

Musicians drum it up for peers who can't get teaching jobs

No formal music degree but expertise gained as practitioner should count too, they say

Amelia Teng and Jolene Ang

Local musicians have spoken up strongly for their peers who are unable to secure teaching positions in institutions in Singapore despite their talent – because they do not hold degrees.

While some said there is value in teaching credentials, others noted that the skills and expertise gained as a practitioner should be equally recognised.

The discussion was sparked by a Facebook post on Oct 3 by home-grown jazz stalwart Jeremy Monteiro, 60, who raised the subject. His post was shared nearly 800 times and garnered more than 1,300 reactions.

He cited a case of a Singaporean violinist who has played in the first chair in a prestigious US symphony orchestra for years and lectured in top US institutions, but is unable to land a job as a professor in a local music institution of higher learning.

Mr Monteiro, whose professional music career started in 1976, was conferred Singapore's highest arts prize, the Cultural Medallion, in 2002. He has also been a visiting professor at Lasalle College of the Arts and University of West London, since 2006 and 2016 respectively.

When contacted, he said he felt that it would be a waste if local musicians, who have years of experience in the industry but no academic qualifications, are not allowed to formally teach part-time or full-time.

"I believe our Government has been thinking about this, in line with previous speeches about offering people without degrees job opportunities on the same level as graduates," he said, referring to previous remarks by Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong.

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of Singapore's most accomplished percussionists, said he used to be a part-time lecturer at Lasalle College of the Arts about 15 years ago.

But he was asked to leave after a change in leadership a few years later, and was told he needed at least a diploma in music, which he did not have.

"When I was younger, I did want to further my studies in music but couldn't afford it... so I pursued my passion in the industry," said the veteran, who has toured worldwide with Hong Kong Heavenly King Jacky Cheung and done recordings with Taiwanese stars A-Mei and Wang Leehom.

"It feels like there's so much we can share, especially having gone through certain experiences you can't gain from academic studies... but most institutions, even private music schools, require some qualifications."

He added: "I could go and get a diploma now in two years but it doesn't make sense at my age. I've learnt to accept that times have changed and it's more about academics now."

Mr Monteiro said he is not against academic qualifications, which can be useful in the teaching of the arts. "Someone who's formally trained may likely be better in articulating music theory than someone who learns all this through the school of hard knocks or trial and error."

But local institutions, he added, should also recognise the benefits that practitioners can bring to music education, and be more proactive in reaching out to them. "There should not be any distinction between the practice, or vocational, and academia tracks of learning."

It would be fair that musicians who want to teach get some teacher training, to know if they are suitable, he said.

Local drummer and percussionist Vicknes Vinayak Veerappan, 46,



Drummer-percussionist Vicknes Vinayak Veerappan, whose career credits include musical Forbidden City: Portrait Of An Empress, pursued a bachelor's degree in music at Lasalle in 2018 to widen his options. PHOTO: VICKNES VINAYAK VEERAPPAN



Jazz icon Jeremy Monteiro says local institutions should recognise the benefits that practitioners can bring to music education. PHOTO: JEREMY MONTEIRO

took up a bachelor's degree in music at Lasalle in 2018 so he could possibly be a full-time music teacher in a primary or secondary school.

"The course did teach some fundamentals that I was already familiar with, but it was fruitful to go back to school to learn new things like music production and songwriting," said the musician who has performed in musicals such as Forbidden City: Portrait Of An Empress and Dim Sum Dollies.

"I wanted to marry my experience in industry with new skills in school, and solidify my credentials. Many people can perform but we don't know how good they are theoretically when they teach."

Local institutions said they value academic credentials. However, some are less strict on such criteria, with industry experience also play-

ing a role in selection processes.

A spokesman for the National University of Singapore (NUS) said faculty members at its Yong Siew Toh Conservatory of Music are "appropriately qualified". NUS "places a high value on... professional artistic capacity, research capacities and output, as well as teaching qualifications and experience".

For music, like other fields taught at the tertiary level, a degree is "widely recognised as the minimum qualification for a university teaching appointment, with most appointable faculty in the contemporary world now requiring post-graduate qualifications", added the spokesman.

Nanyang Academy of Fine Arts (Nafa) said both proven track records of teaching and industry experience are important criteria for



Percussionist Mohamed Noor used to teach at Lasalle College of the Arts but was later asked to leave as he did not have at least a diploma in music. ST FILE PHOTO

MARRYING EXPERIENCE AND LEARNING

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LOCAL DRUMMER AND PERCUSSIONIST VICKNES VINAYAK VEERAPPAN, who took up a bachelor's degree in music at Lasalle so he could possibly be a full-time music teacher in a primary or secondary school.

FOCUS IS ON ACADEMICS

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MUSICIAN MOHAMED NOOR, one of Singapore's most accomplished percussionists.

or relevant working experience will be taken into account.

He noted that the college does hire non-degree holders with "substantive expertise" to teach specific modules and classes such as vocal technique or instrument.

Lasalle graduate Eshan Denipitiya, who did a Bachelor of Arts in music, said he had mentors who did not have formal qualifications. One of them is his father Mahesh, who is a director and composer in their home country Sri Lanka.

Mr Denipitiya, 25, who works in music school Aureus Academy, said: "His unique years of experience and ability to impart knowledge to others is far more valuable than any paper qualification."

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