Inspiring students' creative and performing arts interests in collaborative university and community programs through iStage - Intercultural Sharing of Talent and Art Groups Enthusiasts

Contacts: Maria Victoria McCarthy[1], Uma Parvathy Krishnasamy[2], Yousef Farouk Kurashi[3]

Address: QUT, International Student Services, GPO Box 2434 Brisbane, QLD 4001 AUSTRALIA

This paper aims to describe the founding of iStage, an International Student Services based support group that has become a Student Club affiliated with the Student Guild while being actively engaged in collaborative programs within QUT (Queensland University of Technology) and the Brisbane Community.

iStage members' collaborative performing arts initiatives/commitments and lessons learned from these commitments on campus and out in the community will be identified. A vital part of this paper highlights the club's learning experiences including their challenges and achievements from a multicultural and collaborative leadership perspective. General feedback from iStage collaborators also shapes the meaning of the collaborative experience embedded in this paper.

The authors (iStage representatives and their mentor), informed and influenced by their own previous long term performing arts experiences embark to consolidate three years of experience within iStage as they aim to advance a more practical student and staff collaborative framework in university community engagement.

This paper is the authors' reflections of the various activities and events they had co-initiated with student members and their collaborators (i.e. clubs, students, staff and community allies) These reflections convey insights on inspiring creative and performing arts interests in collaborative university and community programs through a student club named iStage.

Support groups in this paper refer to groups within organised events and activities whether one off or ongoing which aim to enhance the social aspects of students' experiences whilst pursuing their academic career at the university.

A **Student Club** described here is that of a group membership of students of no less than twenty who have convened and formed their own club identity based on common interest, had named their club, identified their aims and vision, agreed on their constitution, determined their needs and responsibilities, elected their executive committee, planned their prospects of activities, delivered and evaluated them according to the Student Guild Clubs and Societies' general rules and guidelines.

Collaborative Perspective refers to a team decision by participating members to wisely invest time, knowledge, skills and talents in view of shared aims and vision within the team and with other likeminded clubs and groups. This is achieved by learning and teaching and by being sensitive to the multicultural dynamics of any given group. In the case of iStage, collaboration is the act of learning and sharing performing arts interests and talents in workshops, events and gatherings within QUT and out in the community.

Collaborators are individuals, groups and organisations who work together to achieve shared goals for a common good.

Being collaborative is also about being aware of one's clubs needs and aspirations while investigating the equally dynamic needs of one's collaborators so that thoughtful, appropriate, responsive and proactive collaboration can happen.

The Founding of iStage

"iStage was a direct offshoot from support groups such as QUT East West (2005) QRSnet - Research students Network (2009), LIFE for all seasons (2010) and YODA – Young Oz dancers and Allies (2011) http://proceedings.com.au/isana/docs/2013/McCarthy_Maria.pdf

iStage stands for intercultural Sharing of talents and arts group enthusiasts. Affiliated with the QUT Student Guild in October, 2012, the authors and student membership from various cultural backgrounds had named and initiated this group. iStage was a result of a number of support group initiatives within ISS - International Student Services at Queensland University of Technology. To date, some of these support groups initiatives have continually flourished particularly East West (promoting global and cultural diversity) which was taken over by the Student Engagement Office and QRSnet (championing research students' network) which was retained at ISS. Both initiatives are successfully run by coordinators in collaboration with staff, students and volunteers. iStage continues to collaborate with East West and QRSnet mainly through performing arts whilst widening it's network within and outside the university.

The chicken or the egg? The Mentor's (the main author) ideas came from the grassroots' (the student body itself) but the founding student members of iStage indicate that the Mentor was behind the idea of iStage. What matters is that the aims and vision are shared and clear to all concerned.

 iStage was a support group that became a club and the prodding from their Mentor was not difficult because the students were excited about the idea of forming an intercultural performing arts group. The founding student leaders had to organise their own constitution and had to have a more definitive sense of responsibility towards their club and the network they seek to collaborate. iStage first founding team lead by QUT students: Petunia Buk, Vinci Fong, Virginia Lao, Rio Rodrigues, Dan Wong and others agreed on their aims and vision, that is promoting performing arts skills, knowledge and cultural experiences and facilitating positive interaction within the university.

Overview of Commitments and Performing Arts Activities

- **From 2011 -2012**

iStage as a support group had been conducting dance and performing arts (dancing, singing and playing musical instruments) workshops the year prior to their official recognition as a student club and affiliation with the Student Guild. iStage members have also been actively gathering and sharing other skills and talents of interest to the members such as photography, cooking, intercultural and interpersonal skills.

During this period, the Mentor was the main organiser in terms of recruiting students who were willing to be guest talent facilitators of workshops of interest, booking the workshop venue, designing the poster, sending the ad to various channels, taking the rsvp, preparing the refreshments, co-facilitating the workshop with guest facilitators and debriefing after the event. It was time consuming and labour intensive for the Mentor who does the job in between her core duties as International Student Counsellor. It also created a dependence on the Mentor and lack of continuity for students who required some further sense of belonging to and pride with their group. As early as it's formation, members' interest reached beyond performing arts workshops alone, it's members were looking for a sense of community feeling within the cohort. A newsletter publication was produced in 2012 to recognise the founding members, to promote the club activities and recruit members.

iStage seemed to have started to develop it's own community confidence when it started to collaborate with QRSnet's arts exhibition and dance drama in November, 2012. iStage representatives helped choreographed the dances and extended help in various ways (e.g. arranging the paintings for exhibition, setting the stage, photography documentation, preparing and tidying up the venue). It was in this event and similar events that iStage started to be noticed and gain greater interest from the university community. https://www.facebook.com/photo.php?fbid=10151141053624117&set=o.72088297507&type=1&theater

- **From February 2013 to December, 2014**

In February, 2013 and 2014, iStage was visible at Orientation Week helping to welcome students and promoting their club. Club Executive Team Vinci Fong (Bachelor of Social work student), Petunia Buk (Bachelor of Nursing student) and Virginia Lao (Bachelor of Business student) effectively put iStage in the map of QUT Student Guild's active club list.

By March, iStage performers (singers and dancers) were ready to participate at the QUT Harmony Day in collaboration with the QUT Student Engagement. Indirectly, iStage collaborated with Equity Services because the Harmony Day event and its philosophy has been part of the Equity's platform.

iStage simply made itself collaborative by performing at various events such as QUT East West Fest in August, 2013 and 2014, Brisbane Moonlight Festival in September, 2014, Mental Health Week in October, 2013 and 2014, Science and Engineering Faculty Trivia Night, ISS (International Students Services) Farewell Function for International Students in 2013 and 2014 and QRSnet (Research Students) Arts Exhibition in November, 2013 and 2014.

iStage widened its collaborative scope by also performing in the community. iStage performed at Technicolour Festival at Newmarket in 2013, City Welcome Festival for International Students at Southbank in 2014 and at the Barrio Fiesta; a Filipino multicultural festival at Rocklea in June, 2014.

Over the years, iStage has developed its own repertoire of dances for performing such as the traditional Chinese, traditional Filipino, Bollywood and Salsa while members also tap into each other's skills in other dance genres and singing that they learn during ordinary "workshops for fun". iStage also attempted some improvised skits and presented this at East West Fest 2014 which was received well by the audience.

Apart from dancing and acting, iStage representatives were also visible at various events run by the QUT Student Engagement; the main ones were the Dragon Boat Race and QUT Run. iStage continues to be creative in various fields as well as fostering its members' goodwill and friendship.

Since iStage became an autonomous club, iStage members started to develop a sense of ownership and greater responsibility for their initiatives and a broader network of support within the university.

Song and dance artists Yani Sunaharum and Ravi Rajapakse, both PhD candidates completed SCAP (Student Clubs and Project Grants) applications to support the club's activities. Their successful application motivated the club to accomplish its artistic inclinations and prospects.

iStage put up a photo exhibition (called "Panomono" - a panorama on a scroll by Yousef Kurashi – Creative Industries Students from Saudi Arabia) back to back with a gala in time for the 2013 semesters' end celebration. Many iStage members are interested in arts and so they themselves were the forefront performers and organisers in this gathering. Collaborative work within iStage was evident in how responsibilities were shared. iStage's sense of autonomy was also evident as the members relied on each other's capabilities rather than importing people to cover the jobs for them. In this gathering alone, iStage showcased a variety of dance talents: Hip hop/Popping, Bollywood, Salsa, Contemporary and Lyrical dancing. iStage singers sang in both their native languages and English. Although the performers and the audience for this event were primarily International Students, a significant representation from various groups (e.g. QRSnet, Representatives from various student clubs, Equity Services staff representatives, AusAid Scholars, students and staff from LPF also known as the Learning Potential Fund) and individuals supported the event. All the Clubs, Societies and Faculty Departments were informed and invited to the event as guests and performers. This gesture was indicative of iStage's intentions to be inclusive and collaborative.

iStage received very positive feedback from this event and one of the most loved part of the program was that everyone got a chance to dance at the end of the gala. Uma Parvathy, iStage choreographer, made

everyone join her mini Bollywood demonstration and got everybody to groove to the music and enjoy the community dancing with lots and lots of laughter.

In December, 2013, iStage also participated in a QUT wide flash mob promoting student scholarships with Learning Potential Fund. This was one of the bigger collaborative assignments that iStage pursued.

Beyond organising photo exhibitions and performing arts, iStage collaborated with the Expo at QUTIC (QUT International College). At least twice a year since 2013 iStage representatives would join the group of Support Services and Clubs to help grace the College's Expo. iStage representatives would wear their club t-shirts, bring their club's information materials, and display their posters/colourful club activities photos to inform the Expo guests of the vibrance on campus and attract prospective members to join iStage.

- **From February 2015 – November, 2015**

iStage started the year by collaborating with and supporting another student's club events. On the 27th February, 2015, iStage graciously performed one duo dance and two solo songs (one Indian and one Sri Lankan) for the Bangladesh Student Association event called "Year of International Mother Language Day." This was short notice but iStage was there to give a helping hand, collaborating with fellow students and staff who lead the event.

iStage steadily learns from their experiences by collaborating with a community program. On the 28th February, 2015, the Organisers of CWF - City Welcome Festival for International Students have included iStage in their Program. iStage's mentor liaised and initiated this collaboration in 2014. The following year, 2015, student representatives from iStage took the liaison role in confirming the dances that they performed. The students themselves arranged their own rehearsal times, organised their costumes and arranged additional dance routines to offer to the CWF which were welcomed graciously by the CWF Committee. The traditional Bangladeshi duo dance was a graceful addition to iStages' choreography at the Festival held in Southbank (an open space central location next to the Queensland Performing Arts Complex in Brisbane). As usual, the traditional Chinese dance (Wu Tao Dance) and the traditional Filipino dance (cariñosa dance) were received with delight from both the newly arrived International Students in Brisbane and also from the Community passers-by in this public iconic spot.

In 2015 iStage took an upward step with the new intake of students at QUT providing an increase in membership.

One new member, Joious Alexander, a Master Social Work student, successfully submitted a funding application to SCAP (Student Clubs and Project Grants) for iStage to organise an Intercultural Gala in collaboration with various other performing arts groups and individuals.

 iStage choreographer and president, Uma Parvathy (Master of Business, Human Resource Management student) then successfully lead this gala in May with assistance from her collaborators, her executive committee and the groups that supported the gala.

The gala attracted a good number of sectors from QUT including ISS – International Student Services, QRSnet, QUTIC, Equity Services, various Clubs and Societies; particularly the Nepal Students Society, QUT Pasifika and Papua New Guinea Students Association who were also co- performers in this gala of talents.

iStage also gained DANS Community's collaboration and were co- performers in this event. As usual, the audience and all collaborators expressed high satisfaction from their participation and involvement in the event. This gala coincided with iStage's fundraising campaign for both the Vanuatu Cyclone and Nepal Earthquake and is indicative of iStage's generosity and willingness to collaborate to the cause for those in need.

A new set of leaders were needed immediately after the gala as the founding leaders prepared for the completion of their studies at QUT.

In June, 2015 exactly a month after the gala and election of a new executive committee, representatives of iStage collaborated with DANS Community helping QUTFSA (QUT Filipino Student Association) recreate a Philippine heroism drama for the Barrio Fiesta (a Filipino Independence day celebration and intercultural festival).

This invitation was offered in person to iStage mentor (because of her attachment with the Filipino community) and who saw an opportunity for iStage and DANS Community to collaborate with QUTFSA and the Filipino Community at Barrio Fiesta. The outcome was very successful and in fact a beginning of new friendships for all the concerned. Posterity photos and feedback were published at social network media. https://www.facebook.com/media/set/?set=oa.897664520295906&type
https://www.facebook.com/marivik61/posts/10152914343394117

In July, 2015, iStage collaborated with QUTIC's (QUT International College) "Busking and Talent Show for fundraising for the Victims of Cyclone Pam in Vanuatu. This involved teaching interested QUTIC students some dancing. Within three weeks, students who had never before danced the dynamic Bamboo Dance learned a routine and performed at QUTIC, Kelvin Grove Campus.

iStage teamed up with DANS Community teacher and choreographer Anika- Jovi McCarthy in teaching the bamboo dance also called "tinikling" to perform at the show. iStage representative, Yani Sunarharum with Anika-Jovi from DANS Community formed a duo and danced the carinosa (traditional sway balance dance) while Uma Parvathy lead in demonstrating Bollywood dance for everyone to follow. The QUTIC building was filled with joy and laughter in this lunch hour show in July.

Excellent feedback from this lunchtime busking show encouraged everyone to continue the iStage-QUTIC-DANS Community collaboration by learning to dance the Tango and to perform at the East West Fest 2015 in August. The rest was history.

Within seven weeks, students who had never before danced the Tango learned a routine and performed at QUT Kelvin Grove Campus. The audience wowed these first time Tango dancers with delight and the dancers expressed as much joy as their audience. https://www.facebook.com/istage1/photos_stream

Equally exciting was iStage's traditional Vietnamese dance at the same East West Fest. One Vietnamese student Nhi Lien (first semester in Bachelor of Business) took the initiative to teach her fellow students who had never before danced a Vietnamese dance. The outcome was grace, colour and delight at the Fest.
https://www.facebook.com/photo.php?fbid=10153072089129117&set=o.390977637631266&type=1&theater

This beautiful Vietnamese dance also made it to the Mid-Autumn Moon Festival held at QUT Gardens Point Campus in September, 2015. https://www.facebook.com/media/set/?set=oa.952199644842393&type=1

This event was in collaboration with QUT Student Engagement and the channels and networks that it serves such as the Chinese Community and all interested staff and student body at QUT.

The month of October is generally an intense academic final assessment time for every university student and iStage members are not an exception; however, the author had been aware that some iStage members had also been actively sharing their performing arts talent and kindness to their community groups. Shagana Jeya (iStage choreographer and Bachelor of Engineering student), although not representing iStage, choreographed a beautiful medley of Indian classical and Modern dance routines for the 'Tamil Festival of Lights' held on 7th November, 2015. This meant that she had been teaching and conducting dance rehearsals all through October to get the dance polished in such a high profile community Diwali festival for November.

At the time of writing this paper, a number of iStage members expressed interest in joining QRSnet's musical play to be presented at the QRSnet's Arts Exhibition on 27th November, 2015.

The summer holiday from November to February over the past three years has been a period of easy workshops and 'catch up' for club members who were in Brisbane. This is the time for connectedness and

respite; even cooking lessons for some. Others chose to prepare for dance routines they might perform at the City Welcome Festival for International Students in the first semester of the New Year. This has also been traditionally the time for the iStage mentor to be helpful in convening the members in the absence of the executive committee. In 2015 however, this practice changed as iStage asserts greater independence. This seems to indicate a strong confidence in leadership. Despite the absence of the current president and the rest of the executive committee's academic and other commitments, one would hope that someone from this club might take the initiative and create bonding activities for the new members who have not had the chance to know each other, the club and its promising new platform.

Lesson Learned, Challenges and Achievements

- **The organisational aspects of iStage**

iStage is currently steady with its affiliation with the QUT Student Guild. Its executive committee is autonomous and prides itself in being able to manage its own collaborative work with the groups it chooses to share its goals and ambitions. Its founding mentor, Maria McCarthy, the author of this paper observed confidence in current iStage leaders in pursuing its own performing arts interest and vision of promoting intercultural creativity and harmony.

Like many other groups, it is the author's observation that effective delegating of tasks is one of the more challenging issues for iStage. If tasks within the club can be shared more equally, the load would be so much lighter for everyone especially for the president of the club who usually bears the impact of club issues and requirements. This is not the president's responsibility alone; the team members need to be proactive in looking after the club's duties and interests.

An effective communication style is also a critical aspect of building a happy and healthy club. As iStage is growing in numbers; its leaders will need to find caring ways to encourage its members to meet and greet and form their own sense of community within the club. Performing arts are inspiring and exciting but the club seemed happiest when the members found time to "chill out" and spend some bonding time together apart from the excitement of stage dancing and performances.

The times that iStage "chilled out" the most were the times when they gathered their members to have afternoon teas or karaoke singing or playing chess, celebrating birthdays and dancing for fun and pleasure as opposed to performances on stage. iStage's biggest achievements have been their performing arts talents, their collaborative skills, their grant applications successes and perseverance in pursuing their projects; however the current club leadership needs to recognise carefully that students join iStage not for performing on stage alone. There is a lot to learn from the time when iStage's priority was team building and social cohesion. Incidentally, it was also the time when iStage was providing more frequent team building activities for its members rather than concentrating on stage performances, which was evident in September, 2013.

Based on the chain of events and performances that iStage accomplished particularly in 2015, iStage has been one prolific club generous and available to collaborate and help others enhance their shows and festivals. Those who have collaborated with iStage can testify that iStage has been instrumental in helping collaborators achieve their goals. iStage also prides itself for gathering the support of others not for iStage alone but in fact for the benefit of those that iStage cares about (e.g. East West Fest championing intercultural collaboration, QUTIC's busking project, Vanuatu and Nepal fundraising campaigns, the Barrio Fiesta requesting artistic help, ISS Farewell Functions seeking performers, LPF and SEF recruiting dancers, CWF seeking dance performers, the Multicultural Community seeking cultural performers, QRSnet recruiting actors and helpers, etc.). Because the leaders themselves were performing artists at the same time, it seemed that this had impact on their organisational ability, level of team communication and team spirit. Furthermore, the club leaders' other commitments including their positions in their national clubs had both positive and conflicting dimensions to their club efficiency which was stressful for them. This needed to be addressed by developing a practice framework that effectively pays attention to the individual, their culture, their group and environment's expectations. Whether the framework is collective or personal, it needs to be realistic and informed by a sense of balance for the individual, the club and its collaborators.

- **The artistic aspects of iStage**

The dance routines that made iStage popular such as the Wu Tao (traditional Chinese dance), the Carinosa and Tinikling (traditional Filipino dances), the Bollywood and recently, the Tango may not be as easily available when collaborators request them as the iStage dancers who used to dance these routines have either completed their studies or have resigned from their involvement with iStage.

iStage however looks promising in its artistic transition. Current iStage leaders and members have a strong interest in dance; namely South Asian dances and Vietnamese dance routine. iStage has also won a SCAP grant to put up a South Asian dance Festival in 2016.

Some of the members of iStage are also actively involved with DANS Community; a continued collaboration is possible. At the time of writing this reflective paper, iStage has more than one hundred members. Based on the authors' experience, only a handful of members will be keen to perform on stage. Most members join iStage for dance workshops as a hobby but especially and more meaningfully to meet friends.

Examples of Feedback from iStage Collaborators:

"The greatest joy I get from teaching dance to iStage is hearing the success stories of my students. I would say for most students the community environment is what really makes the difference. These students are complete beginners, who by the end of their journey, get to perform for the community and walk away with new friends. Their willingness to learn inspires my choreography and overrides any difficulties, making the experience enjoyable for everyone."
- Anika-Jovi McCarthy (DANS Community volunteer)

"I think the iStage Gala was a great night of cultural performances coming together in one place. It was such a relaxed environment while learning about other cultures in the form of dancing and singing. I love how it was organised and run by the students. It would be great to see if somehow we can involve the domestic students by getting them to come and participate. Maybe all students involved can invite and bring a domestic student each."
- Reggie Vercoe, QUTIC Activities Officer

"iStage needs to develop better and more effective strategies to encourage various clubs and groups to be involved and actively participate. The invitation for example was sent to all the student clubs and associations: International, Domestic and Academic groups via email. There needs to be some follow up communications in place as this can possibly increase participation and collaborative efforts among and between groups".
- General comments from iStage gala debriefing, 18th May, 2015

Summary:

Inspiring the creative side and performing arts interests of students needs to be revisited carefully. Any group or club would appreciate a collaborative attitude and practices from within the club first and foremost. The authors suggest that the members interests be attended thoughtfully first before embracing the chain of outside invitations that can cause imbalance within the group.

It is constructive to view iStage as promising and that the new iStage leaders will create a practice framework that's effective for current members. . Learning from the experiences of past iStage members can be beneficial for the new iStage in creating its own identity. Collaborators' feedback are also valuable in shaping the club's developing practice framework.

Overall, iStage has learned the essence of collaboration in the process of being a club regardless of its performing arts commitments. iStage is gifted with intercultural talents. A collaboration from within like a tight knit family will strengthen each other's confidence and deepen its community life in the long term.

Selection of posterity photos taken from 2005 to 2015 - Links published in social network media

1. East West, 2005.
https://www.facebook.com/photo.php?fbid=10151358659399117&set=oa.620212401329221&type=3&theater

2. QRSnet 2009 – 2010.
https://www.facebook.com/photo.php?fbid=438887754116&set=o.72088297507&type=1&theater

3.LIFE,2010.
https://www.facebook.com/photo.php?fbid=443018419116&set=ms.c.eJwzMTE2MLQwMbI0NDTTM4Fy
TJA4hsgyBlCOkSUQmIGUAQCf6gzd.bps.gm.302202673170191&type=3&theater

4. iStage Facebook page Posterity photos 2012-2015. https://www.facebook.com/istage1/photos_stream

5. iStage with QRSnet in 2012.
https://www.facebook.com/photo.php?fbid=10151141053624117&set=o.72088297507&type=1&theater

6. Technicolour Festival at Newmarket in 2013.
https://www.facebook.com/search/top/?q=Technicolor%20festival%20newmarket

7. Panomono dance the photo, 2013.
https://www.facebook.com/istage1/photos/pb.287469508012679.-
2207520000.1447731298./553243434768617/?type=3&theater

8. QRSnet arts exhibition and performing arts 2013.
https://www.facebook.com/istage1/photos/pb.287469508012679.-
2207520000.1447731038./556929257733368/?type=3&theater

9. iStage at front row at LPF's Christmas surprise, 2013
https://www.facebook.com/istage1/photos/pb.287469508012679.-
2207520000.1447731024./564560076970286/?type=3&theater

10. City Welcome Festival for International Students at Southbank, 2014.
https://www.facebook.com/search/top/?q=cwf%20city%20welcome%20festival

11. Barrio Fiesta, a Filipino multicultural festival at Rocklea, June, 2014.
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AKKj3EdmpM0

12. QUT Pasifika and Papua New Guinea Student Association collaborators and co-performers, gala, 2015.
https://www.facebook.com/photo.php?fbid=10152938888274117&set=o.390977637631266&type=1&theater

13. Barrio Fiesta June, 2015
https://www.facebook.com/media/set/?set=oa.897664520295906&type
 https://www.facebook.com/marivik61/posts/10152914343394117

14. iStage tango made QUT Students Facebook Cover, 2015
https://www.facebook.com/QUTstudents/photos/a.476228192416260.106749.195022663870149/937016513
004090/?type=3&theater

15. Tango photos links, 2015
https://www.facebook.com/EastwestQUT/photos/pb.155487217856846.-
2207520000.1447735966./920336248038602/?type=3&theater
https://www.facebook.com/QUTstudents/photos/a.476228192416260.106749.195022663870149/937016513
004090/?type=3&theater