

Work beyond the arts

Some creative arts graduates who have found it difficult to find jobs in the industry have had to look elsewhere



Benson Ang

What can you do with an honours degree in music?

Why, be a dolphin trainer, of course. That was the case with Ms Jasmin Patel, 24, who graduated from Lasalle College of the Arts with an honours degree in music in 2013 and found it tough to find a job related to music.

Instead, the pianist put her scuba-diving certificate to good use and took up a job at Resorts World Sentosa's Dolphin Island, taking care of more than 20 Indo-Pacific bottlenose dolphins.

Admittedly, hers is quite an extreme case of a person with an arts education choosing a dramatically non-arts-related career. But such divergences are getting more common in a market with more creative arts students than available jobs.

Creative arts courses are distinguished from the larger category of arts courses, which include psychology, literature and film studies.

While more people are enrolling in creative arts courses such as theatre, art, music, dance or design, the arts industry may not be growing fast enough to accommodate them when they graduate, human resource experts say.

In a speech last April, Dr Faishal Ibrahim, Parliamentary Secretary for Education and Social and Family Development, noted that enrolment in diploma-level creative arts courses increased by about 30 per cent between 2006 and 2015.

Enrolment in degree-level creative arts courses rose by about 40 per cent between 2010 and 2015.

But it seems that the job market in the arts sector has not kept up.

Figures from the Singapore Cultural Statistics 2015 report by the Ministry of Culture, Community and Youth show that total employment in the arts and culture sector rose by only about 15 per cent between 2009 and 2014 - from 23,770 to 27,436.

Mr Erman Tan, 52, president of the Singapore Human Resources Institute, urges arts graduates to be "flexible". Job experiences, even outside of the arts, can enrich portfolios and track records, he adds.

Mr David Leong, 47, managing director of recruitment firm PeopleWorldwide Consulting, also suggests looking beyond "jobs on the stage, in the museum or in the production room" to apply creative skills to a wide variety of jobs, such as in designing products and services.

Ms Femke Hellemons, country manager (Singapore) of workforce solutions company Adecco Personnel, identifies two recent developments that creative arts graduates can benefit from.

The first is the digital wave. "Nowadays, practically every company or service provider needs to have a website and an app," she says. "This represents a great opportunity for people in creative arts if they can use their skills to help in website and app user interface, as well as the overall user-experience design."

The second is the rising trend of gamification, in which elements of game-play are applied to other areas of activity, such as education and marketing.

She says: "Creative skills are required to think, create and integrate gamification elements, giving artists a definite avenue to apply their skills."

A spokesman for the Ministry of Education says that while creative arts graduates have been able to get jobs in related fields, they have also been employed in non-arts sectors. "For example, many manufacturing or services industry companies need creative talent to do design or corporate communications work."

In any case, experts and arts practitioners are hopeful that arts graduates can find suitable jobs.

Nominated Member of Parliament Kok Heng Leun, 51, who is artistic director of theatre company Drama Box, says: "When people are involved in the arts, the skills they learn - to improvise, reflect critically and explore options - will be an asset in any job, in any field."

Mr Janek Schergen, 65, artistic director of Singapore Dance Theatre, adds: "Study is preparation and - if one has the necessary skills and interest - there will definitely be a suitable job."

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PHOTO: DIOS VINCOY JR FOR THE SUNDAY TIMES

Advertising graduate turned game designer

When Mr Ian Gregory Tan (left) graduated with a diploma in visual communications (advertising) from the Nanyang Academy of Fine Arts (Nafa) in 2011, he had at least six job offers, mostly to be a copywriter or product designer.

He chose to be a computer game designer. The 31-year-old says: "My parents run a design house, so I always thought I would follow in their footsteps. But I love fantasy novels and have been playing Dungeons & Dragons since I was 14.

"On some level, I probably always wanted to design games, but did not think about it until I started my advertising course."

In his second year at Nafa, the bachelor co-founded local game company Witching Hour Studios with some friends and the company has since created three gaming mobile apps and one PC game.

Its most successful game, Ravenmark: Scourge Of Estellion, has been downloaded more than 100,000 times since its release in 2011. Later that year, it won the Charles S. Roberts Award for best science-fiction or fantasy computer wargame, awarded by the annual World Boardgaming Championships in the United States.

Another game, Masquerada: Songs And Shadows, won the Best Indie Game award at the Tokyo Game Show video game expo in 2015.

Mr Tan is creative director in his company, which has 13 full-time employees, including concept artists, programmers and animators. He says: "Creating a game is not different from running a creative ad campaign - both use skills in applied psychology and communications.

"For example, when designing games, I need to convey ideas very quickly through visuals and I picked up this skill while creating advertising campaigns in school."

Creative skills, he says, can be applied to any job. "You can even apply them to business development and marketing, as long as you make them relevant to your business."

But lest students think the arts scene is so fluid that an academic foundation is not important, he cautions: "You must still know the basics. If I did not take Art History 101 as a module, how would I be able to communicate the exact look I want my games to have?"

From music graduate to dolphin trainer

After Ms Jasmin Patel graduated from Lasalle College of the Arts with an honours degree in music in 2013, she applied to teach music composition - her specialisation - at a few education institutions.

She was told she was too young. Later that year, the classically trained pianist then tried her hand as a composer and actor in a local production of the French comedy Ubu Roi, but the show had only eight performance dates.

At a loss, the Singaporean decided to give music a break and accepted a position to be a diver - and later a dolphin trainer - at Resorts World Sentosa (RWS).

Ms Patel, now 24, says: "Getting those jobs were easy as I have scuba-diving certification. While I love music, I am also open to other options."

As a diver, her main responsibility was to maintain the various marine habitats at RWS' Marine Life Park.

As a dolphin trainer, she had to ensure the well-being of the more than 20 Indo-Pacific bottlenose dolphins at Dolphin Island.

Yet, even in the most unlikely of

jobs, she found her music background useful in improving interactions with the gentle creatures and guests.

Music has made her more sensitive and empathetic, she says. "While humans do not know exactly what dolphins think and feel, I felt my music background made it easier to empathise with the animals and sense when something is up, such as when they are uncomfortable."

When educating guests about marine life, her knowledge of music also helped her bond with overseas visitors. "Once, when speaking to a group of tourists from India, I sang a verse from a Bollywood song to break the ice. Immediately their faces lit up and they were more interested in what I had to say."

She learnt most of her dolphin-trainer skills, such as using hand gestures to communicate with the animals, on the job.

Last month, she quit to pursue her master's in arts pedagogy and practice, as well as work as a DJ at the VLV club lounge in Clarke Quay and as an instructor at entertain-



ment agency DJ Senter.

Ms Patel, who is single and has an elder brother, says: "I want to keep learning and am on to my next stage of development."

Asked if she would still have pursued a creative arts education, given her chequered experience with jobs, she replies: "I would. Music has taught me so many things - discipline, creativity and empathy towards others."

"It is more than just a qualification to get a job. It has enriched me."

Ms Jasmin Patel (above) says music helped her empathise with the dolphins.

PHOTO: COURTESY OF JASMIN PATEL



Ms Michelle Low uses her guitar during therapy sessions with adult patients and children with special needs.

ST PHOTO: KUA CHEE SIONG

Using music skills for therapy

As an undergraduate at the Nanyang Academy of Fine Arts (Nafa), Ms Michelle Low often charmed audiences with her skills on the pipa.

She was a freelance musician at the Singapore Chinese Orchestra, chairman of the Nafa Chinese Ensemble and a pipa instructor at various secondary schools.

She can also play the guitar, violin, piano and guzheng. But in her third year at Nafa, she took a module in music therapy, which broadened her outlook on her career options.

The 27-year-old says: "In the past, I assumed a music degree will automatically lead to me becoming a performer. But I realised music can also be used in other ways, such as helping patients improve their physical and psychological well-being."

The Singaporean eventually became a music therapist at Singapore General Hospital, after graduating from Nafa in 2011 with an honours degree in music performance and from the Southwestern Oklahoma State University in 2015 with an honours degree in music therapy.

Ms Low works with children with

special needs and adult patients during therapy sessions, usually with her guitar and a repertoire of more than 100 songs.

She says: "Through music, I can engage with children with autism, who might otherwise find it hard to express themselves verbally. Music can also help stroke patients regain their speech and improve their focus on everyday tasks."

Her musical background has enabled her to design treatment plans. "It's important to know the different elements of music, such as rhythm, melody and timbre," she says. "All these play a role in evoking emotions and creating specific moods."

Ms Low, who is single, says she loves her job as it combines her two passions - music and medicine. Several of her extended family work in healthcare and she is an only child.

"My advice to those interested in music is to pursue your passion, but do not limit yourself. Many music majors I know have formed their own bands, become music teachers or are involved in music arrangement for film and TV."