

## **Internationalizing Education Standards: Evolution of the music educators role – observations over a five year period at the Music Department of Universiti Putra Malaysia**

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### **Abstract**

This paper examines trends in what is expected of tertiary music educators and identifies reasons for staff turnover. The purpose of this research is to improve existing standards of tertiary music education in Malaysia through the understanding of the challenges resulting from evolving roles and demands. A qualitative analysis is undertaken pertaining to quality of enrolled students, including their perceived needs and expectations, as well as statistics and reasons for staff attrition over a five year period at the Music Department of Universiti Putra Malaysia. Findings indicate that student perceptions and needs have changed during this period (1996-2000). Staff turnover has been relatively high due to increased demands and pressures and increasing transparency of individual's capabilities. Conclusions ascertained from this study include the following: versatility and adaptability are becoming increasingly important qualities required of tertiary music academic staff members; personal productivity in terms of international quality output (concert performances by performance educators and publications by non-performance educators) is increasingly seen as an indicator of staff quality; and a constant upgrading of skills and knowledge of tertiary music educators in their respective specialisations is absolutely necessary. The research shows that the tertiary music educator's role has evolved from that of a teacher to that of a guide and a role model.

### **1.0 INTRODUCTION**

The trend in the late 1990s towards the true globalisation of information, catalysed by the development of advanced telecommunications technologies, has resulted in information being made increasingly easily available across national boundaries. To assert influence within such a context requires quality content (Mahizzan, 2000) as the platform for comparison extends over wider and wider boundaries, both in space and time. Students increasingly have access to and have experience with foreign standards in every academic discipline and comparisons are inevitable. (Kameoka, 1996). This international exchange of information is further reinforced by the free flow of expertise into the country. The pressure resulting from this multi-pronged internationalization is causing a change in the traditional teacher-student relationship. (Mok,

2000). This paper examines trends in what is expected of tertiary music educators and identifies reasons for staff turnover. The purpose of this research is to improve existing standards of tertiary music education in Malaysia through the understanding of the challenges resulting from evolving roles and demands.

### **1.1 The UPM Music Department**

The Music Department, also known as the University Conservatoire, was set up in 1996 as one of four departments within the Faculty of Human Ecology. The department, the first in Malaysia to offer its own Bachelor of Music degree, aims at producing skilled and knowledgeable music professionals. The department objectives are specifically advertised as including the targets stated below:

1. To produce graduates equipped with the knowledge, skills and expertise necessary for a successful career in music.
2. To conduct research in music.
3. To hold concerts, seminars, lectures, workshops and academic as well as professional courses in music.
4. To provide consultation services to government and non-government bodies that require this service.

Courses are offered which lead to the award of the degree of Bachelor of Music, with majors in Performance, Music Technology and Music Education. The department also offers music courses which can be taken as a minor package or as free electives by non-music majors. A Masters by research (Structure A) is also available in which students are required to produce a thesis, participate in academic discussions, complete project assignments as well as attend and present seminars as part of the requirements of the program. Areas for study include Music (Composition or Musicology), Music Technology (Musical Acoustics, Music Synthesis or Digital Audio) and Music Education (Instrumental Pedagogy, Early Childhood Music Education or School Music Education).

The UPM Music Department has several significant achievements under its belt. Besides being the first department in Malaysia to offer a B.Mus. degree, it is also the first to offer Music Technology as a major area of study. It's Symphony Orchestra is the only fully home-grown symphony orchestra in Malaysia (the orchestra does not make use of any augmentists, or "borrowed" players external to the department, at all) and performs major works regularly. Recent performances have included the piano concertos of Beethoven, Chopin, Gershwin, Haydn, Mozart and Rachmaninov, symphonies by Beethoven, Bizet, Dvorak and Schubert and a host of other standard works of orchestra such as Ravel's Bolero. Student musicians regularly obtain part-time paid engagements to perform outside UPM while various staff and students compose and sequence music for commercial purposes. The department website<sup>1</sup> and its related *Musical Malaysia*<sup>2</sup> site are both well known to the international World Wide Web community.

Since the setting up of the department 5 years ago, the present author, as founder and pioneer Head of Department, has observed a trend of changing attitudes and expectations of successive batches of students. This, coupled with a relatively high staff turnover rate, led to the need for this research, which is hoped will contribute towards an understanding of what is expected of a tertiary music educator. This in turn should contribute towards the improvement in music education standards nationwide and throughout the region as the research findings may be used as a starting point towards developing, training and selecting future international quality music educators, besides providing guidelines for current music educators to improve themselves.

A qualitative analysis is thus undertaken pertaining to the quality of enrolled students, including their perceived needs and expectations. Statistics and reasons for staff attrition over a five year period at the Music Department of Universiti Putra Malaysia are also examined.

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.music.upm.edu.my/>

<sup>2</sup> <http://www.music.upm.edu.my/malaysia/>

## 2.0 GENERAL OBSERVATIONS

The observations described in this section stem from various discussions over a five year period held among, between and with staff and students at the UPM music department, comments by students and staff including formal evaluations conducted at the close of each semester, as well as comments by outsiders affiliated with the department such as regular UPM concert-goers, and personal observations by the author.

### 2.1 Specific Trends Among Students

UPM has two intakes for new students each year. The July 1996 intake included the pioneer batch of B.Mus. students. The program's second intake came only one full year later with the May 1997 intake. This was followed by three more main intakes in May 1998, May 1999 and May 2000, plus three very small intakes of less than five students each in November 1998, November 1999 and November 2000<sup>3</sup>. For the purpose of generalising our discussion, both intakes in each year are treated collectively as one batch, hence we shall refer to only 5 batches of students: 1996, 1997, 1998, 1999 and 2000. (Table 1).

**Table 1. Student Intake from 1996-2000.**

Year	1996	1997	1998	1999	2000
Total students	45	37	29	27	34

Some very definite collective differences have been observed among students from the different batches. Broad trends will be mentioned here while detailed discussions will follow later when further empirical data is presented. In general, it has been observed that average student standards are increasing in terms of academic entry qualifications as well as musical prowess. Evidence of this is observed in the attainment of improved examination scores, higher quality of student compositional work, and increasing numbers of top level student performers on various musical instruments. This may be attributed to the fact that as the program grows more established and well known, better and better students will apply for entry. That the number of

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<sup>3</sup> The selection of students for the November intake was held in late September.

students applying has not really increased may be explained by the fact that within the same period, several other local universities and institutions of higher learning have also introduced tertiary music programs, thus competing for a limited number of students. That UPM continues to attract the cream of the crop is evidence of the quality of its program.

A paradoxical trend observed has been the deteriorating attitudes of successive batches of students. While it is not true to state that every student within a particular batch shares the same attitudes, general behaviour patterns have been observed which broadly apply to the majority of students within particular batches. Specifically, the pioneer batch was generally lacking in confidence and rather diffident in attitude; the second batch appeared lacking in initiative; the third batch more confident as well as more playful than previous batches; the fourth batch cohesive; and the fifth batch arrogant as well as frivolous. Subsequent batches of students have become increasingly critical of their teachers, and less critical of themselves.

## **2.2 The Teacher-Student Relationship**

The traditional Asian teacher-student relationship, where the student unquestioningly accepts the instruction of his master, has been challenged by the contemporary student's access to virtually unlimited information, thus providing him with an ever wider platform for comparison. It is no longer enough for the educator to have paper qualifications, even from a leading university. The contemporary student does not respect mere paper certificates. He wants evidence of expertise. The information communicated by the educator must be complete. It cannot be only a part of the body of knowledge, and it cannot be out-of-date. The free-flow of up-to-the-minute information and international expertise available to the student means that he knows when his teachers fall short and by how far.

Contrarywise to this trend in events, the student's ability to discern and to make sense of the information available has been observed as not to be increasing. Indeed, it is not how much a

person knows that makes a difference but rather how he handles what he knows. In this sense, the general level of the student has been observed to be static. While gaining access to more and more information, only a handful really absorb and intelligently apply their new found knowledge. (Orr, 1999). The majority do not have the capacity for this. They may only understand a part of what is available and thus not obtain a true picture. A concrete example of this phenomenon was observed among many UPM music students in their perception of the Malaysian Philharmonic Orchestra (MPO). While it is true that the MPO is the first international-class professional symphony orchestra to be based in Malaysia, it is also true that it is a newcomer to the international symphony orchestra scene and pales in comparison to the major players such as the top European and North American symphony orchestras. Now, the MPO through its Education and Outreach program are succeeding in generally raising standards of orchestral musicianship teaching, and this contribution is in no way downplayed. But it is interesting to note that some students were gullible enough to believe the company's media hype that the orchestra is the best in the world. These same students also believed that those who are not members of the MPO are thus inferior musicians. When such criticism was levelled at an illustrious member of staff who joined our department upon retiring from active service as a professional conductor in the former Soviet Union, and who has conducted orchestras as renowned as the Berlin Philharmonic and the St Petersburg, it could clearly be seen that mere increased access to information and resources is insufficient and even potentially detrimental – clear, accurate and firm guidance must be provided for the majority of students if they are to benefit from the internationalizing of education.

Thus, the effective twenty first century music educator must not only build his international recognition through publications or performances in order to gain the respect of his students, he must also make sure his students are truly aware of what it means to be world class and what it takes to achieve such a level.

### 3.0 EMPIRICAL OBSERVATIONS

#### 3.1 Staff Turnover

Staff turnover at the UPM music department has been relatively high due to increased demands and pressures and increasing transparency of individual's capabilities. From Table 2 it can be seen that almost half (45.9%) of the total number of full-time and part-time teaching staff who have worked at the UPM music department between 1996-2000 have not continued with their service. Of this number, 16 have left prematurely (26.2% of the total number), either being terminated or voluntarily resigning from their positions.

**Table 2. Academic Staff Attrition from 1996-2000.**

<i>Category of staff</i>	<i>Number employed from 1996-2000</i>	<i>Number leaving prematurely</i>		<i>Number completing term of service</i>	<i>Number still continuing service</i>
		<i>Resigned</i>	<i>Terminated</i>		
Pensionable	13	4	0	0	9
Local Contract	1	0	0	0	1
Foreign Contract	8	1	1	3	3
Tutor	7	0	0	3*	4
Total Full-time	29	5	1	6	17
Part-time	32	2	11	3	16
Grand total	61	7	9	9	33

\*promoted to lecturer (pensionable)

It is seen from Table 2 that the number of part-time staff who were terminated in the period from 1996 through to 2000 was relatively high. It should be noted here that part-time staff are involved almost exclusively with one-to-one instrumental teaching. At the end of each semester, part-time staff are evaluated not only by their students through the semesterly evaluation forms, but also by the full-time staff through the practical examination of their students. If all the students of a particular teacher display the same technical flaws in their playing, this lack may be attributed to incorrect teaching. On top of this, semesterly evaluation forms prepared by the department and filled out by the students are very detailed, itemising specific teaching approaches and attitudes. The teacher's playing ability (or lack of) is also plainly evident in his or

her demonstrations. A part-time staff member's service is discontinued when all factors above indicate a change in teacher for a particular instrument is required.

Full-time staff members are very rarely terminated, as every effort is made to resolve problems which may arise. Table 2 however indicates that in the period between 1996 to 2000, four permanent (i.e. pensionable) members of staff resigned, while three contract staff did not renew their contracts.

The contract staff are discussed first. Of the three non-renewing lecturers, one was terminated, one resigned and one was not recommended for renewal. The one who resigned was offered a better position in Europe and is thus not considered a problematic case. However, two others were found to cause undue difficulties, such as missing classes and not covering the required syllabus, giving rise to many complaints from students. Dialogue with these problematic members of staff proved fruitless as errant behaviour continued despite assurances of reform.

In terms of the pensionable staff, it is interesting to note that all were heavily involved in teaching one-to-one instrumental (or vocal) lessons. This also proved to be the case with the two contract staff mentioned above. As in the case of part-time teachers, the dual evaluation method is still applicable to full-time staff involved in instrumental lessons. However, unlike the part-time staff, full-time staff are not terminated based on these evaluations. Instead, those who prove not so suited to teach instrumental lessons may instead be channeled to take more lecture-style courses.

In spite of this fact, the pressure of expectations put on each music department staff member remains very high. These expectations may not be from the perspective of management alone, or even from the perspective of students, but includes the expectations of individual staff members of themselves. Musicians are generally known to be more sensitive than others, and

more critical of themselves. With musical ability being a basically protrusive skill, it becomes essential for the educator to display his mastery which lends authority to his teaching. Lack thereof results in not only loss of the respect of students, but also loss of self-respect.

The complexity of all these factors may thus be a plausible explanation for the relatively high rate of attrition among music department staff members. It should be noted here that while those involved in one-to-one individual teaching remain the most susceptible to these pressures, those teaching classroom or lecture-style music courses are also more vulnerable than non-music lecturers, as aural ability is equally protrusive as performance ability and a weakness in this area is clearly evident to students, resulting in the same challenges faced by instrumental instructors. In addition to all these factors is the current trend towards internationalization and globalization of information, as discussed in earlier paragraphs. It is clear that the role of the music educator today cannot remain in the traditional Asian teacher-student mould of the past.

### 3.2 Evolution of Students

Table 3 below provides a profile of students entering the UPM music department over the past five years. Two major trends are observed from this table. Firstly, the percentage of mature students entering the programs is steadily declining, and secondly, more and more students are coming in with higher musical qualifications than previously. This second state is even more clearly depicted in Figure 1.

**Table 3. Student Entry Qualifications.**

<i>Type</i>	<i>1996</i>	<i>1997</i>	<i>1998</i>	<i>1999</i>	<i>2000</i>
Mature	38%	62%	24%	19%	10%
STPM / equiv.	73%	76%	62%	81%	68%
SPM + diploma	27%	24%	38%	19%	32%
> Grade 8	18%	19%	38%	37%	35%
Grade 8	42%	59%	45%	33%	42%
Grade 5-7	40%	22%	17%	30%	23%
> 1 instrument	20%	16%	38%	30%	26%

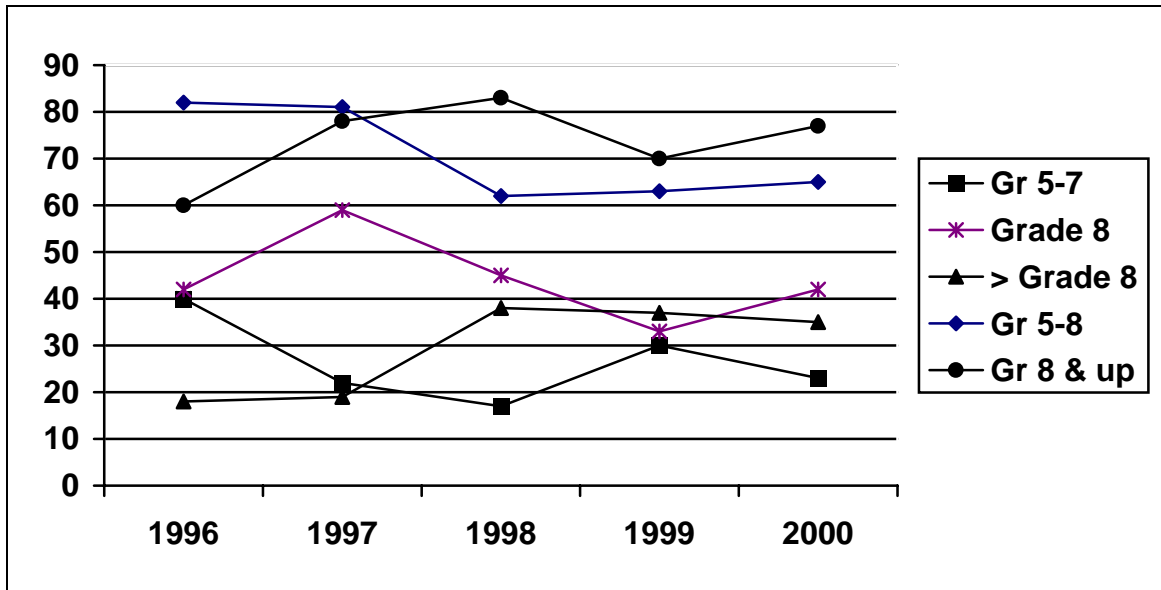


Figure 1. Student Entry Qualifications (Music Qualifications).

Student perceptions and needs have changed during this period (1996-2000). The higher percentage of younger students may explain increasing lack of maturity in attitudes observed among more recent batches of students. Another point to note is that the younger batches went through the New Integrated Secondary School curriculum, which encourages students to speak (a good thing), yet fails to provide opportunities for the development of in-depth critical thinking based on concrete scholarly facts, as the new curriculum does not delve deeply into any subject matter but rather favours a broad surface acquaintance with material facts. This has led to a generation of students who are quick to challenge their teachers, but slow to take the trouble to obtain a complete picture of all available information. The rising average musical performance standards coupled with this decline in attitude has meant that students are more proficient musicians (in general) than in the past, yet with less maturity to handle this. Consequently, this has led to the current situation where music educators come increasingly under fire if not up to the students' perceived expectations in terms of performance ability, knowledge and expertise, including aural ability.

#### **4.0 FURTHER DISCUSSION**

The observations presented in Section 3 above indicate that versatility and adaptability are becoming increasingly important qualities required of tertiary music academic staff members. The effective tertiary music educator must consistently display his or her musical prowess and personal productivity in terms of international quality output. This output, in terms of concert performances by performance educators and publications by non-performance educators, is increasingly seen as an indicator of staff quality. A constant upgrading of skills and knowledge of tertiary music educators in their respective specialisations is also absolutely necessary if educators are to retain the respect of their students as well as their own self-respect. The music educator must be able to adapt to the changing demands placed upon him or her, even more so in the face of internationalization and globalization of information and expertise.

#### **5.0 CONCLUSIONS**

This paper has shown that the role of the tertiary music educator has evolved away from the traditional Asian teacher-student model. The current availability of expertise and information across national boundaries allows the student to pick and choose from whom and what he or she will learn (Tiff, 1989). Where formerly the primary task of the educator was to teach, currently the primary task of the educator is to guide and provide a role model whom the students may be motivated enough to emulate. Links with other educators are also increasingly important (Green, 1997) in order to provide a nurturing environment in which each educator may augment his or her knowledge and experience, besides providing students with a more complete educational experience through drawing on this combined pool of expertise.

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## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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