

Music and Social Class: Implications of Widening Participation in Higher Education for Student Experience of Teaching and Learning in Music¹

A summary of a project funded by a PALATINE Development Award

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University of Sheffield, September 2004.

Introduction

This research investigates the influence of socio-economic background on the undergraduate student experience of teaching and learning within a University music department. Music in HE has a problematic record in terms of social inclusion: a recent internal Annual Review of Teaching at Sheffield University Music Department noted that Music fails to attract applicants/students from lower socio-economic groups (*2003-04 Annual Review of Teaching Quality in 2002-03*, 2004). I examine the extent of this problem, and its implications for student experience: for example, if the increasing student intake appears to be diversifying, what happens to non-traditional students when they enter HE Music programmes? Does socio-economic background influence student experience of teaching and learning, and what are the implications of this for teaching and learning practices? I examine these issues through the case study of Sheffield University Department of Music.

Who studies Music in Higher Education?

Historically, entrants to Higher Education have been from the higher socio-economic groups. Since the 1997 UK General Election Government strategies have aimed to increase the participation rate in English HEIs from the current 41% to 50% of those aged 18-30 by 2010², and to make it more socially inclusive via strategies to Widen Participation. However, the gap between the participation rates of those from different

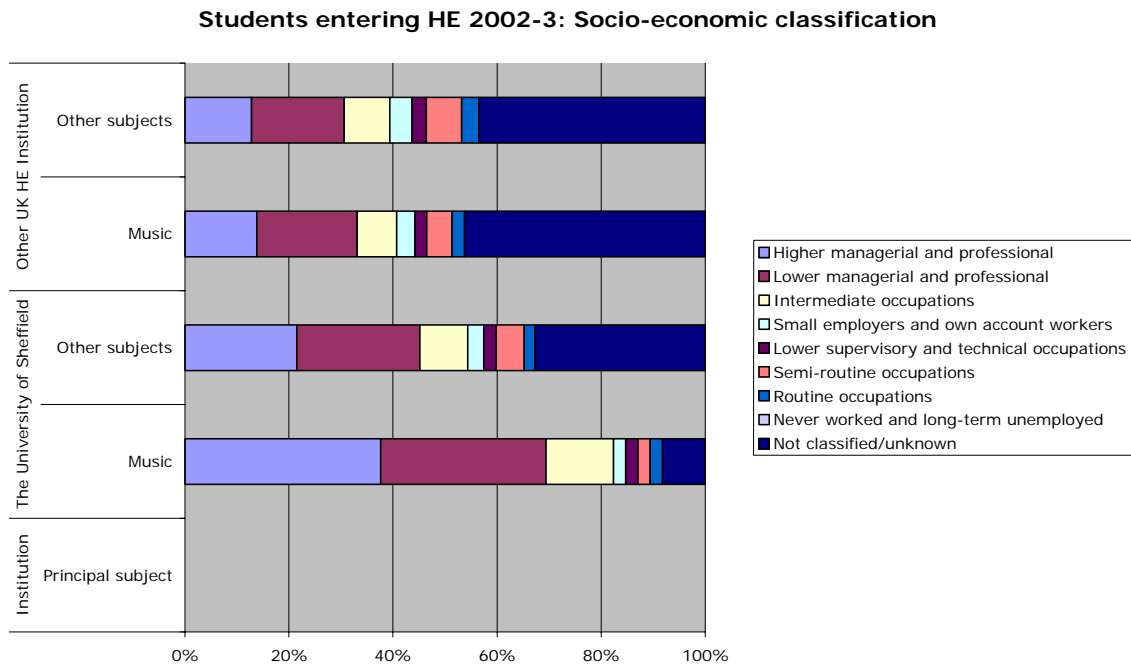
¹ This research was funded by a PALATINE Development Award, 2004. With thanks to Sue Pennington for her research assistance and to Dave Moore for the construction of the online questionnaire. Thanks also to Alan Skelton and members of the MEd in Teaching and Learning for University Lecturers at Sheffield University 2002-04 for their input on the ideas in this report. I would also like to thank the many students who participated in this research.

² Measured by "Initial Entry Rate" to a one year full-time HE programme,

socio-economic groups persists, and those from families with relatively high incomes are still most likely to gain and take up a place to study in HE (Layer, 2004).

Music programmes show a similar predominance of students from the top three socio-economic groups as the national average (Figure 1)³. By contrast, over 80% of entrants to Sheffield University Music degree programmes come from the top three social groups, against a distribution in the general population of 43% (Office for National Statistics, 2004). The predominance of students at Sheffield University from the highest social classes is consistent with its status as one of the Russell Group of Universities, which tend to have a large proportion of students from these groups.

Figure 1



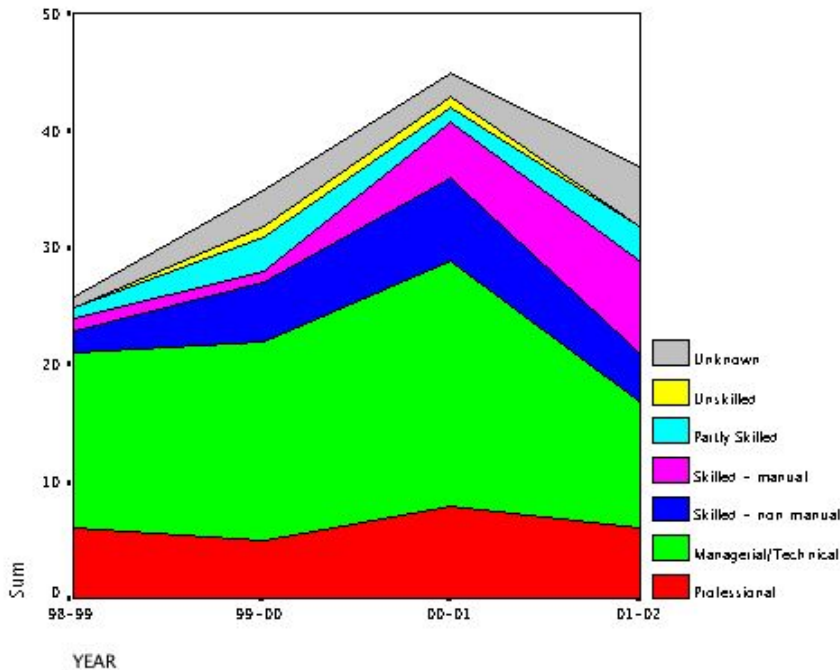
Comparison of the social class of entrants to Music at Sheffield University 1998-2002⁴ reveals an increase in the proportion of students from managerial (II), skilled (IIIN and IIIM) and partly skilled (IV) backgrounds. Interestingly, the largest increase in these groups occurred in years of significant increases in total student intake (1998-01) to the Music programmes at Sheffield. This seems to suggest that increasing student numbers

³ Where data on social class is cited it uses one of two classification systems. From 1998-99 to 2001-02, data on socio-economic classification of entrants to Higher education used a National Statistics classifications based on occupation (SC, formerly Registrar General's Social Class). Data for 2002-03 uses the National Statistics Socio-Economic Classification (NS-SEC), which describes different forms of employment relations.

⁴ The only data available from HESA for longitudinal analysis.

are associated with an increase in participation (Figure 2).

Figure 2: Social class of entrants to Music at Sheffield University, 1998-02.



Why should music be “posher” than other subjects?

- the need for specialist instrumental tuition pre-HE which is not available free through school, and which therefore excludes potential applicants from poorer backgrounds, particularly in relation to learning of classical instruments
- the cost and time required to transport children to instrumental lessons and rehearsals requires considerable parental support, and practicing requires space to rehearse and tolerance from the whole family.
- studying Music at HE does not lead on to an obvious career path and may therefore attract those who do not worry about their future career.
- Classical Music constitutes a form of middle-class culture, by virtue of its historically privileged position (Small, 1998).
- failure of pre-1992 institutions to engage with popular music. This maintains social distinctions because it values the culture of the Western European middle-classes more highly than that of other social groups and concentration of PMS in post-1992 HEIs perpetuates music as the basis for class divide. Cloonan has argued that Popular Music Studies is important within WP because it is relevant to the experience of a widened student population, it recognises existing student expertise, and everyday knowledge, and allows a more inclusive society and curriculum (Cloonan, forthcoming).

Case Study – Sheffield University Music Department

Following research into the “hidden curriculum”, the idea that education serves to allocate and to socialize students, and the critique of disciplinary emphases posited by the “new musicology”, I identify potential ways in which the University and departmental context may construct or maintain social divisions.

- The course is structured so that Year 1 provides a foundation for subsequent specialisation in Year 2 and 3. However, popular music is absent from Year 1 despite options in Year 2 and 3.
- Year 2 and 3 option restrictions position some repertoire (Western classical) and approaches (historical) more centrally than others (supported by Pitts’ finding that students thought the department emphasised performance skills and that some elements of study were more important than others (Pitts, 2003))
- There is acceptance among staff that students entering the Music degree at Sheffield come with different kinds (sometimes as expressed as “fewer”!) skills in Music than hitherto, as a consequence of changes to the school syllabus. This has led to changes to the teaching of harmony courses in Year 1.
- Classical musical performance is institutionalised in relation to popular and world musics: classical ensembles tend to be departmentally organized and performances take place as part of the “Firth Hall” concert series, located within the University’s central administrative building. Firth Hall reinforces the alignment of classical music and the music department with the institution of Sheffield University via its central setting, and by virtue of the décor. Until recently a Union Jack hung above the stage reaffirming the alignment of classical music, institution and state. Students also participate in pop, rock and jazz ensembles, and some work as DJs, but these activities take place outside Departmental time and space. The exception to this is folk music which has recently been introduced as a separate degree path at Sheffield.
- students perceive the department to be a friendly “cosy” place, due to the small student numbers, and the physical location in Victorian domestic buildings. However, for some students this “cosiness” is perceived as cliquy and results in a lack of privacy (Pitts, 2003) or perceived favoritism towards some students by staff (Burland, forthcoming).
- students at Sheffield music department undergo a transition from a self-conception as “performer” to that of an “amateur” musician (Burland, forthcoming), due to a perceived lack of performance opportunities, a lack of an intense and personal relationship with their instrumental teacher, and a lack of

support from the institution.⁵

Previous research reveals a number of factors likely to influence student experience. Students from lower socio-economic groups may be more likely to experience a lack of support and understanding from their family and wider community. They may find their own values at odds with those of family and friends, and therefore experience alienation in both home and educational contexts. Responses to HE are therefore likely to be mediated by the preservation of, or change to, self-identity in these contexts. Students from lower socio-economic groups are also likely to be more debt averse and to take on paid employment in term-time, and work longer hours, with subsequent impact upon academic achievement. They are also less likely to have accurate expectations of HE life, and are more likely to lack self-belief.

A central issue is the way that students' identities mediate relationships with, and attitudes to HE: to what extent students experience engaged learning, whether they experience themselves as "outsiders" to HE, and the impact on relationships with family and home communities. The specific educational context of the Music department at Sheffield may influence this: namely, the small numbers in the music department may exacerbate or moderate feelings of being an "outsider", and the particular kinds of activities afforded by the study of Music may mediate this further (e.g. music performance has the potential to offer more opportunities for social interaction). Another issue is whether students within the Music department experience different financial pressures and whether these have an impact on learning.

Survey on Student Experience

In order to gather information about student experience of teaching and learning, and the salience of social class, an on-line survey was carried out with students at the University of Sheffield Department of Music. The questions focused on four areas of experience: socio-economic background, access to HE, aspects of HE life, attitudes to learning and the department. Forty-one students responded (a 36% response rate), and constituted a representative sample of the undergraduate population of music students by age, year group, gender, and ethnicity. The findings of the survey are summarized below:

- none of the students were first generation to HE,
- a minority of respondents qualified for financial assistance from the state, and even fewer identified themselves as coming from working class backgrounds.
- a small number of students said that they did not fit-in to the music department.

⁵ These are expressed negatively since Burland's questions explore why students have *not* developed a professional performing identity, rather than why they *have* developed other skills.

Certain patterns of experience tend to be associated with this latter, minority group of respondents:

- students take term-time employment and work longer hours if their parents are exempt from paying tuition fees and/or do not pay maintenance costs, i.e. students from poorer backgrounds are more likely to have term-time employment and work longer hours in paid employment.
- students who have paid employment during term-time score 3% lower, on average, in yearly assessments than other students⁶, i.e. students from poorer backgrounds are more likely to show lower academic achievement.
- students perceived the Music programme and Department as fairly traditional in its valorization of Western Art Music, and noted the relative absence of popular culture.

The majority of students characterised the Department as a middle class institution. This was unproblematic for most students, who identified themselves with this image. However, a minority of students felt that they did not “fit-in” to the Music department, and some identified themselves as different from other students and staff. This was explored through semi-structured interviews

Interviews on Student Experience

Ten informants participated in the interview study: seven of whom were current students at Sheffield and the remaining three of whom had recently withdrawn during or at the end of Year 1. I designed the interview schedule to elicit information about informants’ backgrounds and experience of life as a student. Analysis was carried out using a grounded theory approach in which emergent themes were identified. My analysis identified two main issues within respondents’ accounts: first, aspirations to HE, and to the study of music, and how respondents felt these had been supported or hindered; and second, the degree to which respondents felt they ‘fitted-in’ to the music department.

One of the ten informants was first generation to HE, but he was not the first of his family to attend HE. In addition, all the informants came from families containing other members with musical interests, and who valued HE. All but one of the respondents described Sheffield music department as a friendly, and close-knit community within which they felt included to different degrees. Given this generally high degree of integration into the department, and the rather homogenous pool of

⁶ This three percentage point difference seems small, yet for some students it could mean the difference between obtaining an upper or lower second class degree, which is estimated to confer a 4-5% earnings advantage (Naylor, Smith, & McKnight, 2000).

informants, it is unsurprising that few of the differences which emerged between students' experiences could be directly attributed to differences in socio-economic background. Despite this limitation, informants' experiences of the department show some interesting patterns:

- the degree to which informants felt included in the department was determined by the opportunities they had to participate in Department ensembles, which was determined, in turn, by the instrument the individual played, and a circular process in which "being known" within the department lead to more opportunities and greater involvement.
- friendship groups were often based upon instrumental identities, and the more time informants spent in the department buildings (rehearsing and practicing) the more integrated they tended to feel. Students viewed performance activities as synonymous with social integration, which in turn had benefits for the academic and emotional well-being of informants.
- in the first year, integration was influenced by the extent to which their living accommodation facilitated socialisation with other music students.
- students who identified themselves as having a particular interest in classical music felt satisfied with the course; other students noted the absence of modules dealing with aspects of popular music (i.e. film and pop musics). This was not discussed by informants in terms of class culture. However, one of the students who mentioned the absence of popular musics was the student from the "non-traditional" background.
- respondents did not experience the teaching they received as an unwelcome imposition of views different from their own – perhaps because the views were their own in any case (as suggested by the satisfaction many students felt with the "traditional" curriculum) or because they were the subject of discussion rather than imposition (as suggested by students' perceptions of an absence of barriers between staff and students).

Social class was not a concept which informants spontaneously mentioned.

Indeed, when directly asked about whether social class had entered into their experience of HE, informants often claimed that background was unimportant: informants remarked that other students never talked about class, they argued that HE was a "fresh start", and they reconceived social class as affluence. In this respect some cultural differences did emerge: certain students were more debt averse than others (notably, one of these was the "non-traditional" student), and had taken on a larger number of hours of term-time paid employment, with subsequent self-perceived detrimental effects on their academic

achievement and satisfaction with their experience of HE.

Conclusions

The survey and interviews with students at Sheffield University Music Department revealed that students were predominantly from the top three social classes, and almost all had at least one parent who had attended HE. No respondent was the first of their family to attend HE. Students had experienced substantial family support in pursuing music to HE level, with many continuing to receive financial support while at University. This suggests that as an institution, Sheffield University music department recruits from a fairly narrow band of society. This is no surprise in itself, given the statistics on entrants to Music in HE cited earlier. It is the ramifications of this for student experience of HE which are significant.

Students participated in HE in conformance with familial and societal expectations, congruent with their generational, and socio-economic background. The middle class culture of the Music department was only seen as problematic by a few students (who noted the absence of popular culture within the curriculum), and a similarly small number of students felt that they were unlike the typical music student and did not fit in to the music department.

Performance was a central theme within students' discussions of their integration into HE and the music department: friendship groups were often structured around instrumental identities, and students who experienced themselves as "outsiders" had fewer performance opportunities. As a consequence they spent less time in the department, and had fewer opportunities to socialise with other students and staff, which meant that "barriers" between students and staff remained intact.

Social class was never spontaneously mentioned by students, except once in relation to the forms of address used by teaching staff. However, it appears to be an "invisible norm" rather than something which exerts no influence, since socio-economic class did differentiate some aspects of HE experience. The concepts of HE as a "fresh start", and as a way of "bettering oneself", were used solely by non-traditional students, and suggest that these ways of conceiving HE may be particular to this group of students. It suggests that for nontraditional students HE offers an escape from limitations of the home culture and is seen as aspirational. Socio-economic class was reconceived as financial inequality by most students. Indeed, socio-economic background was found to influence whether students had term-time employment, the number of hours spent in employment, and consequent decrements in academic achievement. Thus, although social class is not a category which students explicitly make use of in their accounts of experience in HE, it can be seen to exert an influence

upon the attitudes and behaviours of students within HE.

The assumption which underlies this research is that better understanding of student experience and integration into departmental life will lead to improvements in teaching and learning. In this respect I am influenced by Mann's reconceptualisation of learning which moves away from the framework of "surface" and "deep" approaches to learning, to the notion of "alienated" and "engaged" learning (Mann, 2001). Future research could explore the relationship between learning, and student integration into HE life. It suggests that investigation of alienation in educational contexts and its causes would be worth exploring in greater depth, since socio-economic class is just one factor within this.

Applications

This report provides a summary of the main findings of this research, which will be published in full at a later date. In the meantime, these conclusions will be disseminated to teaching staff at Sheffield, with the intention of starting a discussion about potential changes to curriculum and assessment methods. The findings already suggest a number of ways in which the student experience of HE could be enhanced:

- expectations should be made clear at student induction, since students from backgrounds with little or no family experience of HE are likely to be less familiar with HE teaching and learning styles, and HE culture. Some aspects of this are currently being addressed at Sheffield by a project developing Year 1 study skills (Pitts, 2004).
- careful thought should be given to the provision of performance opportunities, since this was the most significant factor influencing students' social integration. On a local level, this research has revealed a need to monitor the provision of performance modules in Year 1 at Sheffield University.
- the opportunity to form close relationships with teaching staff is beneficial for many students. In contrast, a culture of "us" and "them" is detrimental to student experience of HE. Small-group teaching, being "known" by staff, and "interactive" teaching all facilitate this.
- breadth of the undergraduate curriculum impacts on student satisfaction: many students would appreciate the opportunity to study a range of topics and approaches. At Sheffield, this suggests that there could be a more balanced coverage of genres within the first year, with the introduction of popular music studies.
- assessment practices could take into account student working patterns:

continuous assessment, and portfolio submissions are more manageable for students in term-time employment than exams and coursework deadlines which fall immediately after vacations when students may have been in full-time employment. Assessment practices which do not recognize student working patterns therefore disadvantage students from lower socio-economic backgrounds, since these students are more debt averse, have less financial help from parents and take on more and longer hours of term-time employment. If social class does not appear to be a particularly divisive factor within the context of Sheffield Music department, this only serves to highlight the broader social inequalities which mean that certain kinds of students end up studying music at certain kinds of institution. While this situation persists, opportunity exists to enhance the experience of those students whose backgrounds are at odds with the socio-economic norm of their particular institution.

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