

## **The implausible dream**

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A recent conversation about WFA and the option of hybrid teaching and learning triggered a memory relating to transnational education and how changes in thinking - and of course the technology available today - has changed the landscape - for good - and in line with a dream (vision) that started many years ago. That dream commenced with access to the internet and the use of email.

In an effort to project what the next five years might bring - some reflection on the past is a very useful exercise. What it does demonstrate is the new speed (velocity) of innovation that current exists (not to mention the technology) - fuelled by both the COVID 19 pandemic and the digital revolution that was accelerated accordingly.

My own experience (certainly post 1989) has been one of operating 'outside of the lines' so to speak and being innovative whenever possible - thanks to some understanding supervisors, colleagues and mentors - to whom I am eternally grateful. The establishment of the Musicum20 entity and think tank (2012) also created an environment to benchmark nationally and internationally and share and get feedback on some of the innovative practices.

### **Mid - 1990s**

In the mid-1990s I found myself teaching a masters' level program as a transnational project for *Griffith University, Queensland*. The student cohort was in Singapore (with IBMEC). The initiative was supported by the *Faculty of Education and the Arts* and was seen as a transnational program.

The programme involved teaching eight (8) subjects each year in *intensive mode* on location in Singapore. It was an Australian award with up to 20-30 Singapore students at a time who attended over a ten (10) day period to accommodate their work commitments. It involved me flying to Singapore for twelve (12) days at a time - teaching on two weekends and three evenings - and being available throughout the week for student and learning support.

The programme was well received and included the option for students to come to Australia (specifically the Gold Coast) for one subject delivered in intensive mode in partnership with Warner Bros Studios. This was regularly taken up - but also remained available online.

The technology of the time involved email communication, a basic dedicated website and the use of overhead projector slides for teaching that I would bring with me each delivery. The mode was F2F intensive.

At around the same time I was given the opportunity of running postgraduate programs at multiple locations (including cyberspace) that gave me further insight into issues of distance and difference. The mode was F2F intensive

### **Early 2000s**

In the early 2000s I (along with a colleague – *Professor Ian Bofinger*) developed the idea of a Virtual Conservatorium for *Central Queensland University* that provided the opportunity to deliver a music degree to anywhere and anyone using an online platform. It was presented locally, nationally and internationally. It was part of the Central Queensland Conservatorium of Music offerings.

We were able to deliver subjects on-line using a variety of software (some developed specifically for us) and placing students with location specific performance teachers and ensemble groups.

The model worked – though the technology of the time was basic and a bit ‘clunky’. In principle though, *The Virtual Conservatorium* became a reality and was both acknowledged - and criticised - within the Sector.

Ironically - and as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic circa 2019 - all conservatoria around the world found themselves delivering online – not such a silly idea after all. *It only took 19 years to catch on.* The mode was hybrid.

### **Mid 2000s**

In part inspired by *The Virtual Conservatorium* - the *Australian Guild of Music Education* (now the *Australian Guild of Education*) developed a full Bachelor of Music in 2016 and re-accredited in 2019 (still in operation today) fully available online.

The course had the USP (prior to the pandemic) of being one of the few awards available (nationally and internationally) fully online servicing domestic students and offshore students – though predominantly nationally.

The program was well received from the outset with modest enrolment numbers. With changing regulations regarding F2F for international students – the program remains viable – but would have to consider a hybrid variation as well as the challenges of ‘caps’ being placed on international enrolments.

In my work at the University of Western Sydney I was able to encourage the development of online subjects within the WSU College environment and supported the development of the virtual activities of the larger University. Having had the multi-campus experience at both Griffith University and Central Queensland University I was able to adapt quickly to the diversity of UWS and its multiple sites.

### **Late 2000s into early 2020s**

The COVID-19 pandemic was a major disruption given the various Australian State lockdowns (Melbourne being amongst the world's longest lockdowns) and ironically impacted on enrolments at AGE.

The rest of Australia of course was required to embrace the notion of online learning – at all levels – whether they liked it or not.

My own School at the time (Group Colleges Australia) embraced the technology given the expertise and capital investment available. Ongoing surveys of international students indicated extremely high levels of satisfaction and support of the online mode.

A number of exciting online options emerged including Work Integrated Learning (WIL) online presentations (from all over) and the development of a bespoke invigilation program (*Invigilator Plus*). The technology and mode also provided the option of opening two additional campuses to Sydney – including Melbourne and Adelaide.

The mode was online and later morphed into hybrid.

### **Mid 2020s**

In 2024 I am currently involved in an online (with hybrid option) delivery of a Doctoral program (with *Associate Professor Tom O'Connor*, *Emeritus Professor Jim Mienczakowski* and *Associate Professor Sutheera de Wit*) for *Chiang Rai Rajabhat University* in Thailand. This is a transnational project of the University and currently has students enrolled in Melbourne, Australia.

The mode of delivery is hybrid – but mostly online using ZOOM and other resources to deliver the project and publishing student assignments in the form of blogs on a public website. This added publication dimension is a powerful incentive for students to share their work and enhance their scholarship profiles.

Using current technology with solid WIFI and associated equipment – the programme is achieving excitingly, good outcomes and a positive upbeat response from both students and teaching staff. Essentially – the dream of the 90s has now reached fruition – utilising soft resources and cloud-based storage.

What, at the time, was a dream – has now become a reality. The COVID-19 pandemic combined with the digital revolution that accompanied it (often referred to as the dual tsunamis) have made the notion of transnational delivery quite straight forward and in truth has enhanced the delivery and context.

What has taken some thirty (30) years to refine is in truth a dream coming true – or reaching fruition. The notion - If you want something to happen – first dream about it – and do everything in your power to make it happen. Dreams do come true.

### **So, what of the next five years?**

My observations suggest that we are in a wonderful position to push the online opportunity further moving forward. It is likely to incorporate the hybrid approach.

The technology available to us is impressive and highly customisable. Picture, sound and interface is looking very fresh and effective. The only limitation is the WIFI quality at distant locations.

For the first half of the 2020s I was able to explore the notion of working from anywhere (including home) and exploring the life of a digital nomad. I trialled systems in Vietnam, Hong Kong, Singapore, Macau, Florence, Rome, Paris – and found - despite the time zone differences – the notion was and is highly effective. I found that productivity was high as long s it was accompanied by discipline and focus. The bigger the time difference – the more discipline needed.

I would like to think that we will see considerably more flexibility in our teaching and learning moving forward that will include online access to experts around the world; greater access for offshore students; more transnational work; expert use of both online and hybrid; creative solutions to working integrated learning (beyond physical placements) and of course embracing the preferences and life-style of the digital nomad.

In the late 1990s and early 2000s I dreamed of being part of a virtual school that would operate 24/7 with staff and students based in three time zones – Australia, Asia/Sub-Continent and Europe. Perhaps the so called ‘impossible dream’ that became ‘implausible’ could in fact become ‘reality’ – I would certainly like to think so.

Worth reading –

**WFA Working from Anywhere and the Digital Nomad (2022)** - [Working From Anywhere Formatted](#)

**The New Reality (2023)** - [GCA Vol 11 - Formatted](#)

**50 Shades of Greg - Celebrating 50 years in Academia (2024)** - [Untitled](#)

**Emeritus Professor Greg Whateley** worked at *Griffith University* (Gold Coast/Brisbane) 1991-1999; *Central Queensland Conservatorium of Music* 2000-2003; *The Australian Institute of Music* 2004- mid 2005; the *University of New South Wales* mid 2005- mid 2008; *The Australian International Conservatorium of Music* (mid 2008-2011); the *University of Western Sydney* 2011-2015; and *Group Colleges Australia* (2016-2024). Greg celebrated 50 years in academia in 2024 and is currently an independent consultant with the *Australian Guild of Education* in Melbourne.