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Employability ecosystems in music: (Re)navigating a life in music (in precarious times)

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Abstract

Preparing students to navigate a life in music involves understanding how they develop awareness of their personal and professional identities, build networks, and reflect on practice in order to sustain and develop work which is meaningful. In a complex, uncertain and rapidly changing world, particularly following the Covid-19 pandemic, we explore the ways in which HEIs might support music students as they prepare for their futures. We argue that employability ecosystems may provide a useful frame for considering the ways in which students' work transitions can be supported. We consider three vignettes of practice relating to the role of eportfolios and mentoring in scaffolding student reflections on how the intersections of passion, partnership and identity inform personal definitions of success. We suggest that there is a need to disrupt dominant working practices within the music industry and its institutions towards a more ethical, sustainable and culturally enriching employability ecosystem.

Keywords

Employability, identity, music, ePortfolio, higher education

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Introduction

This article originated as a conversation between three practitioner/researchers across three diverse Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) (2015–2019) in the North of England, UK who shared their experiences of supporting music students to meet the challenges towards employability. Navigating a life in music concerns how students develop 'employability thinking' (a phrase used by one of our music undergraduate participants), develop networks, reflect on practice and have a deepening awareness of their personal and professional identities (Weston, 2020). This is viewed from a life-span perspective in the context of an uncertain and rapidly changing world replete with super-complexity (Barnett, 2009). This article acknowledges that whilst there might not be a certainty of 'future-proofing' there might at least be a possibility to expand the narrative. Since the time of writing the first version of this article, we continue to experience the impact of an even more rapidly changing context due to the global Covid-19 pandemic on the lives of musicians. We therefore return to the (re)writing of this article in terms of (re)navigations, music and employability, interspersing three short vignettes to position ourselves and identify key ideas which bridge the fields of employability, workplace learning and vocational psychology. As we interrogate key themes in the literature(s), we dig beneath the dominant narratives to arrive at a consideration of employability ecosystems in music.

Background and Context

Bennett (2018) defines employability as 'the ability to find, create and sustain meaningful work across the career lifespan' (p. i), acknowledging that the employability of music graduates in creative careers is particularly problematic as 'few students transition to a traditional full-time position' (Bennett et al., 2016: 107). Bennett et al. (2016) suggest that the challenges arise because the navigation involves continually shaping and re-contextualising work to meet both personal and professional needs. This was, and still is, relevant to those who identify as musicians across a full range of music genres, as well as to musicians who identify as traditional performers and composers, and those who specialise in music technology and production. Many develop identities which combine and diversify these skills, activities and roles, navigating positions which include teaching music, facilitating music in community and health-care settings, continuing to study music at masters and PhD levels, but considerations of the employability of music graduates also apply to those who decide not to pursue music as a career option. Given the broad range of musicians and potential work trajectories, understanding the nature of such navigations is vital for the full range of course providers too.

Throughout the article we intersperse three vignettes to illustrate how the authors started to confront and address some of the challenges faced by music students. The types of resource described were developed within our respective institutions to embed employability within the curriculum in order to support students preparing to embark on their graduate lives. Although two of the authors have conducted research projects into this area, the purpose of this article is not to present the research in detail, but rather to highlight how these interventions supported the students; the vignettes identify key ideas,

which viewed retrospectively appear to be situated within unchallenged dominant discourses. Each of the interventions offered a relational experience with others which afforded opportunities to explore complex navigation pathways in the liminal spaces beyond the formal taught curriculum and the contexts of informal learning, often mediated by technology.

Vignette 1: A 'kick start into employability thinking'

Aim: To research the development of a final year module focusing on research, employability and enterprise and which would involve the development of an eportfolio.

Objectives: Students work as part of a research team (which also includes staff and a business consultant) to explore the learning and teaching implications of introducing the e-portfolio within the music curriculum.

Example: Liz Mellor recalls a memorable group tutorial where students were researching performing careers in music. She witnessed one student enthusiastically reporting that she had managed to have a 'phone conversation with a singer with some considerable following in the region. This student reported finding out that the singer's earnings did not provide a sustainable income and that she still lived with her parents. Her shock reverberated round the room with the rest of her student peers. In that moment, Liz realized the level of naivety and/or denial that many students have about their future directions.

Liz became increasingly aware of how difficult it was for students to face reality as they approached the completion of their music degree. Creating this module was like 'pushing them through the eye of the needle' into what might be a 'dashing of the dream' but a necessary confrontation of the realities ahead. Students commented that 'It helped me realise what skills I needed to take a career path forward'; 'I wish I started this at the start of my course rather than in my final year. '

Discussion: Student evaluations of the ePortfolio at the end of the module indicate that they felt resistant at the start, didn't see the point, couldn't see the value, and felt that it took them away from studying music per se. By the end of the module, students reported feeling that this was one of the most valuable aspects of the course, could see how it gave them a 'kick start towards employability thinking' and that the space offered in the module gave them chance to recognise the multitude of skills and qualities gained throughout their degree, both within and outside music. This supported their self-belief and self-confidence and provided a more realistic view of what was possible for them. This kind of career preview, embedded within the curriculum, rather than as an optional co-curricular activity, enabled the students to take small steps towards developing the next steps and enhanced their support networks and contacts outside the university. This also supported some to realise that keeping music as a hobby was 'OK', and that not getting a job in music was not a mark of failure.

As Vignette 1 illustrates, appropriating the language of 'employability' in module descriptions created resistance for some students especially at the outset of a course. For others, especially towards the end of the intervention, both the language and the experience became embedded and was experienced by some students as 'employability thinking' (i.e. metacognitive aspects of employability development, cf. Yorke and Knight, 2004). The language of this discourse is as much a socio-political and economic exercise as an educational one; this is beyond the scope of this paper but is an important consideration which can ultimately lead to structural inequalities and barriers to educational progress (Parutis and Howson, 2020).

What follows is an interrogation of the ways in which aspects of the dominant discourses in overlapping fields may afford understanding of how HEIs might support music students as they navigate a life in music. In particular we will explore the following questions:

- What might be considered legitimate knowledge in 'employability thinking'?
- What tensions and challenges are being contested?
- What might be being excluded or erased from dominant discourses in the field?
- What resources might be (re)imagined to support a renavigation in a life of music in precarious times, and increasingly precarious since Covid 19?
- How might the narrative of 'employability' be expanded?

The contexts of music, 'employability' and precarity

Within the last decade, there has been a move towards embedding employability in the Higher Education curriculum, in the UK (Tibby and Norton, 2020) and further afield (Page et al., 2019). It can be argued that this initiative challenged, and still challenges, course providers to contest what is legitimate knowledge within the context of higher education music, especially in relation to Barnett's (2009) suggestion that the dilemma in higher education is how to make sense of a world which is 'already replete with manifold interpretations – this world presents us with problems of being … who we are, how we are to live in the world and with each other, how we are even to know the world: all these matters are contested' (Barnett, 2009: 439). Barnett suggests that it is the notion of 'being' that is challenged by our world of supercomplexity. Therefore in 'being' a musician there will be many wishes which come and go which need to be outplayed within the (im)possibilities of the structures and constraints which define the personal, political, cultural and economic conditions. The complexities of 'being' then, are confusing, uncertain and ambiguous; it is this liminal state which provides the ideal context for learning (Barnett, 2009: 139). Barnett argues that genuine higher education must engage with educating students on how to 'be' in a world of super-complexity (cf. Wimpenny et al., 2016) and helps us question the type of support needed for students to both imagine and realise possible selves (Markus and Nurius, 1986) as they navigate a life in music.

Socio-cultural Climate

Before the recent Covid-19 crisis, the navigation towards a life in music took place within an increasingly fragmenting socio-cultural tapestry where musicians' identities were continually evolving, mediated and self-managed towards achieving portfolio careers in music (Bartleet et al., 2019; Dawood, 2014; DHA Communications, 2012; Nelken, 2013; Reid et al., 2019). Developing a portfolio career is the result of more than self-critical reflection towards artistic excellence and more than learning and teaching within the university per se; it is multi-sited and happens in partnership, it is often contemporaneous with external contacts, networks and experiences with the aim of working towards a range of different income streams, some of which initially may not be in music. As illustrated in vignette two, such experiences and their impact on learner identity, may be captured through the use of technology, for example within ePortfolio platforms (Bennett et al., 2016) which enable self-reflection and assessment (Carson et al., 2018; Rhodes, 2018; Schrand et al., 2018) towards supporting more realistic career ambitions (Bennett, 2009, 2013).

Vignette 2: Documenting and Evaluating Placement Experience through the ePortfolio

Aim: To document and evaluate workplace feedback through the medium of the ePortfolio.

Objectives: To develop an information repository of contacts and developing networks for future reference, to reflect on what and how they have learned, and to recognize the skills they have developed. Reflecting on feedback from peers, tutors, and involvement in discussion fora was a crucial part of the process.

Outcomes: The students reported that the opportunities afforded by workplace learning were a spur to aspiring to exploring new opportunities that they could never have imagined previously. As the documentation in the ePortfolio grew, students showed how they developed and adapted their skills over time (this included skills in communication, organization, enterprise as well as musical skills), and also built new musical relationships. For some, growing confidence led to increasing self-efficacy.

Discussion: The ePortfolio provides a space to upload testimonials, certificates and to present work in an outward-facing and contemporary medium which develops and utilises existing technology skills from the students' use of social media and other online platforms. When the ePortfolio is placed centrally within a pedagogy of a community of inquiry it is significantly effective as part of the learning process. Garrison and Vaughan's (2008) model of the production of a community of inquiry 'supports connection and collaboration among learners and creates a learning environment which integrates social, cognitive and teaching elements in a way that will precipitate and sustain critical reflection and discourse' (Garrison and Vaughan, 2008: 8). The ePortfolio offers an opportunity for anyone in the module to contribute, thus extending the community of inquiry beyond the classroom.

The diversity of the navigational trajectories facing musicians is affirmed by the Musicians Union, UK (2012: 5):

> There is no such thing as a typical musician. The blend of roles, patterns of paid and creative work, employment status and working hours vary across musicians and across different periods in their careers. Developing a portfolio career, made up of different jobs, is a necessary characteristic of many musicians' careers; this invariably involves developing non-music skills such as business, marketing, teaching and community engagement.

Standing (2011) refers to those experiencing this type of precarious work in the cultural and creative industries as the 'precariat', founded on the idea of a flexible labour market with young people at the core. It is associated with employment insecurity, along with increased competition, anxiety, pressure, and long working hours (Neilson, 2015). As Andrew Ross emphasises in the expression 'precarious livelihoods', the 'precariat' is not just defined by precariousness at work; the boundaries between work and leisure are increasingly blurred, reflecting what McKinlay and Smith call the "idea of work as a life style" (McKinlay and Smith, 2009: 67). As a result, creative workers may struggle to separate their job from other aspects of their lives: family, friends, and leisure time. In the capitalism system, life is arranged around work: this is the 'takeover of life by work' (Gill and Pratt, 2008: 17), highlighting how the characteristics of the 'precariat' are not only observed in the professional sphere, but also in other aspects of creatives' lives.

When potential employability is subject to recognition and validation within the vagaries, precarity and instability of creative industry practices, then navigating these externally driven forces becomes more challenging, and for some impossible, especially where success in relation to potential income becomes difficult to define. In the UK, Help Musicians (https://www.helpmusicians.org.uk/) and the Musicians Union (https://www.musiciansunion.org.uk/) are at the forefront of exposing some of the hidden assumptions and challenges which musicians face as they navigate a life in music, particularly in relationship to the music industry, though the discussions are relevant across the board. A valued aspect of support is to consider the specific and unique issues which face musicians. MusicTank (https://www.musictank.co.uk/) identify that the opportunity for musicians to talk to other musicians is a source of valuable support for addressing potential isolation, providing possible ways forward and literally 'bringing down to earth' and 'bringing into the frame' some of the hidden and harsh realities of musicians striving to forge careers in music (vignette three).

Vignette 3: Mentoring – Employability Conversations

Aims: To facilitate students to have employability conversations with recent music alumni.

Objectives: Students have opportunities to hear, and reflect on, stories about the transition to work after graduation from recent alumni of their music department and to develop ongoing mentoring relationships

Outcomes: Music students have previously indicated that they would welcome opportunities to meet and talk with people working in chosen professions in order to understand how their working lives have unfolded and how they have navigated challenges along the way. They wanted to hear what alumni have achieved and how they have worked with the skills gained during their degree. Therefore, an employability mentoring scheme was introduced which provided a matching service between current students and recent alumni.

Examples: 'Not only has my mentor told me about how she got into the field and given me advice on what I can do, but she's also offered me volunteering opportunities within her work which would obviously be brilliant experience for me'. The mentors in this scheme were perceived to have genuine interest in the students: 'she has given me really good advice – I think it is partially due to her asking me what were my job aims and career aspirations as well as how would I define myself'.

Discussion: The outcomes of the scheme were overwhelmingly positive. The fact that the mentors are alumni of the music department offered significant advantages; similar programmes, experiences and extra-curricular activities provided a way for mentees and mentors to connect and quickly build a relationship. The mentees were inspired by their mentor's passion for their work and valued the insights afforded by direct contact with a particular profession. The value of alumni mentoring is that it provides a form of career preview and allows mentees to learn about the process of seeking employment in a music-related profession (including that it can be a slow process and is rarely straightforward); the mentees valued the reality-check provided by the mentors as it helped them to manage their expectations and to make a plan for after graduation. The first-hand and personal insight from the profession, along with opportunities to explore what that might mean for them, personally and psychologically, is undoubtedly a strength of the scheme, and highlights the necessity for putting the individual at the centre of employability discussions and planning.

The lived experience of musicians navigating this precarious path is a challenging one, associated with much anxiety and questioning.

> If the work they do creates little financial benefit, how else might they understand their work in terms of their self-worth and relationship to the music industries…Indeed, this lack of financial value can cause others to question the merit of what musicians do (Gross and Musgrave, 2017: 21).

Bennett et al. (2016) suggest that developing a portfolio career requires a strong sense of identity and an awareness of opportunities as these can build resilience. To this end, Bennett et al. advocate interventions such as EmployABILITY – an online employability

tool - which aims to support and evaluate the integration of EmployABILITY thinking into the curriculum by developing flexible technological tools that can support and capture students' reflections on their educational experiences (https://developingemployability.edu.au/).

Beech et al. (2016) further differentiate a balance between *identity-in-the-work* and *self-questioning* identity work. In their study with indie musicians, the authors outline the tensions between identity which may be *self-affirmed* towards a more continuous, coherent and distinctive sense of self; or *self-questioned* - where musicians may 'not always seek to arrive at an answer or strive for resolution' (Beech et al., 2016: 507). This challenges a prevalent and dominant discourse directed towards a 'modernist conception of a unified self' (Hartman, 2015: 22, Beech et al., 2016: 509). The shift towards identity-in-the-work, which describes a musician's investment of self in the work, navigates an emotional investment between the polarities of desire and fear: holding these polarities in tension is as much the identity project as the outcome. Further, Beech et al. (2016: 511) stress the relationship between self and the environment where the identity project is an interplay between how people present and explain who they are (to themselves and others) reflecting the roles of social influence (who they want me to be) and self-definition (who I am or want to be).

The relationship between a strong sense of identity and resilience offers a tension from a socio-economic perspective since living with precarity renders musicians as particularly vulnerable (Gross and Musgrave, 2017). Initial findings of research into the incidence of mental ill-health among musicians (Gross and Musgrave, 2016, 2017) suggest that identifying as a musician and creating a music career is problematic and sometimes traumatic (Gross and Musgrave, 2016). This brings into focus a prevalent discourse in terms of health and wellbeing in the navigational trajectory in the lives of musicians. At the time of writing, Covid-19 has intensified the predicament and precarity for musicians (Gable, 2020). According to the results of a survey of Musicians Union members, musicians are facing 'an unravelling of their portfolio careers' as the pandemic has not only prevented opportunities to teach and perform, but also meant the cessation of other jobs that may have provided supplemental income (Gable, 2020: 2). Furthermore, the rules around the Self-Employment Income Support Scheme meant that musicians were only eligible if their self-employed earnings were more than 50% of their total income. This hits hard for musicians, especially those in the early years of navigating a life in music. And this is only the beginning, as our title suggests. Here we write, sitting on the cusp of an even more illusory task to (re)consider how to support music students to (re) navigate a life in music in even more precarious times.

Music students at the 'centre' of an employability ecosystem

The next part of the article (re)visits literature which has underpinned the field pre-Covid 19, to call into focus what might be helpful in moving forward and what might need to be contested. To do this we (re)examine definitions of 'employability' which are more temporal and inclusive of precarious work; this guides us to consider further emerging

complexities in the field as well as to (re)imagine the support for music students at the 'centre' of an employability ecosystem.

From the perspective of vocational psychology and career development, Brown and Lent (2016) provide a useful overview of literature. Relevant here are two main theoretical perspectives. The first relates to a Person-Environment fit perspective which hypothesises that 'the degree of match (or fit) between person (e.g. interests, work values, personality, abilities) and work environment characteristics is an important predictor of work satisfaction, performance and tenure' (Brown and Lent, 2016: 1). The second perspective relates to Social Cognitive Career Theory (SCCT) which focuses on the interplay between person characteristics (e.g. self-efficacy beliefs, outcome expectations, goals) and contextual factors (e.g. supports, barriers) in determining educational and work interests, choice making, satisfaction and performance (op cit.: 1). SCCT emphasises the way in which people become authors of their own lives in relation to environmental influences. Indeed, the theme of promoting agency at work is dominant in contemporary vocational psychology (Yoong et al., 2017), sitting alongside themes relating to equity at work and wellbeing in occupational and educational settings (Brown and Lent, 2016). Viewed through the lens of increasing precarity and the socio-economic crises which musicians are currently facing, the extent to which individual personal agency can overcome contextual and environmental barriers is called into question and into a greater degree of tension. The extent to which individual institutions and their respective mission statements and departmental action plans address this is also a point for debate.

Ideas relating to career adaptability also underpin ideas of how students might navigate a life in music. Career adaptability refers to 'the readiness to cope with the predictable task of preparing for and participating in the work role and with the unpredictable adjustments prompted by changes in work and working conditions' (Savickas, 1997: 4). Career-relevant interests are largely a function of self-efficacy (beliefs about personal capabilities) and outcome expectations (beliefs about consequences of actions) in particular performance domains (e.g. science, arts). People make choices about their educational and working lives that align with their interests and self-efficacy, especially if these are embedded within supportive and facilitating conditions (Blaj-Ward and Matič, 2021; Brown and Lent, 2016). Such favourable contexts include the presence of mentors or financial resources; key to (re)navigating the field is the extent to which the tenets of the discourse 'hold' or 'collapse' in increasingly precarious times. Arguably, this current context demands more than student self-belief in skills and practices, more than student hopes, expectations and goals and faces the reality of a vanishing market, vanishing venues, vanishing audiences and vanishing income.

The construct of work volition and work success may provide a useful additional perspective. As Jadidian and Duffy (2012: 155) explain, work volition is defined as 'the perceived capacity to make occupational choices despite constraints'. Duffy et al. (2014) propose that there is a negative relationship between the number of constraints experienced and work volition. Work volitions serve as moderators for 'agentic-like' career variables such as self-efficacy and career choices, and therefore individuals who feel a greater sense of control over their working lives are likely to perceive fewer obstacles as they progress (Duffy et al., 2012). The notion of control in navigating a life in music, set

against the magnitude of the current socio-economic context, needs to be (re)considered. It could be argued that even despite strong work volition, and greater self-efficacy, goals for students navigating a life in music were hard enough in pre Covid-19 times. In current Covid-19 times, it is debatable where the goals are now situated and the relative impact of the relationship between work volition and efficacy is yet to be seen.

Two further dominant discourses focus on the relationship between well-being and positive adaptation to work settings: the first, *hedonic,* perspective focuses on wellbeing as the result of positive, rather than negative, affect (i.e. happiness and satisfaction as opposed to sadness) in work/education contexts, as well as in the relationship between job and life satisfaction (Duffy et al., 2012: 553). The second, *eudaimonic,* perspective relates well-being to living a meaningful life, encompassing aspects such as a sense of personal growth, meaning and healthy engagement in work. Viewed from this perspective within the current socio-economic context the extent to which HEIs, parents and educators are mindful of the relationship between *musical ways of being in the world* and the increasingly perilous navigation towards *worldly economic survival is* brought into sharper focus*;* balancing the value of intrinsic and extrinsic reward and the value of music experience versus equitable paid work and potentially no paid work. Understanding *how* to support this (re)navigation forms a key question for this article.

Drawing together research on employability in higher education and research in the workplace, Römgens et al. (2020) acknowledge that researchers have different approaches to defining and studying the topic, highlighting that a widely shared criticism is that the term 'employability' is vague and lacks clarity (2019: 2). Research into higher education contexts widely acknowledges that the focus is to prepare students for the uncertainties and challenges they may face throughout their careers (Wimpenny et al., 2016). Conversely, the employability literature focuses on the competencies that contribute to graduate employability, linking knowledge, skills and attitudes to career management skills which aim to increase an individual's ability to obtain a secure job (Dacre Pool and Sewell, 2007; Knight and Yorke, 2004); Bridgstock (2009); Pegg et al. (2012); and Cole and Tibby (2013). As this article has already set out, a secure job for musicians is already contested and calls for a wider definition of employability to account for ongoing and fluctuating socio-economic and political variables. To a certain extent, Römgens et al. (2020) document aspects of this navigational pathway, to include the ideas of *movement capital* (Forrier et al., 2009) and *employability capital* (Peeters et al., 2019) which develop beyond the ideas of knowledge, skills and competencies and effective performance in the labour market towards the idea of career mobility; they consider how to support individuals to cope with changes in the labour market throughout a career. Other researchers have introduced the concepts of *boundaryless* and *protean* careers (DeFillippi and Arthur, 1994; Fugate et al., 2014; Hall, 2004) to describe a more dynamic conception of career, where individuals must manage change continuously as they transition between different roles, affiliations or industries (Römgens et al., 2020).

When reflecting on the vignettes and the discussion so far, the emerging picture of self-identities, expectations and internally and externally moderated notions of success do not now seem to be neatly bound in a resolving navigation or trajectory. This calls into play how music students may or may not 'belong' within dominant discourses within higher

education. Jocey Quinn (2010 challenges the notion of universities as sites of 'communities of inquiry' and 'communities of practice' (after Wenger, 1998), highlighting the importance of capturing the relational mutuality between tutors and learners, where learners are credited for their individual creative contributions within that context (Quinn, 2010). Quinn starts to (re)imagine educational spaces which speak to how 'we occupy multiple landscapes simultaneously; fragmented, multilayered, existing in different dimensions including the senses and the imagination' (Quinn, 2010: 87). Whilst there is not the scope in this paper to fully critique Quinn's work, the notion of a mutual learning approach which envisions a way of supporting students seems highly relevant here. Quinn suggests that learners want knowledge which is relational and communal and which acknowledges unity and interdependency (Quinn, 2010: 149).

Discussion

This article aimed to set out some of the increasingly challenging and complex issues faced by music students as they graduate from university using three vignettes of practice from different higher education providers in the UK. Viewed through a range of theoretical lenses, we touch the surface of the complexity and the precarity as well as the joy, creativity and possibility for transformation; together these expand the narrative in comprehending from a student's perspective what might be considered legitimate knowledge in 'employability thinking'. In the following section we consider how to further an understanding of what this navigation entails in order to understand students' perspectives of the tensions and challenges that are being contested in terms of identity, community and belonging. This helps us to explore what might be excluded or erased from dominant discourses in order to (re)consider the question of support.

Music and Identity: supporting realistic and individualized career preparation

The three examples from practice and research, provide a focused interplay between different modes of career preview, reflection on employability skills and opportunities, and developing awareness of personal values and identities. The typical age at which a student graduates (21 or 22 years) coincides with the transition to young adulthood where the individual has to adapt to new roles and responsibilities and begin to make decisions that will affect the shape of their future life. This may include decisions around financial stability and home-ownership, for example, or, indeed, hoped-for relationships and family life (Erikson, 1994[1980,1959]). It is therefore important that students are encouraged to reflect on their current and future values, goals, and priorities at the same time as they think about their employability since a sustainable career is more likely to be achieved where there is a good fit between the individual (and their sense of self) and their work. The examples we discuss above corroborate current literature on developing employability conviction (Bartleet et al. 2019), where providing opportunities for students to reflect on, and explore, their goals, values, priorities, and their overall sense of who they are now and who they wish to be in the future, is an important part of navigating a life in

music. The quest is now more than ever a perilous navigation and could arguably be retitled *how to survive a life in music*. As we scratch the surface in this article, many of the key ideas inherent in discourses within employability, workplace learning, and entrepreneurship, such as work volition and self-efficacy, are disrupted, decentred and contested as a result of the impact of the current socio-economic and political crisis.

Music and Identity: developing sustainable employability ecosystems

What seems to be emerging as a possible solution is the fertile mix of employability conversations with self and with others which lead towards developing and sustaining employability ecosystems. Viewed in the light of Covid-19, it might now seem a little naïve to assume to know how to make meaning within the context of an existential crisis where nothing is certain. Where before we could propose 'that the vignettes cited above engaged students in self-reflective tasks, meaningfully embedded within compulsory modules of university music degree programmes', now there is a question of the very viability of music programmes in themselves. Given the current situation, employability conversations have surfaced and by the very nature of the crisis need to be confronted at the interplay between music students' personal identities and future goals. It can be argued that the design and development of the tasks above which support students to create, share and nurture relationships with others *within* and *beyond* the university setting is an employability ecosystem that is continually evolving. It is also something more: *it is a necessary means of survival.* As we have seen, the collapse of any one aspect in this ecosystem (e.g. social distancing) has had a chain reaction across the whole of the rehearsing, performing, teaching, community music employability ecosystem.

Music and Identity: Transformational

In our original article we argued a case for potential transformation. Embedding the ePortfolio resource within the assessed music curriculum revealed the propensity to capture not only the movement from self-reflection to more outward-facing employability thinking but also to capture the steps which set this in motion. In creating and presenting their ePortfolios, each individual had to define, refine and bring into clear focus for themselves each problem to be solved at each step of the way. In this way, when the module offered students the space to formally reflect at the end of their course, they were able to acknowledge and appreciate their own sense of development, particularly in terms of personal agency, self-efficacy and for some, considerable personal transformation in employability thinking. Importantly, these student experiences were witnessed not only by their peers, but also by recent graduates, alumni and a range of professionals. This is an important part in the journey from expert students transitioning to novice professionals (Reid et al., 2019).

Yet, viewed in the light of recent literature, especially in the work of Beech et al. (2016), some groups of musicians may not be supported, or be self-affirmed in the current context; this is also true where their *identity-in-the-work* and *self-questioning identity* is

part of the necessary unresolved struggling which drives their growth and creativity forward. This navigational trajectory is much less defined, less self-affirmative, more diverse and more decentred. In addition, Beech et al. (2016) explore the complexities and plural identities that musicians' lived experience entails, as each individual creates co-existing relational identities, for example, singer-songwriter, band leader and front woman. (Re)visiting the literature shows the extent of the power of dominant discourses we unconsciously inhabited.

Similarly, we might be more cautious when we refer to the development of a community of practice. The way Christine Bates established this within her institution leant towards a more reflexive and mutual learning opportunity. Similarly, the opportunity for students to share their ePortfolios offered a way for students to work not in isolation but to learn to solicit and receive support, adapt and develop a flexible mindset and be open to future senses of themselves. This corroborates Yancey's research (2015: 189) which places the ePortfolio as part of an increasingly externally outward facing ecosystem, where 'students may continually re-articulate their ideas of self to others' (Nguyen, 2013: 135). What stands out as valuable from the literature and practice, is how the relational aspect of our work needs to be foregrounded. For example, the use of paid graduate advisors to support the development of the ePortfolio, and which the development of the alumni mentoring role extends, offers a vision of an employability ecosystem where one-to-one relationships were valued for their bespoke paired-matching. As the alumni mentoring was developed over time, this contributed to a sense of increasing trust and sustainability. For some, the reflexive impact, each-to-each-other, student to graduate, was mutually beneficial. Arguably, the threads of relational connection which may become threatened as musicians face periods of isolation, become even more important to establish and nourish within a navigational trajectory. This foregrounds the lived and ongoing experience of belonging to an employability ecosystem, grounded in mutually beneficial relationships of which the higher education system is one. Here again we note caution. In the light of Quinn's (2010) argument, 'belonging' is also a notion which needs to be contested to allow for difference, decentring and diversity within our student populations.

Whilst we may situate our examples within a growing body of practice as corroborated by recent initiatives in Advance HEA, UK (2018, 2019), as well as the development of specific international initiatives (e.g. Bennett's EmployABILITY project), the employability narrative needs to be expanded to engage with the super-complexity and intersectionality of how musicians' lives continue to evolve. In terms of transformation, examples of practice emerging in webinars of evolving practice (e.g. through the International Centre for Community Music in York, UK) and calls for research into the impact of Covid-19 on music education (ISM, 2020) or the future of live music events (UKRI, 2021) are starting to (re)frame future research and practice priorities to accommodate such increasing complexities.

Conclusion

Drawing from the work presented above, we have started to build a picture of the numerous ways in which higher education institutions can respond within their academic programmes to scaffold student reflections and address development within music alongside aspects relating to personal and multi-faceted identities. As we have interrogated and (re)situated our examples through critiquing dominant discourses in the 'employability' literature, what is becoming more interesting is an emerging picture which is more fragmented, more illusory and a less certain employability landscape. At the same time, it acknowledges more of what is unknown and calls into question what the nature of support for music students in the future might be.

It leads us to call out what hovers in margins of uncertainty. Covid-19 demands the question of *how* music students might earn a living and navigate a life in music or to consider the extent to which navigating a life in music might be possible. There is an urgent need to confront and explore the evolving 'new normal' in a supportive way within arts and humanities degree programmes. Similarly, the situation also needs to take a more nuanced look towards exploring the *felt-sense* of the impact of treading the fine-line between personal passion (relationship with self/selves), partnerships (relationships with others) and how *identity-in-the-work* and self-questioning can be as considered important elements of what constitutes success.

This calls for more self-questioning music departments, where students and staff are more realistic, equipped, supported and supporting, where work-related experiences are not just ticked boxes in programme validation documents, and where the employability agenda is not paid lip service to in mission statements and research rhetoric. Ethically, this is an opportunity to more fully understand the lived experience of our students and graduates with the potential for reconceptualising and repurposing the employability agenda within higher education. It is hoped that this experience might not only generate further inter-institution dialogue but most importantly offer something for the future as a sustainable offer of support; we can hope to reduce graduate employment isolation, where studying music is still an option in universities which leads to (multiple) realistic career pathways and more mutually beneficial relationships where feelings of anxiety and confusion are not pathologised individually, but are held and supported within an employability ecosystem. In addition, it may be possible to reduce traumatic and isolating feelings of confusion, isolation and hopelessness and even existential despair (cf. Gross and Musgrave, 2017, and witnessed by one author who also works with musicians as a psychotherapist) which are now exacerbated in the light of Covid-19.

What is also left out is how students manage the boundaries: boundaries which demark self and other in power, monetary and economic relationships, and hierarchical dominant discourses, and arguably define the parameters of (re)navigation in the precarious times of Covid-19. On the one hand, increased collaborative working practices may equip students to navigate the difficult terrain. On the other hand, there are fine lines to be further investigated between what might be potentially mutually beneficial relationships and what might be exploitation; what might start off as valuable unpaid experience but crosses the line into what becomes expected. What might be perceived as marrying everyday

competitive and collaborative working practices within the creative industries might cross the line and lead to deeper waters where working practices and friendship blur and the lines preceding contractual agreements have already been crossed and are difficult to regain. When resource is scarce, arguably these tensions are exacerbated.

As an ethical challenge, work needs to be developed to further inform, resource and support, challenge and disrupt the dominant and hegemonic working practices in music, institutionally and in the music industry, which often go unnamed and unchallenged. The navigation towards a life-in-music, thus takes a relational turn, in which all stakeholders play their part in creating an ethical, sustainable and culturally enriching ecosystem, but with more equitable cultural capital, particularly for those emerging as novice professionals from higher education. Here we arrive at an expanded employability narrative: an employability ecosystem. At the intersection of this ecosystem is both a unity and an interdependence, with students at the centre. Paradoxically, we envision this centre to be more decentered to allow for greater diversity of experience, greater differentiation of identities, and greater awareness of the power of excluding dominant narratives. More hopefully, these are journeys of mutual support and shared resource of which HE will be one part in a rich and sustaining, interdependent employability ecosystem.

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