“What are you going to do with that?” Music students’ perceptions of the value(s) of their degree.

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Eleanor Chung

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Introduction

The terms “Mickey Mouse”; “low-value”; and “rip-off” have all featured in UK media headlines such as *Forbes* (Morrison, 2023), *The Telegraph* (Corfe, 2024) and *Evening Standard* (Cockerell, 2024) to refer to the Arts subjects, which according to the Office for Students’ (OfS) consultation paper, are not ‘strategic priorities’ (OfS, 2021). Following the rapid expansion of higher education in the UK in the 1990s whereby ‘market mechanisms’ were introduced by Conservative governments at the time, the focus has been on producing a highly skilled labour force with the Dearing Report (1997) ensuring that employability be placed on the policy agenda. To reduce the risk of graduate un/under-employment, OfS proposed to slash funding to the Arts subjects by 50% to thus reduce the number of students enrolling on courses that supposedly provide low economic returns for both society and the individual. The value of higher education in the arts and humanities, has long been a subject of debate among educators, students, and policymakers. In recent years, with the rising costs of tuition and the emphasis on graduate employability, this question has become even more pressing, particularly regarding music degrees. Music graduates follow a diverse range of career paths both inside and outside of music and this dissertation seeks to explore and understand the perspective of those who choose to invest in a music degree despite the stereotypes and criticisms the subject has faced. In many societies, the arts are simultaneously praised in terms of culture yet often put into doubt surrounding practicality. For music students, this dichotomy presents a unique set of challenges and opportunities as they must navigate the rigorous demands of their discipline in addition to the social perceptions and economic realities that are attached to this field of study.

Through qualitative research methods, this study aims to examine music students’ perceptions of the multifaceted value of a music degree through gaining a better insight of their motivations for studying music against the backdrop of a highly marketised higher education in England. By investigating these perceptions, this study aims to contribute to broader discourse on the role and relevance of music education in contemporary society. It will provide insights into how music students reconcile the dichotomy between passion and practicality and offer a nuanced understanding of the factors that influence educational and career choices. Ultimately, this research seeks to affirm the diverse experiences, personal fulfilment, and career choices that a music degree can offer and challenges the reductive

question, “what are you going to do with that?” with a more comprehensive exploration of value and meaning in music education.

After the 1992 Further and Higher Education Act abolished the binary system and polytechnics assumed the ‘university’ title, a range of music programmes from ‘plain’ Music to Music Technology emerged. This study focuses on ‘plain’ Music courses that are most commonly offered at Russell Group universities, which typically consists of music history, music analysis, the study of Western and non-Western musics and aspects of performance or composition. By comparison, music programmes can be more costly to deliver than other non-performing Arts and Humanities subjects as they often require concert halls, practice spaces, and music technology equipment. Therefore, by cutting Music degrees, universities have the opportunity to make huge financial savings and redirect resources towards the STEM subjects which are equally if not more costly to run but deemed more valuable. St. Andrew’s University was the first to close their music department (1988), and since the 2000s a number of other universities have followed suit with the most recent being Oxford Brookes set to officially close their department in 2026. On the one hand, there is a lack of supply due to lack of funding, but on the other hand, there has been a lack of demand as secondary music provision has been in decline leaving pupils with insufficient music skills required to enrol on these programmes. Challenges for university music departments across the UK are varied as the landscape of higher education has changed over the past few decades resulting in universities functioning like ‘businesses’ impacting the role of the student. The idea of the university as an institution of knowledge and research production versus the notion of higher education as a commodity has also been a continual debate and has had implications for how students value their education. There are two key debates that are of importance here – namely the value of arts and humanities degrees, and the purpose of higher education, with the latter seemingly shaping the former. This research focuses more on the first debate, giving voice to the students who enrol in a degree that could potentially be threatened in the future.

The next chapter will begin by providing an overview of the changing landscape of higher education in England following the massification and marketisation of the sector since the 1990s. Following this, will be a review of key policy documents that have reinforced the notion of education as a commodity and how policy discourse has shaped the value of the arts and humanities subjects, particularly with Music degrees. Having set the context, I will

examine the notion of value using Shalom H. Schwartz' conceptual Theory of Basic Values in order to understand how Music students ascribe value to their degrees from a bottom-up perspective. The following outlines the research aims and research questions:

Research Aims:

1. To explore students' motivations for attending university against a backdrop of a highly marketised education system.
2. To understand why students choose to pursue Music and what values they ascribe to their degrees.

Research Questions:

1. What values do students ascribe to their Music degree?
2. What are Music students' motivations for attending higher education and choice of Music?
3. How does motivation for attending university/choosing Music either align or conflict with the values they ascribe to their degree?

LITERATURE REVIEW

1. THE PURPOSE OF HIGHER EDUCATION

The purpose of higher education in England has undergone significant transformations over the centuries to reflect broader societal changes, economic demands and cultural shifts. Initially established to serve the elite and advance scholarly pursuits, higher education now aims to transcend the needs of the individual and address societal challenges. This evolution has sparked key debates surrounding the purpose and value of higher education. Central to these discussions are the tensions between economic and intrinsic value, market-driven approaches versus holistic education approaches, the prioritization of STEM fields over the Arts and Humanities, and the balance between individual and societal benefits. These debates shape current policy and practice reflecting ongoing struggles to define the true purpose of higher education.

Economic and market-driven values

As a result of the massification and marketisation of higher education, the new management of higher education in England has been characterised by a shift towards market-driven policies, increased accountability and performance-based funding. This approach, often referred to as the 'neoliberal model', emphasizes efficiency, competition and consumer choice (Peters & Roberts, 2008) The marketisation of higher education institutions (HEIs) has opened up a competitive market where they must attract students through marketing, branding and the pursuit of high rankings resulting in the term 'entrepreneurial university' emerging recent literature (Etzkowitz et al., 2000; Bikse et al., 2016). Olssen and Peters (2005) illustrate how the onset of neoliberal discourse has given rise to new public management (NPM) likening the functioning of universities to businesses strategies. New performance-based metrics have only encouraged this style of management with The Teaching Excellence Framework (TEF), first carried out in 2014, assessing institutional performance based on teaching quality, learning environment, and educational and professional outcomes. Therefore, there has been a rising pressure for institutions to meet these narrow standards, which can pose a threat to the innovation and open way of thinking and teaching that universities were traditionally valued for.

The introduction and subsequent increase of tuition fees have positioned students as consumers, with expectations for value for money and a return on their educational investment. Molesworth et al., (2009) highlight this as a concern as "once…, the undergraduate had the potential to be transformed into a scholar, someone who thinks critically, but in our consumer society such 'transformation' is denied" in favour of student-as-consumer ideals (p. 276). Levidow (2002) acknowledges the link between marketisation of higher education and the promotion of a knowledge economy. The drive towards a knowledge economy and Gary Becker's notion of Human Capital Theory (HCT) (1962) really brought to light the economic value of knowledge, positing knowledge as an intangible asset vital to the labour market. The closening relationship between higher education and the workplace has encouraged students "'to *have* a degree' rather than 'be learners'" (Molesworth et al., 2009, p.276). In its impact assessment the Department for Business, Innovation & Skills states therefore, that the role of the university is integral to ensure that the United Kingdom "can succeed in an increasingly competitive global economy, the UK needs to ensure that it has access to a sufficient supply of high level, economically valuable skills" (BIS, 2016, p.8).

Whilst it is widely accepted that a highly educated workforce leads to higher productivity levels and therefore stimulates economic growth, many studies have focused on the stratification of degree subjects in relation to economic returns (Walker and Zhu, 2013) (Chevalier, 2011). According to *the relative labour market returns to different degrees* research report (Belfield et al., 2018), the creative arts scored the lowest on repeated accounts with institutions such as Royal College of Music and Trinity Conservatoire of Music and Dance proving to have the lowest average earnings. The economic focus in these reports highlights the emerging civic mission of higher education "whereby college and universities have begun to operate as a corporate industry with predominant economic goals and market-oriented values…which has reduced higher education to a transactional process rather than maintaining its transformative potential" (Chan, 2016, p.2).

Intrinsic Value

What is particularly challenging about measuring a Music degree in purely economic terms is that the artistic or other contributions may not be immediately visible or easily quantifiable and graduates enter a diverse range of sectors in and outside of the music industry. Therefore, Towse (2006) questions whether the application of HCT to the artistic labour market is an

appropriate tool for measuring outcomes and success. HCT is defined by Rosen as the "…stock of skills and productive knowledge embodied in people. The yield or return on human capital investment lies in enhancing a person's skills and earning power, and in increasing the efficiency of economic decision-making both within and without the market economy" (Rosen, 1987, p.682).

The dominant discourse often portrays economic or extrinsic value as the more worthy and more profitable. To some extent, students have adopted this mindset and attend higher education as a means to increase their earning potential, but for many this is not the sole purpose as shown by others who resist this school of thought through subject choices that do not conform with this model. Through either reproducing or resisting neoliberal ideals, students will find out for themselves whether this ideology is compatible with the higher education system.

'Art for Art's Sake' was a phrase often used to ascribe value to the aesthetic musical experience. However, as Crooke (2016) points out, the increasing need to 'make the case' for the Arts and justify music education has now led intrinsic value to refer to the "*benefits* of musical participation that are specifically musical in nature". He also argues that the distinction between extrinsic and intrinsic values are not so clear-cut but in fact the major quality of music education is that it encompasses all types of education whether it be musical, academic, social or cultural – all of which are inextricably linked to one another.

Education as a Public Good

The public good debate in higher education centres on whether universities primarily serve individual interests or broader societal benefits, which has deep-seated tensions between neoliberal policies and the traditional view that universities serve broader societal interests beyond economic imperatives. Therefore, the debate is also linked to the cultural value debate. How and in what ways value is ascribed is important to both debates and has been a complex value in defending the Arts and Humanities. The impact agenda in British higher education policymaking has become an important topic of debate as 'impact' appeared as a criterion on the UK Research Council funding assessment and has been demonstrated by the REF (Belfiore, 2015, p.99). It appears that economic value seems to frame most of the discussions regarding higher education in policymaking and further still, has remained unchallenged. Whilst this may be a valid argument to justify public spending, this dominant

narrative "represent[s] a particular, pragmatic and economically inflected articulation of what makes the humanities of value to the public, which highlights economic profitability over other benefits" (p.97). The development and the defending of Music as an academic field is not new (Hartshorn, 1963), but as a result of neoliberal policies prioritizing agendas such as 'graduate employability' and 'impact', there has been a shift in the argument towards 'making a case' in terms of economic benefits. Helen Small notes, "the particular form of justification that involves articulating reasons why we should consider the higher study of the humanities (university and research) a public good is a modern undertaking, driven by institutional political and economic pressures" (Small, 2013 as cited in Belfiore, 2015, p.98). The subsequent examination of policy documents concerning higher education and the creative arts seeks to highlight the framing of value in economic terms within the British policy context.

2. POLICY CONTEXT: HIGHER EDUCATION

According to Tanesini (1994), concepts that are debated in policymaking contexts can be viewed as "proposals about how we ought to proceed from here" whose purpose is "to influence the evolution of ongoing practices" (Tanesini as cited in Bacchi, 2000, p. 45). Therefore, public policy plays a pivotal role in shaping perceptions, as it sets the framework within which individuals and institutions operate and interact with each other. Through legislation, funding and regulatory frameworks, policymakers can emphasize certain value priorities and outcomes over others. In the realm of higher education for example, that prioritises STEM fields and employability metrics may influence public perception to view these areas as more valuable than the Arts and Humanities. By delineating what is funded, regulated and promoted, public policy not only reflects societal values but actively shapes public attitudes about what is important and worthwhile.

Several key policy documents have framed the value of higher education in England, each reflecting different priorities and shaping public perceptions in distinct ways. Some of the earliest most influential documents include The Dearing Report (1997), which focused on the future of higher education, highlighting the importance of "lifelong learning", the need for higher education to support the knowledge economy and the role of universities in social cohesion. It introduced the concept of students contributing to the cost of their education through tuition fees. This report helped to frame higher education as both a personal investment and a public good, balancing economic and intrinsic values. In more recent years,

there has been the Higher Education and Research Act (2017), which established the Office for Students (OfS) and emphasized marketing principles in higher education. It promoted competition, student choice and "value for money", which frames higher education primarily in economic terms. This served to reinforce the perception of students as consumers and universities as service providers, prioritising employability and economic outcomes. The House of Commons Education Committee published a report titled, *Value for money in higher education*, which acknowledged the consequences of the Browne Report (2010), which led to the rise in tuition fees to £9,000 per year funded by income-contingent loans has also contributed to the notion of 'student-as-consumer' and the idea of education as an investment. It notes that, "higher education must play a role in meeting the country's skills needs and preparing students for the Fourth Industrial Revolution" (HC 343, 2018, p.3). The report also attributes the use of the phrase "value for money" in public and policy discourse to the marketisation of higher education. Through an examination of the Department for Education's (DfE) Longitudinal Education Outcomes (LEO) dataset, both institution and subject choice significantly affect graduate earnings with findings that STEM subjects such as Medicine, Maths or Economics offer 30% more than the average graduate and would therefore present a better returns on investment. The *Higher Education Policy Statement and Reform* (2023) published by the DfE as a response to government consultation states that the government wishes to cut down on higher education provision that does not meet "the high-quality employment prospects and the long-term economic returns students should expect" (DfE, 2023, p.9) and given the statistics above, this threatens the survival of the creative arts subjects that consistently rank at the bottom in terms of graduate economic returns.

The heavy reliance on economic discourse in higher education policy can be problematic as it oversimplifies the diverse motivations and expectations that students may have for attending higher education and neglects the human experience of education. Through this lens it is inevitable that policies undervalue disciplines with less immediate economic returns such as Music and obscures the societal role of higher education in fostering critical thinking, innovation, and scholarship by reducing its mission to financial metrics. Kromydas (2017) juxtaposes the instrumental and intrinsic purposes of higher education and proposes a hybrid model for policymakers that equally acknowledges the two. Policy documents and literature provide a top-down perspective, influencing external factors such as governance structures and needs of the economy. What is notably absent is the voice of the students themselves –

the ones who are making the investment, as well as their experiences during and after the degree.

The predominance of economic rhetoric in policy discourse has had an implication on the future for music education although only a small proportion is dedicated to music higher education specifically. Darren Henley's independent review titled *Music Education in England* (2011) suggests music education should have closer links to industry for example, by working with Teach First to create a music teaching programme as seen in recommendation 26 (p.27). The National Plan for Music Education (NPME), *The power of music to change lives*, also notes that "the music industry has deepened its relationship with the higher education or further education sector to help those seeking to be next generation of talent to succeed in the industry" (NPME, 2022. P.69). These suggestions encourage the creation of music programmes to be more vocational in order to equip music graduates with the necessary skills to enter the graduate labour market. Proposals for the restructuring of undergraduate music education have also taken shape in South Africa, whereby De Villiers (2022) suggests a national vocational qualification (NVQ) could be a cost-effective alternative to a diploma to "address under preparedness, improve academic success and lead to high skill levels" (p.61). The solutions provided above, seem to be asking the question, how can we restructure these courses to make them align with wider policy agendas rather than dismissing them entirely? Whilst this could be the answer for now, it seems a shame that this adaptation is necessary in order to 'make the case for the arts' and ultimately undermines the value of music as a subject.

Education reforms made by the government – besides the emphasis on economic returns, can distort students', parents' or educators' perception of the Arts and Humanities. For example, the English Baccalaureate (EBacc) was introduced in 2010 under the Conservative and Liberal Democrat coalition government in an effort to encourage the choice of certain GCSE subjects that would keep "young people's options open for further study and future careers" (DfE, 2019). The facilitating subjects did not include any creative subjects such as music or drama, which clearly privileged the social sciences over the arts. Nicky Morgan, the former Secretary of State for Education during this period referred to the facilitating subjects as "high-quality subjects that will properly prepare them for life in modern Britain", undermining the value of the excluded subjects despite holding a humanities degree herself (DfE, 2014). Commenting on educational policies, Stefan Collini states that "compelling and

often devastating criticisms appear to have had little or no effect on policymaking. The arguments have not been answered they have merely been ignored…the conclusion…is that those who make policy are just not listening" (Collini, 2012, p.10). It can therefore be frustrating for students and academics in the field, who repeatedly find themselves defending the value and worth of their work.

British policy documents and literature tends to group undergraduate courses at conservatoires that specialise in performance or composition together with Music taught at a university as an academic course. It is important to distinguish between the two very different types of institutions, whose teaching, purposes, student experiences and outcomes are in fact, very different. A study conducted in the United States highlights the uncertainty of full-time employment for a Music undergraduate which "considering further the total time and money invested in music study…the situation for many graduates must be frustrating: they find themselves unable to do what they have spent much of their lives preparing to do" (Rogers, 1988, p.107). This is an example of yet another study where students studying academic music were omitted. Therefore, the aim of this research hopes to provide a platform for those enrolled on academic-oriented Music degrees to detail their experiences.

3. GRADUATE LABOUR MARKET

The increasing inter-relationship between higher education and the labour market has caused students, policy makers, and employers to be even more conscious about graduate employability. Graduate employability has been a key policy agenda, driven by both market pressures and policy directives that highlight students as key players in serving wider economic needs. Higher education does not necessarily equate to better job prospects. It is no longer sufficient to obtain a degree certificate unless a specific set of skills have been cultivated through that degree. Greater responsibility has been transferred to HEIs to ensure that students are able to acquire employability skills through their university education. The uncertainty of the labour market has surely influenced the way in which students prepare themselves for their futures. Tomlinson (2012) attributes part of the problem of graduate employability to the emphasis on a supply-side approach. Employers know exactly what they want from graduates, but there seems to be a mismatch between the skills and knowledge provided by undergraduate courses and the specific demands of the labour market. However, whilst it is acknowledged that there are certain skills that are valued more than others such as

STEM degrees, Tomlinson makes a positive observation that successful integration in the labour market ultimately comes down to how well their skills can be adapted and utilised in their future work settings. He states, "graduates appear to be valued on a range of broad skills, dispositions and performance-based activities that can be culturally mediated, both in the recruitment process and through the specific contexts of their early working lives (p. 25).

Graduate labour market returns vary among individuals, marked by a range of factors including structural and cultural inequalities, which influences the way in which students construct their employability (Kupfer, 2011). Certain fields of study and higher institutional reputation can influence employability and tend to have better employment prospects. Socio-economic background is also a major factor as those from more affluent backgrounds may have better access to networks, resources and unpaid internship opportunities. Understanding these dynamics can help graduates better strategize and negotiate their place in the labour market. As such, Holmes (2001) argues that employability can be seen as a conceptualised form of identity that is "relational, emergent and influenced largely by graduates' 'lived experience' of the labour market" (Tomlinson, 2007, p.287). Therefore, when discussing students' perceptions of their degrees, their attitudes towards the labour market and how they envision the paths of their own careers cannot be ignored and are often linked to how they value higher education as a means of enhancing their future prospects.

4. MUSIC HIGHER EDUCATION TODAY

For decades the academic music undergraduate curriculum has revolved around the classical Western European tradition. Is this style of teaching compatible with the changing purpose of higher education and graduate needs? The landscape of music higher education in England today is characterised by a dynamic interplay of tradition and innovation, responding to shifting cultural, economic and technological trends.

The job market for music graduates can be uncertain. While a music degree provides valuable skills, the transition to a professional career often requires additional networking, portfolios and sometimes further training. An exploratory study conducted by Slaughter and Springer (2015) reported a trend in their findings that undergraduate musicians in the U.S did not feel as though their degree sufficiently prepared them for certain skills needed for professional skills. In a similar vein to the recent notion of an entrepreneurial university, Slaughter and

Springer introduce the idea of an ‘entrepreneurial musician’. The definition of entrepreneurial is expanded upon by Ricker (2011) to be “a person who recognises an opportunity, envisions its possibilities, and creates an enterprise to take advantage of the situation, usually of considerable initiative and risk” (p.19) and can thus be a mentality adopted by students from a range of disciplines – not just business. The authors of the study note a mismatch between skills needed in professional music careers including performers, music administrators, or sound engineers, and skills developed during the degree thus making it difficult for graduates to adapt to the changing demands of the labour market. Building on the idea of the entrepreneurial musician, Weston highlights the development of transferable skills in a study that surveyed 80 music graduates in the context of Australian higher education and recognises the value of these transferable skills to the transition from university to employment in a range of careers. Transferable skills are also commonly referred to as transferrable skills which “include[s] communication teamwork, problem-solving, critical and innovative thinking, creativity, self-confidence, ethical understanding, capacity of lifelong learning, the ability to cope with uncertainty as well as the willingness to accept responsibility” (Succi and Canovi as cited in Weston, 2020, p. 527-8). The development of transferable skills is essential in a field with multiple career destinations so that students can easily adapt to non-musical contexts, or the potentially precarious nature that is associated with being a musician.

An empirical study conducted by Comunian and Faggian focusing on music graduates from universities in England (2014) find that only a small percentage (21%) of music graduates enter the music and performing arts industry (p.172). Although statistics show that music graduates earn less in comparison to their non-creative counterparts, among the creative subjects, music graduates still have higher earning potential than other creative subjects. There seems to be a consensus among music graduates that “a career in music might not provide the level of salary of other sectors or might not even be enough to support their living” (p.181), which could explain the concentration of students seeking jobs in the non-creative industries. Given that music degrees are repeatedly associated with phrases such as ‘low value for money’, ‘low-income’ and ‘poor investment’ and many musicians end up in sectors that do not require a music degree, there must be other motivations and values beyond financial reasons that lead students to continue to invest in music education at tertiary level.

Further examination of higher education in relation to music is explored by Dr. Helen Minors (2015) in light of the closures of music faculties across the UK over the past decade. There are a range of challenges that the music discipline faces including the financial costs to run these programmes, an increase in competition offset by the marketisation of the higher education sector, and policies that distort public perception. Clear throughout the paper is Minors' positionality as a former lecturer and vice chair of the National Association of Music in Higher Education (NAMHE) and her intent in advocating for the Arts and Humanities. However, she raises a number of points that show signs of promise for Music. In 2013, private providers of music degrees joined with UCAS – the UK admissions system and has since shown that numbers for Music have increased demonstrating that there is a demand for the subject especially in comparison to other creative degrees such as Dance and Drama (p.6). Minors argues that value should be recognised in terms of something beyond financial benefits, perhaps in terms of culture and diversity that subsequently promotes high achievement. The discussion of this paper is an honest one that simultaneously defends music as an academic discipline whilst acknowledging that change must occur to cope with wider student needs and the goals of higher education institution and policies.

5. PASSION VERSUS PRACTICALITY

Music undergraduates often find themselves at the intersection of passion and practicality, navigating a path that demands both artistic dedication and pragmatic decision-making. While their love for music drives their educational and career choices, the realities of the music industry and broader job market impose significant pressures.

For many, the decision to pursue a degree in music stems from a deep-seated passion. Passion – "a strong inclination towards an activity that individuals like (or love) that they find important, in which they invest time and energy", is true for practically all musicians (Pradipto et al., 2021, p. 6). Due to the time, money and efforts spent on musical activities, passion is a huge motivator for the endurance of a particular activity over a long period of time without questioning the outcomes or end result. For those who want to pursue a career in the music industry are often faced with practical challenges, leading to anxiety and the need for contingency plans. The practical pressures include economic concerns, employability, and societal expectations. The cost of higher education means that many students leave university with student debt and therefore music undergraduates must consider the financial viability of

their field. The job market for musicians or for those who wish to remain in academia, careers are characterised by precarious employment, freelance work, and the necessity to juggle multiple roles such as teaching, performing and composing to sustain a living. Stahl (2012) uses the term "unfree masters" to refer to those in the music, entertainment or film industries, whose experiences are akin to this. In addition, the emphasis on STEM fields in broader educational policy and funding overshadows the Arts, leading to fewer resources and opportunities for music students. Therefore, it can be daunting for music students when making decisions that will affect their future careers as they wrestle with the tension between doing what they love and the realities of wanting job and financial security.

Choosing to pursue Music at university instead of a conservatoire can be one way in which students attempt to resolve this tension. They can continue to engage with performing and composing whilst also studying music under a different light that treats music like any other humanities subject. Since there appears to be a hierarchy of degrees that positions vocational degrees at the top such as medicine, law and engineering, non-vocational subjects tend to attribute their value to other skills alongside subject knowledge that develop across throughout the degree. As observed by Saunders & Addis, "there is some independent basis for the claim that humanities graduates are particularly well equipped with generic skills and competencies that will enable them to adapt effectively to the changing demands of the 21st century world of work", which could be equally as valuable to the labour market (Saunders & Addis, 2010, p.15). Attending university would widen career options – not limited to the music industry, as students develop transferable skills through undertaking analysis and essay-based modules.

6. SCHWARTZ' BASIC HUMAN VALUES

Values fundamentally underpin the organisation of our lives, as they shape our attitudes and beliefs and are a key driving force behind the decisions we make in our lives from day-to-day activities to major life choices. Attending university can be one of the first major life choices a student makes as they prepare to face a host of new responsibilities, independence, personal and financial sacrifices. The concept of value in higher education is multifaceted, encompassing various motivations and outcomes that influence student choices and experiences. Schwartz' theory of basic human values provides a comprehensive framework for analysing motivations and priorities that drive human behaviour. By applying this theory,

we may begin to uncover the underlying value orientations that influence students' education decisions. For example, a student motivated by self-direction might pursue higher education for intellectual exploration and personal growth, opting for a field that fosters creativity and independence. On the other hand, a student driven by security might choose a subject with clear career prospects and financial stability. This value-based approach offers a nuanced understanding of the complex interplay between individual aspirations and societal expectations.

The notion of value has been explored in many disciplines including sociology, philosophy, economics, other sciences, yet it remains an elusive concept due to its subject and context-dependent nature. Many theorists have attempted to understand what drives human behaviour such as Maslow's *Hierarchy of Needs* (1954) and Self-Determination Theory (SDT), which was developed by Richard Ryan and Edward Deci in 1985. Shalom H. Schwartz developed a model that attempted to go beyond prior theories in terms of systematic structure, universal applicability and empirical validation, by providing a set of 10, broad, universal values that can be used to explain human behaviour. These values become internalised as humans observe the consequences of value driven actions in their social environments and thus begin to ascribe certain values with positive attachments and vice versa. The idea that values drive different behaviours and attitudes formed Schwartz' theory of basic human values (1992), which can be used as a useful tool to examine the cross-cultural relationship between values and behaviour. However, the theory has not gone uncriticised. Witte et al., (2020) argue that the theory may not be completely universal, and it must be acknowledged that not all individuals will behave in the same way and different cultural or social contexts can lead to behavioural variations and thus one must be careful not to oversimplify or overgeneralise. Schwartz' theory of value ultimately summarises different theories of values and identifies six main features that constitute as 'values'. These are:

1. Values are beliefs
2. Values refer to desirable goals
3. Values transcend specific actions and situations
4. Values serve as standards and criteria
5. Values are ordered by importance
6. The *relative* importance of multiple values guide action

(Schwartz, 2012, p. 3-4).

The six features listed above highlight the nature of values, their hierarchical structure and their influence on individuals and societies. Values are important because they serve as guiding principles that drive behaviour by representing broad goals that individuals strive to achieve. Behaviour is typically guided by trade-offs and the balancing of multiple values at once which help individuals to make judgements when making decisions. Different to attitudes, which are often situation-specific, values are abstract goals that apply across a wide range of contexts. These features can be applied to understand why students choose to attend university and choice of subject. By recognising that values are beliefs tied to emotions, educators and policymakers can appreciate the intrinsic motivations behind students' educational choices. The transcendent nature of values suggest that students' choices are influenced by broader life goals rather than immediate situational factors, making their decisions about higher education consistent to their overall life aspirations.

Schwartz proposed 10 basic values (1992): Self-direction; stimulation; hedonism; achievement; power; security; conformity; tradition; benevolence; and universalism. However, by 2012, the model was updated to include 19 more narrowly defined values to capture the finer distinctions in motivational goals. Some of these values included humility, self-direction-thought and self-direction-action. The updated model also refines the circular structure, maintaining the original two dimensions but providing more granularity: 'openness to change vs. conservation' further distinguishes between intellectual and action components within values like self-direction and 'self-enhancement vs. self-transcendence' adds nuanced values that separate individual achievement from social recognition and respect. The updated model provides more detailed distinctions among values, allowing for a finer understanding of human motivations. Moreover, this granularity helps in identifying specific motivational drivers that were previously aggregated under broader categories. Whilst the original model is simpler and easier to apply broadly, the updated model's complexity allows for more precise applications and offers flexibility to tailor analyses to specific cultural, social, or individual contexts. As this is an initial study, the original model is sufficient to identify general trends and comparisons. Further research intended to inform or affect change in course design or policy may benefit more from the updated model where understanding specific value orientations can lead to more targeted strategies as, "the finer partitioning of the continuum provides researchers with more precise empirical tools to address questions

involving values" (Cieciuch, 2013, p.1232). Figure 1 shows the original theoretical model of human values in a circular continuum and Figure 2 shows the revised model.

7. APPLYING SCHWARTZ' THEORY OF VALUES

Applying this framework to explore how music students perceive the value of their degree can yield insights into the diverse motivations and expectations they hold about their degree in the context of a highly marketised higher education system. Given the pervasive discourse emphasising the economic value of higher education, students who choose to study music may therefore possess different perceptions of value that extends far beyond the narrow scope of economic value. The list below outlines the 10 basic human values, goals associated with each one and how this may reflect motivations for attending university and/or studying Music.

1. Self-Direction

Goal: independent thought and action, creating, exploring.
Relation to Music Degree: Students may value a Music degree for the autonomy it offers in pursuing personal artistic vision, stimulating creativity, knowledge and innovation. Going to university is a way to further their interests in music.

2. Stimulation

Goal: Excitement, novelty, challenge.
Relation to Music Degree: Music is a multifaceted discipline consisting of performance, composition, musicology and can therefore attract students seeking a diverse educational experience. Higher study is an opportunity to challenge oneself and further one's knowledge.

3. Hedonism

Goal: Pleasure and Sensuous gratification for oneself.
Relation to Music Degree: Students may pursue a Music degree for the intrinsic enjoyment and pleasure gained from creating, performing and engaging deeply with Music.

4. Achievement:

Goal: Personal success through demonstrating competencies.
Relation to Music Degree: Music may be something students are naturally good at or who

enjoy giving performances and composing music to create something tangible. Graduating with a degree is a mark of achievement.

5. Power

Goal: social status, prestige, control or dominance over people and resources.
Relation to Music Degree: Obtaining a Music degree may be a path to gaining influence or status in the cultural or entertainment industry. A university degree might be beneficial on job applications.

6. Security

Goal: Safety, harmony, stability of society, relationships and oneself.
Relation to Music Degree: Music students have often invested a lot of time into their music education and thus it would feel natural to continue pursuing music at a higher-level education. A university degree may better their chances of finding employment thus providing security regarding their future endeavours.

7. Conformity

Definition: Restraint of actions that are likely to upset or harm others and violate social expectations or norms.
Relation to Music Degree: Perhaps students come from a musical family and want to continue this through their studies. They might be more inclined or expected to attend university if other members of their family have.

8. Tradition

Goal: Respect, commitment and acceptance of the customs and ideas that one's culture or religion provides.
Relation to Music Degree: Students might hold a deep appreciation for cultural heritage. Similar to conformity, they might be more inclined to attend university if other members of their family have.

9. Benevolence

Goal: Preserving and enhancing the welfare of those with whom one is in frequent personal contact (the 'in-group').

Relation to Music Degree: Students may value Music for its social and cultural contributions to the wider community such as through teaching or community projects.

10. Universalism:

Goal: Understanding, tolerance, appreciation and protection for the welfare of people and the environment.

Relation to Music Degree: The universal appeal of music in practically all cultures as a means of fostering global understanding and promoting social justice can resonate with students who value universalism. They may wish to explore musics outside of their own culture.

By using Schwartz's theory as a conceptual framework, we can begin to explore the various ways in which students' values influence their decision to pursue a Music degree and how this contributes to their overall life aspirations. Understanding these value-driven motivations can help institutions and educators better support students in aligning their educational paths with their core values to elevate the sense of fulfilment during their university experience.

8. RATIONAL CHOICE THEORY

Schwartz' theory of basic human values emphasises the individual. However, as demonstrated by the tension felt by students between passion and practicality, the values that influence students' decisions to attend university and subject choice do not exist in a vacuum. Therefore, Rational Choice Theory (RCT) can effectively be used to build upon Schwartz' basic human values by providing a structured approach to understanding how individuals prioritize and act upon their value systems in decision-making processes, casting a broader overview of the relationship between the individual and the wider society and economy. By integrating RCT with Schwartz' values, we can model how individuals make choices to reflect their value priorities when there is conflict between what is individually valued, compared to what may be socially valued.

RCT is a theoretical framework used to understand and model social, economic and political behaviour, based on the premise that individuals make decisions by rationally considering the cost and benefits to maximise their utility or satisfaction. However, the framework relies on several key assumptions such as rationality, individualism and temporality (Archer & Tritter, 2000). For example, rationality assumes that individuals are rational actors who make

decisions logically and systematically, whose decisions are made to maximise personal benefits while minimising costs.

RCT is used to explain a wide range of human behaviours and interactions. For instance, it can be applied to understand consumer behaviour, where individuals choose products that offer the highest satisfaction for the lowest price, or political behaviour where individuals make choices based on what they believe will serve their best interests. This aligns with the modern-day notion that neoliberal policy has shaped students to act more like consumers. Sometimes students are faced with more difficult decisions whereby their individual preferences conflict with how they want to position themselves in relation to society and the economy (Hechter, 1994, p.325). For example, students want to pursue a subject that they love – music, but also want to boost their position in the labour market, have a stable job and a high salary.

The assumptions that RCT holds have been criticised to oversimplify human behaviour by ignoring emotional, psychological and social factors that affect individuals differently (Hodgson, 2012) (Blaise, 2000). Therefore, blending this theoretical framework with Schwartz' basic value enables a deeper understanding of how individuals systematically make decisions that reflect their underlying value systems, thus providing a more nuanced understanding of how students perceive the value of music degrees according to their individual value systems, which ultimately have led them to pursue a music degree. Having combined the theoretical frameworks, we can begin to examine the following research questions:

1. What are students' motivations for attending higher education and choice of Music?
2. What values do students ascribe to their music degree?
3. How does motivation for pursuing a music degree align or conflict with the values they ascribe to their degree?

METHODOLOGY

1. CONSTRUCTING THE STUDY

Motivations to attend higher education and choice of degree subject is a highly individualised pursuit and thus conducting an institutional case study on music students at the University of Oxford presents a unique and compelling opportunity to explore the intersection of academic rigour and creativity. Oxford, renowned for consistently ranking at the top of university league tables, offers a rich environment which sheds light on Music being studied in a similar fashion to other traditional, essay-based humanities. This allows for a more nuanced examination of how students perceive the balance between theoretical coursework and more practical performance opportunities. Some previous studies on the Arts and Humanities have disregarded the University of Oxford due to its status as an 'elite institution' and the awareness that reputational advantage can be a factor causing students to overlook concerns about employability. However, since no study has looked specifically at the music course or music students at Oxford, this study can provide insight into what an academic music course truly entails and the experience of those who study it. Music courses can vary among institutions with some focusing more on either performance or composition aspects, therefore it was important that participants had experienced the same course structure and similar styles of teaching. By understanding what values students ascribe to their degree, perceived challenges, and the extent to which the programme meets their career aspirations, this study can begin to gauge the programme's success in fostering both academic excellence and creative talent. Moreover, this study can reveal how the unique resources and traditions of how elite institutions shape the future of music professionals. These insights could inform curriculum development, enhance student support services and contribute to broader discussions on optimizing music education in prestigious academic settings.

Having read Music myself at an undergraduate level at Oxford, my 'insider status' certainly facilitated the recruitment process. My insider status also gave me pre-existing knowledge about course content and helped me to build rapport with participants as I could relate to some of the personal anecdotes that participants mentioned. The majority of participants were graduates from my cohort. After having conducted my interviews, it appeared that the most fruitful discussions were in fact those with the graduates, as it provided them with the opportunity to reflect on their educational journey having completed all three years and

consider the impact their music degree has had on their professional careers a year after graduation.

2. POSITIONALITY

I start this section with a personal anecdote: During sixth form, knowing that I had applied to Oxford to study Music, my chemistry teacher once told me, "at least if you don't know chemistry, you will graduate with music and become a busker". This statement has stuck with me through the years as I think it sums up the misconceptions of a music degree and in many instances after that, I have found myself repeatedly defending my choice to study Music to family, to friends and to employers. Since then, I have always advocated for the Arts and more broadly, the Humanities subjects and disagree with overgeneralised, blanket statements such as 'low-value' and 'mickey-mouse' degrees. However, it was important that I did not let my personal feelings cloud the way in which I conducted my interviews and ensured questions and subsequent data analysis were neutral and open-ended to allow responses that I found surprising or unexpected to develop during discussions with participants. Often at the start of the interviews, as small talk and rapport building, I was asked more about why I chose to research this topic or my experiences of studying music, to which I was careful not to reveal my personal opinions in case this later influenced participants to shape their answers to what they think I might want to have heard. If I had said I was an advocator for the Arts or that I disagreed with certain statements regarding Music degrees, then it is possible participants may have felt more inclined to create a mainly positive narrative of their experiences.

Reflexivity and the consideration of positionality is "self-critical sympathetic introspection and the self-conscious *analytical* scrutiny of the self as researcher" and is essential to the qualitative research process (England, 1994, p. 82). Husserl argues that in order to extract the true essence of human experience, researchers must set aside any 'baggage' they may bring to the research so as to avoid skewing the interpretation of participants' experiences (Hopkins et al., 2016, p.22). Acknowledging the researcher-as-instrument is an essential consideration throughout the study, as the researcher becomes a human filter for data collection and data analysis (Pezalla et al., 2012). In contrast to Husserl, Heidegger argues that the researcher's insider status or pre-existing knowledge can provide a helpful baseline to better understand the phenomenon in question. The inextricable link between humans and the world we live in

help to construct our understandings of certain phenomena that can't be ignored and is known as a process called 'being-in-the-world'. Via this lens, it is virtually impossible for researchers to take a totally objective view of phenomena and "the subjectivity of the researcher is something to be embraced, not controlled for or eliminated" (Grandy, 2018 as cited in Wa-Mbaleka, 2020, p.35). The two opposing views presents a tension in qualitative research that must be addressed. Finlay notes that researchers must negotiate this tension through "dancing between bracketing pre-understandings and exploiting them as a source of insight" (Finlay, 2008, p.28).

3. INTERVIEW-BASED RESEARCH

Investigating student perceptions inherently acknowledges the subjectiveness of human experience, lending itself to an interpretive methodology, whereby social phenomena can be understood "through the eyes of the participants rather than the researcher" (Cohen et al., 2007, p.21). The use of semi-structured interviews allowed for a nuanced understanding by enabling participants to recount personal experiences and the scope of inquiry to broaden or even shift through organic conversations. Music degrees have largely been examined, described and criticised by external voices such as the media and policymakers who so far, have reduced its value to economic terms and statistics. By conducting interviews, I aimed to 'give voice' to the students who have decided to study music and who have experienced life during the course and/or after. The final pool of participants was low (under 20) compared to other qualitative research. However, Crouch and McKenzie (2006) observe that interview-based studies involving only a small number of participants, previously looked down upon due to the belief that bigger sample sizes hold more validity, are becoming more common in social science. Though the pursuit of higher education and the study of music is grounded in a range of social, cultural and financial contexts, the interviews sought to unpack students' perceptions and feelings rather than the external factors and is not primarily concerned with identifying objective facts. Despite the limited number of interviews, each interview aimed to be as in-depth as possible to "generate data which give an authentic insight into people's experiences" (Silverman, 1993, as cited in Crouch and McKenzie, 2006, p.486). Although 'the more interviews the better' may be true in some cases, it is important to recognise that this research is not sampling students based on whose circumstances tick a number of boxes,

but instead is sampling the variants of a particular social setting and the varying experiences that may arise from it.

Some existing studies investigating Arts and Humanities degrees have used mixed methods consisting of surveys and interviews (Robson et al., 2023; Barrett and Helens-Hart, 2022). Other studies investigating returns on investment have a focus on quantifying returns in purely financial terms based on earning potential and career destinations (Belfield et al., 2018). Due to time constraints on this study and a narrower sample size of just music students, interviews were sufficient to obtain the data needed. This research is an institutional case study with a specific focus on a particular set of students and thus does not seek to form any concrete conclusions. Rather, the purpose is to highlight the individualised pursuit of a Music degree and student experience to allow for student voices that have been largely excluded from pre-existing literature and wider public discourse to be heard.

Recruitment was mainly conducted via outreach within social media group chats for each cohort but was only partially successful as I received only one or two responses each time. I was most successful in recruiting graduate students. Although I may not have had direct contact with them during my undergraduate years, they may have felt more inclined to participate because we were already acquainted or shared experiences at a certain time together. A further method of recruitment was snowballing, to get existing participants to put me in touch with other students they knew and reached out to them via LinkedIn – a social media platform for more professional use. In the more general recruitment process, potential participants expressed their interest via email, where online Teams meetings were subsequently arranged. Conducting interviews online was especially useful for graduates who now lived or worked outside of Oxford and for finalists who were busy during exam season. One variable that was kept constant throughout the study and filtered during the recruitment stage was students' domestic status to ensure that the cost of tuition was the same. Whilst of course, each student has their own financial situation, it was important that the base price of their education was the same so as to not inflate the 'value of money' or 'returns on investment' argument should it come up during the interviews. The final pool of participants was as follows:

Name (pseudonym)	Degree	Current Status
Margot	BA Music	Graduate

Max	BA Music	Graduate
Lily	BA Music	Graduate
Raphaël	BA Music	Graduate
Pauline	BA Music	Finalist
Mike	BA Music	Finalist
Louise	BA Music	First Year

To protect students' identity when recounting personal stories, all participants have been given a pseudonym and the participant pool included a range of genders – although this was not controlled for.

The interviews were semi-structured and open-ended, which allowed them to flow more like an informal conversation. This informal conversation-style helped both me and the participants to feel more at ease. Given that I was in the same cohort as the graduates and knew of some of the finalists before this research, although I didn't know much about the participants individually beforehand, the interviewer-participant relationship almost felt too formal, awkward and forced. For example, during the opening section of my interviews, I wanted to understand the participants' motivations for attending university and studying music. To make it feel more like an informal conversation, I always began by asking what instruments they played, when were they first interested in the subject and about their music education at school. This immediately took them back to pre-university times, and they were able to chronologically recount their experiences and influences that led to the choice to attend higher education by the time they reached the age of around sixteen or seventeen.

In terms of benefits to the research, this informal conversational style really brought to light "the spontaneous generation of questions in a natural interaction" (Gall et al., 2003, p.239) and allowed for the participants' answers to steer the conversation towards what was important for them. Discussing educational values, perceptions of the values of a music degree and other wider related topics vary among individuals and there is no right or wrong answer. With so many external influences on the matter such as newspaper headlines and societal expectations, there is a danger that participants might tell me what they think I, as the researcher, wants to hear – for example, the classic argument of value for money. But the flexibility that semi-structured, informal conversational interviews provided, allowed values that were important to the participant to arise naturally. If the topic of employability for

example came up of course I would probe deeper, but my main goal was for these topics to arise organically, rather than me introducing a key concept or debate and for it to dominate the rest of the interview regardless or not if this was something that was important to the participant.

4. ANALYSIS

The foundation of this research is guided by an interpretive paradigm thus the analysis of the data is inductive and seeks to allow patterns in the data to emerge as part of a subset of recurring themes that reveal what values music students ascribe to their degree. Using Braun & Clarke's six-phase framework for thematic analysis (2006), open-coding was first used to break down transcripts into smaller chunks of data and generate initial codes by highlighting key words or phrases before grouping them into broader themes. Though Schwartz' theory provides categories of pre-existing universal values, comparing themes in the data to his set of values was the last stage of my analysis to avoid manipulating participants' answers to 'fit the mould' and to allow "frequent, dominant, or significant themes inherent in raw data, without the restraints imposed by structured methodologies" to emerge (Thomas, 2006, p. 238).

I began by going through each transcript line by line, highlighting key words and sorting them into broad categories such as anything to do with the institution, values, careers and employability. Within those categories I began taking the context into consideration to make subsets such as positive or negative associations. Once all the key words and themes had been broken down, I started listing them in order of priority based on a holistic understanding of each interview. This list and its justification was emailed back to each participant to check for accuracy or gain further clarification. Once I had confirmation of what were the main values they associated with their music degree, I compared this to Schwartz' basic human values based on how closely the participants' experiences resonated with the underlying motivations pertaining to each basic value. The most difficult aspect of this process was seeing how RCT played a role. It was most explicitly obvious when participants spoke of trade-offs, compromises or weighing up options to see what would lead to the best outcome for them. It was difficult because an understanding of what each participant valued the most was necessary before identifying how RCT was used in making decisions. Someone who prioritised their career or earning money will have different motivations behind their choices

than someone who prioritises say, intellectual growth and stimulation. In short, the data analysis process involved first identifying all the different possible values ascribed to a music degree, then the prioritisation of these values in relation to each other and examining this in the case of both the individual as well as how the results compared to other participants.

Ultimately, this process led to the identification of 3 main categories: choice; perceptions of a music degree; and making the arts more vocational. This largely follows the structure of the interviews and also correlates to the past, present and future. The section on 'choice' explores the participants' motivations behind choosing music at Oxford University including moments from before university, and their childhood. 'Perceptions' seeks to reveal the current individual and public perceptions surrounding music degrees as well as comparing these to the reality experienced by the participants. Lastly, 'making the arts more vocational' looks towards the future of music degrees by dealing with a very common concern about employability amongst participants and policymakers.

5. ETHICS

This research invited honest and open discussions about the participants' experiences of an undergraduate music course at an elite institution. Any critique of a prestigious institution like Oxford could affect the university's reputation and any negative findings might be perceived as damaging to Oxford's status and heritage. Given the institutional reputation, this also posed a risk of bias – either of preserving the institution's esteemed image or against it. There was a possibility that students may also experience discomfort or apprehension about expressing honest critiques, fearing potential repercussions on either their academic or professional standing. Therefore, pseudonyms were used, and the names of firms or companies have been omitted to protect the participants' identities to ensure that the research process respects the confidentiality and well-being of participants. Identity protection encouraged students to speak freely either positively or negatively about their experiences. The choice to name the institution, however, was necessary as Oxford's unique traditions, reputational advantage and academic culture provides a distinct context that significantly influences the findings. Citing Oxford and openly acknowledging factors such as reputation also allows readers to measure the applicability or relatability to other institutions. Identifying participants as either first years, finalists or graduates was also necessary in order to understand how values are prioritised according to the stage at which participants were at in

their educational or professional journey. All participants were provided with an information sheet detailing how data would be used and how their identities would be protected during the process, before being asked to complete a consent form. The consent form also gave the participants the opportunity to further anonymise their involvement in the research if they did not wish to be quoted directly. Privacy and confidentiality were of the utmost importance throughout the process. As Govil (2013) points out, informed consent is not enough. Before each of the interview discussions were underway, I began each meeting by running through their signed consent form to clarify how they wanted their data to be used and also made it clear that should anything change, they can update me at any time via email.

6. LIMITATIONS

In addressing the rigor of this study, several limitations must be acknowledged. Largely due to the time constraints in addition to the timing of which interviews took place (coinciding with exams season), the range of the study was quite limited as shown by a relatively small participant pool. Most of the participants were finalists or graduates and perhaps the research was more pertinent for this set of students as they have already begun to experience the impacts of their degree in relation to the job market. As previously mentioned, the choice to focus on one institution was to ensure that teaching style and course content was relatively constant among the participants. However, it is important to acknowledge the University of Oxford's position in league tables and world rankings when considering the transferability and applicability to other institutions. Commonly referred to as an 'elite' institution, pre-dating 1992, there is a risk that the prestige associated with the university carries more weight than the actual degree. The choice to restrict the participant to pool to home students was to create consistency for tuition fees to limit variation in the value-for-money debate and exposure to public discourse. This study revolves around music education in the UK and has touched upon the influence of policy discourse that assumes western neo-liberal ideas that values STEM subjects over the Arts. However, if the study were to include international students, this could broaden the scope and offer a wider perspective.

Although socio-economic factors were not controlled for, it is important to acknowledge that even though the tuition fees were the same for each participants, they all come from a range of different backgrounds with some relying on government loans or scholarships. In addition, there has been a long-time debate surrounding music as an elitist subject (Reid, 1994; Lamont

& Maton, 2008). Therefore, it would be interesting to see how socio-economic considerations might play a role in students selecting Music as a degree subject.

The unit of analysis in this study is the student and student experience itself. Since the 90s, qualitative research practices have highlighted the notion of the researcher-as-instrument in the extraction and analysis of data, which has the potential to introduce researcher bias into the study especially when dealing with topics that are highly subjective (Miles & Huberman, 1994). After having gone through each of the participants' transcripts, an analysis was first made to highlight the key values that the participant had ascribed to their degree as well as the prioritisation of those values that led them to make certain decisions. Discussions during interviews often included personal anecdotes, out of which these values arose. There is a danger that the researcher interprets those stories in a different way to how the participant intended. Therefore, member-checking using analyses of single participants data that occurred after a preliminary analysis was employed to verify the researcher's interpretations and provided an opportunity to correct any misunderstandings or misinterpretations (Harvey, 2015; Koelsch, 2013).

7. FURTHER RESEARCH

As a response to the marketisation of higher education and increasing concern regarding graduate employability, the responses in this study can provide insight for future design and development of undergraduate Music courses. The purpose of higher education to prepare young people for life after university has been discussed by nearly all of my participants and thus calls into question the 'out-datedness' of a music course that is rooted around the history of traditional, Western music and whether certain modules could be used to forge stronger connections to the music industry. As my study focuses only on the University of Oxford despite the fact that the teaching and graduate outcomes of Music degrees vary across institutions, perhaps comparative research across a range of institutions of various musical specialties or rankings could be used to inform the development of a more coherent curricula.

FINDINGS & DISCUSSION

1 - CHOICE

A broader discussion surrounding motivations to attend university showed that all participants felt that continuing onto higher education was 'automatic' and a 'natural progression' as encouraged by a range of factors such as careers counselling at school and parental guidance. Society increasingly equates a university degree with better career prospects, higher earning potential and social status with parents, teachers and peers often reinforcing this expectation by portraying a university education as a necessary path to success and stability. This message seems to have been absorbed by participants who have adopted this mindset, making their choice and expectations of themselves to go to university seem 'natural'. The expansion of access to higher education and the proliferation of degree programs have also contributed to the normalisation of this trajectory. According to Raphael, "at school, over 60% of people each year went to university, so it was kind of doing the majority", which was a share sentiment among other participants. Reasons for attending university correspond to Schwartz' basic values of conformity, tradition and security, which are all closely related as shown by their congruence on the circular continuum. Participants whose parents had attended university as well as seeing their peers pursue higher education hinted at a subtle, underlying pressure to do the same. At the same time, many students felt that foregoing higher education would also limit their opportunities and hinder their long-term professional goals. Therefore, participants understood that a degree could bring them social status that would allow them to access certain kinds of jobs in the future. A sense of security arose from the idea that *a* degree is better than *no* degree where, "you can just get a better job out of it, regardless of what university you go to or what subject you study". It was commonly acknowledged that merely obtaining a degree could increase job offers and earning potential upon graduation in a process of a "signalling" – a concept first introduced by Michael Spence in 1973 (Rose, 2013). This demonstrated basic human values of achievement and power due to the awareness of the social status that a degree could afford the participants, falling under the broader category of self-enhancement. Thus motivations for attending university revealed the importance of conservation – keeping in line with societal and parental expectations that have been ingrained in the participants' minds, which subsequently leads to the desire for self-enhancement.

Whilst it was evident for all participants that attending higher education was a straightforward decision, for some there was a difficulty in choosing between types of institutions, namely a conservatoire or a university. Both Raphael and Louise were certain that they wanted a career in the music industry but ultimately felt that going to a conservatoire would restrict their capabilities to being strictly a performer or a composer and ultimately, university could provide a "fall-back option" due to the variety of skills and experience one can gain. Others had ruled out conservatoires entirely, with Margot saying:

> *"I realised that a Music conservatoire degree would not give me the same quality of life that I look for, so my salary would be relatively low, I would struggle, there's not very much stability coming out as a professional musician".*

The internal debate that some of the participants faced regarding which type of institution to attend, shows their engagement with rational choice theory. There were several factors that participants had to weigh out. Factors included long-term gains, course selection, and opportunity-cost to consider as Margot pointed out. She voiced her concerns that a conservatoire is too concentrated on a specific specialisation which limits skill flexibility and the range of jobs that require this kind of qualification. Maximizing experience was considered by Lily, who acknowledged that even if she undertook an academic course at university, there were still opportunities to join music societies where she could develop practical experience alongside a degree. Even before university, this way of thinking shows that some participants already had preoccupations about the graduate labour market and were already thinking about ways to "get ahead of the game" from the beginning.

Another way in which participants engaged with rational choice theory presented itself in discussions about the status and reputation of Oxford University. Participant responses varied widely when asked whether the reputation of the institution made a difference in their choice of degree. On the one hand, the small teaching classes and academic rigour that Oxford university is esteemed for was the main attraction. On the other hand, Oxford was more of a strategy as the cost of tuition fees and living expenses were compared to the benefits of the prestige of the institution and access to high-quality facilities. Words such as 'skills' and 'employability' that align with neoliberal discourse was more prevalent in the discussion regarding Oxford university. For Raphael, the Oxford name alone could provide opportunities in case he was unsuccessful in the music industry:

> *"I thought I would study music, something that I very much enjoyed. But I knew when the time came to it, I needed to make money and that doesn't have to be in music. I can fall back onto other things because of the Oxford name".*

For Raphael, the benefits of the reputation of the institution was a way of signalling employers, calling Oxford a 'brand' that employers can use to give him a chance at a job because they are already aware of the standard of work all students are put through.

Rational choice theory can be used to explain how students make systematically evaluate their decisions in education and career plaining. They aim to maximise their personal utility by considering the costs and benefits of each option, striving to make choices that offer the greatest potential for success and satisfaction in their professional and personal life. It's important to emphasise that the returns of investment can take on meaning beyond purely economic ones. For example, the skills they want to acquire or experiences they wish to gain that also align with their basic human values.

The importance of Schwartz' basic human values come to the fore especially when participants described how passion for the subject overrode other potential choices that could have resulted in a better returns of investment. For most participants, music has always been a part of their lives as they learnt to play an instrument from a very young age. After such a long period of time and experience, music has become something that the participants are good at, which has consequently instilled a sense of confidence in their musical abilities and for Louise, she "couldn't see [her]self doing anything else". Schwartz' values of stimulation, self-direction and hedonism, and their underlying motivations seems to be the guiding principles when students were asked why they chose to study music despite having studied A-levels that included STEM subjects that could have potentially created better job security later down the line. Comments made by participants point back to traditional views of the purpose of higher education, which intellectually challenges pupils and fosters further interest in a subject that they love as opposed to higher education as a means to an end (finding a job).

The positional advantage that elite institutions such as Oxford offers has contributed to the increasing stratification and hierarchisation of higher education. Aligned with the discourse

surrounding higher education as a commodity, Brown and Lauder (2006) observe that "elite credentials are now an essential commodity that must be fought for through the mobilisation of all the financial, cultural and social capital that families can muster in the market for elite education and occupations" (p.50). Those who have the resources to do so are most likely to have a stronger advantage in the labour market and thus access the more high-paying jobs. However, Waters (2009) argues that this does not necessarily correspond to concerns over employability but is more to do with maintaining social standing. By prolonging time spent in higher education, "individuals invest more time in ascending the hierarchy to the scarcest and most valued credential" (Brown et al., 1997 as cited in Waters, 2009, p. 1866). Studying at a prestigious institution therefore compensates for studying music and can be seen as a bid to gain a positional advantage in the labour market. There has been a shift in responsibility from the workplace to the individual for the training and development of skills and it is up to the individual to 'stand out' and make themselves more attractive to future employers (Pennington and Stanford, 2019).

1.2 – Stimulation

The eventual choice to study music at Oxford showed a desire to be challenged. Although the participants enjoyed music in many different forms such as playing instruments and listening to music, as Max comments, "it was quite fun to see how far I could push myself in an academic sense". Comments often referred to the intensity of the Oxford degree that enabled music to be studied in a similar fashion to other subject such as PPE (politics, philosophy, and economics), and other humanities subjects that have not received the same level of backlash that the Arts have, and they enjoyed the intellectually stimulating nature of the course. Although the course offered a diverse set of modules from music psychology to the performance, Max chose all the coursework modules which gave him the flexibility to write his own titles. He recalls, "I did some really niche stud in my coursework, which I found really fun, so ou know that was really enjoyable you know, and that reflected in my grades". The desire of a degree that was intellectually stimulating and academically challenging was one of the reasons why Lily steered towards university and not a conservatoire. When asked if the essay-based nature of the course took away the essence of 'doing' music, she replied, "if I had wanted a more practical hands-on course, I would have chosen a conservatoire…but that would definitely have been too much.

1.3 – Self-direction

In a similar vein to stimulation, self-direction was another important guiding principle in choosing music. Studying music at higher education allowed participants to inquire further into an area of study that they were interested in. Whilst music at secondary school is taught according to a curriculum in a way that is geared towards standardised testing, participants enjoyed the fact that university allowed them to "tailor the degree to their interests" and "pick modules they were actually interested in "giving them a sense of autonomy" over their own studies. For Raphael:

> *"Coming to university, I knew I wanted to do music but where in the industry I had no idea. It enabled me to develop a particular passion. It solidified my opinion that I didn't want to be a performer and the particular passion I picked up was music production".*

Self-formation is an important process that all students undergo and the flexibility within the course structure allowed Raphael to develop his musical identity. Drawing a comparison to conservatoires once again, Max felt that going to a conservatoire was too restricting whereby training solely focuses on primarily becoming a performer, composer or conductor. Reflecting on his decision to attend university, Max says, "I didn't want to hone in at that point. If anything, I probably consciously left it quite broad. In going to university, you can try out a range of modules and find your niche, something that you enjoy and that you are good at".

1.4 – Hedonism

Guided by love for learning, love for music and doing something they were good at, some participants demonstrated that their motivations for studying music were strongly associated with pleasure and self-fulfilment. Louise spoke about music with such enthusiasm, stating "it was music over the institution, as long as I studied music, I'd be happy. The returns I hope to gain from university for me, is just to be working a job for the rest of my life that I enjoy and that I'm interested in is way more important than money".

Undergraduate music degrees are three years long and subject choice to a large extent can determine what career path students embark on after graduation. For some participants, at the age of 17/18, this kind of life decision was a scary prospect and thus for them, the sensible option was to choose something that they were passionate about and see where it takes them later. Thinking back to applying to university, Max says, "I'm not the kind of person who

usually worries about what comes after. I kind of took it very much one step at a time and I thought this was interesting, I'll do that". For Lily, music was something she felt she was naturally good at and thus music at higher education was a source of great achievement for her.

When participants were asked about the point at which they began to think about career prospects, it was noted that further training or 'graduate schemes' were available for careers such as marketing, law, or accounting that do not require specific degrees unlike medicine or engineering. Thus participants were not too concerned that choosing a subject they were passionate about would limit their chances to enter certain careers. Music would still enable participants to transfer their skills and enter a range of professions, which did not pose too great of a problem in their rational choice-making process. Raphael said:

> *"I would always recommend people to do what you want and have fun and just show your level of competency no matter what. Unless there's a specific requirement for the job you want to go into, do whatever the hell you want, and you'll make it"*

The framing of the values of a music degree in the first half of the interviews discussing the choice to attend university and the choice to study music highlighted more intrinsic values, prompting participants to talk about their own musical experiences, such as playing an instrument in orchestras that have brought them happiness, or how they were able to explore topics of interest in greater depth. For some of the participants, the choice to attend university, especially at Oxford University was a conscious decision to increase their employability levels through gaining a richer and more well-rounded experience, which can partially be explained through rational choice theory. Going to university and the reputation of Oxford could increase their skill set and potentially make it easier to find job stability and increase earning potential. However, gaining an economic advantage whilst important, was not necessarily a priority. The choice to study music – a subject they enjoyed, was a compromise that didn't seem too damaging for career prospects. The main values that participants indicated were important for them, included those falling under Schwartz' category of self-enhancement. When making rational decisions, it was important that the returns aligned to values of self-direction, stimulation and hedonism. When recalling the thought process behind applying to university, music seemed to be an invariable and thus the key decisions that the participants faced were mainly between a conservatoire or a university and the reputation of that institution. The discussions in the second half of the interviews, however, were centred around wider perceptions of

music degrees and careers. For the graduates, this was an opportunity to retrospectively evaluate the values of a music degree now that they have left higher education.

2 – Perceptions of a Music Degree

As discussions turned to the societal perceptions of a music degree and how participants felt in response to labels such as 'low-value' and 'mickey-mouse', the tone of voice began to drop among them. Although none of the participants referenced any policies explicitly, neoliberal ideals equating value with economic terms have seemed to have had a negative effect on participants. Graduate participants in particular recounted stories where they have had to "fight their corner" and "sell" themselves to employers. In some cases, family and friends' reactions had questioned, "what are you going to do with that?" and called the degree a "waste of time and money". In these instances, the decision to pursue music showed some level of resistance to the traditional views of friends and family, which is in contrast to the choice to attend university, where all of the participants expressed to some extent, Schwartz' values of conformity.

Participants suggested that people do not perceive a music degree to be serious, dismissing it to be "fun and games" or just "sitting in a room with an instrument having fun", which is far from their personal experiences of a music degree described as "intense" and "filled with deadlines". Interestingly, Max pointed out that much of this distorted perception comes from a place of misunderstanding, not because people don't value music. Speaking from personal experience, he says:

> *"So I tell people I do a music degree, and their immediate answer is what instrument do you play? My response would then be, well my answer is the piano but that's not really my degree. Then they say, what do you mean you don't play? I started realising it was actually easier to say I do musicology. That tended to get a better, or a clearer response of what I actually did. So yeah, I wouldn't say a negative response but just a lot of confusion of what it is".*

After further consideration, Pauline realised that these types of responses may be fair because if you haven't studied music at university, the only experience one would have of the subject otherwise, is at school which is not taken seriously and is filled with pointless lessons where

people mess about with the special effects on the piano. Therefore, music at university seems to be just an extension of those secondary school lessons.

Speaking about the Arts versus STEM debate, Raphael attributes this negative perception to "the capitalist society that we live in" but cannot deny that "if you're training to save lives versus making some nice noises, it's just not the same". Louise also touches on the influence of neoliberal ideas as she suggests that "[music] doesn't seem to be scientific and therefore not that serious". Raphael also believes that what people can and cannot do after a degree is not directly related to its value. He goes on to say, "if you come out and you have a job in music, then obviously a music degree is great but also you can be sitting at the top of Sony Records without a music degree…it's too hard to say".

When participants were asked how perceptions or stereotypes of a music degree makes them feel, whether it be confusion or negativity, words such as "disheartening" and "demoralising" were often used. Louise described feelings of "inferiority" and "inadequacy" in comparison to her peers as they started talking about aspirations for after university. Many of whom had studied PPE and were going into the finance sector and boasting about how much money they would make and began compring salaries. The most poignant conversation was with Margot, as she appeared to have internalised the negative perceptions and began to believe them herself. Referring to the period at which she began to apply to jobs, Margot says:

> *"The overwhelming majority of people perceive a music degree to be somewhat irrelevant or useless and I really struggle with this perception when I was applying to internships or jobs because it made me very anxious because I pre-empted rejections before I even had them. It does something to your self-confidence, and you feel like you're at an automatic disadvantage just from the perceptions rather from the lack of skills".*

Although this argument has not been present throughout much of this study, Max suggests that perceptions may depend on social class, which is a completely valid and important point. He imagines that those from a wealthier middle to upper class background may not think so carefully about what subject leads to greater earning potential and an afford to focus on personal satisfaction. For those in a less privileged position, he goes on to say, "it is not sufficient to be passionate about something because the reality is at the end of the day you

have to survive, you have to make money to be able to pay the bills, afford rent and buy food". However, he also acknowledges that he comes from a working-class background and just the fact that he went to university was impressive enough to his peers.

Despite the stereotypes and stigma surrounding music degrees, the participants still chose to pursue music regardless. For some participants, these stereotypes have planted seeds of doubt, which have taken a toll on their self-confidence. In extreme terms, this continuous representation of music as an unserious, inferior, low-value subject, which has now been instilled in the minds of even those studying it can be labelled almost as an 'indoctrination'. However, if given the option to start again and choose an alternative degree, all graduate participants responded that they would still choose music again even though none of them were working in music-related fields. This shows therefore, that the passion for the subject, experiences and transferable skills gained outweighs purely career-oriented considerations.

After discussing the different values participants associated with their degree as well as the wider perceptions and stereotypes, the prioritisation of these values became clearer. First and foremost was their passion for music – to study a subject they love for three years, the desire to be intellectually stimulated and challenged. Employability, whilst still a significant concern among participants, was of secondary importance as the possibility to pivot away from music into other professions provided a sense of security, enabling their passion to come first. Whilst many expressed that job security and higher earning potential was a goal, they claim it is not the 'be all end all', otherwise they would never have chosen music in the first place.

3 – Making the Arts More Vocational

All of the graduate participants in the study are now working in non-music related sectors including law, marketing and the travel industry. The development of a broader range of skills that music at university rather than a conservatoire offered, enabled them to pivot away from music. Although the use of any content specific knowledge throughout the three years is no longer required in their everyday lives, all of the participants pointed out certain skills that they acquired during their degree that were relevant to their jobs now. They listed skills such as critical thinking; analytical skills; creating an argument; communication; working under

pressure; presentation; writing skills; and creativity as the key takeaways of their degree. Lily felt that:

> *"The music degree has value in the sense that it gives you a lot of communication skills and analysis skills, but it doesn't have any value in the actual content it teaches. I won't be needing to bring up music analysis or philosophy in my job".*

Lily's statement shows how notions of value can be constructed differently. If the value of her degree is measured according to how and whether she directly uses what she has learnt during three years of study to her job now, then she ascribes it virtually no value. Here, the value is not in the musical knowledge itself, but the extra-musical skills developed in learning, acquiring and demonstrating that knowledge. This relates to Tomlinson's observation of the vertical mismatch of skills, where the role in which graduates end up in does not utilise the knowledge and skills of the field they were formally educated in (Jackson, 2021). Depending on the individual's expectations of graduate employment, feelings of underemployment can vary as shown by Lily, who did not end up in the music industry and thus felt her knowledge was not being utilised to its full potential.

Margot expressed a similar feeling to Lily, as she says:

> *"Music as a whole, whether its essays or practicing an instrument you build up a sense of determination, you understand that hard work does reap results and so you get yourself into a mindset where you can overcome anything which has helped me massively".*

Again, Margot makes a reference to the time, dedication and commitment it takes to learn an instrument that is useful rather than the actual skill of playing a piece of music. The value lies in the extra-musical skills that students can gain whilst also studying topic content that they are interested in.

In a more positive train of thought compared to Lily, even though he uses no musical knowledge in his job now, that doesn't necessarily mean there is no value as he tells me:

"The way I see it, the skills you need for a job, you need to learn those skills through a specific context. You get to decide whether that context is geography, history or music and for me the most interesting context is music".

Interviews with the graduate participants provided an opportunity for them to reflect and look at their degree retrospectively. This prompted more extrinsic values to be drawn upon and emphasised the importance of transferable skills that gave them more flexibility. Despite their jobs not being directly related to music in any way, there was a consensus that the critical thinking, analysis and life skills that arose from their degree were still invaluable a year later.

Despite having overcome the battle with social norms and taken steps to ensure their career prospects were not limited, participants still expressed and recalled how applying to jobs was a source of anxiety for fear that music did not look good on their CV. Some participants were hoping for a career in music whilst others were certain they wanted to explore other professions. There seemed to be divided opinions regarding the course structure whereby those who were certain they wanted to work in non-music related sectors enjoyed the fact that the course was so academic and benefited more from the transferable skills they gained essay-based assignments and meeting deadlines. On the other hand, those who intended to study music with the hopes of entering the music industry expressed disappointment with the structure of the course and felt they were not at all equipped with skills that could be useful to a job in the music industry. Lily emphasised her frustration:

"I remember looking at the list C options from a few years ago and they had a module called Music Industry. I was really hoping they would have something like that because at least we will learn about the business of music and have actual knowledge of it, but it wasn't an option. Really disappointed with our options to be honest".

Putting it more bluntly, Raphael said:

"I came into music wanting to go into the music industry and I've left knowing nothing about it and well, I haven't made it in the industry, so…"

Lily also commented on a contradiction made by the Oxford Music department during an open day, which praised music as one of the highest paying humanities but then proceeded to

list the kind of jobs music graduates go into – none of which were music-related. For Lily, it seemed as though there was little support to guide students in music-oriented careers except for academia.

Participants were then asked if they would have preferred the course to be more vocational in order to equip them with the skills necessary to make it in the music industry. Despite the disappointment, Raphael accepted the fact that if the course was completely vocational, "it wouldn't be an Oxford degree that was respected" and that was a compromise he had to make. Commenting on the over saturation and overall devaluation of degrees due to the massification of higher education, he noted that his peers either at Oxford or elsewhere who studied vocational degrees and even "more socially acceptable" humanities subjects still struggled to find a job and thus he said he "think[s] less of degrees as a whole". Continuing on, he says:

> *"I guess I equate value with the amount of work you're doing. I thought everyone valued history more than music and they always talk about how many essays they have to write or how many books they have to read, and I go, well actually I'm doing the same amount of work."*

Louise had a different response to making the arts more vocational as she warned against turning music degrees into that of STEM subjects, believing that music is the "last preservation of humanity". During her time at Oxford University, there were opportunities for her peers studying Law or Engineering to have dinners and events with firms from the Magic Circle that gave them the chance to network with professionals from big companies in their field, whereas there were no such opportunities for music students despite the fact that the music industry more than other sectors relies on connections and who you know. Whilst she acknowledged the financial contributions that the music industry has provided for England, she insisted that other more meaningful contributions have long been ignored. Louise mentioned how Taylor Swift has come to tour across England and has been donating to charities such as food banks in the local cities as well as reminiscing how music brought the public together throughout COVID, a surely isolating period for many. Louise's argument provided an alternative defence of music, voicing the societal contributions which have thus far been overpowered by economic considerations.

Her comments shed light on the underrepresentation of the music industry as a strong contributor to the economy. In 2001, it was envisioned that the fastest growing sector of the creative industry would lead to "a Britain in ten years' time, where the local economies in our biggest cities are driven by creativity", which Boehm had believed to be a significant shift in the perception of the value of the Arts during the time (Boehm, 2019, p. 495). However, since 2001, there have been policy expressions that have acted like barriers to further productivity within the music industry. Regional boundaries circling London as separate to the rest of the country has created a north-south economic divide. A large proportion of the music industry consists of small to medium size enterprises (SMEs), that are often discounted in commissioned reports that are vital to influencing policy decisions. Given the success and the pace at which the music industry is evolving – thanks to innovations in technology, the question is why are policymakers or universities not doing more to encourage music graduates to enter the industry and supplying them with the training and skills in order to have the confidence that this could be a viable career path? Downplaying the value of the Arts is only pushing music graduates away and steering them towards career paths where there is already saturation in the job market and only leads to the underutilisation of skills.

The disbandment of the Department of Business, Innovation and Skills in 2016 under the governance of Theresa May resulted in a further conceptual gap between innovation and education, as well as relegating arts education in secondary and tertiary education to the bottom in the list of government priorities to address. Government strategies that place technical education above academic education has had an impact on the talent pipeline leading up to higher education, with Ken Robinson noting, "if you run an education system based on standardisation and conformity that suppresses individuality, imagination and creativity, don't be surprised if that's what it does" (Robinson and Aronica, 2015, as cited in Boehm, 2019, p. 499).

CONCLUSION

The aim of this research was to explore music students' perceptions on the value(s) of their degree through the following research questions:

1. What are students' motivations for attending higher education and choice of Music?
2. What values do students ascribe to their music degree?
3. How does motivation for pursuing a music degree align or conflict with the values they ascribe to their degree?

The inception of the study was prompted by newspaper articles pejoratively branding arts degrees as 'mickey-mouse' or 'low-value' in the wake of proposed action to cap student numbers on these courses. The reason behind the Arts being labelled as 'low-value' has everything to do with metrics that assess graduate outcomes and the neoliberal approach to higher education that narrow-mindedly focuses on economic outcomes and returns by treating education as an 'investment' in human capital. An institutional case study at Oxford University presents a unique case where its reputational advantage is thought to mitigate to some extent concerns about employability through its global prestige and academic standard, which leads to targeted recruitment ensuring its graduates are well-positioned in the competitive graduate labour market. It is undeniable that the reputation of Oxford University has contributed significantly to the findings of this study. Schwartz' model accounts for the influence of cultural context on value priorities. The historical prestige and academic expectations certainly attract a certain kind of student. All participants were aware of the highly academic nature of degrees at Oxford, with some even mentioning that was an aspect they enjoyed the most. The context of Oxford has also proved to influence the rational choice of students, as they navigate the prestige and expectations associated with the institution, possibly leading to different cost-benefit analyses compared to students at other universities.

The focus on the music undergraduate programme is also unique in the sense that it is taught in a similar way to humanities subjects and this study also hoped to highlight the study of music in an academic nature, which is not often considered within wider debates surrounding the Arts. The study gives a voice to the students who have chosen to pursue music at higher education despite the negative stereotypes. Through the use of Schwartz' basic human values, other less dominant framings of value beyond economic gain, began to emerge. Combining

Rational Choice Theory was useful to understand how influential wider neoliberal discourse has been to the decision-making process behind the participants' educational choices. By combining these frameworks one can explore how students' value orientations shape their rational calculations regarding their degrees.

The study revealed a disconnect and conflicting framings of value, as discussions with participants transitioned from motivations to attend university and the beginning of the degree, towards the final year and wider career aspirations. Especially among graduate participants, there was a mismatch between the values associated to the three years spent during the degree to the takeaway value of their degree, after having left and entered the graduate labour market. Although participants felt that their degree provided them with social, cultural and a range of transferable skills, they also felt that public misconceptions of music degrees placed them at an automatic disadvantage and was a source of anxiety when applying to jobs. Rational choice theory manifested itself throughout the interviews as the participants talked about making trade-offs or compromises between competing choices. In the context of value conflicts, participants were faced with the challenge of rationalising their decisions by prioritising one value over another, potentially leading to compromises or cognitive dissonance. This was seen through students choosing a university over a conservatoire in order to maximise their chances of career stability or, studying music was perceived as acceptable as long as the institution was renowned. The research shows how music students negotiate value conflicts in their decision-making processes and how these conflicts influence their satisfaction with their degree choices.

The intersection of values-driven behaviour (as per Schwartz) and rational strategic behaviour (as per RCT) could reveal whether students' actions align more with intrinsic values or calculated outcomes, providing insights into the balance between personal values and external pressures. The results of this study show that at the point of applying for university, values that link to self-direction, stimulation and achievement are favoured in the decision-making process but towards the completion of studies, employability becomes a huge consideration when choosing career paths and is where participants showed the most strategic behaviour that will optimise their future prospects. In this regard, a longitudinal study could provide deeper insight into how students' value systems and rational strategies develop over time and potentially shift as they encounter new challenges in their academic and personal lives. Schwartz' theory and RCT can still be applicable to a longitudinal study

as Schwartz' theory allows for the exploration of how values might change over time and RCT can be applied dynamically, considering how students' decision-making processes might change as they progress throughout their degrees, gain more information and clarify their future goals.

The most surprising result of the study was that all of the graduate participants were now working in non-music related sectors and even those who had hoped to enter the music industry did not feel that their degree equipped them with the skills and connections to do so. Despite the shift in responsibility towards universities in ensuring students are employable, it seems as if the set of participants who wished to enter music-related sectors were let down and feel as though they are underemployed. Government strategies have acknowledged that there is this issue of underemployment and a saturation in the graduate labour market as a result of the massification of higher education. However, whilst there is a supply of highly trained music graduates with a wide-ranging skill set, neoliberal ideas that emphasise the importance of economic returns of investment from university degrees, leads them to believe that the music industry is not a highly valued career and instead push their aspirations towards a sector that is already highly saturated and where their skills are underutilised.

There is still a key question to be answered – what is the role of universities in supporting the development of students to confidently navigate, think critically and creatively in order to contribute to the future of society. A reductive focus on economic growth has led to the neglect of music and arts education. It appears perceptions of value with regards to higher education that have emerged in this study, are not quite compatible with role their degree has in life after university.

The findings of this study could have practical implications for how universities design and implement educational programmes that align with students' value systems and rational career strategies, thus potentially improving student satisfaction and outcomes. Using Schwartz' Basic Human Values and Rational Choice Theory together allows for a multi-faceted analysis of music students' motivations and decisions regarding their degrees and future prospects. The approach not only reveals the value-laden motivations behind their choices but also provides insight into how they navigate the complex trade-offs between personal values and rational career considerations in a prestigious academic environment.

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APPENDICES

APPENDIX 1: Ethics approval

Dear Eleanor,

Thank you for your patience and cooperation during this review process.

I am writing to acknowledge receipt of your CUREC 1B application entitled '*Oxford University Music students' perceptions of the value of a Music Degree*'. The application was reviewed and approved by Dr James Robson, your supervisor. No further approval from the Education DREC is required for applications reviewed under the CUREC 1B process. As such, the project will not receive a formal letter of ethical approval from the SSH IDREC.

The ethics reference for your application is C1B-24HT-Educ-016. Please add this reference to your CUREC 1B form and include it on documents for the research participants such as the participant information sheet.

Please note that this is contingent on the research project adhering to the criteria set out in the CUREC 1B guidance. Please ensure, therefore, that you comply with the conditions of this process and, should anything change in the course of the project, you should discuss this with your supervisor to determine whether this requires further review and approval by the Education DREC.

Irina Lepadatu
Research Manager

Department of Education, University of Oxford
15 Norham Gardens, Oxford, OX2 6PY

APPENDIX 2: PARTICIPANT INFORMATION SHEET

Department of Education

Principle Investigator: Professor James Robson
james.robson@education.ox.ac.uk
01865 274044
Primary Researcher: Eleanor Chung (MSc Education student)
Eleanor.chung@jesus.ox.ac.uk

Oxford University Music students' perceptions of the value of a Music Degree

PARTICIPANT INFORMATION SHEET

Central University Research Ethics Committee Approval Reference: C1B-24HT-Educ-016

Introduction

You are being invited to take part in a research project as part of my MSc Education (Higher Education) dissertation. Before you decide it is important for you to understand why the research is being done and what it will involve. Please take time to read the following information carefully and discuss it with others if you wish. If there is anything that is not clear or if you would like further information do not hesitate to reach out via the contact details above. Take time to decide whether you wish to take part.

Why is this research being conducted?

This research is being done as a dissertation project for my master's degree. It will be assessed in the fall of 2024. The research aims to explore perceptions of value that Music students ascribe to their degree in the context of a highly marketised education system.

The involvement of students who are due to graduate or have graduated is crucial to gaining an insight into a Music degree holder's position within the job market. Involvement of students in their first year will be especially useful in comparing expectations or aspirations of students enrolled on a Music course and explore how perceptions of value may differ as students begin to seek employment.

Why have I been invited to take part?

You have been chosen as a potential participant because you are studying/have studied Music at The University of Oxford and are in:

- First year
- Are due to graduate this year
- Have graduated with a Music degree within the last academic year (graduated in 2023).

Including yourself, around 20 other students at the University of Oxford have been invited to take part.

Do I have to take part?

No, it is up to you to decide whether to take part. You can withdraw yourself from the study without reason with no negative implications. If you wish to do so, please do advise me of this decision at the earliest convenience. It is preferrable if you could advise me of this decision before the 1st July 2024. Any data that has been collected will be protected by the researcher on university servers. If you wish to withdraw, data will be destroyed immediately.

What will happen to me if I take part in the research?

If you choose to participate in this research as an interviewee, you may read the consent sheet, sign, and email it back to the primary researcher. With your consent, Teams will record our conversation (audio and visual) but only the audio will be used for my research to have an accurate record of our conversation.

Interviews are expected to be held online via teams, lasting no longer than 1 hour. A date and time will be agreed according to your preference. Contact details may need to be recorded for short follow-up interviews or an email to clarify topics discussed.

The discussion topics will be open ended questions covering:

- Reasons as to why you attended university and what you expect/ed to gain from obtaining a bachelor's degree.
- Your experience of a Music degree – what you did or did not enjoy, skills acquired etc.
- Career options or choices

The research is expected to end on the 8th August 2024. Interviews will be recorded and transcribed via Teams. The recordings will be stored on a university server in OneDrive and will be destroyed automatically after the 8th August.

What are the possible disadvantages and risks in taking part?

All data used in the final dissertation will be anonymised and therefore not identifiable in any direct quotation or elsewhere in the research.

Are there any benefits in taking part?

Whilst there are no immediate benefits for those participating in the project, it is hoped that this research may provide an opportunity to reflect on your university experience. By doing so, if you are yet to decide your career path, the research hopes this project may be a means of guidance in your future endeavours.

What information will be collected and why is the collection of this information relevant for achieving the research objectives?

If you wish to participate, your consent form with your signature and personal details will be stored online in OneDrive on university servers. The consent forms will be destroyed three years after the research ends in accordance with university policy. Any reference to information shared during the interview will be anonymous in the final dissertation. Names will not be used, and participants will only be identifiable by cohort. You can choose whether you wish to be contacted or not in the future, should I need further clarification regarding our interview conversation.

Discussion topics in the interview will help me to understand the different values students may ascribe to a Music degree. I am also interested in your motivations for attending university to see how these values may be situated in the wider context of the purpose of higher education.

Only myself and my supervisor will have access to the interview recordings, which will be stored online in OneDrive too on university servers.

Will the research be published? Could I be identified from any publications or other research outputs?

The findings from the research will be written in my dissertation. A copy of my final dissertation will be deposited both in print and online in the Oxford University Research Archive where it will be publicly available to facilitate its use in future research/ its access will be restricted. However, any reference to data obtained during interviews will be anonymous.

I would like your permission to use direct quotations but without identifying you by name (only by cohort) in any research outputs.

Data Protection

The University of Oxford is the data controller with respect to your personal data, and as such will determine how your personal data is used in the research. The University will process your personal data for the purpose of the research outlined above. Research is a task that is performed in the public interest. Further information about your rights with respect to your personal data is available from the University's Information Compliance website at https://compliance.admin.ox.ac.uk/individual-rights.

Who has reviewed this research?

The application was reviewed and approved by my supervisor on behalf of the Departmental of Education's Research Ethics Committee.

Who do I contact if I have a concern about the research or I wish to complain?

If you have concerns about any aspect of this research please contact Eleanor Chung at Eleanor.chung@jesus.ox.ac.uk or Professor James Robson at James.robson@education.ox.ac.uk and we will do our best to answer your query. We will acknowledge your concern within 10 working days and give you an indication of how it will be dealt with. If you remain unhappy or wish to make a formal complaint, please contact:

The University of Oxford Research Governance, Ethics & Assurance (RGEA) team at rgea.complaints@admin.ox.ac.uk or on 01865 616480.

Further Information and Contact Details

If you would like to discuss the research with someone beforehand (or if you have questions afterwards), please contact:

Primary Researcher: Eleanor Chung

Department of Education

University of Oxford, 15 Norham Gardens, Oxford OX2 6PY

Eleanor.chung@jesus.ox.ac.uk

APPENDIX 3: CONSENT FORM

Department of Education
Principle Investigator: Professor James Robson
James.robson@education.ox.ac.uk
01865 274044

Primary Researcher: Eleanor Chung, MSc Education (Higher Education) student.
Eleanor.chung@jesus.ox.ac.uk

Consent to take part in: Students' Perceptions of the value of a Music Degree at The University of Oxford

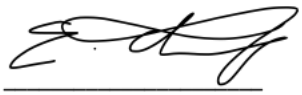
Central University Research Ethics Committee (CUREC) approval reference: **C1B-24HT-Educ-016**

Purpose of Study: The data collected will be anonymised and identifiable only by students' cohort (first year/finalist/graduate) to inform research to be submitted as a master's dissertation.

	Please initial each box if you agree with the statement
I confirm that I have read and understand the information sheet for the above research. I have had the opportunity to consider the information, ask questions and have had these answered satisfactorily.	☐
I understand that my participation is voluntary and that I am free to withdraw at any point until 01/07/2024 without giving any reason.	☐
I understand who will have access to personal data provided, how the data will be stored and what will happen to the data at the end of the project.	☐
I understand that I will not be identifiable from any publications or other research outputs except for the fact that you will have attended Oxford University. Dates of enrolment and graduation will not be mentioned.	☐
I consent to being audio and video recorded – Only audio will be used after the interview.	☐
I understand how audio recordings will be used in research outputs.	☐
Use of quotations: Please indicate your preference (select *one* option):	☐
a) I do not wish to be quoted. **or**	
b) I agree to the use of quotations in research outputs if I am not identifiable. **or**	☐
I give permission for you to contact me again to clarify information.	☐

I understand how to raise a concern or make a complaint. ☐

I agree to take part.[1] ☐

_____	dd / mm / yyyy	_____
Name of participant	Date	Signature
Eleanor Chung		
_____	12/ 05 / 2024	_____
Name of person taking consent	Date[2]	Signature

APPENDIX 4: INTERVIEW SAMPLE QUESTIONS

Sample interview questions

Research title: "**What are you going to do with that?" Music students' perceptions on the value(s) of their degree.**

Introduction:

- Tell me a bit about you, what music do you enjoy; what do you play; when did you first start playing music?
- What was the music department in your secondary school like?
- What A-level subjects did you take?

Motivations for attending university and studying music:

- Can you tell me a bit about why you chose to attend university?
- What did you hope to gain from going to university?
- What drew you towards music?
- Did you always want to study music?
- Had you ever considered going to a Conservatoire?
- How big of a role did Oxford University play when applying to university?

Educational Experience:

- How has the course been so far?
- What aspects or module have you enjoyed the most so far and why?
- In what ways do you believe studying music has enriched your personal life?
- Do you think music has had an impact on your broader academic or professional life?
- What kind of skills do you think you have gained so far? Are they useful?
- What extra-curricular activities are you involved in outside of your degree?

Perceptions:

- What are the usual comments or reactions you receive when you tell people you study music?
- How do you think society perceives the value of music? How does this make you feel/
- When I say the word value, what comes to mind / what do you think that means (in an educational context)?
- If you could go back and choose any degree to study, would you have picked music?

Career:

- Have you given thought / when did you begin thinking about careers or what you would like to do after university?
- [graduates]: do you still engage with music – can be in a formal or informal capacity?
    - Does music play a role in the field that you're in now?
    - What role do you think music will play in your life moving forward?
- Have you ever thought about a career in the music industry?
- What kind of support did you receive in terms of career planning from either the department or college?