

An analysis of undergraduate motivations, perceptions of value, and concerns in pursuing higher popular music performance education

Abstract

The Popular Music Performance undergraduate degree is a growing area within UK Higher Education. These courses carry a vocational emphasis and are popular with students looking to establish professional performing careers. As such, they are often marketed as an intermediary step towards this aspiration but, despite their popularity, there has been little critical review into their effectiveness. This article, based on doctoral research conducted by the author, draws on semi-structured interviews conducted with 12 second and third year undergraduates studying popular music performance-based courses. The article presents data and analysis concerning the motivations for study, perceptions of vocational value, and the concerns around establishing professional careers. Concerns across four key areas are identified: 1) issues of negative public perception; 2) problematic conceptions of the popular music industries (PMI); 3) the value of practical experience over and above qualifications; and 4) negative narratives concerning developments in digital technologies and their effect on career opportunities. Implications from the article include the need for higher education providers (HEPs) to challenge students' misconceptions concerning professional careers in the new popular music industries.

Key words

career, higher education, motivation, performance, popular music

The genesis of this article was as part of wider doctoral research into the vocational efficacy of higher popular music performance education (HPMPE) in the UK. The research included questionnaires and semi-structured interviews with participants from three key stakeholders: undergraduates; higher educators; and professional musicians. The research presented in this article draws upon the semi-structured interview data from twelve second and third-year undergraduate students across various HPMPE courses.

Introduction

The creative arts sector is currently one of the UK's biggest export industries, and the music industries contribute £4.1bn annually to the UK economy (UK Music, 2016), of which popular music represents a significant proportion. Growth in the creative industries has been paralleled by the rise in the number of higher education (HE) courses designed to serve them. Whilst the number of courses on offer in the early 1990's numbered relatively few, this figure had grown into the hundreds in the space of ten years (Music Week, 2007). Data from the Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA) show the number of first degree qualifications awarded across all UK higher education providers (HEPs) in the field of Creative Arts and Design was 14,633 in 1994 – 1995 (HESA 1996) compared with 144,595 in 2011 – 2012 (HESA, 2013): an increase of nearly 1,000%. Currently, the UCAS website returns a list of 117 degree-level courses across 38 HEPs when entering the search criteria 'popular music performance' (UCAS, 2018). This remains broadly consistent with a 2012 review of popular music provision at HE level conducted by Cloonan and Hulstedt (2012), and suggests that the sector remains buoyant.

Marketisation of UK higher education

The growth of UK HPMPE provision has occurred in tandem with a rise in neoliberalism (Radice, 2013) – a monetarist economic approach entrusting cultural, social, and economic progress to market forces. It was with the arrival of the New Labour government in 1997 that HE became a focus of neoliberal policies (Hewison, 2014). A key aim was to significantly increase the numbers of UK adults enrolled on degree courses with the intention to increase social mobility and the UK's competitive edge within the global economy. As a consequence, there has been a notable shift in emphasis in the broader purpose of HE from 'provider of knowledge for contemplation' to providing students with a set of key skills or competencies that belong to the ideology of 'operational competence' (Hesketh, 2000: 5) or instrumentalism. The move towards instrumentalism, together with a shift in the burden of cost, has led to the emergence of a consumer attitude amongst students (Warner 2017; CCS 2010; Naidoo 2015; Molesworth et al. 2009; Furedi 2010; Cuthbert 2015; Newson 2004; Rolfe 2001). Warner (2017: 187) describes a resultant paradigm shift from HE as a free service to 'a market-driven commodity... with an ever-higher price tag'. A common justification for levying the burden of cost of HE onto the student is a capacity for higher future earnings as a result of increased skill levels. This is an expression of private benefit that Scott (2015) argues is part of the neoliberal ideology and makes the tacit assumption that the 'effects of higher education are best judged in terms of instrumental outcomes' (Scott, 2015: 18).

Courses within the creative arts have been developed both to fill a perceived skills gap, as well as meet the growing demand from those seeking to work in this burgeoning sector of the economy (CCS, 2008). Demand for courses and training exists because of a view amongst prospective students that training is linked to employment. The Quality Assurance Agency (QAA) acknowledge students have 'definite career aspirations in mind as they begin their undergraduate study' (QAA, 2004: 8), and Hesketh (2000: 6) suggests 'many students expect their higher education to enrich their future career aspirations'.

In regard to HPMPE however, students do not always hold realistic expectations surrounding performing careers (Hall, 2017) and HEPs do not necessarily dispel incorrect conceptions. Cloonan (2005) suggests that within popular music HE, providers are complicit in perpetuating false notions of success and careers. He refers to a 'hype' that exists which suggests the singular role of a popular music course is to produce 'pop stars', observing that 'press coverage

concentrates solely on students' commercial success' (Cloonan, 2005: 85). In such a scenario, there is cause to question what responsibility rests with HEPs to make clear to students the professional realities. Carey and Lebler argue that HEPs are, in fact, largely responsible (2012: 2), yet tend to proliferate a view that musical careers conform to a sort of meritocracy, whereby the best performers will likely have the most successful careers. Beckman (2007: 93) argues that educators have a 'moral imperative' to construct courses that provide suitable preparation for work in the contemporary creative industries and Ford (2010) suggests there may be ethical issues with regard to accepting high numbers of students onto music courses when few full-time employment opportunities exist. Bennett (2009) is not convinced that an industry demand has ever been substantiated and as such, believes that some performance-based courses on offer are surplus to requirements. Echoing this, Wright et al. (2011) suggest many of the qualifications developed to serve the creative and cultural industries offer little value to employers.

Inherent in the promotional drive of many HPMPE courses is an allusion to some form of career 'success' (Hall, 2017). However, Herbert et al. (2017: 597) suggest that *success* is a 'multivariate, contextual, highly subjective and ideologically loaded construct'. In popular music, success is often seen as analogous to celebrity - a ubiquitous concept in UK contemporary society and representative of an aspiration towards high levels of material and social attainment. Giroux (2014: 49) argues that the neoliberal meta-philosophy underpinning the modern, capitalist society has led to the idea of celebrity as 'principal expression of value in a society in which only commodified objects have any real value'. Favaro (2000) meanwhile, cautions that an assumption of motivation based on material gain presents too narrow a view and suggests that those who work in the creative field do so because of an inherent drive and passion for their craft – an intrinsic rather than extrinsic motivation.

A purely instrumentalist concept of value, then, overlooks many of the arguably more important aspects of education (Longden 2015, Brown 2015). Indeed, Woodward (2017), asserts that popular music education may be used as a vehicle for a variety of holistic educational and developmental ends, such as social justice, equality, and cultural and social cohesion. As a practical example, a study into student experiences across thirteen universities conducted by Brennan et al. (2010) found whilst employability was a key area of value for students, personal development was also of significance in how students valued their HE experiences. Similarly, Lebler and Hodges (2017), have noted the significant personal change that individuals experience as a result of music higher education. Thus, we are presented with two contrasting concepts of educational value (Lomas, 2002): the first where education is valued for its transformative capacity, and the second assigning value within the instrumentalist terms associated with neoliberalism. Parkinson (2014) summarises these as principle value and transactional value respectively.

Entrepreneurship

The tendency to frame success in terms of fame and fortune (Kusek et al., 2005) has led to a form of binary of public perception which sees musicians as either very wealthy and therefore successful, or struggling financially and therefore not successful (Lieb, 2013). As a disruption to such a reductive delineation, Lieb conceptualises those who sit between these two binary positions as *middle-class musicians* (in the economic rather than sociological sense). Similarly, Hughes et al. (2013: 78) make reference to the 'many intermediary stages' that exist between a fledgling career and the realisation of more 'traditional benchmarks' of success and proffer the term *cultural entrepreneur*.

Whilst entrepreneurship can tend to be associated with traditional concepts of business and economics, such as commercialism and profit making, Bridgstock (2013) suggests that discourses have moved beyond reference only to financial success, and acknowledge the potential for social and cultural added value. This concept of entrepreneurship, however, is more nuanced than a simple suggestion that popular musicians require business skills. Burnard (2012) makes the argument that entrepreneurship is actually a form of creativity, ascribing the label *entrepreneurial creativity*. It is posited as an intrinsic part of creativity which is driven not so much by a desire for profit making (as with a more traditional understanding of entrepreneurship), but by the individual having a clear and strong personal sense of their professional career identity (Bridgstock, 2013), as well as an appreciation of the social and cultural capital of music (Hooper, 2017). This assumes that individuals are facilitated in developing in their career identities alongside a more technical, skills-based curriculum – a process which Bennett and Burnard (2016: 135) refer to as ‘career positioning creativity’ (a combination of knowledge-base, professional identity, and market understanding).

Recent developments in digital technologies may help students to develop their entrepreneurial creativity, perhaps most notably in the emergence of what has been termed the DIY artist culture (Hannan, 2010). Within DIY culture, the roles of record label, artist management and promotion, recording production, tour organisation, amongst others things, become redundant in the age of the self-managed entrepreneurial artist (Hughes et al., 2013: 67). Nevertheless, Christophersen and Gullberg (2017: 517) question whether such technologies will ultimately have an emancipative affect or instead ‘represent another inverted hegemony’. Despite the mostly positive stance within discourses in entrepreneurship, a ‘pervasive uncertainty’ around creative arts careers persists (Menger, 2006: 5). Menger notes a tendency for artists to earn less than their equivalently skilled counterparts in other fields, which he attributes to the notion of an ‘oversupply disequilibrium’. McGuigan (2010: 334) echoes this and suggests that individuals working within the creative arts field experience ‘exceptional difficulties in working life - including insecurity, poor pay and conditions’.

However, a significant new voice into the sector is the development of the Creative Industries Federation (CIF). Established in 2014, and opening up to membership in early 2015, the CIF seeks to be a representative voice for the wider creative industries in the UK, and its membership includes many HEPs. The CIF has already published a number of reports and most pertinent is perhaps its ‘Blueprint for Growth’ (2017). In the report the CIF argues for a greater emphasis in creative arts education at secondary school level that can more readily inspire and prepare students for vocational higher education courses or professional apprenticeships (a newly introduced government initiative seeking to bridge an acknowledged skills gap within the creative industries). Notably, the report outlines one of its three key recommendations as ‘correct[ing] inadequate and misleading information about potential careers in the creative industries’ (CIF, 2017: 10), recognising that ‘there is currently no single portal to gather and share knowledge on careers in the creative industries... and the variety of pathways into them’ (2017: 18). The report acknowledges the efforts that some HEPs are making to connect with the creative industries, and thereby tackle some of the inadequate careers information, by holding careers events where representatives from various parts of the creative industries sector can come in directly to the HEP and meet students face-to-face and, in some cases, recruit immediately for paid or voluntary positions.

Methodology and methods

The focal research question was: What are the motivations students have for studying HPMPE? Sub-questions related to this were: What are student's perceptions of HPME's vocational value? What concerns do students have around establishing a professional performing career upon graduating?

The research paradigm lies within the epistemological perspective of social constructivism (Piaget, 1967; Hjelms, 2014), where a view of reality is constructed from the subjective views of the cultural participants. Within this, the conceptual framework of structure and agency (Barker, 2003; Biesta and Tedder, 2006) was used in the data analysis and coding processes. The intention was to interrogate the perceived structures of both education and music industries through the accounts of the research participants, and to evaluate the efficacy of the education process in empowering its participants and increasing student agency.

Data collection, analysis and coding

12 one-to-one, semi-structured interviews lasting between 30 and 45 minutes each were conducted over a three-month period. Each was audio recorded, a verbatim transcription prepared and uploaded to web-based qualitative analysis software (beta.saturateapp.com). The use of the software facilitated a quick search of the interview transcript data as well as an iterative appropriation and refinement of analytical codes. Interviewees were second and third year undergraduate students studying on a higher education degree courses aimed at popular musicians and with a clear and strong emphasis on the performance of popular music. Questions focussed on: motivations for pursuing HPMPE and a professional music career; perceptions of how HPMPE is a preparation for a career and the value placed on qualifications by the music industries; and the challenges faced by new entrants to the music industries.

A total of eight providers are represented and selection of the interviewees was facilitated via contact with senior academics within the respective HEP. The age range of the interviewees is between 20 and 25 years of age, three are female and nine are male. In order to achieve a representative sample of UK HEPs, a geographic spread as well as representation of both alternative provider - HEPs not funded by the Higher Education Council for England and typically with lower tuition fees (HEFCE, 2017) - and university providers was sought. Five of the interviewees were from two alternative providers, and seven were from universities spread across six different providers. Although there were suitable courses on offer at HEPs other than those represented in this article, the sample is, nevertheless, stratified and representative of the range of popular music performance provision on offer in the UK.

A Semi-structured interview format was selected as it allowed for participant-generated ideas to emerge within a general framework that was consistent across interviews. This enabled a consistency in each interview but still the freedom and flexibility for the idiosyncrasies of each interviewee to be represented. Use of the interview allowed for a dialogue between interviewer and participant that was to yield results often very rich in meaning and that focussed on 'personal language as data' (Newton, 2010: 1).

A thematic analysis of all of the data was undertaken to identify salient themes relating to concepts of structure and agency in educational and music industry contexts. A constant comparative method of data analysis was used (Glaser, 1967) whereby a list of codes is developed and continually edited and refined. The coding system thereby evolves through an

iterative process of making comparisons between codes and asking questions as to the phenomenon occurring or the meaning of the participant's words.

Participant anonymity is preserved by referring to participants as *Sn*.

Findings and discussion

Meta-choices in pursuing HPMPE

In over 80% of cases students were clear in their reasoning for pursuing HPMPE: to enable them to pursue a career within the PMI. Whilst this represented the primary driver behind individual choices, there were other principles affecting or guiding the decision to study: principles which manifested as either positive or passive thought processes. These underlying, guiding principles can be considered a form of meta-choice (describing the cognitive framework within which choices are made). Analysis of student responses revealed two key forms of meta-choice: intrinsic motivation and societal influence.

Intrinsic motivation

Intrinsic motivation relates to behaviours and choices that are driven by a desire for internal rewards. Deci and Ryan (2000: 70) describe intrinsic motivation as 'the inherent tendency to seek out novelty and challenges, to extend and exercise one's capacities, to explore, and to learn'. Popular musicians often exhibit strong personal (intrinsic) motivation to pursue a professional career, and their personal identities are 'often linked quite strongly with their arts practices' (Bridgstock, 2013: 123). Such characteristics of intrinsic motivation were evident in many of the student participants. In some instances, the choice to pursue HPMPE was clearly driven by a deep-rooted desire often deriving from a strong, positive sense of personal identity with popular music performance.

From an early age, both S5 and S2 were clear that a professional career within the PMI was the life-choice they wished to pursue. S5 spoke of 'an obsession to be a musician ever since I started playing', whilst S2 (an international student) described a life-long ambition to move to London to pursue a career in music. In S2's case, there were no alternative plans:

'If I were ever to think about moving into another industry, then I'd have to change my whole mindset and whole perception of my person and my vision'.

In these cases, the decision to study HPMPE has been influenced by the strength of the motivational force at play, as well as the long timescales over which the motivational forces have developed.

Societal influences

In some cases, there were external influences evident in the decision to study. For S7, geographical location represented a limiting structure when considering possible career paths. The capacity to remain actively involved within the PMI can be reliant upon a close proximity to a large city location such as London. For those residing in non-city locations, particularly rural locations or small towns, opportunities to meet other musicians and gain valuable live

performance experience are more limited. S7, for example, described university as his ‘ticket out of here’, and an opportunity to meet ‘more people’.

The decision to pursue HPMPE was not always driven by a specific thought process that linked HE study to a defined end goal. In such cases, a university degree was viewed simply as the final stage of an educational process, with little consideration given to any alternative options. This educational process was described in either positive or passive terms. For example, S5 had made a proactive decision to study at HE, but had not made a clear choice as to a specific course or subject area to study:

I’d always liked to go to university, whether it was studying music or English or something... from actually working to the obvious social side of having fun, going out and stuff, living away from home, and away from your parents. (S5)

Alternatively, S4 and S12 both describe the decision to study in more passive terms. They perceived university study as the end stage of a ‘conveyor belt’ process of formal education. S4 explains:

‘I sort of just finished school and it was the thing to do, you know, to go to [university], so I just did it’.

Similarly, S12 reflects that ‘it’s always gone like, primary school, high school, college, [university name] and then after that there’s nothing’.

When considering future career options, expectations prior to HE tended to shift over the duration of the course. In the case of S6 and S12, they reflected back on initial views they held as being naïve. Their thinking followed a simple equation in which HE would provide a path to an immediate and defined career. In these cases, there was little to dispel such notions at the point of making the decision to study HPMPE. As S6 explains, ‘in my naivety I [thought I] would go to [HEP name] and then become a rock star’ (S6).

Perceptions of the benefit of HE

Students placed high value on a structured and disciplined learning environment – something that was lacking in the informal learning experiences described prior to HE:

Their professional approach towards everything – it really whips you into line. So, coming from a college where you are kind of given a bit more freedom, and you may not have as much discipline, or self-discipline – studying under them, their standards of expectation and what they demand of you... (S7)

For S7, whilst the discipline that came from the structured learning environment was new it was something which was appreciated. The high standards, demands and expectations from the professional tutors were viewed in a positive light, as something which would inspire and encourage students. Appreciation was also expressed for the richness of learning environment created when a large cohort was formed from individuals with different musical preferences, backgrounds, and nationalities:

There’s about 40 course members in the year, and you think that all these people have come from different areas of the country, have come from different backgrounds. I’ve worked with loads of different people on the course and been introduced to loads of different styles. (S7)

The practical benefit of such an environment is the opportunity to develop a network of contacts that can remain an integral part of a student’s network, long after graduation. Echoing this, S2

describes the ‘people I’ve met’ as ‘one of the biggest pros of the course’. A further aspect to the learning environment cited was the teaching faculty, under whom students would be learning. In certain cases, students interpreted the professional careers of the teaching faculty to be of a positive benefit to the learning experience. The simple rationale was that tutors with extensive professional experience would contribute substantively to the learning experience.

The broadening of one’s mind as to the range of career opportunities available after graduating was another noted benefit of HPMPE. This was the case both for those with clear initial aspirations who then later discovered an interest in a related area, as well as those not settled on a particular career path to begin with, but whose preferences emerged during their studies. S3, for example, describes finding clarity regarding career direction, stating ‘I’ve now looked into teaching, which was never an option before I did my degree’ (S3). In a further example, S8 had expressed a clear intention to pursue a career as a music teacher: a career in which a music degree is a requirement. In such a case as this, there is a clear vocational value to a HPMPE degree.

Concerns of vocational value

All students were able identify benefits to studying HPMPE, however, there were also expressions of concern made as to its vocational value. These concerns were in relation both to the quality of the educational experience, and to public opinion of HPMPE courses. Concerns tended to emerge after, rather than prior to study. A recurring theme was a perceived disparity in musical ability across cohorts. This may correlate to a disparity in access to formal tuition prior to HE, and account for the differential in musical capability. The concern was the presence of students with perceived lower levels of musical capability could lower the value placed either on the particular HEP, or on HPMPE in general. As S7 explains:

The thing is that I’ve got course mates here, that if people were to judge me alongside a handful of my course mates and were to say we were equal, just from the fact that we studied the degree? No! [Laughs] (S7)

S1 expresses his concern in more polarised terms. He describes a ‘massive divide between the decent players and the players that can’t play very well’ (S1). Despite this, each will likely graduate with the same degree title.

Only a minority of students were of the impression that a HPMPE degree was of value to potential employers. The majority did not view the qualification itself to hold much currency within the PMI. S1 expresses his opinion that ‘a lot of the time qualifications and degrees and things, maybe don’t actually matter as much’. The ‘as much’ here refers to performing and professional experience. S6 identifies the issue of the primacy placed on making contacts and establishing relationships with potential employers. He suggests that a degree does not represent a head start, because what is of primary importance is the extent to which an individual is known within the music ‘scene’. The view as to how an employer might respond to a musician citing their degree qualification as a validation of their ability to undertake professional work is stated in colloquial terms by S10:

‘it’s like do you go there like being a good guy and playing well or do you go “I got a 1st in popular music performance”, like no one gives a shit’.

A key concern then amongst many students is the inability of a HPMPE degree to provide assurance of consistent and high levels of musical ability. This lack of assurance contributes to

students believing their degree qualifications are of little value to potential employers within the PMI.

Perceptions of careers within the PMI

As well as a low value placed on music qualifications by the PMI, a similar lack of value appears to exist within public opinion. Both S10 and S1 referred to resistance or disapproval from those close to them when making the decision to study HPMPE. A suggested reason for this was the perception that careers within the PMI lack financial security and defined structures. S10 describes being clear in his mind to study HPMPE, but then having to battle with subconscious questions such as ‘can you do it, are you good enough, why don’t you choose something secure?’. S1 describes there being ‘quite a bit of stigma attached to being a musician’, and that for some, when explaining to parents of the desire to pursue a musical career, their response is as if it were ‘the end of the world’ (S1).

When describing perceptions of the PMI, some of the language students used highlighted issues of limiting structure. The PMI tended to be conceptualised as distant, bleak and impenetrable. For example, S9 described the PMI as something that is ‘out there’, or in some way separate and distant from their position as a student. Others spoke in terms of a penetrative force required in overcoming initial barriers to entry, and exertion of a continued effort to remain within the bounds of the PMI. S6 spoke in terms of a requirement to ‘make a dent and get into it’ with respect to finding employment. S7 describes the PMI as being ‘complex and embodied as some massive, complicated fortress that you can’t really penetrate... I think it’s pretty intimidating’. S10 talks in more lucid terms, characterising the PMI as ‘a jungle’, an environment where survival of the fittest is the pervading rule, indicative of harsh and callous conditions: ‘It’s cruel, people don’t give a shit about you and you’re treated like shit’. S1 felt that change was needed because, in their view, ‘the same seven people do all the same stuff’. Although an example of hyperbole, it is nevertheless suggestive of a highly competitive, non-meritocratic environment. Such levels of competition would make the PMI rather unstable in terms of employment, a point which S2 supports when describing the PMI as ‘very unreliable and nothing is concrete’.

A further theme that emerged was the importance placed on practical experience:

‘experience is everything when it comes to music... It’s never like “well if you go and get a degree, I’ll hire you”’ (S4).

Whilst some students viewed their courses as being able to provide them with the required levels of experience, S11 did not regard her course to be doing so, and such it was a cause of anxiety:

‘I do sometimes worry that, in terms of the tangible, getting a job at the end of a degree, I don’t know how prepared I am for that’.

However, whilst S11 expected her course to provide that experience, S2 had no such expectation. He believed the responsibility to acquire the relevant experience fell upon his own shoulders, and this was something to be developed outside of the course:

If I just depended on the course to prepare me like that, I wouldn’t have any of those qualities. That’s all personal work and personal effort and my own time that I put into it. (S2)

A range of responses were given in answer to the question of whether HE was able to provide the breadth of experiences necessary for a professional career. In one example, S1 spoke of a month-long opportunity he had as part of function band on a cruise ship. He was of the opinion that the practical experience gained in this professional context was of greater benefit than anything in his studies up to that point, believing that he had ‘learnt more doing this month contract than I did in my 1st year’ (S1).

Students also spoke in similarly negative terms when describing their perceptions around establishing post-graduation careers. For example, S1 refers to ‘giving it a shot’ and ‘trying to make it as a musician’. Such are non-definitive terms, and imply a high degree of risk. Indeed, some individuals used the word ‘luck’ (S2, S6, S11) or the phrase ‘being in the right place at the right time’ (S6, S12). Others spoke of being confused (S10), a little scared (S5), and of a strong sense of having to compete against others in the bid for oversubscribed work opportunities (S3, S11).

In a number of cases, students attributed concerns over their ability to establish careers to developments in digital technologies. Three narratives of concern emerged from the findings: 1) obsolescence of professional roles, 2) piracy, and 3) cultural saturation.

Obsolescence

Developments in digital technology have allowed individuals to record high quality material with relative ease, and without the requirement of a professional studio environment. Some of these developments have brought about a level of obsolescence to certain aspects of the recording process. One such development is the ability to programme authentic sounding drum parts on a computer, rendering the role of session recording drummer obsolete in certain circumstances. S3, who already had experience as a professional musician prior to commencing HPMPE study, comments on an observed shift in available working opportunities as a session recording drummer:

When I first started in the studio, all the demos I recorded on drums, now they’re all being done on Logic, so it’s only when going to record the final project that I actually get to play drums in the studio. (S3)

In this scenario, whilst the services of a real drummer are not entirely replaced by drum programming, it has reduced the number of available opportunities. This is because for pre-production ‘demos’ (the initial recording process undertaken to produce a first draft before full production commences), costs can be significantly reduced by programming certain instrumentation rather than hiring musicians. Similarly, S8 comments that:

The DIY situation is making it more difficult for people to actually earn any money, because people can make music themselves in their house so much easier now, and it can sound to a professional quality as well. (S8)

The ‘DIY situation’ to which S8 refers is as result of the same developments in digital technology that allows individuals to manage all stages of the recording process within their own homes and still produce music to a professional quality.

Piracy

The ubiquity and ease of access to music brought by more recent developments in digital technology also brings about issues of security, monetisation and ownership. S9 acknowledges,

on the one hand, the benefits that such technology can bring in terms of global connectivity, but on the other hand believes the public now expects music to be a free commodity:

We can be in touch with absolutely everyone who's on the internet anywhere in the world, which is great for sales but then equally they can get our music for free if we let it. So, it's just about working out where we're going to make our money from. (S9)

S11 echoes S9's concerns, and adds to them the further issue of illegal downloading. Both an expectation for music to be free, and a technological means by which music can be illegally accessed cause S11 concerns over potential income streams:

Getting people to pay for you, both in terms of live performances and downloads and stuff. I think that's a massive challenge. People just generally get music for free these days...it's so accessible to get it illegally for free... and obviously that makes it pretty hard for musicians. (S11)

The musician is characterised by both S9 and S11 as a victim of a change in circumstance brought about by developments in digital technologies. The subsequent impact, it is believed, targets the very livelihood of working, professional musicians.

Cultural saturation

The beneficial nature of the affordability, quality and ease of access that developments in digital technologies have brought about were not disputed by the undergraduates. However, they were, in some circumstances, viewed as a mixed blessing. Whilst the internet offers benefit to individuals by removing many of the barriers to access to potential audiences, the ease of access means that many more individuals can upload material:

The internet... while it's fantastic, the way it has opened up distribution for musicians, it means that it's completely saturated, and you are competing against so many people doing pretty much the same thing as you. (S11)

Consequently, S11 views the internet as both an enabling and restrictive force. However, S12 does not perceive the internet to be sufficient alone in helping an artist gain access to a wide enough audience to sustain a career. According to her view, industry structures such as record labels, artist and repertoire, and commercial distribution channels, remain necessary as a form of 'gatekeeper' between the artists and the music-buying audience.

Conclusions

Summary of the findings

The findings reveal a strong motivational pull towards the study of HPMPE amongst students existing in terms of two forms of meta-choice: intrinsic motivation and societal influence. Once enrolled, student perceptions of the benefit of HPMPE centre on the value of the experience itself, more than the acquisition of a degree qualification. Students value the opportunity to be immersed within a disciplined, structured and diverse musical environment under the tutelage of experienced professionals as well as the opportunity to develop a professional network.

However, clear expressions of concern were made around the vocational value of HPMPE. These concerns covered issues relating to levels of musical ability amongst cohorts, a lack of

value on musical qualifications amongst the PMI, and a narrative of negativity amongst public perceptions of popular music, and its place within HE. Most notably the language and terms in use by students revealed some negative views of the PMI which indicate a perception of structural limitation.

Developments in digital technologies (in particular the internet), were viewed by students less as an enabling tool, and more as a problem to be overcome. These areas of structural limitation were defined as an obsolescence of certain job roles, issues of piracy that negatively affect income streams, and a cultural saturation produced by the ubiquity and unrestricted access to the internet. In the case of students expressing such concerns, their HPMPE experience had not appeared to directly disabuse them of their fears.

HPMPE then, presents itself as something of a conundrum in that individuals readily choose to take on the expense of a degree in order to prepare to work in a sector that places little value on music qualifications and where earnings are notoriously low and career paths unstable. No reasonable assurance of a professional music career can be given, nor existence of graduate premium with respect to potential earnings. Nonetheless, the marketisation of HE places clear pressure on HEPs to emphasise instrumentalist conceptions of value, those which Parkinson (2014) refers to as 'transactional'. Whilst students exhibit motivational factors other than instrumentalism they do, nonetheless, desire to establish professional careers and look to their HPMPE courses as a stepping-stone toward this. However, the participants in this study expressed relatively low levels of student agency and tended to view educational and industry structures in rather deleterious terms.

Recommendations

With a view to increasing the efficacy of HPMPE, it is recommended HEPs provide clear and unambiguous information within promotional literature such that careers, industry, and concepts of success are more accurately represented. With the clear move towards HEPs regarding students as consumers, the transparency and accuracy of information becomes all the more crucial as a student's HE experience becomes a matter of contractual arrangement.

A subsequent recommendation is for providers of HPMPE to regularly review curriculum content to meaningfully reflect the changing landscape of professional careers in the new music industries as well as the new opportunities afforded by digital technologies. This would involve a review of staff training and experience as well as the provision of learning resources and opportunities to facilitate student learning and engagement. Such a review could be helpful in highlighting any gaps in knowledge and experience amongst staff and any outmoded curriculum content or teaching approaches. A step toward this might be an extension to the JAMES (joint audio media education support) accreditation programme (JAMES, 2019) - which offers an industry endorsed stamp of approval for courses as well as providing industry links - to include a section specifically for HPMPE. Additionally, the recent arrival of the Creative Industries Federation (CIF) offers a potentially unifying voice into the wider creative sector, although there is as yet no specific representation for HPMPE or the PMI. Extension of membership of the CIF to both HPMPE and the PMI is recommended as a positive forward step. In either case, it is greater cohesion and meaningful links between HPMPE and the PMI that will be central to the future sustainability of HPMPE, and the provision of a more tangible, grounded offer to students.

Limitations to the study

The scope of this study was limited to the PMI and HPMPE sector of the UK specifically and did not seek to account for developments in popular music higher education outside of the UK. Moreover, the focus remains on a particular form of popular music higher education: popular music *performance*.

The sample size was limited in number in order to ensure the research was manageable. Whilst 12 interviewees did provide a varied and rich detail of data, a larger number of participants would help ground the findings in a more substantive and representative sample base. In addition, the data offers merely a snapshot in time, meaning participants are reflecting from a static point of view. The research, therefore, does not account for any changes over time that participants may have experienced, such as would be enabled in a longitudinal study.

Finally, data analysis is outworked using an interpretative approach, rather than a fixed paradigm or systematic method, thus there is clear opportunity for bias and arbitrary findings. Those reported as the most key will reflect the particular characteristics of the researcher, and it is understood that a different researcher working with the same data might arrive at a different set of conclusions.

Directions for future research

Further insight could be gained from conducting a longitudinal study following participants from prospective student, to undergraduate, through to professional career. Similarly, tracking a professional musician during a period of time within their career could afford a more dynamic, and fuller insight into the protean nature of professional careers, helping to identify patterns or factors governing a typical professional career. A longitudinal research project that followed the narratives of around 12 individuals over a period of up to ten years would provide a particularly insightful view. Such a research project could allow sampling of views prior to study and a comparison made with views expressed during early career development. Furthermore, the narratives of career development for a parallel group of individuals pursuing a DIY or apprenticeship-style route could be evaluated against those pursuing a higher educational route. Further research of this type would allow for a more grounded answer to the increasingly salient question of vocational value and help address some of the inferences within this study.

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