. Self-assessment performance improves with experience and this is evident at all levels of performance, though the impact of experience is larger at higher levels of performance. Substantial variations between self-assessment and panel assessment would preclude these results contributing directly to students’ grades. Regardless of this limitation, it is clear that developing students’ self-assessment abilities promotes professionalism through enhancing graduates’ abilities to make well-founded judgments about the quality of their own work while it is in progress, which is one of the characteristics of professional behaviour.

While the complexity of the assessment method referred to in this paper would not be appropriate in all settings and may not be achievable even in settings where it might be appropriate, assessment methods that include meaningful self-assessment would seem to be helpful in developing aspects of professionalism that will serve our graduates well in their futures. There are other models that provide opportunities for students to be the first markers of their own work that do not rely on technology and could be adopted in other settings where there is a desire to engage students in the development of their self-assessment abilities (see for example Partti et al., Forthcoming). However, there are costs associated with all assessment activities and the time needed to manage self-assessment processes must be acknowledged in teachers’ workloads for the practice to be sustainable; this may not be welcome in tight budgetary contexts, but the arguments for including student self-assessment are convincing. The ability and inclination to engage in valid and systematic assessment of their own work while it is in progress will enable graduates to continue to develop independently and assist them to adapt to professional contexts that may be substantially different from those for which our educational processes have been designed.

References


