

Music Education for the Real World:

A Comparison of Secondary and
Tertiary Music Education Routes
in England

Exploring Education, Identity, and Industry Relevance
Doctoral Research Project
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Research Context

The relationship between the music industry and the music education provision available is regarded very differently across musicians of varying backgrounds, both musically and as part of their professional and vocational experiences.

Aim of the Study

To examine how music education influences identity, credibility, and career sustainability among musicians across educational pathways.

Research Questions

1. How do musicians evaluate their education in relation to their careers?

2. How is identity shaped through educational pathways?

3. How relevant is institutional learning to real-world demands?

Methodological Framework



- Qualitative design



- Reflexive Thematic Analysis (Braun & Clarke)



- Multi-case study approach



- Focus on lived experience and meaning-making

Participants



- Instrumentalists, educators, producers, engineers



- Classical and commercial musicians



- Varied education levels (GCSE to PhD)



- Extensive industry experience

Data Collection

- Semi-structured interviews

- Focused on education, career, and identity

- Captured narratives of adaptation, frustration, and transformation

Data Analysis

- Iterative coding

- Theme development via pattern recognition

- Reflexivity was key to interpretation and transparency

Authenticity

- Authentic teaching—industry-informed and practical—was valued over abstract, theory-heavy instruction.

Self- Directed Learning

- Informal learning, mentorship, and community spaces were key to skill development, often more than formal education.

Industry Disconnect

- Curricula often ignore portfolio careers, flexibility, and collaborative skills vital for industry work.

Identity and Self- Worth

- Education shaped legitimacy and self-image—sometimes reinforcing it, sometimes undermining it.

Vocational vs Academic Divide

- Academic study = prestigious but detached.
- Vocational training = practical but less respected.

Case Example

- One participant moved from failed A-Levels to private study to a PhD—highlighting value of alternative routes.

Institutional Culture

- Some institutions were seen as inclusive; others as elitist, rigid, or irrelevant to commercial music.

Access and Equity

- Vocational routes felt more accessible and diverse.
- Academic routes often excluded those from under-resourced backgrounds.

Educational Gaps

- Participants noted gaps in:
 - Business training
 - Tech skills
 - Interdisciplinary work
 - Career preparation

Recommendations

- • Align education with industry realities
- • Embrace multiple learning paths
- • Value vocational and lived experience
- • Support identity and portfolio careers

Contribution to Knowledge

- Challenges traditional models by foregrounding lived musician experiences.
- Proposes curriculum redesigns grounded in the realities of 21st-century careers.

Thank You

- Thank you for listening.
- Questions and discussion welcome.
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