SONGBUD RECORDINGS – A STAFF-LED INCUBATOR OF STUDENT MUSICAL TALENT

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Abstract

Providing students with real-world industry experience continues to be a major challenge in music education. This is surprising, as the knowledge and skills amongst university music academics and the resources available are more than sufficient to record and produce commercial quality music releases. In addition, the abundance of talent amongst university music student cohorts is too often funnelled into purely assessment-focused activities, rather than real-world experiences, which could directly benefit careers. This paper discusses the conception and design of a staff-run record label within the TAFE Queensland Faculty of Arts and Design. Songbud will “sign” music students who demonstrate significant talent in music performance or song writing. Experienced industry professionals who are also university academics will combine skills to identify and coach talented students, record and produce their music to a commercial release quality, and plan and deliver marketing strategies for label releases. After marketing and running costs are recouped, income derived from music releases will be shared directly with students.

It is expected that students, staff and the university will find mutual benefit in this form of industry-level collaboration. Students will additionally benefit from the structure and external organisation that being part of a record label can bring to their careers, while staff gains abundant opportunities to engage in creative practice as professional development within an educational context. Plus, it just might lead to commercially successful music that benefits all involved.

Keywords: music, education, creativity, career-building, commercial, industry, wil, work integrated learning, creative industries, recording, label.

1 INTRODUCTION

Modern tertiary education puts great emphasis on industry partnerships and collaboration. Technological and cultural developments influence professional practice so rapidly that up-to-date and relevant education must be closely aligned with industry trends. The creative industries are particularly susceptible to technological and cultural change. Efforts to prepare tertiary graduates in the creative industries have historically focussed on internships and work experience within existing organisations. In music, the typical approach would be securing short-term, often unpaid employment with a record label or recording studio. However, over the past several decades those with successful music careers, and those looking to find success, have distanced themselves from the traditional recording industry, choosing to replace it with a DIY ethos. Small boutique record labels and merchandise brands, home recording studios, self-distribution, direct-to-fan retailing, crowdfunding and social media are some of the enabling factors for modern independent artists. The relevance of an internship with a multi-national music brand has certainly decreased since the decades-past zenith of the traditional music industry. So, what kind of internship or workplace learning experience could benefit the aspiring music performer or song writer in an industry that is no longer dominated by huge recording companies, but instead leans towards a more autonomous and entrepreneurial approach to a music career?

1.1 Workplace learning

According to the National Centre for Vocational Education Research in Australia (NCVER), an ideal workplace learning experience would incorporate the following attributes:

- Workplace learning, aimed at increasing innovative capacity in enterprises;
- Organisational culture supporting and valuing training and learning;
- Training and learning as a part of doing business and included as an integral part of a strategic planning cycle;
- Training and learning in all forms as valued and used according to appropriate circumstances;
- Training customised to individuals and to increase work capability;
- Networks, partnerships and supply chains used to facilitate training.

- National Centre for Vocational Education Research in Australia (NCVER), 2003 [8]

Although larger production companies and recording studios such as those used in film, television and radio still exist - which could still potentially offer these kind of workplace experiences - students interested in song writing and music performance have fewer opportunities. The large music industry recording labels, their recording studios, publishing houses and distribution chains that may have once been able to offer such experiences are now all but gone. Other than playing/paying one’s dues in hotels and clubs - not ideal workplace learning spaces (especially not according to the NCVER attributes) - there are few authentic workplaces able to stimulate and inspire performers and songwriters to innovate, work hard for themselves and for others, while also offering a workplace environment that supports and values education and learning. To expect smaller, independent labels and studios to have the capacity and inclination to consistently support such workplace learning is unrealistic, especially without Government-supported, trade apprenticeship-style schemes in place. However, by providing authentic workplace learning within the education system there exists another way of providing the NCVER-style workplace-learning-ideal – by establishing commercial workplaces on campus.

1.2 Commerce on campus

On-campus internships have many benefits over off-campus work experience. Students gain practical and industry-current skills and knowledge in a consistent and controlled environment, without the need for industry partnerships and the ongoing goodwill of industry mentors. Academic staff maintain professional skills and knowledge as part of their educational contact time and the educational institution promotes a more vibrant, real-world experience to potential students, with a curriculum that can include risk-free, easy to deliver work experience.

Additionally for Songbud, creating an authentic commercial experience, rather than merely a simulated workplace, has the potential to assist students in establishing themselves in meaningful careers while still in undergraduate study. Based on cumulative student debt in Australia, there is a necessity for new educational models in tertiary education that may provide some financial relief to students and there exists the potential for students to benefit financially through working and learning at Songbud to generate music sales, streaming payments, royalty streams through licensing and performance. There may also be potential financial benefits to the institution through mechanical royalty streams and even co-writing and producing credits for the educational mentors.

1.3 Educational benefits

By blurring the lines between an educational institution and a commercial music label, Songbud aims to provide an ideal workplace learning environment, offering song writing and music performance students an avenue to have their work professionally produced and mass distributed to a global marketplace, while absorbing and practicing song writing, music production and mass marketing alongside industry mentors. Songbud aims to impact on students in a far more intrinsic and transformative way, by promoting a more critical view of self and the self within a modern music industry, in a world that is embracing and learning to maximise the potential of the digital, global marketplace.

A defining condition of being human is that we have to understand the meaning of our experience. For some, any uncritically assimilated explanation by an authority figure will suffice. But in contemporary societies we must learn to make our own interpretations rather than act on the purposes, beliefs, judgements, and feelings of others. Facilitating such understandings is the cardinal goal of adult education. Transformative learning develops autonomous thinking [7].

Aside from providing students with a deep, transformative learning experience across their undergraduate studies, Songbud also aims to provide a model of innovation for students who want to pursue their independent music careers, or for those more comfortable in a collaborative start-up label of their own. It may also provide a means by which artists who are unable to self-promote and think business may also flourish in a mutually supportive and nurturing creative environment.
Songbud aspires to endorse a different kind of learning experience: one where students and industry professionals work together; one that mutually benefits all participants and inspires a sense of creative solidarity; where the success of one individual is also regarded as the success of many. The “transition from educational experience to lifelong learning calls for - if not outright mandates - authenticity in which the students, mentors, and teachers unite” [14]. Songbud may even assist songwriters and musicians beyond their undergraduate years and sustain them and support them long into their careers.

1.4 Pracademics

In order to establish a commercial/educational hybrid to create such a transformative learning experience, industry-practising academic hybrid educators will be an essential aspect of the Songbud vision.

In the Australian vocational Tertiary And Further Education System (TAFE), it is *de rigueur* for educators to be practising industry professionals. In universities too, there has been a push towards educators who are also practising industry professionals. The *pracademic* is a relatively recent term ascribed to such educators who are both academics as well as practicing in their field [12]. Although the term is new, the idea is not. Some of the greatest teachers in history were, of course, also expert practitioners. In music especially this is the case. Many of the great composers, for example Mozart, Haydn, Beethoven and Vivaldi, also made part of their living as music teachers.

However, while in the TAFE system educators have traditionally been practitioners first but lacked high academic qualifications and research experience, in universities the opposite has been the case, with many high-level academics rather lacking in up-to-date professional practice. But this is changing across vocational and higher education [9].

While the TAFE system in Australia has employed industry professionals to act as industry educators for over 130 years, the educator versus the practising professional are typically regarded as separate and professional practice on campus is not a requirement of employment. But allowing *pracademics* to work alongside students in a commercial sense, with real commercial potential outcomes, sets up an ideal workplace learning scenario which exceeds the NCEVER attributes to create a mutually rewarding relationship between teacher and student, as well as further benefits for the supporting educational institution, the music industry and the global community at large.

2 METHODOLOGY

The establishment of the Songbud label is based on the epistemological perspective of constructivism, whereby reality and knowledge are constructed through the interaction of ideas with experience [10]. Meaning-making through working in an authentic recording label scenario across a number of years is an expected outcome, but the Songbud project also incorporates aspects of conventional observational learning [2], which is particularly suited to working in social situations or through group work, especially with peers. Modelling behaviour is expected to occur also throughout the students’ interactions with Songbud, from observing and mimicking mentors and peers through the songwriting and music production process to mixing, mastering, marketing and digital distribution. It is also hoped that workplace behaviour and professional etiquette will also be imparted through the running of the label and that Songbud itself acts as a metaphor – a heuristic for potential career progression in the modern music industry.

2.1 Method

The Songbud journey will begin for students in their second year of a three-year Bachelor of Contemporary Music degree. The label will be run by the professional pracademic producer/educators who will be primarily assisting the label’s most promising songwriters and performers in recording, producing and generally honing their work. The student cohort will act as Artists and Repertoire (A&R) agents initially, seeking out the most promising talent on campus. Additionally, they will act as distribution agents and marketers utilising their own social media networks to promote the label’s artists. They will help groom the talent, working on artist image, organising photo and video shoots, single and album artwork, helping artists improve their stagecraft, their live shows, their choreography. Students will be expected to observe and assist with all recording, mixing and mastering sessions, as well as any other creative and non-creative work that needs to be completed, including the preparation of budgets and legal paperwork. By their final year, students will progress to co-produce some of the
talent’s songs and even assist with co-writing. They may be expected to perform specialist work on music tracks such as digital editing, pitch correction and the like, and even start assisting with sound mixing and mastering of tracks. By the end of their two years they will have ideally experienced every aspect of working within an independent recording label, including being a part of the recordings themselves, whether as a featured artist or a session musician.

3 STRUCTURE AND REMUNERATION

Songbud will be established using a fairly traditional recording label structure with dedicated “departments” for A&R, Promotions, Marketing and Publicity, Art and Artist Development. However, there will be no presidents or legal departments. These roles will be absorbed into the duties of the two producer pracademics who will oversee all aspects of the running of the label.

![Figure 1: Record label organisational structure [7].](image)

Initially, Songbud will be a not-for-profit recording label, running on a mutual benefit system, whereby revenue generated may be shared with peers and mentors. Co-writing credits must be agreed on and articulated clearly when registering songs with royalty collecting agencies such as the Australasian Performing Rights Association (APRA). Beyond running costs, any Songbud revenue will be distributed back to Songbud students in the form of academic prizes upon graduation. All artists must be signed up with APRA or an affiliating rights collection society before they can be recorded.

Eventually, it is envisaged a more traditional (and authentic) label will be established which includes a non-exclusive 50/50 recording deal with artists with a set two-year term. However, Songbud will remain a not-for-profit entity until such a time that TAFE agrees to formalise the financial aspects of the label.

The conceivable legal implications of running Songbud as anything other than a staff-led, profit/career generating incubator for students is not a focus at this time. However, the potential for revenue generation for all parties is a possibility if the pilot runs effectively but all parties would need to agree to take the label to the next level commercially in this scenario.

4 CONCLUSIONS

At this stage Songbud is a model only, which aims to provide an authentic and transformative workplace learning experience for songwriters and performing musicians completing their Bachelor of Contemporary Music through a partnership between TAFE Queensland and the University of Canberra, Australia.
The next step is to take Songbud to the pilot stage, which begins this August for the second-year undergraduate cohort. By November 2019, a further paper will be completed detailing outputs, student feedback, problems and suggested solutions. It is envisaged that by the end of 2020 the first cohort of Songbud students will be graduating, with a better understanding of the modern music industry and a clear trajectory and exemplar experience on which to launch their song writing, performing and recording careers.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS
The authors acknowledge the support of TAFE Brisbane in supporting the development of this paper.

REFERENCES