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Identifying, analysing and aligning “the dream” with vocational preparation: An investigation into first-year music undergraduate career aspirations and motivations

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Abstract

As parent universities strive to produce work-ready graduates, tertiary music institutions are beginning to respond by changing their offerings. Consequently, vocational preparation, work integrated learning (WIL) and service-learning courses are becoming increasingly prevalent. For the majority of institutions, these are offered in the latter years of students' undergraduate Bachelor of Music and Music Technology degrees. Some critics consider this is too late. Rather, exploration of what it means to be a musician needs to be encountered early in the degree in order to optimally maximise and engage with undergraduate training. In Australia, it is debatable whether young commencing students are generally ready to accept the realities of the music industry and/or supportive of vocation training.

Traditional career goals such as orchestral employment are becoming less realistic, reducing linear career options, yet some tertiary music institutions with curricula aligned to these employment outcomes continue to thrive. To explore this phenomenon beyond the argument of demographics, population and arts policy, an entire first year Bachelor of Music and Bachelor of Music Technology cohort was asked about their vocational ambitions. As “The Dream” is the initial inspiration for short-term and long-term music career motivation, this paper will identify, explore and define 94 first-year undergraduate students' career aspirations. Intrinsic/extrinsic motivations, perceptions of required career skills and role models are additionally scrutinized. The findings of this study may serve as a guide for music institutions wishing to integrate similar programmes into the first year of their undergraduate Bachelor of Music degrees.

Keywords

music, vocation preparation, career aspirations, career theory, curriculum design

Challenges facing Australian Bachelor of Music programmes

Since the Dawkins reforms in 1988, Australian conservatoires have undergone many developments guided by the graduate attribute expectations of parent universities. As one example, the Queensland Conservatorium's Griffith University Academic plan 2013–2017 claims the “capacity to provide an excellent student experience and to produce outstanding, work-ready graduates” (2013, p. 9). In the tertiary music institution context, this incites the argument for *industry-ready* versus *industry-prepared* graduates.

Transition to music employment is rarely smooth upon graduation. A career in music requires training and experience in addition to a 3 to 4 year degree program. The music industry is affected by macro-environmental factors and the value of music, as perceived by consumers, governments and arts funding bodies is constantly changing. Consequently, linear careers such as opera and orchestral fulltime employment are rapidly declining, portfolio careers are a more viable option, and the nineteenth century conservatoire model is losing its practical relevance (Bennett, 2012). In addition, universities' expectations are becoming increasingly difficult to meet as the cost of tertiary music education currently exceeds the budget provided (Schippers, 2011; Tregear, 2014). Furthermore, curricula are already full, limiting space for suitable vocation preparation (Bennett, 2008).

Regardless, many tertiary music institutions offer core or elective music industry studies courses throughout Australian Bachelor of Music programmes (Daniel, 2013; Tolmie, 2013b). Ryan Daniel writes that Work-Integrated-Learning (WIL) programmes do exist and career preparation, entrepreneurship and enterprise learning may operate at an extra-curricular or hidden level (2013). However, he is concerned that overall:

there are a number of degree programs that maintain a focus on the practice of music, regardless of style or process, with limited time dedicated to developing an understanding of the broader context in which students will be required to operate, to develop a career and also to survive, not only artistically but financially. (2013, pp. 226–227)

My life as a musician

Recognising this need for a more formalised vocation education, the Queensland Conservatorium revised its Bachelor of Music (BMus) and Music Technology (MuTech) programs to include the *My Life as a Musician* (MLaAM) suite of core courses commencing in 2011 (Carey & Lebler, 2012). The overarching aim is to allow students to efficiently engage with their degree, understand the music industry environment, and adopt non-music business tools, thus creating industry-*prepared* and sustainable graduates. Initially delivered as a core subject one semester per academic year, the BMus programme now omits the second year and the MuTech degree includes these courses as electives from the 2nd year on. This reform avoids the “second-year slump” phenomenon (Loughlin, Gregory, Harrison, & Lodge, 2013) and acknowledges that the MuTech degree is a more industry-immersive programme. For this paper the focus is the foundation course, MLaAM 1.

Vocation preparation in context

First-year courses such as these have been trialled in other Australian conservatoires. The general reflection has been students have either not engaged with the presented music industry topics or felt their delivery too early, and out of context with the rest of their training (Tolmie, 2012). Typically, music industry subjects are now offered in the latter years of degrees (Tolmie, 2013b). Given the unpredictable nature of degree-to-employment transition, this may be too late. Ruth Bridgstock writes that students have an unrealistic understanding of graduate life and that “[c]areer management skill development needs to begin early in university programs and should be a mandatory and assessable component of coursework” (Bridgstock, 2009, p. 40).

As a compulsory degree requirement, MLaAM may suffer from student perceived devaluation within the curriculum (Colwell, 2012; Presland, 2005). This has been identified in other arts entrepreneurship programmes. Gustavson recognises “This ‘eat your peas’ approach is distasteful; at worst, submission actually dulls the creative juices - so claim many student artists” (2011, p. 72). Beckman also acknowledges a lack of engagement of these types of courses more so at the undergraduate level (2007). Previously ingrained misconceptions of music careers and romantic dream harbouring also contribute to this refusal to accept reality (Bennett & Freer, 2012).

The Bachelor of Music – a growing industry

Notwithstanding these obstacles, enrolments in music are increasing, not only in Australia (Bartleet et al., 2012), but also abroad (Dempster, 2011). This is surprising and provokes the

question, what is the primary motivation for students aspiring to a music career in the 21st century?

The dream

The inspiration to learn music is deep-seated in early childhood (Lehman, Sloboda, & Woody, 2007; McPherson & Welch, 2012). One's music career identity is influenced by intrinsic and extrinsic experiences prior to tertiary education (Creech, 2009; Creech et al., 2008; MacDonald, Hargreaves, & Miell, 2008; Tindall, 2005). The author understands that the initial career "dream" is not just powerful and long-harboured. It is a fundamental justification for sustaining repetitive hours in the practice room and enduring strong weekly criticism from peers and mentors. MLaaM may be perceived as a threat to students' primary source of motivation, and an inhibitor to their tertiary music education. In a user-pays education environment, this is a topic worth considering. This paper explores the question: How does an undergraduate course introduce the reality of the music industry, respect and retain "The Dream" and vocationally prepare for both?

Methodology

Data collection utilized a non-compulsory non-graded written Learning Support Activity (LSA), initiated in the first week of semester 2013, inviting all MLaaM 1 students to briefly reflect on elements of their chosen career path. The guiding questions were inspired by the research of Dawn Bennett and Patrick Freer (2012). The activity gave students the opportunity to clarify their intrinsic/extrinsic motivations and purpose for enrolling in a music course, consider their career prospects and the process required to achieve their goals.

Probable limitations of this form of data gathering include student perceptions of the task as "assessment" rather than a formative activity, possibly responding with what they considered the lecturer expected. However, it was made known prior that feedback would be limited to writing style and grammar to assist future assignments.

To encourage researcher objectivity, the LSAs were revisited seven months after submission, read with a content focus, then descriptively (Miles & Huberman, 1994; Saldaña, 2012) and from a values perspective (Gable & Wolf, 1986), then responses were coded according to common key themes encountered, guided by the question topic. The core subject of each question, displayed in parenthesis, was not visible to the students.

The LSA questions were:

- 1) What do I currently love about music? (intrinsic motivation)
- 2) What do I want to do long-term with my career? (career identity)
- 3) Why? (primary motivation)
- 4) Who inspires me to be a good musician? (extrinsic motivation)
- 5) What skills am I going to need to achieve my dreams? (career reality)

The initial codes were revisited and refined to develop more concentrated topics. Themes were then grouped into categorical codes. Ninety-four students out of a class of 170 (55%) submitted the LSA and while this is an acceptable response rate (Nulty, 2008) the reasons for non-completion by students must be considered. Using an online assignment collection interface may have been a challenge for some students, and others may have felt the reflective task either confronting or trite. Some students adopt a strategic approach to their degree choosing to engage with summative tasks only. Therefore, the participants for this study may be more engaged with the purpose of the course than non-participants, and more confident with sharing their career ideas.

An overview of results

Generally, the students' commentary appeared detailed and sincere regarding their aspirations and sources of inspiration, offering in many instances multiple answers. Students' reasons for career path choices revealed articulate comments spanning a continuum from self-gratification to altruism. Financial motivation was either not mentioned or deemed not important. Linear careers were a particularly common response with orchestral and opera the most dominant choice amongst the classical students. Music technology and jazz students demonstrated more acknowledgement of the portfolio career, but included fulltime studio-recording production or jazz-greatness as possible careers. A very high percentage of keyboardists desired to be a concert pianist.

Intrinsic motivation vs. primary motivation

Using Maslow's Theory of Human Motivation (1954), students' responses to what they loved about music produced a high propensity towards self-actualization. Self-expression/gratification/satisfaction were key words used throughout whereas safety and psychological needs were barely mentioned. Responses encompassing the social sphere were secondary as many students identified with the communicative nature of music and the social aspect it provides. Self-esteem was of comparatively minimal importance but present. These results correlated closely with the answers to question 3, that is, the principal reason for being engaged with music and the chosen career was congruent.

Career identity

Students proffered 1 to 4 options demonstrating that they either sincerely wished to achieve all these career opportunities, or acknowledged the need for a portfolio career/plan B. These responses were sub-, then further categorized into:

- Dreamer (D) n = 52 = 55% i.e. aspirations for highly competitive linear careers
- Realist (R) n= 28 = 30% i.e. aspirations for diverse non-linear and/or teaching, self-employment
- Artist (A) n = 12= 13% i.e. is career risk tolerant, rather seeking personal creative fulfillment, and
- 2% (n=2) did not respond to the question.

In summary, 55% of the respondents have ambitions for competitive careers that produce a secure wage, thus exhibiting a subconscious aversion to financial risk. Yet, they are risk-tolerant considering their gamble to obtain it. The reality is that not all music students will achieve their career dreams immediately post-graduation (Throsby & Zednick, 2010). However, the MLaaM course objective is not to destroy these aspirations, but rather recognises them as valuable motivation for degree and overall career success, and to prepare students for self- and alternatives forms of employment.

Extrinsic motivation

Students gave multiple answers to question 4. While some students were inspired by the repertoire they study, the majority claimed to be inspired by living people. Within this category high profile working musicians were the most predominant.

Career reality

Students identified a variety of skills required for their chosen careers, and responses were categorised as hard or soft skills with an additional category of enhanced education within and beyond an undergraduate degree.

Notwithstanding the vagaries of what soft and hard skills include, students strongly identified that they required a solid grounding in the rudiments of their craft to support their vocation. A degree in itself was regarded minimally significant, however networking and work experience, debatably part of one's degree, ranked highly. A minority considered the financial realities and concept of sole-trader activity, which remains at odds with the majority's preference for employment security. Time management was regarded an important skill by all. Further or enhanced education was not as significant to the students who are

perhaps yet to appreciate the concept of musicians as life-long learners (Hallam & Gaunt, 2012).

To stereotype, “typical” MLaaM students have high aspirations for a linear or highly competitive career, are focussed on their primary craft, and highly influenced by mentors and teachers second to their living “heroes”. These students understand the value of networking and communication but have not considered the stresses of finance or necessity for self-promotion. The concept of a portfolio career is understood, but more applicable to others rather than themselves. Their focus is on their current degree rather than future education options.

Implications for course design

It is no wonder that music industry courses delivered in the first year of an undergraduate course with hard skills as central topics are considered abhorrent, or at best tolerated by students. From this paper’s study, it would appear the Dreamers are destined for career disappointment and yet the most likely to disengage from vocation preparation. Therefore, should a course such as MLaaM remain in the first year of a Bachelor of Music programme only servicing the 30% Realists? Should it be a course with an evangelical purpose to convert the Dreamers? How does it relate to those possessing the arts-for-arts-sake mindset?

Aligning “the dream” with course content

The first year course needs to introduce the concept of possible selves (Bennett & Freer, 2012; Hallam & Gaunt, 2012), encourage degree maximisation and initiate fundamental career management. One can surmise that students will more likely engage with content relevant to their present exploratory phase of the career cycle and career aspirations.

With the above data in mind, course content can include discussion- and activity-based lectures on career choices including fulltime and self-employment possibilities plus what it means to be a musician. Relevant to all musicians of any age are the concerns of musician’s health. Networking, the value and best-practice of, lays the foundation for professional behaviour, which in turn supports social media marketing and likewise crowdfunding. As most students become active in some way in the music industry by the end of their first year of tertiary studies (Tolmie, 2013c), it would be remiss to exclude sole trader topics including invoicing, tax, insurance and financial planning. To support these theoretical concepts, video-interviews of active musicians and guest specialist lectures endorse the content.

Aligning “the dream” with course assessment

The assessment can be considered utilizing Bloom’s taxonomy for learning: Knowledge, Comprehension and Application (Anderson, Krathwohl, & Bloom, 2005). The possibilities for course tasks include:

- 1) Knowledge: Short answer or online multiple-choice quiz questions relating to the theoretical content (career theory, musician’s health, business basics and professional behaviour) providing a knowledge base for later assignments.

- 2) Knowledge and Comprehension: A report researching opportunities for one’s 5-year career plan identifying degree transition, degree engagement and industry immersion. In addition, a SWOT (Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities and Threats) analysis of the student’s chosen careers.

- 3) Knowledge, Comprehension and Application: Students reflect on their responses to the LSA questions, and undertake a networking field assignment as currently used in the MLaaM 1 course:

Identify and interview ... 3 music professionals representing the same or similar career path you wish to follow. Document their answers and highlight the similarities and differences in their responses and provide a critical appraisal *justifying your conclusions and impressions* of their answers. (Tolmie, 2013a)

This last assignment allows students to draw on their knowledge and understanding and apply it authentically, encouraging the development of a strong network while directing students’ attention to the realities of their chosen careers.

Students who have undertaken this task have expressed shock at how varied their interviewees’ employment lives were. Other surprises included the long time-delay for desired work, the further study required, how important financial management and self-promotion was to their success, and that almost all musicians taught for a living. Most, if not all, students resolved to seek work experience and choose their elective courses to support the development of a portfolio career.

Conclusion

As these findings demonstrate, there are many factors involved in career choice, degree success and employment outcomes, and higher music education has an obligation to prepare graduates for their likely futures. More longitudinal research is needed to track student outcomes, from a variety of locations, so that vocational preparation courses can truly serve students' future success, no matter what form it takes.

It is possible that the Realist, Dreamer and Artist students may not be found exclusively in music degrees. The ethos of MLaaM and its assessment design may be adaptable for other vocation sectors, perhaps even beyond the creative and performing arts.

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