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ARTICLE

Exploring implementation of the UK *Misogyny in Music* report's recommendations to address gender inequalities in music education in England

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Abstract

In 2024, the Women and Equalities Select Committee in the UK Parliament published a report entitled *Misogyny in Music*. It included the recommendations that 'music colleges, conservatoires and other educational settings need to do more to address the gendering of instruments, roles and genres and improve the visibility of and support for female role models'. While there is a dearth of policy levers available to implement this recommendation, this article critically analyses three existing policy/regulatory frameworks that could be used for its implementation in England. The article also highlights a significant limitation of the report – its exclusion of trans and non-binary musicians.

Keywords: Higher education; gender inequality; music education policy; UK; England

Introduction

In early 2024, the Women and Equalities Select Committee of the House of Commons in the UK Parliament published a report entitled *Misogyny in Music*. Drawing on data and expert evidence from music industry organisations, musicians, activists, and academics, it documented the ways in which misogyny manifests in the UK music industry and made a number of detailed recommendations for the music industry, music education organisations and government.

The report's key recommendation in relation to music education was that

> Music colleges, conservatoires and other educational settings need to do more to address the gendering of instruments, roles and genres and improve the visibility of and support for female role models. The Government and industry bodies should offer increased, funded and targeted opportunities for women and girls to study subjects and to engage in training in areas of the music industry that remain male-dominated and where women are made to feel unwelcome (House of Commons, 2024, 10).

The report also made a recommendation in relation to tackling sexual harassment and violence. It noted that 'the evidence we received suggests sexual harassment and abuse is more prevalent in particular environments, in particular educational settings, recording studios and live music venues' (2024, 30), and therefore, recommended that '[f]or progress to be made the high level of non-reporting in education needs to be tackled' (2024, 31). To this end, it also stated support for

new regulations, introduced in 2024, that will require higher education institutions (HEIs) in England to address harassment and sexual misconduct (2024, 32).

In the UK Parliament, select committees do not have any powers to compel the government to act. Instead, their role is to scrutinise the work of government departments; in the case of the Women and Equalities Select Committee, the relevant department is the Government Equalities Office, as well as a non-departmental public body, the Equality and Human Rights Commission. The presiding Conservative government at the time of publication rejected the recommendations in the report for government actions to protect women in the music industry from harassment and discrimination (UK Parliament, 2024a). Its response highlighted existing statutory legal duties such as the Equality Act that prohibit discrimination on the basis of sex, as well as noting the slight increase in women undergraduate music students in higher education between 2019 and 2023 (UK Parliament, 2024b). It claimed that there was an 'improved gender balance in music education for younger [under-18] students' and pointed towards 'the significant work of Government-funded Music Hubs and many music education charities over recent years in tackling disparities between girls and boys' but gave no details or data to support these claims (UK Parliament, 2024b). Overall, the government's response took the position that sufficient work was already underway to address gender inequalities in music education, and further steps were not required. These claims will be discussed below.

The Misogyny in Music report not only called on the government to address the recommendations, but also stated that

> We expect the music industry to act on our recommendations and call on industry bodies to respond to the recommendations relevant to their work (2024b, 59).

Despite this 'expectation', the committee cannot compel industry bodies – or music education organisations – to act, any more than it can compel government. Nevertheless, the report remains an important resource (with caveats, as noted below) to draw attention to the issues raised with organisations that have the power to take action on the recommendations; as Patrick Schmidt argues, in music education, 'policy' should be understood as a practice that requires active participation through 'policy activism', i.e. joining-up policy and practice (Schmidt, 2015, 50). Non-governmental organisations may, therefore, be persuaded to take up the recommendations even in the absence of any government action.

With 34 recommendations made in total, there are significant challenges in enacting them. In relation to education, this issue is touched on in the report, which noted that:

> During the course of this inquiry, we have been made aware of a range of initiatives and interventions aimed at supporting women and girls into education and training in areas that have traditionally been male-dominated. However, while promising, these are often small in scale and limited in funding; wider action across the industry is required to challenge stereotypes and increase female participation in music (2024, 10).

Other than noting these challenges, the report did not outline the policy levers by which the recommendations for music education could be implemented. Furthermore, the report is vague about how it defines music education, referring to 'music colleges, conservatoires and other educational settings'. The emphasis appears to be on higher education, but 'other educational settings' could refer to under-18s education, and indeed, it is difficult to imagine how gender inequalities could be addressed in higher education without also taking steps at an earlier stage. Therefore, in order to contribute towards making the report's work as effective as possible in music education, in this article, I outline potential policy routes – and gaps in these routes – towards implementing the recommendation for music education for under-18s as well as at the tertiary level. I draw on findings from the report *Slow Train Coming* (Bull et al., 2022) on equality,

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diversity and inclusion in UK music higher education, as well as the two National Plans for Music Education in England (2012, 2022), key music education policy documents for under-18s education, to show that there are an dearth of policy levers to implement gender equality measures such as those called for in the *Misogyny in Music* report. Despite these challenges with implementing the recommendations, I identify steps that can be taken, drawing on existing policy and regulatory structures. These steps are not aimed to be exhaustive, and they focus primarily on policies that apply across England. This is because a context-specific approach is needed to address the local nuances of policy and practice. Nevertheless, I address the article's international relevance briefly in the conclusion.

The article first introduces contextual theory and data on gender inequalities in UK music education. It then introduces the *Misogyny in Music* report and highlights a significant limitation of the report – its exclusion of trans and non-binary musicians. The article then critically explores three potential policy levers that could be used to enact the report's recommendations in relation to music education.

Gender inequalities in under-18s music education

The *Misogyny in Music* report discusses the 'gendering of instruments, roles and genres' in music education. These issues are well documented in music education research (see, for example, Abeles, 2009; Armstrong, 2011; Bull, 2019; Hall, 2018; Hallam et al., 2008; Gould, 1992). In order to understand how these gendered patterns come about, a wider theorisation of gender and music education is needed. Lucy Green's research in the 1990s with teachers and pupils in secondary schools in England provides such a framework for understanding how music education is gendered. Green found 'differences in practices, attitudes, approaches and preferences of girls and boys' (Green, 1996, 45), with the music education curriculum, and musical instrument choice, but crucially also musical material were perceived as gendered by both teachers and pupils in her research. Composition was perceived as the domain of boys, with girls professing lower confidence and – as supported by Victoria Armstrong's later research (Armstrong, 2011) – the associations of technology with masculinity in music education. As Green outlines, music is used as a resource or technology to (re)produce masculinity and femininity, and this performance of differences 'go[es] beyond the mere practice of music, to be linked with the very meanings of the music with which girls and boys are associated' (Green, 1996, 48; see also Green, 1997). As such, music education can be understood not only as reflecting – or perhaps amplifying – already-present gender stereotypes or identities, but also as a resource that children use to produce their gender identity (as well as other identities).

Music is an important source of such meaning-making for girls and women, as well as for boys and men. Perhaps surprisingly, given the problems of gender inequality highlighted in the *Misogyny in Music* report, girls in the UK participate in music-making in higher numbers than boys, especially in classical music (Bull, 2021; Cox & Kilshaw, 2021; Youth Music, 2024, 34). Alongside this, music is a hugely important part of girls' lives; according to Youth Music's most recent study of musical participation among young people in the UK, a greater proportion of girls than boys agreed with statements such as, 'I couldn't live without music' (+15%), 'music makes my world better' (+7%) and 'music is a big part of who I am' (+11%) (2024, 34). However, the study found that LGBTQIA+ young people are marginalised in music education; they are less likely to feel that they have the same opportunities as everyone else, to feel supported with making music, or to have enjoyed music lessons (Youth Music, 2024, 40; trans and non-binary young people's data were not disaggregated). There has been minimal research into how non-binary students fit into this gendered picture (although see Nichols, 2013; Pullinger, 2020; Storsve, 2025), an omission that is amplified by the *Misogyny in Music* report, as discussed below.

This understanding of gendered identities in music education is important to bear in mind when discussing the policy context of music education in England, as this article will discuss,

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gender is scarcely mentioned in existing policy. A comprehensive review of music education policy in England is beyond the scope of this article. Instead, it focuses on reforms since 2011. This is the date of publication of the first National Plan for Music Education (NPME), a non-statutory policy that aimed to ensure that all children aged five to eighteen in England had access to music education, and to this end established music education Hubs in England (more recently renamed to Music Hubs). Hubs comprise

> groups of organisations – such as local authority music services, schools, other Hubs, Arts organisations, community or voluntary organisations. The Hubs were designed to augment and support music teaching in schools [...] so that more children could experience a combination of classroom teaching, instrumental and vocal tuition and input from professional musicians (Daubney et al., 2019, 8).

They are part-funded by the Department for Education and accountable to Arts Council England (Huband-Thompson & Dawson, 2025, 14). For a critical overview of the first NPME, see Bacchi (2023), Bate (2020), Spruce, (2013) and Savage (2021). Here, I focus on a key policy pledge of the Plan, which was to expand 'Whole Class Ensemble Teaching' (WCET) of instruments to children in schools (a policy introduced under the previous government) to all children. This policy pledge was retained in the 2022 Plan, which was also non-statutory (HM Government, 2022). This Plan extended the age range covered by the policy to include early years music education, and also expanded the role of schools, outlining strategies for supporting good practice, including in relation to technology in music education. It also includes more focus on progression, including into the music industry – although, as noted below, the stark differences in gendered progression into the industry are not mentioned.

Slow train coming? Gender inequalities in UK music higher education

Turning from under-18s education to higher education, the theoretical lens from Lucy Green's work can also be applied to understanding gendered musical identities in higher education that contribute to the gendering of roles, instruments and genres. There is a body of research documenting these issues in higher education (Bain, 2019; de Boise, 2018; Bull & Scharff, 2021; Bull et al., 2023; Scharff, 2017; Strong & Raine, 2019; Tatlow, 2022). In 2022, the Equality, Diversity and Inclusion in Music Studies network published a report, *Slow Train Coming*, on inequalities in music higher education (Bull et al., 2022). This supported previous studies in showing the stark gender inequalities in this space. Music higher education (HE) has a nearly 60/40 split in favour of men, and some types of HEI have an even more unequal gender split (Bull et al., 2022; Bull, 2025). This analysis was unfortunately not able to report on trans and non-binary students' participation as the dataset was too small to be anonymised, however, it did reveal that the number of students who identified as non-binary increased from 15 to 80 between 2016 and 20.

These gendered patterns varied somewhat across types of institution (such as conservatoires, older, or newer universities), but most types of HEI had more men than women students on music courses. Within the music student and staff population, there is evidence of segregation by gender or type of music degree, with music technology degrees, popular music degrees, or degrees at specialist popular music institutions being most male-dominated (Bain, 2019; Born & Devine, 2015; Tatlow, 2022). However, even in genres where women are equally represented, this does not necessarily indicate a gender-inclusive culture; for example, within classical music higher education, a misogynistic culture has been described within brass departments (Higham-Edwards, 2023). Slow Train Coming also found that women students were more likely than men to progress on to postgraduate taught degrees at most types of institutions, but then less likely to continue on to PhD-level study and to become academic staff (Bull, 2025). For students who move into the music industry, women remain massively under-represented across *all* genres (Bain, 2019) despite

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being more likely to obtain postgraduate qualifications than men (Musicians' Union, 2024). These inequalities are particularly surprising given the findings presented above that girls participate in higher numbers in music-making at a younger age and that music is such an important part of girls' identities. It is clear that girls' significant presence in music-making and music education when they are younger shifts dramatically when it comes to music higher education and the music industry.

Slow Train Coming also surveyed UK music departments and specialist music HEIs to ask about any equality, diversity and inclusion (EDI) work they were engaged in. The responses – from 32 departments/institutions, out of a total of 133 departments institutions in the UK that offer music-related degrees – showed relatively high levels of recent activity among some survey respondents in relation to EDI initiatives, but other departments/institutions were not carrying out any work or were only at the very early stages of this work (Bull et al., 2022). Therefore, in relation to the *Misogyny in Music* report's recommendations that music colleges and conservatoires 'do more' to address gender inequalities, it is clear that this work is – while enthusiastic – ad hoc, short-term and likely to be at risk due to current job losses and financial crises in UK HE.

What, then, can be done to incentivise gender equality work in music education in England? Before turning to examine this question, I briefly turn to a critical analysis of the *Misogyny in Music* report.

Gaps in the Misogyny in Music report: the exclusion of trans and non-binary musicians

The Misogyny in Music report drew on testimony given in evidence sessions from key figures within the music industry, as well as written submissions from interested parties, including academic researchers. The report should not, therefore, be seen as an objective review of existing evidence, but rather as a snapshot of current discourses and issues of concern within the sector. It contains chapters on representation and discrimination (in which material on music education is included), legislative changes (for example, maternity and paternity support and childcare), and sexual harassment and abuse (which also discusses educational settings). It also contains two chapters on current initiatives and issues, the Creative Industries Independent Standards Authority – an independent body being set up to address harassment and bullying within the creative industries – and non-disclosure agreements.

This article focuses on the recommendations relating to education settings. However, a significant limitation of the *Misogyny in Music* report – both in relation to the education recommendations and the report in general – is that it does not mention issues faced by trans or non-binary musicians or music students. Studies of trans and non-binary music students have revealed the importance of musical communities, musical expression and supportive musical mentors in creating spaces where they can express their gender identity (Nichols, 2013; Palkki, 2020). The gap around this group is, therefore, a worrying oversight; misogyny in music can be experienced by both trans and non-binary students. Indeed, the term 'transmisogyny' was coined by Julia Serano to describe the intersection of transphobia and misogyny that trans women face, in a form of double disadvantage (Serano, 2016). Trans and non-binary students are substantially more likely to experience sexual harassment and violence than cis women students (see, for example, Heywood et al., 2022). There is also evidence that, in the UK, trans people experience even higher levels of hate crime than lesbian, gay and bisexual people (Walters & Paterson, 2015, 2). The music industry may not be safe enough for trans people to come out at work; a study of the UK classical music workforce found that respondents who identify as LGBTQ+, but are not gay or lesbian – i.e. bisexual, trans and gender/queer people – were less likely than others, including gay and lesbian musicians, to be open about their gender identity and/or sexual orientation (ICM Unlimited, 2021, 65). While this study unfortunately

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does not disaggregate between bisexual and trans or non-binary people, the findings show that these groups do not feel safe to come out at work.

Indeed, musician and activist CN Lester cautions against the belief that transphobia does not exist in music because the arts are assumed to be more inclusive than the rest of society. Transphobia in music can negatively affect trans musicians' artistic freedom and voice, for example:

> when demands for information become deeply personal and/or combative ("what surgeries have you had?"/"what are you *really*?") then my ability to make music in an equal environment, and to trust my colleagues, is damaged (Lester, 2020).

This is a particularly important issue for educators as there is a larger proportion of trans and non-binary people among young people than older age-groups; the 2021 census showed that 1% of 16–24 year olds in England and Wales stated that their gender identity was different from their sex registered at birth (i.e. that they were trans or non-binary), which translates to 40,000 young people (Office for National Statistics, 2023). With anecdotal accounts suggesting that trans and non-binary young people are over-represented in music spaces, and evidence of the importance of non-formal and informal musical spaces for young trans and non-binary people (Storsve, 2025), inclusion beyond the gender binary is clearly an important policy and practice agenda.

Policy levers to address gender inequalities in music education

In order to explore routes for implementing the key policy recommendations relating to music education from the *Misogyny in Music* report, I focus on three existing policy and regulatory frameworks that, in theory, could play a role in leveraging the changes called for. At the higher education level, these are first, the Athena Swan Charter for gender equality in higher education and second, the Office for Students' regulation to address harassment and sexual violence in English higher education. In relation to under-18s music education, I examine the second NPME, focusing in particular on one aspect of this plan: Whole Class Ensemble Tuition (WCET), as well as the framing in the Plan of diversity and inclusion work in music education Hubs in England.

The choice of policies for analysis was informed by two considerations: first, the national scope of policies across England, and second, my own knowledge of the policy landscape in these two areas from engaging as an activist and researcher in these two areas over the past decade and a half. Policies were chosen that apply across England and that have the potential to be influential at a national level. This is because, in order to create the kind of large-scale change that is called for by the *Misogyny in Music* report, policy levers need to be national rather than local, and need to work across the entire sector rather than only with one subset of actors. Policy actions by, for example, unions, grade exam boards, membership associations or other networks, may be effective in making change, but they do not have as much reach as the policies discussed here, or, in the case of the Office for Students' regulation, a statutory basis. Other than the national curriculum, the policy levers outlined in this article have the most potential to reach all children/young people nationally across higher education or under-18s music education. While the Athena Swan Chartermark, as discussed below, is non-statutory, it has been effectively made mandatory in other disciplinary areas through incentivisation by research funders; therefore, it also has the potential to create national-level change. However, a major omission in this article is the national curriculum. This is because a comprehensive discussion of all music education policy is not possible within the length of this article. Therefore, as my own expertise is in instrumental education, I have chosen to focus on WCET as an example of under-18s education policy, but I hope that others will analyse the statutory music education curriculum through the lens of gender equality.

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Policy lever 1: Athena Swan chartermark

Athena Swan is a gender equality charter programme run by the UK's AdvanceHE (formerly the Equality Challenge Unit). AdvanceHE is a charity, independent of government, and it describes itself as 'member-led' (Advance-HE 'about us'), with members being higher education providers (i.e. universities, research institutions or other HEIs). HEIs or departments/faculties within them can apply for either a bronze, silver or gold Athena Swan award to evidence their work towards gender equality. A bronze award requires the department or institution to gather data and develop an action plan towards addressing specific issues identified from the data gathered. The silver and gold awards require progress to have been made towards the action plan.

The programme started in STEM (science, technology, engineering and mathematics) and was subsequently expanded to include all disciplines within HE. Its take-up within STEM disciplines was greatly supported by research funders requiring departments they funded to have an Athena Swan award. A five-year analysis found that having an Athena Swan award increased the number of women in leadership positions in UK HE, especially where a Silver award was held (Xiao et al., 2020). However, the scheme has been criticised for increasing women's workloads and taking them away from career-enhancing work, for a lack of intersectionality, and for its complicity with neoliberal higher education whereby it requires a performative 'doing' of equality work rather than real change (Tzanakou & Pearce, 2019).

A further limitation of Athena Swan is the lack of specific attention to gender-based violence (GBV) or sexual harassment, a key issue highlighted in the *Misogyny in Music* report. Indeed, GBV was not even mentioned in Athena Swan's documentation until 2020, when its principles were revised to include 'gender-based violence, discrimination, bullying, harassment or exploitation' (AdvanceHE, 2020). Despite GBV being now included in the principles, it still does not appear in the guidance for applicants or in the resources for developing an application; survey questions ask about 'harassment and bullying' in general, with no mention of GBV or sexual harassment. This is a problem because there is evidence that those targeted for GBV or sexual harassment may not recognise and label such behaviours due to how normalised they are in academic spaces (Bull & Page, 2021; Lombardo & Bustelo, 2022). The approach taken by the Athena Swan guidance and model survey is directly contrary to the good practice outlined by Walby et al. (2017, 139). They explain that in order to make GBV visible, surveys must use 'detailed behavioural descriptions' and avoid 'summary' or 'popular' terminology (which could include 'bullying' and 'harassment'); Walby *et al.* argue that this is 'an unavoidable necessity for a high-quality survey and should be considered a minimum standard' (139).

As a result, in HEIs' and departments' data-gathering exercises for Athena Swan applications, GBV and sexual harassment are unlikely to be identified as a problem. This data is then used to outline an action plan to address gender inequalities; as GBV and sexual harassment are absent from the data, they are also likely to be absent from action plans. While applicants may choose to include data and actions on GBV in their action plans, they can therefore still achieve a chartermark without carrying out any work in this area.

The lack of attention to GBV in the Athena Swan charter could relate to AdvanceHE's 'member-led' organisational structure. As its members are HEIs – and a substantial proportion of its income is derived from their membership fees – it may avoid taking steps that would risk losing members, for example, by requiring data collection and actions to address GBV in order to receive an award. The higher education sector has been slow to take up national recommendations from Universities UK for addressing GBV (Bull & Shannon, 2023; SUMS Consulting, 2022) and even when data is gathered at the institutional level, it does not necessarily get published or used to make change (Bull et al., 2022). Indeed, the limitations of Athena Swan are such that the Institute of Physics, the UK's national disciplinary association for physics, has created its own bespoke, more rigorous chartermark called Juno (Institute of Physics, 2024).

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Nevertheless, some music departments have used Athena Swan to identify and begin to address gender inequalities; for example, the Faculty of Music at the University of Cambridge, for its Bronze award application in 2018, collected and analysed data to understand why female recruitment is low, with the aim of changing admissions practices as well as 'work to increase the visibility of positive and diverse role models' (University of Cambridge, Faculty of Music, 2018, 4; MacGregor, 2024). Their current action plan expired in 2022, so it is unclear whether this work is still ongoing.

Despite its limitations, then, there is scope for Athena Swan to be used more actively to support gender equality in music higher education, and in doing so, to address 'the gendering of instruments, roles and genres and improve the visibility of and support for female role models' (House of Commons, 2024, 10). While funders in STEM subjects have made Athena Swan accreditation mandatory to be eligible for research funding, the Arts and Humanities Research Council – the main funding body for academic music research – has not taken such a step. Therefore, one potential policy lever for incentivising gender equality work in music HE is for the Arts and Humanities Research Council (and potentially other humanities research funders) to introduce a requirement for higher education departments that it funds to have at least a bronze award, similar to the requirements for STEM departments. Alongside this, the Women and Equalities Select Committee could ask AdvanceHE to make GBV and sexual harassment a mandatory area for awardees to address, in order to enhance the potential for Athena Swan awards to address the recommendations made in the *Misogyny in Music* report.

Policy lever 2: office for students' regulation around harassment and sexual misconduct in HE

The second policy lever to explore is, therefore, the Office for Students' new regulation to address 'harassment and sexual misconduct'. The Office for Students is the regulator for higher education in England. In 2024, it announced its regulatory regime for addressing harassment and sexual misconduct, and it came into force in 2025 (Office for Students, 2024). This regulation is overall to be welcomed as it may help to address the patchy and uneven, and sometimes appalling ways in which HEIs have addressed this issue (Bull & Rye, 2018; Bull & Shannon, 2023; SUMS Consulting, 2022). While it will help incentivise HEIs to carry out work to address GBV and sexual harassment in higher education, including in music HE – which is both a cause and a consequence of gender inequalities (Bull, 2024) – it has several limitations.

The first limitation to address here is that this regulation will only apply to students, not to staff in HE. Sexual harassment or other forms of gender-based violence experienced by staff in higher education also need to be a policy priority. This is particularly important given that many staff in higher education may also be working in the music industry, and harassment or abuse that is taking place within the industry (McCarry et al., 2023) may co-occur, even from the same people, within HE. Given the weakness of statutory protections that currently exist for addressing discrimination or sexual harassment in the workplace (Bull, 2023), urgent attention is needed to ensure that when more provisions are introduced for students, this also extends to staff in HE.

A second limitation is that the Office for Students only has jurisdiction in England. Wales, Northern Ireland and Scotland have separate higher education regulatory regimes. As such, despite the *Misogyny in Music* report purporting to cover the UK, its recommendation supporting the Office for Students' new regulation omits HE in Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland. There has been work on gender-based violence in HE funded by the Scottish government; the Welsh higher education regulator was set up in 2024, and plans work in this area. In Northern Ireland, the Department for the Economy oversees higher education. Students in the devolved nations obviously need similar levels of provision as students in England.

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A final limitation is that, as with previous guidance from Universities UK (Universities UK, 2016), the proposed regulatory framework lacks a gendered lens, failing to address the causes of gender-based violence (and indeed naming it as 'harassment and sexual misconduct' rather than gender-based violence). Tackling misogyny – whether in music or elsewhere in HE – is therefore outside the remit of this work, even while it aims to prevent and respond to the effects of misogyny, i.e. sexual violence and harassment.

However, despite these significant limitations, music departments and institutions in England can use the Office for Students' regulatory agenda to push for positive change in HE music. For example, the regulations state that all staff and students should have training on recognising harassment and sexual misconduct and in their HEIs' approach to tackling it (Office for Students, 2024, 96). Departments can use the introduction of this training as an opportunity to hold discussions on harassment and sexual misconduct within music as a discipline. In addition, in curriculum and pedagogy in music higher education, staff can consider how to incorporate GBV in teaching and how to respond appropriately when students include material relating to GBV – including their personal experiences – in their creative outputs. In addition, on industry placements, students may end up in workplaces where GBV is normalised; in placement agreements with industry partners, a shared approach to this issue should be set out. Finally, as part of their programme of work to prepare students for the music industry, students need to be taught about their rights as well as resources for tackling GBV (Bull, Forthcoming). Outside of England, HEIs in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland can use the existence of this regulation to request similar training or institutional work. In this way, the *Misogyny in Music* report's recommendation in relation to gendering of instruments, roles and genres will be indirectly addressed through tackling the exclusion of women, trans and non-binary people from musical spaces due to gender-based violence.

Policy lever 3: the national plan for music education and whole class ensemble tuition

Prior to HE level, the gendering of instruments, roles and genres is already entrenched, as demonstrated by the gendered patterns to students applying to HE (de Boise, 2018; Born and Devine, 2015; Bull, 2025; Bull et al., 2022; Scharff, 2017). To address gendered cultures within under-18s music education, a relevant policy lever in England is the (non-statutory) second NPME. In this section, I critically discuss whether this policy framework is adequate to address the recommendations for under-18s music education in the *Misogyny in Music* report. A full critical discussion of the NPME is beyond the scope of this article; instead, I focus in particular on WCET, as this policy has been in place on a national level since the first National Plan was published in 2011. I also discuss how 'inclusion' is framed more generally in the report.

However, this discussion needs to be framed with a caveat around the changing political landscape, which is affecting music education policy. The Labour government elected in 2024 has announced it is commissioning an independent evaluation of the NPME (UK Parliament, 2024c). It is also carrying out a major curriculum review of education more broadly, as well as announcing a new 'National Centre for Arts and Music' expected to be established in September 2026, which will promote arts education, provide CPD for primary and secondary school teachers, and support partnerships with cultural organisations (HM Government, 2025). Nevertheless, the main policy under discussion in this article – WCET – is not proposed to be changed, and indeed, despite being in place nationally for nearly 15 years, it has not been subjected to a gendered analysis. Therefore, regardless of subsequent policy changes, it remains important to discuss to what extent WCET – as framed within the first and second NPMEs – might affect the issues raised in the *Misogyny in Music* report.

Indeed, the (previous Conservative) government's response to the report refers to the NPME in order to evidence its work to address the recommendations for music education. It states that:

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> The National Plan for Music Education [. . .] sets out the Government's vision for music education up to 2030: to enable all children and young people to learn to sing, play an instrument and create music together, and have the opportunity to progress their musical interests and talents, including professionally. Central to this vision is inclusion, so that all music educators working with children and young people to 18 commit to achieving greater access and more opportunity in music education, identifying and removing barriers.
>
> As part of achieving this ambition, the network of Music Hubs across England will have a Participation and Inclusion Strategy from September 2024 as part of their Local Plan for Music Education, including access to a range of musical instruments. All Music Hubs will also have an Inclusion Lead with the role of broadening access and improving participation in music.

As noted in the introduction, the government further claimed that 'the significant work of Government-funded Music Hubs and many music education charities over recent years in tackling disparities between girls and boys' has led to 'improved gender balance in music education for younger students' and a slight improvement in gender inequalities in higher music education at undergraduate level (UK Parliament, 2024b). While the claim of improvements in gender inequalities in HE is evidenced (for a critical discussion, see Bull (2025)), there is no evidence put forward to substantiate the government's claim that music Hubs have undertaken 'significant work' to tackle 'disparities between girls and boys', nor of the 'improved gender balance in music education for younger students'.

Neither of the NPME documents discusses gender (or indeed race), despite schools' obligations under the Equality Act in these areas and the documented gaps in access to music higher education and the industry among racially minoritised people and women (Bull et al., 2022) in which women of colour and women from working-class backgrounds are particularly underrepresented (Bull, 2025). In the first NPME, gender has only one, brief, substantive mention, which states that the Plan:

> aims for equality of opportunity for all pupils, regardless of race; gender; where they live; their levels of musical talent; parental income; whether they have special educational needs or disabilities; and whether they are looked after children (Department for Education, 2011, 9)

The second NPME does not mention gender at all, discussing 'inclusion' in general terms, although requiring Hubs to have an inclusion strategy and lead. Discussion of inclusion in the second NPME is limited to geographical location, disability or special educational needs, pupils in care, socio-economic barriers and access to instruments (55–56).

As such, it is possible that Hubs' work on inclusion will focus on the areas explicitly named without addressing other areas of inequality. In line with the lack of attention to gender in both NPMEs, no evidence is given in the government's response to the *Misogyny in Music* report that action has been taken by Hubs to work towards greater gender equality. In Arts Council England's analysis of hub data (which stops in 2018), the only gendered analysis is in relation to participation in ensembles, where girls participate in greater numbers than boys (see, for example, Fautley & Whittaker, 2017, 21).

As a result, there is a risk that gender inequality is not seen as a problem for music Hubs, or that boys' lack of participation is the main problem. This assumption is, of course, belied by the lower numbers of women students enrolling in music HE; by the gender segregation for those students who do, including the lower numbers of women studying music technology; and by the stark gender inequalities in the music industry (Bull, 2025; Strong & Raine, 2019). As such, attention needs to be paid to gendered cultures of music-making for under-18s that are contributing to these inequalities in HE and the industry.

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Despite the absence of explicit discussion of gender in both NPMEs, there are potential consequences for gender equality in relation to WCET. In particular, this policy could be argued to constitute a step towards countering the 'gendering of instruments' because all children have the opportunity to learn an instrument, and all children within a class learn the same instrument. Therefore, this approach could enable the gendered association with instrument choice to be broken.

While this is an appealing idea, I am sceptical that it will make a significant difference. First, the short-term nature of WCET – usually only delivered for less than a year, sometimes even less than a term – is unlikely to be sufficient to counter the powerful gender norms that underpin the gendering of roles, genres and instruments, and the complex ways in which music is used as a resource for shaping gender identities. At present, in the absence of evidence of gendered patterns in progression after WCET, we simply do not know whether it is indeed successfully countering the gendering of instruments. A further, and more urgent concern, is that WCET does nothing to counter the gendering of music technology, which is a key driver of gender inequalities in HE (Bull, 2025). Girls already learn classical music instruments in greater numbers than boys (Bull, 2021; Cox & Kilshaw, 2021), but this over-representation has not fed through into creating gender equality or gender-inclusive cultures in the music industry (Bull et al., 2023; Musicians' Union, 2024; Strong & Raine, 2019). As such, while a universal music education programme that focuses on first access to instruments – and often the instruments that girls are already more likely to play such as the violin – provides space for girls' music-making, it does not serve girls and women in the longer term as it fails to disrupt male dominance in music technology. The second NPME does include a significant focus on music technology, but in discussing creating and composing music and music technology without reference to gender, tacitly perpetuates the socio-cultural alignment between masculinity, technology and creativity (Bull, 2025). Girls have lower confidence in composing and creating music (Green, 1997) and face challenges in accessing music technology spaces where boys dominate (Armstrong, 2011). Equality of opportunity, in this situation, is leading to *inequality* of outcome; an offer for 'all pupils' that fails to acknowledge gendered patterns in ability to engage with composing/technology is not equally accessible to all.

As a result, including more music technology in under-18s music education risks pushing girls out and increasing the male dominance of music education at *all* levels. A careful rebalancing is required. Mark Banks has already pointed out the implications for class inequality of the first NPME's over-reliance on instrumental tuition, arguing that we need to find ways to bring the tools and techniques of those using peer-to-peer technology into the classroom, who are more likely to be from lower-income homes (Banks, 2014). I agree with Banks' analysis that under-18s music education does need to move away from the primary focus on learning an instrument to include a broader focus on music technology skills. But this work needs to be designed in ways that recognise the socio-cultural associations of masculinity, creativity and technology, and make spaces to support girls' development of creativity and technological skill, for example, through dedicated spaces for girls and non-binary children. At present, as Brereton et al. note, there exists little guidance for teachers (at any level of education) on how to ensure that music technology teaching is inclusive (Brereton et al., 2020, 243).

Such a policy direction would also help with inclusion of working-class or disadvantaged young people, especially in light of dedicated music education organisations – including those focusing on girls' and women's access to digital technologies – cutting back activities (Griffiths, 2024). Alongside this, in HE, sound engineering and music technology should be mandatory modules for students on music degrees (a step that some departments have already taken (University of Southampton, 2024)) alongside cultural shifts to make musical cultures in HE and the industry more inclusive of women and non-binary people. Without these changes, the unintended gendered consequences of the WCET policy will continue, whereby boys retain their dominance of

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digital music-making spaces (Armstrong, 2011; Born & Devine, 2015; Bull et al., 2022), but these inequalities remain unaddressed within music education policy and practice.

A potential model for equality work within music education Hubs exists in an ongoing programme of work on inclusion in music education Hubs and associated guidance from Arts Council England that has focused on inclusion of children with special educational needs and those in 'challenging circumstances' (Arts Council England, 2023), in line with the focus in both NPMEs on these areas. Arts Council England has been funding the national state-supported charity Youth Music to oversee this work. It has included work that – while not directly focused on gender – could indirectly contribute to addressing gender inequality, for example, supporting greater trauma-informed practice in music education; encouraging creative music-making such as songwriting; diversifying the workforce; setting up reflective practice networks for instrumental teachers; and supporting Hubs to develop diversity and inclusion strategies and policies (*Outcomes from the Changing Tracks project*, 2023).

This programme is a helpful model of how Hubs might address gender inequalities and inclusion of trans and non-binary young musicians. However, there are limits to what such a policy agenda could do. First, the NPME is non-statutory, so even if gender inequality were addressed in it, there is a chance this would have a limited impact in practice. Second, the aims of the second NPME have been called into question by analysis that shows that extra funding is required to be able to deliver the activities it outlines (Huband-Thompson & Dawson, 2025). Finally, there are significant difficulties in regulating the music education sector beyond Hubs due to its 'fragmented' nature amidst 'a proliferation of music education initiatives' during the 21st century (Daubney et al., 2019, 6; Savage, 2021). It is unclear what policy levers would be effective in engaging the informal economy of music education to address gender equality. As it stands, then, the NPME's provision for WCET – and its rhetoric on inclusion generally – cannot address the issues raised around music education in the *Misogyny in Music* report.

Concluding discussion

One year on from the publication of the *Misogyny in Music* report, the Women and Equalities Select Committee held a follow-up hearing to discuss progress. At the same time, a collective of musicians, academics and activists wrote to the committee to ask for further action on implementing the recommendations from the report (Bull et al., 2025). As this article has revealed, this lack of progress reflects the absence of mechanisms in existing governance and policy structures to implement the recommendations from the Misogyny in Music report. To summarise: in higher education, the Athena Swan chartermark does not require applicants to gather data or propose actions specific to gender-based violence or sexual harassment, while the Office for Students' proposed regulation on harassment and sexual violence omits gender inequalities. In under-18s music education, the main national music education policy statements are the first and second (Department for Education, 2011; HM Government, 2022), which do not include any substantive material on gender inequalities, and as argued above, the WCET policy to provide 'first access' to an instrument to all primary school children ignores and possibly even exacerbates gender inequalities by failing to address the gendered technology divide in music-making. This blind spot around gender equality may be due to a perception that it is not a problem in music education, as more girls than boys say they are likely to make music; but if music education were indeed fully gender-equal, then there would not be such stark gender inequalities among undergraduate students in music HE and the music industry. The fragmented nature of the music education sector creates significant challenges in working towards gender equality, and similarly, the music industry is characterised by a lack of regulation, process and governing frameworks (McCarry et al., 2023). Higher education in the UK has also historically been resistant to regulation, thanks to the fiercely-guarded autonomy of HEIs from the state. In the current situation, it is left to campaigning organisations (such as Brighter Sound, Donne, the Musicians' Union, the

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Independent Society of Musicians or The F-List) to try and address the gender inequalities within music education and the industry that are ignored within formal music education policy.

Nevertheless, the three policy levers discussed above can be amended or adapted for music HE: the Athena Swan chartermark can be helpful despite its lack of attention on GBV; the Office for Students' regulatory requirements on harassment and sexual misconduct will incentivise more attention on this issue for HEIs in England; and the NPME alongside associated diversity and inclusion work by music education Hubs has been putting related issues on the agenda, and provides a model for gender equality work going forward. These levers do not give straightforward routes towards implementing the recommendations of the *Misogyny in Music* report, but the fragmented nature of the sector may mean that a 'carrot' rather than 'stick' approach may be the only way forward, following the model of Youth Music/Arts Council England's work on other aspects of inclusion (Davidson, 2023).

Such steps will only be a start to tackle the gender inequalities in music education and the industry. Many approaches for addressing inequalities in the creative sector more generally – for example, as recommended by Comunian et al. (2023) – will also be relevant to music, as well as those aimed at music industry (House of Commons, 2024) and those from the organisations who have indefatigably been doing work in this space for years, such as Brighter Sound (*All Things Equal: A Manifesto for Gender Equality in Music*, 2022). In addition, as De Boise writes, 'gender equality should involve engaging and challenging men around questions of privilege rather than encouraging women to better compete in men-dominated spaces' (de Boise, 2018, 35). As it stands, music education policy in the UK is likely to be entrenching wider gendered cultures, but it also has the potential to challenge such cultures and create spaces where gender is experienced differently.

The discussion of policy levers in this article is also relevant outside England. The Athena Swan framework is used internationally, for example, in Scotland, Wales, Ireland, Canada and Australia. In addition, many other countries are in the process of introducing guidance or regulatory requirements to address gender-based violence and harassment in higher education. Finally, the gendering of music technology is an issue that has been identified in other contexts as well as the UK (Onsrud et al., 2021; Strong & Raine, 2019). However, identifying appropriate policy levers to enact change often requires a nationally specific analysis, such as has been offered here, in order to take into account the specific local context.

To finish, it is important to emphasise that these inequalities are not inevitable. Both Norway and Sweden have seen state support for gender equality programmes in music higher education and/or industry, where funded projects have addressed gender inequality in music HE and the industry (Björck, 2021). While gender inequalities in music education still exist in those countries, they appear to be less stark than in the UK (de Boise, 2018). As such, while there is a lack of clear policy levers for addressing gender inequalities in music education in England, music education policy-makers and leaders will need to be creative with new programmes of work or regulatory levers that will support women and non-binary people to participate fully in musical life.

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