

Haphazard pathways:

Students' perceptions of their routes to music study in higher education in the United Kingdom

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Abstract:

This article reports on a qualitative study which explored perceptions of 14 first year

undergraduate music students in the UK regarding their secondary school music education as preparation for undertaking degree-level music study. The authors (both lecturers in popular music at a UK university) were motivated to undertake this research to explore issues of alignment between school music and music degrees in the UK and the pathways students constructed through this transition. Data pertains to three key areas: students' perceptions of the extent that school music courses prepared them for university application, students' descriptions of their extracurricular music activities, and areas that students would like to change about their secondary music courses. Findings suggest that all interviewees felt underprepared for university study by their secondary music courses, yet differences in perception exist between students who were accepted to 'classical' music degrees, and those who went on to study popular music.

Keywords:

Popular Music Education, School-University Transitions, Extracurricular Music Activity, Higher Education, Secondary Education, Class Exclusion

## **Introduction**

This article reports on a small-scale qualitative study in which the authors explored the pre-university music education experiences of first-year undergraduate music students. We conducted the research in order to garner insight into students' perceptions and experiences of secondary education as preparation for higher education (HE) music study.<sup>1</sup> Current literature on the transition from secondary education to HE music study (Burt and Mills 2006; Lowe and Cook 2003; MacNamara et al. 2006; Pitts 2002) is somewhat sparse; Burt and Mills (2006) highlight the fact that 'a gap exists in the examination of this transition from the perspective of the students themselves' (quoted in MacNamara et al. 2008: 339). Throughout our exploration of this area, we have continually conceived of these highly individualized learner journeys as 'haphazard pathways'. We chose this term to capture the notion of students assembling their own routes towards HE music study, drawing on and engaging with a multitude of discrete learning experiences in an unsystematic manner.

We use the term 'pathways' intentionally to relate to the more conventional 'educational pathways', which we consider as the educational events and transitions of individuals throughout students' lives (Gorard et al. 1998, 2001; Pallas 2003). For many young musicians applying to study music in HE, such pathways incorporate extracurricular experiences or activities supplemental to their formal music education, through the construction of a self-designed and therefore highly personalized series of (often) informal and non-formal learning experiences (Green 2002; Smith 2013a; Folkestad 2006). These experiences are used to scaffold the skills and knowledge gained while engaged in formal music education, and 'plug' any specialism-specific gaps in their musical skill/knowledge.<sup>2</sup> When school courses do not provide appropriate frameworks, content or meaningful learning experiences to allow pupils undertaking such courses automatically to meet the entrance requirements of HE music programmes, those wishing

to pursue further study need to use their leisure time to engage in additional music related activities to supplement their secondary music education (Moir 2016). For the purposes of this research, such activities and learning experiences could be considered as the metaphorical ‘paving stones’ used to construct students’ haphazard pathways.

In the context of formal education, learning experiences are generally designed by a professional educator to meet specific learning outcomes. Due to their knowledge and experience of the subjects being taught and the course being delivered, educators have the advantage of being able to constructively align (Biggs 2003) learning experiences, curriculum content and assessments to help ensure learners achieve the (educators’) desired learning outcomes. For students constructing individualized pathways towards HE study, there is no guarantee that the combination of self-directed, and often autodidactic learning experiences will provide the knowledge and experiences to render them suitable candidates in the eyes or ears of the professionals dealing with HE admissions. Therefore, because learning and development are essentially students’ own responsibilities (albeit in addition to generic advice from school teachers and guidance counsellors, e.g.), they enter a wilderness in which they rely on received wisdom and the experiences and anecdotal evidence of peers as guidance towards a somewhat ambiguous goal, i.e. being ‘suitable’ for HE admission – whatever that may mean. Applicants design individual pathways related to a set of values that they see as important to their future study. This process is complicated by the diversity and range of music programmes offered in further education (FE) and HE, as applicants may seek to apply to multiple institutions that may consider different skills and experience to be of value in applicants’ profiles. Published entrance requirements often tell only part of the story of what an institution is looking for.

Each year when auditioning prospective students for the BA Popular Music programme at Edinburgh Napier University (on which we teach), the authors and our departmental colleagues notice that many applicants who have met the published entry requirements (i.e. school grades, etc.) are somewhat lacking in other musical skills and knowledge that staff have identified as valuable for fully engaging with our programme.<sup>3</sup> While a comprehensive discussion of ‘musicianship’ is beyond the scope of this article, the salient point here is that despite possessing formal qualifications in music, many applicants fall short of educators’ and practitioners’ and expectations of them. This can, to an extent, be attributed to the fact that applicants auditioning for places on a popular music programme may have developed as musicians through informal learning processes and/or autodidacticism, often learning in haphazard or idiosyncratic ways (Green 2002: 348). It may also be attributed to the nature and scope of their secondary education music education and qualifications, discussed below.

When scrutinizing applications, it is difficult to identify an applicant’s instrumental competence, their musical knowledge or the extent of their creativity, from school qualifications alone. However, often use school music qualifications as a benchmark to determine whether to consider an applicant for HE study. Edinburgh Napier University currently requires applicants to have achieved an A in Higher Music (Scottish music qualification offered by the Scottish Qualifications Authority [SQA], discussed below) or

a B in A-Level Music (typically offered throughout the rest of the United Kingdom, also discussed below) to be considered for audition.<sup>4</sup> For better or for worse, these requirements have been set to ensure that students have gained an ‘advanced’ secondary-level qualification in music, but in practice this is no guarantee that students will have the desired musical knowledge, skills and attributes to be of a standard to be admitted to their chosen music programme. This is a fundamental problem related to the nature of the secondary-level music courses discussed in this article. For many HE courses outside of music, the prerequisite school qualifications provide sufficient evidence of subject related knowledge/skills, and can therefore enable a linear progression to university-level study. Given that this is the case for other subject areas (but not music), the authors are interested in understanding the relationships between school-level music education and music education in HE.

This research took place in the United Kingdom; however, many issues discussed below are likely to have wider relevance. In the interests of clarity and framing of the findings presented in this article, a brief consideration of the courses undertaken by the participants prior to this research will be of benefit to those readers unfamiliar with secondary-level music provision in the United Kingdom.<sup>5</sup> In the United Kingdom, as mentioned above, there are two main secondary-level music qualifications that universities use as entrance requirements. These are the Music Higher in Scotland, and A-Level Music in the rest of the United Kingdom.<sup>6</sup> Although the SQA offer a further level of Music qualification named ‘Advanced Higher Music’, Music Higher is typically used as the basis for university entrance requirements. The SQA are the sole authority that offer and validate the Music Higher qualification in Scotland; in the rest of the United Kingdom, A-Level qualifications and courses are validated by a number of examination boards, including Edexcel and the Assessment and Qualifications Alliance (AQA), for example.<sup>7</sup> Although the Higher and A-Level courses are provided by different qualifications agencies, they are similar in general construction in that they are each predicated on three central tenets of performance, analysis and composition (Choksy et al. 1986). The minimum standard set for instrumental performance exams varies across these qualifications. SQA Music Higher requires candidates to perform on instrument or voice ABRSM Grade 4 (SQA 2014a).<sup>8</sup> A-Level typically requires pupils to perform at ABRSM Grade 6/7 although this varies by qualification agency. It should be noted that UK university entry requirements typically demand applicants to be able to perform at ABRSM Grade 7 or 8 level (at least) even to be considered for audition.

## **Method**

Fourteen first-year undergraduate students were recruited from three UK HE institutions in 2016: Edinburgh Napier University (n=7), Newcastle University (n=3) and the Institute for Contemporary Music Performance (n=4). At each institution, our recruitment strategy was to distribute a call for interviewees, stating the criteria for inclusion, which were that participants must be first-year undergraduate music students with no prior experience of HE study, having sat either A-Level or Higher/Advanced Higher music. Interviewees were eight males and six females ranging in age from 17 to 20 years. Given the generic nature of secondary qualifications available in the United Kingdom, we

wanted to include participants from a variety of music degree programmes. Participants comprised seven students on popular music programmes and seven students studying on 'traditional' BMus courses with a focus on western classical music. Seven participants had attended secondary school in England and sat A-Level qualifications, and seven had attended secondary school in Scotland and sat SQA Higher/Advanced Higher qualifications.

Eleven of the participants were entirely unknown to the interviewers. Three of the participants from Edinburgh Napier University were known to the authors. However, students had not been taught or assessed by the interviewers prior to interview. All names used herein are pseudonyms, to preserve the anonymity of participants.

The authors conducted semi-structured interviews with the participants. Questions pertained to the nature of participants' secondary school music qualifications and their experiences of studying music in school, their musical background and their engagement in co-/extracurricular musical activity. Interviews were conducted separately and in private, audio recordings were made with written consent from all participants, and each recording was fully transcribed. Each author conducted independent thematic analyses of the data, and transcripts were repeatedly analysed and coded to identify emergent themes. The authors then compared and discussed their independently developed categories and generated a single list of themes, which were verified collaboratively by rechecking the themes against the interview data.

## **Findings**

Three main thematic areas emerged from the data analysis. These pertained to perceptions of the extent to which secondary school music education had prepared interviewees for further study in music, interviewees' discussion of their engagement in extra-curricular music activities, and changes interviewees would like to see made to secondary level music courses.

### Preparation for music in HE

The authors asked Interviewees about the extent to which they felt that their experience of secondary music education prepared them for studying music in HE. Responses divided into two categories, relating to (a) how secondary level music courses equipped students with the requisite knowledge and skills to be able to meet entry requirements and prepare for auditions for HE music courses, and (b) the relevance of curricular content and assessments as preparation for HE music study.

We are keen to avoid making broad generalizations and dealing with potentially false dichotomies (particularly given the relatively small participant numbers). Nonetheless, it would be disingenuous, were we to fail to acknowledge stark differences in the perceptions of those students studying popular music and those studying classical music. Popular music students, regardless of whether they had studied SQA courses or A-Levels (i.e. in Scotland or England), felt that very few areas of their secondary music curricula were useful to them in preparing for their HE music study, or particularly relevant to their

area of musical study or their conception of musicianship. Jenny (popular music student, England) felt that, due to the nature of the curriculum and the constraints imposed by assessment requirements, her A-Level music teachers were:

So focused on teaching what we needed to do to pass, that they didn't really give us any background knowledge or any context for what we were learning.

She continued by referring to her own self-directed learning and the value of such autodidacticism:

[...] whereas when I was learning it on my own, I either could find out the context or give it context so it made sense and I could rely on it.

This comment from Jenny relates to a key finding of this study, which is that students felt the need to supplement their school music education with individual, extracurricular learning. This will be discussed in greater depth, below.

Denise (popular music student, England) had similar feelings to Jenny, and felt that:

Education-wise with music, it hasn't really taken the path I've always expected until I got here [university], because it was never the kind of classes I wanted to do. It was never the lesson I wanted to do. It would always focus on classical music, which I didn't want to do.

Those studying classical music in HE felt that their secondary music curricula were somewhat useful in preparing them for their university studies, overall, and they believed that their courses were aligned to an extent with their interests in music. However, there was a clear difference of opinion between those who had studied A-Level music, and those who had studied Higher/Advanced Higher music. Students who studied for Higher/Advanced Higher music were far less positive about the scope, content and general suitability of their secondary music education. For example, Thelma (popular music student, Scotland) stated:

If I had just done the course, just what was expected of me, I don't think I would have been able to do this. I wouldn't have been able to handle it all. I wish they had pushed us a bit more because I feel like I would've been a bit more equipped to deal with other things in the course. As it stands, the course as in itself, I don't think that it was quite enough without all the stuff I did outside of class, prepare me for this.

Similarly, Laurie (classical music student, Scotland) felt certain subjects which have more curricular prominence in his university course were not dealt with adequately in his school course:

I do think that for people who are going on to study music [...] that the school qualifications aren't going far enough. [...] Things like harmony – that's not looked at in school at all, really. Then you get to somewhere like here [his university] and it's really full on, there's a lot of harmony. Stuff like that I think

could be done more at school to give you a bit more of a base knowledge before you go on and study it further.

In the case of both classical and popular music students, one key area of dissatisfaction relating to preparedness for HE music study seemed to stem from a discrepancy in the level of study between the minimum performance standards in secondary curricula, and what is expected of students if they are to even be granted an audition for university music courses. In simple terms, the standard of performance required to pass (or even excel in) school exams was significantly lower than university entry requirements. While there is no official 'rule' stating that students cannot perform material of a higher level than the minimum requirement, a common complaint amongst interviewees was that they were encouraged not to do so by their classroom teachers and instrumental instructors in the hope that less challenging music would be performed more accurately and that the performance would thus be awarded higher marks. Clara (classical music student, England) stated that:

I was encouraged to do Grade 6 pieces [...] rather than to do Grade 8 pieces and blast out mistakes. Better to have secure lower grades than be shaky on ambitious material and losing marks for mistakes. [...] their thinking was don't try. [...] Don't risk the Grade 8 if you can't play it.

Interviewees studying on both popular and classical music degrees were also keen to note the significant discrepancy between the level of music theory engaged with in their secondary music courses and the level of knowledge expected by universities as an entry requirement, whether in the form of a music theory qualification or something to be demonstrated in an entrance exam at audition. This was particularly emphasized by interviewees who had studied SQA courses, with interviewees appearing particularly frustrated and even angered by the lack of music theory in school curricula. Many cited the futility of simply remembering 'abstract musical concepts' rather than learning about 'how music works', as a main area of dissatisfaction and source of anxiety. David (classical music student, Scotland) states this very clearly:

I don't think music at high school prepares you for university at all. It's been a big jump [...] they teach you the concepts and that's it [...] the bare minimum. There was a wee section of the music paper that you had to do the bass clef or what time signature is this but it's really minimal, compared to what you actually need to know if you're going to do a music degree.

### Engagement in extracurricular activity

Every interviewee stated explicitly that they felt as if they had needed to engage in extracurricular activities in order to address the variegated entry requirements of the multiple institutions to which they applied for music study in HE. In each case, interviewees stated their belief that problems with the content and focus of their secondary music curriculum (either in scope or depth) forced them into a situation in which they would not have been able to audition/apply for HE music courses, had it not

been for self-directed, non-school activities. Ellen (classical music student, Scotland) noted succinctly:

I don't think that you would be able to get into music university no matter what the course. [...] I think anyone would still need to do stuff outside of class.

Interviewees (both popular music students and classical music students) report engaging in additional instrumental/vocal lessons – often with a specialist instructor out with the school context – and usually leading towards taking graded exams, or learning more taxing repertoire, in order to achieve the required standard for university entry. The need for this additional study was reported as a result of the significant discrepancy between the standard required to pass the performance element of the secondary music exam, and that which was advertised as the minimum entry standard for HE. The vast majority of interviewees also noted that they had to take additional lessons in music theory (either in school but during break/lunch times, or in their non-school time), and sit extracurricular music theory exams, as neither the A-Level nor the Higher/Advanced Higher (see above) incorporates a music theory element that encompasses the same content as the ABRSM Grade 5 exam, which is typically the standard required in order to be able to apply to study music in the HE context, in the United Kingdom. Tom (popular music student, Scotland) stated:

For the theory and listening concepts, I don't feel like that really set me up for university, because we needed Grade 5 [ABRSM] to get in, but none of that stuff [the school curriculum] was anything to do with Grade 5 theory, really. We didn't learn much. It's quite upsetting! [emphasized verbally by interviewee] I feel like they should be teaching Grade 5 theory in schools. I was having to get extra help at school at lunch times, from all my [music] teachers, for Grade 5 theory. I was giving up breaks and lunch times to do theory work for a whole year!

Laurie (Scottish classical music student) felt similarly:

Interviewer: When you were at school, what sort of music theory did they cover in class with you?

Laurie: Not very much at all. It was only really what was required for the exam [...] they would print out an excerpt from score and [ask you to] put in the time signature, and put in extra bar lines, and ask 'what's this note?' and all that kind of thing. It was really basic stuff. [...] I have my Grade 5 theory, which I did external from school. If I hadn't done it out of my school I wouldn't have got it from school.

Another area of extracurricular work on which interviewees spent a great deal was performance. However, here there was again a clear split between those studying popular music and those studying classical music. The classical musicians tended to be involved in ensembles (typically orchestras and choirs) organized and run by their local authority (city or regional council music services, e.g.) – extracurricular activities that were generally not self-directed. Popular music students tended to be involved in informal,



self-organized activities, often based on and perpetuated by their autodidacticism, which in many cases, could be described as ‘leisure education’ (Blackshaw 2009; Moir 2016). These activities were typically creative endeavours in which music is written, performed and recorded.

In terms of the ways in which the curriculum aided the development of general musicianship, provided opportunities for collaborative musicking and encouraged creative work, there was a sense among Scottish students in particular that the SQA courses were ‘unsuitable’, and that extracurricular pursuits were far more useful for students. As Liam (classical music student, Scotland) notes:

Although school gave me the base knowledge, I think the experience that I’ve had with my extracurricular activities has to take first place [...] it’s just given me many more performing opportunities and [...] experience in working with other people. Working in groups, and working on a piece and getting it to a standard where you get up, and perform it and everyone expects it to be good. I think probably the extracurricular stuff has been more useful for me than school stuff, generally.

Similarly, Jane (classical music student, Scotland) states that the education experiences that proved to be most beneficial to her, in terms of the development of her musicianship and her preparation for university study, were through her community brass band. She notes:

If it wasn’t for the [brass] band I would never have got in to study music [at university]. They were the ones that taught me. From when you’re 8 years old and learning the C [major] scale and the fingerings and everything at a very basic level. It was the community; it was the brass band that taught me.

Tom (popular music student, Scotland) also asserted that, had it not been for him choosing to use his non-school time to attend extracurricular Saturday school at the local conservatoire, that he would not have met the standard for university applications:

When I was starting to audition for uni and stuff, I felt like if I hadn’t gone to a conservatoire, I definitely wouldn’t have gotten into uni, even though I’m on a pop course, and I’m not doing classical music. But the fact that, if I’m only doing Grade 5 or 6 in Advanced Higher music, the requirements for university are Grade 7 or 8. Yeah! I didn’t feel like it [Advanced Higher Music] set me up for university at all!

### Desired/Suggested changes

We asked all interviewees if there were anything that they would like to see changed about their secondary music curriculum. The authors note three categories of response: (1), changes to the curriculum, (2) changes to assessments and (3) a desire for greater focus on popular music within curricula, or even a dedicated popular music curriculum.

Popular music and classical music students, alike, reported that they would welcome changes to the curricula leading to a reduced emphasis on memorization of abstract musical concepts. With regard to secondary music curricula, interviewees believed that there should be more alignment between what is taught in schools and wider conceptions of music theory, such as that which people associate with the ABRSM graded music theory syllabi. They also noted that any music theory content should be integrated into the curricula, so that it is embedded in practice, and not presented as an abstract, stand-alone area simply to be memorized and regurgitated in exams. Wilma (classical music student, England) stated:

Interviewer: You said you would prefer it to have been less factual [...]

Wilma: Yeah, exactly. I guess usually another word to describe factual, in a way irrelevant facts, relevant to the exam, I want the facts to be relevant to my general understand of music, not just relevant to my memory in the exam.

Additionally, a number of interviewees noted that one of the changes that they would make to their school curriculum would be to have it more related to university entry requirements. While this was a recurring theme, Tom (popular music student, Scotland) raised an important point:

[I would] have it all geared towards [university] entry requirements [...] then you're not having to go off and spend lots of money on stuff – lessons are really expensive! [...] A few lessons and theory, or doing the grades for the entry requirements in schools, then people who maybe aren't as well off can actually go to university.

Tom's point here suggests implications in terms of socio-economic and ethical considerations around the purpose and structure of music education courses in schools. He continued:

That way people would not have the struggles like 'Oh I actually can't afford to go and get extra lessons, because schools only take you up to Grade 6 on drums or whatever. I need to get to Grade 7 or 8. I'm not really sure how to do it, but I would have to get lessons. Oh I can't afford that'. I would really change the Higher and Advanced Higher courses to be geared towards entry requirements!

In terms of assessment, one of the most common suggestions for change amongst interviewees related to the required level of instrumental performance in examination. Most interviewees raised this issue, indicating that they felt teachers approached this in an overly cautious manner, which in turn often served to demotivate students and hinder their progress and development. As Wilma (classical music student, England) stated: For performance, students should be allowed to play at their own ability [i.e. at a grade they are capable of] and to push at their own boundaries rather than push at invisible boundaries which are imposed on us [by music teachers and exam boards] just to increase our marks.

Thelma (popular music student, Scotland) made a similar point noting that she: was trying to do pieces that were. [...] I don't know, I think it was maybe Grade 7 or 8 or something. I feel like I pushed myself in that aspect instead of them saying, 'You should push yourself'. In fact, I think a lot of them were saying, 'You shouldn't actually do that. Try and just to go with my [preselected, simple] piece. Keep it simple'. I don't think it's a good idea to say, 'Keep it simple', necessarily. I actually think it's kind of a two-way street [...] it should be 'Learn this [more difficult] piece more slowly. Learn it more accurately'.

Other interviewees noted that they would be keen for the music curriculum to be assessed through coursework, rather than a final exam. For example, Maria (popular music student, England) stated emphatically:

I feel exams are so unfair. I wish everything was coursework – I've got so many thoughts going through my head when I'm doing an exam. I'd love to get them all down, but I can't remember everything. Yeah. I know that there are so many steps that you'd have to go through to change it, but if I could change the course I'd make it so much more coursework-based, submit an annotated score so that you understand what's going on [...] [the school course should be] Much more coursework based!

Each of the popular music students we interviewed, noted that one important change that they would like to see in their secondary curriculum (whether SQA or A-Level) was a greater focus on popular music, in the hope of a more 'balanced' curriculum that also includes content that relates to their areas of interest and musical practice. For example, Sarah (popular music student, Scotland) noted:

Although I did have a lot of access to popular music [for listening], it'd be great to have a bit more popular music theory and popular music concepts within higher music. I think that would engage people a bit more.

Theresa (popular music student, England) believed that her interests in musical study (i.e. popular music), and the curricular focus of her A-Level qualification were not aligned, to the extent that she felt as if she was not actually studying a music-based course. She stated:

At that point [A-Level] I'd already realized that music was something I wanted to pursue. It was all I really wanted to do. By the age of 16 or 17 I was already touring as well. But then I felt like I was having to do subjects which weren't at all music based [referring directly to A-Level Music]. I didn't feel like I was being served rightly [...] the exam syllabus didn't work for me at all and it was making me feel more stupid than I am.

## **Discussion**

## Secondary-level music education and transitions to HE

As noted above, the purpose of this research was to probe the personal perceptions of first-year undergraduate students regarding the nature of their pre-university music education and the extent to which it prepared them for HE music study. The findings of this study indicate that the interviewees perceived a number of problems with their secondary music education. Indeed, many of the interviewees report being fundamentally dissatisfied with their experience of formal music education in school, and the extent to which studying music was beneficial to them in terms of development and preparation for HE. While there was an element of this feeling amongst all interviewees, differences became more pronounced when we considered (a) the focus of the participants' HE study (popular or classical music), and (b) their secondary-level music course (Higher or A-Level).<sup>9</sup>

Participants perceived their formal school music education (whether SQA or A-Level) to be deficient in providing them with skills, knowledge and learning experiences for HE study in popular music. This is, in part, because of fact that these courses have developed in ways that foregrounded and centralized western art music concepts and practices (SQA 2014a), only dealing with other forms of music in a way that treats it as 'content' to be studied within this system (e.g. 'world music' and 'popular music' units). While it would be inaccurate to suggest that the SQA and A-Level courses deal exclusively with classical music, the way in which popular music is included in these courses is not in keeping with the distinct ways of learning, pedagogies and values of popular music practitioners out with the formal education system (Moir 2017; Smith 2013b, 2014; Parkinson and Smith 2015). This, it could be argued, may lead to a situation in which popular music is a 'square peg in a round hole' (Moir and Medbøe 2015), being given little more than token value as something novel or 'other'. It is easy to understand why this is problematic and dissatisfying for students who have become interested in studying music because of their passion for popular music, or who have ambitions of progressing to study popular music in HE.

When comparing the ways in which reports on experiences of secondary education differ depending on whether interviewees studied SQA or A-Level, we see that those who undertook SQA music courses report greater dissatisfaction with the extent to which their course prepared them for HE music study. This, it would seem, is primarily because of the perceived 'level of challenge', in the sense that those studying A-Level felt as if they were encouraged and required to synthesize and apply knowledge and skills as part of their music education. SQA students, on the other hand, lamented the perception that the focus of their studies and the pedagogic approach were based on encouraging students to memorize (and subsequently recognize and regurgitate) musical concepts that were not only abstract but also dealt taught in a superficial way that did not facilitate comprehension.<sup>10</sup> On this issue, we are reminded of Vygotsky (1987: 170), who notes: Pedagogical experience demonstrates that direct instruction in concepts is impossible. It is pedagogically fruitless. The teacher who attempts to use this approach achieves nothing but a mindless learning of words, an empty verbalism that stimulates the

presence of concepts in the child. Under these conditions, the child learns not the concept but the word, and this word is taken through memory rather than through thought.

### **Making up for it**

One of the key findings of this study is the unanimous perception that, in order to meet the entry requirements for undergraduate study, all participants had felt obliged to engage in extracurricular work and that they effectively had to construct their own 'pathways', often in an idiosyncratic and haphazard manner. Much of the activity that participants described included group music-making, writing music in bands or recording/performing and was identified by the students as beneficial.<sup>11,12</sup> In terms of musical development, practice, musicianship and 'professional' experience, such activities are clearly beneficial to young musicians, providing experiences that go beyond the remit and reach of secondary school curricula in the United Kingdom (Moir 2016). The authors are concerned, however, by the gulf that exists between the extent to which secondary-level music courses prepare students, and the expectations that institutions offering HE music programmes have of applicants, as evidenced by their admission criteria.<sup>13</sup> The fact that participants feel that they would be unprepared to apply for university music courses, despite having successfully completed one of the highest levels of secondary education in their subject area is cause for concern and leads the authors to question whether this renders such courses unfit for purpose. Of course, the purpose of secondary qualifications is not simply to prepare students for HE; however, it is clear that more alignment could aid transitions for those who do wish to progress to HE studies in this area.

It would be informative to consider other subjects at secondary level in this light. It is, to the best of our knowledge, a safe assumption that a student who sits and completes examinations in another subject at SQA Higher/Advanced Higher or A-Level (to a sufficiently high level, e.g. achieved an A), would be able to apply for and be admitted to study a related programme of study in HE, primarily on the grounds of their secondary qualifications.<sup>14</sup> That is to say, there would be no expectation that the student would have taken extra lessons in that subject – to address gaps in their knowledge and experience to account for that which was not 'covered' in their school course, as is the case for music – or that they would have participated in extracurricular activities associated with their chosen subject for example. In fact, in many subject areas, SQA Advanced Higher is considered as equivalent to the first year of a degree in the same subject, and some universities offer direct entry to second year of a degree programme for those students with this qualification.<sup>15</sup>

The question of whether the music qualifications stipulated in HE entrance requirements serve as appropriate indicators of the attributes, skill and levels of knowledge that we expect of applicants should also be considered.<sup>16</sup> It could be argued that university music programmes are trying to conform to a hybrid admissions system based on: (a) a perhaps-outdated conservatoire-style approach displaying advanced musicianship and performance ability (but, we acknowledge, not necessarily indicative of students' creative musical attributes; Hickey 2012; Kaschub and Smith 2009; Moir 2017), and (b) secondary-level academic qualifications. For music programmes, these entrance

requirements are also used as a convenient filter to separate those who have engaged in the formal study of music and have achieved a recognized qualification, from those who have not. However, with approximately 50 per cent of Scottish Music Higher students achieving an A pass (SQA external assessors reports, 2012, 2013, 2014b and 2015) – i.e. that which our institution (Edinburgh Napier University) and many other UK institutions state as an entrance requirement for music study – one might legitimately question the challenge presented by this course (and the relevance of its outcomes) given this grade distribution and, in turn, any desire to use it as a benchmark. The authors believe that this is particularly important when considering entry requirements for popular music programmes, given the differences in the focus of such programmes in comparison to traditional (i.e. classical) music degrees, and the clear lack of alignment with the secondary music courses undertaken by applicants. Given that universities set the entrance requirements for their own degrees, the authors suggest that such qualifications are simply being used as a convenient benchmark and filter for applicants, rather than as meaningful indicators of the skills and attributes we would want our applicants to possess, including creativity, originality and appropriate musicianship skills.

Among the authors' primary concerns are the implications of data demonstrating that students report a perceived (and arguably actual) need to undertake extracurricular work, to make up for the fact that their secondary music courses do not adequately prepare them for HE music study. In order to engage in many extracurricular, or co-curricular activities, particularly when considering additional instrumental lessons for example, there are obvious financial ramifications and impact on learners' non-work time (Stebbins 2014). Not all school pupils and/or their families are in a financial position to be able to pay such extra expenses, and thus we are concerned that this reality may lead to a situation in which we will see a more pronounced socio-economic divide between students who are able to access music in HE and those who are not. As noted by Archer et al. '[c]urrently, almost all young people from middle-class and professional families go on to university. Participation from working-class groups has remained persistently low' (2005: 1).

As Reay states, 'issues of social justice have traditionally been couched in terms of access; inequalities have been seen to exist in demographic patterns of class [...] exclusions' (1998: 519). It is obvious that more affluent families will be better placed to fund the types of extracurricular activities that seem (based on the findings of this study) to be tacitly required in order to develop and prepare students for university applications and auditions. Music is already a subject that is expensive to participate in, given the cost of buying and maintaining instruments, consumables (strings, reeds, sticks, plectrums), sheet music, apps, rehearsal spaces/studios, etc. (Moir 2016). The authors fear a continuation (or worsening) of the disturbing current situation in which students from lower-income families or those who are socioeconomically disadvantaged, are currently unable to study music in HE as a result of having been 'let down' and 'underprepared' by secondary courses (particularly SQA Music Higher). When secondary courses do not provide sufficient opportunity (for those learners who wish) to develop the skills, knowledge and experience expected for university application, students are effectively being forced to engage in additional learning in their own time and at their own

expense.<sup>17</sup> This creates an access issue, and fosters inequality between those who can afford to supplement their education and those who cannot, and it is not a stretch to see this, in Reay's terms, as an effective class exclusion (1998).

### Implications, suggestions and limitations

We acknowledge that further research is required to construct a more clearly defined picture that considers all factors at play in this complex situation, for instance taking into account the views of school teachers, curriculum designers and university lecturers. That said, whether it is due to the scope or depth, or indeed the rigidity (and lack of opportunity for student-led development) of secondary music courses, it is clear from this preliminary study that students who wished to study music in HE felt underprepared and consequently obliged to undertake extracurricular activities in their own time and at their own expense. This is particularly true of popular music students, and the authors believe that it is becoming increasingly obvious that the nature of popular music and the associated pedagogic practices is/are so distinct from those of western classical music, to be almost as if distinct subjects (Smith 2014; Moir 2017).<sup>19</sup> We are keenly aware that there are roles for schools, HE institutions and exam boards to play in considering the transition between studying music at secondary and tertiary levels. It has already been noted by Hurry (1997: 42) that 'stronger links between course designers at A-level and in higher education could ease the natural progression from one to another'.

The authors recognize the issues raised by participants and can understand why there is particular dissatisfaction amongst those who went on to study popular music in HE. The secondary-level courses have evidently (and unsurprisingly) not been designed with a view to students progressing to study popular music in further or HE. Given that popular music is now an accepted area of HE study, and that it is offered – in some form (Cloonan and Hulstedt 2012; Herbert et al. 2017; Mantie 2013) – in many institutions throughout the United Kingdom and beyond, and that many students are motivated to engage in music education because of their passion and enthusiasm for popular music, the authors believe that a changes are required. These may take the form of updates and amendments to the secondary-level courses in question in terms of content or pedagogic approach. Indeed, changes may be effected through the creation of a new qualification that deals specifically with popular music – something that the authors believe to be important, even if as a temporary measure. It is clear that there are (and should be) such pronounced differences in the ways in which classical music and popular music are taught and learned and, as such, we would strongly advocate for a dedicated popular music education at secondary level in the United Kingdom.<sup>20</sup>

Given that popular music education is a relatively new field, people are still unsure about what it is and how it may be meaningfully incorporated into HE contexts (Parkinson and Smith 2015). Additionally, the rise in prevalence of popular music education in the United Kingdom seems to be primarily taking place in FE and HE, and thus there is a clear responsibility for colleges and universities offering such programmes to engage with schools and other organizations and to begin to share practices, negotiate expectations and facilitate the development of pathways to their programmes.

Winterson and Russ suggest that:

Pre-university music qualifications are too diverse to facilitate a smooth transition from school to university, and university staff need to understand these more comprehensively in order to manage transition more effectively. (2009: 343)

We recognize the issue raised by these authors and argue that this it is now further complicated by the diverse range of music programmes available to prospective students particularly in light of the recent growth in the area of popular music programmes in HE. University educators and academics have a responsibility to engage in knowledge exchange with students and secondary education institutions and discuss what PME might mean at HE level.

Students creating their own haphazard pathways is natural and an arguably useful part of self-development for many musicians. However, when students are forced to take matters into their own hands because they feel unsupported and unfulfilled by their formal learning experience of music at secondary school, serious questions need to be asked about the nature, focus and ethos of such courses and their suitability for purpose. The authors believe it is the responsibility of all music educators working in this sector to take an active role in developing courses and learning experiences, and to signpost how courses can align more seamlessly with and support transitions for students of all social classes, economic backgrounds and musical interests.

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**Notes:**

1. This research took place in the United Kingdom where the terms ‘higher education’ (HE) and ‘further education’ (FE) are commonly used as descriptions of types of post-compulsory education. HE typically describes programmes of study that take place in universities or colleges offering undergraduate or postgraduate degree-level study. FE, on the other hand, typically refers to vocational training but can also include foundation courses that prepare students for HE. During the last 25 years, this distinction has become blurred in many (particularly practical or artistic) subject areas, but this terminology remains a useful distinction that the authors use throughout this article.

2. This includes activities such as participating in local/regional/national bands led by professional music educators, playing in bands (self-formed bands with peers), additional music theory and instrumental lessons, and completing formal qualifications in performance and music theory.

3. These could be said to include traditional aspects of musicianship, for example aural skills, music theory, knowledge of rudiments, scales and harmony, and even a general comprehension of how their instrument functions.

4. Universities may also consider a good pass in Business and Technology Education Council (BTEC) Level 3 Extended Diploma, or the SQA National Certificate music course as an equivalent to the A-Level or SQA Higher qualifications for entry to their music programmes. Typically, students studying these programmes will not be studying other subjects alongside their course and are therefore immersed in music practice.

5. This is by no means exhaustive. For a helpful overview of the general structure of education in Scotland, see Harlen (2001).

6. It should be noted that this is not necessarily such a clear geographical divide, as in some Scottish secondary and FE institutions, students can undertake A-Level qualifications, but it is far from common for this to be the case.

7. For examples of A-Level course documents, see Edexcel (2016) and AQA (2017).

8. The Associated Board of the Royal Schools of Music is an examinations board based in London, United Kingdom, but that provides examinations in music in many parts of the world. In the United Kingdom, the graded exams provided by this organization are typically used as benchmarks for instrumental performance ability: <http://us.abrsm.org/en/our-exams/what-is-a-graded-music-exam/> (although the authors question this practice).

9. While it is clear that interviewees seem broadly to bemoan their secondary-level music education experiences, we acknowledge that this could be part of a natural transition process in which learners value current (i.e. more advanced) educational activity over prior learning experiences, and thus a function of constructing a ‘university’ or ‘specialist’ identity. However, as this study focused on personal experiences, these

interviewees are uniquely positioned to be able to comment on their own pathways.

10. It should be noted that the authors recognize and can sympathize with this criticism as they have each been involved in teaching the SQA courses, and both studied SQA Highers (albeit older versions of the course) while at secondary school, and have also been involved in the teaching of these courses in Scottish secondary schools.

11. A growing number of music educators also recognize the intrinsic value of such extracurricular musical activity, particularly within popular music (see Moir 2016; Bell 2016; e.g.).

12. Particularly as they are essentially participating in valuable learning experiences within what Lave and Wenger (1991) describe as ‘communities of practice’.

13. We believe that there is particular cause for concern in this area when considering the situation with respect to the SQA music courses.

14. Obviously applications take other activity into account, in some cases but the primary indicator of an applicant’s suitability for admissions teams is their successful completion of the requisite secondary-level academic courses.

15. See, for example, Edinburgh Napier University’s Computing Courses (<http://www.napier.ac.uk/courses/bengbeng-hons-computing-undergraduate-fulltime>), and The University of Edinburgh’s College of Science and Engineering (<http://www.ed.ac.uk/studying/undergraduate/entry-requirements/scottish>).

16. Regardless of their validity, we have and continue to use, a number of grading systems for musical performance (the ABRSM Grades 1–8, e.g.) – no such equivalent exists in the majority of other school subjects.

17. The authors would like to make it abundantly clear that we fully encourage and recognize the importance of extracurricular music activity in the development of well-rounded, experienced musicians, but we believe that this is entirely different to having to supplement a formal education, which is clearly deficient for many learners.

19. This is an ongoing discussion, and one that is too wide for the remit of this article; however, it is important to disclose that this belief drives the authors in their pedagogic practice and desire for developments to popular music education in secondary schools.

20. If such a change was to occur, we should be very careful about how we proceed, and ensure that any course adequately reflected the nature and practices of popular music. Hess (2019) warns educators to consider the way in which they approach popular music education and warns that it could become a new hegemony if we are not careful about our pedagogic approaches. Moir and Hails (2019) also warn of the problems facing popular music education if we continue to be dominated by structuralist, work-centric approaches to music education that are associated with the study of western classical music.

