

DESIGNING THE TEACHING AND LEARNING ENVIRONMENT FOR THE VIRTUAL CONSERVATORIUM AT CENTRAL QUEENSLAND CONSERVATORIUM OF MUSIC

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ABSTRACT

The Virtual Conservatorium' is an exciting new initiative of the Central Queensland Conservatorium of Music. It provides students with the opportunity to complete an undergraduate Bachelor of Music/Performing Arts and/or a Master of Arts Administration in an electronic environment. In this paper we consider the design of the actual teaching and learning interface – and model some of the current designs in terms of the feedback and evaluation conducted over the last seven years of work in this area.

Some time is given over to the actual screen designs and a discussion on the decisions made, in the light of current thinking on interactive web sites within the educational context. The Virtual Conservatorium has recently received funding to commence both the undergraduate and post-graduate initiatives from July 2002 – this project is now a reality.

The following pages describe the design decisions made in the light of considered teaching and learning contexts. Under the subheadings of marketing to potential customers; enrolment process; accessing the products; the products themselves; assessment processes; evaluation processes; and ongoing revamping and re-iteration of product this article elaborates on the development of an exciting and important initiative in tertiary music education that utilizes technology to ensure greater access and equity.

The Research Problem

The research problem associated with this project is the appropriateness of the electronic interface for access by the students studying within the Virtual Conservatorium. There is a fine balance

that needed to be achieved between the aesthetic value without compromising the access speed.

Speed, Connectivity and Intangibles

Davis and Meyer (1998) provide inspiration for a new way of doing things with an emphasis on speed, connectivity and intangibles. Speed is the shrinking of time through near-instantaneous communication and computation; Connectivity is the shrinkage of space with the advent of the Web, e-mail, beepers, SMS, and other media of communication; and Intangibles are values without mass, most importantly knowledge and its mobility, made possible through speed and connectivity.

In examining the Blur economy three parts emerge “ the blur of desire, the blur of fulfilment, and the blur of resources.” (Davis and Meyer, 1998: 14) In the ‘old economy’ model businesses sold either products or services. In the ‘new economy’ the blur is to do with the fact that businesses now sell product and service – often so meshed or intermingled that the distinction becomes very difficult.

This issue resonates when considering the changes needed to develop a new conservatorium in this new economy. Amongst fifty ideas to ‘blur’ businesses in the new economy, three emerged as fundamental to the Central Queensland Conservatorium of Music challenge - virtual location; connect everything to everything; and anything at anytime. These three notions feature strongly in our project.

The concept of access is an international issue in university ‘modus operandi’. The University of Phoenix online advertises on its home page, ‘In America one in four individuals obtain at least degree-level education, and continuing education after high school is rapidly becoming the norm. There is every chance that employers will soon require a degree as a minimum prerequisite of employment. However, taking time out for a degree is expensive and diminishes the opportunity for valuable on the job experience. The answer to this conundrum is an Online Degree that allows you to earn, learn and work - all at the same time.’

The focus on student access – Anywhere, anytime, anyhow – is one of the foundation theories that the Virtual Conservatorium is based.

The buzzword “24/7” is commonly used in business marketing and operations but never before used in conjunction with a conservatorium of music. To achieve this a reinvention of the product delivery is essential for future feasibility. Many universities use the concepts of online delivery as a marketing tool, but when you look closer this is simply the use of online notes and email. The University of the Sunshine Coast boasts that ‘USC’s Online MBA gives students two options in how they can choose to study. The first is to work online. The second is the flexibility to download a PDF file of the whole course content so that you can print it out and take it with you for those odd study moments you have while travelling etc’.

The concept of virtual delivery proposes to eclipse these simple methodologies to truly gain access to students anywhere anytime anyhow with technologies such as bluetooth mobile communications, Software training packages, specifically designed CD-Rom, DVD, VCD as well as more traditional online methodologies. With the creation of such diverse resources are potentially available efficiencies in utilization for both the virtual and on-campus student body.

The Virtual Conservatorium

Considerable time and effort has been expended on the development of The Virtual Conservatorium to date and the project will require further commitment and resource to make it a functional reality. When we review the nature of the enterprise it is important to remember that the project entails the delivery of an undergraduate project: The Bachelor of Music/Performing Arts and a post-graduate programme, The Master of Arts Administration (see Appendix 1).

Both programmes are formal awards of Central Queensland University and as such carry the necessary credentials to entice market participation. It was decided from the outset that two existing programmes would be utilised rather than initiate two new awards that would have taken considerable time to process through the lengthy University approval process. This project (The Virtual Conservatorium) was as much about being there quickly as being there at all. There is considerable advantage in being the first conservatorium to run with the design. Hamel and Prahalab (1996) urge, “the primary challenge

is to become the author of industry transformation" (p.22). There are a number of conservatoria in Australia talking about the concept (some have been taking about it for some time in fact) – it is only a matter of time before they put product on line and make it available to students within their own organisations and beyond. We concur with Gibson's 1998 commentary-

"The winners of the twenty-first century will be those who can transform their organisations into something that more resembles a jeep – an all wheel drive, all-terrain vehicle that is lean, mean and highly maneuverable. One that can move and shift direction quickly in uncertain territory, reacting rapidly to the changing nature of the business environment, the changing nature of competition and the changing needs of the customer." (p. 8)

The 'new conservatorium' will indeed need to be flexible and capable of rapid change in order to develop niche markets and cater for a changing breed of students at both undergraduate and post graduate level.

In this brave new world of virtual music (no one else is actually doing this) it will be imperative to listen carefully to what students (clients) are saying and act on the feedback. This is probably more so than ever before given the fact this is a new industry initiative and client satisfaction will need to be strong from the outset. Birch (2000) believes that developing performance measures and benchmarking are essential ingredients of any new initiative – particularly with on line developments "Performance measurement systems are designed to allow the leaders of an organization to link the vision to the execution of that vision. They provide a mechanism for assessing progress towards the vision." (p.11) and "Benchmarking can uncover the need for revamped reporting relationships, for organization-wide change, for new remuneration systems, improved employee productivity and many other things besides." (p. 153)

In some respects this measurement is reasonably simple to develop in the electronic environment and the process of benchmarking with other like-minded operations is also enhanced through the electronic medium. This will form a vital element of the 'listening' process augmented further with on going student evaluation and feedback.

The new conservatorium will need to develop new and sustainable initiatives on an ongoing basis to stay ahead of the competition and at the same time maintain a high level of diversity within the operation to ensure sustained prosperity. Willcocks and Sauer (2000) put it succinctly, "...sustainability is not achieved through any one thing. It requires the combination of a range of resources and services that together are hard to imitate." (p. 9)

Quality Assurance will centre on the ability to sustain and augment programmes that provide high levels of student satisfaction and interest. This in turn is made possible only if the organization has the funds to support such initiatives. There is a circular quality to the process.

In considering the design of the teaching and learning environment, the process is best achieved using a number of distinctive (7) packages or sub-sections. These sub sections best encapsulate the steps involved in putting the initiative forward. Each represents a tangible package that students will encounter-

- Marketing to potential clients;
- Enrolment process;
- Accessing the products;
- The products themselves;
- Assessment processes;
- Evaluation processes;
- On going revamping and re-iteration of product;

We consider each item, in turn, in relation to the development of the programme.

Marketing to potential customers

It was decided that a revamp of the conservatorium's overall website would be done at the commencement of 2002. This overhaul was as much about faculty corporate identity (School of Education and Innovation; Central Queensland Conservatorium of Music; and Language Centre) as it was about revitalising and modernising the electronic conservatorium presence.

Access to The Virtual Conservatorium must be fast and simple. To this end Click ons – including MAA on line and eBachelor of Music/

Performing Arts would be readily available via the 'virtual' heading tab on the front page. The home website address is www.cqu.edu.au/cqcm

A quick tour of the revitalised site is appropriate-



The site is designed as a portal to the various activities of the conservatorium currently accessible via eight tabs across the top of the site – standard fare, but very easy to spot and navigate. The face-to-face details associated with the delivery of the MAA in Sydney, Rockhampton, Melbourne and the Gold Coast can, for example, be located by clicking on the 'MAA' tab at the top of the site. Details associated with the MAA on line and the eBachelor of Music/ Performing Arts can be accessed via the 'Virtual' tab. Students across the conservatorium operation (currently located on eight sites) are encouraged to visit the site regularly for updates, information on performances and concerts, access to alumni information and the like. Virtual students (from all over) may access their programme directly through the virtual conservatorium portal www.thevirtual

conservatorium.com if they prefer – although both sites are linked and located on the University server. Our preference is for virtual users to come through the ‘front door’ taking time to check out some of the current developments and updates available. It is envisaged, for instance, that streamed performances and streamed lecture/performances will soon be available from the home location.

The website serves as the fundamental medium for communication and marketing for this project (supported by newspaper, radio and television information) and is of course most appropriate given the fact that students involved in the virtual conservatorium will be largely electronic students using electronic tools and media. We envisage minimalist advertising with website address dominating the campaign.

We are currently encouraging staff and students to use the electronic identity of the conservatorium and this process has developed well over the last two years. The Conservatorium is committed to developing quality resources and electronic options for both students and staff. We take heed of Jennings and Haughton (2000):

“The internet is the best tool that’s ever been available for observing life and identifying new communities. Spend at least an hour daily on the Internet and you’ll quickly be discovering new communities and trends. Consider it vital work, not an indulgence.” (p. 33)

The Conservatorium has already invested some funding into the development of website interest propaganda such as complimentary mouse pads in 2001 and inscribed pens/biros in 2002. These have worked remarkably well to date and have certainly raised the awareness and interest levels of the existing website. They are cost effective and are highly sought after by current clients. We are consistently informed by community members across a number of sites that they regularly log on to the website to check on performance availability and scope.

It is important to remember that the intent of the website is to have useful and essential information located within creating the need for staff and students (and other interested parties) to visit the site on a regular basis. It is about being interactive and relevant – not only about being attractive – though an appealing image is very useful for first time users in particular.

It is our view that staying in touch with the market that we service is also vital to success. Helgesen (2001) comments:

Connecting directly with your market distinguishes it as your own. Connecting directly with your market also adds to your value. And connecting directly with your market expands the parameters of your web, giving continuity to your passage through life. (p. 145)

Constant interaction with students (customers) needs to be a feature of the new conservatorium. Electronic means make this task considerably easier than ever before.

The role of the eCarer is paramount in the design. We suspect the distinguishing factor between successful eLearning endeavours and the unsuccessful ones will be centred around the quality interaction with the clients on a regular basis. This will form an integral part of The Virtual Conservatorium. The choice of eCarer will also be an important issue. Our intention is to use existing customer focused staff in the early stages with a notion of employing a suitable full time operative in the not too distant future – we envisage it being fulfilled by a telecommuter most likely operating from home. The role is one of regular (at least weekly) dialogue and interaction with virtual students ensuring processes are working, students are kept up to date with any new developments, and that they feel a sense of ‘belonging’ to a virtual community. Dinnocenzo and Swegan (2001) reinforce the need to treat electronic students differently and with a new set of sensitivities, “...working successfully within the e-communication culture ... means raising awareness and increasing sensitivity to the communication needs of geographically dispersed associates and global teams.” (p. 37)

The website will ultimately form the basis of all inquiry and information and will serve as the doorway to information – including enrolment procedures. All course and programme information will be available on site as well as the application, audition and design forms.

Undergraduate students will be required to audition for their position. This will require a step by step process involving applying for a position through QTAC (which will be monitored by the eAdministrator from the outset), completing an audition application (sent directly to the eAdministrator electronically), presenting at an

audition at a centre nominated or video recording (arranged by the eAdministrator), being offered a place within the programme (arranged by CQCM Student Administration closely monitored by the eAdministrator), and formally accepting that position with the necessary forms and electronic means (managed by the eAdministrator who in turn facilitates access to the eTutor and eCarer).

We anticipate financial investment in the marketing of the first offering of the awards on line, but imagine (as has been the case in the past) that 'word of mouth' will be a powerful tool in the marketing strategy of The Virtual Conservatorium in the second offering and beyond. The eAdministrator will maintain a careful monitoring of interest levels following the first intake. The virtual option will be advertised clearly in the future QTAC publications, in the case of the undergraduate programme, and will feature as an option in the post graduate general propaganda from 2003 onwards.

Enrolment process:

The enrolment process must, from the outset, be user friendly and comprehensive. The enrolment process, particularly for students who have little or no intention of visiting a campus, needs to be streamlined and transparent.

The university recently launched its 'e-enrolment' design, which provides the opportunity to enroll via the internet. This is a most timely opportunity and works very well in the proposed design. It is useful to walk through the enrolment process incorporating the technology resource available.

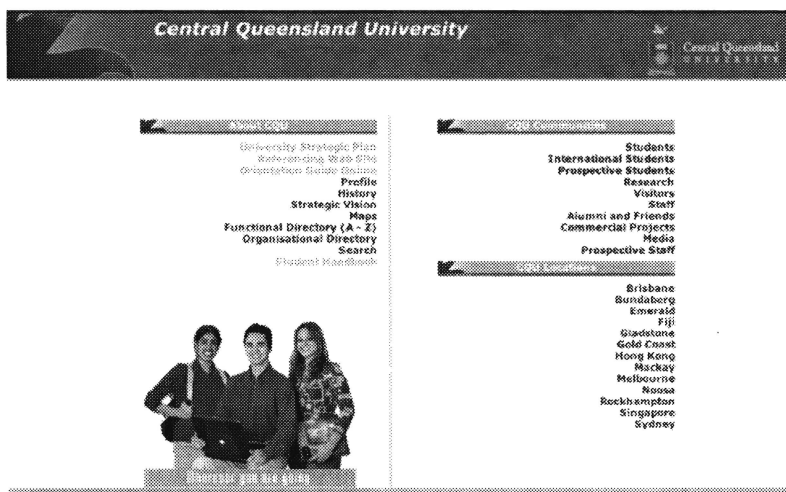
At the post graduate level, for example, the potential virtual student is required to complete a formal application form available electronically on the conservatorium website. Students complete the form on line and send it directly to the eAdministrator at the conservatorium. The eAdministrator lodges the application with the University's Student Administration and monitors the process ensuring speedy response to the potential student.

The applicant receives an immediate email noting that the application has been received and transferred to student administration with an indication of a time line. The eAdministrator makes regular

checks on progress of application informing the student of progress and expected outcome dates. The entire process is handled via email. The regular (weekly) updates ensure that the student is 'kept in the loop' throughout the application process. It also ensures that the process moves at an appropriate speed.

The student receives a formal offer via regular mail, which includes a student identification number and a CD Rom detailing the steps required to enroll in the appropriate courses within the MAA structure. Students within this programme are deemed 'flexible' for the purpose of enrolment and support.

Entry to the electronic enrolment process is via the Central Queensland University website at www.cqu.edu.au -



The enrolment programme (e enrolment) is very impressive and ideal as a support system for students who may never set foot on any formal campus during their candidature. Furthermore, it means that students do not have to make a purpose visit during the first week/s of term simply to fill in the enrolment papers at a student administration office.



Smith (2000) reinforces our opinion firmly when she writes-

New information systems, the internet and intranet technologies have created new business possibilities, including methods of carrying out transactions and communicating with colleagues and customers. These technological advances have revolutionised the way many of us do business, they have helped to improve general efficiency and have often resulted in substantial cost savings. (p. 11)

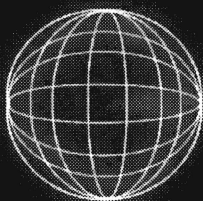
Part of the role of the eAdministrator is to ensure that students are processed quickly and efficiently and are assisted with electronic enrolment procedures. These procedures are 'user friendly' – but naturally from time to time students may experience difficulties that can be quickly contained with appropriate support. This is a feature of The Virtual Conservatorium

Accessing the products

The access to resources is obviously a key issue in the design and implementation of The Virtual Conservatorium.

The establishment of the portal www.thevirtualconservatorium.com and/or access via the "Virtual" tab at www.cqu.edu.au/cqcm means that students can readily access the resources made available to them. The maintenance of the resources themselves remain the responsibility of the eTutor; the ensuring of appropriate passage lies with the eAdministrator; and the eCarer will ensure that students' needs and interests are being catered for to a high level of satisfaction.

Our preliminary sketches for the site were basic but realistic. We emphasized, from the beginning, the need for speed and simplicity with minimum holding time. All elements are branded with the CQCM logo, but graphics and photographs are kept to a low level to ensure a speedy traverse. The entry to the site is immediate-



the virtual conservatorium

Update messages stream across the bottom of the screen informing students of coming deadlines, events, issues or alterations – this proves a very useful device. There is a simple ‘enter’ button that appears as you ‘mouse’ over the bottom right hand corner of the page.

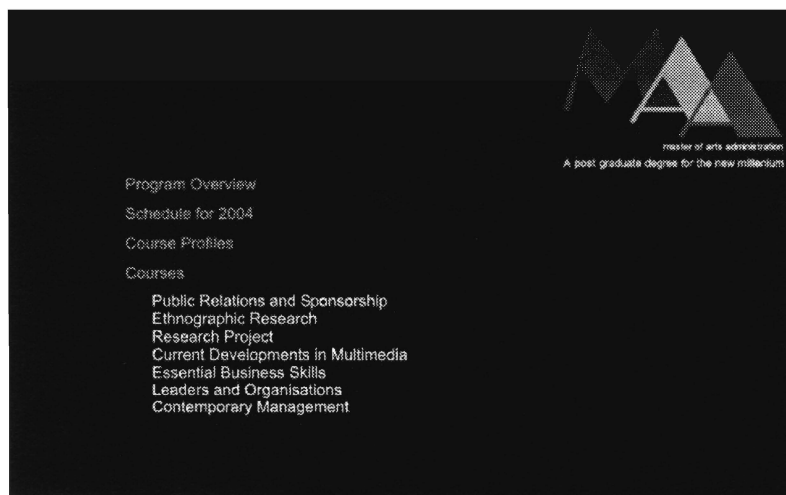
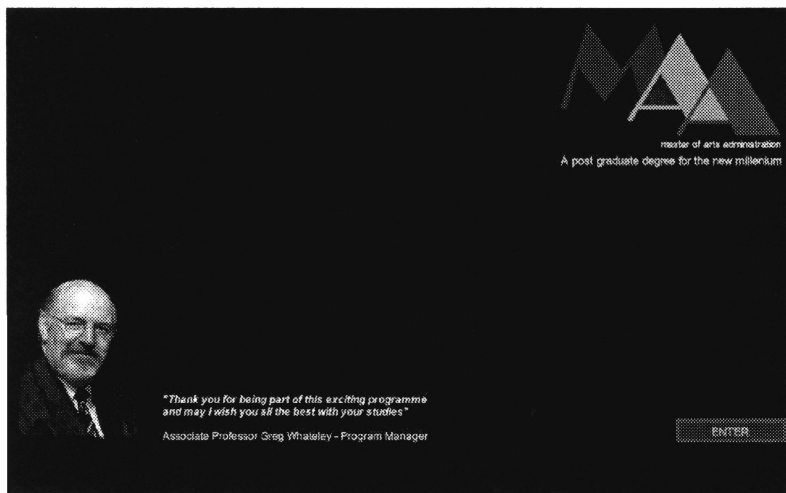
On entering the site the following information is made available – a choice of entry to either the post graduate offering (MAA on line) or the undergraduate option (eBachelor of Music/Performing Arts) - neither are password protected.



About the Virtual Conservatorium
MMA online
Bachelor of Music
Bachelor of Performing Arts
Bachelor of Music Theatre
Electives for non-Conservatorium Students

the virtual conservatorium


On selection of an option (in this case the MAA on line) – the schedule of offering is readily accessible and each of the on line courses can be accessed accordingly. It is most likely that only the courses available during a given term will be available at any given time – this will avoid confusion and make the access even more speedy and user friendly’.



For the purpose of this exercise we will select 'Essential Business Skills' from the menu



We are given access to the course synopsis, which is linked to the University handbook...


Study@CQU
 MGMT20122 Course Synopsis

Quick Links
[Handbook Home](#)
[Handbook Errata](#)
[Contact Us](#)
[CQU Home](#)

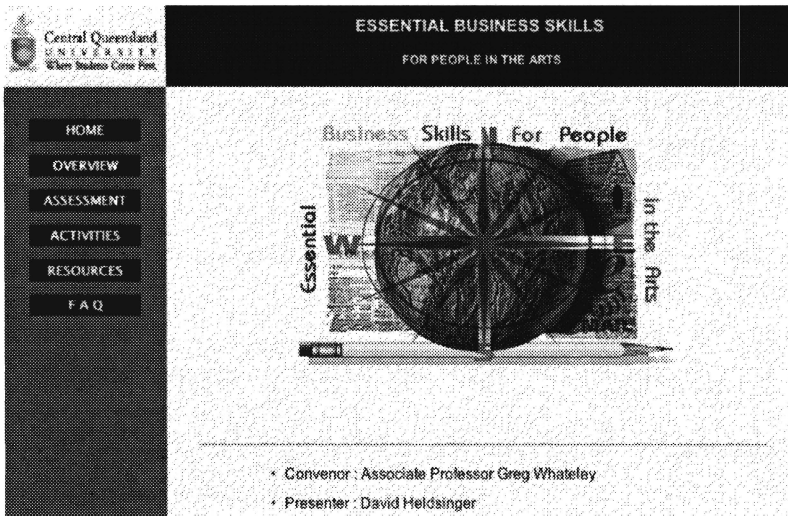
Programs
[Undergraduate Programs](#)
[Postgraduate Programs](#)
[Terminology](#)

Courses
[Undergraduate Courses](#)
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[Course Availability](#)

MGMT20122 Essential Business Skills for People in the Arts
Postgraduate
Faculty of Education and Creative Arts

This course provides the opportunity for students to consider the four essential elements of running a small business and/or initiative - management, strategic planning and compliance. These issues are important to people who are associated with the diverse arts industry.

...and we are able to access the course material, which in turn activates the electronic interest of the eTutor – alerted by the eAdministrator and the eCarer. Currently programme access is limited to the first five pages of the course so that students can sample the content, assessment, procedures, etc.



The notion of being able to ‘browse’ through the website and at least the first five or so pages of the programme is consistent with the current view of access and commitment within the electronic community. Electronic organizations are keen to avoid ‘walls’ of any kind. Levine, Locke, Searls and Weinberger (2000) state it well:

“In the world of closed rooms and weekly meetings, you’re a member or not. To join, you have to commit to sitting in a room at a particular time. In the open, hyperlinked world, it requires nothing but a few clicks to check out what a particular group is doing. You join their email discussion group or visit their group intranet site. Zero commitment. So membership isn’t a yes-or-no decision. You can browse with all the lack of commitment the word implies.” (p. 155)

We have little need for password protection. The courses available within the MAA on line programme, for example, require a range of support materials to fully utilise the site – these resources are only

made available to appropriately enrolled students. The on line resources serve as a good advertisement for the programme and we have no hesitation in allowing interested, potential customers to browse.

The products themselves

The products, in the form of courses, have been developed over a period of five years and adapted to The Virtual Conservatorium over the last twelve months. The programme is new to the on line market but the resources have been well tested, evaluated and modified to meet student needs.

The support materials (readings and case studies) have been recently renewed to ensure their relevance and 'up to date' ness. Their projected life span is approximately two years from the commencement of 2002. Regular updating of these materials is essential, along with consistent updating of the website.

It is our intention to remain with support print material given the enthusiasm shown by post-graduate students, in particular, to a multi-modal approach to the various courses. We anticipate a CD Rom version of the notes being made available in the not too distant future – not as a replacement of the hard copies but as an option. The Virtual Conservatorium is about 'options'.

Evaluation processes:

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

Evaluations will be conducted using an electronic survey pro-forma developed and managed by the eAdministrator. The survey will be web based and available on the front page of the site. Students will be asked to complete an electronic evaluation immediately following the completion of the final assignment in each course. The first of these evaluations will be completed in November 2003.

Given the relatively small number of students involved in the initial run of the project (27 undergraduate students and 25 post graduate students) a chat room feedback environment will be established for a thirty day period following the completion of the first part of the project. This environment will provide a useful qualitative method of validating the survey responses and hopefully provide the designers with more in depth feedback on the actual interface being developed.

Further, sixty days after the completion of the first run of the initiative a selection of 12 students will be interviewed electronically in the hope of providing the triangulation needed to ensure the improvements and changes made are appropriate.

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

On future directions

We have a commitment to the ongoing updating and manipulation of the courses as they are completed by cohorts of students. The combination of eCarer, eTutor, eAdministrator and compulsory course evaluations by students makes the direction of this revamping doable. This redirection will be greatly assisted by the feedback we gather and the efficient and appropriate use of that feedback.

The Virtual Conservatorium is highly market driven and relies on its customers (students) to assist in the placement and design of the resources in the market place. We see this as a fundamental aspect of the initiative.

Conclusion

The Virtual Conservatorium project represents a bold and well needed tertiary music initiative that will provide a range of options for undergraduate and post graduate students. The project team has spent considerable time and effort to date developing the framework for delivery and management.

The project was launched at the commencement of July 2002 and will be monitored carefully with an expressed intent of development and expansion.

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