Students' perceptions of music courses in the Birmingham and Solihull Learning and Skills Council Area

Adrian Hancock[1] and Janet Hoskyns[2]

[1]Faculty of Health and Life Sciences, Coventry University, Coventry CV1 5FB, UK
[2]University of Central England, Faculty of Education, Attwood Building, Franchise St, Perry Barr, Birmingham B42 2SU, UK

aa2439@coventry.ac.uk, Janet.Hoskyns@uce.ac.uk

During 2003/4 a team from the University of Central England in Birmingham (now UCE Birmingham) undertook an evaluation of student perceptions of their music courses as part of the Birmingham and Solihull Learning and Skills Council review of music in the area. As well as identifying the wide range of courses available in the locality and students' perceptions of the teaching and learning they undertook, the research uncovered some significant issues about the nature of musical learning for those aged 14+ and the pathways and guidance that they received both before and during their courses of study.

Introduction

A team from the University of Central England in Birmingham (UCE Birmingham), comprising an experienced careers guidance tutor and a music specialist tutor, set out to evaluate student perceptions of Learning and Skills Council (LSC) funded music courses offered in a particular area of the West Midlands. This evaluation was set against a background of continuing change and development of the curriculum for post-16 learners in England and also a number of significant shifts in the funding methods for the 14–19 and adult education sectors. In addition, careers guidance programmes and the agencies which offer them were also being restructured. The survey uncovered a number of issues relating to the continuity and fragmentation of young people's musical learning and the ways in which their aspirations for future study were managed.

Changes to 14–19 curriculum and opportunities

Curriculum 2000 (DfEE, 2000) made many changes to the statutory curriculum in schools, colleges and private educational institutions in England. Subsequent reports (DfEE, 2002a; DfES, 2003) have continued to develop the framework for education and training, allowing more flexibility in the curriculum, and offering choice as to where students may take up places in order to study. Proposals for 14–19-year-olds in the Government Green Paper *14–19: Extending Opportunities, Raising Standards and Success for All* (DfEE, 2002b) have played an important part in moving the agenda towards more vocational, individualised courses and pathways for young people in full-time education and those in the immediate

years thereafter. Concurrently, the Qualifications and Curriculum Authority for England, Wales and Northern Ireland (QCA), has been through a process of accrediting and in some cases re-accrediting all qualifications, in line with the new qualifications framework, implemented on 1 September 2004 (http://www.qca.org.uk/493.html), which assigns a level to all public awards. The expectation is that 'individual learners may access local provision flexibly responsive to local employer needs and therefore to prospects for employment through Local Learning Partnerships' (Ainley, 2003: 392). The decision to 'blur the edges' of the required, prescribed elements of the National Curriculum and the opportunities for students to take up individualised courses in Further Education Colleges from the age of 14, should offer a range of courses and pathways in Music as in other subjects. However, new vocational pathways at GCSE (level 2 of the National Qualifications Framework) do not yet include music as a discrete subject, and in reality Music has not fully explored vocational GCSEs (see Osterley, 2002; Dumbreck, 2003). Many of the vocational Music courses accredited by QCA are National Vocational Qualifications (NVQs) or equivalent courses. In England, awarding bodies have reorganised their music courses to meet the needs of an increasingly diverse group of candidates wishing to study music including music technology. As The Music National Council report indicates with reference to degree courses:

> For the classical/musicology sub-sector, music degrees have been, and continue to be, of traditional importance. However, these qualifications suffered from a lack of vocational orientation in terms of business studies. A similar criticism was also levelled against qualifications in other areas of this sub-sector [composition of musical works and music publishing] with more than one voice calling for degree courses to have a more vocational approach and nature. (Dumbreck *et al.*, 2003: 13)

We investigated student perceptions of their music courses in the Learning and Skills Council (LSC) sector in a West Midlands LSC area as part of a subject review of all aspects of LSC funded music education in the region. The Learning and Skills Councils were set up to fund post-16 courses of training in every region in England. Their remit is to assess the training and educational needs of the post-16 sector, including adult education, and to fund relevant courses in the geographical area for which they have responsibility. From our survey we were able to ascertain not only the range of courses on offer, but also student perceptions of these courses, whether they were offered in school sixth forms, sixth form or further education colleges or in private institutions supported by LSC funding. The majority of the participants interviewed were in the 14–19 age group, although in one or two of the Further Education Colleges and evening classes, adult students were engaged on courses and contributed to the survey.

Aims and methods

Our aims were part of the brief provided by the LSC, and required us to investigate the following elements:

● The perceptions of students who were taking music at levels 1, 2, 3 and 4 of the National Qualifications Framework.

- The effectiveness and relevance of the programme they were following.
- The suitability of the course related to their choice of career pathway.
- Their reasons for choosing the programme they were following.
- Their commitment to a career in the music industry.
- The standard and mode of tuition they received.
- The benefits of the programme for their general career development.
- Improvements which might be made to their programme.

The research was a survey using both quantitative and qualitative data collection, consisting of an initial questionnaire, and follow-up focus groups and interviews. A letter was sent out to all centres that were known or thought to provide LSC-funded courses, asking them if they would be willing to take part in the project. All the centres that replied then received a questionnaire for their students to complete: 498 were sent out, of which 258 were returned (52% response rate). The questionnaire was designed to cover the general aims of the research through the following questions:

- How appropriate are the teaching methods?
- How would you rate the standard of teaching?
- Overall how would you rate the course?
- What are your career plans?
- To what extent do you think your course will help you in your future career?
- If you intend to pursue a career in the music industry, how committed are you?

We did not ask about gender, ethnicity or disability, since it was thought that such information was available from other sources. Following an analysis of the initial returns, a revised set of questions and prompts was devised for focus groups, which reflected emerging themes and issues. When the focus groups had been conducted, further revisions then took place in preparation for the individual interviews.

In total, focus groups and/or interviews were conducted in nine institutions. Four focus groups were conducted with a total of 28 students. A further 10 individual interviews were undertaken. The focus groups lasted in general for about an hour, whilst the individual interviews ranged from 15 to 35 minutes.

The total number of returns, broken down by course and level, is given in Table 1.

Accredited Courses – what is available and to whom?

There are a number of accredited courses available in schools, and also in Sixth Form and Further Education Colleges. In schools we found that the courses offered and funded by the Learning and Skills Council were at AS and A2 level (equivalent to the first and second years of a GCE A level course, normally taken by students aged 17–18 in England) in Music and/or Music Technology, following examination specifications from all three examining boards: AQA (the Assessment and Qualifications Alliance), EdExcel and OCR (Oxford, Cambridge and RSA awarding body). These courses are part of the array of school-leaving examinations taken by students in England and Wales.

A high proportion of schools in the Birmingham and Solihull area are designated 11–16, so students who wish to study post-16 have either to transfer to a neighbouring school with a

Table 1 *The courses being taken by the respondents to the questionnaire*

Course	National Qualification Framework level	Returns
HND Popular Music	4	14
HND Music Performance	4	1
AS Music	3	55
AS Music technology	3	39
A2 Music	3	42
Access to Higher Education	2/3	6
BTEC FIRST – Performing Arts (MUSIC)	3	26
BTEC Music Technology	3	27
BTEC National Music	3	5
BTEC Music Practice	3	17
NCFE Music Technology	2	11
GCSE (Year 11 Students)*	1/2	2
OCN Sound Engineering	Unknown	7
OCN Vocals (evening course)	Unknown	3
Cubase (evening course)	No level assigned	3
Total number of student respondents		258

*Only two respondents were studying GCSE Music and this was at an FE College. Both were very positive about all aspects of their course and this may give a false impression in terms of their prominence in the charts below.

Sixth Form or else attend a Sixth Form or Further Education College. Sixth Form and Further Education Colleges also offered BTEC First and BTEC National Diploma courses as well as NCFE (a National Awarding Body), OCN (Open College Network, now known as National Open College Network NOCN) and GCSE (General Certificate of Secondary Education) Music and Technology qualifications at levels 1, 2 and 3 of the National Qualifications Framework. A range of students of all ages attended the courses run in Further Education colleges and were not necessarily in the 16–19 age bracket. Some of the courses were run as adult evening classes at FE colleges; this was particularly noticeable for the Open College Network courses. We were aware that a large private provider in the area also offered a number of OCN and NCFE courses for students of all ages post-16, but this provider did not respond to our invitation to be involved in the survey. Two students who were taking GCSE Music at a college were in Year 11 (aged 15–16 years old) but were taking other relevant vocational courses at the college and therefore took their GCSE music as part of the package rather than returning to their original school. Additional provision occurs at Birmingham Conservatoire Junior School where school-age students who are already registered at the Junior School can take AS and A2 Music examinations if they wish. These students did contribute to the survey. For 14–19-year-olds wishing to take accredited courses in Music

there is a range of options and for adults there is a similar but more extended range of courses which they can access in the region.

Reasons for choosing courses

The most common reason given by students for choosing their course was enjoyment of the subject, and a general interest in music, as the following quotes illustrate:

> 'Music has been a hobby for many years and it seemed like an obvious choice.'

> 'Because I enjoyed music and got an A at GCSE.'

> 'I have music skills and wanted relief from heavier subjects.'

> 'More enjoyable and less stressful.'

Further reasons for choosing the course were a desire to enter the music industry, or enter Higher Education:

> 'I'm a musician and want to go into the music industry.'

> 'To learn about recording techniques.'

> 'I want to do a degree in music and needed to enhance my knowledge.'

> 'I want to be a sound engineer.'

Students' perceptions of their courses

The themes emerging from our data analysis can be grouped under three headings: first, students' perceptions of their courses, with regard to both content and resources; second, their perceptions of teaching; and third, comments relating to career issues. We turn first of all to comments about their courses.

Course content

This topic was explored in some detail in the focus groups and individual interviews. In general most students appreciated the content of their course. Any negative comments often concerned not being able to exercise a personal preference or develop specific interests: for example, one student wanted to be able to study more jazz. Another student would have liked to study musical theatre instead of harmony, but the course specification did not allow for both options to be studied. However, many students suggested that they had faith in their teachers choosing a syllabus that was best for them. Thus the course at a very academic middle-class school reflected a desire to give students a good grounding in the history and techniques of classical music; whilst at another school (also with good academic results, but with a more diverse student population) the students covered very little classical music and one student was able to maintain an interest in jazz:

> '[I'm playing] a Bach aria, a Charlie Parker number, and a Courtney Pine as well.'

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Table 2 *Pupils' reasons for choosing their course.*

Course	Did well/liked GCSE music	Interest in music	Enjoy music	Aiming for career in music	Planning to study music at university	To gain access to FE/HE
HND Popular Music	0%	21%	0%	50%	21%	7%
HND Music Performance	0%	0%	0%	100%	0%	0%
AS Music	18%	16%	40%	21%	5%	0%
AS Music technology	3%	59%	21%	15%	3%	0%
A2 Music	10%	12%	53%	10%	14%	0%
Access to Higher Education	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%	100%
BTEC FIRST – Performing Arts (MUSIC)	0%	36%	39%	25%	0%	0%
BTEC Music Technology	0%	33%	11%	48%	4%	4%
BTEC National Music	0%	60%	20%	20%	0%	0%
BTEC Music Practice	0%	6%	12%	76%	0%	6%
NCFE Music Tech	0%	45%	36%	9%	0%	9%
GCSE (Year 11 Students)	0%	0%	50%	50%	0%	0%
OCN Sound Engineering	0%	43%	0%	57%	0%	0%
OCN Vocals (evening course)	0%	100%	0%	0%	0%	0%
Cubase (evening course)	0%	100%	0%	0%	0%	0%

'I'm not trying to big him up [referring to the teacher], but he'll choose whatever is easiest.'

'If we're given more choice we might not know what we can do...say we were choosing a piece we may not know what to look for.'

Teachers were generally perceived to be adept at choosing the course content to suit the needs of students. However, one student felt that their AS course failed to cover either

classical or modern music in any detail:

> 'It doesn't cover deep into rock or deep into classical . . . it's sort of floating somewhere in the middle . . . you get a snippet . . . if you want to be a rock star you don't care about Mozart . . . and the same if you're classical, there's no point learning about Oasis and the Kinks.'

Some students did express specific views about what course content could be altered. For example, a number of AS students pointed to the lack of opportunities to perform: by 'performance' they mostly meant in front of peers as preparation for the end of year recital examination.

It also became apparent during the focus group sessions and individual interviews that many students felt there was a lack of provision for practical experience in the form of field trips and other visits. Conversely, there was provision for these experiences at a limited number of centres: for example, one centre had arranged a field trip to Scotland to follow the 'Mendelssohn Trail' and another centre had taken a group to an event at Birmingham Symphony Hall.

We found only one example of work experience or work shadowing amongst the students surveyed, which contrasts sharply with the type of provision that is made for under-16 GCSE students, in particular those taking vocational courses. Not only had this establishment arranged a visit to the National Exhibition Centre, but it was also attempting to arrange a visit from a music producer, as well as a two-week period of work experience. It is surprising that on courses that have, or would be expected to have, a significant vocational element, we found so little evidence of practical experience of music in the real world. Furthermore, hardly anyone understood the term 'work shadowing', something that can be utilised effectively by post-16 students. We return to this issue later.

Resources

There is no detailed quantitative data on this topic, but a number of students on each course, with the exception of NCFE Music Practice, drew attention to difficulties with resources, and we therefore explored this in detail in all the focus groups and interviews. It is fair to say that some of their answers reflected local issues – e.g. one interviewee remarked on the need for a whiteboard in the classroom – but a general feeling emerged from our questionnaire returns that in most instances courses could be better resourced. However, some students seemed to feel that this was a more important issue than others, especially those on some technology or BTEC courses: for example, on the questionnaire there were 4 comments (from 14 returns) from BTEC Music Technology course students about the need to improve resources; 6 comments (34 returns) from AS Music Technology course respondents; 3 comments (5 returns) on the BTEC National Music; 2 comments (7 returns) on the BTEC Music Practice course. Some illustrative quotations follow:

> 'Better music equipment, i.e. amps that work.' (A2)

> 'More funding and better funding for Internet.' (AS student)

> 'More computers.' (AS Music Technology)

'Wider range of equipment.' (BTEC Music Technology)

'More up-to-date equipment and software.' (BTEC National)

'A rehearsal studio on site.' (BTEC Music Practice)

Exploration through focus groups gave further insights and, if anything, indicated that resourcing was a problem to more students than the questionnaire results suggested, and included consideration of lack of space or unsuitable rooms for teaching music. Whilst it is hard to draw any firm conclusions, it would appear that concerns about computers were prevalent, whilst other equipment difficulties reflected the needs of specific courses: for example, at two centres attention was drawn to a lack of functioning pianos, which was a problem because so many students used them for performance. No doubt some of the problems require hundreds, if not thousands, of pounds to rectify, yet some problems could be tackled relatively easily: pianos could be tuned; guitar strings replaced. Some centres seemed able to repair equipment quickly; others did not, causing difficulties for students. Of course these things may have had an impact on the quality of their achievements, although we could not measure this, since we had not set out to do so. However, it was something that clearly concerned almost all respondents.

Students' perceptions of teaching

Appropriateness of teaching methods

The second theme concerns students' views about the teaching they received. The vast majority of the students felt that the teaching methods were very or quite appropriate. Only 2 of the 193 respondents said that the teaching methods were not very appropriate. However, there are distinct differences between courses. On three of the courses – AS Music Technology, A2 Music and BTEC First in Performing Arts (Music) – students' opinions were fairly evenly split between very and quite appropriate. Although the number of returns from the remainder of courses was low, most students were very positive about the teaching methods: students' opinions on both the AS Music and BTEC Music Practice courses were divided about 60/40 between very and quite appropriate, whilst on both the other BTEC courses opinions were split 80/20 (Fig. 1). The eight NCFE students were unanimous in their praise, giving a 'very appropriate' rating.

The standard of teaching

The majority of students on the first four courses (Fig. 2) stated that the standard of teaching was good or very good, with the 'good' rating being most used. However, a notable proportion (19%) of BTEC Performing Arts (Music) students felt the standard of teaching to be only average, and the BTEC First course rating was low owing to local factors. The views of the BTEC Music Technology students were split 50/50 between very good and good. The vast majority of students on the remainder of the courses felt that the teaching was very good overall (Fig. 2).
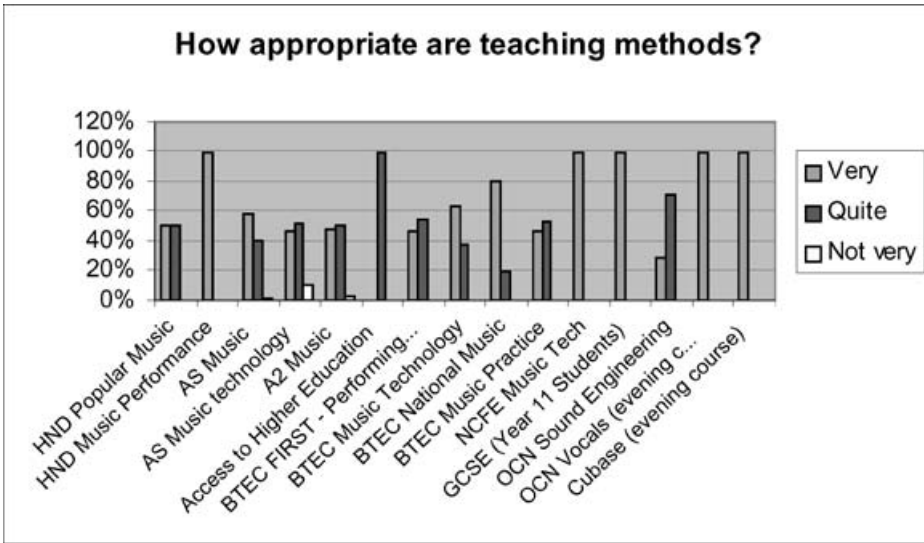
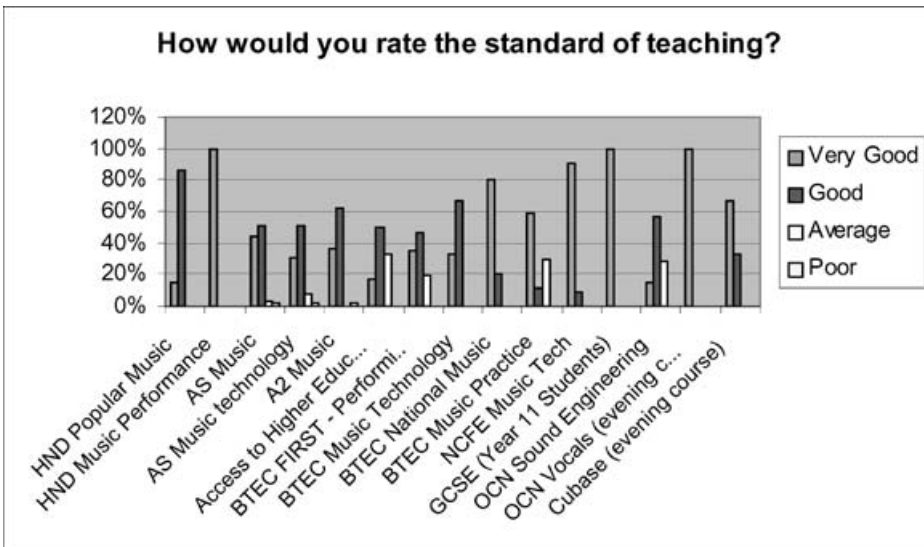Fig. 1   The level of appropriateness of the teaching methods, as rated by the pupils.

Fig. 2   The standard of teaching as rated by the pupils.

However, there are some exceptions to this positivity. One concern relates to the teaching of computer software packages such as Sibelius and Cubase at some centres. Some students remarked that they had to virtually teach themselves how to use these packages. In a few instances, it was also remarked that teachers' time was spread too thinly

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because of other teaching commitments: 'there are so many students and they are all calling the tutors at the same time'.

Several students were forthright in their opinions about what constitutes good and bad teaching:

> 'They're very much for saying do this, this, this, . . . they don't go into detail . . . we do need guidance . . . and if we go and ask for help it's like "well I've just explained it" . . . or they'll say you weren't paying attention . . . so we don't know if we are coming or going.'

> 'I got told to go on there [the computer, to use Cubase] last week and I never had a clue what I was doing . . . never played the piano in my life, but I had to play the keyboard.'

This contrasts with their perceptions of good teaching:

> 'They go over and over and over till you get it basically . . . they'll come at you from different angles till that one person or these people understand. Whereas with [another teacher] it's "let's get as much done as possible, cos we'll get it all done"; but what if we don't understand it?'

> 'I think [name of teacher] is quite flexible and he'll accommodate how he thinks I can work . . . and if I don't understand he'll take time out . . . have a chat.'

Overall rating of courses

It is obvious that the students' answers to this question reflected their views not just on teaching but other issues, such as the course content and resources. The BTEC National students were most satisfied with their course (80% saying it was very good). There was only one other course where the majority felt the course was very good (NCFE Music Practice). To varying degrees the students on the other courses felt that their courses should be rated good rather than very good, with some rating their courses only average or poor. The most highly rated of these courses were the BTEC National in Music Technology and the AS Music Technology courses, with small percentages saying that the course was average (7% and 6% respectively). The responses from A2 Music, BTEC First in Performing Arts (Music) and BTEC National Music Practice students produced similar percentages on average (around 15%). The AS Music course, however, was the least highly rated of all, with as many rating it average as very good (25%) and one student rating it poor (Fig. 3). It is interesting to compare the answers of the AS music students with those obtained from the first two questions of the questionnaire about the appropriateness and standard of teaching. Since the AS Music students answered 'very good' or 'good' to the first two questions about the standard of teaching, it would suggest that teaching was not an issue, or the reason for 25% saying the course is average. We believe that the course content could provide some answers as to why such a high percentage of students felt that the course was only average.

The following quotations highlight these issues:
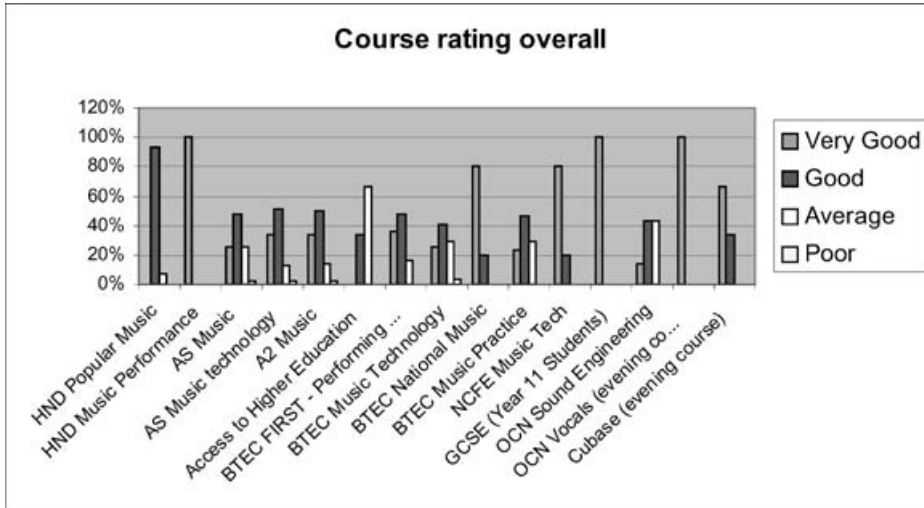
> 'More practical work.'

> 'Less harmony.'

Fig. 3   The course rating overall as rated by the pupils.

'Less theory. More composition plus practice.'

'More interesting.'

'More modern – no serialism.'

'Massive step from GCSE.'

'It is traditional.'

From close analysis of the AS student data, we would suggest that there are very individual reasons for students' beliefs that the course was only average. It would appear that a number of factors may produce this rating: first, the transition from GCSE to AS, which is difficult for many students, was made even more problematic for those with little or no prior musical training of a conventional academic kind; second, the course content did not appeal to all – although differences existed between centres; third, there was a lack of prior awareness about the content of the course. There is little literature available about students' perceptions of the transition from GCSE to the new AS and A2 examination courses although retrospective accounts suggest that those who have had instrumental lessons on a Western European instrument have found the gap less difficult in the past (Bunting, 2002).

Career issues, work experience and work shadowing

The third theme arising out of our research encompasses career-related issues, which can be grouped as follows: first, knowledge of possible alternatives to their current course; second, pre-course knowledge about the content of their current course third, knowledge

of the job market. These are topics which arose solely as a result of focus group discussion and therefore were also explored in the 10 individual interviews.

Knowledge of alternatives

Some students drew our attention to the fact that they had limited knowledge of alternative courses at 16, and the careers advice received in year 11 tended to be 'patchy'. Even some of those that had received 'formal' careers advice did not always know about alternative courses: one school AS music student said, 'I've got a mate . . . and he's in a pop band . . . and for him it [BTEC course in Popular Music] may have been a lot better'. The same student said that he had not received any formal advice himself. At another institution many of the respondents seemed generally unaware of any alternatives to their current course of study.

Knowledge of current course

A significant minority of students mentioned that their expectation of their current course failed to fully match the reality. For example, a group of AS students said there was more music analysis and less performance than they expected. At other centres, one BTEC First student did not know what to expect from their course at all, whilst a group of AS Music Technology students felt the course was very different to what they expected.

Since this topic was not one we explored in the questionnaire, and it only arose out of the focus groups, it may be that more students actually lacked knowledge about the content of their future courses than our data exemplify. Furthermore, older students, who may not fall within the remit of the Connexions careers service, may not be able to access any impartial advice about course options.

Knowledge of the job market

More than 50% of the students on the following courses wanted to work in the music industry: BTEC Performing Arts (Music), BTEC Music Technology, BTEC National Music, BTEC Music Practice, NCFE Music Technology. In addition 20% and 25% respectively of the BTEC National Music and NCFE Music Technology students saw the prime aim of their course as to in some way 'improve their skills'. Very few students on these courses intended to go on to higher education; the highest figure being the BTEC in Music Technology students, of whom 28% stated that they would like to go on to Higher Education.

In contrast, almost half of all the AS level (42%) and A2 (47%) music students intended to go on to HE, although only 13% of AS level students and 14% of A2 students intended to study music at HE. However, substantial numbers of these students also intended to find work in the music industry (AS: 29% and A2: 33%).

The AS Music Technology student data stand out, as the statistics are noticeably different from all other courses: 47% intended to find work in the music industry, whilst the figure for those intending to enter higher education (21%) is below the A2 and AS figures and, interestingly, below the BTEC National in Music Technology figure. Of possible concern is the fact that 26% did not know what they want to do after the course.

Most students, across all courses and centres, could see the benefit of their course for their future career. Some of these benefits were to do with its direct relevance to specific

occupations or further study. However, some students also remarked on the fact that the course provided opportunities for personal development, such as increased confidence:

> 'I'm already more confident with songwriting and stuff. I expect to make lots of contacts in "the biz"' (BTEC Music Technology)

> 'If I don't achieve what I want, this could be my backup.' (BTEC First)

> 'AS/A2 Music will develop me as a musician, practically and academically. The course will also provide a solid base for my degree.' (AS)

Where the relatively few negative comments occurred, the students concerned did not always expand on their views, making it difficult to assess their dissatisfaction. However, it is apparent from responses to other questions that many of these students, especially those on evening courses, do not intend to pursue a career in music so the course will not have a direct vocational relevance: 'I don't think this course will help me unless I intend to go to university' (BTEC Music Practice).

Although the majority of students felt that their courses would help their career we picked up differing perceptions about how easy it is to enter the music industry, suggesting that some students may have inaccurate perceptions of opportunities. Although most students recognised that it was a competitive industry to enter – 'It is really hard to get into a studio' – there was lack of understanding by some students and/or at some centres about the possible range of options available. Perhaps a distinction needs to be made here between the vocational and non-vocational course students. As Table 2 showed, students on vocational courses largely view the course as a means to a job. Conversely, A level music students see their course as a way of building an academic portfolio and/or means into HE. The lack of agreement about the music job market is exemplified by the following comments:

> 'Music Technology isn't that competitive, there aren't that many people that want to do it, although people are becoming more and more interested in it so maybe it's becoming more competitive now.'

> 'The music industry is very competitive – where I want to get into you have to have a hell of a lot of talent – R+B, soul.'

All four of the focus group participants on a BTEC course in music technology at a college of FE wanted to enter sound engineering. This view was expressed by other students on other courses elsewhere and seems a popular career idea. Thus there seem to be tens of students throughout the Birmingham conurbation at any one time aiming for sound engineering. These comments raise the question of how realistic their aims are: can there be so much demand for these skills within the music business?

The three career-related issues discussed in this section raise the question of whether or not there is sufficient careers advice in Year 11, and also the extent to which appropriate pre-course advice is offered by post-16 course providers. Although we are not aware of the destinations of students from the courses surveyed, it would be interesting to know how successful they were/are in achieving their career aim at some point down the line.

The literature on career choice, and the factors that influence young people's career decision-making, are too vast to be explored in detail here. However, a few salient points are worth noting. First, young people's career ideas have been shown to be based on stereotypes – either stereotypes of the work involved in any occupation, or stereotypes of what are acceptable 'male' and 'female' jobs (O'Neal *et al.*, 1977; Nelson, 1978; Gottfredson, 1981; Hemsley-Brown, 1998; Furlong & Biggart, 1999). Second, their occupational knowledge is restricted in range, and often in depth (Hemsley-Brown, 1998). Third, any knowledge about careers is also influenced by social class (Ball & Maguire, 2000), culture (Hollands, 1990; Hodkinson *et al.*, 1996), geographical location (Banks *et al.*, 1992), and opportunity structure (Roberts, 1977).

Family and significant others also appear to feature prominently in young people's career decision-making (Kidd, 1984; Hodkinson *et al.*,1996; Ball & Maguire, 2000). Kidd (1984) found that many young people used family and significant others as a resource in their career decision-making: significant others can be work experience providers, teachers, peers etc. It is also worth highlighting that there are a number of lifestyle choices available to young people today and the impact of popular culture, through the media, must be recognised as a possible influence on young people's career ideas: 'young people are what they consume – they consume what they want to be' (Ball & Maguire, 2000); young people certainly 'consume' music.

Finally, Hodkinson *et al.* (1996) argue that in real life many career decisions are 'pragmatically rational' rather than the more fully reasoned 'technically rational' decisions that policy makers, and careers guidance practitioners, hope young people will make. The young people in their cohort made career decisions that 'were pragmatic, rather than systematic' (Hodkinson & Sparkes, 1997: 33). They argue that these 'pragmatic' decisions are made within a person's horizons for action, which they define thus:

> 'No one can choose a placement that does not exist or for which they would not be considered. Horizons for action, therefore, are partly determined by external opportunities in the training markets. Equally, no one can choose a placement that they do not perceive as suitable or appropriate for themselves. Therefore, horizons are also formed by their own subjective perception.' (Hodkinson *et al.*, 1996: 3)

As our brief exploration of the careers literature shows, the importance of careers advice cannot be overstated, since many young people make career choices in 'pragmatically rational' ways (Hodkinson *et al.*, 1996) and are likely to be influenced by outside factors. The need to help young people make 'well informed and realistic decisions' (Allen *et al.*, 1997) is self-evident, since particular courses may well be more appropriate for certain individuals and their career aims. Better careers advice could have helped students to overcome some of the lack of knowledge explored in this section: course content; range of courses on offer; and career options.

One way of improving occupational knowledge and employability could be through the provision of employer visits, work experience, or work shadowing during music courses. Although not all students felt there was a need for visits or work experience, many did comment on the lack of provision. It seems self-evident that many students, on both vocational and non-vocational music courses, would benefit from further insight into the music industry. Whilst work experience (which traditionally lasts for a minimum of one

week) can be utilised with post-16 students, it is also appropriate to consider the alternative approach of work shadowing, which normally lasts for between 2 days and a week (Watts, 1996): for example, a student wishing to pursue a career as a sound engineer could benefit from the opportunity to view a recording studio in operation. Additionally, from a pragmatic point of view, work shadowing could be arranged for as little as half a day, which places less of a burden on the employer and the establishment's syllabus. The benefit to students of work experience is exemplified in the following comment:

> 'For work experience last year I worked in the sound dept and lighting dept...I was backstage watching the sound technicians doing what they have to do in pre-performance – I spent a week with them and I learnt a lot from there, there's more to it than I thought, it's not just a mixing desk, they have to research sounds and things.'

Conclusions

As a result of the survey we note that there is a considerable range of opportunities for young participants to study music in the Birmingham and Solihull area of the West Midlands. However, one major issue was that of access. Courses of study appear to be located in geographical clusters, which mean that students in the far north and south of the region have more potential choice about courses than those located in the centre. There is also a noticeable cluster of institutions offering AS and A2 Music in the southern part of the region. It is not clear whether this is demand-led or an historical accident. However, further study of the potential and actual student group needs to be undertaken to ensure equality of access to relevant courses for all participants.

Students in a number of centres seemed not to have been consulted about the choice of options within their AS and A2 courses. With the introduction of personalised learning this needs to be remedied as not all students are well prepared to follow some of the options selected by their tutors. This is particularly important for those who have clear ideas about what they need in order to progress further, whether in higher education or in the music industries.

A number of students reported that instruments and suitable equipment did not function or were not repaired quickly enough for them to use during their course. It is clear that musical equipment of all sorts must be maintained so that students can use it and that technical support should be provided if students are to have access to appropriate equipment to complete their studies.

The most significant point to emerge from this survey has been the observation that many students are ill-prepared for the demands of working in any part of the very diverse arena which is the music industry and are unaware of the routes into such work. There is clearly a need to provide formal programmes of work experience and work shadowing in the music industry and this will need considerable cooperation between the educational institutions and the music industry. In England, the emerging sector skills councils should have a significant role to play, in particular that set up for creative and cultural skills (http://www.ccskills.org.uk/). Many students have unrealistic ambitions and a lack of knowledge about how the industry functions and about what they need in order to be qualified to follow a range of career paths in music. Music teachers working with 14–19-year-old students are often not aware of the range of new courses and qualifications which

could usefully be undertaken. Furthermore, the careers advice offered by schools, colleges, Connexions (government-funded careers advice organisation) and higher education should be closely matched to the needs of the students and to local music industries' expectations.

The 14–19 sector in England is undergoing a period of continuous change and upheaval, however recent signs are encouraging. In February 2006 the UK government announced a programme of specialised diplomas to be introduced and on 20 February 2006 Creative and Cultural Skills announced the following:

> Creative & Cultural Skills – the sector skills council for advertising, cultural heritage, crafts, design, music and the arts, Skillset – the sector skills council for the audiovisual industries and Skillsfast-UK – the sector skills council for textiles, apparel and footwear are joining forces to develop the Government's proposed new 14–19 Creative & Media Diploma. It is envisaged that the new diploma – one of 14 new qualifications ranging from construction to retail – will be on offer at England's secondary schools between 2008 and 2013 before becoming a national (England) entitlement. (http://www.ccskills.org.uk/news/story.asp?pageID = 889)

Other research (Biesta & Davies, 2004; Cochrane & Straker, 2005) shows that the sector as a whole is unsure how to proceed and those working within it are not always equipped with the latest and most relevant information. This tends to affect those who are involved in choosing and following particular subject options in ways which are not always appropriate. Music as a subject area has to take some responsibility for ensuring not only that students are offered appropriate choices but that a suitable range of different kinds of course is available which can lead logically to a particular range of futures.

Ainley's (2003) 'seamless web' of post-14 education has not yet materialised for music but there are signs that the new agencies which have been established are genuinely attempting to bring industry and education together. The different strands of music education and the music industry will need to work much more closely together in future if they are to succeed in coordinating students' aspirations with appropriate qualifications and to develop meaningful, relevant qualifications which young people will wish to undertake prior to embarking upon careers in the music industry.

Acknowledgements

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