

# Striving for a Perfect Ensemble:

(mis-)understandings between conservatoires and the music profession and their impact upon the quest for excellence in the teaching and learning of higher music education



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- Below is a key extract from the **phexcel** Draft Quality Framework for Professional Higher Education Excellence:

*Professional higher education (PHE) is a form of higher education that offers a particularly intense integration with the world of work in all its aspects, including teaching, learning, research and governance and at all levels of the overarching Qualifications Framework of the European Higher Education Area.*

*An understanding of excellence specific to PHE must, by definition, be based on the cornerstone of its intense integration with the world of work.*



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- If ‘intense integration’ is to be understood as ‘the cornerstone of excellence’ it is important to understand what this phrase means.
- It implies that the separate binary (or multiple) entities of higher education and the world of work should act as one
- In music, we might speak of this integration in terms of ‘Ensemble’
- ‘Ensemble’ designates both a group of musicians and the quality of closely coordinated precision with which they aspire to play
- A ‘perfect ensemble’ refers to the second meaning – to the idea of the separate elements being fused into an inseparable whole





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- A 'perfect ensemble' implies a coming together not just in space (occupying the same platform) but in time (acting in the same moment)
- The same is true if an intense integration between professional higher education and the world of work is to achieve excellence
- Those coming from both sides may work closely together, but they often have conceptions of one another that are seriously outdated
- This presentation examines how such conceptions arise, their consequences and what strategies may help in overcoming them; it will deal with Higher Music Education but has wider applicability



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- The broader relevance is shown by results recently published in Times Higher Education of the sixth annual Global Employability University Survey (THE 12-18 November 2015)
- These show that recruiters across the world attach more importance to having favourable past experience of a university's graduates (19%) than they do to graduates' expertise in the field of competence for which they are applying (14% and only the 3<sup>rd</sup> most important factor)
- In other words, they are primarily making decisions in the present that affect consequences in the future (the on-going vitality of their professional field) based on knowledge acquired in the past



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- In the field of Higher Music Education, and doubtless elsewhere, this phenomenon is obscured by the apparently rich and more or less constant interaction between higher education and the profession
- Instrumental and vocal teachers in conservatoires mostly combine their teaching with continuing professional activity; a typical working day for them might well alternate between elements of both
- However, partly because they are making this constant and busy interchange, they do not always have the time to explore either world beyond the immediate confines of that part of it with which they happen to interact; nor do they have space to reflect on these worlds





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- On the other hand, leaders, in either higher music education or the profession, tend to be located more unequivocally in one world or the other; their knowledge of their own milieu may be deep and nuanced but they don't have the time or space to achieve anything like this level of sophistication in their understanding of the 'other side'
- In this situation, the fact that they often have had greater previous than present exposure to this other side (dating from a time when they, too, were either in higher education or starting their careers) can be a hindrance, rather than a help; they still feel knowledgeable without recognising that their knowledge-base may be outdated



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- This syndrome might be called the ‘Professional Parallax’ – a tendency to see across the HE/professional divide, but in a distorted way (with the distorting lens being, in this case, temporal, rather than optical):

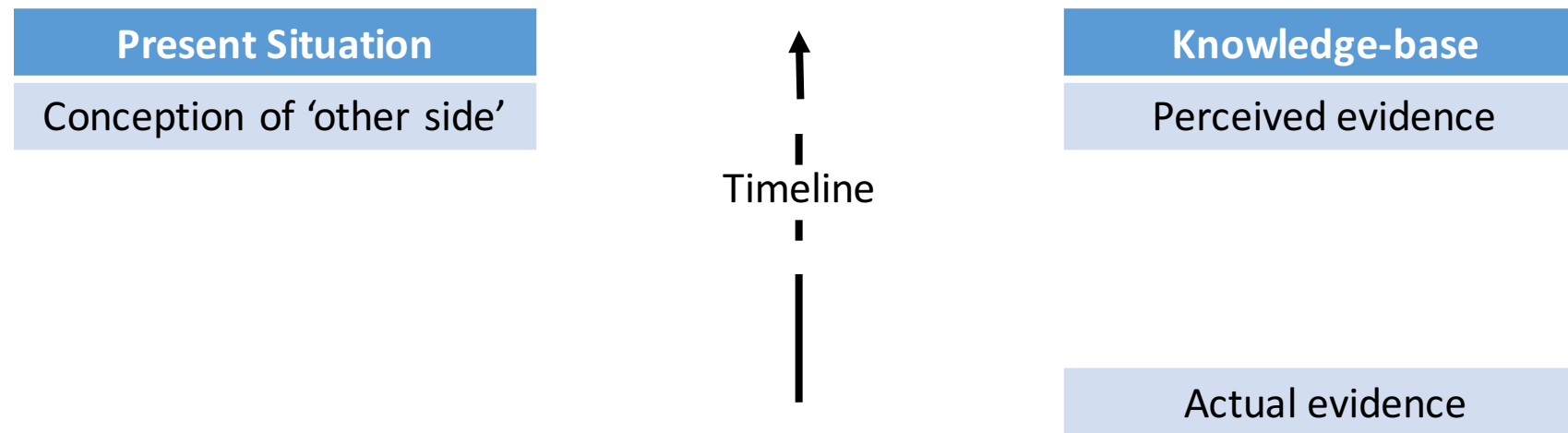




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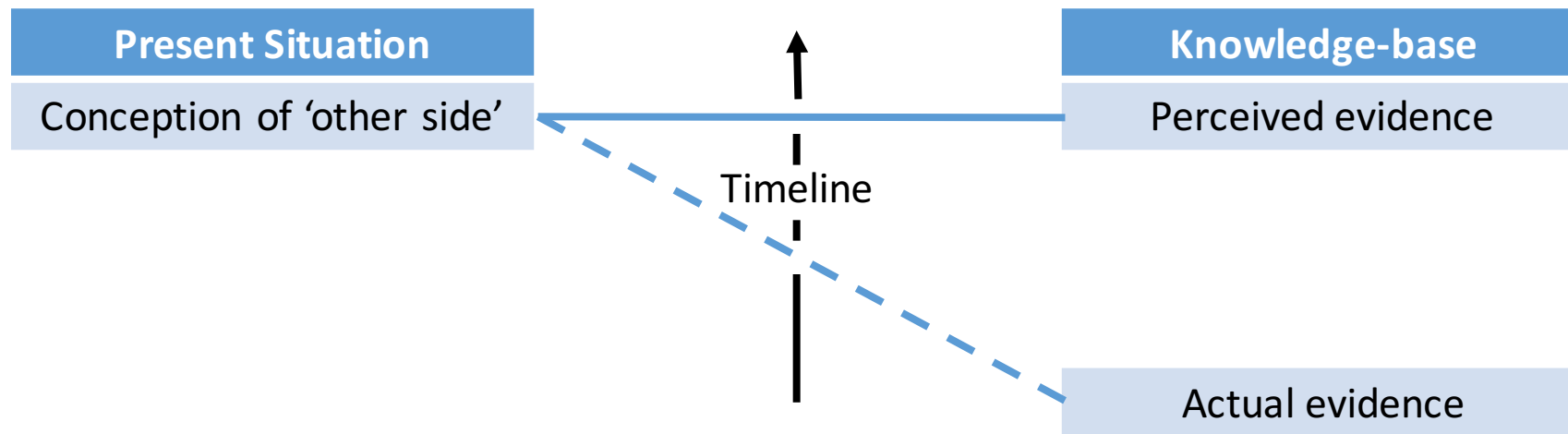
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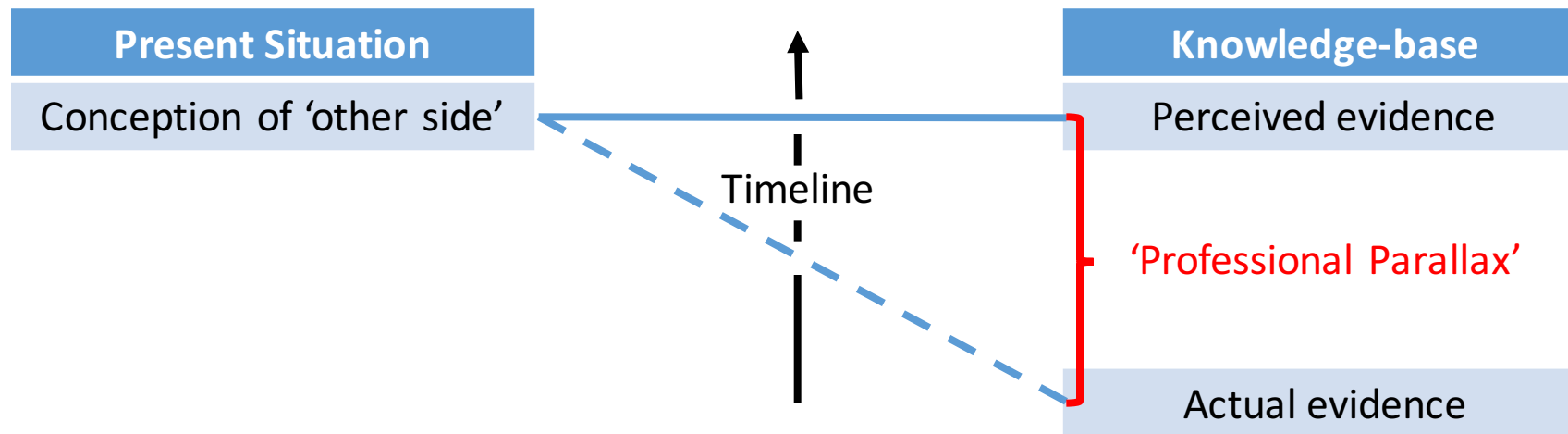




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- The more that change accelerates, both in higher education and in the professional environment, the more this professional parallax becomes an impediment to excellence; perceptions can become outdated in years or months, rather than decades, and updating them needs to be an almost constant exercise
- So how can the effects of professional parallax be mitigated?
- The first step is recognising the phenomenon
- The next is to ensure that all groups within institutions are mobilised: leaders and, within higher education, teachers and students – the last in some ways the most important



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## *Leaders:*

- For higher education, the modernisation agenda of recent years has made it harder for leaders to straddle the world of HE and work; in professionalising themselves in terms of HE, they have less opportunity to maintain a professional profile in their own field
- To compensate, they must set clear institutional priorities that emphasise the importance of a close and up-to-date understanding of the professional world; they should be prepared to invest in giving staff time for the upkeep of contacts; they may create strategic partnerships and alliances that bridge the worlds of HE and work



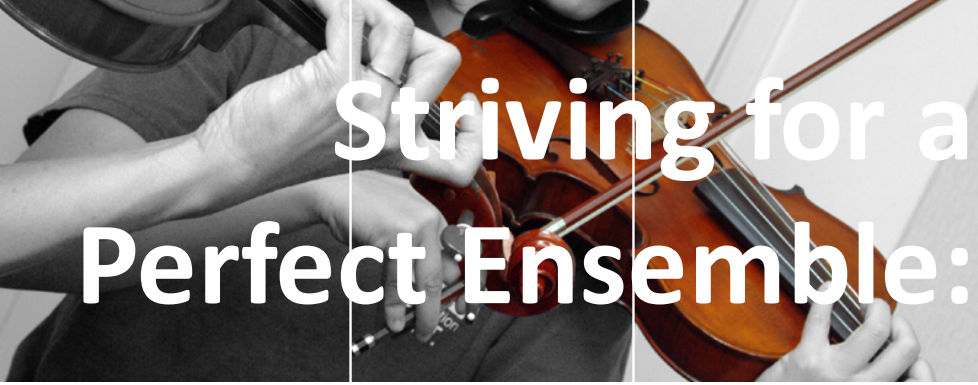
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## *Teachers:*

- For higher music education, teachers need to be encouraged to take on wider responsibilities than those of just delivering their lessons; they need to be engaged with curriculum development and quality enhancement activity and to think critically about all of the learning and teaching processes in which they are involved
- If this is to happen, contractual arrangements for teachers need to reflect this broader commitment
- At the same time, greater demands coming from the conservatoire must not keep the teachers away from the professional environment





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### *Students:*

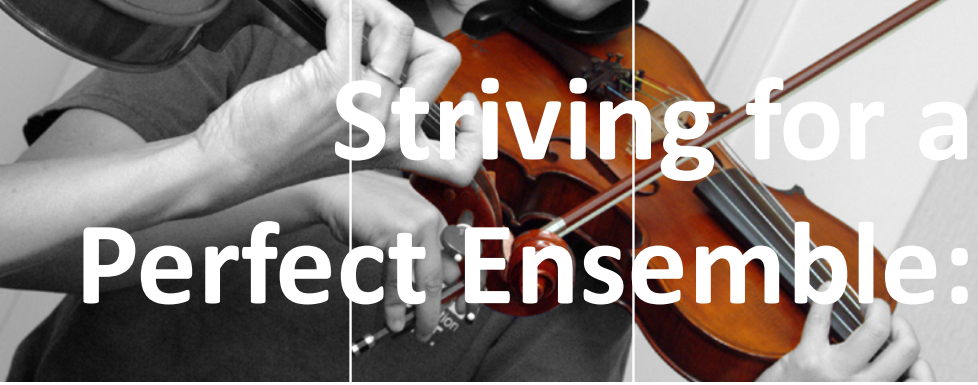
- There is still a tendency in conservatoires to think in terms of students as receivers of the accumulated wisdom of their teachers and not as pro-active agents in their own learning; student-centred learning is more rhetorical than real
- Music students often embody a more complete integration of the contemporary realities of HE and the world of work than their teachers; they are making their way in both simultaneously
- True student-centred learning, plus the active presence of students on committees, can make them an invaluable resource for institutions



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- Driven by this collective mobilisation, the ways in which curriculum design contributes to professional integration need to be kept under constant review
- The Times Higher Education article referred to earlier quotes the CEO of the UK's National Centre for Universities and Businesses as saying that universities need to be more “sophisticated” and “contemporary” when designing degrees and must move beyond sandwich courses and traditional placements
- Higher music education actually has quite a good record in devising innovative integration models



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- Rather than segregating periods of study and work experience, conservatoires adopt a more blended approach
- Students may interact with current professionals in a variety of ways:
  - Through the continuing engagement of their main teacher in professional activity
  - Through project-based interactions
  - Through concerts conducted by guest professionals
  - Through 'side-by-side' rehearsal sessions in professional orchestras





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- AEC has been prominent in sharing information and experience about such patterns of engagement and how they can enhance quality





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- But even if implementing all of this takes us closer towards a ‘perfect ensemble’, the final point to remember is that such unanimity and precision may be *necessary* for excellence but it is not *sufficient*
- Musicians need more than a mechanical perfection; they must draw upon empathy, emotional intelligence and a lightning-fast adaptability to turn perfect coordination into intense musical integration
- By analogy, professional excellence implies not just creating a perfect match between the curriculum and current professional needs but also building in ‘future-proofing’ through the development of broader skills of critical thinking, flexibility and creativity

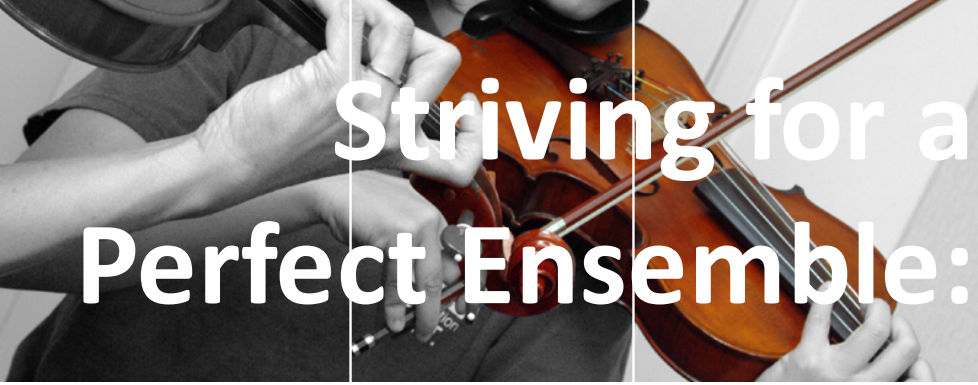


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- Again, the THE article is relevant, quoting the Vice-President and Provost of the University of Toronto as saying that ‘What we understood from employers is that skills help students get an initial job, but creativity, critical thinking, analysis and a broad knowledge base contribute to a successful career’
- Recent trends in conservatoire training reflect a growing realisation of the crucial nature of such wider competences even in an apparently closed and specialised profession such as music. This does not mean that we don’t need a close and up-to-date understanding between HE and the world of work; just that we need more than this





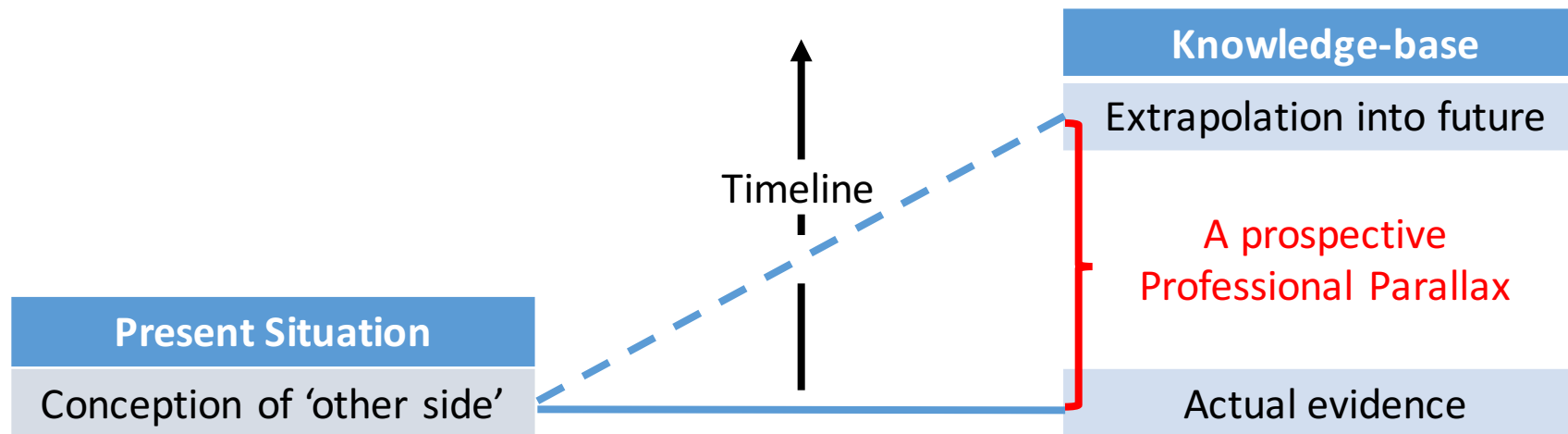
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- In a sense, what we need is not just to narrow the outdatedness embodied in the Professional Parallax, but to reverse it; by examining the present situation, we need to extrapolate, insofar as this is possible, to that which will operate in the future:



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- All this raises questions as to whether there truly is a meaningfully distinct brand of excellence associated with professional higher education compared with HE as a whole
- On the one hand, employment imperatives are increasingly important for the whole sector (as the very existence of a Global Employability University Survey shows)
- On the other, transverse skills such as creativity, critical thinking, analysis and a broad knowledge base seem as relevant to PHE as to HE in general





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- In fact, this is acknowledged in the **phexcel** Draft Quality Framework for Professional Higher Education Excellence:

*It [a sense of professional value] is about integrating professional aspirations and ethos with those of knowledge acquisition and self-growth applicable to any learner group.*

- The passage goes on to say that:

*Learners assimilate these through their learning and through their realisation that the professional world is in both the classroom and the (work) placement – i.e. that they are learning **for** a profession but also learning **in** a profession.*



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- This last statement connects with the call in the THE article for more sophisticated and contemporary models of integration to inform the design of new degrees; as such, it may be a better litmus test of PHE excellence than the mantra of ‘intense integration’
- Ultimately, the value of the **phexcel** project may lie more in the way it challenges our thinking about excellence across HE than in its identification of any convincing model for a distinctive PHE excellence
- This presentation has tried to rise to that challenge in assessing critically, through the lens of higher music education, what PHE excellence means and whether it is truly reflected in current reality

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