

New research reveals national inequality in access to A-Level music education

New research commissioned and released today by the Royal College of Music has revealed dramatic year-on-year declines in the study of A-Level Music and a correlation between lack of provision and social deprivation. The most deprived areas in the country face significant difficulties as A-Level music provision continues to shrink, whilst across a number of large regions there is no provision at all. The study was undertaken by researchers at the Centre for the Study of Practice and Culture in Education at Birmingham City University.

The researchers used POLAR¹ data to find out how likely young people are to participate in music A-Level across the UK and how this varies by geographical area. The number of students taking A-Level music is a good measure of the health of music provision at sixth-form level in secondary schools. Between 2013/14 and 2017/18 at least 60% of A-Level music entries came from schools in postcodes with POLAR ratings of 4 or 5 (5 showing the highest rate participation). Those from geographical areas with historic access to Higher Education are therefore much more likely to engage in a music A-Level. Areas of lower levels of A-Level music entry correlated with lower POLAR ratings and greater levels of deprivation. This is a significant finding that has profound implications for equitable access to music education, especially at advanced levels.

Knowsley, Tower Hamlets and Middlesbrough are three local authorities that didn't enter any students for A-Level music in 2017/18 and are also amongst the most deprived local authorities in the country (based on data found in the Indices of Multiple Deprivation). Blackpool, Tameside, Barnsley, Slough, Hartlepool, Redcar and Cleveland and Bury were amongst the localities with only a single entry centre for A-Level music and similarly high ratings for social deprivation.

Many students in the UK who learn a musical instrument to a high level also study A-Level Music. Nearly all applicants to music conservatoires therefore have an A-level in Music. There is no POLAR data available for learning an instrument, so A-Level data is the closest it is possible to get to understanding the social background of the pool of potential UK conservatoire applicants.

Professor Colin Lawson, Director of the Royal College of Music, comments;

“Large geographical areas are completely without music provision at A-Level standard and this is especially alarming when research tells us that these are areas of the greatest social deprivation. We know there is a crisis in music education. The inequality in provision is now deep within the schools system and has been for years. The conservatoire sector cannot recruit from the greatest pool of talent and, ultimately, the music profession will lose out.”

Lord Black of Brentwood, Chairman of the Royal College of Music comments; “High-quality music education must be available to all, regardless of means or background. Many of the most talented

¹ What is POLAR? The Office for Students defines this as: the participation of local areas (POLAR) classification groups areas across the UK based on the proportion of the young population that participates in higher education. It looks at how likely young people are to participate in higher education across the UK and shows how this varies by area. POLAR classifies local areas into five groups - or quintiles - based on the proportion of 18 year olds who enter higher education aged 18 or 19 years old. Quintile one shows the lowest rate of participation. Quintile five shows the highest rate of participation.

children are being denied the chance of a proper music education at school, which is now in a state of crisis. The long-term impact on the UK's cultural life and our creative industries - as well as the profound impact on the well-being of children - is incalculable."

Over 20% of A-Level music entries are clustered so as to be found in fewer than 50 schools (just 4% of entry centres), with the makeup of this group changing little across the five years under consideration here. This highlights a trend of stability in centres of large entry across the country, and may go some way to account for a relative lack of diversity in conservatoire applications nationwide.

There are only a few areas which offer sustained provision that is able to support students through A-Level music, with London and the South East showing the highest number of entries for music A-Level. Hertfordshire, Surrey, Hampshire, Manchester are four local authorities which also have high numbers of A-Level entrants. This status was maintained across multiple years and points to the relative stability of A-Level music provision in these localities, including in the state-funded sector.

Independent schools account for a disproportionately high number of A-Level music entries when compared with national entry statistics. Trends observed in this analysis show that the proportion of entry centres from the independent sector has actually increased slightly over the last five years.

Recent research shows that music provision in many schools, especially those in poorer areas, is under threat as part of a broader diminishing of creative subjects in these areas (All-Party Parliamentary Group for Music Education, Incorporated Society of Musicians, & University of Sussex, 2019). One factor is the introduction of the EBacc which has resulted in many secondary schools cutting provision for non-core subjects, and music has been a significant casualty.

The full report is available to read at RCM's open access research repository:

<http://researchonline.rcm.ac.uk/502/>

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Notes to Editors

This research was jointly commissioned by the Royal College of Music, London and the Royal Academy of Music.

Birmingham City University researchers used publicly available datasets from the National Pupil Database, provided by the Department for Education, and POLAR postcode data. POLAR data is compiled from national census data and university admissions data to give a rating of the levels of access to higher education on a scale of 1 to 5, with 1 indicating areas with the lowest levels of engagement in higher education and 5 highlighting areas with the highest levels of university participation.

[About the Royal College of Music](#)

Founded in 1882, the Royal College of Music (RCM) is a world leading music conservatoire with a prestigious history and contemporary outlook. Our 800 undergraduate and postgraduate students come from over 60 countries and are taught in a dynamic environment, leaving the RCM to become the outstanding performers, conductors and composers of the future.

For the fourth consecutive year in 2019, the RCM was ranked as the top conservatoire in the UK for the Performing Arts in the QS World University Rankings. RCM was also ranked the top UK conservatoire for music in The Times and Sunday Times Good University Guide 2019 and top music conservatoire for overall student satisfaction in the 2018 National Student Satisfaction (NSS) Survey according to the Times Higher Education.

RCM professors are leaders in their fields and, under such expert guidance, RCM students regularly achieve remarkable success around the globe.

Among our alumni are composers and performers such as Sir Hubert Parry, Benjamin Britten, Gustav Holst, Samuel Coleridge-Taylor, Lord Lloyd Webber, Rebecca Clarke, Dame Joan Sutherland, Dame Sarah Connolly, Elizabeth Watts, Ralph Vaughan Williams, Mark-Anthony Turnage and Sir Thomas Allen.

Regular visitors to the RCM include Bernard Haitink, Sir Thomas Allen, Vladimir Ashkenazy, Alina Ibragimova and Lang Lang. Our most recent honorary doctorates include Vladimir Jurowski, Dame Kiri Te Kanawa, Sir Roger Norrington, Sir Bryn Terfel, Steve Reich and Maxim Vengerov (Polonsky Visiting Professor of Violin).