

**‘The Virtual Conservatorium’ – An Initiative of  
the New Conservatorium in the New Economy.**

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**Abstract**

*'The Virtual Conservatorium'* project represents a bold step forward by the Central Queensland Conservatorium of Music to make its mark on the regional, national and international market. This has been made possible by partially re-inventing itself into an electronic, in part 'virtual', flexible operation that makes it possible for students to access offerings without having to physically relocate permanently to any of its physical campuses (currently Mackay, Rockhampton, Bundaberg, Gladstone, Pomona, Sydney, Melbourne and Singapore).

Utilising a mix of electronic delivery, intensive mode delivery and software based learning activities CQCM is able to accommodate students from multiple locations with multiple learning needs and demands. With the incorporation of 'industry mentors' from 'all over' - students are able to access industry standards and practices at a most sophisticated level.

This paper outlines the processes by which *'The Virtual Conservatorium'* entity has been integrated into the operation of the Conservatorium giving domestic and international students a whole new range of delivery and content options. The paper covers key issues such as - economic rationale; pedagogical and delivery issues; elements of *iCon* - intensive, internet, industry & innovation; staffing issues; the technologies incorporated; and student feedback and evaluation.

*'The Virtual Conservatorium'* was officially launched in July 2002 offering a post graduate *MAA on line* and an undergraduate *eBachelor of Music/ Performing Arts*.

## **Economic Rationale**

Universities in Australia (firmly encouraged by Higher Education authorities) are currently concerned with the mind-set, mechanisms and practices that are necessary for universities to re-invent and re-engineer themselves in order to become successful, surplus-making organisations. Central Queensland University is no exception. Given the context of current economic pressures, this surplus making exercise, is fundamental to future growth, quality provision, and student/staff morale. Important matters such as changing mind-set from a 'scarcity' to 'abundance' mentality; the encouragement of new venture units ('skunk works') within elements; changing management style at all levels to facilitate entrepreneurial activities; the effective use of out-sourcing for teaching and administrative purposes; the development of strategic alliances and networks; and developing the notion of thinking globally even though working locally; require exploration.

To operate within the *new conservatorium* within the *new economy* calls for a change in thinking and approach. There is a need for a 'new approach' – a 'new organisation'. Limerick et al (1998) speak of a new form of organisation that is required:

“A new form of organisation is set to take us into the twenty-first century. It will have strategies, structures and cultures which are quite different from those with which we have been experimenting for the past decade and which are dramatically different from those that served us so well during the previous 20 years or more. It will offer new opportunities as well as new problems for management, and it will demand new mind sets, skills and competencies from those within it.”  
(Limerick, 1998: 1)

This is hardly an easy task with academic elements often opposed to, or at least uncomfortable with, 'entrepreneurship' and with university bureaucrats experientially far removed from contemporary business practices. In the short term, it is necessary to empower university elements to develop entrepreneurial activities. Concurrently, the larger organisation needs to reinvent itself attitudinally to deal with flexibility, a broader

range of initiatives, a focus on significant add-on value to its conventional operations and dealing with 'profit' from its initiatives.

In order to put new initiatives in place and to respond quickly to new demands and opportunities, flexibility and autonomy are essential elements of a successful proposal.

Kanter (1989) argues that winning the new game

... requires faster action, more creative manoeuvring, more flexibility, and closer partnerships with employees and customers than was typical in the traditional corporate bureaucracy. It requires more agile, limber management that pursues opportunity without being bogged down by cumbersome structures or weighty procedures that impede action. Corporate giants, in short, must learn to dance." (Kanter, 1989: 20).

In these respects, universities must 'learn to dance' anew by mastering new manoeuvres, taking on new shapes, and searching for new opportunities. Speed is essential and timing imperative if market issues are to be satisfied for both the university and its clients.

### **Pedagogical and delivery issues**

The claim is that flexible delivery provides new alternatives for higher education providers and clients alike especially opportunities to offer courses off-campus and off-shore. Flexible delivery, then, is perceived as a marketing and development tool as well as a means of catering for local teaching and learning needs and requirements. The challenge to university management centres around creating the best methods of achieving diversity and reaching new markets in an increasingly competitive climate, and at the same time distributing programmes maintaining quality.

Flexible delivery is a sub-set of a larger issue namely 'organisational flexibility'. The keys to organisational flexibility appear to be technology, customer satisfaction and quality control. The technology issue is related both to the delivery mechanism, such as the use of internet, CD Rom, and e-mail and the communication means. 'Customer satisfaction' is related to the way courses are designed to maximise participation

especially in relation to duration and location. Quality control places the focus on both the perceived and real measures of delivery success ensuring that courses maintain appropriate standards despite the range of delivery mechanisms.

More formally, flexible delivery has been defined as:

“An approach to vocational education and training which allows for the adoption of a range of learning strategies in a variety of learning environments to cater for differences in learning styles, learning interests and needs, and variations in learning opportunities”  
(Flexible Delivery Working Party, 1992: 47).

Flexible delivery then encompasses a wide range of approaches to teaching and learning. It emphasises alternatives for students in an effort to maximise the quality of the teaching and learning process and create greater accessibility for a range of student types. For universities, the challenge of flexible delivery is the capacity to design, promote, deliver and evaluate provision. In the tertiary context, it forces the provider to reassess traditional provision modes in terms of client needs and wants. It places the emphasis firmly on client issues and satisfaction and de-emphasises provider demands.

‘Virtual’ courses are offered using some or all of the following -

- Innovative and Interactive On line delivery;
- Intense periods of study (weekends, after hours);
- Industry recognised leaders (Professional musicians, Administrators etc);
- Synchronous communication (video conferencing);
- Asynchronous communication (video, email);
- Stylised Print material - commercial quality of presentation;
- CD self contained learning packages (similar to on line course material for students not online);
- CAL ("Computer Aided Learning" where the software teaches, trains and also examines the students if required. Staff can then be accessed via e-mail tutorials/video conferencing);
- SMS (Short Message Service) text message for student contact;

This multi-modal presentation format allows the student the greatest access and choice of environment that most suits their life and learning styles. Students who need greater time to process information are ideally suited to CAL and online delivery as they can spend as much time directly interfacing with the tutoring media as they require. Similarly, a student who needs less time on a particular course can choose to complete the coursework at a faster pace and employ their time elsewhere in their studies. Smith (2000) notes:

“To retain customers, it is vital to focus on what people want and need rather than on what we want to sell to them.”  
(Smith, 2000:7)

*The Virtual Conservatorium* provides students with the opportunity to complete an undergraduate Bachelor of Music/Performing Arts and/or a Master of Arts Administration in a multi-modal virtual environment utilizing all of the virtual modes noted. Most subjects, offered within ‘*The Virtual Conservatorium*’, are delivered in a variety of modes to suit the students’ learning requirements

### **Elements of iCon - Intensive, Internet, Industry & Innovation**

The sub project ‘*iCon*’ (an essential element of ‘The Virtual Conservatorium initiative’) was devised to create greater options and flexibility for study. Four key vehicles were identified to help develop the approach to undergraduate offerings -

- The use of the *Internet*
- *Intensive* delivery of product
- Involvement of *Industry* mentors
- On going *Innovation*

Individually, each of the elements is not ‘ground breaking’ the practice of combining them however, within the Australian context, is quite unique to conservatoria – and a significant achievement for Central Queensland Conservatorium of Music.

### *Internet*

The uses of the Internet in the 'iCon' project were threefold. An asynchronous device; as a synchronous delivery medium; and by the use of 'software-controlled' training packages.

On-line studies are commonly of an asynchronous nature. The delivery and feedback is not given in real time but rather in a non-time specific format. The lecture is generally located on a server and accessed by the student to study at a convenient time. Contact with the tutor predominantly is in the form of e-mail.

Synchronous lectures within the Central Queensland University are mostly given using ISL (Integrated System-wide Learning) technology. This is only possible if both the lecturer and the students have access to an ISL theatre. After further software installations, communication can be made from desktop to desktop and also a lecturer can make real time audiovisual contact with a single or group of students from an ISL equipped room.

CAL refers to the use of commercial software teaching packages for the initial training and sometimes testing of the prescribed course. This allows for different rates of learning between students and creates much greater access time for students to pose questions and enter into informed academic debate with the appointed lecturer. The adaptation of Rising Soft's 'Auralia' has been used for the offering of all Musicianship courses at CQCM.

### *Intensive*

By utilising intensive delivery mechanisms a range of new possibilities for course delivery is now available. Initiatives such as weekend intensive delivery provides students with new options and at the same time increases the opportunities for industry based staff to participate. This is an important issue for regional based organizations.

### *Industry Mentors*

Each higher education centre will need to develop strategies and practices that best reflect the needs of their clients and are manageable within the existing resources - both physical and human. The human resource factor will become more and more important. Fewer full time staff will be required. More emphasis will be placed on utilising the expertise of visiting 'satellite' sessional staff. These staff will act as industry mentors and be located throughout the world and access students in a variety of ways including intensive face-to-face, video conferencing, teleconferencing and electronic conversation. Kinsman (1990) urges that a series of contingency plans are put into place to ensure that students are well catered for.

“Provided with these varied visions of the future, it is up to the individual or the institution to chose the most attractive permutation.” ( Kinsman, 1990: 189).

An exciting implication of flexible delivery is the potential to incorporate industry based specialists into the teaching and assessing team.

### *Innovation*

The utilisation of a three semester model allows for a second “mid year” intake into the first year of the course. Turoff (1997) supports the faculty's initiative -

“Ultimately a three semester system for Institutions of higher learning would be an extremely desirable situation for distance courses...On the other hand the four quarter system probably leads to a too compressed time scale for asynchronous communication oriented courses”  
(Turoff. 1997: 21)

This arrangement also makes possible the delivery of other institutional products on a sub contractual basis. Students may cross-enrol from other universities or from faculties within the university for credit towards their nominated program.

### **Staffing issues**

In the new conservatorium within the new economy a range of staff options will become available. Developing the entrepreneurial environment with the right people contributing will be essential for growth and development.

It was clear from our first examination of the financial records of the Central Queensland Conservatorium of Music some two years ago that it was imperative to generate additional funding in order to facilitate survival in the short term and subsequent growth in the longer term. Current higher education in Australia thinking is that elements within the university need to generate 10% of their total income from sources other than HEFA funding.

In 1999 the Conservatorium achieved an impressive additional income of 19%. This was, unfortunately, still not enough to solve the financial difficulties experienced. In 2001 the additional income percentage reached a heady overall 60% of the total income source. It is likely that this percentage could be further extended within the next two year cycle. Post graduate sources; international student sources; and affiliated projects such as The Language Centre initiative present tangible opportunities. Each, however, requires a certain rethink for management and staff. The new demands that these endeavours place on the organization are considerable. Staff with little experience in post graduate supervision and international student management, for example, will find the transition difficult.

The quality of the staff employed for the new endeavours will be a key factor in the outcome. The New Conservatorium, however, will need a new kind of staff member in

the long term. Product delivery will be only one aspect of the new staff role. Staff will need to develop an entrepreneurial style, a real desire to innovate, a strong sense of income generation and a need for a independence and self worth. Buckingham and Coffman (1999) state it well –

“In the entrepreneurial company ... the critical striving talent is desire – a burning need for independence – and the critical thinking talent is focus.” (Buckingham and Coffman, 1999: 100)

The recruitment process will need to reflect the true aims of the organization – it is not only about teaching, it will also be about creative thinking and innovative behaviour. Candidates will need to be able to demonstrate this diverse range of skills – which, frankly, will be in short supply in the short term. Staff currently in the conservatorium circuit have little experience and/or background in the areas cited. Finding the right people will be a significant challenge.

### **The technologies incorporated**

The creation of *‘The Virtual Conservatorium’* came about as a result of a series of interconnected events. A new CQCM building in Mackay (Head Office); e-rolment as a university wide standard; ‘high tech’ teaching spaces (such as ISL) becoming available; and growth in technology interest in general. To further develop the physical framework that under-pinned *‘The Virtual Conservatorium’*, ‘Project Uptech’ was initiated.

#### *Computer Upgrades*

For staff to keep abreast of the changing technological demands of the proposed teaching environment, two important needs had to be met. Firstly there needed to be a standard operating environment across the conservatorium and secondly, these computers had to be industry current and able to remain viable for at least 2 years. The purchase of all new

iMacs meant that every staff member had an up-to-date desktop computer that was linked in to a faculty wide standard operating system.

### *Internal Communications*

The 'Internal Communications System' was devised as a system that could -

- replace unsightly notice boards for displaying general information;
- act as multiple monitors for a master computer;
- display video and DVD advertising for upcoming events;
- act as the show relay for performances;
- be used a standard television when required;

The final result is that the public areas of CQCM are free from the clutter of standard university notice boards. Only accurate and appropriate information is displayed which is continuously updated. Promotional material can be broadcast throughout the conservatorium. The performances happening onstage can be monitored from most places within the building. Computer images can be projected to all televisions throughout the precinct.

### **Student feedback and evaluation**

On going evaluation is a highly regarded aspect of *iCon* and the *The Virtual Conservatorium* projects. Each course offering is evaluated formally on a 7 point scale and a record of results is maintained. We anticipate an average of 6 (out of a possible 7) to be the average on going result for the *MAA on line* and 5 (out of a possible 7) to be the average on going result for the undergraduate *eBachelor of Music/Performing Arts*.

Evaluations are conducted using an electronic pro-forma developed and managed by the eAdministrator. Students are asked to complete an electronic evaluation immediately following the completion of the final assignment in each course.

eTutors have access to the collective information ordered and summarised by the eAdministrator. This is used to ensure necessary modifications are made to the courses in operation where deemed necessary by the academic co-ordinator of the programme.

Possibly more than ever before this ongoing evaluation and feedback is critical. A significant quality assurance measurement within the new economy and the new conservatorium will be client/customer satisfaction. Quality will need to be measured in terms of the levels of support students have for the activities and the outcomes will be measured largely by what the students believe they have achieved. This is a fundamental shift for conservatoria – and not any easy one at that.

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**Greg Whateley will present this paper at the Conference.**