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Setting the Tone: Considerations for Educating the Next Generation of Sound Reproduction Professionals

Introduction

The number of formal educational programmes that include sound reproduction as an area of study can be difficult to deduce due to differences in the use of terminology and the handling of search through various online course databases. In addition, sound reproduction is typically included in programmes such as Audio Engineering, Sound Technology or Music technology, which further adds to the difficulty in determining the extent of its inclusion.

This paper highlights some of the challenges and considerations in designing and delivering the sound reproduction subject area in a formal educational setting, using the BSc (Hons) Music Technology course at Leeds Beckett University as a case study.

Background

Performing a search for ‘Music Technology’ through UCAS returns 80 institutions in the UK that ‘include courses related to this title’. Searches for ‘Sound’ and ‘Audio’ return 58 and 66 providers respectively. In its most recent directory, UKMusic.org lists over 1250 formal music courses at FE and HE level5 that include elements of sound reproduction. Most notable are the number of Music Technology programmes that include elements of sound reproduction, but two courses sharing the same course title often include differing amounts of sound reproduction content with varying opportunities for technical and practical study or skills development.

Various institutions and organisations view formal education programmes as a route into employment in the creative industries, which include the industries of film, video games and music. Recent studies highlighted some of the issues that the creative industries face, in particular the skills shortage of technically proficient young people in the games industry in the UK caused predominantly through ‘a failing of our education system – from schools to universities – and it needs to be tackled urgently if we are to remain globally competitive’.

The Skillset Group’s Report To The Creative Industries Council in 2012 identifies a number of challenges faced by the creative industries leading to a range of recommendations and guidance. Among these recommendations are that ‘industry relevant HE provision genuinely simulates the workplace’ and ‘within the UK’s universities and research institutions, there should be greater synergy and exchange between STEM subjects (science, technology, engineering and maths) and the arts and creative industries. The report also highlights the need to ‘develop a skilled technical workforce in music, where a growth in employment is predicted’.

The curriculum for the course has recently undergone a refocus in which subject themes were created to help provide pathways of development through each academic level. These are Audio Engineering, Acoustics, Recording Practice, Computer Music, Critical Studies and Professional Practice as shown in Figure 1. The course themes represent well-established curricula in Music Technology and, as well as providing clear pathways for students, are clearly interpreted and evaluated published specification sheets for audio devices - useful for students who are not currently engaged with industry work. Students could also undertake shadowing of professionals or location work which could also prove evidence from this study is representative of other students in HE institutions and it could be surmised that many students on these types of courses are already working or have worked in the industry.

Methodology

The educational experiences of students studying the ‘Audio System Design’ module at Leeds Beckett University were captured through a structured questionnaire distributed and administered using Google Forms. The questionnaire was divided into three distinct sections in an attempt to capture three core themes identified in the previous discussion, that of personal experience, educational impact and professional impact.

The data was collected in the final week of the module. 24 responses were received from a possible 72 students and these were used to derive the data in the results shown below.

Results

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Methodology</th>
<th>Description</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Demographic</strong></td>
<td>Male: 56%  Female: 44%  Age 18 - 21: 65%  Student - Undergraduate: 82%  Student - Postgrad: 18%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>After studying Audio System Design...</strong></td>
<td>I spend more time considering the signal chain in Line Sound environments: 84%  I have more time considering the signal chain in Line Sound environments: 75%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Your practice...</strong></td>
<td>I consider myself to be professionally active in the industry: 64%  I have received payment for audio related work: 64%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>I am aware of the Audio Engineering Society:</strong></td>
<td>54%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>I am aware of the Institute of Acoustics:</strong></td>
<td>56%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
| **Conclusions and Further Recommendations** | This paper has highlighted the need for HE courses that include the area of sound reproduction to have a clear eye on the needs of industry and feature learning activities that engage students in realistic and industry-relevant ways. If the evidence from this study is representative of other students in HE institutions it could be surmised that many students on these types of courses are already working or have worked in the industry.

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This paper has highlighted the need for HE courses that include the area of sound reproduction to have a clear eye on the needs of industry and feature learning activities that engage students in realistic and industry-relevant ways. If the evidence from this study is representative of other students in HE institutions it could be surmised that many students on these types of courses are already working or have worked in the industry.

References and Further Reading

9. Paul Thompson: po.thompson@leedsbeckett.ac.uk.