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# Preparing conservatoire students for the music education workforce: conversations with alumni

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## Abstract

Higher music education institutions should continually review their curricula to ensure that their graduates are best equipped to support musical learning for children and young people. Perspectives on early careers in instrumental teaching were obtained via an alumni-led workshop and focus group at a UK conservatoire. Findings revealed that whilst extensive pedagogical training was offered, its value was not fully acknowledged across the institution and that more could be done to alleviate students' anxieties about their developing musician identities and future stability. As new teachers, alumni are well placed to help prepare students for the professional realities of joining the music education workforce.

**Keywords:** Conservatoire; music education workforce; instrumental teaching; conservatoire alumni; musician identities

## Introduction

Access to high-quality instrumental music tuition is essential for school-aged pupils, equipping them with a range of transferable skills and offering cultural enrichment (Brown & Ribeiro, 2023). However, whilst research suggests a positive relationship between children's engagement with music and their overall development and attainment, Hallam (2015, p. 105) emphasises that 'the quality of teaching needs to be high'. Yet, there is no regulation in place for the instrumental music teaching profession in England (Boyle, 2021) and musicians may teach without formal qualifications (Barton, 2019). Many instrumental teachers emerge from universities and conservatoires where, according to the most recent Subject Benchmark Statement for Music (Quality Assurance Agency, 2019), there is no mandatory requirement to provide pedagogical training as part of the curriculum. Indeed, the conservatoire sector's approach to pedagogical training appears inconsistent and has been criticised by employers as being outdated (Shaw, 2022, 2023d), whilst some conservatoire students still perceive that they will be judged by their families, tutors or peers as 'a failed musician' if they pursue a teaching career (Shaw, 2022, 2023c).

Despite this context, the intensive nature of conservatoire training leaves little time and space to train students to teach. Undergraduate programmes in conservatoires comprise both principal study (the student's primary specialism, for example, performance or composition) and supporting academic studies, such as aural training, analysis, harmony and music history. The majority of students' time is invested in principal study activities which, depending on their specialism, will typically include an intense combination of individual daily practice, weekly one-to-one lessons, workshops, forums, masterclasses, ensemble work, rehearsal and performance (both public and non-public). Interestingly, Porton (2020) found that conservatoire alumni perceived a lack of guidance and training on how to improve their teaching skills during their undergraduate music studies due to the 'hierarchical value' placed on performance (ibid: 84) and a 'tug of war between academic and performing departments' (ibid 110–11).

Alongside Porton's work, previous research involving conservatoire alumni perspectives on instrumental teacher education includes the 'Working in Music' project, initiated in 2001 (Mills, 2004a, 2004b). The 2004a study focused on alumni who had returned to the Royal College of Music (RCM) to teach as professors. It was suggested that the RCM alumni had little if any training prior to taking up their instrumental teaching positions, and in some cases, had never taught before at all. The aim of the 2004b study was to investigate the careers of RCM alumni more broadly, though views about instrumental teaching featured prominently. For example, Mills reported that, where alumni had initially taken on teaching 'simply because they needed the money' (2004b, p. 181), attitudes subsequently changed such that they later found they could not be without it, either personally or musically. Even though the music education landscape looked rather different when these RCM alumni graduated (across 1960–1998), it would have been interesting to discover how participants viewed their course in terms of preparing them for a career that included instrumental teaching. Unfortunately, whilst participants' opinions were sought, the findings were not reported.

Though not specifically targeted, conservatoire alumni would likely have been included in Boyle's (2021) survey of over 300 instrumental teachers working in a variety of educational contexts in the UK. Whilst over half of respondents suggested that they had not received any training or guidance prior to working as an instrumental teacher, many felt that formal training routes were often inaccessible, variable in quality and irrelevant to their instrument-specific needs. Nevertheless, respondents suggested that they would value sharing and learning from the experiences of other instrumental teachers in workshop settings.

In light of the above, alumni with recent instrumental teaching experience may be able to bring much-needed currency to instrumental teacher training programmes in conservatoires, whilst acting as relatable role models for students and advisors for staff. From an institutional point of view, alumni can provide 'a link to the outside world' (Sturrock, 2007, p. 9) and, through contributing to taught provision in various ways, they have the potential to keep staff and students informed of recent issues and developments in music education. Gaunt (2016, p. 270) advocates such an approach: 'It is vital that we further champion the interface between education and professional worlds, increasing two-way influence and exchange'. By engaging alumni as research partners and 'pedagogical consultants' (Healey et al., 2014, p. 50), it is possible to learn from their lived experiences beyond the conservatoire context. For example, a mixed-methods study involving 31 conservatoire alumni revealed that early-career instrumental teachers were keen to share experiences and insights learned 'on the job', both to inspire current students to pursue teaching careers and prepare them to tackle key challenges when starting out in the profession (Shaw, 2020).

This desire to share experience amongst fellow instrumental teachers is pertinent, given the recommendation in the National Plan for Music Education in England (DfE & DDCMS, 2022) that teaching practitioners should aim to build their skills by connecting with one another. According to Bennett (2008, p. 62), working music educators tend to 'operate in isolation from peers', so by contributing to conservatoire activity, alumni stand to benefit themselves by participating in networks that have the capacity to lead them to reflect on their practice in new ways. As Lave and Wenger (1991, p. 93) state, 'Where the circulation of knowledge amongst peers and near-peers is possible, it spreads exceedingly rapidly and effectively'.

Whilst the studies by Mills (2004a, 2004b), Porton (2020), Shaw (2020) and Boyle (2021) obtained rich data from conservatoire graduates, they did not require or enable alumni to interact face-to-face with current students, nor with one another. Shaw (2022, 2023a) interviewed conservatoire graduate instrumental teachers who had mentored students in teaching scenarios in schools, but still, opportunities for the mentors to network with other conservatoire graduates did not present themselves in this scenario. In contrast, the current study undertaken at Royal Birmingham Conservatoire, UK, enabled three alumni to share early-career experiences: (i) with a group of final-year undergraduates who were enrolled on a final-year instrumental

teaching module; (ii) with their graduate peers and (iii) with the researcher (who also happened to be the module leader). Through the process of integrating alumni into instrumental teacher education, this paper asks:

- how can students and alumni be supported to develop their professional networks in music education?

and

- how might conservatoires learn from their alumni?

## Methodology

As noted, this study was designed to enable interaction between research participants and to gain insight into graduates' early-career experiences as music educators. A mixed-methods approach was adopted. Firstly, three graduates (all former 'home' students, residents in the UK, who had previously studied a final-year pedagogy module and gathered a range of experiences of working in music education) were selected via theoretical sampling (Denscombe, 2014). It was important to consider the size and approachability of the alumni group in order to maximise effective interaction and elicit questions from students. The alumni were invited to lead a workshop in January 2020, to be attended by students enrolled on a later iteration of the same final-year pedagogy module. The alumni were informed that the researcher would adopt the role of non-participatory observer (Creswell, 2012) to avoid influencing the proceedings. The graduates were invited to stay behind after the workshop to participate in a focus-group discussion without the students present. The alumni were briefed (both by email several weeks before the session, and in person immediately prior to) that they would be asked to outline their career trajectory since graduating along with any relevant experience they had accrued whilst still a student, and to respond to questions posed by current students. To reduce any sense of power relations, given the researcher's connection to the alumni participants as former lecturer, it was suggested that they should choose the room layout for the session themselves. Informed consent was gained well in advance with permission to record the focus-group discussion for transcription purposes. However, the workshop would not be recorded given that it formed part of a regular weekly lecture series for which student attendance was mandatory, and because the researcher was keen that students' ability to participate freely would not be inhibited. All data relating to the study were stored securely and confidentially on an encrypted, password-protected device, and the three graduates were assured that alphanumeric codes would be employed throughout the data analysis and reporting process to preserve participant anonymity. The researcher was mindful of the Hawthorne effect (Cohen et al., 2018) and the need to mitigate potential feelings of anxiety, self-consciousness or a desire to please the researcher. However, participants were reassured that their status as former 'insiders' who had since become 'outsiders' (Reed-Danahay, 2006) was vital in offering fresh perspectives that would be highly valued. Adhering to the BERA Ethical Guidelines (2018) by being rigorous, transparent and respectful throughout the project ensured that these ethical considerations were approved via the required institutional processes.

The workshop was attended by 17 of a possible 19 students. Due to the relatively recent graduation dates of the three alumni, all were known to current students and could act as relatable role models. At the time of the study, participants were actively pursuing careers as professional music educators (for example, instrumental or vocal teaching, ensemble coaching/conducting and music workshop leading). A summary of their professional activities, gathered through informal discussion immediately prior to the alumni-led workshop is shown in Table 1. Since the alumni participants graduated in 2017, 2018 and 2019, respectively, they are identified as A17, A18 and A19 throughout this paper.

**Table 1.** Professional activity of alumni participants

<p><b>A17 Pianist</b> Living, working and studying locally. Also working a significant distance away from home as an instrumental (piano) teacher</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• 2 days of teaching in an independent secondary school, c. 50 miles away</li> <li>• 1 day of teaching in an independent prep school, c. 90 miles away</li> <li>• Teaching in private practice</li> <li>• Had formerly undertaken music service teaching</li> <li>• Accompanying graded music exams</li> <li>• Undertaking doctoral research</li> <li>• Performance opportunities arise from time to time within the schools above</li> </ul>
<p><b>A18 Singer</b> Living and working locally. Also working in several surrounding towns and cities up to c.50 miles away</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Running 6 choirs – 2 in prisons, 2 in healthcare, 2 community choirs</li> <li>• Teaching singing in an after-school club</li> <li>• Leading music workshops for vulnerable young people through a nationally recognised trust</li> <li>• Leading workshops in conjunction with an international festival which has also led to some occasional performance work</li> <li>• Gained a salaried one-year graduate traineeship within the local music hub upon graduation</li> </ul>
<p><b>A19 Brass player</b> Living, working and studying locally</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Working for a local music service, undertaking a combination of Whole Class Ensemble Teaching, small group, 1:1 and ensemble teaching/conducting</li> <li>• Conducts a local community brass band</li> <li>• Undertaking postgraduate study</li> </ul>

To begin the session, the alumni decided to place chairs in circle formation around the edge of the room and seat themselves within that circle as opposed to leading from the front. Their intention in suggesting this layout was to ensure that everyone felt as comfortable as possible and that the alumni would be viewed by the students as equals rather than superiors. The alumni then provided an overview of their experiences of working as music educators since graduating, following which, students were offered the opportunity to ask questions, openly or anonymously. To facilitate the latter, postcards were used for written questions, subsequently collected, rearranged into random order and passed to the alumni who read out the questions on the students' behalf. Throughout this process, informal notes were taken by the researcher, to be referred to during the subsequent focus-group activity if required.

The researcher's role within the focus group was to facilitate further discussion among the alumni to explore the issues arising from the workshop. In this context, the focus-group method was deemed more appropriate than one-to-one interviews, given that the aim was to have participants 'interact with each other [...] be willing to listen to all views [...] and give a good airing to the issues which seem[ed] to be interesting or important to them' (Bell, 2010, p. 166). Nevertheless, a semi-structured approach akin to interviews was achieved via a 'half-way house' route (ibid: 165), whereby prompt questions (derived from notes taken during the workshop) were only used as pointers where the conversation might have otherwise veered off track in the limited time available (see Table 2).

The focus-group recording was subsequently transcribed and imported into computer-assisted data analysis software (NVivo). The qualitative data were then analysed line-by-line to identify segments of text that were distinctive from one another in some way. Initially multiple 'codes' were applied to these text segments but, subsequently, codes were grouped together and overlapping themes were eliminated to create broad categories and overarching themes (Creswell, 2012), as summarised in Table 3.

**Table 2.** Prompt questions for alumni-led focus-group discussion

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• How did you all feel during the session?</li> <li>• What did you think of the questions asked? Were they as anticipated, or did anything surprise you?</li> <li>• Based on what you know from your early experiences of working as professional music educators, are there any questions you wished you had asked when you were undergraduates?</li> <li>• Is there anything [conservatoire] could have done differently to help prepare you for your current music educator roles?</li> <li>• What do you think alumni can bring to the development of instrumental teacher education/music educator training in conservatoires?</li> </ul>
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**Table 3.** Summary of themes

Overarching themes	Sub-themes
Alumni as role models and advisors	Identity stability anxiety Reflection and self-awareness Performer vs teacher Continual professional development Learning from other professionals Personal qualities for teaching Balancing work and study Impostor syndrome when working with more experienced colleagues Financial security – travel costs and time Dilemma of staying locally or moving further away Support (or lack thereof) from employers Developing independence and confidence as a teacher
	Professional realities Reflections on RBC curriculum/placements Emphasis on principal study insufficient preparation for working life Conservatoire perceived as a ‘bubble’
	Implications for conservatoires Need for more reflection/self-evaluation opportunities during studies Need to raise students’ awareness of relevance of academic/supporting studies Need to acknowledge and celebrate careers in teaching and non-musical careers

**Table 4.** Student questions arising from the alumni-led workshop

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• What were the steps you took to build up a number of private students?</li> <li>• How much time do you have available to dedicate to your work as a performer?</li> <li>• Do you still perform as a soloist?</li> <li>• Would you all class yourselves as musicians who teach?</li> <li>• How did you get involved with a music service?</li> <li>• Do you have a bank of things you call on if a strategy isn’t working?</li> <li>• What age range do you prefer to teach and why?</li> <li>• Are you financially stable?</li> <li>• What are your plans for the next few years?</li> </ul>
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## Findings and discussion

During the alumni-led workshop, the questions posed by students revealed that they were both curious and concerned about the future in relation to establishing their professional identities and achieving a sense of stability in their work (particularly in relation to financial concerns), whilst demonstrating their awareness of the need for flexibility in their approaches to teaching and facilitating music-making (see Table 4). Similar concerns were also shared by the alumni in the

subsequent focus-group discussion, though alumni participants were also able to offer insights into their individual and shared professional realities having already entered the music education workforce. The graduates also made a number of recommendations regarding the potential to further involve alumni as role models in students' wider career preparation, and the mutual benefits of doing so. The emerging overarching themes: 'Identity, stability and anxiety' and 'Professional realities' are discussed below, leading to a discussion of the implications of the findings for conservatoires.

### Identity, stability and anxiety

From the questions posed by students in the alumni-led workshop, it would appear they were balancing concerns about their emerging musical identities as they approached graduation alongside the need to maintain stability in their future careers. Evidently, musician identity was important to students and alumni alike. Indeed, one alumni participant expressed the view that trying to explain the nature of their work to people outside the world of music could be difficult at times due to the sheer range and variety of activities involved in a portfolio career.

*I feel like sometimes talking to people about what I do [...] can sometimes be weird trying to explain 'well I do this, but I don't really do that, but I do this and I don't really do that', you know, lots of different things. (A18)*

Bernard (2005) empathises with this inner conflict, having found themselves in a similar situation when introducing themselves at research conferences. However, Bernard suggests that teaching is just one layer of a musician's identity and that all facets of the 'musician-teacher' (p. 9) should be celebrated and supported, bringing the whole person to the craft of teaching music. Jeffery (2005) concurs, considering the roles of teacher/artist and artist/educator to be inextricably linked, and viewing the process of teaching as artistry in itself.

In light of these perspectives, questions posed by students in the workshops, such as 'Would you all class yourselves as musicians who teach?', 'Do you still perform as a soloist?' and 'How much time do you have to dedicate to your work as a performer?' seem highly pertinent. Evidently, there was some degree of anxiety surrounding the balancing of performer and teacher roles, the amount of likely time dedicated to the former once they left full-time study and how they would be perceived as professional musicians. Nevertheless, it was clear to the alumni that this particular group of students viewed teaching as part of their developing professional identity and were studying the pedagogy module out of choice rather than necessity. 'I think they all seem to have an understanding and a desire to do it. I think that's really important to want to teach [...] and not just see it as the only option' (A18).

Interestingly, for the alumni participants, there was more to 'identity' than a distinction between performing and teaching. Instead, identity could be viewed in relation to the specific nature of the education work that a graduate chose to engage in, for example, private teaching, music service work or both. Music service work was viewed as 'a certain kind of teaching' (A17), avoided by some and actively pursued by others. A17 viewed their former music service teaching employment as valuable learning experience that 'made me realise that it wasn't quite what I wanted to do'. Similarly, A18 shared that they turned down music service work because they 'wanted to have more of a say' in who, when and how they taught.

All three alumni reported a lack of self-belief about their identity as a music educator immediately after graduating, identifying 'Impostor Syndrome' as 'a massive thing' (A18), feelings that relate closely to those of schoolteachers in a study by Carrillo and Baguley (2011). Indeed, for early-career instrumental teachers, characteristics of 'Impostor Phenomenon' (Sims & Cassidy, 2020) such as an inability to internalise achievements, downplay accomplishments and a fear of



being exposed as inexperienced or untalented can manifest in debilitating ways, as discussed below.

Further questioning by students during the alumni-led session demonstrated that they were (naturally) concerned about future employment. The question, 'Are you financially stable?', led alumni to recall their own similar feelings as final-year undergraduates: 'Well, that's what I was thinking when I was in pedagogy [lectures]. Do you eat?' (A18). This participant attributed their current employment to their ability to 'make work' (akin to Latukefu & Ginsborg, 2018, p. 91) from connections formed during external placements taken during their course and was keen to advise students to maximise such opportunities whenever and wherever they were offered.

*It's very easy to [be] consumed by this place [ . . . ]. It can be such a bubble. You see the same people day in, day out [ . . . ]. I didn't realise just how much there was out there that I could be doing at the same time [as] my degree. That's the thing I look back on and [am] so glad [ . . . ] I started doing things while I was still here. I made sure that I was ok financially (A18).*

Similarly, A17 found that taking on teaching work whilst studying was a positive step, personally, financially and practically, but likened the experience of transitioning from conservatoire into the music profession to 'taking the plunge' (Burt & Mills, 2006) in the move from school into higher education:

*I think I was quite lucky because when I was here during my undergrad, I was always working, so I got used to juggling both [ . . . ]. I've always been conscious of trying to [put] the next steps in place already. But it's just terrifying isn't it? I guess it's like going to university (A17).*

From a financial point of view, A19 claimed that they found the move from conservatoire study into employment relatively straightforward, having 'segued into basically doing what I was doing on my work placement and then getting paid for it'. However, it soon became apparent that this journey was not as smooth as suggested when a discussion ensued about issues ranging from setting fees for the running of music workshops and choir rehearsals, to travel (including the expense of running a car and the impracticalities of carrying multiple tenor horns and euphoniums on a bus!).

*Without a car I couldn't do all the work I do. I have to carry a guitar, I live out of the city centre, so public transport, if I had to rely on it, it wouldn't make me a reliable person and I probably wouldn't have the jobs I have. But cars are absolute money pits, so you have to say 'Well, I'll earn £100 doing this gig, but most of that will go on my car and petrol!' (A18)*

Participants spoke openly about the emotional challenges they had experienced during their first weeks and months of being professional music educators. However, whilst the alumni may have seemed more mature than their student counterparts on the surface, it did not appear to be the case that these graduates had fully formed and developed their artistic personalities, a stage which, according to Manturzewska's model of lifespan development (1990), ends around the ages of 23/24. For example, a common source of anxiety amongst the alumni related to 'believing you have something worth teaching so soon after you've been taught yourself' (A18). In reflecting on commencing a new teaching position in an independent school and attributing their own impostor feelings to youth, A17 recollected that the anxiety had eased over time.

*It took a while for me to feel comfortable, that I deserved to be there, and that actually [ . . . ] I had the skills to [ . . . ] do a good job [ . . . ]. I never had issues in terms of what I was teaching. I felt quite comfortable in knowing that, [but] I always felt that I was closer in age to the students than I was to my colleagues [ . . . ]. I think that was my insecurity: 'Oh I've only just*

*graduated. I'm not good enough to do this. I'm not good enough to be here.' But I think over time, that has levelled out.*

This 'levelling out' is pertinent to the ongoing development of professional identity which, according to Wagoner (2015, p. 28), 'is influenced both collectively, as one is socialised within a group for a specific occupation, and individually, as one integrates the proposed professional roles with the sense of self'.

Unlike A17, A19 had been fortunate in receiving employer support to help them manage teaching-related anxiety and build self-confidence, particularly in Whole Class Ensemble Teaching. However, as discussed by Shaw (2020, 2022, 2023d), such support is often not available to new teachers. This might be due to lack of funding, timetabling issues, non-availability of senior staff or other factors. However, the alumni acknowledged that transferable skills developed during their undergraduate performance training had helped them manage teaching-related anxiety:

*Obviously, there are still some anxieties going in [to teach] and I don't think those will ever go away, but I think that's the same with performing. You always get a little bit nervous going in and performing, no matter what level you're at (A19).*

### Professional realities

As noted above, only one of the graduates had chosen to pursue actively the 'certain kind of teaching' they had experienced whilst on placement. Nevertheless, in general, the pedagogy and community engagement strands of the conservatoire's curriculum were viewed positively by all three alumni as being highly relevant, helping them to make professional connections that proved beneficial on graduation, and in one case (A18), motivating them to continue with their conservatoire training:

*Group teaching stretched and developed the way in which I approached [the] different abilities, personalities, and motivations of each student, by becoming creative in room layout, structuring lessons, use of resources and repertoire. [It] was quite a challenge for me to begin with as I had to adapt very quickly to this type of teaching. The lessons I observed during my pedagogy modules helped prepare me for this [as well as] the way the schools were run, [their] expectations, and the involvement (or lack of involvement) from parents. In hindsight, I am so grateful for the skills I developed [ . . . ] from [my placements] as they provided a true overview of how instrumental music lessons work in state schools (A17).*

*Other than [my final year] I found [conservatoire] a hard environment [that] almost turned me off music and singing forever. It was only [ . . . ] finding my groove with [pedagogy] that made me carry on and take different routes. [The fourth-year pedagogy] module [was] really eye-opening. Without that I wouldn't be doing all the work I'm doing now (A18).*

*It's worth noting that with [pedagogy] we [were] actually taken outside of the conservatoire building which [was] lovely (A19).*

In general, alumni were mindful that their perspectives, informed by 'real music in real situations' (A18), might influence students positively or negatively regarding instrumental/vocal teaching and other educator roles. Clearly, the alumni participants appreciated the benefits that their roles could bring in supporting students in the lecture room environment. As A17 stated: 'It is nice to know that [ . . . ] you can actually help someone else [and] be in a position where you can [ . . . ] benefit someone in some way you're not expecting' (A17). Equally, the alumni evidently benefited



from the experience themselves. Not only did the students' questions lead them to reflect on their practice in new ways (Bennett, 2008), but the mutual reassurance and support offered by their like-minded graduate peers seemed valuable because, 'Often [ . . . ] we go in, teach, don't see anyone else music-related then leave. It's not very often that you get the chance to actually talk, and [ . . . ] hear that 'ok, it's not just me experiencing this thing' (A19). Ultimately, it would seem that connecting students to alumni, and alumni to each other, can reduce isolation by creating professional networks (DfE & DDCMS, 2022).

### Implications for conservatoires

The findings above have highlighted the value of alumni as role models for students in the lecture room. Simultaneously, however, alumni have the potential to advise their former conservatoire tutors with regard to curriculum currency. With this in mind, alumni were asked whether they felt their institution could have done anything differently to better prepare them for the transition into their current roles. Amongst the responses, significant concerns included the challenging process of leaving full-time education behind and guarding against releasing new graduates into the world of work with a 'music college mind-set' (A18).

*I guess going somewhere new when you've done four years with the same teachers, with the same colleagues [ . . . ] I'm kind of realising that meeting new people and going into new work environments has caused me a lot of anxiety. Leaving a small incestuous department and going out into the real world [ . . . ] was a real shock to the system actually. It's the first time you're not at school anymore (A18).*

Several comments resonated with Porton (2020), especially in relation to certain curricular aspects being valued more highly than others. For example, A18 felt strongly that their principal study activity alone did not prepare them for their future career. They also suggested that more could have been done to help students to make connections between the principal study and academic aspects of their course, and to help students to understand the relevance of course content to their future professional lives.

*It felt like a lot of my [principal] study stuff wasn't very real. And a lot of the things that were made to be the most important things like the operas, auditions [ . . . ] and final recitals [ . . . ] didn't set us up for what it's really like [outside]. There was a lot of fluff in my degree that I'm never gonna use [ . . . ]. My lectures in historical music didn't go down the right route and should've been more about: 'how am I going to use that?' (A18).*

This implication that students (and staff) do not automatically connect the different areas of an undergraduate music degree course and their relevance in terms of student career preparation relates to the work of Haddon (2012, 2014), who uncovered hidden learning opportunities in a university music department. Haddon (2014, p. 247) proposes that

many practical learning outcomes may be unacknowledged or underdeveloped because of the importance placed on [performance]. For many students, performance can be an externally imposed objective that conflicts with their own goals for learning or restricts their development.

This view is pertinent since, unlike the conservatoire students in an earlier study who were asked to consider how all aspects of conservatoire curricula can potentially contribute to their ongoing development as music educators (Shaw, 2022, 2023b), the alumni participants in the current study had evidently not been supported to reflect in this way during their course. Nevertheless, these

musicians did acknowledge the importance of transferable skills in relation to taking part-time jobs in areas other than music. For example, one participant had found working in an environment unrelated to their instrument or music really useful in improving their communication skills: *'Talking to people in [my] life who aren't musical has really helped me gain confidence'* (A18).

Whilst the alumni felt strongly that more provision should be made compulsory for students who may not yet realise that music education could be a worthwhile pursuit, they also advised that the institution could be more open-minded about students' career choices generally, including how to better support students who might not wish to pursue a music career. The following perspective suggests that alumni were aware of hegemony amongst staff, which tended to be transmitted to the student population:

*Not everyone comes out of music college and goes into music and I think some acknowledgement of that here would be really positive thing to help people find a career. I remember talking to my peers about maybe going into something [other than performance] but it was always [...] met with a 'well then, you're not taking it seriously'* (A18).

Consequently, the alumni suggested that students could be supported in analysing their skill set and mapping it onto elements of a (non-musical) job description, perhaps as part of an assignment. It was also proposed that the conservatoire might facilitate sessions whereby students could interact with alumni working outside music to discover how they experienced the transition from *'doing music all the time to not doing much at all'* (A18) and help students to see that this did not constitute failure.

*It might be a little bit harder, because they've been out of the music world a bit, but maybe [asking] people [who] didn't go into something to do with music, 'why was that?' and how they found the change [from] doing so much music all the time* (A19).

Alumni shared that they had found opportunities for self-reflection to be limited whilst studying and recommended that more thought could be given to integrating this into the curriculum. It was apparent that all three alumni reflected continually as practitioners, but that *'real talk'* (A19), or some form of counselling during the course about the wide range of career options available both in or outside music, would have a positive impact on the conservatoire environment and students' confidence in developing independent professional identities.

*I think this place is incredible with principal study, sort of perfecting that. But there are so many supporting elements which don't get thought of for people that don't want to perform [...]. I don't think there's enough self-reflection here [but] I do think that would really help the whole music college environment. The support is there, churning away in the background [...] but I feel like [it could be] more mainstream for everyone* (A18).

Participants felt that students could benefit from more alumni conversations in sessions similar to the one they had led prior to the focus-group discussion. They believed that such activities would show students that there was *'light at the end of the tunnel'* (A17), as A19 joked, *'We've made it through and we're still alive!'* Adopting a more serious tone, A19 suggested that

*It would be useful for students to have access [to alumni] to ask questions. There will be some things that maybe I wouldn't have wanted to ask [tutors], but maybe I'd have wanted to ask someone who'd literally just been through it, just to have an extra network'.*

It was also suggested by A17 that alumni could provide motivation for students as they come to the end of their degree. A18 concurred, whilst reflecting on the impact of several role models encountered during the course, both formally and informally:

*'I think as soon as you finish your recital, that's you done! Then you think, 'Oh no! What am I actually going to do with my life?' But seeing alumni, you think 'Oh that's really great, I could do that!' (A17).*

*I got a lot from [alumni] coming to deliver on [modules]. It can be such an eye-opener [...]. Seeing the kind of jobs they went on to helped me to realise that it's actually making connections outside the conservatoire that will get you the work and that the bubble of college suddenly stops when you leave [...]. The more I started to work/volunteer outside college, the more I realised how accessible music [...] could be for everyone. Studying singing to degree level meant that it became so specialised that it was hard to see [...] other ways of using singing, for example in the community and in health and wellbeing settings.*

### Closing remarks

The motivation for this research stemmed from the author's acknowledgement that despite their experience as a higher education practitioner-researcher, and portfolio background as a performer and teacher (to name just a few identities), they, and their institution, could not possibly begin to understand the reality of what it is like to be a new teacher in the twenty-first century without learning from teachers who are experiencing that reality right now. But clearly, the findings have relevance to all higher education institutions that offer undergraduate degrees in music. In summary, these findings suggest that:

- students can be supported to develop their professional networks in music education by interacting with and questioning alumni who have experience in the field. This support extends to alumni who, in sharing their early-career experiences with students and fellow alumni, are able to benefit from reflection and reciprocal peer support;

and

- where alumni-student interaction happens in the lecture room, conservatoires can learn from their alumni, utilising the insights gained from former students to mould curricula, ensuring that they evolve continually to meet the early-career needs of graduates.

This study represents the views of a small number of conservatoire alumni situated in a particular geographical area, yet the findings raise important issues of relevance to Higher Music Education Institutions worldwide, and draws attention to issues that require further investigation across multiple geographic areas and educational contexts. Further research is recommended in order that institutions can learn about early-career motivations and challenges from a wider demographic that takes into account issues such as race, gender and disability. A broader range of alumni perspectives, including those working outside the field of music, would also illuminate the research findings. It may also be useful to investigate whether integrating alumni-led learning from the earliest stages of students' conservatoire training would be as, if not more, effective than waiting until the later years. Nevertheless, graduates' in-depth reflections on students' questions in this small-scale study have demonstrated that workshops of this nature, when integrated into a lecture series, can provide a useful reciprocal learning experience for students and alumni. Furthermore, involving multiple alumni to take part in such sessions can support their

professional development by enabling career-related discussions and the expansion of professional networks. It would seem that giving conservatoire alumni a voice can unearth and challenge underlying institutional hegemonic assumptions about career aspirations and pathways for conservatoire students and graduates. As A17 proudly pointed out: ‘*We decided [ . . . ] not to perform as our main goals [ . . . ]. It’s not that we didn’t want to or that we couldn’t, but that we chose alternative routes*’. Importantly, the focus-group discussion appeared to have created an outlet for these alumni to question the institutional status quo, giving them permission ‘to take up the wicked problems of the [conservatoire] sector’ (Canham, 2022, p. 157). In this alumni-led research context, they were given freedom to celebrate their musician-teacher identities (Bernard, 2005) knowing that their contribution was valued.

Integrating alumni into student learning experiences has the potential to support student transitions into the music education workforce in multiple ways, not least, helping to raise the profile of instrumental teaching as a career choice for conservatoire students. Equally, as conservatoires become increasingly aware of their graduates’ professional realities, course content and delivery can be developed in ways that prepare students to navigate their career choices with greater confidence.

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