

Finding the Edge

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Change? Institutions? The very word has always implied establishment, aversion to change. Not any longer. No more may institutions rest calmly against their sandstone edifices. Change is inevitable if they are to meet the challenge of competition for students, at both entrance to and exit from tertiary training, in a climate of what some would say is economic rationalism but I prefer to call “frugality”.

Institutions are responding to this stimulus by looking to find an edge ... in the market ... (for us as practicing artists) in the artform ... or in anything which might gain for them a chance of better students, better graduates, better funding. What do we mean by “an edge”? One automatically assumes that it is the sharpest point, implying superiority, the achievement of excellence. In fact, the word simply means “extremity”. In looking for the “edge” therefore, we must be certain to head for the extremity which will bring with it the greatest advantage!

This paper offers one example of the search for an edge in an increasingly demanding and exacting marketplace. It is but one way of finding a niche which will work, bringing with it the benefits which have, for others, been long in the making. The example to which I refer is that of the Central Queensland Conservatorium of Music.

Presumptuous of me, I accept, to quote my own institution. Even more so to claim its achievements. But the reality is that the CQCM has surprised us all. Not that we're unhappy with its progress! I must admit, however, to experiencing some apprehension in respect of the implications and responsibilities of an earlier-than-anticipated arrival at (or near) “the edge”.

The History

Central Queensland Conservatorium of Music began life as the only regional campus of the Queensland Conservatorium. In fact, even before then, it was a twinkle in the eye of the Community Music Centre of Mackay, itself an outstanding example of finding an edge in the unexpected (and almost unsuspecting) city of Mackay in the early 1980s.

Why unexpected? Primarily because in the eighties, if one was to establish a regional offshoot of anything, the Queensland (then National Party) Government, combined with a number of other factors (including a long-standing push for secession by North Queensland) would probably have assumed that it should be situated in Townsville. However, a feasibility study of the four major coastal centres (Cairns, Townsville, Mackay and Rockhampton) proved that Mackay had greater support from within the community, and therefore a better chance of success. This community support has been a critical factor in the development of a supportive infrastructure.

From the outset, the new campus of Queensland Con was concerned with survival. After all, it is a simple matter to come up with an initial intake in a community which has been working towards the arrival of the campus for some time. But where will the next intake come from? More importantly, what will it comprise? The answer to that second question was different, dependent on whether it was asked of the Conservatorium (by that I mean the Brisbane parent) or the local community.

The Conservatorium planned that the regional campus would act as a pre-tertiary feeder (in reality, “filter”) for the many regional students who apply for entry each year to the campus in Brisbane. As such, it offered an Associate Diploma which acted as a bridge into the full-time courses in Brisbane. The plan was a long way from reality. For a start, not all of the regional applicants lived within cooee of Mackay. Don't forget, Cairns is another 1,000 kilometres to the

north! In any case, the Mackay community had other ideas. Why were there no degrees on offer? Given that the community was coming up with some pretty supportive financial arguments, it wasn't long before the first year of the Bachelor of Music degree was offered in Mackay.

To imply that this was progress towards the "edge" would not only be premature but delusive. In fact, whilst it may have improved the options on offer to the incoming students, it did little to raise the profile of the regional campus outside Queensland. Why? Because whilst students had the choice of Brisbane or Mackay, the more obvious preference was for the larger metropolitan campus. In the early years, some of the students found themselves in Mackay as a result of not being accepted by the Brisbane campus. And one doesn't always have the same cutting edge potential with students who are enrolling in the institution which was their second or third preference for study. At that time, the only "edge" was the link to the already-established profile of the Brisbane campus, but the majority of the best students were enrolled there, not in Mackay. After all, if one has access only to the first year of the degree, for students originating outside the immediate Mackay area it meant relocating twice in as many years. That is not to say they didn't enroll. They most certainly did, but Mackay was second choice to Brisbane for most students. As a result, long-term planning of any kind was made more difficult by the radical change in the composition of the intake each year.

This fact became more critical to the young campus when it was contemplating independence from the alma mater in the forced move to Central Queensland University in 1996. In the approach towards taking those first lone steps as (what was affectionately known as) the newest Con on the Aussie block, strategy was of vital importance if the young Conservatorium was to attract its own high quality students. To compete against the larger metropolitan universities was not an option worth considering. Therefore, offering the same type of degree was not considered feasible.

The Strategy

The successful solution lay in the decision to offer something which was unique, something which was not disadvantaged by geographical complications, and to do it as well as it might possibly be done. The answer was not a difficult one. Mackay has had a long and successful record in the training of dancers (Vicki Attard of The Australian Ballet being one example) and there are a number of very good drama studios in the city. The mix suggested Music Theatre – note, not 'musical' theatre. This is not a Bachelor of Broadway! The degree covers repertoire from early Greek through to off-the-wall theatre, and includes any concept which combines the elements of music, drama and choreographed movement. The second choice, Jazz Studies, was based on staffing strengths and the demands of the hospitality industry in this tourist region.

1. Make it different

The design of the new Bachelor of Music Theatre degree was deliberately different from that already offered by the Western Australian Academy of Performing Arts, and from those options at other universities such as the University of Wollongong. The plan was that, by linking the training carefully to industry expectations and experience, and by making the students flexible in their skills, the graduates would find themselves working in some capacity within the industry they had chosen. Eventually, we thought, the record would speak for itself.

But here we are, without even a graduate to boast, attracting students from all over the country as well as overseas. The competition for this course is fierce and in 1997 we selected only one in four first preference applicants, 40% of them from outside Queensland. The 1998 Intake looks like increasing the first preference ratio, with 60% from outside Queensland. In a year when applications for tertiary entry have declined, CQCM had a significant increase in first preference applications.

Why? Certainly not because they've seen the quality of the graduate. More certainly not because of advertising – one run of print advertisement in two national publications cannot solely account for the level of increase. It seems that the answer lies in having chosen a niche market. The jokes about boutique degrees may well be deserved, but the bottom line is that it works!

The Bachelor of Jazz Studies degree is only very new, offering its second year in 1998. Already it is demonstrating a similar growth in the rate of applications, although with the greater preponderance of jazz courses available, it is unlikely that it will have the same edge as does the music theatre option. Whilst it is different from the others, it most certainly couldn't be called unique.

So what are the differences?

The Music Theatre degree seeks to train practitioners with an integrated approach to the industry. Not only does this plan to offer them flexibility of employment opportunities, but also a better understanding of those with whom they will work. The performer appreciates the lighting technician's concerns about focus, the director understands the singer's need to breathe, the sound technician knows what problems a costume change might cause for the radio mike.

The students complete a common year in which all aspects of music theatre are covered – performance, creation, production, technical and even aspects of management. After that, it is possible for students to design their own course of study. From the second year, they begin to specialize in one of the four major strands – performance, creative, technical or management. Further specialization may occur in the third year, but there remains also an option to change tack if the student wishes to remain more versatile. Post-graduate diplomas fine-tune such special areas as performance, direction, choreography, design and management.

During the course, all productions are managed on a schedule closely aligned to that which the industry demands. Open auditions are held for all performance work and the timeframe for each production is short, with brief and intensive rehearsal periods. No concession is given to the participants. They are no longer students, and they are required to meet industry standards in all aspects of the rehearsal and production process. Their assessment reflects their professional response to this obligation. For all students, the highest weighting of assessment is given to a unit called Production, which brings together all aspects of their study.

The final year provides a real transition, moving students towards self-management within the industry they hope to join. For example, in their voice studies, they move from weekly voice lessons to a "bank" of hours with a visiting voice consultant, supported by a répétiteur/coach who assists them in the preparation of repertoire in between their occasional appointments with the consultant, who travels regularly to Mackay from Brisbane. They may also attend vocal performance workshops but are expected to demonstrate independence in their approach to vocal management.

Also in the final year, as in post-graduate work, the students are encouraged to develop projects which will afford them the opportunity of experiencing the industry in real terms. Hence, in 1998 one student who is working towards management has designed her own show, including selection of other students and professionals in the key roles of design and direction as well as managing the auditions, the budget and promotion. She will have access to one staff mentor who will guide her as would a post-graduate supervisor. Another student will be seconded to a major performing arts venue to gain experience in technical aspects of production.

The students are members of a student-managed company, **Con Act**. The executive of the company comprises Company Manager, Company Administrator, Technical Manager, Promotions Manager and Dance Captain. They are selected by interview from a shortlist of applicants who have responded to an open advertisement. They are given a position description and the responsibility for managing the company and liaising with the “producer”, the Conservatorium management. Each member of the executive is linked to a staff mentor who guides them in their role. Already this has proven an invaluable experience for those who have been involved with the company executive. For some, it allowed them an early realization that their original field of specialization (usually performance) wasn't really what they wished to pursue after all. For others, it has developed valued links with all parts of the industry.

The Jazz Studies course has a very practical base. Because one target group of potential students is professionals working within the local tourist industry and wanting to formalize their qualifications, the focus of study needs to be performance-based. Hence, studies in jazz history are linked to sessions which explore the styles, and experience in jazz materials also relate to practical sessions. Once the students have demonstrated competence, they are offered performance work in the local industry through the Conservatorium's own agency, **Con Artists**, which manages the bookings and allows senior students professional experience in the generation and management of the work.

2. Make it exceptional

Whilst all it might need is a flexible approach to where the money is spent, what it takes is a little more. Linked to the choice to offer “niche market” degrees is another decision, sometimes less palatable to public perception. Our determination to avoid compromising quality means that if we aren't able to do something well, we don't do it at all. When a student wants to study a second instrument and we are unable to provide a specialist teacher, it is simply not available. If we do not have appropriate expertise for a given area, we bring it in, or we leave it out. This non-nonsense approach is beginning to be understood by those whose initial encounter with it seemed less positive.

Because this policy tends to impact more at the pre-tertiary level, it has minimal impact on the breadth of our undergraduate work. The only outcome for the full-time students is that whatever is offered is of high calibre. The flow-on is that the students now expect the maintenance of high standards! We've quite a challenge ahead if we are to continue to manage that in the current funding climate.

3. Make it – where ?

The question is often asked – why Mackay? My answer usually begins with “Why not?” After all, some of the best specialist schools in the world are situated in non-metropolitan centres. If one wants to be “on the edge”, why not on the edge of the Great Barrier Reef?

With careful planning, there is no reason why students need to be disadvantaged by geography. In fact, there's something to be said for the level of focus brought to the course when students from a number of states converge in one place, with one purpose in mind. Neither is it difficult to attract some of the leading practitioners in music theatre for a residency to work with the students. What it needs is a flexible approach to how the money is spent.

The word “regional” often brings with it connotations which seem to imply compromise. After all, much of the infrastructure, particularly within the performing arts, exists in the metropolitan centres. As a result, most of the opportunities are metropolitan-based. The

annual tour of the various performing arts companies afford regional centres a “one-night stand”, but no ongoing developmental support.

The last ten years have seen the start of a turnaround in this trend in Queensland. *Dance North*, a company based in Townsville, has had international success and in the twenty years of its existence has provided for the Townsville region a strong infrastructure for the development of young dancers.

The company’s evolution into a professional ensemble took place over a period of ten years, nurtured by local supporters working with the Queensland Government Arts Division and the Australia Council. It is particularly significant that the company grew out of the community, and as it did, it provided progress within the community. Dance students in Townsville now enjoy regular access to resident professional artists of excellent quality as both teachers and performers.

Likewise in Mackay there has been a parallel development of two young professional companies. The first, *The Lyrebird Ensemble*, a professional chamber orchestra, provides a strong infrastructure for the training of young orchestral players. It has a broad audience base and local corporate support. Notable initiatives of the orchestra have been to establish an annual commission for new work by young Queensland composers and to encourage corporate sponsorship of scholarships which bring into the community players of the highest calibre to join the orchestra. Now that students need financial assistance for tertiary study, they are prepared to consider non-metropolitan alternatives.

It should be noted that offering the dollar-coated carrot brings with it a heavy responsibility. Beneath the façade must lie teaching and performance opportunities of similarly high calibre. Sometimes this requires taking the hard decision *not* to offer a scholarship if the teaching can’t extend the potential performer.

The second young company in Mackay, *Opera North*, also has the potential to develop an infrastructure which will provide valuable cultural growth within the city. Whilst at present its youth and strategy rely on importing professionals to work with the company, many students have the opportunity to access these professionals and the production process itself. The company employs some of the Conservatorium’s senior students as assistants to the roles of director, musical director and sound and lighting technicians. No doubt, as the company strengthens so too will the off-campus opportunities locally.

However, the Conservatorium cannot afford to wait for that development to happen. Students are also seconded to major performing arts venues in other cities, including Brisbane and interstate, to gain professional experience. The future will offer students both options.

Maintaining the Edge

Therein lie the secrets to finding the edge in this particular case. Do something different, do it without compromise and don’t be discouraged by geography.

However, if getting to the edge was a lot faster than anticipated, staying on the edge is likely to prove a much greater challenge.

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