

**Outcomes of the Conservatorium Curriculum Review:  
Curriculum Review and Reform Symposium, November 3, 2006**

I was asked to present on the outcomes of the Conservatorium's curriculum review. The first thing that I should say is that the Conservatorium is still in the middle of its curriculum review. A two-day retreat took place in December 2005 and a Curriculum Review Committee was established in April 2006 under the very able leadership of Dr Jennifer Shaw. The Committee recently produced a substantial interim report that details changes designed to commence in 2008. This report is currently on the web for consideration by staff and students. Since we cannot know with certainty what the final benefits will be, my comments relate to the process so far and to the outcomes we anticipate.

No curriculum review takes place in a neutral context. The Conservatorium resisted, longer than any faculty, the university-wide standardisation of undergraduate subjects to a 6-credit point structure. This reflected less opposition to curriculum reform as such than a widely held belief within the Conservatorium that the requirements of a music curriculum do not fit – for some, cannot fit - into the 6 credit point model. The curriculum was structured on units worth 3 credit points, a value which often appeared almost divinely designed to support our particular faculty requirements. But the University is a persuasive institution and there were other forces driving the desirability of curriculum change — most obviously the recent amalgamation of the Con with the University's Music Department. In terms of context it is not insignificant that the review itself, has taken place against the divisions created by certain staff resignations.

So, in brief, the Con was a reluctant participant in the recent round of curriculum reviews, the outcomes were driven much more by utility rather than a grand conceptual design, and the preoccupations consequently tended to be with structures more than content.

### **How then can we assess the outcomes or benefits?**

1. First, after hard work and some anguish we will broadly achieve the overall goal of 6 credit point standardization for undergraduate subjects. In some cases, existing 3 unit subjects have been combined into new 6 unit courses. Where the content was thought outdated or unsuitable, new 6 credit points units have been created. To meet the distinctive pedagogic requirements of a tertiary music school we have, however, retained some 3 credit point units though, in line with Academic Board guidelines, these units will be only available 'in house', to students enrolled in Conservatorium degrees.

2. In the process I think we have created an undergraduate curriculum that is not only more accessible to other Sydney University students — especially those in the new cross faculty degrees such as the Bachelor Of Music Studies/Bachelor of Arts or Bachelor of Music Studies/Bachelor of Medicine — but also better integrated, more contemporary, more competitive in areas such as orchestral training, more sharply focused and better aligned, in some important areas, with student workload. This is particularly the case of instrumental teaching – or Principal Study as it is known at the Conservatorium. Instrumental study is demanding of student time – the practice expectation for a piano performance student, for example, is 7 hours a day. Not only are all Principal Study units now worth 6 credit points but in semesters 7 and 8

Principal Study value has increased to 12 credit points a semester, achieved by offering 2 concurrent 6 credit point units. Overall, Principal Study has grown in value from 50% of the degree to up to 66%. Students are wholly approving of this increased recognition of their workload. So in this reform we have added tangible value and satisfaction to the student experience.

3. The revisions to Principal Study, in particular, should also produce a curriculum with a more realistic acknowledgement of the teaching resources this study requires. International best practice in instrumental teaching mandates not only considerable student work hours but also 1:1 teaching. 1:1 Teaching is very expensive. So let's not ignore the elephant in the room. An important intention of the curriculum review and reform process is more financial sustainability for the faculty. This has been achieved not only by enhancing the credit point values of the most expensive units but also by changes in performance curriculum assessment and design. There has been a shift from a very heavy reliance on sometimes expensive examination panels to individual teacher assessment. This shift has important pedagogic rationales since it introduces more assessment diversity and more opportunity for continuous assessment. In the Composition and Music Education programs, the curriculum review has also provided an opening to experiment with a mix of small group as well as 1:1 teaching of the Principal Study curriculum.

4. Although the mix is not yet finalised, this is probably the most controversial outcome of the curriculum review. While many staff and students are sympathetic to some level of curriculum change, I think it is fair to say that, at this point in the process, there remain a significant number of staff and students who regard any loss

of 1:1 teaching as the sort of naked cost cutting that casts doubt on University and faculty commitments to excellence and international best practice. Managing this perception will be one of the most important aspects in shaping the ultimate benefit of the entire curriculum review process.

5. The increased credit point bite which Principal Study now takes out of the overall curriculum has also meant some adjustment to the relationship between the performance and academic curricula components. Because the Con predominantly offers professional diplomas and degrees, curriculum design always means a compromise between providing a diverse range of technical competencies and giving that broader academic and contextual education that helps equip students with the flexibility as well as skills required of 21<sup>st</sup> century music workplaces. At the Con these competing needs have long dictated a curriculum structure that combines an individual student's Principal Study with compulsory core as well as elective academic and performance units. While mandatory academic studies are retained, the core has been simplified so that it provides fewer — though we hope better targeted courses. The negative outcome is some reduction in student choice, with the extent of reduction varying across programs. As with some of the changes to Principal Study teaching, this may have some adverse outcomes on our attractiveness as an educational destination. We simply do not yet know.

6. Curriculum reviews are crucially about market perception. No less than in other faculties, a major rationale for review and reform is enhancing the recognition and positioning of the Con at all market and industry levels. The review has involved substantial national and international benchmarking with other tertiary music schools

and with the industry and professional partners. We can already see positive benefits from this. The Conservatorium has just been accepted as an associate member of the Association of European Conservatoriums. This is a substantial achievement. The recent revisions to performance assessment were recently cited by some G8 music schools as a model in their own reviews.

7. For me, an equally critical perceptual outcome for any curriculum review is the way such changes impact internally, the way in which they confirm or reconstitute that crucial sense of self, of inner identity. On the positive side, in negotiating curriculum redesign we are rediscovering what unites the faculty as well as what divides us. The performance staff, for example, proved to be among the most vigorous supporters of the importance of the Conservatorium's academic program. In a faculty where sharp unit divisions and very high levels of casualisation mean that communication lines are a good deal less than ideal, the curriculum review is also promoting, perhaps a little too episodically, public conversation about tradition, purpose, opportunity and change. These conversations are with students and staff. Recently there has been a genuine effort to incorporate students into the review process. Students are on the review committee and there have been a series of general and unit-based meetings with students to explain the proposed changes. So the review is also demystifying the faculty for students. Curriculum structures and rationales are becoming more transparent. Continuing review will hopefully set a precedent for drawing students more permanently into larger decision-making processes.

8. As I said at the beginning, our curriculum review is far from complete. So it seems fitting that I conclude by suggesting a few watch points, areas where the outcomes

remain more problematic. Perhaps one of the greatest challenges is whether we can sustain collegial conversations and engagements in such a way that curriculum reform can be owned more fully by the faculty. Otherwise the end result of reform may not be new energy but exhaustion and cynicism.

We need also to ensure that the legacy of curriculum reform is not an overarching sense of winners and losers. While students in performance degrees are pretty clearly advantaged, we need to make stronger arguments for the way in which this curriculum review meets the aspirations of Composition or Music Education or Music Studies students. Especially as there are positive changes for these students with the introduction, for example, of an honours year in Music Studies and separate acoustic and electro-acoustic streams in Composition.

At the Conservatorium there is also the ongoing tension between a constructing a curriculum which reflects financial imperatives and one which meets the expectations of a world class music school. So we need the University to acknowledge that faculties require more resources to support the international and national ambitions represented by 1:5:40. Standardisation and internationalisation increase our recognition factor and expand student access but these goals also demand genuine comparability in tuition expectations and curriculum support. Otherwise we can risk the fundamental integrity of our teaching and, in some senses, the University itself.

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