A Manifesto for Music Education in Scotland

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A Manifesto for Music Education in Scotland
In December 2016, it was announced that Scotland had slipped down world education rankings in the areas of reading, science, and maths, according to the Programme for International Assessment (PISA). Scottish Cabinet Secretary for Education and Skills, John Swinney, publicly stated in response that “we now must be clear: reform is required. This data reinforces the case for radical change that this government is determined to pursue.”

Our aim is to make the case for music as a crucially important component in the education of Scotland’s young people – particularly within the current context of potential radical reforms during a challenging time for our education sector.

The authors of this manifesto convened a series of research workshops to complement the 32nd World Conference for the International Society for Music Education, hosted by The Royal Conservatoire of Scotland in 2016. These workshops brought together leading music educators, researchers, and learners to discuss the current state and possible future of music education in Scotland. Here we outline our findings and our vision for music education, with specific reference to the following four national outcomes taken from the Scottish Government’s National Performance Framework:

• Our children have the best start in life and are ready to succeed.
• Our young people are successful learners, confident individuals, effective contributors and responsible citizens.
• We have tackled the significant inequalities in Scottish society.
• We are better educated, more skilled and more successful, renowned for our research and innovation.

We make specific policy recommendations for the Music Education Partnership Group and Scottish Government pertaining to each of the outcomes above, and overall recommend that music education be supported through legislation by Scottish Parliament and the development of a National Framework for Music Education.

Meanwhile, the Australian government-supported National Music Teacher Mentoring Programme is a model of a national programme that helps generalist teachers gain more confidence. The full potential of partnership with third sector organisations should be maximised, building on existing good practice in this area, to benefit both in-school music activity and training for teachers. Universities should also share publicly recognized good practice in teaching music to young people.

Consequently, our vision for music education in Scotland advocates the improvement of the quality of primary music education, recognising generalist primary teachers as gatekeepers to early music education experiences and further opportunities. Primary teacher education should include a minimum benchmark on training in delivering music, so that generalist primary classroom teachers feel more confident, empowered and equipped to work with music with their pupils.

Music is a natural part of childhood, from early years play to initial music education. As well as allowing children to explore music in its own right, engaging in structured music activities at a young age has been shown to enhance literacy, numeracy, and language development, as well as improving social and emotional skills.

Primary school is key to reaching the majority of children. Amidst cuts to specialist provision, generalist teachers are increasingly responsible for delivering music, yet initial teacher education can provide as little as three hours of music-specific training. Confidence in music continues to be a significant issue for generalist teachers – research shows that little has changed in how teachers experience the music curriculum under the current Curriculum for Excellence and its predecessor, 5–14.

In our workshops, we sought to explore ideas of what an early music education should look like in Scotland, and the impact it might have on a child’s musical future. Participants suggested that it should be based on principles such as giving more control to learners, allowing them input into their own education. It was also suggested that it would be worth developing policy to ensure that early years workers are equipped to embed music-making with children into their daily practices. A journey-mapping activity highlighted the importance of early music education as a platform for further learning opportunities. International participants provided insights into other models: Finland, for example, places greater emphasis on access to music education in childhood years, including statutory early childhood music education in public day care and in compulsory basic education.


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7. ‘Our children have the best start in life and are ready to succeed.’
Consequently, our vision for music education in Scotland recognises the connection between non-formal, informal, and formal aspects of musical learning. We therefore recommend the appointment of a Scottish Music Education Officer. The music education officer should have an overview of Education Scotland and Creative Scotland while also incorporating, recognising and preserving the kind of formal and non-formal music activity that neither organisation can presently do. Their role will be to work with the broadest range of communities of practice across Scottish music education, as well as the Chief Education Officers appointed by every local authority (now a statutory requirement after the Education [Scotland] Bill 2015) to enable and encourage a holistic view of music education activity. This will require an overview of the support available to music learners across the country, the making of recommendations regarding gaps in provision, and the recognition of student and community-led curricula.

Workshop participants agreed that Scotland has strong foundations for the development of a leading approach to music education, and the opportunity to effect important change in this area. However, they stressed the importance of aiming for a more holistic and consistent model of music education: one that better joins up primary, secondary, further and higher education, as well as private tuition, informal learning, and community activity. They also stressed the importance of strong links with communities, and with the music industries. Drawing on expertise and perspectives from other countries, and comparing this to the experiences of Scottish music-learners, our research findings point towards the importance of diversifying and integrating the widest range of musical learning experiences. The discussions also highlighted the crucial role of community, connection, integration and encouragement to practice - rather than an emphasis on knowledge and assessment.

12. Both non-formal and informal learning happen outwith formal education settings. Non-formal learning is directed and structured but without a strict curriculum or qualification (ie. a community drumming class) whereas informal learning could be defined as spontaneous and undirected (ie. friends having a jam in a garage).
These factors create potential barriers to studying music, like the cost of private tuition and continued education, and implicitly favour first time applicants who can fund learning privately. Clearer routes to musical study would reduce vocational uncertainty, which is especially important for learners who face financial barriers or who are the first in their families to access higher education.

Workshop participants agreed that Scotland should protect and enhance its strengths. However, the undergraduate programme requirements and available paths to pursue music in higher education should be clearly signposted to all learners from an early age, and appropriate support should be available in particular for students from non-traditional backgrounds. More vernacular musical styles should be encouraged within higher education as a way of connecting with grassroots music activity more effectively.

Building on the Scottish Government’s vision of music enhancing learning and enriching living, we propose that providing free school instrumental provision should be a national commitment. Connecting the SQA curriculum with further and higher education admissions departments should also be prioritised, alongside a continued effort to offer more diverse advanced training options at undergraduate level, with opportunities to articulate into university music programmes for adult returners.

We therefore recommend that the Commissioner on Fair Access works directly with the Scottish Music Officer to address the discipline specific gaps in provision that create barriers for marginalised learners in accessing further and higher music education in Scotland.

13. Scottish Index of Multiple Deprivation. A Scottish government ranking of geographical areas in Scotland based on indicators such as health, income, employment, housing, access to services, crime, and education.
16. Advanced Higher performance requirements are Grade 5 while most applicants to university courses are expected to be of Grade B standard.
Consequently, our vision for music education in Scotland is to ensure that Scotland’s music education policy is adaptive, and continues to be informed by the best research, evidence, and practices available in the field.

We therefore recommend that Scottish Government commission a biennial roundtable and short written report that gathers both local and international examples of best practice in music education and assesses their suitability across Scotland. This report should be used to inform any reforms to music education policy.

Scotland’s musical culture enjoys an enviable international reputation, and there is no reason why Scotland’s music education policy should not be equally well known for being innovative, evidence-based, and among the most successful in the world.

We gathered evidence in our workshops of innovative practice in music education occurring in nations of comparable size and means to Scotland. These ranged from activist teaching practices in Finnish schools that foster inclusivity among students with special educational needs,20 to the Cultural and Artistic Education programme in the Netherlands that supports students to choose and attend cultural events that are meaningful to them.21

Research suggests that music has faced de-prioritization in many countries in the face of currently-favoured curriculum models, international rankings based on standardised testing, and the ongoing challenge of resources. However, the latest research literature also gives strong evidence for the positive effect of participation in the arts and music. Such participation has been shown to aid “learning, remembering and problem-solving, and the formation of transferable skills such as communication skills and social competency.”22 Furthermore, according to a 2016 review of the research in this area, it was found that “these effects are particularly positive for young people from disadvantaged backgrounds.”23

23. Ibid, p.117.

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Overall, the authors believe that music education would be best supported in the form of a firm commitment from Scottish Government written into legislation. To this end, we encourage any initiative from the Music Education Partnership Group or other stakeholders to develop a National Framework for Music Education and for the specific inclusion of music as a focal point in any forthcoming legislation on education in Scotland.

Moreover, we believe that the research cited in this report supports both the recommendations above and the underlying national vision of music’s key role in enhancing learning and enriching living in Scotland.
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