Premier’s VET in Schools Scholarship

Vocational Education and Training – Entertainment

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Introduction

Vocational Education and Training (VET) Entertainment is a relatively new course available to secondary school students and, as a qualification, Live Production, Theatre and Events is not as established in the industry as other vocational qualifications, particularly those that provide a pathway to an apprenticeship in a recognised trade. In New South Wales (NSW), Technical Operations work in Theatre and Events is a highly casualised industry, with a significant percentage of available employment being contract-based for the duration of a theatrical production’s performance season, the duration of a tour, or for the short period in which a concert or other event is being staged in a particular location. Technical Operations work is also available in the corporate sector as events like product launches and share-holders meetings increasingly become theatrical in nature, involving controlled lighting, multi-media production and the ever present public address systems and microphone management.

While the Entertainment sector is one of the fastest growing industries in NSW, the above factors mean that it is an ongoing challenge to ensure that students have access to industry-relevant experiences and resources as part of their training towards the Certificate III qualification that forms part of the Higher School Certificate (HSC) VET Entertainment course.

The purpose of this specific study tour was to investigate approaches to the delivery of Technical Operations courses and qualifications in London’s West End, one of the world’s two largest live-entertainment and theatrical districts. The specific focus of my tour was on approaches which maximise ‘industry preparedness’ and the management of partnerships with professional industry bodies that support that training.

Contextual Differences

One thing that I experienced during my tour in the operations of all aspects of the Entertainment industry was that the practical manifestations of certain contextual differences were significant influencing factors in the management of training and industry operations.

The first significant difference is population density. Greater London has a population of approximately7.75 million living in an area of 1,572square kilometres. By comparison, the state of NSW has a population of approx. 7.3 million living in an area of 809,444square kilometres. If we only focus on the Greater Sydney area, there is a population of approximately. 4.6 million living in an area of 12,144square kilometres, resulting in a population density that is less than one-tenth that of the Greater London area. For the sake of further comparison, the population of England is approx. 51.5 million in an area of 130,395square kilometres.

One effect of this difference is that the Entertainment sector in London, which is dependent upon audiences being able to access performance venues, has significantly greater audience availability. The population density of London is also able to sustain a greater volume of public transport services that make travel to and from performance events around London a much easier proposition.

The second significant aspect of this difference is the effect of different cultural heritages. Live theatre and events play a much larger role in English society than they do in Australia. One of the first events I attended during my tour was a symposium on the issue of theatre touring around the United Kingdom (UK) and Europe. Represented at the symposium were over 60 venues and production companies all looking to produce and tour, or host tours of original works of predominantly live theatre. Combined with the 50 plus theatre venues around Greater London, including the West End, this means that there are many more opportunities for students to gain practical experience in a commercial production or event. While NSW does have a large number of amateur and community based theatre groups, many of them do not manage their own premises or have the capacity to effectively supervise students under their care. The professional theatre companies and receiving venues that exist in NSW are based primarily in Sydney, and, with only a few commercial venues outside of the Sydney CBD, students in NSW do not have the same access, even relative to population size.

A corollary of this factor still relates to population density, but, particularly, in relation to neighbouring countries and tourism. Within 10 hours of flight time from London you can reach the majority of Western European nations, as well as many parts of the United States of America, and, combined with the effects of population density, this means that flight services are more frequent and less expensive than from Australia. The tourism generated by neighbouring countries with a high cultural value for Theatre and Entertainment also provides additional support for the industry. This also allows institutions to have closer relationships with companies that design and manufacture equipment. This will be discussed in greater detail later in this report.

The third and final difference is more contextually specific. At the time I visited London there was a significant public policy focus on investment in vocational training, with particular emphasis on the cultural and creative sector, including theatre and live events. This focus included investments in training facilities and the development of new standards and qualifications, including apprenticeships in theatre live events that were still in the early stages of implementation. Numerous events that I attended were quoting a research papers and economic analysis that identified a significant return on investment in training and apprenticeships, and these paper were spurring a wave of public and private sector investment.

While I was in London, I perceive a significant change of attitude to the worth of vocational training, although more was still to come.

These contextual differences create an industry that is able to provide more long term employment and training opportunities, and be more accessible to a larger number of students seeking professional industry experiences. These are factors that play a large part in approaches to vocational training in the Entertainment industry.

In identifying practices and approaches that can benefit vocational education in Entertainment, these contextual differences will need to be carefully considered in the translation to an Australian context.

Core Teaching Practices

Throughout my tour I spent time at a number of drama schools and training institutions around Greater London. These schools included: East 15 Acting School at the University of Essex; Central School of Speech and Drama; The Royal Academy of Dramatic Arts; and Lewisham College. Wherever I went, the delivery of technical theatre training was centred on project based learning experiences that saw students engaged in the development and production of public works at every stage of their learning process. The range of facilities available at each institution varied considerably, however, every institution maintained a dedicated live-performance space, all of those I saw were in the form of a theatre space, and this space was central to the teaching of technical theatre courses.

While conventional theatrical productions were used in every institution, Central School of Speech and Drama (CSSD) had an innovative interdisciplinary project that had technical students and performance students working together in a way that helped develop communication and teamwork skills beyond the usual workplace requirements.

The project was called ’London Walks’, and first-year students were put into teams consisting of people from each course strand. Each group was then given a famous area of London that they had to investigate and then reproduce as an installation piece that not only ‘told the story’ of the area the group was assigned, but also had to incorporate elements of each different strand, thereby requiring each student to understand something of how the other practitioners within the industry worked. In my interviews with students throughout the week I spent at CSSD, this project was repeatedly identified as a key part of the learning process for the reasons mentioned above.

Philosophy: ‘Collaboration, not competition’

This phrase was re-stated in various forms at a number of different institutions I attended, and was the umbrella under which many of the innovations and better practices were taking place. This was evident at the levels of organisational relationships, as well as intra-organisation practices and teaching methods.

Some key examples include:

**High House Production Park**

[High House Production Park](http://www.highhouseproductionpark.co.uk) is one of a number of restoration projects seeking to build industry in socio-economically depressed areas. Arts Council England, East of England Development Agency, The National Skills Academy for Creative and Cultural Skills (NSA CCS) and the Royal Opera House (ROH) collaborated on the development of a dedicated production centre and training facility.

The park included two main production facilities, one production workshop operated by the ROH, and the other, which was in development at the time of my tour, was to be operated by NSA CCS.

The NSA CCS facility was described in an interview with Robin Auld, Project Manager of the NSA CCS site, who stated that:

It’s an amazing facility, 875 square metres and it’s – I’ll just get into how big it is. Inside, here – inside the main space, it’s big enough for the biggest operas, the Cirque de Soleil, the biggest bands like U2, Muse, Cold Play, to come in and do a full rehearsal and 16 to 19 year olds come in and work with the professional technicians in doing training with the real world, because the problem we face here is that a lot of the training is delivered – vocational training - in spaces, colleges and environments which are just studios or their classrooms

This concept of partnering training colleges with industry events was one example of the way in which students were being offered more significant industry experiences as part of their training.

**The Backstage Academy**

While I was not able to visit [this institution](https://www.backstage-academy.co.uk/), I met with its Chief Executive, Dr. Rory Perret, who outlined the nature and function of the school.

Built on a partnership with private industry, the Backstage Academy occupied space in the LS-Live rehearsal venue in West Yorkshire, a rehearsal venue with a capacity and style similar to that being built for the NSA CCS.

The course provided students with access to stadium scale concert events as learning experiences, which also involved working on the cutting-edge equipment that accompanied many of these tours. Dr. Perret indicated that when the venue was not being hired for concert rehearsals, it sat largely empty, so they had arrangements with a number of European manufacturers who would lend a significant amount of their latest equipment to the venue for short periods (up to 3 months) in order for the students to train on it. Dr. Perret identified that this was done partly with the expectation of brand recognition among students going into the industry, and increased likelihood that they would choose that brand in their work. This arrangement was also enhanced by the relative ease of access of companies to ship equipment over land from European manufacturers.

As part of the course at Backstage Academy, students were also provided with courses and certifications on specific products and software. Courses from companies like Apple that offered an authorised certification program were incorporated into the course. Dr. Perret said that this resulted in students being highly employable, and that it actually created a problem for the school as their affiliation with a University meant that their funding was dependent on students completing their second year of study and a number of students from the school would find work prior to that time.

The details of the Backstage Academy provided significant insight into the role of industry partnerships in the provision of vocational training, and I believe are worth investigating in NSW.

Unique Organisations, Associations and Training Initiatives.

As well as the places mentioned above, I also encountered a number of organisations and associations working within the very specific UK context to support or develop aspects of technical theatre training. These included:

**The Association of British Theatre Technicians**

This organisation is a product of the size of London’s theatre industry. It is a representative organisation that engages in advocacy for, and the training and support of, technicians already working in the theatre.

Its advocacy and campaigning for industry-appropriate legislation is informed by the publication of industry codes of practice, which are published in ‘little blue books’ that each focus on specific topics, as well as their technical standards manual. In almost every educational institution I visited the [Association of British Theatre Technicians](https://www.abtt.org.uk/) (ABTT) and its publications were mentioned as informing part of the standards of education and training, providing a central reference for students and teachers/trainers. The development process for these standards was particularly consultative and comprehensive, and at the time of my tour, there was an ongoing dispute about the code of practice for the use of the theatre ladders, *Tallescopes*, as they tried to develop a code of practice that recognised the needs of the many varied workplaces in which telescopes might be used by a member of the ABTT.

These collectively-developed codes of practice also informed the training programs that the ABTT ran alongside its own graded certification system. As the ABTT’s training was intended primarily for unqualified people already working in the industry as technicians, their involvement with other training institutions was limited, however their publications seemed to play a significant role in the training programs of many institutions as they aimed to prepare their students for the industry.

Julie’s Bicycle: Training and Environmental Impact Awareness

Throughout my tour I attended several events at which increasing environmental awareness was a key theme in the development and training. While three of the events I attended were organised by different organisations, each one was connected to an organisation called ‘Julie’s Bicycle’, which promotes and supports improved environmental sustainability practices within the Arts sector in the United Kingdom.

Two of the events I attended contained sessions and workshops on the environmental sustainability of venues. Both of these workshops were presented by Sian Alexander and Helen Heathfield, though they had significantly different focuses.

The first event explored production behaviours such as re-using timber versus always purchasing virgin timber for set production. The size and geographical accessibility of London’s venues have also given rise to businesses that specialised in transporting and recycling old production sets which, while slightly more expensive for production companies than hiring a skip and disposing of used materials, was becoming increasingly popular to the point where demand was periodically outstripping the capacity of the business. At this event there was also a presentation of Julie’s Bicycle’s online environmental calculators. Informed by research into the energy use and environmental impact of different practices and materials, the online tools allowed production managers to estimate the environmental impact (in terms of carbon pollution produced). These tools also presented students with the opportunity to examine the environmental impact of production decisions as part of their studies.

The second event was exploring concepts in venue management. Research conducted by Julie’s Bicycle had identified that human behaviours were the biggest contributing factor to energy use in the UK entertainment venues, and so they were working with venue managers to identify and improve the specific energy use habits of staff, which also carried over into the training of staff. Practices such as; isolating different lighting areas for use when only limited staff numbers are on site; and selective use of air conditioning and heating systems before, during and after events. For technical operations staff, understanding that the energy consumption of lights between 80 percent and 100 percent was significant despite there being little to no perceptible difference in lighting output. This workshop also discussed the issues of advertising and promotional materials and the ways in which companies were attempting to reduce paper use.

All of these issues were being integrated into a training package, to be delivered as one of a suite of certified training packages. The formal announcement of environmental sustainability as a unit of study was made at the NSA CCS annual conference at Media City UK.

While the research behind these initiatives focused on the U.K. context, the inclusion of environmental awareness as an area of competency, or at least as an outcome in each of the key units that involve resource consumption of some kind, is an idea that I perceive to be easily achievable in VET in NSW.

Media City UK

Media City UK is a privately owned and managed site that saw the long-disused Salford Docks of Manchester transformed into a state-of-the-art entertainment and media production district. The NSA CCS annual conference I attended was held there, and information about the project’s aim of restoring a once-thriving but now-derelict industrial district was one of the workshop sessions I attended.

Shortly before I arrived in London, BBC had made the decision to shift all of its media production out of London to a custom-built facility at Media City UK, an impressive structure containing the film studios and news production facilities required to consolidate all of the BBC’s production work into the one building. At the time I visited, the set of *Coronation Street*, a massive outdoor set that requires the reproduction of an entire street of houses, was being built on the outskirts of the district prior to production of the show being moved there later in 2012.

These were some examples of the success of the initiative, as well as the increased opportunities made available for training and apprenticeships in Technical Operations. There had been some dissent voiced in local papers that any significant production jobs were going to people from London and that local people from Manchester were being used primarily as unskilled labour; however the NSA CCS annual conference presented a number of panel discussions and announcements about training programs and apprenticeships being developed to target the local population. Indeed, it was acknowledged that a lot of the people involved in production in London were reluctant to move to Manchester. Also on the site were dedicated hotels and a shopping mall, as well as the live entertainment venue, The Lowry. The Lowry operates as a charity receiving only 1/7th of its funding from public sources and relying on donations and venue hire revenue to support production and distribution. The venue is one of the highest capacity live entertainment events in Greater Manchester and was hosting many touring concerts and performances. It was also a site for apprenticeships and training, although the less-permanent nature of the work at the venue was more evident than were opportunities for sustainable apprenticeships.

Media City UK had to be seen to really take in the scale of the development and the potential for growth in the Entertainment industry that the site offered.

Additional Observations

While there were many great initiatives driving the development of training and apprenticeships in the Entertainment sector in London and the UK, many people I spoke to acknowledged that there were still issues with coordination and communication in many parts of the industry. Many people I spoke to in theatres said that they would often prefer to hire an unskilled staff member and train them in-house, utilising ABTT training programs as needed, rather than relying on a technical theatre qualification as a measurement of quality or ability.

Likewise a number of people in educational institutions acknowledge that while national standards did exist, they were often replaced by independently developed outcomes. One course supervisor identified the fact that many drama schools had been in operation for over 100 years and the sense of tradition was often a barrier to more effective ways of working.

These issues seem to have prevented a unified approach to developing training standards and on more than one occasion I was told that the NSW standards were actually viewed as a benchmark for the development of a recognised qualification.

Conclusion

Being able to spend a significant amount of time inside the training sector of one of the world’s largest Entertainment industry sectors demonstrated just how important it is to work in conjunction with industry and other stakeholders to be able to deliver effective training. While I saw many effective practices, implementing them in NSW would require more careful consideration of transport and access issues. It is my view that community and amateur theatre groups would have to fulfil the role of the many professional theatre companies in London and around the UK that have ongoing supportive relationships with training institutions. Further development of partnerships or dedicated training facilities will likewise require more consideration and negotiation to make them work for the benefit of students.

References

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