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Bridging the gap: An evaluation of Monash University's Professional Practices pilot program

Keywords: Professional development, Student wellbeing, Art professions, Creative education, Fine art pedagogies

Abstract

This paper examines Monash University's implementation of the Professional Practices program in 2023 for second- and third-year Bachelor of Fine Art students. Designed to address limited professional development opportunities, the program comprised 12 modules delivered over 2 years and was integrated into core studio subjects. An anonymous digital survey was conducted at the end of the pilot to assess the program's effectiveness in reducing student anxieties relating to launching a career in the arts. Findings revealed overall satisfaction among students, attesting to the program's effectiveness. Notably, the second-year cohort expressed a desire for more practical examples to understand real-world applications of the program to their careers better. This highlighted a need for increased education towards the complexities of creative careers and will inform future program modifications. Third-year students, with clearer career aspirations, found the program immediately applicable and anxiety-reducing, particularly for those interested in freelance practice or arts employment. Despite varying career interests amongst the cohorts, the program was found to have provided valuable insights for all participants. Through a detailed discussion of these findings this paper therefore outlines how the Professional Practices program successfully alleviated career-related anxieties for fine art students, emphasising the program's value in enhancing career readiness. The paper further underscores the significance of student feedback in refining program design for future iterations, affirming the program's role as a crucial component of fine art education.

Introducing the Professional Practices program

In Semester 1 of 2023, Monash University's Faculty of Fine Art implemented a new professional development program. The program was designed to enhance professional development opportunities for second- and third-year undergraduate students studying a Bachelor of Fine Art. Titled 'Professional Practices', the program aligned with a national study that identified the prevalence of professional

development education across tertiary institutions offering undergraduate fine art degrees. Monash University's Bachelor of Fine Arts was included in the study and was found – through an evaluation of professional development content included in the course handbook – to demonstrate limited formalised professional development opportunities for students from within current curricula (Slonim 2021). With this limitation in mind, the implementation of Professional Practices further responded to anecdotally expressed desire from current fine art students for additional professional development opportunities. This qualitative information was collected informally through voluntary expressions during classroom conversations and in email exchanges with students, often following the delivery of guest lectures on subjects relating to art professions (such as arts funding). This desire was frequently found to arise from an apprehensive sense of unknowing in relation to the development, implementation and sustenance of a creative career.

As a result, the Professional Practices program was born. Designed for second- and third-year Bachelor of Fine Art students, the program consisted of 12 modules that were delivered as guest lectures – 3 per semester across the 2 years – within core studio subjects. The third-year students received a condensed, 6-module version of the program due to their participation in the program in the final year of their studies. The second-year students were the first cohort to receive the first half of the full 12-module program, with plans to complete the remaining 6 modules in 2024.

The modules were delivered in an amalgamated style of both guest lecture and seminar by a guest lecturer (the author) specialising in arts professions instead of by the students' regular teachers. This was due to a presumption that the students did not recognise that they were already receiving professional development education from their current educators through their usual engagement with them. Therefore, by including a new teacher who only engaged with the students through this program, the program became a separate and designated aspect of their fine art education. Through formalised lectures, it was made overtly clear to the students that they were receiving professional development education in addition to their ongoing fine art education. The veracity of this speculation was ascertained through a survey that was delivered to all students at the conclusion of the first year of the program, which is explained in greater detail below.

Further to this amalgamated style of course delivery, students were encouraged to participate in the program actively and consistently across the 2 years. The program

recognised the uniqueness of a creative career pathway and deliberately encouraged the students to apply the professional development theory that spoke to 2 high-level career pathways – freelance practitioner and employed arts worker – to their individual career needs and interests. This participation was facilitated through a fourfold approach. Firstly, through the instruction of how to develop ongoing and personalised research records to span the 2-year program so as to build a continuous log of tailored professional development content specific to their interests. This was secondly achieved through the delivery of templates for students to complete beyond the lecture hour (such as CVs and budgets). Participation was thirdly fostered through the availability of consultations with the guest lecturer for students interested in further support. Participation was fourthly sought through gathering student feedback at regular intervals to ensure that the content of the program was in alignment with student interests and professional development needs.

An example of how this feedback was sought was through a group activity delivered in the first introductory module for second-year students, which asked them to articulate any concerns they had in relation to their future careers. This activity provided an opportunity to ensure that the content of following modules related to many (if not all) of the responses gathered in some way, such as containing a list of current opportunities available for students concerned with identifying and/or missing current exhibition call outs in future modules. This simultaneously provided an opportunity to immediately reduce some of their concerns and build trust in the relevance of the program to them and their unique careers. This activity further provided an opportunity to demonstrate how some of these concerns were in accordance with those held by established practitioners in the field, thereby also providing an opportunity to reveal the role of industry collectives such as peak bodies, who actively address these concerns through sector-wide initiatives. The relationship between obscured senses of charging artist fees, which many students articulated, and NAVA's 'Fair Pay for Artists' campaign to promote industry standards for artist fees in 2023, was emblematic of such a match (NAVA 2023). Establishing a connection between career concerns and industry initiatives from the broader arts and cultural ecology further helped to reinforce one of the learning outcomes from the program, which was to strengthen the bridge for students between tertiary education and participating in the sector. More than this, however, the act of articulating and sharing their concerns facilitated an important opportunity for the students to increase their social cohesion as a cohort by building mutual moral support of one another

upon seeing these private concerns expressed aloud (Manca 2014). This cohesion was reinforced in later modules when topics such as community building and networking were introduced and the students were encouraged in forming their support network with one another prior to graduating.

Given that the program was designed at both an overarching and modular level to satisfy student appetite for professional development, a digital questionnaire survey was developed and distributed to both year levels of students to evaluate whether this goal was being achieved. Moreover, the survey aimed to go beyond anecdotal comments from vocal students in previous classrooms and delve deeper into understanding the prevalence of student concerns regarding their future careers. The objective was to determine whether the program effectively addressed these concerns. If such concerns were indeed identified, understanding the exact concerns that students had towards their future careers would in turn provide rich data to inform future content development for the program.

Methods

As such, an anonymous and voluntary digital survey was developed and distributed to students at the conclusion of the 6th module towards the end of Semester 2 to assess the effectiveness of the Professional Practices program in its first year. The survey was designed to gauge the students' perception of the usefulness of the professional development they received through the program across the year. It aimed to evaluate student perceptions regarding the usefulness of the program to their current or future creative careers, the impact of the program in relation to their concerns for their careers, and to assess their understanding of the program's value as a component of their fine art education. Fundamentally, the survey was designed to answer the research question: does the Professional Practice program alleviate student anxieties towards implementing a creative career?

The survey design was informed by the 'Captive group survey' method outlined by A Veal and Christine Burton in *Research Methods for Arts and Event Management* (2019). This method was selected for its central relationship to arts and cultural management, to role-model industry best practice for the students. The survey received ethics approval from Monash University's Human Ethics Low Risk Review Committee and was delivered in-class during the final module for the year for both

cohorts of students to encourage high response rates.¹ Students were provided with an Explanatory Statement and encouraged to read it and ask questions of the guest lecturer, who further explained the purpose of the survey and outlined the consenting procedures and voluntary nature of the study to the students. Students were informed that the survey did not collect any identifiable information, to protect their anonymity with the intention of encouraging them to respond honestly and freely to their questions posed. They were further encouraged to avoid self-identification through the free-form response fields should they wish to maintain their anonymity. Students were also informed that the anonymous results would only be accessed by the guest lecturer, and that a report based on aggregated results would be delivered to select staff involved in the program, with the overarching and aggregated results distributed more broadly in academic publications such as this. They were also informed that the individual and aggregated responses from the survey would directly inform the future improvements to the Professional Practices program. The students were finally informed that it was within their rights to exit the survey and withdraw their participation at any point prior to completion, but that their previously provided responses could not be extracted without identifying themselves due to the anonymous nature of the survey design.

Instructions to complete the survey were delivered in both written and verbal form, with emphasis on the voluntary and anonymous nature of the survey. Students were then provided with a QR code to access the survey, which was hosted on the Qualtrics platform in accordance with Monash University's recommendations to ensure it followed standard protocols and procedures for maintaining data security and privacy (Monash University Library 2024). The survey included a condensed version of the explanatory statement at the beginning of the survey, which again explained the purpose of the survey and informed participants of their option to either agree or refuse to participate in the survey. It further notified students of the length of the survey and expected time to completion. Students were then asked for their consent to participate in the survey, where students who selected 'yes' were directed to the questionnaire and students who selected 'no' were prevented from accessing the questionnaire. Participating students then completed the survey that was divided across 3 sections and consisted of 21 questions in total. Part 1 attempted to gain the students' perceived access to professional development at university, Part 2 aimed to

¹ Monash University's Human Ethics Low Risk Review Committee, project 39967, approval 20/09/2023.

understand the students' experience of the Professional Development program, and Part 3 sought to assess the impact of the program on the students' future career in the arts. The survey was anticipated to take up to 15 minutes to complete. No further actions were required from the participants after survey completion. The second-year students had a strong response rate of 56%, and the third-year cohort had a good response rate of 34%. This suggests that whilst the sample of responses is large enough to apply the learnings from the survey to the population of students at large, they did not speak to all experiences of the program from either year level. The following discussion includes select results from the survey that directly relate to the impact of the program on student anxieties.

The experience of the second-year cohort

When asked if students think that it is important to receive professional development in parallel to their fine art education, an overwhelming 96% of students indicated that they either strongly agreed or somewhat agreed that it is. However, students did not always recognise the extent of the professional development that they were already receiving prior to commencing the Professional Practices program. This conclusion arose from a 3-part question in Part 1 of the survey where students were asked to answer the following question: How many professional development opportunities did you receive as a part of your Bachelor of Fine Art studies, prior to starting the Professional Practices program? Three pre-coded answers were offered, with the results as follows:

1. Many, professional development was a regular component of in my prior studies: 19% of students selected this answer.
2. A little, professional development was sometimes included in my prior studies: 52% of students selected this answer.
3. Not any, professional development was never included in my prior studies: 29% of students selected this answer.

These results suggest that while a small portion of students did believe that they were already receiving many professional development opportunities, most students wanted more professional development than what they thought they were already receiving. To understand what students did and did not recognise as professional development prior to commencing the Professional Practices program, a non-exhaustive list of 9 items was presented to the students, as follows:

- An internship organised by Monash University
- Anecdotal experience shared in class from my teachers

- When I emailed my teachers and asked for their help
- Guest lectures from practising artists
- Guest workshops run by practising artists
- Excursions to galleries and arts and cultural spaces
- Anecdotal experience shared by other students
- Opportunities advertised through Monash University emails, such as the Fine Art office or 'Resources to Thrive' Moodle unit
- Opportunities advertised through Monash University arts and cultural spaces, such as Intermission Gallery, MADA or MUMA

They were asked to identify which of the 9 items they perceived as professional development opportunities. All 9 items were selected by at least 7% of respondents. The question above regarding the professional development opportunities students received outside of the Professional Practices program was then repeated for the survey respondents with reassurance that their answers were welcome to either stay the same or change from their previous response after reviewing the list. Notably, the answers did change in favour of an increased awareness of the professional development that they had already been receiving. Ten per cent more students agreed that they did receive 'many' opportunities, bringing this cohort of students to almost a third at 29%. Another 10% of students noted an increased awareness that they had received 'a little' professional development prior to commencing the Professional Practices program, totalling more than half the cohort at 62%. This reduced the total number of students who had not thought that they had been receiving any professional development by 20%, though notably this was not reduced all the way to 0%. Due to the anonymous nature of the survey, it is not possible to draw any correlations between the responses to these 3 questions to determine the changes in results at an individual level. What can be understood from these responses is that the second-year cohort of students as a collective didn't necessarily realise that they were already receiving professional development prior to commencing the Professional Practices program. Yet despite this, the fact that 62% of students still felt that they had received only 'a little' or 'not any' professional development opportunities suggested that they still had a greater appetite for professional development than what they were receiving prior to the implementation of the program.

To understand the students' experience of the program, Part 2 of the survey then presented the respondents with a list of 8 statements that they were asked to rank on a Likert scale between 'agree' and 'disagree'. Their responses suggested that most students agreed the modules to be informative (95%), useful (85%), confidence imbuing (90%), accessible (100%), satisfied their professional development needs (85%) and alleviated some concerns they had about starting a career in the arts (80%). However, when asked if the students found that they were able to immediately apply the learnings from the modules to their careers, only 50% of students agreed, whereas 40% responded 'neutral' and 10% disagreed. The fact that many students chose to respond 'neutral' as opposed to 'disagree' with this statement suggests that the notion of the program content being transferable to their careers was not applicable to the students, as opposed to them disagreeing with the statement. For if they found that they could not apply the learnings they would have selected 'disagree'. These results read in conjunction with the analysis of results from Part 1 suggest that whilst the second-year students do think it's important to receive professional development and that their experience of the program was overwhelmingly positive, the students don't conceptualise their careers as having begun at this point in their studies. Rather, the neutrality of their response to the question of program relevance to career implementation suggests that the second-year students perceived that their careers were distant eventualities and not yet immediate realities.

This raises a question as to what student anxieties were in relation to, if their careers had not yet begun at this stage. Part 3 of the survey was designed to understand the impact of the program on student anxieties in relation to their careers, where the survey then presented another list of 5 statements for the students to consider. These statements asked students to reflect on how they felt about their career, as follows:

When thinking about my future career:

- I felt anxious, nervous, or scared about my career in the arts.
- I felt happy, eager, or excited about my career in the arts.
- I didn't know where or how to implement my career in the arts.
- I didn't have a strong network of support around me to pursue a career in the arts.
- I hadn't considered a career in the arts.

Students were asked to select which, if any, of the above statements they identified with at the start of the year prior to starting the Professional Practices program. They were then presented an adapted version of list that expressed positive changes in each statement and asked if they identified with any of the altered statements at the conclusion of the first year of the Professional Practice program. To mitigate the leading nature of this second set of statements, an option was provided for students to disagree with all statements, or to comment further. The students did not select either of these options. Instead, the results unanimously demonstrated significant positive impact of the program: 100% of students indicated that they felt less anxious, nervous or scared about their career in the arts; an additional 25% of students felt happy, eager or excited about a career in the arts; 100% of students felt they now had a deeper understanding of where or how to implement a career in the arts; an additional 25% of students expressed an increased awareness of a network of support around them to pursue a career in the arts; and an increase of 500% of students identified that they were considering a career in the arts. There is an obvious design flaw relating to these 2 questions by asking students to recall an emotional state from over 6–8 months ago. To combat this flaw in future evaluations, students will be presented with these statements at 2 points in the year instead of one, the first prior to commencing the program and the second at the completion of each semester to measure changes based on current emotional states as opposed to recalled ones. However, this does not negate the positive changes effected, for the changes in student sentiment were recorded simultaneous to the conclusion of the program.

These encouraging outcomes indicate that the program did primarily alleviate anxiety among students regarding their future careers in the arts and cultural sector, inspiring many of them to seriously contemplate pursuing this career path. This reiterates the question, if the students perceived their careers as distant possibilities due to the perceived lack of immediate applicability of the content, what specifically caused their anxiety?

In the final section of Part 3 of the survey, the students were asked 3 questions that attempted to capture their individual experiences with the overall program. These questions were designed as free-form responses to allow for individuality of response from each student to inform future programming. This design negated the risk of capturing only some experiences through presuming the answers with pre-coded

questions. The students were firstly asked what they felt they benefited from the most from the program. Resoundingly students indicated benefit from learning about:

- Funding, grants, budgets and how to make money as a freelance practitioner
- How to apply for professional opportunities (grants, exhibitions and jobs)
- The ease and benefit of networking
- Current professional opportunities and the plethora of possibilities available
- The professionalisation of artistic practice and how to conduct oneself professionally.

Students were then asked what they felt was unnecessary to the program. An overwhelming majority of commentary indicated that students found everything to be necessary to the program. Finally, when asked what they thought was missing from the program, many students commented that the program covered a lot or that nothing was missing. A majority of commentary called for more details requesting more examples of applying the theoretical content to practice, which is designed for delivery in the second half of the program in third-year. This request made it clear that students would benefit from insight into the program progression to appease any anxiety about the absence of such content in future iterations of the program.

The results identified in these questions directly address the arising secondary research question into understanding the specificities of student anxieties from this cohort of students. For whilst the students expressed overall satisfaction with every aspect of the program, they were unable to pinpoint what could be missing from the program. However, the students emphasised in their responses the value of practical examples showcasing the real-world application of the program content to creative practice – something they suggested they both benefitted from and desired more of. These findings therefore suggest that the students may not have had a robust awareness of the intricacies of what a creative career could be, and that their anxieties were closely tied to the uncertainty and self-imposed pressure of having to work this out for themselves. The program's impact evidently lies in its ability to support second-year students in developing a clearer perception of what a creative career entails prior to guiding them through its practical implementation. As a result of this key insight, modifications to the program design for 2023 will prioritise reinforcing this finding as a central learning outcome.

The experience of the third-year cohort

The third-year students received a mirror questionnaire to the second-year students, with the only differences appearing in the adaptation of the module titles for applicability to the condensed version of the program that this cohort received. So, when asked if the students thought it important to study professional development in parallel to their fine art education, 100% of students unanimously agreed (either strongly or somewhat) that it is.

When asked the same 3-part response to how many professional development opportunities the students received as a part of their studies prior to engaging in the Professional Practices program, the results differed from the second-year students. Initially, students predominantly (73%) found few ('a little') opportunities had been included in their prior studies; a fifth (18%) of the cohort indicated receiving 'not any' professional development and only 9% agreed they had received 'many' opportunities. When presented with the same list of 9 items in the second part of the question as the second-year students, the third-year students were also asked to select if they perceived any of these items as professional development opportunities. All 9 items were selected by at least 7% of the cohort of respondents. However, when presented with the initial question again, the results demonstrated only minimal change. Only one additional student had selected that they had received 'many' professional development opportunities and one less student selected 'a little'. The number of students who selected 'not any' remained consistent at 18%. It is important to note that since this survey was conducted anonymously, it is not possible to definitively conclude that the same students had selected the same answers both times the question was posed. What can instead be inferred, however, is that overall, third-year students were largely cognisant of the professional development that they were already receiving prior to commencing the Professional Practices program. Nonetheless, a majority of the cohort still expressed a perception that they were not receiving as much as they desired.

In gauging the students' experience of the program in the second part of the survey, it was revealed that the third-year cohort were mostly unanimous in their overall positive experience of the program and articulation of how it addressed their professional development needs. Unlike the second-years, the third-years mostly (83%) found the content to be immediately applicable to their careers. All students found it be informative (100%), useful for their future career (100%), confidence imbuing (100%), and alleviated some concerns they had about starting their career (100%). Most students found the modules to be accessible (83%) and that the

modules provided a good balance between theoretical and practical content (83%). These results suggest that the third-year students do have a firm grasp of the immediacy of their careers, and that the program is helping them build the bridge between their tertiary studies and implementing a creative career. However, just over half of the students (67%) found their professional development needs to be satisfied by the modules, with the rest indicating a neutral response (33%). A possible conclusion drawn at this stage suggests that not all Bachelor of Fine Art students aspire for careers as freelance practitioners or employed arts workers – the 2 overarching professions that the program spoke to. There are many students enrolled in double degrees, and the results presented here regarding satisfied professional development needs may reflect the breadth of this cohort of students.

This theory was applied to the next point of analysis relating to the impact of the program on student anxieties. When presented with the 2-part list of statements about how students felt towards a career in the arts at the start of the year versus in the concluding module, the results differed to the second-year cohort:

- The number of students who felt less anxious, nervous, or scared about a career in the arts expanded to almost double the amount who had originally expressed anxiety, nervousness, or fear towards a career in the arts.
- The number of students who felt happy, eager or excited about a career in the arts doubled.
- The number of students who felt they now know where or how to implement a career in the arts doubled.
- The number of students who felt more aware of a network of support around them to pursue a career in the arts doubled.
- The number of students who were considering a career in the arts halved.

These outcomes underscore the significance of the program, revealing that as well as being well-received by students, it played a pivotal role in crystallising career aspirations both within and beyond the arts and cultural sector. Notably, however, for the students with career aspirations towards being a freelance practitioner or an employed arts worker, the program was found to be exceptionally beneficial. In response to the final 3 free-form questions that sought to gauge the program benefit and identify any unnecessary or missing content from the students' perspective, one student wrote that "[the program] changed my life", echoing sentiments shared by a number of others who expressed a desire for an earlier introduction of the program in

their studies or its inclusion in their core curriculum. Like the second-year cohort, many of the third-year students found all of the content to be necessary to the program, indicating a consensus regarding the program's comprehensive and valuable nature.

The following content consistently reappeared across the range of feedback relating to what the students thought they benefitted from the most from the program:

- Practical guides and supporting resources for applying the theory (such as a budget or project management templates).
- Contextualisation of professional practices, such as the mapping of career pathways, the multiplicity of income sources freelance practitioners have, and how specific organisations fit within a broader ecology.

These final questions suggest that the third-year students have much clearer ideas of what their career will be/look like than the second-year students and were eager to apply the learnings straightaway. For the students who were interested in a career in the arts, they found the program to be immediately applicable, helpful and that it reduced anxieties. For students uninterested in pursuing a career as either a freelance practitioner or employed arts worker, the program served as a valuable tool for clarifying this awareness. Despite their lack of interest in these professions, however, these students still contributed to positive outcomes from the program. This underscores that while the program may not have been directly applicable to these students' alternative career paths, there remained value for them in the general nature of content covered. What is interesting to recall is that this cohort of third-year students received a condensed version of the program. What will be evaluated in future years is whether the delivery of the program to current second-year students led them to the same clarity for their careers as the current third-year cohort, and whether the effect of the program on their third and final year of studies was similarly as positive and as applicable as it was for this cohort of third-year students. Overall, however, it can be understood that the program was successful in reducing career-related anxieties for the third-year students with career aspirations towards freelance practice or employment as an arts worker.

This conclusion is reinforced by additional tangible outcomes of the program that occurred outside of the survey but undoubtedly attribute to the Professional Practices program's positive influence on third-year students and a demonstrated reduction in their anxieties towards their careers. Firstly, one student who actively participated in

the program throughout the year, including taking up the offer of consultations, was supported to apply for a grant from the City of Melbourne in support of their artistic practice, which they were successful in obtaining. An additional student similarly engaged with the program in an active way, particularly through the consultations and customisation of templates to their career interests. This student was supported to apply for an entry level position at the National Gallery of Victoria and secured employment in the role. These instances exemplify the real-world impact and transformative potential the program holds for students at a third-year level. It further demonstrates the readiness of third-year students to immediately apply the learnings from the program and kick-start their careers.

Conclusion

Upon reviewing the feedback from both second- and third-year students, it becomes evident that the Professional Practices program successfully alleviated the anxieties that fine art students commonly face when considering a career in the arts and cultural sector. For second-year students, it was found that the identified anxieties were predominantly linked with conceptualising the nature and formation of a creative career. Conversely, third-year students had clarity of what constitutes a career in the arts and cultural sector and rather expressed anxieties more rooted in an unmet appetite for more professional development opportunities beyond their current experience. Consequently, these findings present valuable opportunities for enhancing the program design in the upcoming 2024 delivery.

Recalling that the current second-year students will be the first cohort to undergo the full 12-module program, lessons gleaned from both cohorts of the 2023 program will be incorporated into content enhancements for the 2024 program delivery. Specifically, the articulation of what constitutes a creative career will be accentuated in addressing the apprehensions identified by the second-year students. The new cohort of second-year students will thus receive content more astutely tailored to clarifying the concept of creative careers, rather than assuming they have this knowledge already. In addition, the program's scope will be broadened to encompass examples of careers extending beyond the arts and cultural sector. This may include, where applicable, highlighting pathways towards parallel professions such as art therapy. This targeted approach aims to enhance the overall effectiveness of the Professional Practices program in alleviating student anxieties relating to careers in the arts and cultural sector. The success of the program has since lead to a planned

expansion of an adapted program for second- and third-year students enrolled in the Bachelor of Art History and Curating in 2024.

Acknowledgements

The development and implementation of the Professional Practices program in 2023 was championed by the Head of the Fine Art Department, Associate Professor Spiros Panigirakis, the Co-ordinator of third-year students, Professor Kathy Temin, the Co-ordinator of second-year students, Dr. Sean Dockray, and the Department Manager, Fine Art, Melanie Flynn.

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