



The Virtual University: Impact on Australian Accounting and Business Education

edited by Elaine Evans, Roger Burritt and James Guthrie



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The Case for a Global eConservatorium of Music Based in Australia¹

JOHN DUMAY, RALPH EVANS, KIM WALKER AND OLGA BODROVA

INTRODUCTION

This article outlines the case for the foundation of an Australian eConservatorium of music, offering aspiring musicians in Australia and around the world access to performers and scholars of international stature for online teaching, research and accreditation. In the present context the case outlined is designed to assist with the parallel understanding of business education through virtual and/or electronic means.

Currently, accounting education is under the spotlight because it suffers 'from the combined pressure of a large international student enrolment, high student-to-staff ratios, an inadequate funding model, and an ageing academic staff profile' (de Lange and Watty, 2011, p. 625). Music education suffers from similar ailments, and hence the quest to provide a new way forward.

The vision for the eConservatorium is to deliver high-quality flexible programs in music, with a blend of traditional and online teaching. Through strategic partnerships with key industry players, the eConservatorium targets market opportunities among Australian students of all ages, professional musicians and music retail consumers. The eConservatorium also supports existing national conservatoria by offering complementary specialist courses to incorporate into their music faculties.

We argue that the eConservatorium is a timely initiative supporting the Australian Government's drive to grow the nation's digital economy and increase the utility of the National Broadband Network (NBN). This is because it provides an opportunity to improve the delivery of regional music education, lead innovation in the fast expanding field of technology-based distance learning and enhance the global presence and marketing of Australia's current music programs while mitigating the impact of underfunding identified in the 2011 Higher Education Base Funding Review (Lomax-Smith et al., 2011). In addition to its own exciting potential, the eConservatorium will be a beacon for similar initiatives across a wide range of advanced education disciplines, in Australia and beyond.

Excellence in music is central to Australia's cultural identity and international status. It also represents a valuable sector of the economy, generating over \$6.8 billion in gross value, according to the most conservative estimates (Evans and Bodrova, 2011, p. 11). In addition to the performing arts, music education develops skills used in a wide range of other creative industries including film, web development and computer games (Hannan, 2003).

We see that with the emergence of new technologies and implementation of the NBN, Australia now has the perfect opportunity to develop a new model for music

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1. This article is based on the confidential report by Global Access Partners Pty Ltd, *The Case for a Global e-Conservatorium of Music Based in Australia*.

education and capture both economic opportunities for Australian students and Australian education exports. But unless we act urgently, we risk losing this opportunity because the current talent pool will diminish, and other countries will capture the opportunity.

The proposed eConservatorium will first focus on Music Education professional certificates, undergraduate and postgraduate teaching, expanding over time to offer solutions for the pre-tertiary sector, which remains a real challenge in Australia. Also, it has the potential to support the Australian Music Examination Board as a certified examination and training platform. The success of the new institution will be measured by the number of student enrolments over its first four years of operation, its international affiliations, diversity of faculty, philanthropic and industry contributions, quality of education and curricula innovations.

Seed funding is fundamental to the success of this venture. A strong capital base will allow the eConservatorium to concentrate on providing its core teaching services, invest in technological innovation and fulfil its potential to become the pre-eminent provider of world-class online music training and research.

BACKGROUND TO THE ECONSERVATORIUM

In early 2011, public policy think tank, Global Access Partners (GAP), invited senior representatives from academia, the arts, government, business and not-for-profit organisations to examine tertiary music education in Australia. The Tertiary Music Education Taskforce assessed the impact of the amalgamation of music conservatoria with universities in the 1990s as part of the Dawkins reforms, reviewed new reform proposals placed before the Australian Government and addressed specific challenges facing the sector in order to provide a meaningful and informed contribution to policy development (Evans and Bodrova, 2011, p. 8).

The taskforce report also outlined a low-cost plan to reform tertiary music education and offered a number of comprehensive recommendations for further development. It called on Australia to acknowledge the talent and economic potential of its musicians and stressed the importance of music education to the nation's cultural identity. The taskforce argued that equality of access to tertiary music education depended upon greater equality of access to pre-tertiary

music education, and recommended that pre-tertiary music education become a priority on the National Cultural Policy agenda. It suggested existing Australian conservatoria strengthen their relationships with each other and develop a framework to drive collaboration. Finally, it requested government action to rectify the funding model's inefficiencies and introduce incentives to encourage music teaching institutions to share talent.

Above all, the taskforce advocated the foundation of a specialist virtual music Conservatorium at the national level, to take advantage of the NBN, the Internet's fast-expanding cloud computing capacity and the latest developments in high-definition video technology. It saw an eConservatorium as a cost effective and sustainable complement to more traditional methods, which would reduce overheads, increase funding per student, and eliminate the problem of defining music research and performances in traditional academic terms. Additionally, it would help leverage regional educational opportunities for all students; generate international educational opportunities to meet niche interests with global expertise; and provide international visibility and participation in esteemed academic circles.

The taskforce saw the need for music institutions to develop specific methodologies for online music teaching and distance learning, and to conduct research into the impact of such online teaching on the quality of education.

In the wake of these recommendations, GAP brought together a Working Group of leading academic, government and business representatives in 2012 to oversee the development of a scoping study for the proposed eConservatorium, analyse market opportunities and outline governance and funding models, technical framework, mode of operation and reach. The Group was supported by three Federal Government Departments – the Department of Industry, Innovation, Science, Research and Tertiary Education; the Department of Regional Australia, Local Government, Arts and Sport; and the Department of Broadband, Communications and the Digital Economy. Interest from leading national and international companies included Telstra and Google.

The Working Group conducted a series of meetings in Sydney between May and July 2012 under the chairmanship of Mr Ralph Evans. The meetings were documented under the Chatham House rule of non-

attribution.² Participants attended in a personal capacity, rather than as official representatives of their respective organisations, while international observers offered their feedback by correspondence. The conclusions of the Working Group regarding the feasibility of the eConservatorium as a new model of tertiary music education were summarised in a confidential proposal submitted to the Australian Government in August 2012.

What the Working Group realised was that the world has changed. During this time, the Australian Government released the Gonski report into school education funding (Gonski et al., 2011), the principal recommendation of which was to increase funding by about \$5 billion per year. We see the Gonski report as an appropriate and thought-provoking document – if it had been written in 1980, not 2011. The focus of the Gonski report is propping up our legacy educational systems. Of course, most people are interested in propping up legacy systems because that's where they are comfortable. Legacy systems are solid, we know them well, and we have invested a lot of money in them. We have the infrastructure, so it is hard to throw it away. However, as can be seen by the response to the Gonski report, the Federal Government has not yet convinced all the states that they must bear some of the cost of propping up our legacy educational system (Blake, 2013).

The key to any business is customers. If you bring customers, you have a business. The key customers in the education system are the students (Dumay et al., 2008). The academic world invested extremely heavily in legacy institutions like buildings that need to be maintained and have done so sometimes at the expense of teachers and teaching. For example, in 2012, the University of Sydney faced a downturn in income and as part of cutting costs to fund works to legacy infrastructure enacted a redundancy of up to 100 academic staff and offering teaching-only roles to others (Metherell, 2012). Is this a customer-focused strategy? Is it forward looking?

The Working Group concluded that in setting up an elearning institution, the investment would be modest compared to setting up, for example, a new university. The eConservatorium could potentially be funded through sponsorship. Research shows that over 1.3 million Australians, young and old, are actively involved in music (Evans and Bodrova, 2011). It is a large market. Businesses can sell music to Australians, and they could pay the eConservatorium for the opportunity.

2. See www.chathamhouse.org/about-us/chathamhouseerule

WHAT IS DRIVING THIS PROJECT?

Proposals for the eConservatorium derive from addressing the recommendations of the Australian Government Higher Education Base Funding Review (Lomax-Smith et al., 2011) and the GAP Taskforce on Tertiary Music Education (Evans and Bodrova, 2011). As a result, the Working Group identified the following national, global and technology drivers (GAP, 2012, pp.10–11).

NATIONAL DRIVERS

- The tertiary music sector is unsustainable in its current form. It lacks adequate funding and is failing to deliver the breadth and quality of instruction that Australia's talented young musicians deserve
- Additional revenue streams must be developed to support music learning in both regional and metropolitan Australia
- Musicians require an avenue to complete degree courses while remaining active performers
- New accreditation programs with flexible learning technologies are required to increase the number and skills of Australian music teachers
- There are severe shortages of Australian teachers of certain musical instruments, forcing talented students to study abroad
- Students in regional Australia have limited opportunities to study music or increase uptake due to the shortage of available teachers
- Teaching models need to be redesigned to allow talented teachers to reach the greatest number of students while also improving provision of intensive one-on-one tuition
- There is both inequity and general inadequacy in the provision of music education to students in Australian schools. Individual talent remains unidentified while appreciation for classical music is underdeveloped
- Australian music education will substantially benefit from cost-effective avenues to develop joint ventures and partnerships of international scope and, as a result, increase its quality and market opportunities
- Australia will gain critical advantage by building a central repository of knowledge and music research available to teachers to share and encourage best practice.

GLOBAL DRIVERS

- Growing demand from Asia and elsewhere and fast-developing technology is encouraging the emergence of a plethora of online education schemes worldwide. What was once considered a niche channel for the delivery of educational content has rapidly become mainstream, offering wider access, new markets for content and expanded revenue opportunities for academic institutions
- Distance education allows domestic institutions to extend their reach across the globe. Universities in the US, Asia, Middle East and elsewhere, are already leveraging advanced technologies to put their services within the reach of students around the world
- Fast-developing economies in Asia, South America and elsewhere have large middle classes with the desire and ability to pay for high-quality cultural education
- A new generation of students are 'digital natives', who live much of their personal and professional lives online. They expect more convenient, diverse and flexible methods of education, using mobile, digital and Internet technology, in keeping with every other aspect of their lives
- The specialisation, customisation and convenience offered by distance education makes it an attractive proposition for working professionals and employers
- Music eConservatoria will inevitably arise, and Australian students will take advantage of them. The only question is whether the profits, prestige and capabilities will flow to Australia or elsewhere.

TECHNOLOGY DRIVERS

- The development of the NBN and the adoption of cloud computing will transform Australia's economy and society. Education cannot afford to be left behind as more modern and productive methods of delivery in all sectors overwhelm legacy providers who refuse to change
- The Internet and Australia's incipient NBN can now satisfy the heavy bandwidth demands required for real-time audio and video transfers. Technology and infrastructure continue to improve, and current constraints may erode over the next two or three years in Australia, given the implementation of the NBN, development of cloud computing and a new generation of video-streaming solutions

- Information technology will allow students in the regions to access teaching talent based in metropolitan areas. It will also create the ability to generate new income streams for Australian education by exporting services to the rest of the world. This, in turn, may allow talented Australian musicians, teachers and academics to stay in the country, instead of being forced to further their careers abroad
- Online connectivity is set to transform the delivery of higher education just as it has revolutionised retail, publishing, media and social networking. Imaginative companies are already profiting from services provided to the 'iPad Generation'.

HOW IS THE ECONSERVATORIUM DIFFERENT?

The proposed eConservatorium will comprise a new style of institution, based in Australia and complementing the services of existing domestic tertiary and pre-tertiary institutions, as well as building fresh affiliations across the world. Ideally, it will involve all of Australia's current conservatoria in time. In doing so, the lack of equity in the existing provision of music education for people living in remote and rural areas can finally be addressed. A national eConservatorium, networking a national and international pool of first-rate music teachers, would particularly benefit talented students living outside the major cities who are currently denied access to many instrumental specialists. The highest quality of learning will no longer be restricted to a privileged few favoured by geography. It will be possible for almost anyone, almost anywhere to study any musical instrument with expert instruction in their own home or community centre via television, tablet device or computer. Potentially, the opportunity to locate loan instruments for students will be significantly enhanced.

Students previously unable to attend a major conservatorium program, for reasons of finance, prior commitments or geography, will be engaged, while those who plan to attend institutions under threat or extinction will have a viable alternative. The eConservatorium will also offer employment opportunities to the skilled and experienced staff being shed from traditional institutions due to financial pressures. Thus, it is imagined that existing national students will continue to take their undergraduate degrees through the existing institutions, where

they pay a top-up on the Commonwealth supported place (CSP) allocation.³ However, some rare courses can be offered through the eConservatorium allowing the current institutions to rotate or reduce costly offerings. International and diverse niche market students, who are less mobile, will find this an attractive alternative.

The creation of the NBN should be seized upon to transform Australian tertiary music institutions by linking, consolidating and coordinating their teaching and resources to eliminate duplication, increase efficiency and maximise their potential to service Australia's music education needs. As a new business model, the eConservatorium will reduce costs and overheads associated with traditional models of music education delivery while increasing the number of students able and willing to study music.

Distance learning programs using modular systems in combination with short residencies for higher degree courses have been successfully implemented around the world. Examples include RDAM, the Manhattan School of Music Distance Learning, Walden University (using personnel from Harvard, Yale, Stanford and Indiana Universities and the Sorbonne), Boston University and the University of Phoenix, Arizona. Although radical in its conception and groundbreaking in its implementation, the eConservatorium will be seen in time to represent a natural progression in Australia's education system and the global classroom.

Moreover, the eConservatorium will both embody and symbolise the continuing importance and relevance of classical music today, not only in the lives of music-loving individuals, but also at the national and global level. By building an extensive archive of video learning materials, the eConservatorium will secure the rich legacy of the arts for a new generation through the application of modern science and technology. Just as sound recording made music permanently accessible to everyone at the start of the 20th century, online technologies can play a similar role in helping preserve the best of music teaching in the early years of the 21st century.

THE ECONSERVATORIUM'S VALUE PROPOSITION

The eConservatorium will be established as a separate entity utilising a virtual network of existing facilities. Modern technology will bring together the most talented students and most capable teachers to deliver both virtual classrooms of infinite size but the effective one-on-one instruction required through face-to-face and online methods. Also, beyond major world centres, there can be a shortage of properly qualified elite teachers. The eConservatorium's unique 'selling point' will be the quality of its professorial talent, while alliances with prestigious international partners will help establish the eConservatorium as an attractive brand in global music circles.

The eConservatorium will meet the emergent needs and demands of a diversified domestic market.

- Traditional undergraduate and postgraduate students will benefit from the application of technologies to support and accelerate their learning and performance capabilities. Concurrently, the eConservatorium will expand the potential student body from metropolitan Australia to much broader national and global audiences and will potentially result in higher completion rates
- Professional musicians who seek opportunities to expand their skill sets will be attracted by master classes with expert musicians, both over the Internet and face to face
- Music teachers seeking accreditation will be able to raise their competencies and professional standing
- K-12 students undergoing private music tuition will have an opportunity to join structured learning programs, while those previously unable to learn music due to the lack of opportunity, resources or geographic considerations will be able to access music tuition. The eConservatorium can also serve as an AMEB-certified examination and training platform
- Music lovers of all ages in the community will be able to access non-award courses and benefit from the rich informational resources the eConservatorium will build over time
- The eConservatorium will provide immediate access to emerging research and global innovation.

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3. A Commonwealth supported place (CSP) is a higher education place for which the Commonwealth makes a contribution towards the cost of a student's education. The student also pays a contribution amount, which varies depending on courses undertaken, at rates approved by the university within ranges set by the Commonwealth and indexed annually.

The eConservatorium is proposed as a device-independent, universally accessible platform, combining new and established technologies. Access will require only a browser interface and broadband connection. With most of the innovative technology to be utilised by the eConservatorium's providers, rather than its consumers, there will be few entry barriers to anyone wanting to take advantage of the program.

Income will be generated under the current structures for Australian enrolments, including both the current undergraduate base funding and postgraduate completions. The eConservatorium's new model of governance and provision will ensure the continuity and sustainability of programs currently struggling under current Australian university funding and administrative arrangements.

ANTICIPATED OUTCOMES AND BENEFITS

A national eConservatorium, catering to students of all ages and backgrounds, no matter how remote their location or underprivileged their circumstances, will not only ameliorate many of the existing pressures in Australian music education, but support the Federal Government's wider agenda of social inclusion, increased opportunity and technological advance for all. Through online connectivity, the rapid development of information and communication technologies and changing needs and expectations of modern students are driving the emergence of new business models and fresh methodological approaches and the eConservatorium, as a 'centre of excellence', will form the frontline for such developments in music education.

Through the smart use of technology, the eConservatorium can improve the economic efficiency of music teaching and learning, unlock new revenue streams and expand current educational offerings to new and increasingly global markets. It will also build Australian expertise and know-how in innovative uses of teaching and learning technologies and tools, which can then be leveraged elsewhere. Additionally, the eConservatorium will foster cooperation within the Australian tertiary music sector, create improved and collective resources and enhance current programs by supplying performers and scholars to complement existing faculty and student profiles, particularly in terms of rare instruments and specialty scholars.

It will lead a new generation of interactive online degrees in which contextual education is combined with practical, tactile, creative and analytical skills, in contrast to earlier distance learning programs forced by the limits of their technology and vision to restrict themselves to dry theory and mass-produced content. The syllabus will be modelled upon those of contemporary universities in North America and Europe, which have already embarked on the elearning revolution. Students will enrol in a certain number of modules to suit their interests and abilities with rigorous minimum requirements required to complete their chosen, individually tailored, course.

The broader benefits to be realised through the eConservatorium project include:

- Sustainability of the sector within government provision of existing services by increasing external revenues
- Increasing community participation and access by raising the profile, standing and accessibility of music programs in Australia
- Developing teaching and learning experiences for academics and students
- Optimising the productivity and documentation of teaching time
- Supporting teaching excellence and improving the quality of Australian music graduates
- Developing courses involving world-class international contributors
- Controlling costs and better utilising existing facilities and resources
- Meeting increasing demand from domestic and international markets
- Supporting Australia's national and international education and arts strategies
- Pre-empting international competition through building alliances in Asia, Europe and the Americas
- Broadening educational opportunities through online study of traditional music and specific discipline areas such as indigenous studies and 'world' music
- Mitigating the duplication of resources
- Generating revenue for the current institutions
- Effective international marketing for the Australian music education sector
- Elevating the status of the music teaching profession in Australia.

RESEARCH IMPACT

While the eConservatorium is focused on delivering a dynamic learning experience tailored to its students' specialised interests, the eConservatorium will also undertake research projects to advance the profession. It will encourage a diverse set of options, from PhD projects to broad interdisciplinary ventures. Importantly, credit for work with primary sources of people and places around the world will be recognised and made accessible through telepresence, independent study and travel.

Through innovative technologies, global library connections and research affiliations, students will enter a new domain of learning and enquiry. The eConservatorium's discovery portals will offer a range of learning and research opportunities, from archival material to live virtual retreats and seminars and such opportunities will expand as the technology develops. Expert supervision and external assessment from eminent faculty, from within Australia and abroad, will be enhanced.

ORGANISATIONAL AND INDUSTRY IMPACT

Just as Internet services such as Amazon have come to dominate the retail market by flattening supply chains, reducing traditional overheads and offering quick, convenient and above all highly tailored personal service, so the eConservatorium has the potential to revolutionise the structure of high-level tertiary music education. The eConservatorium will lead this much-needed change by example in the traditionally conservative education sector. Music departments are currently bound by the enormous overheads incurred and charged for by the main university administration. These rates can reach as high as 72%, as currently at The University of Sydney, and the ongoing costs and provision of performance facilities and highly expensive musical instruments and equipment further burden already constrained and compromised budgets. By contrast, the eConservatorium will allow students to study with the best teachers in the world while practising on their own instruments in their own homes or schools. Just as the outsourcing of computer or administrative services allows businesses to save money and concentrate on their core activities, so the eConservatorium will prosper by selectively outsourcing its teaching and supervision of research.

Alliances and partnerships will become the norm, rather than the exception in enabling a demand-driven business in a revitalised education sector. In meeting the demands of under-served domestic and fast developing international markets, the eConservatorium will create joint ventures and partnerships with individuals, other institutions and public and private sector organisations to provide a model for developments throughout the sector. The successful implementation of the eConservatorium will encourage Australian entrepreneurs and other educational institutions to replicate its impact in other subject areas, including business and medicine.

The eConservatorium will also prompt the re-design of teaching methodologies for the modern age. 'Sitting at the feet of the master' has long been regarded as the optimal teaching model and a substantial proportion of existing teachers tend to resist even looking at how technology can support alternative, technology assisted pedagogies. However, the world is increasingly going digital, and change is inevitable. Teachers will need to embrace a significantly different approach to teaching, and experience gained through the eConservatorium will help prompt wider cultural change.

Just as film and television are increasingly 'time shifted' and distributed online direct to people's homes or mobile devices, so the eConservatorium will drag education into the modern, distributed, on-demand age. Given the large and currently untapped markets it will enter, and its much lower cost base, the eConservatorium will be able to reinvest its returns by continually updating and expanding its technology and lead innovation into the future.

The eConservatorium can also play a key role in pre-empting the creation of inferior projects by individual operators by offering a high-quality, consolidated product tied into Australia's existing tertiary provision. To be globally significant, it has to be the best that Australia and our affiliates can provide.

CONCLUSION

The teaching of music performance is a niche within higher education. It is expensive under the current legacy university structures, being time-intensive and requiring specialists in up to 50 areas to provide a base curriculum. This is challenging for the largest nations but especially so for Australia, with its small population grouped mainly in a few large cities located well apart from each other.

At the same time, a global revolution is underway in the delivery of education. Many of the world's leading universities are now offering online degrees or course modules. As such, this paper proposes a solution to many of the problems of Australian music teaching using the technology of the education revolution. It proposes an Australian eConservatorium of Music for aspiring musicians at tertiary and pre-tertiary levels, which will also offer community courses for people who live away from the main centres. The eConservatorium will provide unparalleled access to performers and scholars of international stature to help improve outcome for music education, research and the industry and it will do so at lower cost. In addition, it will be a pilot to test and demonstrate teaching approaches that can later be applied in larger education sectors, such as medicine, law and business.

Wrong decisions like investing in legacy systems beyond what is necessary have the potential to stifle progress while at the same time represent an inefficient use of resources. While we have to maintain much of what we have, equally we have to manage the transition to new ways of enabling education. As such, new initiatives such as the eConservatorium have to be started on new foundations.

While this paper does not directly address accounting and business education, it is useful because it can help encourage dialogue regarding current and future curriculum design (Evans et al., 2010, p. 11). Using the eConservatorium as an example it shows how academic educators need to open their mind to utilising technology to deliver quality-focused accounting and business education. As at 2012, there was still a shortage of accountants although the gap between market demand and supply was narrowing (Lloyd Morgan, 2012). However, there is an ongoing trend for accountants to specialise in areas such as superannuation, sustainability and strategy thus opening opportunities for accounting education providers to deliver ongoing skills training to aspiring accountants and those already in the workforce. For the former, it will allow greater access to accounting education external to the university, which could possibly free up some time so they can gain some work experience and position themselves better against other graduates following the traditional accounting education pathways. For the latter, these accountants are less likely to be able to attend traditional university classes based in legacy university campuses. What they desire is a more flexible and timely education, that gives them these skills and accreditation today in specific accounting subjects rather than over the course of two or more years of study.

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