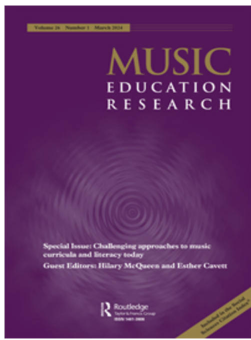

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Please mind the gap: reflecting on gender inequality in music higher education, one year on from *Slow Train Coming*

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Introduction

In November 2022, the Equality, Diversity and Inclusion in Music Studies (EDIMS) network published the seminal report, *Slow Train Coming? Equality, Diversity and Inclusion in UK Music Higher Education* (Bull et al. 2022). Using statistical data sourced from the Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA), survey data from thirty-two higher education institutions, and testimonial accounts from minoritised staff and students in music higher education, the report aimed to highlight demographic patterns and lived experiences of inequality in music higher education, and to document examples of institutions engaging in ongoing work relating to equality, diversity, and inclusion.

Overall, the report offered 'a broad, shallow overview' (Bull et al. 2022, 9) of inequalities in music higher education relating to race, gender, class, and disability. It highlighted concerning issues including the notable underrepresentation of global majority ethnicities, the working classes, and women among music students and staff, alongside higher rates of disability among music students in comparison to the wider student population. Survey data demonstrated that although many institutions had engaged in equality, diversity, and inclusion initiatives, these were sometimes narrow in focus, failed to be embedded in important areas such as student and staff recruitment, and did not alleviate the microaggressions testified to by individual respondents.

In November 2023 – one year on from the publication of *Slow Train Coming* – music students and staff from institutions across the UK met together at the inaugural conference of the new Centre for Music Education and Social Justice at the University of Southampton. Presentations and panels throughout the day reviewed *Slow Train Coming*, drew comparisons with other reports, and offered case studies relating to specific institutions. Delegates sought to begin to construct an 'activist' research agenda in response to *Slow Train Coming*, and to take steps to make positive changes across music higher education in the UK. In what follows, I report on themes relating to gender inequality that were drawn out during the conference. After contextualising the issue of gender inequality within education systems more widely, I evaluate the findings of *Slow Train Coming* in relation to gender, and expand on two 'edge cases' that were discussed by Anna Bull, Vick Bain, and Elizabeth MacGregor during a panel discussion at the conference. First, I draw on Bain's (2019) report, *Counting the Music Industry*, to investigate the gender participation gap in music technology degrees and related industries. Second, I draw on my own experience of undergraduate music studies at the University of Cambridge to evaluate curriculum initiatives addressing gender attainment gaps in music degrees (University of Cambridge 2018). To conclude, I draw on the recommendations made in *Slow Train Coming* to highlight some initial research priorities for making change in gender representation at all levels of music higher education.

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Gender inequalities in higher education

Concerns over gender inequalities in education – which can be defined as 'systematic variations in aspects related to education that are structured along gender as an axis of inequality' (Hadjar and Buchmann 2016, 160) – are shared by societies across the world. Generally speaking, girls outperform boys at primary and secondary levels (Hadjar and Buchmann 2016), especially in reading but not usually in mathematics (Early et al. 2020). Some gendered trends have changed over time: for example, 'until 1990 men had been more likely to obtain good degrees than women, but since 1990 women had been more likely to obtain good degrees than men' (Richardson, Mittelmeier, and Rienties 2020, 346).

Educational participation

Often, significant shifts in gender inequalities, like the reversed gender gap in higher education, are a result of changing perceptions of educational participation. Throughout the twentieth century, the growing awareness of the benefits of education for women was an important contributing factor to improving gender representation in higher education. In the UK, girls are now more likely than boys to aspire to reach higher education, and more likely than boys to proceed from secondary to tertiary level (Richardson, Mittelmeier, and Rienties 2020). This may in part be attributed to girls' prevailing positive attitudes, perceived competencies, and overall enjoyment associated with education (Brozo et al. 2014).

Educational attainment

Closely related to trends in educational participation are those in educational attainment. Not only are women more likely to participate in higher education, but they are also more likely to achieve better degree classifications (Cotton et al. 2016; Richardson, Mittelmeier, and Rienties 2020). Although men and women are fairly evenly matched in achieving first-class degrees, men are more likely to drop out of university, fail, or receive third-class degrees. There is some evidence to suggest that this may be correlated with a tendency for men to be overconfident of their ability (and therefore spend less time studying), and a tendency for women to be over-anxious about their performance (and therefore spend more time studying) (Cotton et al. 2016).

However, there are several confounding factors associated with the gender gap in educational attainment. Achievement may be influenced by the gendering of educational institutions; it is possible that the so-called 'feminisation' of primary and secondary education may benefit female attainment (Drudy 2011), while assessment at the tertiary level may favour masculine-gendered traits such as self-confidence, assertion, and risk-taking (Read, Francis, and Robson 2005). Assessment bias may also occur according to whether a subject domain traditionally has masculine connotations (such as maths and science) or feminine connotations (such as languages and arts) (Bygren 2020), and possibly in relation to examination format (with coursework benefiting females and exams benefiting males) (Cotton et al. 2016).

Gender inequalities reported in *Slow Train Coming*

The evidence of gender inequality in music higher education participation, as reported in *Slow Train Coming*, is at once shocking, yet perhaps unsurprising. In contrast with higher education more widely across the UK, in music higher education there are more male (59%) than female (40%) students. Post-1992 former polytechnic universities, 1960s universities, and specialist non-conservatory institutions are typically male-dominated (e.g., Smith 2015), while post-1992 non-polytechnic universities, specialist conservatories, and old and ancient universities are typically more equal in their gender split. Only civic universities are likely to have more female students than male (Bull et al. 2022).

Slow Train Coming also reported on the dramatic attrition of female students through the academic pipeline from undergraduate, to postgraduate, to postdoctoral positions. In line with findings in wider higher education, women and men are fairly equally represented at master's level (women: 50%; men: 49%), but attrition increases at doctoral (women: 39%; men: 60%) and postdoctoral (staff) (women: 35%; men: 65%) levels, regardless of type of institution (Bull et al. 2022).

Many of the participants surveyed for *Slow Train Coming* described significant equality, diversity, and inclusion initiatives underway at their institutions, especially in relation to gender. In many institutions gender equality had received particular attention, since departments had undertaken self-evaluation in order to be accredited by Athena Swan, a national gender-equality kitemark programme in the UK. However, as highlighted in the report, 'this institutionalised focus on gender inequalities can lead to a danger that gender is seen as 'done' and attention then moves onto other issues' (Bull et al. 2022, 58). Indeed, although initiatives such as diversifying gender representation in curricula and increasing diversity in student admissions were commonly cited by participants, testimony from staff and students demonstrated ongoing gender-related discrimination, bullying, and harassment (Bull et al. 2022).

Furthermore, no data were released by HESA regarding the representation of transgender or non-binary students and staff in music higher education, and no institutions or individuals shared accounts of the experiences of transgender or non-binary students or staff. Although there is some evidence to suggest that transgender and non-binary people can thrive in music education settings (e.g., Nichols 2013; Palkki 2020), there remains a need for further research into how gender equality initiatives in music higher education may or may not cater for these marginalised groups (Bull et al. 2022, 134).

Edge cases: participation and attainment gaps in music higher education

As acknowledged in *Slow Train Coming*, there are some disadvantages to drawing conclusions about the state of music higher education from a single institutional survey (with a 24% response rate) and the aggregate figures provided by HESA (Bull et al. 2022, 29). Categorising data according to a simple gender binary obscures the experience of transgender and non-binary students and staff, while conflating different types of institution and qualification can lead to universalising assumptions about issues faced across music studies. For example, 'the male bias within student populations studying degrees combining music and technology can significantly alter the presentation of the data for the overall field of music' (Tatlow 2023, 250), even though some courses (such as musical theatre) may have a female bias. However, it is important to be aware of the potential pitfalls of granular classifications of sub-types of institution and qualification (Pace 2023; Tatlow 2023), such as the hierarchisation of academic (read: 'real') music degrees and vocational music degrees, and an incipient blame-shifting, 'not-our-problem' attitude.[1]

In response to the general trends identified using statistical, survey, and testimonial data in *Slow Train Coming*, the conference held at the Centre for Music Education and Social Justice, University of Southampton in November 2023 was a valuable opportunity to explore the nuances and complexities of the experiences of students and staff in music higher education. In an effort to highlight the distinctive issues facing different higher education pathways, in what follows I reflect on specific gender inequalities debated at the conference. In order to acknowledge the interrelation between institutions and qualifications in music and its sub-disciplines, I first employ Bain's (2019) research to reflect upon the apparent male bias in participation in music technology degrees, and its possible influence upon gender gaps in the wider music industries. Second, and by way of contrast, I draw on my own experience as a student and supervisor to consider the recurring issue of male bias in

[1]Consider, for example, the implicit denunciation in Ian Pace's (2023) comment about how the movement 'from academic music study to music technology has added a gendered dimension to the shift, as the latter is overwhelmingly dominated by male students, while the former was more evenly matched' (n.p.).

attainment at the University of Cambridge, as highlighted in the Faculty of Music's (2018) Athena Swan evaluation. Finally, I ask how future research could impact persistent gender disadvantage in both participation and attainment in music higher education.

The gender participation gap in music technology degrees

Participation in music technology degrees in the UK has grown steadily since their emergence in the post-1992 diversification of higher education. Their popularity has had significant ramifications for the characterisation of student cohorts in music higher education, since they often attract students of a lower social class profile and higher ethnic diversity than traditional, academic music degrees (Born and Devine 2016). However, they also overwhelmingly attract male students, and can have a gender imbalance of up to 90% men and 10% women (Born and Devine 2015).

This gendered pattern is one that is reproduced across employment in the music industries. In the UK, men are overrepresented among writers signed by music publishers (women: 14%; men: 86%), artists signed by music labels (women: 20%; men: 80%), and employees of music publishers (women: 37%; men: 63%) (Bain 2019, 3). These inequalities appear in part to be correlated with different genres' reliance on technology: women are better represented in the primarily acoustic genres covered by classical labels (30%) and folk labels (24%), and progressively underrepresented in popular labels (18%), indie labels (17%), electronic labels (12%), jazz labels (11%), metal labels (6%), and drum and bass or grime labels (5%) (Bain 2019, 14). As Bain (2019) has highlighted, classical and folk genres characterised by quiet, 'feminised' instruments are likely to integrate more female musicians, and have also taken measures to address the gender participation gap (e.g., Cheng 2020; Goldin and Rouse 2000). Women are usually far less visible in rock genres that foreground hyper-sexualised, hegemonic masculinities, and in metal, drum and bass, and grime genres that often express misogynistic violence, aggression and deprivation, and working-class male culture (Johnson and Cloonan 2009).

However, why it is that men are overrepresented in genres and fields related to music technology remains a complicated issue. To some extent, music technology degrees have grown out of fields that have historically been highly masculinised, such as avant-garde and electro-acoustic composition, sound production and recording, and instrument design and manufacture. Broader social processes have further reinforced technological prowess as masculine in character (Born and Devine 2015), and these patterns are reproduced through gendered socialisation in the music classroom and gendered segregation in the music industries (Bain 2019; Bull 2019; Green 2010).

Unfortunately, evidence suggests that gender inequality in music education and the music industries can have detrimental effects on professional musicians. Studies have shown that those working in the music industries are up to three times more likely than the general public to suffer with depression – and that this is not helped by 'the problems of being a woman in the industry' (Gross and Musgrave 2016, 14). Women have recounted experiences of bullying and harassment in the workplace, sexual abuse at gigs or studios, and developing eating disorders while signed to record labels (Gross and Musgrave 2017, 24). These problems may be exacerbated for Black women in the music industries, over 40% of whom may feel pressured to change the way they look or behave to fit in with industry expectations (Gittens et al. 2021a; 2021b). Through the intersectionality of race and gender, Black women therefore 'have mental health concerns at a disproportionate rate to Black men' (Gittens et al. 2021a, 32), and rarely receive appropriate, targeted support.

The gender attainment gap at the University of Cambridge

In 2018, the Faculty of Music at the University of Cambridge publicly acknowledged a concerning, 'unbalanced' trend between outcomes for male and female first-year undergraduate students. Since the introduction of a new syllabus in 2012 – shortly before I began undergraduate study in the

Faculty – male students had consistently outperformed female students in the first year of the course: 72% of first-class results were awarded to males, while 65% of lower second-class results went to females (University of Cambridge 2018). These findings were consistent with broader trends at the Universities of Oxford and Cambridge, where, in all subjects, male students have outperformed female students in the achievement of first-class degrees throughout the twentieth and into the twenty-first century (Ahlburg and McCall 2021; Mellanby and Zimdars 2011). There has been much speculation over (but little research into) the reason for this persistent gender gap, including suggestions that male students are more likely to have attended prestigious independent schools, that tutorial teaching favours masculine, antagonistic traits, and that an emphasis on written examinations benefits male students (Ahlburg and McCall 2021; Turner and Gibbs 2010).

In a survey of staff and students, the Faculty of Music at the University of Cambridge 'revealed perceptions, especially from female undergraduates, that years one and two of the current undergraduate programme favour men because its core components refine choir-school skills, and most such schools are for boys only' (University of Cambridge 2018, 59). In line with research indicating the advanced musical education offered to (predominantly male) choristers and organists before reaching higher education (Barrett and Zhukov 2022; Dong and Kokotsaki 2021), undergraduates reported an over-reliance on 'tests focusing on types of practical musicianship associated with male-dominated and privileged educational backgrounds' (University of Cambridge 2018, 16). In response, the Faculty of Music proposed several initiatives to address this perceived gender gap. Like some institutions represented in *Slow Train Coming*, these included increasing representation of female musicians in curriculum content, improving the visibility of female academic role models in the department, and diversifying student admissions. However, the Faculty also implemented significant changes to pedagogy, curriculum, and assessment practices, overhauling the first-year undergraduate syllabus to change the weighting of content, modes of assessment, and student autonomy.

Compared to the 2012 syllabus, the new curriculum first saw history (of the Western art music canon) and tonal skills (harmony and counterpoint) reduced from 55% to 36% of the course, while musicology (comprising diverse topics such as ethnomusicology, popular music, and sound studies) was increased from 8% to 18%. As a supervisor teaching students taking the new syllabus, I noted that these changes theoretically reduced the emphasis on musicianship skills that are not widely taught in secondary schools but are well-established in choral and organ training, and instead attributed greater weight to emergent musicological discourse. Second, modes of assessment for tonal and aural skills were adjusted to longer or takeaway papers, with the potential to benefit students with limited ear training during their previous education, or without absolute or (good) relative pitch. Finally, the updated curriculum significantly increased opportunities for student autonomy. Students' own choice of performance, composition, history, or dissertation modules was increased from 8% to 18% of the course, thereby offering students' own musical interests and preferences equal value to foundational papers on history, analysis, tonal skills, and general musicianship.

Conclusions

Although it is too early to judge the outcome of the measures put in place by the Faculty of Music at the University of Cambridge, they highlight the ongoing need for critical debate around the place of curriculum content, assessment modality, and student autonomy in promoting equitable achievement and accessible routes into postgraduate and postdoctoral levels of music higher education across genders (Bull et al. 2022). While research suggests that there is much more to be done to promote equal participation in disciplines such as music technology (Bain 2019; Born and Devine 2015), it is not enough to promote equal participation if it is impossible to achieve equal attainment.

Nevertheless, it is by no means certain that changes such as those at the University of Cambridge will have a measurable impact on the gender gap: many previous adaptations in assessment environment across higher education have been shown to have limited effects on parity of attainment (Turner and Gibbs 2010), while changes that have made a difference have been as subtle as rewording examination questions (Gibson, Jardine-Wright, and Bateman 2015). Furthermore, it is likely that even wholesale curriculum change will have an inadequate impact upon gender inequality if wider issues of hegemonic masculinity, institutionalised discrimination, and gendered microaggressions – such as those highlighted in *Slow Train Coming* – go unaddressed. It is entirely possible that even at an institution where equal participation and attainment has nominally been achieved, a student may have to (or choose to) take courses that are disproportionately male- or female-dominated, that favour combative or confrontational modes of discourse, or that result in experiences of belittlement or intimidation.

In addition, it remains the case that students and staff with specific intersectional identities – such as Black women, British Asian women, working-class women, transgender women, and disabled women – are more likely to go unnoticed or be made invisible in music higher education. Future activism and research therefore need to prioritise listening to the experiences of these individuals and accounting for them in strategies for equal participation and attainment. Issues that extend beyond the realm of gender representation – such as genre scenes and conventions (Bain 2019), sex and sexuality in music education and industries (Gould 2012), and the pursuit of amateur or leisure-time music-making outside higher education (Mantie 2022) – need to be brought into parallel discourse to open up a plurality of possible futures for music higher education. *Slow Train Coming* is just the beginning.

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